

Converso Spirituality During the Seventeenth Century According to Rabbi Saul Levi Mortera

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1. Introduction

In 1579, a decade after the United Provinces of the Netherlands initiated an eighty-year war of independence from Spain, a tolerant climate was established with the promulgation of the Union of Utrecht, according to which “each person shall remain free in his religion and that no one shall be investigated or persecuted because of his religion.” Dutch tolerance attracted refugees escaping religious persecution, including several hundred Portuguese *conversos* who established a synagogue in Amsterdam in the early 1600s. These *converso* merchants and their families descended from Jews who had been forced centuries earlier to convert to Catholicism and whose spirituality had evolved secretly, as crypto-Judaism, in inquisitorial Spain and Portugal. Any practices that deviated from Catholic doctrines could subject *conversos* to punishment by the Inquisition, and crypto-Judaism was thus a skeletal form of Judaism with no communal religious education, and which consisted of practices that were distant from rabbinic Judaism and infused with Catholicized beliefs. For integration within the network of established European and Mediterranean Jewish communities, which would in turn afford greater access to markets abroad, the *conversos* of Amsterdam would need to be “rejudaized,” or instructed in the norms of rabbinic Judaism. To this end, in 1619 they hired Saul Levi Mortera (b.c. 1590-d. 1660) to be their rabbi, and over the next four decades Mortera delivered sermons and wrote polemical works to promote the superiority of rabbinic Judaism. At the same time, the present study will reveal that Mortera recognized in his writings the enduring significance to *conversos* of a crypto-Jewish Iberian identity.

2. Rabbinic Judaism and Crypto-Judaism

Unlike his congregants, the spiritual formation of Mortera (sometimes spelled Morteira) was closely tied to rabbinic Judaism since his childhood in the Venetian ghetto. Mortera’s maternal grandfather was Rabbi Judah Katzenellenbogen (b. 1521-d. 1597), who moved among “the most important groups [...] comprised [of] Jews who had lived in Italy and Venice for hundreds of years, as well as recent immigrants of German and, more generally, Ashkenazic origin” (Calimani, 39). Mortera’s rabbinic heritage differed greatly from the belief systems of *conversos* who continued to arrive in Amsterdam throughout the seventeenth century. While early modern Jewish communities outside of Iberia operated according to norms that regulated every aspect of daily life—such as the 613 biblical commandments, Talmudic laws, and the *Shulchan Aruch*, a sixteenth-century codification of Jewish law adopted by both Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities—within Spain and Portugal crypto-Judaism evolved among individuals who were uneducated in Jewish doctrines and whose minimalized clandestine spirituality had no public form of expression.

An obstacle faced by Mortera was a reluctance among some *conversos* to abandon crypto-Jewish practices and be rejudaized by adhering to rabbinic Judaism. Rejudaization required *conversos* to relinquish a spirituality that had evolved in the shadow of Catholicism, including with respect to the doctrine of individual salvation, which is not discussed in rabbinic Judaism. It is logical to speculate that the significance of individual salvation in Catholic prayers

and rituals that *conversos* needed to perform publicly to avoid inquisitorial scrutiny contributed to the fact that “the majority of crypto-Jews swiftly adopted the Christian idea of salvation” (Gitlitz, 110).

3. *The Imprint of Crypto-Judaism on Mortera’s Arguments*

Mortera recognizes that individual salvation was an integral component of *converso* spirituality in a work that he composed around 1650, “*Obstaculos y opoçiones contra la religion cristiana en Amsterdam*,” which I have translated into English as *Arguments against the Christian religion in Amsterdam*. *Arguments* comprises a dialog between two *conversos* who meet by chance in the French city of Orléans. One, called “peregrino” (pilgrim), who was born in the Portuguese city of Montemor-o-Novo, stops in Orléans while returning to Portugal from Rome. The other, called “amigo” (friend), was born in either Portugal or Spain before emigrating to Amsterdam, where he will return after a layover in Orléans. The spirituality of each *converso* is symbolic of constituencies within Mortera’s congregation. The many successful cases of rejudaization are embodied in the depiction of “friend,” who lives openly in Amsterdam as a Jew and who attempts “pilgrim” to leave Portugal and follow his example. “Pilgrim,” an aspiring Jesuit whose efforts to enter the Society of Jesus and becoming a priest have met with failure, expresses through his discourse the reluctance of *conversos* to submit to rejudaization.

