The Aztec Conquest: Surrender to God or Man

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In the year 1 Reed, Montezuma was the ruler of a vast Aztec Empire. He held sway over the peoples of Mesoamerica, friends and enemies alike. His armies waged wars for conquest, spoil, and especially for captives. It was important that the Aztec sun god, Huitzilopochtli, be well fed on human sacrifice. Without the sun, the Aztec believed the world would literally come to an end. They lived in a well-regulated, orderly world, where everything was preordained and nothing was left to chance.

A year before 1 Reed, in 1518, Montezuma received word from the Gulf coast about "towers or small mountains floating on the waves of the sea." Light skinned men with short hair and long beards had been seen walking on these "towers." Who were these strange looking men? How did they fit into the orderly world of the Mexica? What was the relation of these intruders to the Aztecs? Because everything was preordained, the Aztec’s ancestors may have left some past record foretelling this present event.

Montezuma had a picture of the intruders and their "towers" drawn. He then called together the oldest artists in his domain to learn if they knew anything about predicted strangers. In a
world where everything was predestined, there would probably be
some forecast of their arrival. The Malinalca people, from the
south, brought a picture of men with a single eye in their
foreheads and others with only one leg. Still others had
paintings of men who were fish or snakes from the waist down.
None of these matched Montezuma's picture.

Next, Montezuma called on the descendants of the ancient
Toltecs. They told the monarch about their tradition that the
sons of the Toltec god, Quetzalcoatl, would return and possess
what had been theirs in ancient times. But when Montezuma saw
the pictures of these descendants, they did not look like the
Spaniards. An old man from Xochimilco knew about these
strangers. His ancestors told of men in wooden houses who would
come from the east. They were white men with beards. Some were
mounted on deer like beasts and others on eagles. The old man
warned that before two years had passed, the white men would
return again. When Montezuma saw the drawings the old man had,
they matched his picture exactly.²

According to other native sources, Montezuma's first
impression was that the Toltec god, Quetzalcoatl, had returned;
this was the god, "whom they had been and are expecting."³ This
is the version that European historians tended to cite in later
years. The Aztecs, however had myths about "returning" gods other than Quetzalcoatl. They believed that the lord who had led them to Mexico would return to claim his throne.

Were they expecting, for example, their patron god, Huitzilopochtli, at the time the Spanish appeared? Montezuma may not have thought that the Spanish leader was Quetzalcoatl; but rather that the leader was Huitzilopochtli. Or was the history of "returning" gods a post-conquest invention, created by the Spanish to justify their position, or possibly by Aztec survivors as a way to explain their defeat and give hope to their future?

In the centuries since the Aztec conquest, their defeat has been attributed to their belief that Cortés was the god, Quetzalcoatl. In theory, the Aztecs were so paralyzed by their own irrational world view that they could not put up an effective resistance. According to this traditional European narrative, even the most sophisticated and formidable Indians were obviously inferior to Europeans and were tainted by their mental defects. However, if there were no pre-Hispanic legends about "returning" gods, then obviously the above scenario is so much moonshine. It is necessary, however, to debunk the legends in order to show that Montezuma acted in a rational manner within the context of his own culture.
Contrary to accepted interpretations of the conquest, the Aztecs were not defeated by their own cultural defects but by a combination of very pragmatic considerations. The uncertainty of Spanish intentions would have initially thrown the Aztecs off-balance. Did the strangers come as invaders or as traders? If they came as ambassadors, it was important they be treated with due respect. If they came as invaders, the season of year was crucial. Since most of the Aztec troops were farmers, they staged their wars around growing cycles. Cortés was marching to Tenochtitlan from August to November 8. This coincided with the harvesting period, making it impracticable for Montezuma to raise an army, even if he believed the Spanish to be an invading force, rather than a "returning" god.⁴

Another consideration for Montezuma was the combined strength of the Spanish and their native allies. Faced with a potential rebellion, it behooved him to try to defuse the situation or at least to confront it on his own terms. Montezuma, also, would have wanted to gauge the strength of the invaders, since the Mexica clearly were not familiar with Spanish technology or war tactics.

By far, the single most devastating European weapon was smallpox. According to Gómez, Narváez brought the disease with
his expedition. 5 Cortés would have carried it to Tenochtitlan on his return to the city. It would have taken sixty days for the epidemic to run its course. It is estimated that from one-third to one-half of the population died. 6 The survivors were weakened, both physically and morally.

Whether Montezuma believed Cortés to be Quetzalcoatl or Huitzilopochtli is important to Spanish self-esteem. Europeans have justified the conquest and subjugation of native peoples as part of a divine mission. To the Christians, Quetzalcoatl was a benign god, who did not condone human sacrifice. Huitzilopochtli, on the other hand, they perceived as the devil incarnate. He was the god who, not only, demanded human sacrifice, but ate the flesh of his victims. It would not have been acceptable for Cortés to be associated with Huitzilopochtli.

