

HISPANIA JUDAICA BULLETIN

Articles, Reviews, Bibliography and Manuscripts on Sefarad

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No 8 5771/2011

Hispania Judaica
The Mandel Institute of Jewish Studies
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem



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* The articles in this volume are based on lectures delivered at a conference on "Expulsion and Forcible Conversion: Their Aftermath in the Life of the Sephardi Refugees and their Children", held in January 2009, under the auspices of the Israel National Fund of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities

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Blood in the Church: The Inquisition against Hernando Alonso

Schulamith C. Halevy

This article proves, applying both Jewish and Christian sources, in addition to what Inquisitorial materials remain, that Hernando Alonso, a conquistador, and one of the first two individuals to have been burned at the stake in Mexico City with an accusation of Judaizing, was, in fact, a Catholic. Many researchers, both Jewish and Gentile considered him a Jew, although some discussed the possibility of a political motive for his harassment and, eventual execution. The account presented here should resolve the matter once and for all.

Introduction

Two Spaniards were burned at the stake in Mexico in 1528, at what was the first auto de fe in New Spain. One of the victims was Hernando Alonso, who had arrived in Mexico as a *conquistador* to join Hernán Cortés.¹

This *auto* took place before the establishment of an official tribunal of the Inquisition. In fact, the proceedings of Hernando Alonso's trial were already missing by the time the tribunal arrived in 1571. What is still extant is the record of the investigation by the newly-arrived inquisitors as to the disappearance of Hernando Alonso's *sambenito* from the cathedral, along with that of the other

- 1 José Toribio Medina, *La primitiva inquisición americana (1493-1569): Estudio histórico*, Santiago de Chile 1914, vol. 1, pp. 121-125; George R. G. Conway, ed., *An Englishman and the Mexican Inquisition, 1556-1560*, Mexico 1927, pp. xxix-xxxii; George R. G. Conway, 'Hernando Alonso: A Jewish Conquistador with Cortés in Mexico', *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* XXI (1928); Alfonso Toro, ed., *Los judíos en la Nueva España: Selección de documentos del siglo XVI, correspondientes al ramo de Inquisición*, Archivo General de la Nación, Ciudad de México 1932, pp. 17-48 (reprinted in Mexico 1982); Boleslao Lewin, *Mártires y conquistadores judíos en la América Hispana*, Buenos Aires 1954, pp. 11-19; Seymour B. Liebman, 'Hernando Alonso: The First Jew on the North-American Continent', *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 5, 2 (Apr. 1963), pp. 291-296; Richard E. Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century*, Albuquerque 1969, pp. 26-40.

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victim, Francisco Gonzalo de Morales.² A long series of testimonies came before the inquisitors regarding both victims.

What interests us here are the accusations against Hernando Alonso, and they were three. The first was that he had baptized his son *twice*, albeit with the full knowledge of the second baptizing priest. To this accusation another was added on, accusing him of having poured water, or wine, over a small naked child while in Cuba or Mexico, or elsewhere (depending on who was testifying), and drunk the liquid, all this in an attempt to “undo” the child’s baptism.

The crucial, third charge, the one which, according to the best information, instigated the denunciation to the Inquisition, was that he did not allow his wife to go to church during her menstrual period, and that he did this “in accordance with the old ceremonies of the Jews”.³ As we will see, there is nothing particularly Jewish about this.

Alonso, born in Niebla, Spain (in the region of Huelva), came from Cuba to join the *conquistadores* led by Hernán Cortés after Cortés had conquered the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan (later Mexico City), on November 8, 1519. However, in an attack on June 30, 1520, which came to be named, *la noche triste* (“the sorrowful night”), Cortés’ troops were forced to retreat, suffering very significant losses, estimates ranging from hundreds to many thousands. Alonso was a carpenter and ironsmith, and was considered indispensable on account of his role in building the brigantine (two-masted sailing ships) with which Cortés later reconquered Tenochtitlan.⁴

Alonso was rewarded by Cortés with a nice *encomienda* (fiefdom), but probably did not feel that he was sufficiently compensated. He went on to establish far-flung business operations, including cattle, raising pigs, slaughterhouses, moneylending, mining and real estate.⁵

The Mexican Inquisition was formally established only in 1571. The investigation and execution at the stake of Alonso were performed by unofficial inquisitors. Indeed, Alonso was one of the first pair of victims of the Catholic Church in Mexico, after a trial that violated the clear rules for tribunals of the Inquisition.

