Quetzalcoatl's Hero Journey, from the Anales de Cuauhtitlan

Willard Gingerich

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THE FLAYED GOD

THE MYTHOLOGY OF MESOAMERICA

SACRED TEXTS & IMAGES FROM PRE-COLUMBIAN MEXICO & CENTRAL AMERICA

ROBERTA H. MARKMAN & PETER T. MARKMAN
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Quetzalcoatl's Hero Journey, from the Anales de Cuauhtitlan

Originally written in Nahuatl around 1570, the Anales de Cuauhtitlan is one of the most important and extensive sources of Aztec myth and history. In form it is a chronicle: it lists each year and then narrates the events of that year, if any. In what has been called an “expansion narrative,” it includes an account of the adventures of Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, an account that shows profound insight into the symbolic implications of the mythic narrative. Although the actual author is not known, much of its mythic insight, offered in the guise of history, is symbolically attributed to Quetzalcoatl, the personification of wisdom, a wisdom associated with Ometeotl, the generative force of the cosmos. Quetzalcoatl “cried out” to the place of “Duality Above Nine Heavens,” that is, to Ometeotl, the god of duality. Realizing the greatness of that cosmic force, epitomized by and embodied in the god who gave order to the universe and who was metaphorically the essence of the life force, “the universal cosmic energy from which all life gained sustenance,” he entreats Ometeotl to provide insight into the nature of that duality, the nature of all life. As ruler Quetzalcoatl thus acts as a conduit through which that essence of the divine can enter the world of human life.

But immersed in the purity of this life of the spirit, he is unable to recognize the other side, the human side, of his own duality, that which is represented by Tezcatlipoca and his sorcerers, who will bring him the ominous symbolic mirror that will reveal not only his own mortality but also mankind’s darker side. By the time he dies he has explored this other side of human nature, and when, at his death, he is “changed to the star that appears at dawn,” Venus, the morning star, the “alter ego” of Venus as evening star, his own dual nature has become apparent. As the myth makes clear, the morning star is a destructive force as well as a benevolent one, depending on the particular day of the calendar on which it appears. But “in each of these signs did the elders pay him their homage.” His apotheosis as the nature of duality is complete.

Willard Gingerich, the translator of this version of the story of Quetzalcoatl, in an application of the techniques of close literary analysis to a reading of the text, points out that Quetzalcoatl’s vital dates, which complete a fifty-two-year cycle from 1 Reed to 1 Reed, “are too symmetrical to be anything but ritualistic and symbolic,” and he suggests that “the Anales narrator creates ... an illo tempore vignette of a perfect pre-Cortesian (and pre-Aztec) society with a perfectly integrated human psyche at the center. None of it ever existed, of course, except in the nostalgia of the narrator and his sources.” That mythic narrative of Quetzalcoatl’s “fall,” of the flawed ruler and the jealous tempter, creates a sense of tragedy reminiscent of the great Greek drama of the fifth century B.C. The story of Quetzalcoatl’s confrontation with his own mortality, narrated with great psychological sensitivity and profound metaphorical overtones, is one of the most moving and universally appealing of the Aztec mythic texts.
1 Reed: It is recounted, it is said, in this year was born Quetzalcoatl, the one called Our Honored Prince High Priest One Reed Quetzalcoatl; and it is said his mother's name was Chimalman. And also in this fashion was Quetzalcoatl placed within his mother's womb: she swallowed a precious green stone, it is told.

[Years] 2 Flint, 3 House, 4 Rabbit, 5 Reed, 6 Flint, 7 House, 8 Rabbit, 9 Reed.

In this year 9 Reed Quetzalcoatl searched for his father, when he had come to a little knowledge, being now nine years old. He said, "What is my dear father like? May I see him? May I look on his face?"

And then he was told, "He has died with honor, he is buried there. Go look upon him."

Then Quetzalcoatl went there at once and dug up his bones and buried them again in the temple of the one called Quilaztl.

