

The Gospel Pathway at Izapa

By David B. Brown © 2016

Our recent Spring Expedition took us to the Chiapas site of Izapa located just outside the city of Tapachula and just a few kilometers from Mexico's southernmost border with Guatemala. Here we found an archaeological site with a long history and very unique art styles. It appears that this site was located on a merchant route that connected Teotihuacán with cities in Guatemala and El Salvador. Being a site with such strong connections to the north, it displays Olmec artisan influence by its use of very large stones. For example, a large toad head, a large snake head, a large bowl



and large altar, each of them made from a single piece of carved stone. These features are clearly Olmec and testify to the influence of the northern culture in this region.

Through the years we have identified certain ancient cities as locations for Book of Mormon stories. Izapa has been identified as the Lamanite city of Shimmilon that is listed as one of the seven cities converted by the sons of Mosiah. Ammon is clearly responsible for the conversion of King Lamoni and the people in the city of Ishmael. We have identified Ishmael as Tazumal in Chalchuapa, El Salvador. Aaron is said to have been held in prison in Middoni, which we have identified as the Guatemala

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Mayan Burial Rituals

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We know very little about the early Maya's burial practices. Much of our information about Mayan burial ceremonies and rituals comes from Post Classic accounts like the Popol Vuh and the books of Chilam Balam. No written records exist regarding the **early** Mayan except what we find on glyphs and images carved on temple walls. "As with other texts (e.g., the *Chilam Balam*), a great deal of *Popol Vuh's* significance lies in the **scarcity of early accounts** dealing with Meso-american mythologies."¹

The Popol Vuh (*book of the people*) was based on an oral history and mythology of the Maya. It was first written down around 1554 to 1558.¹ Sometime after 1701 when Father Ximénez came to Santo

Tomás (*Chichicastenango*) in Guatemala, he "transcribed and translated the manuscript (*Popol Vuh*) in parallel K'iche' and Spanish columns."¹

Xibalba (Shee-bal-ba) or 'Place of Fright' is the name of the Mayan underworld (*afterlife*) written about in the Popol Vuh. Many of the death or burial rituals seem to be based on preparing the dead for their journey to

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The Gospel Pathway at Izapa *continued*

site of Takalik Abaj about 40 miles southeast of Izapa. Because of the cultural commonalities shared by Takalik Abaj and Izapa, we have surmised that Aaron is the key figure who was instrumental in converting these Pacific Coast cities and developing the very unique art style known as the Izapan Art Style.

The Izapan Art Style is characterized by several features. There is a central pictographic mural that defines the theme of the stela, which is then bracketed by a celestial band at the top and an underworld band at the base. Almost all of the stelae are pictographic—there appears to be no glyphic writing involved.



Therefore, all of the images used and their relational positioning on the pictograph are assumed to be symbolic.

We believe that this art style is unique to Aaron. He came into a region with no formal writing (at least there is none discernable) and he had to convey his story of the gospel. This would work fine as long as he was present to convey the story while consulting the written word from time to time to be sure that he was keeping the story

straight. But, once Aaron leaves, how does the story continue to get told with any accuracy? We believe that Aaron used this method of pictographic story telling by carving it in wood or stone so that the images would continue to tell the accurate story even if he was absent.

Likewise, we believe that structures were built to illustrate the pathway of the gospel. Izapa Site F contains one of the gospel pathway illustrations. Coming into the site from the northwest, we find that the left side on the west edge of the first structure has three steps up, but the right side is in the form of a ramp. We believe that the ramp illustrates an event when a portion of the inhabitants of the higher plane slide down, or as the Bible says, Adam fell. Especially since the



downward slide is in a westerly direction where the sun sets and the light fades—west is the direction that symbolizes death and change.

In order to avoid certain death as illustrated by the descent to the west, we must find a way to reverse direction. Once on the terrestrial plane it is necessary to perform a 180 degree turn back toward the light (east). This takes the individ-



ual through a narrow passage that empties into a plaza.

Once in the plaza, to the left is a stairwell that descends to the terrestrial plane from the higher plane,



and beside this stairwell is a large stone bowl with a braided cord carved around the edge. Next to the bowl is a serpent head (Quetzalcoatl) whose mouth forms a spout. The symbolism seems to imply that the waters of life from the higher realm will fill the bowl into which one will enter into a covenant as indicated by the braided rope on the lip of the bowl. In spiritual terms, we will enter into a baptismal covenant. After entering into this covenant we continue to travel east and find ourselves at the north end of a ball court.