This dichotomy informs the attempt by “friend” to persuade “pilgrim” to embrace Judaism, which occurs during a boat ride on the Loire River from Orléans to the port city of Nantes:

The time came and they got on the boat to head down the freshwater Nantes River. During the voyage, the pilgrim said, “Friend, I need to ask you if you’re content.”

“In every way,” said the friend, “and I’ll answer whatever you ask me.”

The pilgrim said, “My Spanish friend in Rome told me to stay away from the Portuguese living there because he didn’t think very highly of them, which made me cautious. I looked into the matter and found out that the ones who went there changed their religion, which is something that I both admire and consider to be scandalous to all who witness it. After a few days in Venice in the lands of the Great Duke, I left those people because of the pain that I felt in my soul after seeing how those of our Nation do this thing, and I don’t know if those who live in these parts are just as mistaken.”

“You’re right,” said the friend, “to call what they’re doing a mistake.”

“It is,” said the pilgrim, “if they leave the Christian faith in which they were raised.” (Mortera 2017, 92)

“Pilgrim” asserts that the *conversos* in Rome who have been rejudaized (“changed their religion”), have made a “mistake” by “leav[ing] the Christian faith in which they were raised.” He amplifies this negative attitude toward rejudaization in comments that he makes a little further on in the text: “it would be a reckless act and a lack of faith to stop following the Law by which I was raised, and which has been and continues to be followed by so many kings, emperors, popes, learned men and doctors of the Church, as well as by so many people in the world” (Mortera 2017, 93). “Friend” then attempts to combat this attitude by presenting his perspective: “what I want to say to you is that there are many erroneous paths and only one correct one. And according to that truth man must seek out the right one, embrace it, and follow it” (Mortera 2017, 93). However, “pilgrim” is not convinced: “That right path [...] how can’t it

be evident? For the Christians consider theirs to be as such, and thus each man can choose his own, as you said earlier” (Mortera 2017, 93).

Freedom of choice, as “pilgrim” recognizes, is at the core of the attempt by “friend” to convince him to leave Christianity: “man is free, and he should act freely, carefully, and attentively.” During much of the dialogue, “pilgrim” believes that he has already made his choice, namely, to practice Christianity based on his familiarity with Christian practices and doctrines: “I’ve spent most of my life in the faith into which I was born, with which I was raised, and by which I must live. I don’t think about changing to another one that I consider to be better and in which I hope to find salvation” (Mortera 2017, 96). The desire for “pilgrim” to “find salvation” speaks to the influence of the Catholic concept of personal salvation on *converso* spirituality, and “Friend” recognizes this tendency by appealing to “pilgrim” in *Arguments* in Catholicized terms.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Mortera 2017, 40-41), personal salvation is depicted by “friend” as being achieved through adherence to Judaism. This fusion of religious traditions motivates “pilgrim” at the end of *Arguments* to declare that “the Law of our Lord is the true one” (Mortera 2017, 157). Although “pilgrim” appears to be on the path toward abandoning “all the [Catholic] lies [...] followed until now” (Mortera 2017, 157), the Judaism to which he aspires “contains and bestows salvation” (Mortera 2017, 157). Mortera’s depiction of this path therefore takes into account the strong attachment of *conversos* to this crypto-Jewish tradition.

4. The Imprint of Crypto-Judaism on Mortera’s “Questions”

Mortera’s awareness of this attachment surfaces in a Spanish work that he wrote around 1650, *Preguntas que hizo un clerigo de Ruan de Francia alas quales respondio el exelente, y eminentissimo señor H.H. Saul Levy Mortera*, which I have translated into English as “Questions by a cleric from Rouen, France, which were responded to by the excellent, most eminent, and wise Saul Levi Mortera.”¹ In “Questions,” Mortera responds to 23 queries on Jewish doctrines, which mostly concern eschatology, posed by an unknown Christian cleric from Rouen. Mortera’s 23 responses are intended to convince the cleric (as well as *converso* readers) of the superiority of Jewish doctrines, and they also shed light on his perception of *converso* spirituality.

