

# Nebaj Ixil "Christian" Lore

**Ray Elliott**

Nebaj, Quiché and Guatemala City

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[[ PLEASE NOTE THE DATE.

This content is valid as of the time I wrote it,  
but I won't claim that everything is just the same now  
as it was then. ]]

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## **A sketch of Nebaj Ixil "Christian" lore and legend, and some implications for translation**

Subsequent to the conquest, Catholic priests imposed upon the Ixil people the forms of a religion that was alien to them. Written testimony from priests themselves which I have seen,, dating back as far as 1800, indicates that they felt great frustration due to the apparent lack of positive impact from their work upon the Ixil people. But at the same time they judged both the people and their language as no better than animalistic, and therefore unsuited to the worship of their Catholic God. There was, therefore, no motivation (or, I could say, strong negative motivation) for the priests to learn the Ixil language.

Gradually some of the Ixil people learned some of the Spanish language, as well as certain Latin and Spanish terms used in connection with the church, which were perceived as being important. But the Ixil people had no basis for understanding *how* and *why* they were important. They grasped what they could, and then "filled in the blanks" on the basis of their own system of cultural understanding. Some few attempts were made to communicate religious content in the Ixil language itself. But the amount and types of misunderstanding were and are vast, and they differ markedly from ignorance associated with simple lack of contact with the Bible.

The nature of many of these misunderstandings can be guessed at, partly on the basis of the way Ixil people currently define and describe "Christian" terminology in the Ixil language. For example, I once did a survey among a select group of ten Ixil leaders, giving them a list of religious terms in Spanish, and asking them to define them in Ixil. In not one case did an Ixil person define even one of these terms in the Ixil language in a way which was similar to the way in which those Spanish terms were understood by people whose mother tongue was Spanish.

Furthermore, the nature of some of the misunderstandings could be deduced on the basis of the kinds of stories the Ixiles still hand down from one generation to the next as part of their religious heritage. The following paragraphs represent some examples which we have had occasion to note, and for many of them we made tape recordings and then translated the Ixil transcriptions of the recordings into English. The following notes are not verbatim, but rather representative, but they are faithful to the content of the original Ixil stories. They are not exhaustive, and **it is not to be assumed that all speakers of Nebaj Ixil today would want to be characterized by what is noted here.**

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When God's mother was in labor, she was not able to deliver and so she was dying. No visitors were allowed until an exception was made for the three kings named Gaspar, Melchor and Baltazar--probably the most important gods in the Ixil pantheon. They came bearing gifts with magical powers, the most important of which was burning incense. When God's mother smelled the incense, she immediately delivered safely, so "Jesucristo" was born. But some of the incense smoke blew into the face of one of the kings, turning him black, and causing his offspring in turn to be born black. This explains why burning of incense is one of the most powerful features of the divinations of the prayermakers today, and why there are both black people and white people in the world.

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"Hail Mary, full of grace," or the Ave María as it is also known, is associated only with God's mother just before he was born, so "grace" is a common way of referring to pregnancy. The hymn "His grace reached even me" is sung by some women as a charm to help them become pregnant, or as a way of expressing either thanks or grief because they are pregnant. A woman about whom it is said, "she is graceful" or "she has grace," is being described as pregnant.

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Nowadays, on the day after Christmas, a small image representing the newborn "Jesucristo" is carried from house to house in a cradle supported on shoulder poles by four men, under a canopy supported by poles carried by four other men. At each house, the cradle is lowered to waist height, the occupants of the house approach to kiss the image, deposit an offering in the attached box, pass liquor around to the official party and drink some themselves, and then shoot off a string of firecrackers and an aerial bomb. At this signal, those carrying the image grab it up and depart on the run for the next house. This hurried exit from each house is called the "flight into Egypt." Each house where the ritual is enacted has thus received the blessing of the newborn Jesucristo for the coming year.

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God the Father is thought of as a crotchety old grandfather type who is never satisfied with the way things are, and he is always "on the case" of people who can never do anything which pleases him. Since God is now senile and can't keep things under control, he has delegated to his brawny and astute son Jesucristo the job of running the world. People try to stay on the good side of Jesucristo, since if they don't he will find some way of making life miserable or tragic for them.

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When God made the world, there was a stage at which he was separating the land from the water. His second son, Jesucristo, managed to swindle the older son, unnamed, out of his rightful inheritance and take possession of the land for himself. The older son was angry, and went off in a huff to become the Devil.