On the north end of the ball court is a four-cornered alter with a head carved on one end. We believe that the new believer who has accepted the challenge to change his life when he entered into the baptismal covenant is now being asked to sacrifice the physical aspect of his life as alluded to by the four-cornered

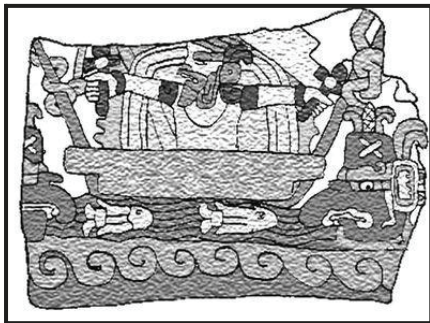
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The Gospel Pathway at Izapa *continued*



altar. Our physical existence is illustrated by the number four; four directions, four corners of the earth, four fundamental elements (earth, water, fire and air), four foundational atomic elements (hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen and carbon), and so on. Therefore, if we are to win the spiritual battle that takes place on the ball court, we must focus on the spiritual rewards and be willing to sacrifice the physical.

On the east wall at the halfway point of the ball court is a stela that illustrates a person in a boat who is

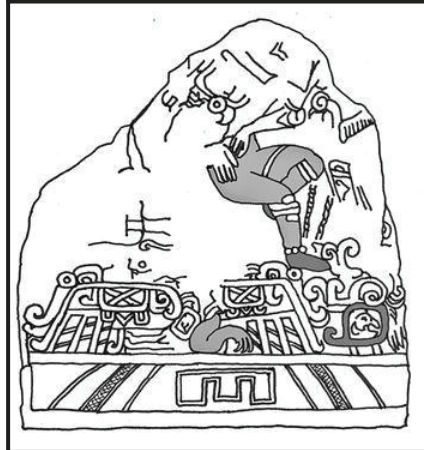


holding a symbol of life (Egyptian ankh) in each hand and there are fish underneath the boat. This pictograph implies someone that offers life to all players on the court.

The Christian imagery abounds with a bearded god bearing crosses, fish (spiritual humanity), an ark, a rainbow, and the number 8 represented in the waves; 8 is the number of resurrection in Mayan mythology. Being placed at the midpoint of the arena where opposing teams battle, this diety certainly displays Christ-like characteristics by offering safe passage for all players.

Moving to the south end of the ball court we find a large stela

mounted in the south wall. This illustrates a ball player who has defeated a bird that represents death. Again, this seems to be representative of Quetzalcoatl overcoming



death and exiting the spiritual battle ground (ball court) as the victor.

Continuing the right turns, the south end of the ball court empties back into the central plaza next to a square structure that is slightly humped, but the corners are set to cardinal directions of north, south, east and west. We believe that this



represents the place of judgment. The four corners refer to the physical realm, the slightly humped cobblestone feature refers to the Mayan concept that we live on the back of the turtle, and the cardinal directions are symbolic of celestial laws that never change because on the equinox, the positioning of east and west will always be the same. Therefore, the unchanging celestial

laws will judge our earthly walk by providing consistent direction. Once we have received judgment,

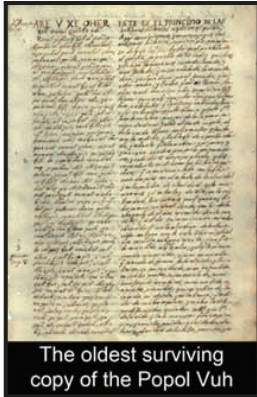


we are then invited to the higher realms again, as illustrated by the three tiered structure on the south side of the plaza.

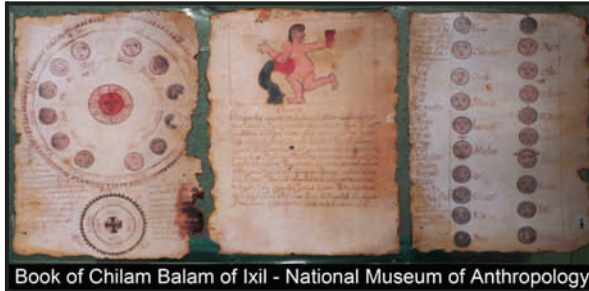
I admit that there is nothing in writing stating that these are the intended meanings of the structures and objects found at Izapa. This is purely an esoteric interpretation of what is found. However, the positioning is so artfully done that one gospel concept applied to one structure tends to lend itself to an understanding of another. And as we take a clockwise route through the site it appears to illustrate the interaction of heaven to earth, of physical versus spiritual, of eternal life versus temporary death.

