

PREPARING to *Read*

Now that you have read one of the best-known creation stories, it's time to turn your attention to a less-familiar one, from a culture very different from the ancient Hebrews'. As you will see, the Mayan account of creation differs in many ways from that in Genesis. But there are also many surprising similarities between the accounts.

Build Background

Mayan Civilization The selection you are about to read is an excerpt from an important Mayan work—the *Popol Vuh*. The Maya were a Native American people who lived in what is now southern Mexico and Guatemala. They developed an advanced civilization that flourished from A.D. 250 to 900. Their cities were magnificent, with grand temples. Around 900, for reasons not completely understood, they abandoned the cities and migrated into the surrounding countryside. Spanish invaders entered their territory in the early 1500s, and by the middle of the century, most of the Maya had been conquered by the Spaniards.

The Maya excelled in painting and sculpture and developed advanced forms of mathematics and astronomy. Using paper prepared from fig-tree bark, they even made books. Other Mayan inventions include an accurate yearly calendar based on precise astronomical measurements and a complex system of hieroglyphic writing. Like the ancient Egyptians, the Maya used their written language to decorate as well as communicate.

In addition to their yearly calendar, the Maya created a sacred calendar of 260 days. Each day was associated with a particular god or goddess. Mayan priests used the calendar as a way of harmonizing their activities with divine forces. In the *Popol Vuh*, when the gods speak of “keeping days,” they are referring to the use of the sacred calendar.

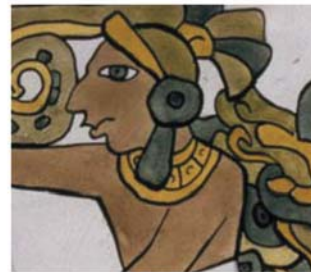
The *Popol Vuh*, or “book of the community,” contains the Mayan story of the creation of the world. It was written not long after the Spanish conquest by an anonymous Mayan noble, who may have been trying to keep the work from becoming lost as a result of his people's defeat.

from

POPOL



VUH



Translated by Dennis Tedlock

GUIDE FOR READING

FOCUS In the opening section, you will learn about the very beginning of the world. As you read, notice how the gods think and talk about their creation.

This is the beginning of the Ancient Word, here in this place called Quiché.¹ Here we shall inscribe, we shall implant the Ancient Word, the potential and source for everything done in the citadel of Quiché, in the nation of Quiché people. . . .

This is the account, here it is:

Now it still ripples, now it still murmurs, ripples, it still sighs, still hums, and it is empty under the sky.

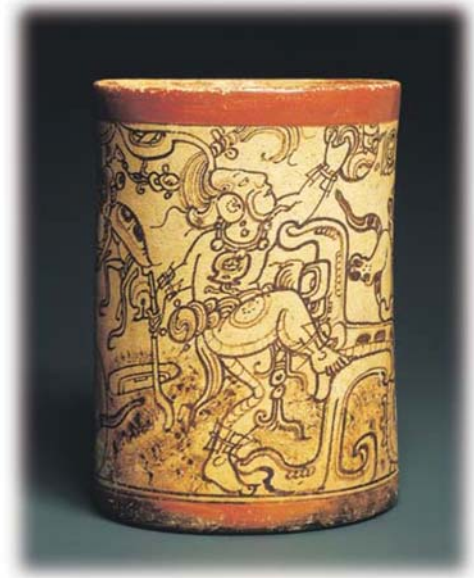
Here follow the first words, the first eloquence:

There is not yet one person, one animal, bird, fish, crab, tree, rock, hollow, canyon, meadow, forest. Only the sky alone is there; the face of the earth is not clear. Only the sea alone is pooled under all the sky; there is nothing whatever gathered together. It is at rest; not a single thing stirs. It is held back, kept at rest under the sky.

Whatever there is that might be is simply not there: only the pooled water, only the calm sea, only it alone is pooled.

Whatever might be is simply not there: only murmurs, ripples, in the dark, in the night. Only the Maker, Modeler alone, Sovereign Plumed Serpent, the Bearers, Begetters are in the water, a glittering light. They are there, they are enclosed in quetzal² feathers, in blue-green.

Thus the name, “Plumed Serpent.” They are great knowers, great thinkers in their very being. And of course there is the sky, and there is



Mayan cylindrical vessel decorated with mythological scene (seventh to eighth century). The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1968.

also the Heart of Sky. This is the name of the god, as it is spoken.