In what follows, we address all three charges against Hernando Alonso.

- 2 Liebman, ‘Hernando Alonso: The First Jew’, p. 292, says that the two relaxed victims were brothers, but may be confusing Hernando Alonso with the reconciled brother of the second victim, Gonzalo de Morales. See Conway, *Hernando Alonso: A Jewish Conquistador*, p. 32.
- 3 The investigation proceedings are published in Toro, *Los judíos en la Nueva España*, pp. 17-48.
- 4 Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition*, pp. 33-34.
- 5 Robert Himmerich y Valencia, *The Encomenderos of New Spain, 1521-1555*, Austin, TX 1996, p. 117.

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The Reinvestigation

The main source we have regarding the trial and conviction of Alonso is the reinvestigation by the inquisitors *licenciados*, Don Alonso de Peralta y Gutierrez and Bernardo de Quirós, in 1574, forty-six years after the event.⁶ What follows is a summary of the evidence brought before them.

The first to be questioned was Fray Vicente de las Casas. As far as he could remember, Alonso was accused of baptizing his son a second time *in error*, but when menaced by the torture instruments, became frightened and confessed that his son's second baptism was in the judaizing manner, which involved washing the baby while standing on his feet in a basin and then drinking that water. De las Casas did not remember any other crime of which Alonso was accused and did not know why he was not given a chance to repent, as was the norm. Regarding the other victim burned at the same auto de fe, de las Casas said that he had confessed too late.⁷

The next witness who remembered anything was Pedro de Nava, and all he could remember was that at one time there was a *sambenito* of a "Fulano" (i.e. "John Doe") de Morales hanging in the cathedral. He could not even remember whether Morales was relaxed or penanced. He returned, still not remembering Morales's given name, to report that he remembered flames on the *sambenito*, meaning that he was indeed relaxed.⁸

The next informed witness was Pedro Vázquez de Vergara, who was over seventy years old. He said that he had actually witnessed both the sentencing and the auto de fe where the two accused were burned. He had also been present, he reported, when Alonso tried to prevent his wife from going to church during

6 Conway, *Hernando Alonso: A Jewish Conquistador*, provides a very nice summary of this reinvestigation, but does not cover everything of relevance to our study. Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition*, asserts that no scholar save himself did anything more than read what was in the reinvestigation, whereas there were other documents available and not employed both to the newly arrived inquisitors, who were investigating the auto of 1528, and to modern researchers studying this cases. While he is not unique in using the other material, he does in fact provide some further insight into Hernando Alonso's life as a merchant. Unfortunately, he failed to read all the material carefully. For example, when it comes to the matter of Hernando Alonso and his wife going or not going to church, Greenleaf, p. 35, asserts that it was the wife who protested that those were the old ways of the Jews, rather than Vázquez de Vergara (see below). More recently, Eva Uchmany, 'De algunos cristianos nuevos en la conquista y colonización de la Nueva España', in *Estudios de Historia Novohispana VIII* (1985), pp. 265-318, has also written about business aspects of Hernando Alonso's life based on the same material.

7 Toro, *Los judíos en la Nueva España*, pp. 20-23, 27.

8 *Ibidem*, pp. 25-26.

her menstruation. He reports the incidents both as he remembered their occurring and as described in the victims' confession. This makes him the only surviving eyewitness to the scene regarding not attending church, and, overall, he does seem to be the best informed of all the witnesses regarding Alonso.

