

Mexico: The Great Journey

The Place you seek is on the shores of a lake, far from here. There you will find an eagle perched on a cactus which grows from a wave-washed rock. In the eagle's talons is a great serpent and the birds spread wings glisten in the rays of the rising sun.

Where you see this sign you must found your city.

Huitzilopochtli: The Hummingbird of the South

It is said that long ago the seven tribes of the Aztecs lived in Atzlan,
the white land,
the place of the seven caves.

It was a land of plenty,
with fish and waterbirds of all kinds, with brillaintly covered feathers,
meadows and grass flowers, gardens of maize, chilli, tomatoes and beans.

One day a man who was walking among the trees heard a bird calling urgently:

"Tihui....Tihui...Tihui...."

He stopped to listen and realised that the bird was calling out in his Aztec language the words,
"lets go, lets go, lets go..."

"What can it mean?"

he asked his people and since no-one could be sure they went together to their chief Tecpaltzin.

"The bird is wise" said Tecpaltzin when he heard their story.

"We have enemies in this place

and it is time we found another land.

I have known that this time would come

and I have waited for a sign.

This bird speaks for the gods."

So the Aztecs gathered together and made an image of their great God,

the Sun God, Huitzilpochhtli

The placed the image on a bier of rushes

and holding him high at the head of their column,

moved southwards to wherever he would lead.

Before they set out Huitzilpochhtl spoke to the priests:

"The place you seek is on the shores of a lake, far from here.

There you will find an eagle perched on a cactus

which grows from a wave-washed rock.

In the eagle's talons is a great serpent

and the birds spread wings glisten in the rays of the rising sun.

Where you see this sign you must found your city.

There were seven sub tribes travelling together
and they formed a great caravan of Indians,
men, women and children,
carrying all their belongings in bundles,
leading their animals.

The Land they entered was different from Aztlan.
The ground was hard and stoney
and their feet were constantly cut by sharp thorns and thistles.
Snakes and rats slithered and scuttled among the sparse grasses
and larger animals threatened to snatch the weaker members of the column.

On the long journey , the God, H
tested the seven tribes.
He called the chief T and said:
"Tomorrow morning there will be two bundles on the ground by the camp.
One contains a bundle of sticks,
the other a precious jewel.

"Let them choose which bundle they should take and I will judge who is the wisest."

In the morning the two bundles lay where the God had said they would be
and the tribes began to quarrel over them.
At first everyone wanted to take the bundle with the jewel in it
but then some of the more thoughtful people changed their minds.

The jewel might be more beautiful
but with sticks they could make fire,
they could build shelters and makes staffs and arrows.

These would certainly be more use to them on their journey than a stone, however precious.

So the tribes divided the ancestors of the Aztecs chose the sticks
while others chose the jewel and went their own way.

After many years of wandering and hardship,
the Aztec tribes reached the city of Tollan
and there they settled for a time,
living in peace and prosperity.

Some thought this was their final home
but the priests of H knew that they must go on.
Many were reluctant:
they had settled in Tollan
their children had been born there and knew nowhere else.
Then H himself spoke to them:

"Do as I say and follow where I lead.

I shall take on the form of a white eagle.
 I am your God.
 I am the Sun that looks after your lives,
 that warms you and keeps you.
 Anyone who disobeys me and does not go my way is no true Aztec.

Go only when you see me
 and when I alight, you must stop.
 There you will see the sign,
 and there you will build my temple."

The Aztecs listened respectfully
 and did everything that he commanded them.
 They followed him as he flew before them a white eagle shining in the sunlight.

At last the Aztecs came to the Valley of Mexico and the swampy lake Tezucó.
 There among the reeds they found a sign they had been waiting for.
 A great eagle perched on a cactus
 that grew that grew from a rock
 washed by the lakes waves.
 In its talons writhed a serpent and the wings were spread ready for flight.

Again the God spoke:
 From this place you will conquer all corners of the earth
 and subdue its peoples,
 for you are mine and there is no greater Sun God in all the world than I.
 Through strength
 and suffering
 you will gain everything you could desire."

This long migratory journey took nearly 300 years.

This city founded in 1320 was to become Tenochtitlan, the centre of the Aztec Empire.

When Cortez and his men entered in 1519
 they found a thriving city
 built on an island in the lake
 and approached by massive stone causeways.
 Two years after the Spanish conquistadores had arrived
 Tenochtitlan had been destroyed

Today Mexico city stands near the site of Tenochtitlan.
 The Aztec Symbol of the eagle and the serpent
 which lead them on their long journey to their new home remains the National Emblem of Mexico.

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 by Douglas Gifford, illus. John Sibbick: HOODER AND STOUGHTON