

The story of the Iberian Crypto- Jews

Part 4: The Religion of the Crypto- Jews

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The Story So Far

- Our first week, we reviewed the possibilities for the origins of the Sepharadim.
- Our second week, we reviewed the “Golden Age” of Sephardic Jewry.
- Last week, we reviewed the decline of Sephardic Jewry until the expulsion in 1492.
- This week, we will review the story of those Jews who stayed behind and those who made it to Latin America.

A side note

My presentations will not contain references to aid with aesthetics, but I will make a written account available at some stage. It will be my telling of the story, but in more detail than covered in the presentations and will contain references.

The numbers

- Population of Spain 1492: 7,000,000
- Jews in Spain (who were expelled) in 1492: 100,000
- Conversos in Spain: Just over 200,000
- Jews in Portugal: 20,000

Where did Jews go?

- Many went to Portugal.
- Others went to other parts of the Mediterranean (North Africa, Italy, Greece, Ottoman Empire). Also went to France and Holland.
- They were quite unwelcome in Morocco, but made quite welcome in the Ottoman Empire and Holland.
 - “You venture to call Ferdinand a wise ruler?...he who impoverishes his country and enriches mine.”-attributed to the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II.
- Definition of “Sepharadi,” starts to evolve.

The situation in Portugal

- Portugal didn't experience the Inquisition and persecutions like Spain did so far.
- Almost no conversos in 1492, but very small Jewish community.
- From 1492-1497, wavering degrees of tolerance, then forced conversions or expulsion in 1497 - "Anusim."
- "Cristao Novos" (New Christians) were not officially persecuted until the Portuguese Inquisition started in 1536.

Environment of fear

- After 1492, the only acceptable religion in Spain was Catholicism.
- Conversos were the main target of the Inquisition for first 50 years, (then Lutherans, witches, etc).
- Most of them tried to assimilate.
- People had difficulty even trusting their families.
- Two main categories of people were willing to take the risk:
 - “Passive Judaizers:” Omitting Christian practice.
 - “Active Judaizers:” Adopting Jewish practice

Crypto-Judaism in Spain

- Some observance of Sabbath, festivals, fasts, kosher was common.
- More overt observances such as Sukkot were quickly shut down.
- Jewish literacy quickly diminished-no books, no rabbis.
- Loss of Jewish calendar meant times for festivals changed.
- Inquisition activity remained strongest in Spain.
- The movement quickly declined in Spain by mid 1500s, but persisted in Portugal in significant amounts until 1700s (and even present day).

Crypto-Judaism in Spain

- Difficulties:
 - Persecution – Inquisition.
 - Lack of knowledge – no books, no teachers, fading memory.
 - Poor community cohesion - Judaism is communal, not individual.
- Why didn't it die completely?
 - The Tanach was available.
 - The Edicts of Grace detailed very specific Jewish practices, which Crypto-Jews were able to learn from.
 - Tenacity and perseverance from these Crypto-Jews.
 - Divine intervention

Crypto Jews in the colonies

- By far the strongest presence was in New Spain (Mexico) and Brazil.
- Some in Peru and Colombia. Both countries had inquisitions.
- Very few elsewhere.

Crypto Jews in the colonies - Brazil

- Arrived as soon as the Portuguese claimed Brazil in 1500.
- Portugal occasionally encouraged New Christians to immigrate.
- No inquisition in Brazil, but bishops could send suspects to Portugal for trial (who would, ironically, send them back as “punishment”).
- New Christians were wealthy and powerful. Owned sugar plantations, slaves, large lands.
- Inquisitorial activity increased from 1570-1630, though only a minority was for Judaising.

Crypto Jews in the colonies - Brazil

- Dutch conquered North-East Brazil in 1630, and held it until 1654.
- They were tolerant of Jews, hence Jews “came out of the closet.”
- Open Jewish practice for those 24 years.
- First synagogue in the Americas in Recife 1636, first rabbi in the Americas Rabbi Isaac Aboab da Fonseca in 1641.
- At the peak, several thousand Jews in the territory, about half the European population. Jews from elsewhere (Holland and Ottoman Empire) immigrated to Brazil.