One additional comment on the positioning of the structures at Izapa. If you do an internet search on Izapa, you will discover countless papers that connect astronomical positioning with the placements of structures, stelae and monuments. Why would Aaron do that? What is he trying to convey? He is telling us that the placement of things on Earth are ordered by Celestial Law. He is connecting this earthly realm with the heavenly realm and is using astronomical order to direct its placement. He is telling us that this gospel pathway at Izapa is a reflection of, and established by, Celestial Law.

Mayan Burial Rituals *continued*



The oldest surviving copy of the Popol Vuh



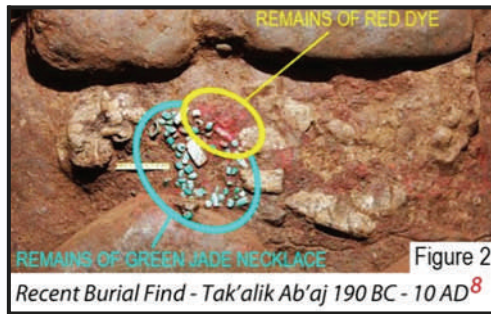
Book of Chilam Balam of Ixil - National Museum of Anthropology

Xibalba.²

The Books of **Chilam Balam** are a collection of books originally written by Chilam Balam and then added to over the years. ‘Chilam’ meaning priest and ‘Balam’ meaning jaguar or Jaguar Priest. These books were kept in a series of small towns in northern Yucatan and Belize. There are nine surviving books, but more existed. They date as late as the 17th or 18th century, but some of the language and content date back to the Spanish conquest. (1527-1546 AD). In some places hieroglyphic scripts are used, pointing to an even earlier time, possibly when Chilam Balam began them. Several texts even contain prophecies about the coming of the Spanish.³

The Maya prepared their dead in special ways. They wrapped them in cloth, often dyed red (figure

1) or a woven mat, and then placed in their grave with items of special significance to them. Colors had special meaning to the Maya. Black was a symbol of death, but they used the color red when burying them because red symbolized the sunrise, dawn and rebirth or resurrection. (figures 1 & 2) They used ground cinnabar to create the color red. (figure 3) They also used the color Green. It was the center of the North, South, East and West directional points. It is also the color of the ‘Great World Tree’; the center of their universe.^{4,5,6} It is interesting to note that the color green is also



REMAINS OF RED DYE
REMAINS OF GREEN JADE NECKLACE
Figure 2
Recent Burial Find - Tak'alik Ab'aj 190 BC - 10 AD⁸



GREEN JADE NECKLACE
REMAINS OF RED DYE ON BURIAL WRAPPING
FIGURE 1
Mummified body from Calakmul tomb - Campeche Museum

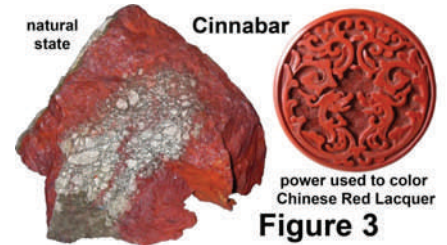


Figure 3

Cinnabar has a bright red color and has been used as a pigment for thousands of years in many parts of the world. The Chinese used it to color their lacquer. It was used by the Olmec before the Maya here in America. It is also an important ore for mercury.

the center color of the light spectrum which we often see displayed in the rainbow, with yellow, orange and red on the low side of the light spectrum and blue, indigo and violet on the high side.

