

The Princeton Passion Play

Nican pehua in itlazohmahuizpasiontzin in totecuiyo Jesucristo

Princeton University Libraries

Mesoamerican Manuscript no. 13

The Passion play held by the Princeton University Libraries, transcribed and translated here for the first time, consists of 50 leaves of paper completely covered in a single copyist's clear but unadorned hand. He had the habit of entering parallel lines, like long equal signs (=), between phrases and sometimes within words. Names of speakers are written in a wide left margin, clearly separated from the dialogue. He inscribed his stage directions in a different color ink, probably once red but now faded to brown. The copyist opened the script with this heading:

Here begins the precious and revered Passion of our lord Jesus Christ, the way he died for our sake, us sinners, as he came to save us. Here it begins in the cemetery at the edge of the house(s). Christ will come out, all the apostles. The Jews will go in the lead. First they will go inside. The Passion will begin. The Passion of our lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew. *Hosanna, filium David, Rex Israel.*

This passage provides the important detail that the production was expected to take place in the local cemetery. The scriptwriter thus confirms a statement by Dominican friar and Inquisition censor Francisco de Larrea, whose 1768 report is one of the most valuable testimonies in the Inquisition file (AGN Inquisición vol. 1072, legajo 5, folio 221r–227v; forthcoming on this website). Larrea wrote that Passion plays in both Spanish and Nahuatl were typically performed in cemeteries. He considers this an appropriate setting because the graveyards were neither as “profane” (*profanos*) as the public plazas nor as “respectable” (*respectables*) as the church buildings.

The opening passage also indicates a link to Juan Navarro's 1604 book of choral settings of the four evangelists' Passion accounts—specifically, his setting of texts from the Gospel according to Matthew, with which his book begins, also evident in the University of Pennsylvania and Axochiapan plays.¹ As in these other plays, the copyist legitimates his work by relating the script to a Latin source, which could look like a reference to the Bible even though it is actually to the choral book. Also, as in the Penn play, the title highlights the “Hosanna” chant that will be sung early on in the action. At least several of the choral chants later cued in the play are likely taken from Navarro's book; others draw on hymns and chants in the liturgy.

Sometime after the script was completed, another writer transcribed a list of dramatis personae on the front and back inside covers. Apparently in the same hand are written the date 1750 and two names, accompanied by identical rubrics: Señor don Bartolomé and Gregorio Eusebio, the latter identified as a choirmaster (*m[aest]ro de capilla*). Below don Bartolomé's name is written “dimas” in small letters. Dimas is the name given to the repentant thief crucified alongside Jesus, though he is called *buen ladro*, for *buen ladrón*, at the end of the list of characters just above. This note might indicate that don Bartolomé took the role of Dimas in the production, at least in 1750, and perhaps played a sponsoring role. As for Gregorio Eusebio, as choirmaster he may have directed the entire production, and definitely was in charge of the choral music.

A much later note, written vertically inside the back cover, reads: “Property of Presbyter Canuto Flores, Tlalnepantla, State of México” (Propiedad del Pbro Canuto Flores Tlalmanalco Es de Mx.). Father Flores was a Catholic priest from Tenancingo, in the state of México.

¹ Juan Navarro, *Liber in quo quatuor passiones Christi Domini continentur: octo Lamentationes, oratioq. Hieremie Prophete*. Mexico: Diego López Dávalos, 1604 (archive.org/details/fioannisnauarrog00nava/page/n3/mode/2up).

Ordained in 1893, he was posted in multiple parishes around his home state, which apparently included Tlalmanalco at some point, prior to his death in 1946.² Flores may or may not have obtained the script in Tlalmanalco, but it is likely from somewhere in the State of México, given his long career there. Another note in what may be Flores's hand is on the very back cover of the play, but it is illegible.

The Princeton Passion is in most respects consistent with the other Nahuatl Passion plays, with a similar cast, length, and overall sequence of scenes, though like each of the others it is a unique composition that includes, excludes, relocates, streamlines, or elaborates upon material found in other examples of the genre. A few notable features are briefly discussed below.

Like the Penn Passion, the Princeton play includes a version of Pontius Pilate's death warrant derived from a document supposedly discovered in 1580 in L'Aquila, in the Kingdom of Naples. It is similar to the Spanish one from Ozumba in the Inquisition file (to be posted on this website), but is not a direct translation of, or model for, that text. Allegedly discovered in the ruins of an ancient house, written on sheepskin in Hebrew, the document was soon discredited by a judge in Naples, but nevertheless circulated around western Europe in various translations, including an eighteenth-century Spanish one made by Archbishop of Segovia Francisco Domingo Valentín Guerra. It found its way into eighteenth-century Passion plays in New Spain. Read in the Nahuatl plays by the character Notary, in vied in length with the longest speeches by Judas and Jesus.

² Information from J. Trinidad Basurto, *El arzobispado de México*. Mexico: El Tiempo, 1901, 226, and a list of historical events in one of his posting, Mexicaltzingo (estadodemexico.com.mx/Mexicaltzingo), which mentions the fiftieth anniversary, in 1943, of Flores's ordination.

Another distinctive feature of this play is its inclusion of the “seven sayings” or “seven last words” of Jesus, delivered from the cross, to be intoned in Latin and then, or simultaneously, spoken in Nahuatl by the actor playing Jesus (folios 45v–46v). These could have been extracted from the different sung Passions in Juan Navarro’s choral book, or from a separate choral setting of just these passages to which the scriptwriter, or a choirmaster colleague, had access. Also unique to this play is the long final speech, made by Saint John while the actor playing Jesus still hangs on the cross and the actor playing Mary lies in a feigned swoon at the foot of the cross. John here breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience directly. The speech is moralistic, but more in the mode of contemplative Passion literature than of a typical sermon. He urges parents in the audience to put themselves in Mary’s place and imagine a child of their own undergoing such torments, and weep accordingly. He urges people to give up sinning in response to Jesus’s suffering, which he reviews in painful detail. He then invites listeners to follow along as they proceed with the removal of Christ’s body for burial. As the last stage direction calls for a procession to begin, it may be that the audience follows the cast members as they carry the Jesus actor away from the performance space.

Early in the play, after Jesus preaches in Jerusalem, he is visited by three angels (folios 8v–9r). This is the only time three angels come at one time in any of the Passion plays. The stage directions refer to an orchard (*huerto*) and, apparently, a chalice (*cáliz*), while the angels’ words of encouragement are reminiscent of the angel encounter in the Garden of Gethsemane, without corresponding very closely to any of the extant versions of that scene (in Princeton, see folios 24r–25v). The scriptwriter may have inserted here a Gethsemane scene from another source. There is also an oddly truncated exchange when Peter follows the arrested Christ to Caiaphas’s residence. A woman (referred to as *Judío cihuatl* ‘Jewish woman’ in the list of dramatis

personae) lets him when he requests entry, but then asks him, “Aren’t you also a student of the one they brought here?” (folio 28v). This is the beginning of the scene where Peter denies knowing Christ three times, which is included in every play and, in its Gospel sources, includes at least one woman, from Caiaphas’s household staff. However, the scriptwriter drops the topic here and then includes the complete scene, with three male interlocutors, a bit later on (folios 29v–30r). Christ’s speech at folios 3r–3v is also a bit oddly placed, as it includes some of what he will say later on, in his speech to his students after the Last Supper. Although these innovations might suggest a somewhat haphazard editing process, none of these choices creates any jarring discontinuity or excess repetition, and the scriptwriter may have found them appropriate to his vision of the play.