

The Mayan Calendar: 2012

By Ben Williamson

The Mayans: The Ancient Mayan civilization dwelt in what is today southern Mexico and Northern Central America. The Mayan culture reached its' apex from AD 200-900.

Documents: Dresden Codex, Madrid Codex, Paris Codex and Grolier Codex. The *Popol Vuh* and *Chilam Balam* are transcribed Mayan hieroglyphics done in the 1500's and 1600's.

Publications: Publications addressing the Mayan Calendar and the 2012 date are predominately New Age. A few of the most popular writings are Gregg Braden, et. al. *The Mystery of 2012: Predictions, Prophecies & Possibilities*; Patrick Geryl, *How to Survive 2012*; John Major Jenkins, *Maya Cosmogenesis 2012*; Daniel Pinchbeck, *2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl*.

The Theory: The Ancient Mayans were privy to astronomical knowledge and made elaborate calendars based on these observations. It is alleged that their calendar ends on December 21, 2012.

HISTORY

The History of the Mayan people can be divided up into three major periods, Pre-Classic (up to AD 200), Classic (AD 200 to AD 900) and Post-Classic (AD 900 to AD 1521). Debate exists regarding the origin of the Mayan people, both to its time and appearance.

The Olmec are another Mesoamerican people, who were then followed by the Zapotec. Historians believe that the Olmec civilization predates the Mayan by over a thousand years.¹ Due to the vast differences between the civilizations, some suggest that the Mayans originated independently of the Olmec, and not in succession.² It is probably safe to say "that the Mayan civilization did not evolve in a vacuum. All around the Maya lands were other related peoples, developing on parallel lines."³

A popular theory holds that the Mayans (and other Mesoamerican groups) are the descendents of one of the lost tribes of Israel. However, modern DNA research has dismissed this theory⁴ in addition to the realization that the Mesoamerican worldview is vastly different from that of the Israelite's.⁵ The most popular theory today is that the Mesoamerican civilization has its origin when man crossed the Bering Strait and journeyed south sometime in the distant past, though possible arrival by sea cannot be ruled out either.

Whatever their origin is, Mayan civilization is credited with reaching its zenith during the Classical Period (200 BC to 900 AD). "The Mayans occupied eastern Mesoamerica, which today is the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, extending down into modern Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize. Mayan cities were large population centers. Tikal, a Mayan city in what is now Guatemala, had a population of about 50,000, had more than 3,000 buildings, and covered an area of six square miles."⁶

The Post-Classical period of the Mayans closes with the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadors under the leadership of Hernando Cortes (1485-1547). After the Aztec Empire collapsed in 1521, the Mayan civilization would be the subsequent focus of the Spaniards. "Conquest of the Maya was more difficult because there was no single political center to overthrow. Each Mayan city-state fiercely resisted the Spanish and each had to be overcome one by one. In the end it was not Cortes who subjugated the Maya. A member of his original war party returned with his own army. He waged war with the Maya through three separate campaigns between 1527 and 1546. It would take over 150 years before Itza, the last Maya stronghold, fell in 1697."⁷

Due to the order of the destruction of Mayan religious books under the Franciscan bishop, Diego de Landa, most of the Mayan literature is extinct today except for the Dresden, Madrid,

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Paris and Grolier Codices. Two other important documents for Mayan study are the *Popol Vuh* and *Chilam Balam*, which are Spanish and Latin transcriptions from Mayan hieroglyphics done in the 1500 and 1600's. These sources "are rich resources for understanding Mayan spirituality"⁸ and "have become cornerstones in understanding Mayan beliefs."⁹

Though there are remnants of the Maya people still around today,¹⁰ the mighty civilization as it was in its former days during the Classical Period is long gone. What became of them? "The most accepted theory today is some kind of environmental collapse and resulting famine from overfarming, deforestation, and depleted soils. While no one can be certain, a fatal combination of several causes makes the most sense."¹¹

MAYAN RELIGION

Mayan belief regarding God was highly polytheistic. "There were hundreds of individual Mayan deities."¹² As detailed in the creation account in *Popol Vuh*, the supreme god was Hunab K'u. "Hunab Ku...was so remote, impersonal and incomprehensible that in practice little account was taken of him. His son, Itzamna, was the god of the heavens and of night and day."¹³ In addition to these gods, there were the *Bacabs* who "held the heavens up on their shoulders" plus gods that pertained to everyday life.¹⁴

A key element of Mayan religion were ceremonies. Here, purification rites were undertaken, incense burned, and offerings of food and blood sacrificed to the gods. "The ceremony closed with dancing, feasting, and drinking."¹⁵

MAYAN CALENDARS

The reason for the current fascination with the 2012 date is the Mayan calendars. This is seen in their use of mathematics¹⁶ and their preoccupation with the sky.¹⁷ To just speak of the Mayan *calendar* would be inappropriate since the Mayans used many calendars, but three of the calendars are most noteworthy.