The second question concerns whether “faith in the Savior Messiah has always been necessary for Jews to attain grace and forgiveness for their sins,” and Mortera’s response describes a spiritual path similar to the one taken by “pilgrim” in *Arguments*:

if what is understood is the faith and belief that one must have that he will come to redeem the people of Israel, the Jews are obligated to possess this as one of the articles of faith of the law of God, so much so that whoever does not believe that God will send the Messiah to redeem the Jews from the captivity in which they are because of their sins and gather them in their lands is banished and cut off from the people of Israel, and has no salvation. (Mortera *Preguntas* 1712, fol. 88v-89r)

Like the Judaism in *Arguments* that “contains and bestows salvation” for a *converso* who chooses the path described by “friend,” the absence of salvation is inflicted on the Jew who chooses not to follow Jewish doctrines. The significance of personal salvation within Mortera’s

¹ “Questions” is preserved in three early eighteenth-century copies held by the Ets Haim library in Amsterdam, including the one (ms. EH 48 D 38) on which my translation is based.

response to the cleric may have its origins in his contact with the crypto-Judaism of *conversos* undergoing during rejudaization in Amsterdam.

The twenty-first question provides a window into Mortera's perception of the spirituality of *conversos* living outside of Amsterdam:

Can Jews still be saved if they have not been circumcised or observed the Law in the lands where it is not permitted, after having gone against it and against their consciences by sincerely practicing Christianity, worshiping idols, attending mass, and denying being Jews even though they are in their hearts? (Mortera *Preguntas* 1712, fol. 104v-105r)

In his response, Mortera identifies three types of *conversos*:

The first are those who reside in the kingdoms where it is not only forbidden to observe the Law, but they also close the ports to prevent them from leaving. These are guilty before the Lord of not trying to leave for free ports, even though they risk their lives, as the Lord explicitly commands: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."² From this we see that we must leave all things for divine love, and the examples of Hanania, Mishael, and Azariah, in Babylon, show this truth because they jumped into the fire rather than worship idols.³ Even so, since He is merciful, and slow to anger, and takes into account human weakness and the great respect owed to the ones who are persecuted in those lands, tempers His rigor and favors them, seeing their spirits willing to serve Him as experience has shown in so many cases. (Mortera *Preguntas* 1712, fol. 105r-105v)

The first type of *converso* is personified by "pilgrim" in *Arguments*. As such, "pilgrim" lives in a Portuguese kingdom "where it is not only forbidden to observe the Law, but [where] they also close the ports to prevent them from leaving." Mortera alludes here to the obstacles faced by *conversos* wishing to leave Portugal to practice Judaism in a tolerant land, which is what "pilgrim" is encouraged to do by "friend."⁴ Mortera believes that they are "guilty before the Lord of not trying to leave for free ports," which is, in a spiritual context, his condemnation of their public life as Christians. At the same time, by declaring that God "is merciful, and slow to anger, and takes into account human weakness and the great respect owed to the ones who are persecuted in those lands," Mortera believes they have the potential to be turned toward rejudaization.

Mortera does not have the same faith in the *conversos* who have not left Iberia to be rejudaized:

The second type of people are those who live in kingdoms where they are not prevented from leaving, and who are free to go wherever they choose. Those are an utter abomination to the Lord, and destined for damnation because they are truly worshipers of gold. As such, in the sheer interest of accumulating property, they deceive, or intend to

² Deut. 6:5. Quotations from the Old Testament are taken from *The Jewish Study Bible*.

³ This story of the young Judean courtiers' resistance to Babylonian cultural imperialism is related in Daniel 3.