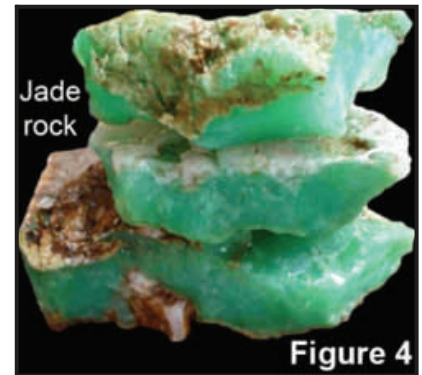


Figure 4

The Maya often used Jade (figure 4) to represent green. “At Piedras Negras there have been instances of elite burials containing clay beads and necklaces which had once been painted green to look like jadeite.”⁷ “The bodies of the dead were surrounded by religious objects from the person’s life and their mouth stuffed with maize and a jade stone.”⁹ Maize was a symbol of rebirth and food for their journey to the afterlife. Jade, highly valued by the Maya, was thought to be used as currency to enter the afterlife.⁴

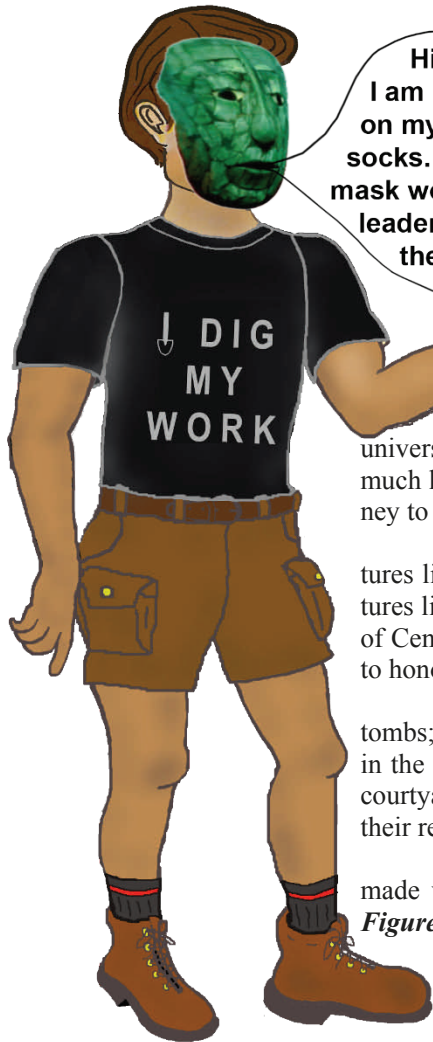
Where the Maya buried their

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Mayan Burial Practices

The Maya treated their dead family members in very special ways. They believed in an afterlife, so they wrapped their loved ones in red

Hi, Arty here again. Today I am dressed for a funeral. I have on my best black shirt and black socks. I am also wearing a funeral mask worn by Pakal, a famous Mayan leader buried at Palenque in the Temple of the Inscriptions.



cloth and spread red powdered cinnabar around their grave to help their rebirth in the new life. They also left special items in their graves like figurines of pottery or jade and green necklaces and ear rings. Green symbolized the center of the universe where they went after death. They even left plates and bowls of food, much like the Egyptians did. Many Archaeologists believe this was for their journey to the afterlife.

Many cultures prepare food to honor their ancestors. Many Asian cultures like China, Korea, Vietnam, India and the Philippines and even Gaelic cultures like Ireland and Scotland prepare food to honor their dead relatives. In most of Central and South American countries they still celebrate the Day of the Dead to honor past relatives.

Kings and other important people had whole buildings built for their tombs; others buried their dead in the ground. Some built small stone chambers in the ground while the commoners just dug a hole under their home or in their courtyard and buried them there. Archaeologists believe they wanted to keep their relatives close to remember and honor them.

Later in the Mayan culture, they began to cremate their dead. They made very fancy jars to place the ashes in. **Figure 1** shows a jade burial jar. **Figure 2** shows a necklace found buried in a dirt grave as well as some red powder. **Figure 3** shows some of the special items found with the dead. **Figure 4** shows a fancy tomb built for Pakal, the same one who's mask I am wearing.

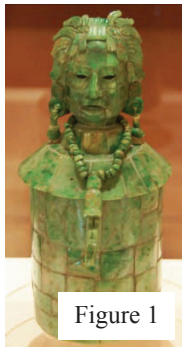


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

WORD SEARCH

Find and circle the Maya Ball Game words from the story:

- Afterlife
- Ancestors
- Buried
- Cremation
- Deceased
- Figurines
- Food
- Graves
- Green jade
- Honor
- Necklaces
- Pakal
- Pottery
- Powder
- Rebirth
- Red
- Tomb
- Wrapped