And then came his word, he came here to the Sovereign Plumed Serpent, here in the blackness, in the early dawn. He spoke with the Sovereign Plumed Serpent, and they talked, then they thought, then they worried. They agreed with each other, they joined their words, their thoughts. Then it was clear, then they reached accord³ in the light, and then humanity was clear, when they conceived the growth, the generation of trees, of bushes, and the growth of life,

1. Quiché (kē-chā').

2. quetzal (kēt-säl'): Central American bird, with brilliantly covered plumage, often identified with the Sovereign Plumed Serpent.

3. accord: agreement.



**AND THEN THE
EARTH AROSE
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THE EARTH THEY
SAID “EARTH.”**

plate and platform, then should come the sowing, the dawning of the sky-earth. But there will be no high days and no bright praise for our work, our design, until the rise of the human work, the human design,” they said.

And then the earth arose because of them, it was simply their word that brought it forth. For the forming of the earth they said “Earth.” It arose suddenly, just like a cloud, like a mist, now forming, unfolding. Then the mountains were separated from the water, all at once the great mountains came forth. By their genius alone, by

of humankind, in the blackness, in the early dawn, all because of the Heart of Sky, named Hurricane. Thunderbolt Hurricane comes first, the second is Newborn Thunderbolt, and the third is Sudden Thunderbolt.

So there were three of them, as Heart of Sky, who came to the Sovereign Plumed Serpent, when the dawn of life was conceived:

“How should the sowing be, and the dawning? Who is to be the provider, nurturer?”

“Let it be this way, think about it: this water should be removed, emptied out for the formation of the earth’s own

their cutting edge alone they carried out the conception of the mountain-plain, whose face grew instant groves of cypress and pine.

And the Plumed Serpent was pleased with this:

“It was good that you came, Heart of Sky, Hurricane, and Newborn Thunderbolt, Sudden Thunderbolt. Our work, our design will turn out well,” they said.

And the earth was formed first, the mountain-plain. The channels of water were separated; their branches wound their ways among the mountains. The waters were divided when the great mountains appeared.

Such was the formation of the earth when it was brought forth by the Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth, as they are called, since they were the first to think of it. The sky was set apart, and the earth was set apart in the midst of the waters.

Such was their plan when they thought, when they worried about the completion of their work.

PAUSE & REFLECT How do the gods seem to feel about their creation at this point?

FOCUS Now the gods will create the animals. As you read, notice what the gods expect of the animals and how they react to the animals’ behavior.

Now they planned the animals of the mountains, all the guardians of the forests, creatures of the mountains: the deer, birds, pumas, jaguars, serpents, rattlesnakes, fer-de-lances,⁴ guardians of the bushes.

A Bearer, Begetter speaks:

“Why this pointless humming? Why should there merely be rustling beneath the trees and bushes?”

“Indeed—they had better have guardians,” the others replied. As soon as they thought it and said it, deer and birds came forth.

4. *fer-de-lances* (fēr’dl-ān’səz): poisonous tropical snakes.

And then they gave out homes to the deer and birds:

“You, the deer: sleep along the rivers, in the canyons. Be here in the meadows, in the thickets, in the forests, multiply yourselves. You will stand and walk on all fours,” they were told.

So then they established the nests of the birds, small and great:

“You, precious birds: your nests, your houses are in the trees, in the bushes. Multiply there, scatter there, in the branches of trees, the branches of bushes,” the deer and birds were told.

When this deed had been done, all of them had received a place to sleep and a place to stay. So it is that the nests of the animals are on the earth, given by the Bearer, Begetter. Now the arrangement of the deer and birds was complete.

And then the deer and birds were told by the Maker, Modeler, Bearer, Begetter:

“Talk, speak out. Don’t moan, don’t cry out. Please talk, each to each, within each kind, within each group,” they were told—the deer, birds, puma, jaguar, serpent.

“Name now our names, praise us. We are your mother, we are your father. Speak now:

‘Hurricane,
Newborn Thunderbolt, Sudden Thunderbolt,
Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth,
Maker, Modeler,
Bearer, Begetter,’

Speak, pray to us, keep our days,”⁵ they were told. But it didn’t turn out that they spoke like people: they just squawked, they just chattered, they just howled. It wasn’t apparent what language they spoke; each one gave a different cry. When the Maker, Modeler heard this:

“It hasn’t turned out well, they haven’t spoken,” they said among themselves. “It hasn’t turned out that our names have been named. Since we are their mason and sculptor, this will

not do,” the Bearers and Begetters said among themselves. So they told them:

“You will simply have to be transformed. Since it hasn’t turned out well and you haven’t spoken, we have changed our word:

“What you feed on, what you eat, the places where you sleep, the places where you stay, whatever is yours will remain in the canyons, the forests. Although it turned out that our days were not kept, nor did you pray to us, there may yet be strength in the keeper of days, the giver of praise whom we have yet to make. Just accept your service, just let your flesh be eaten.

