

# A Banned Sixteenth-Century Biblical Text in Nahuatl: The Proverbs of Solomon

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Between 1536 and the late sixteenth century, the Colegio de Santa Cruz, established by the Franciscan order at the *altepetl* of Tlatelolco in the Basin of Mexico, served as a hub for many intellectual enterprises that featured a close collaboration between Nahua scholars educated in Latin and the liberal arts and their Franciscan teachers. Several important intellectual projects originated in this milieu. Among them, one could mention Alonso de Molina's highly influential Nahuatl-Spanish and Spanish-Nahuatl dictionaries, which appeared in 1571 after a much shorter version was printed in 1555, and Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia General*, a monumental encyclopedic work about Nahua language, literature, cosmology, and social and cultural practices.

These extraordinary Nahua-Franciscan collaborative projects were eventually impacted by a rise in the scrutiny of printed works in Spain, which featured a crackdown on Erasmist thought in the middle years of the sixteenth century, and by a more focused monitoring of devotional texts and local forms of worship that was ushered in by the Council of Trent. In 1577, not long after the establishment of a separate Mexican Holy Office tribunal in 1571, two Mexican inquisitors banned a translation of the Proverbs of Solomon into an indigenous language by the Franciscan fray Luis Rodríguez that had circulated in manuscript form. This decision followed a growing concern in Spain with controlling (and, eventually, banning) easy access to the Scriptures in vernacular languages. As Martin Nesvig has noted, Molina, Sahagún, and other prominent mendicants responded to an inquisitorial questionnaire, also dating from 1577, regarding the wisdom of having Ecclesiastes translated into indigenous languages.<sup>1</sup>

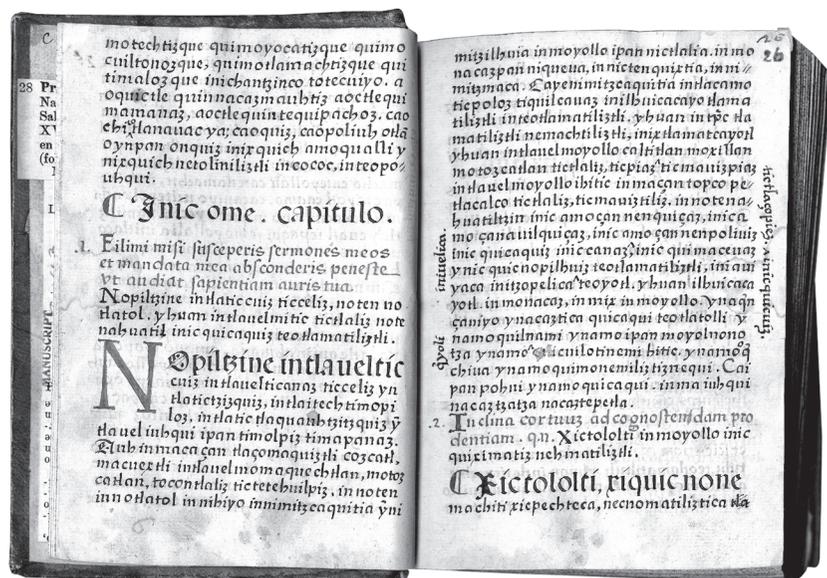


Figure 1. The first two full pages of the Proverbs of Solomon in Nahuatl, with translation of and commentary on Proverbs 2:1 and 2:2. Image reproduced with permission from the Hispanic Society of America

Some Franciscans had knowledge of this manuscript version of the Proverbs before it was banned, as this order's chronicler, Gerónimo de Mendieta, stated that Rodríguez “translated the Proverbs of Solomon in a very elegant manner.”<sup>2</sup> Since Mendieta also records Rodríguez’s proficiency in Nahuatl, it is to be assumed that this language was the one chosen for carrying out the translation of the Proverbs. Given the extent of censorship and ecclesiastical scrutiny in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, no translation of a book from the Scriptures into an indigenous language was thought to be extant, except for a few brief sections that were translated in relative clandestinity by members of Nahua confraternities or quoted in manuscript or printed sermons and devotional works.

Nonetheless, I recently located a Nahuatl manuscript translation of the Proverbs of Solomon in the holdings of the Hispanic Society of America in New York (see fig. 1). This work is bound in a volume with another manuscript containing an unrelated group of sermons in Nahuatl, and its folios were numbered 25r–190r, perhaps when these two manuscripts were bound together. According to an appended catalog note, the nineteenth-century historian Joaquín García Icazbalceta inspected this tome when it was part

of the collection of Augustin Fischer, the chaplain of Emperor Maximilian I of Mexico (1864–67). Hence, this volume may have been sold at an auction featuring Fischer's collection by Puttick and Simpson in London in 1869.

This work is a 168-folio manuscript in sixteenth-century *letra gótica* featuring several hands, in which Latin verses written in red ink are followed by a Nahuatl-language translation, gloss, and/or commentary in black ink. The manuscript's contents feature a Nahuatl-language version of the Proverbs of Solomon that runs from Proverbs 2:1 to Proverbs 15:23—about one-half of the contents of this biblical book. More importantly, interspersed in this manuscript are Nahuatl glosses of a multiplicity of Latin citations drawn both from the New and the Old Testaments and from classical authors such as Aristotle and Ovid.

There are no signatures in this work, but its contents provide an excellent match to the limited information we have about Rodríguez's banned Proverbs in Nahuatl. It is known that Rodríguez left New Spain permanently in 1562, so any copies of his Nahuatl Proverbs would have been based on an original completed before this date. Indeed, some features of this manuscript support a tentative dating to the middle years of the sixteenth century. This dating is supported by this work's calligraphic style, the elaborate drawing of initial letters, and the diversity and frequency of abbreviations employed in both Latin and Nahuatl terms—with a special focus on the grapheme *q* in the latter. Moreover, the authors of this text have a predominant tendency to transcribe prevocalic [w] as *u*. As shown by James Lockhart, the use of the graphemes *v* and *u* in lieu of *hu* for prevocalic [w] is a feature often found in Nahuatl texts produced before the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

These are three reasons the study of this work will advance our knowledge of indigenous intellectual and social history in the Americas. First, this text is the only extant scholarly translation and commentary of a biblical book produced in an Amerindian language in early colonial times. As such, this manuscript is a prime exhibit of the translation methodology and scholarly practices followed by Franciscan and Nahua authors in the middle years of the sixteenth century. Second, the very existence of this manuscript pushed hard against the boundaries of what inquisitorial and ecclesiastical officials allowed to circulate in Spanish America, even before the turn toward greater vigilance in the 1570s in New Spain. Having access to a Nahuatl translation and commentary of the Proverbs would have placed a Nahua reader at a vantage point similar to that of a Lutheran or a Calvinist who studied vernacular translations of the works of Solomon, which were in broad circulation in Protestant Europe in the second half of the sixteenth century. Third, this text showcases the Nahuatization and intel-

lectual appropriation of a critical apparatus for the translation and commentary of the Scriptures that had been widely employed in a diversity of academic settings in early modern Europe.

### Notes

- 1 Martin Nesvig, *Ideology and Inquisition: The World of the Censors in Early Mexico* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 153–57.
- 2 Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica Indiana*, vol. 1, Antonio Rubial García, ed. (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1997), p. 75.
- 3 James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 336–37.