F	T	M	U	X	N	V	Y	E	N	R	N	T	D	G
M	I	P	P	Q	A	R	F	E	Y	X	Z	J	B	R
L	X	G	D	P	E	I	C	Q	H	I	A	B	I	E
P	L	P	U	T	L	K	R	A	L	G	O	U	N	E
E	I	X	T	R	L	A	B	E	R	V	B	R	O	N
U	Z	O	E	A	I	M	K	A	D	I	P	I	I	J
J	P	T	C	D	O	N	V	A	M	W	R	E	T	A
B	F	E	O	T	Y	E	E	M	P	C	O	D	A	D
A	S	F	Z	W	S	L	D	S	Q	M	C	P	M	E
J	S	Y	Q	W	R	Z	F	Z	X	B	T	D	E	R
G	U	T	J	R	J	A	R	C	J	D	R	P	R	R
W	U	W	J	Z	I	R	P	P	L	O	Q	W	C	G
D	E	S	A	E	C	E	D	P	R	O	N	O	H	G
R	E	B	I	R	T	H	K	J	E	F	L	S	D	C
A	N	C	E	S	T	O	R	S	Q	D	J	T	S	U

Mayan Burial Practices Crossword Puzzle

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

- Across**
- 2. wore funeral mask
 - 7. color for center
 - 8. who else buried food
 - 9. after death comes
 - 10. color for rebirth

- Down**
- 1. buried in fancy tombs
 - 3. dead relative
 - 4. colored red powder
 - 5. colored green stone
 - 6. found in funeral jars

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OTHER SITES OF INTEREST

http://www.teach-nology.com/teachers/lesson_plans/science/archaeology/

http://research.history.org/Archaeological_Research/KidsPage.cfm

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2007/08/maya-rise-fall/map-interactive>

<http://www.digonsite.com/drdig/mesoamerica/15.html> <http://www.smm.org/sln/ma/index.html>

Mayan Burial Rituals *continued*

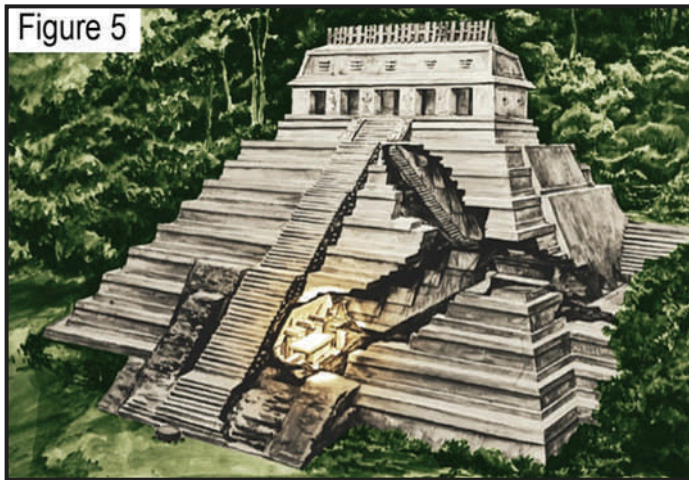


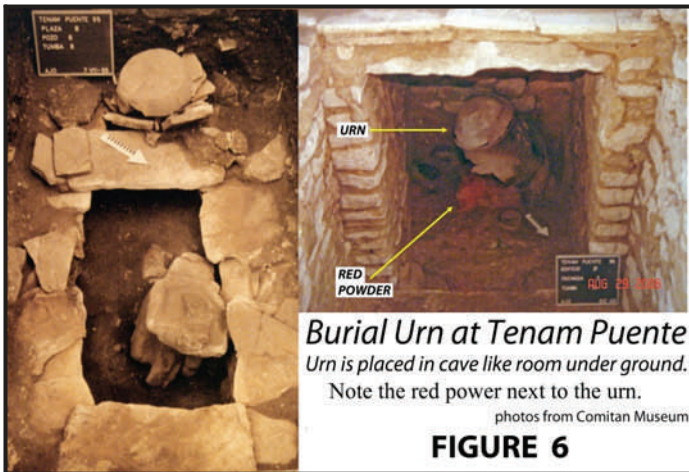
Figure 5
Pakal's Tomb inside the Temple of the Inscriptions



FIGURE 7
Mayan Burial Urn with Skeleton
 Compeche Museum



FIGURE 8
Mayan Cremation Urn
 Comintan Museum



Burial Urn at Tenam Puente
 Urn is placed in cave like room under ground.
 Note the red power next to the urn.
 photos from Comintan Museum
FIGURE 6

dead varied for each class of citizen and changed over time. The nobility or elite were buried in elaborately constructed tombs or temples⁷, much like the discovery of Pakal's tomb at Palenque. (figure 5) Burial urns (figure 6) were used for important non-elite people, sometimes placed in caves or cave-like chambers. Caves were considered entrances into the underworld or after life. Children and women that died in child birth were also buried in urns too, but usually in the ground next to other family members.¹⁰