[Years] 10 Flint, 11 House, 12 Rabbit, 13 Reed, 1 Flint, 2 House, 3 Rabbit, 4 Reed, 5 Flint, 6 House, 7 Rabbit, 8 Reed, 9 Flint, 10 House.

In this year died in honor the Lord Speaker of Cuauhtitlan, Huactli, who had ruled for sixty-two years. He was the Lord Speaker who knew not the sowing of maize, the edible foodstuffs. His people knew not the making of tilmal capes. They wore only skin clothing; their food was only rabbits, snakes, birds, and deer. Nowhere did they keep houses, but only wandered from place to place.

11 Rabbit: The lady Xiuhtlacuiloxochitzin was installed as Speaker. Her grass dwelling stood at the side of the market plaza where Tepexititenco is today. And the city, Cuauhtitlan, passed to her since she was the wife of Huactli, it is said, and because she spoke often to the devil Itzpapalotl.

12 Reed, 13 Flint, 1 House, 2 Rabbit: This year Quetzalcoatl arrived there in Tollantzinco, where during four years he built his House of Fasting, his House of Turquoise-inlaid boards. From there he passed to Cuextlan, from which place he laid a bridge across the water which, it is said, still survives.

3 Reed, 4 Flint, 5 House: In this year the Toltecs took Quetzalcoatl and installed him on the throne there in Tollan and he was their priest; in another part his story has been written.
6 Rabbit, 7 Reed: Lady Xiuhtlacuiloxochitzin died; she had ruled twelve years in Cuauhtitlan.

8 Flint: In this year Ayauhcoyotzin was installed as Lord Speaker of Cuauhtitlan at the place known as Tecpanquauhtla.

9 House, 10 Rabbit, 11 Reed, 12 Flint, 13 House, 1 Rabbit,
2 Reed: (It is the word of Tetzcoco that in this year died Quetzalcoatl, Our Lord of Tollan Colhuacan.) In this year 2 Reed he built his House of Fasting, his place of penance and of prayer. He, Our Lord One Reed Quetzalcoatl, carefully laid out his four houses: his turquoise-plank house, his coral-inlay house, his whiteshell-inlay house, and his quetzal-feather house where he prayed frequently, performed penance and observed his fasts.

And at the exact hour of midnight he went down to the place called Atepan Amochco, by the water, and there he humbly inserted his penitential spines, which he did as well on the heights of Xicocotl and Huitzco and Tzincoc and Nonohualcatepec. And his penitential spines were made of precious greenstone and he offered them up on a bed of quetzal feathers. And for incense he burned turquoise, greenstone, coral; and his blood offerings were of serpents, birds, butterflies which he sacrificed.

And it is recounted, it is said he prayed often, he sought godhead in the depths of heaven and invoked it by the names

*Citlalinicue, Citlallatonac*  
*Tonacacihuatl, Tonacuteuctli*  
*Tecolliquenqui, Estlaquenqui*  
*Tlallamanac, Tlallichcatl.*

And the place to which he cried out was known as Omeyocan Chiuconeapanuiuhcan, “Duality Above Nine Heavens.”

And so in this manner he knew those who there kept their dwellings, calling upon and petitioning them insistently in most honorable humility and contrition.

And finally it was he who revealed the grandeur of wealth: jade stone, turquoise, gold—yellow and white, coral, mother-of-pearl, plumage of the quetzal, the cotinga, the roseate spoonbill, the troupial, the trogon and the heron. And he revealed the multicolored cacao as well as multicolored cotton. He was a great Toltec, a grand artisan, in all his earthenware, painted blue green, white, yellow, red and a multitude of colors.
And in the time that he lived he began, he founded his temple and set its serpent columns, but he did not finish and he did not give up hope.

And in the time that he lived he did not show his face before the people; deep within his house he lived where he was protected.

And his heralds kept him, in many places they enclosed him well.
And in every place he stayed, in each and every place were his heralds, and there were the Jadestone Mat, the Quetzal Mat, the Gold Mat of his authority.