It would have been even less desirable to have suggested that the King of Spain was the devil, especially to his face. This myth, that Cortés was the god, Quetzalcoatl, had been accepted by historians without question for centuries.

William H. Prescott influenced generations of historians in perpetuating the paradigm of the irrational Indian. He was the first American historian to write about the conquest of Mexico and Peru in English. He finished his three volume work, The
History Of the Conquest of Mexico and The History Of the Conquest of Peru, in 1843, amidst the Manifest Destiny phase of American expansion in the United States. He portrays all Native Americans as tragic, yet inferior, beings. "He [Indian] shrinks instinctively from the rude touch of a foreign hand. Even when this foreign influence comes in the form of civilization, ..." Prescott attributes the dramatic drop in the Mexican population to this sensitivity and innate inability to thrive under the dominion of a foreign culture, before which, he argues, the Indian "seems to sink and pine away . . ." By contrast, he credits the Europeans with a natural dominance. No matter how hopeless their situation may have been "they quickly recovered their confidence with their superiority."3

Prescott interprets the two antagonists through the prism of his own era. He describes Montezuma as riddled with "superstitious fears." The Aztec ruler, Prescott argues, saw the Spaniards as "the men of destiny," who would deprive him of his throne. The very presence of the Spanish, according to this view, reduced Montezuma to a weak-minded incompetent.9 But in Cortés, Prescott sees "the instrument selected by Providence to
scatter terror among the barbarian monarchs . . . , and lay their empires in the dust.”

Prescott, himself, was building on the established Spanish version of events. Histories of the conquest emerged as early as the sixteenth century. Some who wrote those histories, like Bernal Díaz, other conquistadors, or the Dominican, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, were participants or eyewitnesses to many of the events. Others built on previous sources, Native and Spanish, both primary and secondary. Frequently, what appears to be a rich and varied interplay of sources is riddled with contradictions, often within the same source. Some of the earliest accounts of the conquest have been lost or have come down to us via other sources.

Two prominent Mexican historians of the latter half of the sixteenth century were Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, a descendant of Montezuma, and Fray Diego Durán, a Dominican. Both of these historians drew from the same, earlier Nahuatl text, referred to as Crónica X, that has subsequently disappeared. Prescott does use Tezozomoc as one of his sources. Durán's The History Of the Indies Of New Spain, dated 1581, however, was unknown until the mid-eighteenth century, after Prescott had finished his history. According to the Crónica X source, the legends were pre-Hispanic
and Montezuma did believe that Cortés was the "returning god" Quetzalcoatl.

Alva Ixtlilxochitl, a descendant of the Texcoco royal family, is another important Mexican historian of the early 17th century. Ixtlilxochitl, accepted the legends as true; however, he concluded that the "returning" god was Huitzilopochtli. Although Prescott uses Ixtlilxochitl as a source, he does so selectively. Prescott accuses the Texcocoan historian as lending "a too willing ear to traditions and reports which would startle the more skeptical criticism of the present time [ca 1840]."12

The first European accounts were letters sent to the Spanish Monarch, Charles V, in 1519, one from Cortés and the other from the Justiciary and Council of Vera Cruz. This first letter from Cortés, written in June or July 1519, has been lost. Fortunately the letter of July 10, 1519 from the Justiciary and Council was found in the Imperial Archives of Vienna in the 19th Century. The Council's letter, however, was likely influenced by Cortés.13

Cortés also wrote two subsequent letters to the King describing his adventures and the conquest of Mexico. The second letter was dated October 30, 1520 and the third was written May 15, 1522.
Both of these letters were published in Spain by 1524 and widely circulated.

In his second letter, Cortés quotes two speeches by Montezuma about the return of an Aztec lord. Montezuma, according to this account, believed that the Spanish represented this lord, but nowhere in his letter does Cortés mention the god by name. Francisco López de Gómara, Cortés' secretary, is considered the first historian of the conquest of Mexico. He published his Historia de las Indias in 1552 and a second part called, Historia de le Conquista de México. Gómara draws heavily on Cortés' letters and reminiscences. In his account of the initial meeting between Montezuma's ambassadors and Cortés, however, Gómara declares that the Aztecs said of the ships that "the god Quetzalcoatl had come, bearing his temples on his shoulders." It is not clear who his informant was on this point.