⁴ A well-known historical case is that of Manoel Fernandes Villareal (b. 1608-d. 1652), a Portuguese *converso* writer and politician, who emigrated to France was detained by the Inquisition in 1650 while on a visit to Lisbon and executed in 1652.

deceive God for the love of worldly things, and the world for love of God. They think that because they love God in their hearts they have fulfilled their obligation, and they do not see what the Lord explicitly says in the Law, in Deut. 30:14: “No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.” Here it also explicitly says that in order to observe the Law, it is necessary to proclaim it with one’s mouth, believe it in one’s heart, and carry it out through one’s acts. It would have been better if they had no knowledge of the truth, rather than having it and pretending the opposite. For in that case they would have some excuse, which they do not have although they do know what suits them. (Mortera *Preguntas* 1712, fol. 105v-106r)

The second type described by Mortera appears to refer to communities of *conversos* such as those that inhabited the coast of France:

Marrano settlements had been formed in several of the French seaports, notably Bordeaux and Bayonne. The country was Catholic, and officially in sympathy with the policy followed in Spain and Portugal. Declared Jews were, indeed, unable to settle there. Marranos, on the other hand, might immigrate without interference, so long as they continued to call themselves Christians. (Roth, 302)

Implicit in Roth’s observations is the notion that *conversos* who lived in French seaports were not willing to fully embrace Judaism. Of course, such unwillingness may have been grounded in the economic opportunities available only to Christians in port cities that flourished in the 1600s due to increased international trade with Europe and America.

At the same time, a realization of the benefits of continuing to live publicly as a Catholic may explain failed cases of rejudaization such as Esteban de Ares de Fonseca, whose encounter with Mortera is recorded in a deposition Fonseca gave in 1635, in Madrid, before an inquisitorial tribunal.⁵ Fonseca was a Portuguese *converso* who emigrated to Bayonne, where he continued to live as a Christian. Fonseca’s reluctance to practice Judaism motivates some of his *converso* friends to send him to Mortera, and in 1625 or 1626 he arrived in Amsterdam to undergo rejudaization by Mortera. For six months, Mortera unsuccessfully attempted to persuade Fonseca to stop living as a Christian, and Fonseca was ultimately excommunicated by a rabbinic tribunal overseen by Mortera.

It is instructive to underscore that this case of failed rejudaization was an exception. The growth of Mortera’s congregation during the 1600s attests to his success in persuading most *conversos* to abandon crypto-Judaism and follow rabbinic norms. However, exceptions such as Fonseca, as well as the need for Mortera to write about such *conversos* decades later, testify to a lingering reluctance among *conversos* to abandon their Iberian identity. Communities such as those in Bordeaux and Bayonne formed among *conversos* who were required to be Catholics in public. In his response to the twenty-first question, Mortera is condemning the unwillingness of such *conversos* to take the next step and undergo rejudaization in Amsterdam.

Mortera reserves his harshest criticism in “Questions” for a third type of *converso*:

⁵ This document, titled ‘Vida y aventuras de un malsín’ (The Life and Adventures of an Informer) is transcribed by Caro Baroja (332-36).

To these we might add a third group, which resembles the first two in its pretense. They are the people of Israel who, though Christians in their hearts, for fear of torture and death, confess to being Jews although they are not. They deceive God so that they can know the truth, as if they possessed an understanding. This is a result of the moral failing of the Inquisition, which spills so much innocent blood. For they see explicitly that they were forced to confess against their conscience what they were not. About such people, the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 20:32-33, says: “And what you have in mind shall never come to pass—when you say, ‘We will be like the nations, like the families of the lands, worshipping wood and stone.’ As I live—declares the Lord God—I will reign over you with a strong hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with overflowing fury.” These are the ones who, by the strong hand of torture, the outstretched arm of prisons, and with overflowing fury from apprehension about life, confess to being Jews and that the God of Israel is their king. And if they do not deny what they said afterwards, it is because they know the punishment they deserve. (Mortera *Preguntas* 1712, fol. 106r-106v)

Mortera opens his discussion of the third type by asserting that this type “resembles the first two in its pretense.” The “pretense” to which Mortera refers is an insincere spirituality that, in his opinion, is shared by the three types of *conversos*. In the cases of the first two types, this insincere spirituality is the Catholicism that they practice in public. However, each of these types has the potential to be rejudaized. Mortera criticizes the willingness of the first type to “worship idols,” or live publicly as Catholics, although he recognizes that they possess “spirits willing to serve Him as experience has shown in so many cases,” and thus commands such *conversos* to flee the Inquisition and undergo rejudaization “even though they risk their lives.” Similarly, Mortera accuses the second type of *converso* of “pretending the opposite,” or acting publicly as a Catholic, even though they possess “knowledge of the truth.” Mortera proclaims that these conversos “are free to go wherever they choose,” and thus they are also candidates for rejudaization.