Vázquez de Vergara told the inquisitor that one Saturday, while he and Anton Ruiz de Maldonado were present, Alonso told his wife not to go to church the following day, Sunday. When she protested, he said that it was because she was having her menstrual period and going would "violate" the church. At that point, Vázquez de Vergara had commented to Alonso that those were the old ways of the Jews, and are now no longer kept, as now "we have the law of evangelical grace", as he reported. But, Vázquez de Vergara adds, it was his true opinion that his *compadre*, Hernando Alonso, was just jealous, and was merely seeking a pretext to keep his young wife from going out and flirting. Following are his exact words, as recorded:⁹

Que seis ó siete meses antes que fuese preso [...] este testigo le oyó decir al dicho Hernando Alonso en presencia de Antón Ruiz Maldonado, difunto, quereando la dicha Isabel de Aguilar ir á misa el Domingo siguiente, porque era sábado cuando esto pasó: "Señora, no vais á misa", diciendo ella: "¿pues por qué no?" el dicho Hernando Alonso le respondió: "porque estáis de arte que inviolaréis la iglesia", y como este testigo lo oyó, le dixo: "esas son ceremonias antiguas de los judíos, y ya no se guardan después que tenemos la ley de gracia evangélica",¹⁰ á lo cual el dicho Hernando Alonso no le respondió ninguna cosa, ni este testigo, reparó en ello, pareciéndole que sería achaques del dicho Hernando Alonso, para que su mujer no saliese fuera, y el dicho Antón Ruiz lo tomó á malicia, y denunció de ello cuando vino á México el dicho Fray Vicente de Santa María...

It was, in fact, Antón Ruiz Maldonado, the offended wooer who was annoyed by Alonso's attempt at preventing his wife from going out, who denounced Alonso to the inquisitors as soon as they arrived, according to this account.

Vázquez de Vergara said that he had also heard at the sentencing that Alonso had confessed that he and someone named Palma along with some others, while on Hispaniola, had taken a child of no more than two years of age and placed him

9 *Ibidem*, pp. 32.

10 Even though this witness said clearly that he himself had said that these are the old ceremonies of the Jews, both Liebman, 'Hernando Alonso: The First Jew', p. 239, and Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition*, p. 35, put this comment in the mouth of Alonso's wife. Conway, *Hernando Alonso: A Jewish Conquistador*, p. 22, on the other hand, brings the conversation in translation verbatim and without this error.

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in a large tub and poured water over his naked body, from which they all drank. This, Alonso had confessed, was in offence to the sacrament of baptism.¹¹

Also, according to that confession, Alonso had had a son who was baptized by some friar, while still travelling, and then, in Mexico, wanted the child baptized by a more important priest, in the cathedral of México. Alonso had done this because he had thought that the first baptism was not worth anything, and had not been aware that this was improper. Fifteen days after his imprisonment, when threatened with the torture instruments and in their presence, he reportedly confessed that the re-baptism was done as a judaizing practice and beseeched the court for its mercy.

This witness knew of no other sins on the part of Hernando Alonso.

Prior to sentencing, Vázquez de Vergara had spoken to Fray Pedro de Contreras, one of the inquisitors with whom he was friendly, and Contreras confirmed that indeed Alonso had originally denied everything under oath, and only confessed out of fear of torture, and even though he did beg for mercy, there was no room to offer him any. Vázquez de Vergara had remarked to Contreras that it seemed to be an act of too much “rigor” to burn Alonso over that, but the answer was that this was what had to be done.¹²

Fray Antonio Roldán, the next witness, was seventy-four years old at the time of the interview. He repeated all of the general details from hearsay, but had nothing to add.¹³

Bernardino de Albornoz, also over seventy, remembered less than did Antonio Roldán. According to him, the un-baptism had taken place in the house of Alonso. They poured wine over the body of the child and then drank what washed off (“*el que se escurría por la natura del niño*”).¹⁴

Diego de Valadez, an old and crippled *conquistador* to whom the inquisitor had to pay a home visit, also heard about Alonso, “*Que bebían boronia, que es caldo prieto*” (“They drank *boronia*, that is *caldo prieto*”), something not mentioned before.¹⁵ As a matter of fact, however, *boronia* and *caldo prieto* are two distinct and quite different foods, both attributed to Jews or judaizers.¹⁶ Thus, this detail betrays the ignorant, gossipy nature of its bearer.