Gómara's histories were controversial from the beginning. The books were suppressed at the time by Prince Philip, the heir to Charles V. Copies were readily available, however, outside of the Spanish empire. The prince may have been influenced by Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, a missionary at Cuba, who hated Cortés and Gómara. Las Casas declared that Gómara "fabricated many
stories in Cortés' favor which are manifestly false..."\(^{16}\) The
conquistador, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, accused Gómara of
praising Cortés too highly and neglecting the importance of the
other captains and soldiers. One reason Díaz wrote his True
History of the Conquest of Mexico was in response to Gómara.

Bernal Díaz, in his True History, however, gives basically
the same account as Gómara and Cortés regarding the Aztec legend
of the returning lord. According to Prescott, these are "[t]he
two pillars upon which the story of the conquest mainly rests,...
the Chronicles of Gómara and of Bernal Díaz."\(^{17}\) Prescott also
relied heavily on the Codex Florentine by Fray Bernardino de
Sahagún, a Franciscan, who played an important role in fostering
the Quetzalcoatl legend.

About 20 years after the conquest, some of the Spanish
priests became interested in documenting the native cultures.
Since the priests, themselves, had destroyed virtually all of the
Nahuatl manuscripts after the conquest, they wanted to record
what they could before all remembrance was lost. These works are
known as codices. The most extensive is the Codex Florentine,
compiled by Sahagún. He worked with 10 or 12 elderly native
informants who used a combination of paintings (codices) and
verbal explanations. Then native students would write the
explanations in the native language, Nahuatl, and Sahagún translated that into Spanish.

The first version of the text, finished in about 1555, disappeared, it is possible that either Sahagún or his superiors had it suppressed. In 1585, Sahagún wrote a second version explaining that the first version contained "certain things that were not true, and was silent about certain others where it should have spoken...." What these "certain things" were is not known. A clue to Sahagún's reasoning may be found in a postscript in his second version. There he labels the Indians' belief in the return of Quetzalcoatl a "falsehood." It is not that he doubts the Mexica's belief in the legend, but as a Christian, he does not believe that Quetzalcoatl is capable of returning. Sahagún admonishes the Indians that "His body died."

Prescott's 1843 interpretation of the conquest, primarily based on the accounts of Gómara, Díaz, and Sahagún, became the accepted version of historians for over a hundred years. Put simply, Prescott argued, the Spanish defeated the Aztecs because of Montezuma's foolish belief that Cortés was the god Quetzalcoatl.
Recently, scholars have been re-examining and questioning the early documents. The Mesoamerican archaeologist, Susan Gillespie, has come to the conclusion that there were no pre-Hispanic legends about "returning gods." Gillespie argues that the legend of Quetzalcoatl was a post-conquest creation of the Aztecs. They needed a way "to explain to all, but especially to the Aztecs themselves, who the Aztecs were, how they came to be conquered, and what their ultimate destiny was to be in the new society...." ²⁰

Gillespie notes that there was no pre-Hispanic written legend about Quetzalcoatl returning to his kingdom. The earliest written records were by Franciscan friars. What Gillespie fails to take into account is that any such records would have been destroyed by the early missionaries. She further notes, however, that the account of the legend given in Cortés' second letter fueled speculation among the Spanish clergy.

The Spaniards had wondered at similarities between the Aztec and Christian religions since the first contact, especially the Mexica use of the cross. There was a common belief among the Spanish clergy that one of the apostles of Christ had preached in the New World. ²¹ Most of the friars ultimately credited this honor to St. Thomas. They thought that the saint had traveled as
far as India; therefore, he could have easily come to the New Indies. St. Thomas also fit the bill because his name in Hebrew and Greek is the word "twin," and Quetzalcoatl can be translated as "precious twin." So, even though Cortés did not mention a god by name, Quetzalcoatl was elected to the post by the clergy.²²

Other recent historians do not disagree on whether there were pre-Hispanic legends but only dispute the influence such legends would have had on Montezuma. Francis Brooks, leaves the question of the gods' identity for Gillespie and others to solve. What concerns Brooks are the motives behind the telling and retelling of such legends.²³ He contends that the episode was mentioned to Charles V as a calculated attempt by Cortés to gain official sanction for what was, in reality, a rebellious act.²⁴

Likewise, the French historian, Tzvetan Todorov, also credits Cortés with using the legend for his own purposes. Todorov does not give credence to the claim that the Mexica identified Cortés with Quetzalcoatl. He raises the interesting point that Quetzalcoatl was only a minor god among many gods, especially to the Aztecs. Based on this argument, if the Aztecs did believe Cortés was a god, then they likely would consider him a major one, not a minor one. The most reasonable candidate among the major gods was Huitzilopochtli.
The historian, David Carrasco views the Mexica-Spanish contact as mythic drama. He studied the nature and meaning of archetypes and symbols in Aztec culture and concluded that Montezuma did believe that Cortés was Quetzalcoatl. He uses a post-modernist approach to reach the same conclusion that Prescott did a hundred and fifty years earlier. He also uses the same sources, mainly Fray Sahagún and Cortés' letters.

