

Original Paper

The Inquisition and Jewish Converts in New Spain

Eduardo Jiménez Mayo, Ph.D., J.D.

San Antonio College, San Antonio, Texas, USA

E-mail: eduardojimenezmayo@gmail.com

Telephone: (210) 316-5534

Abstract

This article provides a brief exploration of the migration of Jewish converts to New Spain and emphasizes the subjection of some of them to the processes of the Spanish Inquisition, as well as examining the traces of crypto-Judaism in the territories now forming the borderlands between Mexico and the United States of America.

Keywords: Jewish converts, conversos, crypto-Judaism, Spanish Inquisition, Jews in New Spain

1. Introduction

I confess that I am Catholic and I acknowledge that the topic of this article may be uncomfortable for the Catholic Church insofar as it deals with the Inquisition in New Spain. Let it be clear that my purpose is not to criticize the Church, as such, but rather to delve into a chapter of its history in which monstrous acts were committed against Jews.

2. Method

I am reviewing the case of the victimization of recent converts of the Spanish colonial period, because in late January we commemorate the Holocaust internationally with the intention of preventing the horrors of the past from being repeated. I submit this brief recapitulation of the facts for my readers' consideration.

3. Result

The seat of the Inquisition in New Spain was located in Mexico City. Given that fact, it was not uncommon for families of recent converts to move as far away as possible, even to the northern frontier, today's borderlands between Mexico and the United States of America.

The history of Jews in New Spain begins in 1492 with the crew under the command of Christopher Columbus. Earlier that year, Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand expelled the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, except for those who converted to Catholicism.

Some stayed behind and others set sail on the galleys of the Crown of Castile, passing themselves off as converts. Those who were persecuted by the Inquisition in the viceroyalty of New Spain were relatively few (around 50) and were usually nominal converts to Christianity who continued to practice Judaism openly in spite of the prohibition.

Archeologists have encountered in the northern states of Mexico ritual baths for Hebrew hygiene rites, among other relics of what is known as crypto-Judaism. These Judaizing Christians sometimes fell into the hands of the Inquisition, especially when they insisted on publicizing their affiliation.

4. Discussion

The most radical example is that of Luis de Carvajal the Younger, who was burned at the stake in 1596. Carvajal called himself a prophet. He wrote the first Jewish diary in the so-called New World and he considered himself on par with the great prophets of the Old Testament.

It is not clear whether he had followers, but after being accused by the Inquisition, he was handed over to the secular authorities who sentenced him to death. Professor of Latin American Studies at Amherst College, Ilan Stavans, believes that Carvajal may have been schizophrenic, as Carvajal displayed characteristics of profound mental instability. The importance of this topic for residents of the borderlands is enormous, since the northern states were the cradle of the crypto-Jewish population. Carvajal himself came from the border state of Nuevo León.

“In New Mexico and in Texas there are many Catholic cemeteries where one can walk—I have done so many times,” says Stavans, “and see graves where the ancestors send a message to their surviving relatives that they were Jews. Sometimes, for example, there is a Star of David with a crucifix inside, or there is a lion, which was a symbol of Kabbalistic Jews, integrated into the design, and that means that those families secretly maintained their identity, importing it from Spain to Mexico.

“Of great interest,” Stavans comments, “is that in recent years there has been an awakening among these families, say, from the 1980s to the present, in which some individuals are converting back to Judaism and expressing more openly who they originally were.”

5. Conclusion

Due to spatial limitations, we will not discuss how Yiddish, French, Ladino, or Arabic-speaking Jews began to settle in Mexico in the nineteenth century after emigrating from the Ottoman Empire: not to mention Jewish immigration in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries. But the crux of the matter is that Jews were present from the very beginning of the Spanish enterprise in the New World, and we do not want such diversity to be forgotten, suppressed or ever again castigated.