Crypto Jews in the colonies - Brazil

- When the Dutch were expelled in 1654, they secured 3 months for their Jews to make arrangements.
- Most Jews emigrated with the Dutch.
- Those left behind went underground again, though the community never recovered. Mass assimilation.
- Crypto-Judaism was effectively suppressed when the inquisitorial activity officially ended in 1773.
- However, “bnei anusim,” are coming forward today.

Crypto Jews in the colonies - Mexico

- Though officially excluded, New Christians came to Mexico in the 1500s for economic opportunities (slaves, land, gold, silver).
- Mexican Inquisition established in 1571, ended in 1820.
- Intense persecutions from 1570s until c1600, then again in 1640s.
- In the period from c1600-1640, Crypto-Judaism experienced it's most successful period in any Latin community. Due to a relative lull in inquisitorial activity. From 1650 onwards, declined.

Crypto Jews in the colonies - Mexico

- Crypto-Jews were relatively open in the “heyday period.”
- Mexico received immigrants, not only New Christians from other Latin countries, but also from places where Judaism was only practiced.
- Community was refreshed.
- Tight and well organised social networks, particularly in cities.
- Relatively wealthy: were merchants, artisans, sometimes military
- A flourishing on Crypto-Judaism, with interesting syncretism.

Crypto Jews in the colonies - Mexico

- Passover: no bread in week before Easter, used corn tortillas.
- Kiddush: no wine, but drank chocolate.
- Communal meals were held at “safe houses,” for the Shabbat and festivals.
- Catholic beliefs in purgatory, veneration of saints and icons appear.
- Festival of Santa Esterica.

Crypto Jews in the colonies

- By the end of the 18th century, most Crypto-Jewish movements were either extinguished or heavily suppressed.
- We don't hear from them much in the 19th century.
- We will discuss the history of Judaism in these countries from the 18th century onwards including the modern re-awakening next week.

A challenge from a Crypto-Jew- the Carvajals

- Luis de Carvajal came to Mexico in 1567 and became a renowned conquistador. He brought over his extended family in 1580.
- He was a devout Catholic, but his family were Crypto-Jews, including his nephew, called Luis de Carvajal the Younger.
- Was arrested for Judaizing in 1589, was reconciled, then arrested again and burnt in 1596, with his mother and three sisters.
- “The Younger” was the leader of the Crypto-Jewish community and his autobiography is still extant.

A challenge from a Crypto-Jew- the Carvajals

- His memoirs show his dedication to serving his community and his courage in sharing what he believed to everyone.
- Also describes his travels around Mexico, where he would encourage, pray for people and teach them about Crypto-Judaism.
- He would describe how various Scriptures would give him strength and also convict him.

A challenge from a Crypto-Jew- the Carvajals

- Even though it was very risky, he was convicted to obey:
 - *“Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” (Genesis 17:14)*
- After reading this as a teenager, he talks about the incredible conviction he felt to obey G-d as he knew how, and he circumcised himself.
- A great example to obey Him, even when it is dangerous in this world.
 - *“When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.” (Psalm 56:3)*

A challenge from a Crypto-Jew- the Carvajals

- Carvajal travelled widely, preaching and educating wherever he went. His perseverance in serving his community, cannot be overstated. Without meaning to, he followed the example of the Apostle Paul.
 - *“When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” (Acts 14:21-23)*

A challenge from a Crypto-Jew- the Carvajals

- He would even speak to a Dominican friar about his beliefs, with an extreme risk of being denounced to the Inquisition. Again, reminiscent of Paul's attitude when he faced certain danger in preaching the Gospel.
- *"...For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."* (Acts 21:13)
- With this man, only being a nominal Christian, able to exhibit so many of the behaviours we believers are called to embody, that should be a wake up call for us to step up in our lives, in which we enjoy much better circumstances.