Whether or not Sahagún's account of Quetzalcoatl legend was true, it was certainly based on solid evidence. Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, is an ancient Mesoamerican god, a son of the original Creators. He brought maize, all learning, and the arts to humans. Quetzalcoatl is also a title held by the highest priests. A famous priest, Quetzalcoatl, lived in Tula, the capital of the Toltecs, in Central Mexico from about AD 950 to AD 1150. To the Aztecs, who arrived in AD 1250, the legendary Toltecs were superhuman. The Aztecs credited the Toltecs with developing high Mesoamerican culture. Tula, their capital, was believed, by the Aztecs, to be a mystical place ruled by semidivine kings. The most exalted of those rulers was the priest-king, Quetzalcoatl. He ruled Tula during its Golden Age (AD 980). By the 1500s, the Aztecs considered all things Toltec as sacred.
Among the cultures of Mexico, human sacrifice was the highest form of worship to the gods. According to the legend, Quetzalcoatl's opposition to human sacrifice angered traditionalists, so three wizards came to discredit Quetzalcoatl and drive him from the land of Tula. They gave him a mirror that made his image look very old, then offered him a drink they claimed was a remedy. At first he refused, but they coaxed him to have a little sip. Finally, he drank it all and became inebriated and thus discredited. He left Tula for the Land of Wisdom, of the Red and Black, in the east off the Yucatán coast.

By some accounts he embarked on a raft of serpents, according to others he sacrificed himself in fire, from which his heart emerged as the morning star.26

The Spanish came from the east. According to the Codex Florentine, the Aztecs were forewarned. For ten years before the arrival of the Spaniards, certain omens had been seen in Mexico. Fray Diego Durán's Chronicle and his other sources also mention prophetic warnings and omens given to Montezuma. The first warning was from the king of Texcoco, Nezahualpilli, who was regarded as a great necromancer. This king had a vision "that in a very few years our cities will be ravaged and destroyed. We and our children will be killed and our vassals belittled." As
further proof that he spoke the truth, Nezahualpilli predicted that omens would appear in the sky.\(^{27}\)

The first bad omen mentioned in the *Codex Florentine* appeared at night in the eastern sky. It was a fiery signal in the heavens that lasted from midnight to dawn and appeared for a full year.\(^{28}\) Durán's *Chronicle* tells how a comet was first seen by a priest of Huitzilopochtli, coming from the east. When Montezuma heard of the omen he remembered Nezahualpilli's warning and was terrified. According to Durán, the mighty Aztec Emperor is rendered immobile and cried out through his tears "what can I do, O powerful monarch, but await that which you have predicted?"\(^{29}\)

In 1518, Juan Díaz, a conquistador on the Grijalva expedition, tells of a great miracle. A brilliant star appeared at night over the ship moving toward the land, east to west. He described it as "emitting continuous rays of light ..., leaving a trail ... that lasted three hours or more." Unlike the Mexica, the Spanish saw this same event as a good sign. According to Díaz, they took this as "God's wish that we settle in that land."\(^{30}\)

The second omen in the *Codex* was the burning of the wooden temple of Huitzilopochtli. It was said to have caught fire of
its own volition.\textsuperscript{31} In Durán's account, by contrast, this omen is not a real event but the strange dream of an old man.\textsuperscript{32} The third bad omen, according to the Codex, was the destruction of the temple of Xiuhtecuhtli.\textsuperscript{33} During a light rain it was struck by a lightning bolt, though thunder was not heard.\textsuperscript{34} Since it was the practice of victorious armies to burn the temples of the vanquished, these signs were particularly ominous.\textsuperscript{35}

The fourth sign in the Codex came during the day, it was a fiery flash across the sky from west to east giving off a "shower of sparks."\textsuperscript{36} The historian, Muñoz Camargo, describes this phenomenon as comets that terrified the people.\textsuperscript{37} Carrasco believes that the reverse direction, west to east, from the sun's path "suggests the reversal of cosmic order."\textsuperscript{38}

The fifth bad omen: the wind rose up and lashed the nearby lake. It battered the houses and caused them to collapse into the water.\textsuperscript{39} Fray Durán's source describes this as not a real event but the dreams of old women. Here, the water took the form of a mighty river. It destroyed Montezuma's palace and demolished the temple. The mighty chiefs were so full of terror that they fled from the city into the hills.\textsuperscript{40}
The sixth portent was a woman crying in the night. She was heard to wail: "My children, we must flee far away from this city!" At other times: "My children, where shall I take you?" According to Durán, if anyone were to encounter the woman, they were to ask her why she weeps and moans.