And it was recounted, it has been said, his House of Fasting was built in four parts.

And it is recounted, it is said, how many times in vain the Human Owl sorcerers sought to humiliate Quetzalcoatl so that he would make his offerings of humans, that he would sacrifice men.

But he never desired it nor consented. For greatly did he love his common people, his Toltecs, and his offerings, the sacrifices he made continually, were but serpents, birds and butterflies.

And it is recounted, it is said that the owl sorcerers became greatly angered and began tormenting, mocking and humiliating him, saying they wanted in this way to make him miserable. And thus would they drive him out, and truly it was done.

[Years] 3 Flint, 4 House, 5 Rabbit, 6 Reed, 7 Flint, 8 House, 9 Rabbit, 10 Reed, 11 Flint, 12 House, 13 Rabbit, 1 Reed: In this year Quetzalcoatl died. And it is said he went to Tlilan Tlapallan, to die there.

Then was Matlacxochitl installed as Speaker in Tollan.

||

Now, it is recounted how Quetzalcoatl conducted himself when he disregarded the desire of the owl sorcerers that he should make human offerings, that he should sacrifice men.

The owl sorcerers counseled together, those whose names were Tezcatlipoca, Ihuimecatl and Toltecatl. They said, "Certainly it is necessary that he abandon the city, which we will occupy." They said, "Let us brew the pulque which we will give him to drink; so he will be corrupted and so he will no longer perform his sacramental penances."

And then Tezcatlipoca said, "I say we must give him his own body, that he should see it." And so it would be done, that in this way
they might punish him with great severity. Then Tezcatlipoca went ahead, carrying a small, double-sided mirror, enwrapped.

And when he had arrived where Quetzalcoatl was, he said to the heralds who protected him, "Please do the honor of saying to the High Priest: 'Truly, Telpochtli, the Young Man, has come to you and wishes most humbly to deliver to you, to humbly show before you your body.'"

And the heralds went in to him and delivered the message. Quetzalcoatl said to them, "What is this thing, grandfather-heralds, what is this body of mine that he has brought here? Examine it; then he will enter."

But he did not wish them to see it. He said, "Truly, I myself must show it to him; tell him this." They went to tell him, "He will not consent. He very much wishes to show you himself." Quetzalcoatl said, "Let him come in, grandfathers."

They went to summon Tezcatlipoca who came in and greeted him saying, "My beloved Prince and High Priest One Reed Quetzalcoatl. I salute your grace, and I arrive to set before you your beloved body." Quetzalcoatl said, "You have wearied yourself in this work, grandfather. From where did you come? What is this thing you call my 'body'? Show it to me."

He said, "My Beloved Prince and High Priest, certainly I am your humble subject. I come from the lower slopes of Mt. Nonohualca. Won't you please look upon your beloved body?"

Then he brought him the mirror and said, "May it please you to know, to look upon yourself, my Beloved Prince, for you will appear there in the mirror."

So then Quetzalcoatl looked upon himself, and he was overcome with horror. He said, "If my subjects see me, perhaps they will flee." For his eyelids were swollen, his eyes sunken deep in their sockets, his face all heavily pockmarked and furrowed; he was a monstrous sight. When he had seen himself in the mirror, he said, "My subjects shall never see me; I will stay here."

Then Tezcatlipoca turned away and withdrew; he called urgently for Ihuimecatl so that they might fully abuse him. Ihuimecatl said, "Let Coyotlinahual 'Shape-shifting Coyote,' the feather-artist, go in to him now." The shape-shifter listened to their suggestion, that he would be the one sent. Coyotlinahual the feather-artist said, "It is good. Let me be the one to go, the one to see Quetzalcoatl."
Then he went, and said to Quetzalcoatl, "My beloved prince, I come to say to your grace in all reverence, come out, show yourself before your subjects. Permit me to array and prepare you so that they might look upon you." Quetzalcoatl said to him, "Prepare them, grandfather, I will see what they are."

