

Behold My Hands: Evidence for Christ's Visit in Ancient America



Jade Plaque. Altun Ha Belize. Circa 600 A.D.
(Note the right hand)



The Mayan Deity Itzamna
(Notice the hands)

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By Steven E. Jones

The Book of Mormon makes the bold statement that Jesus Christ, shortly following His resurrection, visited people in the New World and invited them to "feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am... the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world. ... Ye are they of whom I said: Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice..." (3 Nephi 11:14, 15:21). The Bible states that Jesus "showed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days" and that this witness of Christ would be "unto the uttermost part of the earth." (Acts 1:3-8) and that Jesus would indeed visit "other sheep" (John 10:16).

Several years ago, an idea popped into my head: Would people in the New World who also saw Jesus Christ leave memorials of this supernal experience by showing *marked hands of Deity* in their artwork? So I began a search with the following hypothesis-to be tested: Ancient artwork portraying a deity with deliberate markings on his hands will be found somewhere in the Americas. A crazy idea, maybe - but wait till you see the artwork of the ancient Maya!

Death of Itzamna

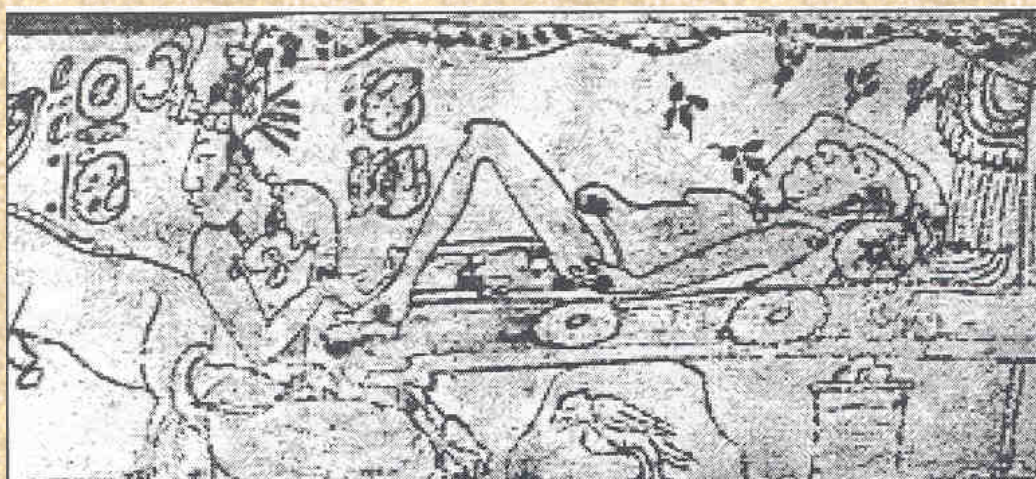


Figure 1. Classic Mayan vase painting: Death of Itzamna. (Marvin Cohodas. *Word and Image in Mayan Culture*. 220) © Justin Kerr

Figure 1 portrays the death of the great Mayan Deity known as Itzamna, as found in a painting from a classic Mayan vase. (Marvin Cohodas, "Transformations: Relationships Between Image and Text" in *Word and Image in Maya Culture*, 220). Notice that *both* hands of this dying Deity show definite round *spots*. The artist evidently took some pains to bring the right arm over the head, and the spot on this hand can be seen as well as the marking on the left hand. Only one foot is visible, and it again displays a round marking! The very notion that the great and kindly Itzamna would die is suggestive; we soon learn that this Deity will later be resurrected!

In describing the scene, Marvin Cohodas explains that this is related to the beautiful legend of Hunab Pu "who dies and travels to the underworld later to be reborn [or resurrected]" (Ibid, 229-230). While much could be said about this legend [see Jones 1999], I would just comment briefly on the death and resurrection of Hunab Pu/Itzamna and the symbolic connection to the planet Venus. Although lacking telescopes, the Maya achieved an impressive breadth of knowledge about the stars and planets. In particular, they studied and recorded data on the planet Venus because it represented to them a Deity. Closer to the sun than earth, Venus appears in the sky as "the evening star" just after sunset, or as "the morning star" just before sunrise. When the travel of Venus takes it in front of or behind the sun, it cannot be seen for a few days. Thus, Venus appears as the "evening star" then disappears for several days after which it re-appears as the "morning star."