The seventh sign was a strange bird caught by fishermen. According to the Codex it had a mirror in the crown of its head where the night sky could be seen. When Montezuma looked a second time he saw people making war with each other and some rode on the backs of animals like deer. The eighth bad omen mentioned in the Codex Florentine was monstrous men with two heads who vanished the moment Montezuma saw them. These last two fantastic omens must have had some deeper meaning to the Mexica.

According to the Cronica Mexicana by Fernando Tezozomoc, Montezuma sent for his magicians and seers to have them interpret the omens. When asked to comment on the signs they replied: "What can we say? The future has already been determined and decreed in heaven, and Montezuma will behold and suffer a great mystery which must come to pass in his land...and since it must surely take place, he can only wait for it." This interpretation fits nicely into the Aztec view of the universe: a
fatalistic knowledge that all things must come to pass. As a former high priest, Montezuma would have understood the cyclical nature of the universe.

According to Sahagún and Prescott these omens caused Montezuma great suffering and anxiety. While Gillespie considers they are part of the post-conquest legacy of a combined Native and Spanish creation. Either way, Europeans would have seen them as further indications of Indian irrationality. Yet, if all, or some, of these omens did reach Montezuma, he would have been remiss in his duties had he not considered them important.

If the belief in portents were proof of irrational behavior, the Spanish were equally guilty. Omens and signs were also important to the sixteenth century Spanish. They viewed Juan Díaz' comet as a prediction of conquest along with other miracles. During a battle against the Potonchán a rider on a dapple-gray horse came to the assistance of outnumbered foot soldiers frightening the Indians away. He charged the enemy three times before Cortés and the other mounted troops arrived. They later claimed that the rider on the dapple-gray was not one of the expedition. The Spanish believed the rider to be St. James, the patron saint of Spain, but Cortés thought he was St. Peter. The Spanish took it as a sign that God was on their
When five of the horses fell one night as the Spanish were preparing to attack the Tlascalans, they considered that an evil omen. Cortés, however, ignored that "warning" and successfully routed the Tlascalans.

Unlike the Spanish, who for the most part considered such signs as positive, the Aztecs saw them as portents of doom. Even without omens and signs, such alien beings, with their light skins, hairy faces, strange animals, and wooden houses on the water, must have seemed ominous. It is human nature that the first reaction to the unknown is fear.

The invaders mounted their first expedition in 1517, led by Hernández de Córdoba. They landed on the Yucatán Peninsula, home of the Maya. There, according to the eyewitness account of Bernal Díaz, the Maya killed more than half of the company. Bernal Díaz also joined the second expedition under Juan de Grijalva that left Cuba on April 8, 1518. This was to be a peaceful trade mission, with strict orders from the Cuban governor, Velázquez, not to colonize. They were attacked by the Maya like the first expedition and sustained many casualties; however, they also inflicted numerous casualties. Although most of the conquistadors were wounded, they continued their journey. Word of their weapons and military acumen preceded them. For
this reason, or some other, the next natives they encountered were peaceful and willing to barter.

This expedition was the first Spanish meeting with Aztec representatives. Montezuma ordered his governors to trade gold for the Spaniards' beads. Juan Díaz was also present on this expedition. He relates how the chieftain "dressed" Grijalva in "a breastplate and bracelets of gold, and on his head he placed a gold crown which was of very delicate leaves of gold." Then the Spaniard dressed the chieftain in "a green velvet doublet, pink hose, a frock, some espadrilles and a velvet cap." This would have been the expedition for which Montezuma commissioned the drawing.

The third expedition sailed in 1519 under Hernán Cortés. Like Grijalva, Cortés was ordered to conduct trade; not to colonize. The Cuban governor, Velázquez, had authority to organize such enterprises. Cortés acquired the proper licenses from local officials to operate as Velázquez' agent. These licenses granted limited activities, mainly the right to explore and trade. Permission to colonize could only come directly from the Spanish Crown. By the time permission to colonize was
granted and reached Cuba, Cortés had already sailed. Furthermore, this right was granted to Velázquez, not to Cortés.