Commoners buried their dead family members in dirt graves (figure 2) under the floors of their homes¹¹ or in a special area close to

death was not the end, but they would rise again in the afterlife. Cherished family members were laid to rest, thoughtfully and with much care. It is believed they were buried close to home to honor their memory. We are not sure if they talked to their ancestors or asked their advice but **The Day of the Dead** has been celebrated in Mexico to honor their ancestors maybe as far back as 3000 years.¹³

Footnotes:

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popol_Vuh

²<http://www.ancient.eu/Xibalba/>

³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chilam_Balam

their home such as the family alter or courtyard¹², later cremation became more common, placing the ashes in elaborate urns. (figure 8)

The Maya appear to be a very respectful of their deceased. They believed that

⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya_death_rituals

⁵<https://mesoamericablog.wordpress.com/2013/03/20/mayan-mortuary-rituals/>

⁶http://www.authenticmaya.com/maya_religion.htm

⁷<http://anthrojournal.com/issue/october-2011/article/examining-class-and-status-of-the-ancient-maya-through-burial-analysis>

⁸<http://www.soychicano.com/forums/howthread.php?t=56201>

⁹<http://www.pitlanemagazine.com/cultures/burial-customs-in-central-america.html>

¹⁰ Ardren, Traci, *Social Identities in the Classic Maya Northern Lowlands: Gender, Age, Memory and Place*, University of Texas Press, Austin. p.98

¹¹ Gillespie, Susan D., *Body and Soul among the Maya: Keeping the Spirits in Place*, University of Florida, Gainesville

¹² Zach, Stephanie R. & Hume, Douglas William, *Changing Mortuary Rites: An Ethnohistory of 19th Century and Contemporary Religion in Northern Belize*, Contemporary Journal of Anthropology and Sociology, CJAS 4(2), 149-161, (2014) p15

¹³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Day_of_the_Dead

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Tonina Update By David B Brown 2016 ©

We have previously identified the archaeological site of Tonina located in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico as the Book of Mormon site of Ammonihah. The history that archaeologists have developed at this site seems to fit the unique stories of Ammonihah.

First, there were two entrances to the city, one on the east and the other on the south—a Book of Mormon description of the city of Ammonihah.

Second, there are two individuals illustrated as bound captives being held without food and water; this is the description we have of Alma and Amulek when they are taken captive by city officials.

Third, there are three types of bone burials found here; skeletal bones that were crushed such as the lawyers and city officials who were caught in the prison collapse when Alma and Amulek were miraculously released from the prison; bones that displayed charring from fire such as the women and children of the believers who were burned alive because of their belief in

the words of Alma and Amulek; and bones that displayed marks from hacking such as blades and axes similar to what we might expect when the Lamanites destroyed the inhabitants of the city.

Fourth, the city was reinforced with a high-wall and mote, and the land surrounding the plains of the south entrance were clear-cut of timber and leveled. This is the very description we are given concerning how Captain Moroni fortified the city of Ammonihah to thwart the Lamanite attack.

Fifth, the images mounted on the sunken ball court are of kneeling captives with their hands bound behind their back. This seems to be a compilation of the Alma captivity and the believers who were burned alive; both of them being held captive because of their belief in the gospel.

And finally, the name of one of the captives is Jaguar Bird. We have long

believed that this is Bird Jaguar IV of Yaxchilan, but there has not been any evidence of this—until now. During our recent visit to Tonina, Neil Steede discovered there has been a recent translation to some of the glyphs that state, “Jaguar Bird is the son of a ruler from Bonampak.” We believe that things are finally getting straightened out. You see, Alma II was the son of a High Priest from Zarahemla, and the Book of Mormon states that he traveled to Ammonihah after visiting the City of Melek. Now, I will make this same statement using archaeological terms. You see, Bird Jaguar IV was the son of a ruler from Yaxchilan (Bird Jaguar III) and the Book of Mormon states that he traveled to Tonina after visiting the city of Bonampak.

Yes, enough said. Things are coming around—science and religion are coming into agreement.