A non-LDS scholar explains the Mayan legend:

"According to tradition, [Hunab Pu] appeared as morning star after being dead for [several] days, the period between disappearance of Venus as evening star and the planet's reappearance as morning star. As Venus as morning star is frequently depicted with death symbols, one may assume that he obtained these in his journey through the underworld during the [few] days between his disappearance in the west as evening star and reappearance as morning star in the east." MHW 172

Thus, in the Mayan view, the Deity Hunab Pu/Itzamna is associated with Venus and the "morning star" with his resurrection. The Maya followed the death of the evening star and its transit through the world of spirits. Men would follow this path also. Venus as Morning Star thus signifies the Deity following his resurrection. The notion that Christ, the Morning Star of the New Testament (Rev. 22:16), descended into the underworld prior to His resurrection is found in the Bible:

"Now that he [Christ] ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?" Ephesians 4:9 (See also I Peter 3:18-19.)

The notion of a Deity who dies then is resurrected is remarkable among the Maya and reminiscent of the Christian belief. Striking indeed is the fact that the visible foot and both hands of this Deity as he died are each marked by a round spot [Figure 1].

Mayan Deity Itzamna

Look at the sculpture in Figure 2 - notice anything peculiar about the hands? George E. Stuart and Gene S. Stuart describe the sculpture as "...the exalted Itzamna, lord of sky and earth" (*The Mysterious Maya*, 97). And Robert Elliot Smith describes the line drawing of a similar sculpture [shown in Figure 3] as "Itzamna, the old god...[with] prominent cheekbones, markedly Hebraic nose..." (Robert Eliot Smith, *The Pottery of Mayapan*, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and ethnology, Harvard University, 1971, pp. 50-52). Yes, the nose does look "Hebraic" as he says, not like the typical Mayan nose. Interesting. [I quote only non-LDS sources in this paper, by the way. And all of the artwork pre-dates Columbus by many years.] According to Michael Coe, Itzamna can be traced to the hieroglyphic record to "the mid-second century after Christ" (*Early Steps*, 117). Would you agree that the holes in the hands or wrists of this Deity are clearly portrayed?



Who is Itzamna?

Before going on to more ancient Mayan artwork, let's see what the non-LDS scholars say about this Deity Itzamna:

"Chief of the beneficent gods was Itzamna. He was the personification of the east, the rising sun with all of its manifold mythical associations....He was said to have come across the eastern waters. One of his titles was Lakin-Chan, the serpent of the East...As light is synonymous with life and knowledge, he was said to have been the founder of the culture of the Itzas and the Mayas. He was the first priest of their religion; invented writing and books...As a physician he was famous, not only knowing the magic herbs but possessed of the power of healing by the laying on of hands...For his wisdom he was spoken of as the royal or noble master of knowledge" (Daniel Brinton, *American Hero-Myths*).

"Itzamna was also...able to cure the sick and even bring the dead to life. People came from all over the land to his shrine, and for that reason he was known as Kabul, 'Maker with his hands'...it seems to be the equivalent of Bitol, 'Maker,' title of the Quiche creator" (J. Eric S. Thompson, *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization*, 229).

"Itzamna was the high god of the Maya. Fitting his role as paramount king, he often bears the title of ahaulil, or "lord," in the Postclassic Yucatec codices....he was considered as the first priest and the inventor of writing....Itzamna was identified with the powers of curing" (Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya*, 99-100).

"The greatest god of the Yucatec Maya, but in some respects the most puzzling, is Itzam Na. As we shall see, he came near to incorporating most of the other major gods in his person...the Indians of [Yucatan], before the introduction of idolatry, worshiped a single god named Hunab Itzamna (Itzam Na). Hunab, "Unique," was a name applied to the creator....we deduce that in one of his aspects Itzam Na was the creator" (J. Eric S. Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 209-210).

These descriptions of Itzamna compare favorably with those given of the resurrected Lord in Third Nephi in the Book of Mormon, in which the people come to the temple at Bountiful in the New World to hear Jesus Christ, to touch his wounded hands, and to be healed. Now back to the artwork of the ancient Maya as it whispers to us from the dust.