The first is the *Haab*, also called Vague Year, which was a solar calendar. It consisted of 18 months with 20 days each.¹⁸ Since this adds up to being five days short of a solar year, the remaining five days were "known as *wayeb*, or unlucky days, and were devoted to religious ceremonies concerned with the New Year."¹⁹

The second calendar is the *Tzolkin* consisting of 260 days. Numbers 20 and 13 are important to this calendar. There are 20 names for each day but you would only count 13 days and start again. Therefore, when day 14 came, it would be counted as day 1, though the name for the fourteenth day would be used. Likewise, when day 21 came, it would be counted as day 8 but the name used for it would be the name for the first day. "How such a period of time even came into being remains an enigma, but the use to which it was put is clear. Every single day had its own omens and associations, and the inexorable march of the twenty days acted as a kind of perpetual fortune-telling machine guiding the destinies of the Maya and of all the peoples of Mexico."²⁰

Interconnecting the *Haab* and *Tzolkin* calendar forms the Calendar Round. To have a certain day and number on the *Haab* calendar line up with a certain day and number on the *Tzolkin* calendar would be once every 52 years.²¹

The third, and of particular interest to 2012, is the Long Count calendar which is "the greatest of all Maya timekeeping cycles."²² Each day has five separate parts. Using Mayan terms, these are spelled out as: 1 kin (=1 day); 1 uinal (=20 kins); 1 tun (=18 uinals); 1 katun (=20 tuns) and 1 baktun (=20 katuns). Day one on the Long Count calendar would be converted to read 0.0.0.0.1. When you would get to 20 kins (20 days), it would be 0.0.0.1.0, indicating 1 uinal. 23 kins would be recorded as 0.0.0.1.3. If you wanted to record 1 baktun (144,000 days) it would be 1.0.0.0.0. A full Long Count calendar is one "Great Cycle" which is 13 baktuns (5,125.37 years), or 13.0.0.0.0.

The Mayans believed the world consisted of five Great Cycles. When one Great Cycle was completed, the next Great Cycle would start. The last day of the Great Cycle would read 12.19.19.17.19. The next day, which would be day zero, is 13.0.0.0.0. The next day, day one, would be 0.0.0.0.1. For this reason, many researchers explain this calendar in terms of an odometer—when the odometer reaches its highest count, it will simply turn over and start again.

Due to the syncing of a Mayan date with a Spanish date of the same event, researchers were able to tie a Gregorian date with a Mayan date. Counting back in time to when this present Great Cycle began would also show when the Great Cycle would end. The result is that the beginning date of the present Great Cycle was calculated to August 11, 3114 B.C. The ending date would be December 21, 2012 A.D.²³ “The year 2012 is the year that the fifth great cycle is supposed to end. This is the genesis of the belief that the end of days is 2012.”²⁴

Events Surrounding December 21, 2012

What is supposed to take place on 12/21/2012? We do know that this is a winter solstice, which is nothing out of the ordinary. What is said to take place is an event that supposedly happens every 26,000 years: the alignment of the sun with the center of the Milky Way. However, “[r]eal astronomy does not support any match between the Baktun-13 end date and a galactic alignment. The advocates both admit and ignore this discrepancy.”²⁵ Other natural phenomenon is said to occur, though “there is no indication the Maya cared a whit about solar flares, sunspots, or magnetic fields.”²⁶

Typical of the 2012 proponents are New Age prophecies regarding entering a New Age of awakening²⁷ or experience the next “jump” in “the evolutionary stage.”²⁸ It is taught that we are gradually moving from one age into the next: the Age of Aquarius. “Like the Mayan researchers, modern astrologers can’t agree on when the Age of Aquarius is really supposed to start, or the Age of Pisces end. It’s generally agreed that the switchover doesn’t happen on a single day, but will be happening around the change of the millennia—which puts it right in the ballpark of 2012.”²⁹

What the Mayans believed would happen at the end of the current “Great Cycle” is virtually nonexistent. “Though the Maya believed that successive creations were cyclic, there is no evidence of what they thought would happen on our 13.0.0.0.0. The same holds true for what happened last time the odometer of creation turned over.”³⁰ Others agree: “What did the Maya themselves think about End Times? There is no evidence that they saw the calendar and a world age ending in either transcendence or catastrophe on December 21, 2012.”³¹