“So be it, this must be your service,” they were told when they were instructed—the animals, small and great, on the face of the earth.

And then they wanted to test their timing again, they wanted to experiment again, and they wanted to prepare for the keeping of days again. They had not heard their speech among the animals; it did not come to fruition and it was not complete.

And so their flesh was brought low: they served, they were eaten, they were killed—the animals on the face of the earth.

PAUSE & REFLECT How do the gods change their expectations of the animals?

FOCUS As you read the next section, notice what the gods say about their expectations and how they react to the mud person and the people of wood.

Again there comes an experiment with the human work, the human design, by the Maker, Modeler, Bearer, Begetter:

“It must simply be tried again. The time for the planting and dawning is nearing. For this we must make a provider and nurturer. How else

5. **keep our days:** pray to us according to the regular movements and rhythms of a calendar.

can we be invoked⁶ and remembered on the face of the earth? We have already made our first try at our work and design, but it turned out that they didn't keep our days, nor did they glorify us.

"So now let's try to make a giver of praise, giver of respect, provider, nurturer," they said.

So then comes the building and working with earth and mud. They made a body, but it didn't look good to them. It was just separating, just crumbling, just loosening, just softening, just disintegrating, and just dissolving. Its head wouldn't turn, either. Its face was just lopsided, its face was just twisted. It couldn't look around. It talked at first, but senselessly. It was quickly dissolving in the water.

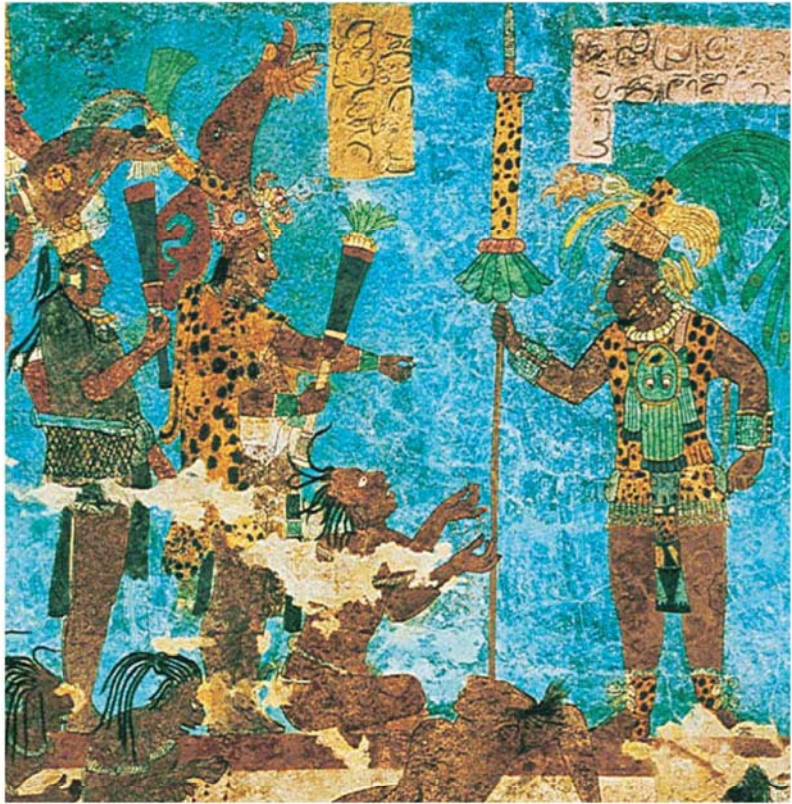
"It won't last," the mason and sculptor said then. "It seems to be dwindling away, so let it just dwindle. It can't walk and it can't multiply, so let it be merely a thought," they said.

So then they dismantled, again they brought down their work and design. Again they talked:

"What is there for us to make that would turn out well, that would succeed in keeping our days and praying to us?" they said. Then they planned again:

"We'll just tell Xpiyacoc,⁷ Xmucane,⁸ Hunahpu Possum, Hunahpu Coyote, to try a counting of days, a counting of lots," the mason and sculptor said to themselves. Then they invoked Xpiyacoc, Xmucane.