Figure 5

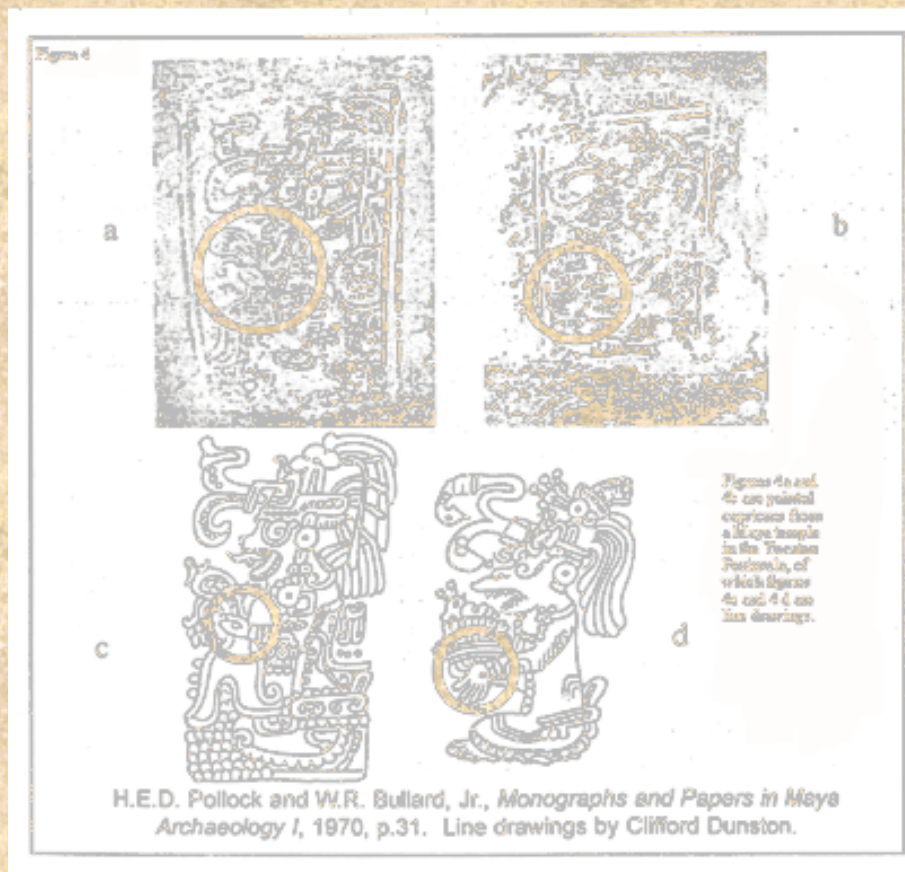


Eric Thompson, *M.H.W.*, figure 21.

Marks on Hands of God K

Figures 4a and 4b show photographs of ancient painted capstones from a Mayan temple in the Yucatan peninsula, from a ruin known today as Dzibilnocac. Eric Thompson suggests that the paintings depict God K of the Maya (F. Nelson, personal communication), who is sometimes identified with Itzamna (Nicholas P. Dunning, *Lords of the Hills: Ancient Maya Settlement in the Puuc Region, Yucatan, Mexico*, 142). The original painting on the upper right (4b) is badly faded, but if you search near the center of the painting you will see a clear black spot on the palm of this deity's hand. In fact, the spot on the hand is among the clearest surviving features on this painting. The line drawing (Figure 4d) retains this circle on the back of the hand, but shows only an open circle whereas the Mayan artist clearly filled in the spot on the hand. The other capstone (Figures 4a and 4c) also shows the deity with a circular marking on the palm of the hand. (The fingers are not detailed in

this case.) Figure 5 is another depiction of Itzamna. Although perhaps not as striking as other paintings, we see markings on the left hand and on the wrist as well. The right hand shows a clear mark on the palm. The examples in Figure 6 portray circle-motif markings on both hands and wrists. These three were painted on ancient Mayan vases, and do not necessarily represent Deity as the previous paintings and sculptures do. Figure 7 shows a stone carving at Yaxchilan, Mexico, also displaying marks in both the hand and wrist. (Photograph by my son David E. Jones, with line drawing by artist Clifford Dunston.) Latter-day Saints generally believe that nails were driven through both the hands and wrists of Jesus (Bruce R. McConkie, [A New Witness for the Articles of Faith](#), p. 14.)



Hands in Mayan Hieroglyphs

Do marked hands appear in Mayan hieroglyphic writing? Yes they do, numbering in the thousands of marked hands! Figure 8 is taken from Piedras Negras, Guatemala, and provides typical examples of marked hand symbolism in Mayan hieroglyphic writing. I should mention that a Mayan stone carving may show an actual hole or cavity in the hand, while the modern line-drawing of the carved glyph often simply uses a circle. Usually the wrist is not shown in these carvings. Figure 9 displays Maya glyphs representing "the god of the seventh day." (E. Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, pl 76.)