Cortés' first act on landing was to found the city, Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, where he left some of his men. He also encountered the same Maya who routed Córdoba and defeated Grijalva. But Cortés was better equipped and was able to defeat the Indians after a hard battle. The Maya did not confuse the Spaniards with gods; they did not hesitate to attack. The Maya gave Cortés 20 women, including Malinali, a Nahuatl-speaking slave who could translate to Mayan. The Spaniard, Francisco de Aguilar, spoke Mayan. It is difficult to assess how this clumsy chain of interpreters would have effected Mexican-Spanish communications. According to Todorov, Malinali quickly learned Spanish. She interpreted not only the Indians' words but also their actions.51

From the commissioned drawing, Montezuma had already learned that the strangers were "returning" gods. He sent emissaries, magicians, and wizards to the coast to get a first-hand account of these intruders and also to dissuade them from continuing their journey. He also sent many gifts, perhaps as a gesture to a potential trading partner, perhaps as a bribe to go away, or perhaps as a show of wealth, or a display of power. According to
Fray Sahagún's informants they brought clothing and gifts that were representative of Quetzalcoatl and addressed Cortés as if he were a god. However, Juan Álvarez, who was present, does not describe the traditional dress of the god. As Gillespie notes, this episode was not mentioned by Cortés nor were any of these gifts listed as being sent to Spain. It is possible that this has been confused with Grijalva's meeting, where clothing had been exchanged. According to Bernal Díaz, the Aztec ambassadors did ask for a rusty, gilded helmet, that looked like one their ancestor Huitziilopochtli wore, to show Montezuma.

Whatever Montezuma's intent, this display of wealth only increased Cortés' determination to see Tenochtitlan. The Spanish made their way into the interior of Mexico seeking Montezuma's gold. In August 1519, they encountered the Totonac Indians from Cempoalla and by September they were battling the Tlaxcalans. Both tribes, after being defeated in battle, became strong allies of Cortés. The Tlaxcalans were a powerful people and a traditional enemy of the Mexica. Some Mesoamerican wars were waged with the sole purpose that both sides could obtain sacrificial victims for their gods. Resentment against the
Aztecs had grown as the number of Tlaxcalan victims increased throughout the years.

The next stop for the Spanish and their new friends was the city of Cholula, an ally of the Mexica and an enemy of the Tlaxcalans. Cholula was a city of merchants and traders. It was devoted to the worship of Quetzalcoatl. Surely if the Cholulans thought Cortés were the manifestation of their lord, or even his ambassador, they would have shown some reverence. However, the conquistador, Andrés de Tapia, in his account, makes no mention of any demonstration of piety. To the contrary, the Spanish accused the Cholulans of plotting with Montezuma to attack them.

In response, Cortés brutally massacred the inhabitants and destroyed the town.55

The Spanish continued their march to Tenochtitlan, fighting and recruiting allies along the way. On November 8, 1519, Cortés reached the Mexica capital and met Montezuma (figure 1). By all eyewitness accounts, Montezuma recognized Cortés as the god who had come to reclaim his throne. De Aguilar states that, 

"[Montezuma] said word had been handed down from their ancestors that bearded and armed men were to come from where the sun rises,...they would be the lords of the land." He also says that
Montezuma "certified that he would serve His Majesty [Charles V] as his lord."\(^{56}\)

Bernal Díaz notes that "none of us [Spanish] were present at the talks Montezuma had with his chiefs. They say that he told them to recall how they had known for many years, through what their ancestors had told them,...that men would come from where the sun rises to rule these lands..." He also relates how "Montezuma and his chiefs,...gave fealty to His Majesty."\(^{57}\) The native informant in the Florentine Codex gives a similar account, "that the rulers on departing said that you would come in order to acquaint yourself with your altepetl [realms] and sit upon your seat of authority."\(^{58}\) Notably absent is any allegiance to Charles V.

This meeting was recorded by Cortés in his second letter to Charles V, dated October 30, 1520. Cortés claims that Montezuma declared "the Aztecs always knew they were not natives of the country. A chieftain of whom their ancestors were vassals brought them here, departed, returned, and was rejected. They always knew that the descendants of this chieftain would come and conquer the land and make them his vassals."\(^{59}\)
According to Aztec history, they were nomads from the north. They were led by priests from a land called Aztlan to Central Mexico between approximately AD 1200 and AD 1250. According to their migration legend, they were guided by their patron, the sun god, Huitzilopochtli, who was also the god of war. The Mexica Aztec were the last wave of migrants. They came to a land already populated by highly cultured societies and so the Mexica had to settle on the poorest land under the suzerainty of the Culhua. Considered barbarians by the cultured Culhua, the Mexica managed to outrage their hosts and had to flee into the swamps. In AD 1325 Huitzilopochtli appeared in a vision to a priest and directed the Mexica to their future homeland, a place where an eagle lived atop a tall nopal cactus. This small island in a swamp became the site of Tenochtitlan (figure 2). In this history, it was Huitzilopochtli who led the Mexica to Tenochtitlan. However, there is no indication that he "departed, returned, and was rejected" like in Montezuma's speech.