5. Conclusion

In his depiction of the first type of *converso* in “Questions,” which finds parallels in his depiction of “pilgrim” in *Arguments*, Mortera demonstrates a willingness to accept that his *converso* congregants might never fully abandon the crypto-Judaism that had been practiced by their ancestors for centuries at great risk and in defiance of the Inquisition. The first type of *converso*, after escaping Iberia, can be guided toward rejudaization, albeit by preserving the Catholic tradition of reverence for personal salvation. Although the second type of *converso* knows the “truth,” the refusal of such a *converso* to stop practicing Catholicism in public and “and carry it [Judaism] out through one’s acts” prevents rejudaization.

Like the first two types of *conversos*, the “pretense” of the third type is an insincere spirituality. However, while the first two types are insincere Catholics, the third type of *converso* is an insincere Jew. The third type includes *conversos* who, while they “are the people of Israel,” are also “Christians in their hearts, [who] for fear of torture and death, confess to being Jews although they are not.” Mortera lays the blame for the false confessions of such *conversos* on the “moral failing of the Inquisition, which spills so much innocent blood. For they see explicitly that they were forced to confess against their conscience what they were not.” At the same time, Mortera establishes a parallel with Ezekiel 20:32-33 to illustrate the reason that their forced confessions do not reveal sincere Judaism, namely, because they are sincere Catholics,

“worshipping wood and stone.” In spite of the fact that the Inquisition, along with what Mortera calls an “overflowing fury from apprehension about life,” motivate the third type of *converso* to “confess to being Jews and that the God of Israel is their king,” such a *converso* merits additional “punishment” until they “deny what they said afterwards.”

Mortera’s *converso* typology presents a relatively negative view of types two and three in comparison with type one. Types two and three are reviled by Mortera because they remain outside of the sphere of rabbinic influence. Type two *conversos* are “destined for damnation” because they pretend to be Christians, and type three *conversos* will face “the punishment they deserve” because they are “Christians in their hearts.” Type one, however, has the potential to be rejudaized by traveling to places such as Amsterdam and Rome, although Mortera appears to realize that their crypto-Judaism will never be fully erased. Mortera’s attitude toward type one invites a comparison with textual and artistic portrayals of his congregation made by two non-Jews, Philipp von Zesen (b. 1619-d. 1689) and Jan Veenhuysen (b.c. 1631-d.c. 1685). In his chronicle of life in mid-seventeenth century Amsterdam, *Beschreibung der Stadt Amsterdam* (Depiction of Amsterdam), Zesen (263-265) observes that Jews of Portuguese (*converso*) origin preserved their Iberian identity by celebrating Catholic festivals. Pancorbo has recently asserted that a similar expression of this “doble identidad” (124) surfaces in an engraving by Veenhuysen of the interior of Mortera’s synagogue that is included before page 263 of Zesen’s *Beschreibung der Stadt Amsterdam*. Zesen and Veenhuysen were, like Mortera, commenting on the *conversos* from a non-*converso* perspective, and it is noteworthy that Zesen and Veenhuysen, who had much less contact with the *converso* community than Mortera, detected the same “doble identidad” as the rabbi who oversaw rejudaization. One logical conclusion is that some *conversos* fled the Inquisition to Amsterdam to publicly practice the crypto-Judaism that they perceived to be authentic Judaism. Rather than just reluctance, cases such as that of Fonseca, and the fact that the persistence of crypto-Judaism among *conversos* inside and outside of Iberia made a significant impact on Mortera’s writings, suggest that instances in which *conversos* refused to be rejudaized occurred with some frequency over the course of Mortera’s four decades on the pulpit.

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