Of the Mayan codices that have survived to this day, the Dresden Codex (so-called because of its present location, in Dresden, Germany) may have the closest suggestion as to how the Mayans believed the world would end. The last page of this codex shows some kind of a description of a flood. Did the Mayans believe the world would end in a flood? While this page “could be a prophecy [by the Mayans] of a massive flood,” writes Hitchcock, it may just simply “refer to some past event, such as the biblical flood event, or even the Mayan rainy season.”³² While this may be the only possible surviving clue as to how the Mayans believed the world would end (if that is what this page in the Dresden Codex is actually saying), it is interesting to note that “contemporary prophets of doom haven’t seized on the flood myth as a mode of destruction, though moviemakers certainly have.”³³

There is one Maya monument that is said to reference the 2012 date but even this is not conclusive. “In all of the Long Count texts discovered, transcribed, and translated, only one mentions the key date in 2012: Monument 6 at Tortuguero, a Maya site in the Mexican state of Tabasco. The text is damaged, but what remains does not imply the end of time.”³⁴

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

As noted, the most popular proponents pushing 2012 are New Agers. Hitchcock writes, “I believe the entire 2012 phenomenon is the eschatology of the New Age movement. It’s their view of how this world will end or how a new age of human consciousness will begin.”³⁵ Therefore, what can be said in critiquing the New Age Movement aptly applies here as well.³⁶

People in the New Age that are using 12/21/2012 are doing so inconsistently. Though one of the Mayan calendars may point to this date,³⁷ there is no indication anywhere that the Mayans believed a great awakening or a new evolutionary jump would take place then. The Mayans were polytheists, thus would have rejected such a notion. As stated above, this might be the only date when the calendar is reset to 0.0.0.0.1. If they did believe it was the end of the world, the only current information we have regarding how they believed the world would end might be by a flood. Hence, New Agers looking to 2012 have borrowed the date from a religion it disagrees with, and given it an entirely different meaning. Hence, 12/21/2012 may have significance to the New Age, but the Mayans should not be credited (blamed) for the current interest in it. Plus, even if the Maya were predicting a flood at the end of this present age, we know this is wrong because Scripture specifically states that this present world will not be destroyed by a flood (Gen. 9:12-17).

Furthermore, Scripture is clear that God has chosen not to disclose when the world will end, especially the date of Christ’s return (Matt. 24:36; Acts 1:7). Therefore, any attempt to assign a date

to such matters will result in futility as is evidenced in the many previous attempts to prophesy ascertain day. This includes even using the Bible to come up with dates.³⁸ Because God has chosen not to reveal this information to mankind, Christians are called to be “ready” and “faithful” always (Matt. 24:44-45) for Christ could come at any moment.

Finally, while God can and does use pagans for His purposes and glory (Num. 23:11-12; Isa. 45:1), it would be out of character for God to reveal to the ungodly the time of the end of the world and not to His own children (cf. Matt. 13:11; 1 Cor. 2:14).