Another *conquistador* visited in his home in Villa of Atlacubaya, Bartolomé González, seventy-four years old, clearly remembered the accusations as they

11 Toro, *Los judíos en la Nueva España*, pp. 31-36.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 33.

13 *Ibidem*, pp. 36-38.

14 *Ibidem*, pp. 38-40. Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition*, speaks of water that ran off the baby’s genitals; perhaps he understood *natura* in this way.

15 Toro, *Ibidem*, pp. 40-42.

16 See, for example, Carlos Alvar, ‘Cervantes y los judíos’, *Cervantes y las religiones*, Ruth Fein and Santiago López Navia, eds., Madrid 2008, pp. 29-54.

were made public. He added that in the strange unbaptizing incident, as he heard it, wine was poured on a child in Cuba on Holy [Maundy] Thursday, and the group drank everything that dripped off, then, circling around the child, everyone sang some psalm along the lines of “*Dominus Deus Israel de Egipto*”.

The initial accusation against Alonso, which apparently led to his downfall, was that he had told his wife not to go to church one day, in the presence of the man who later denounced him. This informer had stated that Alonso’s reason for keeping her home was because she was “*de arte*”, or with her *regla* – her menstrual period. But it was not a strong enough accusation for the purpose of making him a sinner worthy of the death penalty. Thus more, and inconsistent, evidence had to be accumulated, or so it appears.

Some of the witnesses during the later inquiry felt that Alonso had been dealt with unfairly and that he should not have been killed. Several had said as much to the assistant inquisitor at the original trial, Contreras. But the head inquisitor, Fray Vicente de Santa María, to whom Ruiz Maldonado had denounced Alonso, prevailed, and Alonso was burned at the stake on the very same day as his confession under threat of torture was given, and a mere fifteen days after his arrest, a speed otherwise unheard of.¹⁷

At the end of the second investigation, the *sambenito* was re-hung, and Alonso was listed in the first official auto de fe of the Inquisition in Mexico as victim number one, “*hereje judaizante, relaxado en persona*”. Gonzalo de Morales, the other victim burned at the stake, is identified as “*de generacion de judios, hereje judaizante, relaxado en persona*”.¹⁸

The Trial

We have seen that the crimes Alonso was accused of having committed against the Church were threefold. For one, he was said to have baptized his son twice, with the full knowledge of the priest the second time around. To what degree is this forbidden and to what degree does this represent a judaizing practice? This is not at all clear.

The second accusation was that he stood a baby (or maybe his own child), when in Mexico (or was it Hispaniola, or perhaps Cuba?), in a large basin, pouring water (or wine) over him, and then having guests drink from it.¹⁹ Thus, we have

17 Toro, *Los judíos en la Nueva España*, p. 33.

18 *Ibidem*, p. 47.

19 Some witnesses said water and some said wine. Medina, *La primitiva inquisición americana*, p. 122, mentions both; Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition*, p. 34, simply decided that it was wine.

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Alonso accused (and convicted) of having participated in two wildly disparate manners of voiding a baptism.

Lastly, he is said to have prohibited his (third) young and beautiful wife from attending mass one day, explaining, when she protested, that this was on account of her menstruating.

A custom of some Iberian Jewish women to avoid praying during their *regla* was documented by the Inquisition.²⁰ This is not mentioned in published edicts of faith, but a similar postpartum quarantine is listed as a sign of secret Judaism.²¹ Edicts from Mexico in 1639 and 1795 also list this quarantine of forty days explicitly:²² “*O si alguna muger guardase cuarenta dias despues de parida, sin entrar en el Templo por ceremonia de la ley de Moyses. O si cuando nacen las criaturas las circuncidasen...*”. Reported cases go back at least to 1490 in Soria, Spain. And there were also instances of abstaining from sex during menstruation or after childbirth.²³

There are many interesting angles to this issue. First and foremost is the fact that the Church was presumably viewed as a sacred place by those individuals who refused – out of respect – to go there while in an “unclean” state. These two blood-related limitations, on account of menses and parturition, have been connected throughout history, and cross-culturally, as we will see. It is the contamination of feminine blood that is at issue, part of a widespread notion throughout the world of impurity and potential danger associated with a woman’s blood.