Cortés further claims that Montezuma gave the same speech to his chieftains. As a result of this speech, according to Cortés, there was a formal submission by Montezuma and all of the Aztec lords to Charles V. The fact that the Mexica chieftains willingly subjugated themselves would have been an important
point. A legitimate ruler in sixteenth century Spain was termed a señor natural. By definition a señor natural is "a lord who, by inherent nature of superior qualities, goodness, and virtue, and by birth of superior station, attains power legitimately..., being universally accepted, recognized, and obeyed by his vassals and subjects..." By delivering the riches of Mexico in this way to Charles V, Cortés hoped to legitimize his position.

Cortés' second letter was published in 1522 and has been the official version of the relations between Montezuma and Cortés, either directly or indirectly. Bernal Díaz notes that "none of us [Spanish] were present at the talks..." Still, they all give a similar account, Cortés' version. This is the version recorded by Gómara and through him to Prescott.

Brooks argues that Cortés' letter is in "the language of Spanish imperialism..." Cortés' main concern was to document legal arguments to justify his actions and to make a case in Spanish law. He had no legal authorization from the King to colonize. He had defied Governor Velázquez and his agent, Narváez. He was a rebel facing a death sentence if caught. He understood the legal ramifications of his actions, since he studied the law for two years and had also been secretary to
Velázquez in Cuba. He was engaged in a battle for control of Mexico and his life.

Cortés' patron, Velázquez, had sent Narváez to arrest him. However, Cortés managed to defeat him in a minor battle. With Narváez in irons, Cortés had little trouble in recruiting his troops with promises of gold. After this open act of defiance, he had to present his case to the King in the best possible light. Cortés argued that because of the God-given superiority of the Spaniards, and of course the King, it was only natural that the Aztecs should want to be their vassals. He was, therefore, advancing the great Spanish Empire for his Majesty.

Both Brooks and Todorov credit Cortés with consciously exaggerating the importance Montezuma had placed on a “returning” god legend. Todorov accuses Cortés of “converting the rather marginal myth into the myth of Quetzalcoatl’s return—...”63 Cortés was quick to seize upon the legends of the Aztec gods and turn them to his advantage. The legends had to be in place before he could use them.

Legends of people who could be described as Europeans were also told throughout America, from the Eastern Woodlands to the Southwest. As such, they cannot be discounted as post-contact inventions. They are an intrinsic part of Native American
The fabrication is not of the legend but of which god Cortés is supposed to be.

According to Cortés, Montezuma never mentioned a god by name. Cortés does, however, mention an encounter during the siege of Tenochtitlan. In his third letter, Cortés describes meeting some of the Mexica at the barrier to the city. They told him that "they held me [Cortés] for an offspring of the sun,..."

The Aztec associated Huitzilopochtli with the sun. Aztec legend has it that Huitzilopochtli led them to their homeland then took the books and continued on his journey. When he returned years later the Mexica drove him from the valley. The Aztec believed that someday his children would return and take their rightful place. The 17th century historian Iztlilxochitl, a descendant of the royal Texcoco family, stated that the Mexica assumed that the Spaniards were the descendants of Huitzilopochtli, in fulfillment of Mexica prophecy. The first Viceroy of Mexico, Antonio de Mendoza, wrote in a letter in 1540 that the story going around was about Huitzilopochtli.

Of course, in theory, the mighty lord that the Aztecs surrendered to was not Cortés but Charles V. It would have been more flattering for Charles to have been compared to the wise and benign god, Quetzalcoatl, than to the blood thirsty
Huitzilopochtli, who ate mens hearts. Gillespie makes a strong argument that it was the Spanish clergy who decided on Quetzalcoatl, making it a post-conquest myth of Spanish origin. The Indians accepted this version as an explanation for their defeat and as a hope for the future. Quetzalcoatl became a savior figure that would return someday to lead them out of bondage."

Although the Spaniards, like Quetzalcoatl, condemned human sacrifice and did not eat the hearts of men nor drink their blood, they were certainly not pacific in nature. In a very short time, through the massacre at Cholula, they acquired a reputation of savagery and cruelty. This reputation was worthy of the descendants of the war god, Huitzilopochtli.

For the first time since the Aztec Conquest, scholars, in the late twentieth century, began taking a more critical view of the sixteenth century sources. They re-examined the myth that Montezuma believed that Cortés was the god, Quetzalcoatl, coming to reclaim his throne. Some, like Gillespie, have concluded that there were no such legends. She claims that the myth is a post-conquest construction, created and perpetuated by Spanish and Indian interests. Still other historians, like Carrasco, searched for symbolic meaning and came to the same conclusion as
historians centuries before them, such as Prescott, who did not even question the myth's validity.

Todorov and Brooks, by contrast, have reached something of a middle ground. Though they approached the subject from different venues, they reached similar conclusions. They both argue that Cortés built upon some unspecified but existing legend to suit his own design. Todorov sees this maneuver as a communication triumph for Cortés. Brooks sees it as a calculated, yet bold, attempt by Cortés to justify his dubious legal position to the Spanish king.