As I have asked non-LDS archaeologists about the hand-markings, they have generally replied that either they don't know, or perhaps this is a protruding wrist bone as the hand is severed from the body. I don't know who initiated this idea, for I have not seen anyone write it down in published material. Further thought would suggest that the wrist has two bones not just one, and that many of the hieroglyphics show the single mark near the middle of the back of the hand or the palm. Several cases have been brought forth which show marks in both wrist and hand. Finally, the spot is seen on hands of Itzamna while connected to the rest of his body, both as he dies and evidently following his resurrection.

Figure 7



a Photograph taken by David E. Jones of a stone carving at Yaxchilan. E. Carving by Christl Davidson

Figure 8



A Maya Hieroglyphic Writing System, 1988, p.248

Stela 3 from Piedras Negras, Guatemala. These are a few of the many examples of marked hand iconography in the Maya hieroglyphics.

Serious non-LDS commentary continues:

"[Note] the close relationship between Maya hieroglyphic writing and religion, for there is no doubt that many forms and perhaps the names of hieroglyphs have religious connotations" (Thompson, *Mayan Hieroglyphic Writing*, 9).

"As in the case of several of the day signs already examined, the design has been shown to reproduce a characteristic attribute of the deity to whom the day was dedicated; it is virtually certain that **the hand is the symbol of the god of the seventh day....The hand is also associated with Itzamna....**" (Thompson, *Mayan Hieroglyphic Writing*, 76).

Thus, the marked hand symbol is connected to Deity-in particular with Itzamna, who died, went to the world of spirits and then was resurrected. All of this is reminiscent of Jesus Christ, supporting



the claim of the Book of Mormon that New World inhabitants knew of Jesus long before Columbus arrived. There is much additional evidence, and the interested reader is pointed to reference [Jones 1999].

The hypothesis that started my search, that Christ's "other sheep" would have artwork depicting deliberately marked hands, has led to a remarkable conclusion: Hands (and wrists) with clear holes or marks are depicted in the art as well as the hieroglyphic writings of the Maya of Middle America, dating from within about 200 years of the time of Christ. These hands are associated with Itzamna, a kindly Deity associated with healing and teaching the people. He is shown dying in Mayan art, later to be resurrected. Finally, the Maya await the return of this great resurrected Deity in the not-distant future. [See Jones, 99]

These discoveries have provided me a deeper appreciation for the reality of the resurrection of Jesus and of His visit to "other sheep" who heard His voice and saw His wounded hands as did Thomas. My hope is that these new insights will encourage you to seriously consider the Book of Mormon, Another Testament of Christ. Why don't you start reading right away? The Apostle Paul said: "Prove all things. Hold fast that which is good." (I Thessalonians 5:21) Why not? I've

done this and for me, the Book of Mormon is a remarkable new witness for Christ, standing as a companion to the Bible.

Appendix: Excerpts from a beautiful Mesoamerican poem that I believe is relevant, providing further insights into the beliefs of the Maya:

The kettle drums color of jade resound,
Brilliant dew has fallen over the earth.
In the house of yellow feathers
it pours down with force.

His son has come down, descended there in the springtime.
He is the Giver of Life.
His songs make flourish, he adorns himself.

O friends, let us rejoice, let us embrace one another.
We walk the flowering earth.
Nothing can bring an end here to flowers and songs,
they are perpetuated in the house of the Giver of Life.
Friendship is a rain of precious flowers.
We are here, we are living here,
but we are only beggars O my friends.

Where do we go, oh! Where do we go?
Are we dead beyond, or do we yet live?
Will there be existence again?
Will the joy of the Giver of Life be there again?
Where is the source of light, since that which gives life hides itself?

Let our hearts not be troubled.
One day we must go, one night we will descend into the region of mystery.
We will have gone to His house,
but our word shall live here on earth.
Remove trouble from your hearts, O my friends.
Indeed one must go elsewhere; beyond, happiness exists.

O Lord of the close vicinity, it is beyond, with those who dwell in Your house,
that I will sing songs to You, in the innermost of heaven.
My heart rises; I fix my eyes upon You, next to You, beside You, O Giver of Life!

(Excerpted from Native Mesoamerican Spirituality, edited with a foreword, introduction and notes by Miguel Leon-Portilla. Translations by Miguel Leon-Protilla, J. O. Arthur Anderson, Charles E. Dibble and Munro S. Edmonson. NY: Paulist Press, 1980.