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The landlocked Ixil people living in the Guatemalan highlands have traveled very little (if at all) beyond their own immediate villages and cornfields. So it is not surprising that their concepts of geography, and (significant for the Bible translator) the geography of the Holy Land itself, are somewhat lacking. (All of this is rather relative, of course, since there are many parts of the world of which I know nothing at all.)

So terms like "the Holy Land," "Israel," "Palestine," "the Middle East," "the Mediterranean," and so on, carry little if any meaning. Some people have heard that there is a part of the world where Jesus lived and walked, and that it is therefore a "holy land," which makes it taboo, quite dangerous, for other people to go there or to be there.

A significant part of my introduction to local concepts about geography came in the Spring of 1955, when we were preparing to return from Guatemala to the U.S. for another summer of study at the Summer Institute of Linguistics. My neighbor in Nebaj asked me to do him a favor. "On your way to your town, will you please stop off in Rome and ask the Pope to remove our local priest? He is corrupting our religion." [Actually, the missionary Catholic priest from Spain in Nebaj was involved in a campaign to eradicate "pagan" elements from the religious observances of local people who thought they were Catholic. The changes he was insisting on would indeed have constituted a corruption of the current practices of the local religion.]

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One of the principle jobs of Jesucristo is to see that justice is practiced on the earth. There is some discrepancy between the kind of justice Jesucristo espoused and the way Ixil people today understand the Spanish word for justice. The Ixil people understand the Spanish word "justicia" in one of two ways: it can be either (1) the punishment a poor person receives from the civil authorities (a poor person is victim of, not vindicated by, legal disputes), or it can be (2) the benefits a rich person can buy at the town hall from those civil authorities. Many stories are told about how Jesucristo administers justice. Here is one example:

Once while traveling through the countryside, Jesucristo asked lodging for the night in a home where another wayfarer was already being given hospitality. This one decided he would steal from the host in such a way that Jesucristo would be blamed for it. As he was secreting the host's goods in his shoulder bag, he was seen by a rooster, which he promptly killed so it couldn't tattle. At daybreak Jesucristo was accused of the theft, whereupon he stretched the rooster's neck and brought it back to life. It immediately crowed out the true version of what had happened, saving the threatened reputation of Jesucristo and dooming the real thief.

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Adam tried in vain to get people to straighten up and do what God ordered, but they not only continued in their sin but jeered at Adam as well. So when God decided to punish all the people for being evil, he made Adam build a big boat according to magic instructions he handed down through a window in the sky.

The next day, when the boat was finished, he told Adam that it would start raining by ten thirty a.m., eleven at the latest, and commanded him to load the boat with pairs of animals.

When that was done, Adam jacked the boat up to a height of five or six meters (16 to 20 feet) in order to make it safe from the water, then climbed in and shut the door.

People who had continued in their wrong ways and jeered at the boat builder became concerned when the rain showed no sign of stopping. As the waters began to rise around them, they clamored to be allowed inside the boat, but Adam (and Noah, who somehow was also in the boat now) said, "If we're such fools, why do you want in here with us?" So all those outside were drowned while Adam, Noah and the animals were safe in the boat.

But Noah must have been washed overboard in the storm, for Adam was left alone with all those dumb smelly animals. He complained to such an extent that God finally gave in and said, "I'll make a companion for you." He put Adam to sleep and took one of his ribs and made a woman to be his mate. This is why women have only eleven ribs. But making the woman was really a mistake on God's part, for the woman he had made gave an apple to Adam (understood metaphorically to be sexual intercourse), and man has never since enjoyed the intelligence he had exhibited before that.

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"Sin" is assumed to be sexual intercourse, whether within wedlock or extramarital. Any man who has at any time had sexual relations with a woman (whether the woman is his wife or not) is sinful and therefore disqualified from some of the benefits and privileges he might otherwise enjoy. He can never be allowed even to touch, much less read, the book called "The Word of God" which is chained to a post in the Catholic church. Only the priest, who has never stained himself by sexual contact with a woman, can dare to touch it or read it, and he usually doesn't bother. But this belief about the priest's sexual purity exists side-by-side with accounts of which children in the community might have been sired by a priest at some time or other.

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When I was translating Chapter 5 of James into Ixil and sought to express "confessing your sins one to another," I was told that we didn't dare include that, for if taken seriously it would require each man to tell in church when he last had sexual intercourse, regardless of whether that had been with his wife or not.