It is more than probable that such legends were of pre-Hispanic origin. Gillespie bases her argument on the fact that there are no written records dating before the conquest period. But she does not take into account that the early missionaries systematically destroyed practically all Nahuatl manuscripts. At the same time, she does effectively argue that it was the Spanish clergy who cast Quetzalcoatl as the god Cortés was suppose to have been.

What remains is a pre-conquest legend that is not related to Quetzalcoatl. It was more likely that Montezuma would have believed the Spanish were representatives of the god, Huitzilopochtli. Viceroy Mendoza claims that was the story going
around at the time. The Texcoco historian, Iztlilxochitl, agrees that the Aztecs thought it was the sun god, and even Cortés confirms that the Mexica thought of him as the "offspring of the sun."

Did Montezuma believe that Cortés was Quetzalcoatl or Huitzilopochtli? Or were the legends of "returning" gods a post-conquest invention? Both native and Spanish accounts, after the conquest, relate stories about "returning" gods. Cortés claims that Montezuma believed he was the son of the mighty lord who led the Aztec people on their migration into Mexico, however, he did not mention that lord by name. Although Cortés used this information to further his own ambitions, that does not diminish the reality of the tale. If this Aztec legend really existed, the lord likely referred to by Cortés is Huitzilopochtli, the god who led the Mexica to Tenochtitlan. The Quetzalcoatl legend, by contrast, was about the return of a Toltec ruler to reclaim his throne.

It was the early Spanish missionaries, based on their own religious doctrines, who thought that Montezuma was referring to Quetzalcoatl. Subsequent native accounts, as recorded by the clergy, would have reflected the missionaries' interpretation.
44. Marina interprets for the Spaniards when Moctezuma meets Cortés (Chapter 16). 45, 46. Spaniards take Moctezuma with them as they enter the great palace (Chapter 17). 47. Supplies demanded by the Spaniards (Chapter 17). 48. Moctezuma leads Cortés to the treasure (Chapter 17). 49, 50. Spaniards and allies loot the treasure house (Chapter 17). 51. Marina addresses Mexican noblemen (Chapter 18). 52. Mexicans leave supplies for the Spaniards (Chapter 18).
VALLEY OF MEXICO

Figure 2
According to non-clerical sources, such as Viceroy Mendoza and the native historian, Iztlilxochitl, the Aztec believed that Cortés was Huitzilopochtli.

The evidence seems clear that there were pre-Hispanic legends of "returning" gods. And given the pre-ordained nature of Aztec faith, it would have been logical for Montezuma to surmise that Cortés was one of those gods. The most natural assumption would have been that he was the most important Aztec deity, the sun god, Huitzilopochtli.


8. Prescott, 430.


12. Prescott, 207.


14. Hernando Cortés, see note 13, 70 and 82.


16. Fray Bartolomé de La Casas quoted by Lesley Byrd Simpson in introduction to Gómara, Cortés, xvi.

17. Prescott quoted by Lesley Byrd Simpson in introduction to Gómara, Cortés, xvii.


21. There is one notable exception. Fray Sahagún believed that the world visitor was not a saint but the devil.


25. Carrasco, 200-204.


28. Sahagún, 50.


31. Sahagún, 52.

32. Durán in Lockhart, 259.

33. He was the oldest and most venerated Aztec God.

34. Sahagún in Lockhart, 52.
35. For examples see Hassig.

36. Sahagún in Lockhart, 52-54.

37. Quoted in Leon-Portilla, The Broken Spears, 9. To me the description sounds more like meteors burning up in the atmosphere but the distinction is not important.

38. Carrasco, 189.


40. Durán, 259.

41. The ancient Earth Goddess, Cihuacoatl, is said to have wept and cried out in the night. See Leon-Portilla, The Broken Spears, note 4, 12.

42. Sahagún in Lockhart, 54.

43. Durán, 259.

44. Sahagún, 54-56.


46. Gillespie, 196.

47. Gómara, 46-47.

48. Cortés, 46.


50. J. Díaz, 10.

51. Todorov, 100.

52. Sahagún in Lockhart, 62-72.

53. Gillespie, 195.
54. B. Díaz, 58.


56. Francisco de Aguilar, "The Chronicle of Fray Francisco de Aguilar" in Fuentes, 147.

57. B. Díaz, 184.


61. B. Díaz, 185.


63. Todorov, 117.

64. Samuel M. Wilson, "White Legends, Lost Tribes," *Natural History*, no. 9 (1991), 16.

65. Cortés, 220.


67. Gillespie, 185.
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