And so then Coyotlinahual the feather-artist fashioned them; first he made Quetzalcoatl's plumed headdress, then his turquoise inlay mask. He took red with which to paint his mouth; he took yellow with which to stripe his face. Next he prepared his serpent teeth, then his beard of cotinga and roseate spoonbill feathers across his lower face.

And so he arrayed him in his attire and he was Quetzalcoatl. Then he handed him the mirror, and when he looked on himself he was very pleased with what he saw. Then Quetzalcoatl abandoned forthwith the place where he was guarded.

And so then Coyotlinahual the feather artist went to Ihuimecatl and said, "Certainly I have caused Quetzalcoatl to emerge. Now it's your turn." He replied, "That's fine."

Then he befriended one named Toltecatl and they went off together, and they arrived at a place called Xonacapacoyan where they met with a farmer named Maxtlaton who guarded Toltec Mountain.

And then they also grew herbal greens, tomatoes, chili, green corn and beans, and in only a few days it was done. And there also were magueys in that place which they requested of Maxtlaton. For only four days they fermented the pulque. Next, they collected it; they found wild honeycombs and with these they collected and mixed the pulque.

Then they went to the home of Quetzalcoatl there in Tollan. They took all their herbs, their chili, etc., and the pulque. They arrived and requested entrance, but those who guarded Quetzalcoatl refused them. Twice and three times they returned but were not received. The last time they were asked where was their home? They responded and said, "Why, there on Priest's Mountain, Toltec Mountain." And hearing this, Quetzalcoatl said, "Let them come in." They entered and greeted him and then finally gave him the green herbs, etc.

And when he had eaten, they entreated him once more: they gave him the pulque. But he said, "No, I will not drink it; I am fasting.
Does it not intoxicate? Is it not fatal?” They answered him, “Do taste it with your honorable finger. It is certainly strong and fresh.”

Quetzalcoatl tasted it with his finger and found it good. He said, “Allow me to drink, grandfathers; three drinks.” “You must drink four,” the owl sorcerers said to him, and they gave him the fifth, saying, “This is your ritual libation.”

And when he had drunk it, they served it to everyone, to all the heralds they gave five drinks. They made them completely drunk.

Then again the owl sorcerers spoke to Quetzalcoatl and said, “My Beloved Prince, may it please your grace to sing. This is the blessed song it shall honor you to lift up.” Then Ihuimecatl raised the song:

“My house of quetzal, quetzal
my house of troupial
my house of redshell—
I must already lose them
for my carelessness, An ya!”

And Quetzalcoatl was now full of joy; he said, “Bring my sister, Quetzalpetlatl. Let us be drunken together!” So his heralds went to Mt. Nonohualca where she practiced her meritorious penances. They said to her, “My beloved princess, noble lady of fasts, Quetzalpetlatl: We have come for you; the High Priest Quetzalcoatl awaits you. Will it not please you to go into his presence?” She answered, “It is good, herald grandfather; let us be off.”

And upon arrival she sat herself beside Quetzalcoatl and they served her the pulque, four drinks and then the fifth, her ritual libation. The seducers Ihuimecatl and Toltecatl then also raised another song before the sister of Quetzalcoatl:

“My sister, Where now will you live?
O Quetzalpetlatl, let’s make ourselves drunk!
Ay, ya, yya, yn, ye, an.”

When they were fully drunken, they no longer said, “If it were not for the merit we earn . . .,” nor did they go down to the water’s edge, nor any more plant spines in their bodies. At dawn they performed no sacraments and when the sun appeared they were stricken with anguish, their hearts were orphaned in remorse.
Then Quetzalcoatl spoke and said, “O how unfortunate I am!”
And then he composed the lament of his exile; he sang there:

“No longer is even a single day-sign counted in my house;
Let it be here, aya, where he was guarded, let it be here.
Let it already be, let it happen,”

he chanted,

“He who owns the body of earth can be but miserable and afflicted.
All that is precious is no more;
Certainly I return to sober virtue.”