Then comes the naming of those who are the midmost seers: the "Grandmother of Day, Grandmother of Light," as the Maker, Modeler called them. These are names



HUMANITIES CONNECTION This picture of Mayan warriors and their prisoners of war comes from Bonampak, a Mayan city that flourished 1,200 years ago. One building at Bonampak contains three rooms of murals, the most complete set of ancient paintings yet discovered in the New World.

of Xpiyacoc and Xmucane.

When Hurricane had spoken with the Sovereign Plumed Serpent, they invoked the daykeepers, diviners, the midmost seers:

"There is yet to find, yet to discover how we are to model a person, construct a person again, a provider, nurturer, so that we are called upon and we are recognized: our recompense⁹ is in words.

Midwife, matchmaker,
our grandmother, our grandfather,

6. *invoked*: prayed to.

7. *Xpiyacoc* (shpē'yä-kök').

8. *Xmucane* (shmōō'kā-nē').

9. *recompense* (rĕk'am-pĕns'): payment; reward.

Xpiyacoc, Xmucane,
let there be planting, let there be the dawning
of our invocation, our sustenance, our
recognition
by the human work, the human design,
the human figure, the human form.
So be it, fulfill your names:
Hunahpu Possum, Hunahpu Coyote,
Bearer twice over, Begetter twice over,
Great Peccary, Great Coati,
lapidary, jeweler,
sawyer,¹⁰ carpenter,
plate shaper, bowl shaper,
incense maker, master craftsman,
Grandmother of Day, Grandmother of Light.

You have been called upon because of our work,
our design. Run your hands over the kernels of
corn, over the seeds of the coral tree, just get it
done, just let it come out whether we should
carve and gouge a mouth, a face in wood,” they
told the daykeepers.

And then comes the borrowing, the counting
of days; the hand is moved over the corn kernels,
over the coral seeds, the days, the lots.

Then they spoke to them, one of them a
grandmother, the other a grandfather.

This is the grandfather, this is the master of
the coral seeds: Xpiyacoc is his name.

And this is the grandmother, the daykeeper,
diviner who stands behind others: Xmucane is
her name.

And they said, as they set out the days:

“Just let it be found, just let it be discovered,
say it, our ear is listening,
may you talk, may you speak,
just find the wood for the carving and
sculpting
by the builder, sculptor.
Is this to be the provider, the nurturer
when it comes to the planting, the dawning?
You corn kernels, you coral seeds,
you days, you lots:

may you succeed, may you be accurate,”

they said to the corn kernels, coral seeds, days,
lots. “Have shame, you up there, Heart of Sky:
attempt no deception before the mouth and face
of Sovereign Plumed Serpent,” they said. Then
they spoke straight to the point:

“It is well that there be your manikins, wood-
carvings, talking, speaking, there on the face of
the earth.”

“So be it,” they replied. The moment they
spoke it was done: the manikins, woodcarvings,
human in looks and human in speech.

This was the peopling of the face of the earth:

They came into being, they multiplied, they
had daughters, they had sons, these manikins,
woodcarvings. But there was nothing in their
hearts and nothing in their minds, no memory
of their mason and
builder. They just
went and walked
wherever they
wanted. Now they
did not remember
the Heart of Sky.

And so they fell,
just an experiment
and just a cutout
for humankind.

They were talking
at first but their
faces were dry.
They were not yet
developed in the
legs and arms. They
had no blood, no
lymph. They had no
sweat, no fat. Their
complexions were
dry, their faces were



**AND SO THEY
FELL, JUST AN
EXPERIMENT
AND JUST A
CUTOUT FOR
HUMANKIND.**

10. lapidary . . . sawyer: gemstone cutter . . . cutter of timber.

crusty. They flailed¹¹ their legs and arms, their bodies were deformed.

And so they accomplished nothing before the Maker, Modeler who gave them birth, gave them heart. They became the first numerous people here on the face of the earth.

Again there comes a humiliation, destruction, and demolition. The manikins, woodcarvings were killed when the Heart of Sky devised a flood for them. A great flood was made; it came down on the heads of the manikins, woodcarvings.

The man's body was carved from the wood of the coral tree by the Maker, Modeler. And as for the woman, the Maker, Modeler needed the hearts of bulrushes for the woman's body. They were not competent, nor did they speak before the builder and sculptor who made them and brought them forth, and so they were killed, done in by a flood:

There came a rain of resin from the sky.

There came the one named Gouger of Faces: he gouged out their eyeballs.