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The word "Jew" is synonymous with the word "devil"--and the Jews are the archtypes of those who disobey and oppose what God wants. The first time I innocently mentioned that Jesus, Joseph and Mary were Jews, I was cautioned that saying such an abominable thing could lead to physical violence.

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The Jews were constantly trying to get the best of Jesucristo but never quite managed, for he always outsmarted them in some way. For example:

There was a time when the Jews succeeded in capturing Jesucristo and had placed him, tied up, in the corner of a dirt-floored, thatch-roofed hut so that he could not help seeing them celebrate his capture. As they were enjoying their victory feast of chicken stew, Jesucristo

"blessed" the rooster in the pot so that it flapped its wings, splashing chile sauce into their eyes. They howled with rage and pain, wiped their eyes, and when they could see again, Jesucristo was gone, leaving nothing but his ropes behind in the corner of the hut.

The Jews split up into search parties to try to recapture him, but meanwhile Jesucristo, running through a pasture, demanded a lamb from a shepherd boy, who of course would not dare to withhold it from him. Jesucristo disemboweled the lamb, leaving the entrails on the trail, hid the carcass behind some bushes, and ran off. When one contingent of the pursuing Jews came upon the entrails in the trail, they had a parley to determine what significance this might have for them. They finally decided that Jesucristo had been able to escape because he had removed his own intestines, thereby reducing his weight so that he could run faster. "We'll never catch him unless we do the same thing," they concluded. So they did--and Jesucristo escaped again.

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There came a time when the Jews finally did manage to kill Jesucristo, and to show off they strung his corpse up on a cross. But again he tricked them and came back to life. He then conned the twelve "apostles" into switching sides. That is why "apostle" is a synonym for "turncoat." As the feuding continued it was now Jesucristo and the twelve apostles against the Jews.

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Some years ago, a film crew from a Canadian TV corporation shot a lot of footage in Nebaj during Holy Week, and did a masterful job of editing a beautiful documentary from it. We were in the U.S. at the time that its showing was announced on a public television channel, and friends of ours invited us to view it with them, which we did. Sound tracks made during the filming were included in the documentary, but of course they needed to have an English "voice-over" dubbed in to make it intelligible for U.S. and Canadian viewers.

One sequence showed something we had often heard about but had never witnessed for ourselves. On Wednesday night of Holy Week, the twelve men who are the heads of the twelve religious brotherhoods associated with the Nebaj Catholic church have their feet washed by the Catholic priest (who during those years was always a missionary from Spain) as a reenactment of what John records about Jesus in chapter 13 of the fourth Gospel. The English soundtrack accompanying the documentary was a translation of the explanation in Spanish by the Catholic priest, who was by this ceremony presenting to his congregation an example of Christian humility and servitude. And I am convinced that this is what the priest thought he was doing.

That is not, however, what the Ixil people thought he was doing. In their minds, when the priest washed the feet of these twelve religious leaders (11 of them are Ixil Indians, one is of mixed Spanish and Indian blood), he had thereby qualified them to act in the role of the twelve "apostles," who later that same night killed Jesucristo and then strung up his corpse on a huge wooden cross. There was no clue in the documentary that the priest or any of the large crew involved in putting together the film had any idea about what was in the minds of the Ixil people themselves during that ceremony, and the film crew would have had no reason to suppose that the humble priest was not sharing with them what he believed to be true.

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Holy Week is an especially dangerous season, for it commemorates the time when the Jews beat and killed "our father Jesucristo," and it is taboo to do any type of ordinary work during these special days. Those who work anyway will either die or be changed into animals. The special days are Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Easter Sunday is not taboo, and is used by many people to catch up on jobs they haven't had time for otherwise, like mending their fences. On Monday, those who are sober resume their normal work routines.

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One of the men crucified with Jesucristo was a murderer who surprised someone else in bed with his wife, so he could be pardoned. The other, however, was a thief, so he could not be pardoned.

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The "Holy Spirit" is the name given to the cookfire, which is never (well, hardly ever!) allowed to go out, since it is the good spirit which protects the family against the evil spirits of darkness which lurk outside the house, especially at night.