The second time he chanted his song:

“Aya, she had formed and shaped me,
she who is my mother, an ya,
Coacueye, the goddess;
ah, her son, yyaa,
I weep, yya, ye an.”

And when Quetzalcoatl had sung, all his heralds were overcome with sadness and wept also. Then they also sang and raised the chant in that place:

“Aya, He gave us a life of abundant riches;
He who is my Lord, he, Quetzalcoatl.
Lost, your jade-stone headdress;
the tree, broken and bleeding.
Let us look already upon him,
Let us weep also.”

And when the heralds finished singing, then Quetzalcoatl said to them there, “Grandfather heralds, let it be finished. Let me abandon the city, let me go. Send word that a stone sarcophagus be made.”
Then they quickly prepared the sarcophagus and when it was prepared and finished, they laid Quetzalcoatl within it.
And he had lain in the sarcophagus only four days when he became ill. Then he said to his heralds, “Let it be finished,
grandfather heralds. Let us depart. Conceal and hide all around the felicity and the rich prosperity we have revealed, and all the property of our inheritance."

And the heralds did as he said. They hid them well in the place where Quetzalcoatl’s bath was, a place called Ateepan Amochco.

So then Quetzalcoatl left. He rose up, summoned his heralds, and wept deeply for them.

Then they departed in search of Tliillan, Tlapallan, Tlatlayan "The Black, the Red Land, Place of the Burning."

And he looked upon every place and traveled everywhere, but no place was satisfactory to him. And when he found at last the place he sought, then once more he wept in sad contrition.

And it was again on the day 1 Reed, it is recounted, it is said, when he arrived at Teoapan Ilhuicaatenco, "Along the divine water, At the shore of heavenly water." Then he halted and stood; he wept, took up his vestments and adored himself in his insignia, his turquoise mask, etc.

And when he was fully adorned then with his own hand he set himself on fire, he offered himself up in flame. So the place where Quetzalcoatl went to immolate himself came to be called Tlatlayan, "Place of the Burning."

And it is said that even as he burned, his ashes emerged and arose: and there appeared, before the sight of everyone, all the birds of great value which emerged and rose into the sky. They saw the roseate spoonbill, the cotinga, the trogon, the heron, the yellow parrot, the scarlet macaw, the white-bellied parrot, and every other bird of precious plumage.

And when the ashes were extinguished, then arose his heart, the quetzal bird itself; they saw it. And so they knew he had entered the sky within the sky.

The old ones used to say he was transformed to the dawn star; thus it is said that when Quetzalcoatl died this star appeared, and so he is named Tlahuizcalpanteuctli, "Lord of the Dawn House."

They used to say that when he died he did not appear for four days; he went to live in Mictlan, the Nether World, they said.

And also in another four days he made for himself arrows. So in eight days appeared the great star which was named Quetzalcoatl, and this, they said, is when he was enthroned as Lord.

And so they knew when he came to appear, each individual tonal or day-sign under which he falls upon men, he fires his arrows, he is
provoked. If on 1 Crocodile, he shoots arrows at old men and women all alike; if on 1 Jaguar, if 1 Deer, if 1 Flower, he shoots well-born children; and if on 1 Reed, he strikes all the ruling speakers, as also on 1 Death. And if on 1 Rain, he shoots the rain; rain will cease. And if on 1 Motion, he shoots the young men and women; and if on 1 Water, then drought comes.

Each of these day-signs, therefore, was held in veneration by the elders, both men and women.

So it is recounted how for Quetzalcoatl all was in vain. He was born under a day-sign 1 Reed and he also died under 1 Reed. Thus it is completely read, thus it is exhausted, fifty-two years or one full calendar round. So it all came to an end in this year One Reed.

It was said that Matlacxochitl took his place as Speaker there in Tollan.