There came Sudden Bloodletter: he snapped off their heads.

There came Crunching Jaguar: he ate their flesh.

There came Tearing Jaguar: he tore them open.

They were pounded down to the bones and tendons, smashed and pulverized even to the bones. Their faces were smashed because they were incompetent before their mother and their father, the Heart of Sky, named Hurricane. The earth was blackened because of this; the black rainstorm began, rain all day and rain all night. Into their houses came the animals, small and great. Their faces were crushed by things of wood and stone. Everything spoke: their water jars, their tortilla griddles, their plates, their cooking pots, their dogs, their grinding stones, each and every thing crushed their faces. Their dogs and turkeys told them:

“You caused us pain, you ate us, but now it is *you* whom *we* shall eat.” And this is the grinding stone:

“We were undone because of you.

Every day, every day,
in the dark, in the dawn, forever,
r-r-rip, r-r-rip,
r-r-rub, r-r-rub,
right in our faces, because of you.

This was the service we gave you at first, when you were still people, but today you will learn of our power. We shall pound and we shall grind your flesh,” their grinding stones told them.

And this is what their dogs said, when they spoke in their turn:

“Why is it you can't seem to give us our food? We just watch and you just keep us down, and you throw us around. You keep a stick ready when you eat, just so you can hit us. We don't talk, so we've received nothing from you. How could you not have known? You *did* know that we were wasting away there, behind you.

“So, this very day you will taste the teeth in our mouths. We shall eat you,” their dogs told them, and their faces were crushed.

And then their tortilla griddles and cooking pots spoke to them in turn:

“Pain! That's all you've done for us. Our mouths are sooty, our faces are sooty. By setting us on the fire all the time, you burn us. Since *we* felt no pain, *you* try it. We shall burn you,” all their cooking pots said, crushing their faces.

The stones, their hearthstones were shooting out, coming right out of the fire, going for their heads, causing them pain. Now they run for it, helter-skelter.

They want to climb up on the houses, but they fall as the houses collapse.

They want to climb the trees; they're thrown off by the trees.

11. flailed: thrashed; beat.

FOCUS As you continue to read, notice what the first human beings are made of and how they behave.



Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent (center), fashioning a human being. *The Creation of Man*, Diego Rivera. Page from *Popol Vuh*, water color on paper. Copyright © 2001 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust. Av. Cinco de Mayo No. 2, Col. Centro, Del. Cuauhtémoc 06059, México, D.F./Bridgeman Art Library.

They want to get inside caves, but the caves slam shut in their faces.

Such was the scattering of the human work, the human design. The people were ground down, overthrown. The mouths and faces of all of them were destroyed and crushed. And it used to be said that the monkeys in the forests today are a sign of this. They were left as a sign because wood alone was used for their flesh by the builder and sculptor.

So this is why monkeys look like people: they are a sign of a previous human work, human design—mere manikins, mere woodcarvings. . . .

PAUSE & REFLECT Why do you think the gods treat the people of wood so harshly?

And here is the beginning of the conception of humans, and of the search for the ingredients of the human body. So they spoke, the Bearer, Begetter, the Makers, Modelers named Sovereign Plumed Serpent:

“The dawn has approached, preparations have been made, and morning has come for the provider, nurturer, born in the light, begotten in the light. Morning has come for humankind, for the people of the face of the earth,” they said. It all came together as they went on thinking in the darkness, in the night, as they searched and they sifted, they thought and they wondered.

And here their thoughts came out in clear light. They sought and discovered what was needed for human flesh. It was only a short while before the sun, moon, and stars were to appear above the Makers and Modelers. Split Place, Bitter Water Place¹² is the name: the yellow corn, white corn came from there.

And these are the names of the animals who brought the food: fox, coyote, parrot, crow. There were four animals who brought the news of the ears of yellow corn and white corn. They were coming from over there at Split Place, they showed the way to the split.

And this was when they found the staple¹³ foods.

And these were the ingredients for the flesh of the human work, the human design, and the water was for the blood. It became human blood, and corn was also used by the Bearer, Begetter.

And so they were happy over the provisions of the good mountain, filled with sweet things, thick with yellow corn, white corn, and thick with pataxte and cacao, countless zapotes,

12. Split Place, Bitter Water Place: the site of a stronghold of the Quiché lords.

13. staple: principal; most basic.

anonas, jocotes, nances, matasanos,¹⁴ sweets—the rich foods filling up the citadel named Split Place, Bitter Water Place. All the edible fruits were there: small staples, great staples, small plants, great plants. The way was shown by the animals.