Christendom

At this point, we do not know why Converso women would not go to Church during their menses or after giving birth. It seems that, in fact, mainstream Christianity excluded menstruants and parturants from the church long before local Jewish practice may have excluded such women from the synagogue.²⁴

20 David M. Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit*, Philadelphia 1996, pp. 273-274.

21 Examples include Valencia, 1512, at es.wikisource.org/wiki/Edicto_de_Fe (viewed February 10, 2011) and Madrid, 1633, in Joseph Ortiz, *Directorio parroquia: práctica de concursos y de curas*, Antonio Pérez de Soto, Madrid 1769, pp. 486-487.

22 Seymour B. Liebman, *The Jews in New Spain*, Coral Gables 1970, p. 97.

23 Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit*, pp. 209-210; E.M. Umansky and D. Ashton, eds., *Four Centuries of Jewish Women’s Spirituality: A Sourcebook*, Waltham, MA 2008, pp. 42-43.

24 Shaye Cohen, ‘Menstruants and the Sacred in Judaism and Christianity’, in *Women’s History and Ancient History*, ed. Sarah B. Pomeroy, Chapel Hill 1991, pp. 273-299.

Following the first council of Nicea in the fourth century, the following was announced:²⁵

For husbands it is not allowed that they approach their wives during menstruation, so that their bodies and their children will not manifest the effects of elephantiasis and leprosy; in fact that type of blood corrupts both the body of the parents as well as of their children.

At the end of the sixth century, Augustine of Canterbury asked whether a woman may properly enter church while menstruating. Pope Gregory the Great answered:²⁶ “A woman must not be prohibited from entering a church during her usual periods, for this natural overflowing cannot be reckoned a crime...”. To prove his point, he referred to the Gospels where a woman who was bleeding incurably for years touched the hem of Jesus from behind and was cured. Gregory reasoned, “If this woman who was suffering from the issue of blood humbly came behind the Lord’s back was justified in her boldness, why is it that what was permitted to one was not permitted to all women...? A woman ought not be forbidden to receive the mystery of the Holy Communion at these times”.

On the other hand, in the seventh century, Bishop Theodore of Canterbury wrote, “During the time of menstruation women should not enter into church or receive communion, neither lay women nor religious”; “In the same way those women should do penance, who enter a church before their blood is purified after birth, that is for forty days”.²⁷ Similarly, Timothy, Bishop of Alexandria in the second half of the seventh century, denied communion to menstruating women.²⁸

Paucapalea, circa 1140, in Bologna, wrote: “Women are not allowed to visit

25 Quoted in Ottavia Niccoli, “‘Menstrum Quasi Monstruum’: Monstrous Births and Menstrual Taboo in the Sixteenth Century”, *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective*, Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, eds., trans. Margaret A. Gallucci, Baltimore 1990, p. 10.

26 Gregory the Great, *Epistola* 64, PL, 77: 1183–1199. Translation in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, p. 48, B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors eds., Oxford 1969, p. 88, cited in Joan R. Branham, ‘Bloody Women and Bloody Spaces: Menses and the Eucharist in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages’, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 30, 4 (Spring 2002), pp. 15–22. Rob Meens, in ‘A Background to Augustine’s Mission to Anglo-Saxon England’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 23 (1994), p. 15, finds this to be a particularly British concern.

27 Quoted in Ida Raming, *A History of Women and Ordination*, Vol. 2: ‘The Priestly Office of Women: God’s Gift to a Renewed Church’, B. Cooke and G. Macy eds. and trans., Oxford 2004, p. 78, and at www.womenpriests.org/story.asp (viewed February 22, 2010).

28 *Nicene And Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series, Volume XIV: The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace eds., New York 2007, p. 613.