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The "Our Father" (The Lord's Prayer) is a sequence of magic syllables which a person pronounces to ward off evil, especially if he must be out on the trail after dark. Also, prayermakers recite the "Our Father" as part of their prayers to the many nature gods in their animistic pantheon. No one today can assign any meaning at all to the nonsense syllables of the "Our Father," but it is evident from examining those syllables that the current form is a corruption of what were once Ixil words, apparently put together in an over-literal fashion to match Spanish grammatical order, and thus they had never made any sense to Ixil people. So far, no one has shown any interest in a *translation* of the Lord's Prayer into Ixil as the language is spoken today: no such easily understandable words could possibly have the magical powers associated with the traditional nonsense syllables which are used as a charm.

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The word "angel" is associated with lightning in some way which the Ixil people themselves find hard to explain. At a place where lightning was once seen to strike the ground, stone or obsidian potscrapers were uncovered by the blast. Such potscrapers are apparently not in use among Ixil people today, hence are unknown to them otherwise. But they are called "angel things" since it was the "angel" who uncovered them when the lightning struck.

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The sun is called Our Father and is identified with "the god who made the world," whose name is Joseph. The moon is Our Mother, named Mary, and is associated with the mother of God and the mother of Jesucristo. Another of her names is "Virgen," a Spanish word ("Virgin" in English) which is only a title and has no other meaning. A number of other female gods are also called "Virgen": Fátima, Guadalupe, Rosary, and so on. Each of these names represents a different "person," and these persons have different ranks, both in relation to each other and in relation to the kinds of prayers they specialize in answering, but no one among the Ixil people identifies any of these other "vírgenes" with Mary, the mother of Jesus.

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November first is "The Day of All the Saints"--a "saint" being, in this context, the spirit of anyone who has died. Unless properly honored and propitiated, such saints are quick to make trouble for their relatives who still live on the earth. Special ceremonies must take place on the anniversary of the death and on All Saints' Day, both at the place where death occurred and at the burial site. (Since by law in places where no embalming is available, burial must take place within a day of the time of death, these two locations are not usually very far apart.) The ceremonies consist of prayers by the family and a hired prayermaker, burning of candles and incense, and leaving offerings of food, flowers, money and liquor for the spirit of the dead at the gravesite. The prayer-makers rather forcefully remind the spirits that the proper honor and recognition have in fact been extended. The spirit can then be scolded, to induce it to leave the living relatives in peace.

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The influence of the many "gods" is assumed to be local or, at best, regional, as well as seasonal. The "Black Christ of Esquipulas" (in the southeastern part of Guatemala) has for many decades been the most revered image among Guatemalan Catholics. The "Cristo Negro de Esquipulas" has a brother in the town of Chajul, which is the center of another of the Ixil languages. This "Cristo Negro de Chajul" does powerful things which gods in other regions can not do, but he is more likely to do them during certain parts of the year than at others, and apparently he is more likely to do them for out-of-towners than for local Chajuleños. Some local Chajul people go elsewhere to ask favors of a different god, while people from elsewhere come to Chajul for the same reason. Even the brother of the Black Christ of Esquipulas has his limitations.

He also gets lonely at times, as is evidenced by the story of how several hundred years ago, very early one morning, people went into the church which usually houses him and found he was missing. They assumed that out of loneliness he had left for Esquipulas to visit his brother, so they quickly gathered some gifts and ran to overtake him, thinking enroute of ways they could persuade him to return to their church and continue to perform his special favors for them. At a certain hill several hours' travel away, they caught up with him and were successful in persuading him to return, in response to several favors the people promised to do for him. But they no longer trusted the locks on the church door to restrain him. As soon as they had collected funds enough, they purchased images of two Roman soldiers to guard him. These images stand guard today on either side of the Black Christ's brother in the church at Chajul.

But people began to reason that if the Roman guards were powerful enough to control the actions of the Cristo Negro himself, then they must be more powerful than he was. So today many people burn candles before the soldiers, offering up prayers to them and asking for favors. In spite of the insult, their god has not run away again, for, after all, there are the two wooden guards with spears handy.

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"Guilt" is hardly distinguishable from sin. It may arise from getting caught at doing something in violation of local customs, or from doing something, even inadvertently, which offends one of the many nature gods or the spirits of the family dead. Any type of misfortune--

sickness, death, damage to crops or animals, too much rain, too little rain—is evidence that the wrongdoer has been caught and is being punished by the offended spirit or spirits.