And then the yellow corn and white corn were ground, and Xmucane did the grinding nine times. Food was used, along with the water she rinsed her hands with, for the creation of grease; it became human fat when it was worked by the Bearer, Begetter, Sovereign Plumed Serpent, as they are called.

After that, they put it into words:

the making, the modeling of our first mother-
father,
with yellow corn, white corn alone for the
flesh,
food alone for the human legs and arms,
for our first fathers, the four human works.

It was staples alone that made up their flesh.

These are the names of the first people who were made and modeled.

This is the first person: Jaguar Quitze.

And now the second: Jaguar Night.

And now the third: Not Right Now.

And the fourth: Dark Jaguar.

And these are the names of our first mother-fathers. They were simply made and modeled, it is said; they had no mother and no father. We have named the men by themselves. No woman gave birth to them, nor were they begotten by the builder, sculptor, Bearer, Begetter. By sacrifice alone, by genius alone they were made, they were modeled by the Maker, Modeler, Bearer, Begetter, Sovereign Plumed Serpent. And when they came to fruition, they came out human:

They talked and they made words.

They looked and they listened.

They walked, they worked.

They were good people, handsome, with looks

of the male kind. Thoughts came into existence and they gazed; their vision came all at once. Perfectly they saw, perfectly they knew everything under the sky, whenever they looked. The moment they turned around and looked around in the sky, on the earth, everything was seen without any obstruction. They didn't have to walk around before they could see what was under the sky; they just stayed where they were.

As they looked, their knowledge became intense. Their sight passed through trees, through rocks, through lakes, through seas, through mountains, through plains. Jaguar Quitze, Jaguar Night, Not Right Now, and Dark Jaguar were truly gifted people.

PAUSE & REFLECT How do the first human beings behave?

FOCUS As you read to the end, notice what the gods do not like about the new kind of person and what they do about it.

And then they were asked by the builder and mason:

“What do you know about your being? Don't you look, don't you listen? Isn't your speech good, and your walk? So you must look, to see out under the sky. Don't you see the mountain-plain clearly? So try it,” they were told.

And then they saw everything under the sky perfectly. After that, they thanked the Maker, Modeler:

“Truly now,
double thanks, triple thanks

14. **pataxte and cacao . . . matasanos:** Pataxte (pă'tāsh-tā') and cacao (kə-kou') are two varieties of seeds from which chocolate is made. Zapotes (zə-pō'dēz), anonas (ə-nō'nəz), jocotes (hō-kō'tāz), nances (nān'sāz), and matasanos (măd'ə-să'nōz) are kinds of tropical fruits.



that we've been formed, we've been given
our mouths, our faces,
we speak, we listen,
we wonder, we move,
our knowledge is good, we've understood
what is far and near,
and we've seen what is great and small
under the sky, on the earth.

Thanks to you we've been formed,
we've come to be made and modeled,
our grandmother, our grandfather,"

they said when they gave thanks for having been
made and modeled. They understood everything
perfectly, they sighted the four sides, the four
corners in the sky, on the earth, and this didn't
sound good to the builder and sculptor:

"What our works and designs have said is no
good:

'We have understood everything, great and
small,' they say." And so the Bearer, Begetter
took back their knowledge:

"What should we do with them now? Their
vision should at least reach nearby, they should
see at least a small part of the face of the earth,
but what they're saying isn't good. Aren't they
merely 'works' and 'designs' in their very names?
Yet they'll become as great as gods, unless they

procreate, proliferate at the sowing, the dawn-
ing, unless they increase."

"Let it be this way: now we'll take them apart
just a little, that's what we need. What we've
found out isn't good. Their deeds would become
equal to ours, just because their knowledge
reaches so far. They see everything," so said

the Heart of Sky, Hurricane,
Newborn Thunderbolt, Sudden Thunderbolt,
Sovereign Plumed Serpent,
Bearer, Begetter,
Xpiyacoc, Xmucane,
Maker, Modeler,

as they are called. And when they changed the
nature of their works, their designs, it was
enough that the eyes be marred by the Heart of
Sky. They were blinded as the face of a mirror is
breathed upon. Their vision flickered. Now it
was only from close up that they could see what
was there with any clarity.

And such was the loss of the means of under-
standing, along with the means of knowing
everything, by the four humans. The root was
implanted.

And such was the making, modeling of our
first grandfather, our father, by the Heart of Sky,
Heart of Earth. ❖