

The story of the Iberian Crypto-Jews

Part 1: origins

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Why bother learning about the Crypto-Jews

- It is a story not very well known, compared to that of the Ashkenazi Jews
- It is a story full of trial and triumph
- It is a story which speaks to G-d's ability and willingness to preserve and redeem us, individually and as a people.
- It is a story immersed in prophecy and arguably, a fulfilment of prophecy.

Overall Structure

- Two main parts, the story of the Sepharadim until 1492, and the story of the Sepharadim and Crypto Jews after 1492.
- I plan to dedicate about 3 weeks to each half, hence approx, 6 weeks in total.
- Today we will start at the beginning, and will discuss with origins of the Sepharadim.
- Note: Sepharad=Spain, hence the word “Sepharadim” refers to Jews from Iberia (Spain and Portugal) and their territories. These Jews have since spread and mixed with other Jewish communities but have maintained a uniquely rich and vibrant cultural/religious tradition.

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.

Origins of Sepharad-archaeology

- We don't know exactly when Jews arrived in Iberia.
- If only cold, hard archaeological evidence will do, we can go back to the latter days of the Roman Empire.
- In 2012, an archaeological team from the Friedrich Schiller University of Jena, Germany found a marble slate with the name "Yehiel" inscribed in Hebrew letters, in what looks like to be a portion of a tomb slab. It was dated to about 390 C.E. It was found in southern Portugal.
- This was really an amazing discovery, as Jewish people in the Roman Empire usually wrote in Latin, not Hebrew. Hence this is precious evidence of a Jewish presence in Iberia in Roman Times

Origins of Sepharad-the New Testament

- The New Testament is actually an excellent source for understanding the situation of the Jewish people during Roman Times.
- Paul's words imply that he went to Spain to witness to the Jews and Gentiles there. While there is no specific mention of a Jewish community there, Jews were present throughout the Roman Empire and Paul's pattern of evangelism was to go to the Jews first, even when they didn't accept his message.
 - "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while." (Romans 15:24)
 - "When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you." (Romans 15:28)

Origins of Sepharad-the Talmud

- The Talmud contains some references to a Jewish presence in Spain.
- While the Talmud was compiled well after the time of Yeshua, they point to earlier traditions of the Jewish people can provide unique insights into Jewish history.
- We read in Leviticus Rabbah the following legend:
 - “Be not dismayed Israel for I (G-d) will deliver you from far away... from Gaul and Spain and its fellows.” (Leviticus Rabbah 29:2)

Origins of Sepharad-the Rabbis

- The Rabbis would often preserve their own (or others they have heard) legends regarding the origins of a particular Jewish community.
- Once fascinating one is contained in Seder Ha-yom, written in 1605 by Moses ben Machir. A small part of it refers to ben Machir hearing about some exiles who were not with Ezra in Babylon during the first exile, and who didn't want to heed his call to return, as they thought it was futile.
- They reasoned that if a second temple were to be built it would be destroyed again in the future anyway and they would have to go into exile again. They thought it best to stay put and serve G-d where they were. Then ben Machir writes that these were "those in Tullaytulah (Toledo)."

Origins of Sepharad-?Tarshish

Let's consider the following references to Tarshish in the Old Testament:

- “For the king had a fleet of ships of Tarshish at sea with the fleet of Hiram. Once every three years the fleet of ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks.” (1 Kings 10:22)
- “Tarshish did business with you because of your great wealth of every kind; silver, iron, tin, and lead they exchanged for your wares.” (Ezekiel 27:12)
- These referred to the great wealth that Israel had at her disposal at her peak (during Solomon's reign). Hence, they were able to do business with Tarshish.

Origins of Sepharad-?Tarshish

- But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.” (Jonah 1:3)
- The above refers to Jonah attempting to flee the Lord by going as far as he could away from where he was, which he thought was to Tarshish.

Origins of Sepharad-?Tarshish

- We have some ideas about where Tarshish was, but we are not exactly sure where.
- Some even say that Tarshish was never a specific place, but rather simply meant “a coast.”
- But one of the possibilities was the city of Tartessus in Southern Spain, near Gibraltar. This is supported by the fact that from Joppa (Yafo), one of the furthest places you could realistically sail to at the time was the Iberian Peninsula. Jonah was trying to flee as far as possible when he got on that ship.

The Jews after Rome

- The Romans were definitively expelled from Iberia in 481, by the Visigoths.
- They mostly left the Jews alone until the Third Council of Toledo in 589. That coincided with the conversion of the Visigoths from Arianism to Catholicism.
- For the next 120 years, until the Arab Muslim conquest of Iberia. Jews were under variable, but usually intense levels of persecution.
- Such restrictions included Jews being forbidden from holding public office, being forbidden to proselytise, being forbidden to eat with Christians, hire Christian workers, or marry Christians.
- Intermarried couples who refused to convert to Christianity were often exiled or killed.
- Indeed massacres against Jews became increasingly common.

The Jews after Rome

- However by 711, the invading Arab Muslim conquerors, called Moors, drove the Visigoths out, and within three years, captured almost the entirety of Iberia, only being stopped by the Pyrenees in the north.
- This would change Jewish history forever, not only for the Sepharadim, but for the entire Diaspora. Jews would not be free from hardship under Muslim rule, but would have enough freedom and protection to thrive.

The Jews' status under Muslim rule

- After the Muslims entered Iberia in 711, they would dominate the Peninsula for many centuries.
- The way they dealt with the Jews and Christians they conquered was influenced by the Pact of Umar, which was a supposed agreement made by a caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab and his Christian subjects in Syria in 697.
- The authenticity of this document has been questioned, but it created the basic inspiration of how “people of the Book,” (i.e Jews and Christians) would be treated under Muslim rule.

The Jews' status under Muslim rule

- The main tenet of the pact was that non-Muslims, who were not pagans (i.e Christians and Jews) were not be compelled to accept Islam by force.
- In return for this protection, non-Muslims had to pay a tax called “Jizyah.” This tax was different to the one that Muslims had to pay (Zakat), which non-Muslims were exempt from. In return, the Muslim ruler were to protect their minorities. However there were other restrictions placed upon Jews and Christians, which had to be upheld for the protection to continue.

The Jews' status under Muslim rule

These included:

- Not being allowed to build new places of worship or to repair damaged places of worship.
- Being obliged to feed and house a travelling Muslim for at least three days.
- Not to manifest their religion publicly, or try to convert anyone to it.
- Giving up their seat for a Muslim who wants to sit.
- Having to dress differently to Muslims.
- Being forbidden to mount arms.
- Conduct funerals, and other religious ceremonies quietly.
- Building houses with roofs lower than that of the Muslim houses.
- Being forbidden to strike a Muslim.

The Jews' status under Muslim rule

- These restrictions were designed to render Jews and Christians as second-class citizens. However, while this pact discriminated against Jews and Christians, it also protected them and gave them rights, as long as they obeyed the pact.
- So while the Sepharadim were definitely second-class citizens, they were citizens with rights. This was far better for the Jews than the situation under Visigoth rule, where they often had no rights at all.
- The situation remained stable for a few centuries, which allowed Jews to adapt effectively.
- Jews were also given enough rights and freedom to worship freely, study religious texts, engage in commerce, and even engage in secular studies.
- Under these conditions, Jewish civilisation flourished.