The severity of the sense of guilt may be modified by the relational distance between perpetrator and victim: one would never steal, for example, from one's own close family members, but he might from someone less closely related, and more likely yet from a distant relative. To steal successfully from a non-Ixil without getting caught can be a positive cultural value. Any sense of guilt, of whatever degree, may be removed by hiring a prayermaker, who must first ascertain (on the proper calendar day, by asking of the appropriate god) what sin may have caused the god's wrath, and then, learn which gifts and rituals will properly buy off the offended god. If, after the first encounter with the gods, the prayermaker reports a sin the client knows he has not committed, the assumption is that his own spirit must have committed the wrong while he slept. But the client is still wrong, and responsible.

The offended spirit may be identified by his traditional tribal name, or by the Spanish name of the corresponding "Christian" saint. The Ixiles are unaware that the Spanish names of San Miguel, San Antonio, Santa Cruz, and so on, represent beings which to the Spanish mind are quite distinct from the Ixil tribal spirits. The Ixiles have identified each of the Catholic images with one or more of their own spirits, and now they say they know what their traditional spirits look like and what their names are in Spanish. Jesucristo is not usually included in the list or, if he is, he is of relatively low esteem.

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This by no means exhausts the ways in which miscommunication and misunderstanding are everyday facets of the religious life of Ixil people. It is, however, sufficient to illustrate several things which the translator of God's Word into the Ixil language must keep constantly in mind: Anything and everything which the translator has "learned" about the Ixil language by means of reliance on the way Ixil people use and (mis)understand Spanish must be rigorously checked and crosschecked as to the way the Ixil people themselves understand it. Further, anything and everything stated by the Ixil translation of the Scriptures is automatically compared by the Ixil reader or hearer with what he already "knows." Therefore, in any given passage or portion of the Scripture, I must be as explicit and specific as the context and the normal Ixil language structures will allow.

@ "Jesucristo" is Spanish for "Jesus Christ." It is also the name which has somehow become attached to the Nebaj Ixil cultural folk hero, whose personal characteristics are anything but Christ-like, in our sense of the term. How do we as Bible translators deal with a language situation in which the same term is used for such widely disparate personalities?\*

I dare not, of course, attempt to create a "translation" which is in fact a commentary, since I cannot expect to combat all the relevant misconceptions within the limits of the translation itself. Still, I am constantly faced with reminders of the way in which questions raised by the translation, if still left unanswered, will literally foster all kinds of speculations about possible relationships between what the Ixil people do not understand and that which they already assume. My basic assumption is that the presentation of the truth is the best antidote to error, as well as the best teaching base for nurture, and that the presentation of that truth has to be made in an understandable and natural form. To the extent that it strikes the Ixiles as unnatural to their own language patterns, or as lacking in the appropriate discourse structure signals, then

the potential for being misunderstood rises dramatically, and they are denied the content which could, even if unobtrusively, provide the context within which the truth can be readily understood and perceived as such.

One of William L. Wonderly's principles in **Bible Translations for Popular Use** (pages 39-40 and elsewhere) is that for people who lack an adequate Christian cultural background, the translation must communicate adequately for them in their cultural milieu. Thus, for a people with little or no previous contact with Bible content, the translation may need to be styled in a way quite different from that used for people with a more adequate Christian background. Eventually, Wonderly presumes, as Christian growth and maturity come, the translation can be revised in appropriate ways to make it more concise than the form which was needed to communicate adequately with them at earlier stages of their Christian experience. But the kind of burden appropriate for later maturity should not be imposed upon a group which has had no adequate Christian acculturation.

For me, if I must choose between adding "too much" information, on the one hand, or explaining too little, on the other, I will risk putting "too much" into the translation itself. My assumption is that net distortion of the message in this way will be far less serious, in the long run, than the type of distortion which can result when the translation is either artificially too tight or when too much culturally- or linguistically-necessary information is left unspecified.

\* Earlier in this essay, and elsewhere, I have described in more detail some of the specific problems which Bible translators face in dealing with linguistic and cultural differences. A source available now which was not yet in print at the time this article was written, is the chapter "Bible Translation," in Origin of the Bible edited by Philip Comfort (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992). This chapter gives examples of problems which arise from differences in language structures, as well as those which arise from the differences in the historical and cultural environments in which the authors of the Scriptures wrote and in which their recipients read; these are usually quite different from the historical and cultural environments in which we live and work today. The chapter also includes brief discussions of several topics relating to the theology, philosophy, and practice of Bible translation.