

## Book Reviews

ALLEN J. CHRISTENSON, translator and editor. *Popol Vuh: The Mythic Sections—Tales of First Beginnings from the Ancient K'iche'-Maya*. Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000. xv; 278 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendix, bibliography. Softbound, \$19.95.

Reviewed by John S. Robertson

This book is the second of the FARMS series *Ancient Texts and Mormon Studies*. The complete title, *Popol Vuh: The Mythic Sections—Tales of First Beginnings from the Ancient K'iche'-Maya*, reveals that Allen Christenson chose to publish the part of the Popol Vuh (an ancient Mayan story) that explains the Mayan view of the creation of humankind. The unpublished part deals with the protohistory of K'iche' nobility.

Christenson prepared himself well to undertake the onerous task of translating a text whose language is very remote from English and whose content is far removed from what is culturally conceivable to English speakers. Christenson spoke K'iche' as a missionary in Guatemala and, under the direction of the renowned Mayanist Linda Schele, earned his Ph.D. at the University of Texas at Austin.

Christenson's book has three main segments: an introduction, a "free translation," and a "literal translation" with the K'iche' text running alongside. The introduction outlines the origins of the people and the manuscript and also gives a description of K'iche' poetic style. As Christenson explains, our current historical understanding holds that a migratory, conquering people came to the Guatemalan highlands from the Mayan lowlands (the southern coast of the Gulf of Mexico), bringing with them new languages and culture. The conquerors were likely bilingual in both Nuhua (Uto-Aztecan) and Chontal (Mayan), but like the Manchus of China, they ultimately assimilated to their new environment, adopting the language of the people they conquered (K'iche'-Maya).

The introduction also gives some historical background: According to the author, the Popol Vuh was written in the ancient Mayan script long before the time of Columbus. The Popol Vuh was first written in Roman script in the mid-sixteenth century. The authors of the Roman manuscript are anonymous but were likely grandsons of the two Mayan kings burned at the time of Spanish contact.

The author carefully inventories the rhetorical tropes of the Popol Vuh, which is high poetry in the best literary tradition. Roman Jakobson regards poetry as a focus on "phonological, grammatical and semantic

structures in their multiform interplay,” with the stipulation that parallelism “does not remain confined to the limits of parallel lines but expands throughout their distribution within the entire context.”<sup>1</sup> Such distribution is certainly true of Mayan poetry. Undoubtedly, Christenson’s most significant contribution to the broader understanding of Mayan poetry is his careful attention to chiasmus, which is significantly present in the Popol Vuh.

The final portion of the introduction is entitled “The Popol Vuh and Revealed Scripture.” Christenson initially points out that “there has never been an official statement by the Church” concerning the geographic setting of the Book of Mormon (24). It follows that the historicity of the Book of Mormon hardly hangs on the degree to which the Popol Vuh reflects Mormon theology. With that caveat, he lists some suggestive themes, including organizational—not ex nihilo—creation; gods—not just God—in creation; planning (spiritual creation) before creation; emergence of land from water; and creation by the spoken word.

The free translation and the literal translation constitute the core of the book. In one sense, Christenson picked an impossible task for himself, since it could be argued that absolute translation is impossible—especially translation of poetry. Of course, linguistic content gets translated all the time, but the fact remains that translation of artistic creation, which depends so heavily on those elements unique to the respective languages, is like trying to shop with pennies: there is no functional medium of exchange. Difficulties of exchange are heightened when the respective languages’ literary devices—including phonology, grammar, and cultural references—are fundamentally different.

That said, Christenson’s method comes as close as any method could to bridging the gap between the two languages and cultures. The free translation aids those readers who want an approximate sense of the content and story line of the Popol Vuh. The copious footnotes are rich in ethnographic and linguistic detail. For example: “*Kik’* is the vital fluid of any living thing (blood for animals, sap for trees, etc.). Rubber, as well as a ball made from rubber, is also called *kik’* since it is made from the sap of the rubber tree (*Castilla elastica*)” (75). It turns out that the rubber ball (or lack thereof) on the Mayan ball court is a symbol of life (or death).

The literal translation is also helpful, not only because it is virtually a word-by-word rendition in English for K’iche’, but also because it contains the K’iche’ text itself. This inclusion is particularly valuable to scholars. As a student of Mayan languages for some thirty years, I have found this volume very helpful as a reference work. In addition, the author generously provided me with a digitized version that facilitated my research.

Finally, the illustrations (typically pictures of the Guatemalan countryside or illustrative ceramics) are nicely chosen. Of special interest are the scenes from ancient ceramics, usually with a caption that includes text from the *Popol Vuh*. It is remarkable that these ceramic depictions correspond directly with certain descriptions of scenes found in the *Popol Vuh*. It would roughly be like a non-Christian a thousand years from now reading about Christ's nativity from the New Testament and then finding some of the thousands of paintings with the Christ Child, Mary, Joseph, the wise men, the shepherds, and the animals in the stall.

My only complaint about the book would be the orthography in the K'iche' transliteration. In K'iche' (some dialects, at least), long vowels are distinguished from short vowels. Apparently, Christenson uses diereses (the symbol "¨") on some vowels to make that distinction, but his markings do not always correspond to the spoken language. It probably would have been better to have left out the diereses because the distinction is so dialectically complex that it is an overwhelming task to try to reconstruct the complicated vocalic distinctions of four hundred years ago. Furthermore, some words are lost from the modern language, so it would be impossible to know the pronunciation anyway. But this is a small matter compared to the overall strength of the book. His reconstruction of consonantal distinctions not found in the original text is accurate.

Anyone interested in Mayan myth, culture, and prehistory will find this work full of information that bridges the gap that otherwise makes the ancient Mayan language and worldview so remote from our own. Christenson is to be congratulated for a massive effort that resulted in a book whose value can only increase with time.

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1. Roman Jakobson, "Grammatical Parallelism and Its Russian Facet," *Language* 42 (April–June 1966): 423.