Notes

- ¹ Howard W. Goodkind, “How Lord Kingsborough Lost His Fortune: Looking for the Lost Tribes Among the Maya” in “Mysteries of the Bible: From the Garden of Eden to the Shroud of Turin” (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2004), 90.
- ² Synthia Andrews and Colin Andrews, “The Complete Idiot’s Guide to 2012: An Ancient Look at a Critical Time” (New York: Alpha, 2008), 7.
- ³ Ralph Whitlock, “Everyday Life of the Maya” (New York: Dorset Press, 1987), 22.
- ⁴ See the Southerton, Simon G. *Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004.
- ⁵ See Goodkind’s work noted above where he shows a number of dissimilarities between Israelite and the Mesoamerican religions.
- ⁶ Mark Hitchcock, “2012, The Bible, and the End of the World” (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2009), 30.
- ⁷ Andrews and Andrews, “Idiot’s Guide,” 14.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17. “Despite the long campaign against them, the Maya did not disappear. Although there are few full-blooded Maya left, many Mayan descendents still live in the same villages and cities of the original Maya Area...There are 440 tribes within the Maya, and each one has an elder. These 440 elders make up the Mayan Council.”
- ¹¹ Hitchcock, “End of the World,” 31.
- ¹² Andrews and Andrews, “Idiot’s Guide,” 34.
- ¹³ Whitlock, “Everyday Life,” 91.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.
- ¹⁵ Andrews and Andrews, “Idiot’s Guide,” 31.
- ¹⁶ Whitlock, “Everyday Life,” 107. “The Mayan system of numbers was brilliantly conceived and far superior in most respected to the system that served the Roman world for centuries.”
- ¹⁷ Hitchcock, “End of the World,” 31. “[W]e know one main thing about the Maya: They were sky-watching timekeepers.”
- ¹⁸ The number “20” was an important number for the Mayans.
- ¹⁹ Whitlock, “Everyday Life,” 109.
- ²⁰ Michael Coe, “The Maya,” 5th ed. (Thames and Hudson: New York, 1993), 18. Coe notes that this particular calendar “still survives in unchanged form among some indigenous peoples in southern Mexico and the Maya highlands, under the care of calendar priests.”
- ²¹ “Each day had two labels, one in accordance with the *Haab* year, one with the *Tzolkin* year. Each day of the *Tzolkin* year coincided with the same day in the *Haab* year once every 18,980 days; 73 *Tzolkin* years equaled 52 *Haab* years, and at the end of 52 *Haab* years the cycle began again.” Whitlock, “Everyday Life,” 109.
- ²² Anthony Aveni, “Long Count Lowdown” in *Archaeology*. Nov./Dec. 2009, Vol. 62, Num. 6, 33.
- ²³ Though the starting and ending dates noted are the most accepted, others question their accuracy. “The most notable dissenter is Swedish microbiologist and Mayan researcher Carl Johan Calleman. He believes the end date of the Long Count is actually October 28, 2011. He bases this in part of an adjustment made to the Long Count by Mayan priests in Palenque in 600 C.E. The adjustment was made to correct a 420-day error in the continuity of the calendar....There are many who believe the entire dating of the Long Count calendar is faulty. Chief among these is Vincent Malmstrom at Dartmouth University. He believes that the start and end dates are contrived to fit our modern understandings of the universe.” Andrews and Andrews, “Idiot’s Guide,” 75.
- ²⁴ Hitchcock, “End of the World,” 33.
- ²⁵ E.C. Krupp, “The Great 2012 Scare,” *Sky & Telescope*, Nov. 2009, 26.
- ²⁶ Anthony Aveni, “Apocalypse Soon? What the Maya Calendar really tells us about 2012 and the end of time,” *Archaeology*. Nov./Dec. 2009, Vol. 62, Num. 6, 32.
- ²⁷ For instance, Vaughan-Lee writes, “Perhaps the prophecies of the year 2012 point to this possibility, a moment in cosmic time when, with an outpouring of energy, the world will awaken to its divine nature and throw off the debris of materialism. Those identified with the dying dream would experience this as a cataclysm, a global disaster. But others might recognize it as what we have unknowingly been waiting for, a new Golden Age in which we can return to the simplicity and joy that belong to life in its essence, life as it really is....” Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee “An Awakening World” in *The Mystery of 2012: Predictions, Prophecies & Possibilities*. Braden, et. al. Boulder, Co: Sounds True, Inc. 2007, 262.
- ²⁸ For instance, Argüelles, writing from an evolutionary framework, states, “If you go back 26,000 years, this cycle roughly encompasses the evolutionary stage of Homo sapiens. The peak of the last Ice Age was in 24,000 BC. This is when what we call ‘modern humanity’ emerged...We’re in the fifth and last of a set of Great Cycles that began in 24,000 BC. It’s on this basis that we’re looking at 2012 as being a very, very critical juncture. It’s what I refer to as ‘galactic synchronization,’ and it also is a major evolutionary shift. The evolutionary shift will occur in 2012.” José Argüelles, “The Mayan Factor: Path Beyond Technology” in *The Mystery of 2012: Predictions, Prophecies & Possibilities*, 74.
- ²⁹ Andrews and Andrews, “Idiot’s Guide,” 291.
- ³⁰ Aveni, “Apocalypse Soon?” 34.
- ³¹ Krupp, “Great 2012 Scare,” 26.
- ³² Hitchcock, “End of the World,” 36.
- ³³ Aveni, “Apocalypse Soon?” 34.
- ³⁴ Krupp, “Great 2012 Scare,” 26. Aveni adds, “Concerning our 13.0.0.0.0, Monument 6 at Tabasco tells of the descent of some transcendent entity to earth. But just when the story might get even more interesting, the glyphs have eroded away, leaving the door open for the prophets to continue to speculate.” Aveni, “Apocalypse Soon?” 34.
- ³⁵ Hitchcock, “End of the World,” 24.
- ³⁶ A separate 4-page *Profile* has been published on this subject: Craig Branch, “New Age Movement” *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2008). A complete *Profile Notebook* (over 370 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook.htm.
- ³⁷ Again, not all are in agreement with the Long Count calendar date ending on December 21, 2012. See endnote #24 above.
- ³⁸ One such attempt at using the Bible to get 2012 is Jack Van Impe. After stating, “Now, this is just a supposition. I don’t set dates” and quoting Matthew 24:36 to acknowledge that December 21, 2012 would be date setting, Van Impe goes on to explain why he believes the coming of Christ is near, in keeping with verse 33 in relation to the year 2012. See the DVD by Drs. Jack & Rexella Van Impe, “December 21st 2012: History’s Final Day?” available from Jack Van Impe Ministries, Troy, MI 48007, www.jvim.com.



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