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a church during menstruation or after the birth of a child". Following Isidore, of fifth century Seville, he explains the popular "biological" rationale:²⁹ "For only a woman is a menstrual animal by contact with whose blood fruits will do not produce, wine turns sour, plants die, trees lack fruit, rust corrupts iron, the air darkens. If dogs eat it, they are made wild with madness". Rufinus, in 1159, also in Bologna, stated the following:³⁰ "This permission [of Gregory] to the woman has now been abolished because of the contrary practice of the Church and mostly because of what we read in the penitentiary of Theodorus, that if a woman has presumed to enter a church before a predefined time, she has to do penance by fasting on bread and water for as many days as she would have needed to stay away from Church".

In 1198, when asked by the archbishop of Armagh if the Mosaic law concerning women in childbirth still held good, Innocent III had replied in the negative, "but if women desire to absent themselves from church for a while out of reverence, we believe that we cannot censure them".³¹ Both points of view on this issue were still quoted in *A Complete Manual of Canon Law* from 1896.³²

The edicts of faith notwithstanding, there was a widespread Christian custom of "lying in" after giving birth and of a "churching" ceremony at the end of a quarantine of a month or more. Waiting for approximately forty days after birth and then ceremoniously returning to church was the norm in many Catholic regions of Europe.³³ Old Chrisher, avoided the Church when bleeding and also kept the quarantine, perhaps in imitation of Mary.³⁴ Churching at the end of the quaran-

29 *Summa*, On Distincto 5, princ. ch. 2 v, quoted at www.womenpriests.org/traditio/unclean.asp (viewed February 22, 2010). Similar views prevailed in the Eastern Church; see William E. Phipps, 'The Menstrual Taboo in the Judeo-Christian Tradition', *Journal of Religion and Health* 19, 4 (1980), pp. 298-303. Cf. Pliny, *Natural History*, 7.15.64-66. For Rabbinic and early Christian attitudes, see Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*, Stanford, CA 2000.

30 Rufinus, *Summa Decretorum*, H. Singer ed., (1902), quoted at www.womenpriests.org/theology/rufinus.asp (viewed February 22, 2010).

31 *Ep.* 1, 63; Peter Browe, *Beiträge zur Sexualethik des Mittelalters*, p. 26, quoted at www.womenpriests.org/body/ranke.asp (viewed February 22, 2010).

32 Oswald Joseph Reichel, *A Complete Manual of Canon Law*, London 1896.

33 See, for example, Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, New York 1997, pp. 28-33, Penny Howell Jolly, 'Learned Reading, Vernacular Seeing: Jacques Daret's Presentation in the Temple', *The Art Bulletin* 82, 3 (Sep. 2000), pp. 428-452, and Becky R. Lee, 'Men's Recollections of a Women's Rite: Medieval English Men's Recollections Regarding the Rite of the Purification of Women after Childbirth', *Gender & History* 14, 2 (2002), pp. 224-241. Jolly calls churching a "Hebrew" idea, that is, biblical.

34 The apocryphal story of the Presentation of Mary and of Mary's later removal from the Temple is told in *Protevangelium of James*, 8: "Behold, Mary has reached the age of

tine was a cherished Christian custom throughout the ages, documented in papal literature and in the arts.³⁵ This quarantine persists until today, in certain places of modern Spain, Portugal, and elsewhere. There have been recent reports of the custom in Extremadura, for example.³⁶ In my many visits to Northern Mexico and New Mexico, I found that the quarantine, or *la dieta de cuarenta dias*, is still very widespread among descendants of Old and New Christians, alike.³⁷

Finally, though most Islamic authorities enjoin menstruating and postpartum women from praying in the mosque,³⁸ there does not appear to be any mention of

twelve years in the temple of the Lord. What then shall we do with her, lest perchance she defile the sanctuary of the Lord?"

- 35 Jolly, 'Learned Reading, Vernacular Seeing', pp. 443-444, attributes churching to an imitation of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple. Article available in Internet: www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-66304030/learned-reading-vernacular-seeing.html
- 36 J. Marcos Arévalo, 'El fuego ritual y la purificación: Caracterización de las fiestas de las candelas en Extremadura', *Zainak. Cuadernos de Antropología-Etnografía* 26 (2004), pp. 247-257. A relatively recent example is the following: *La mujer bajo el franquismo*: "En lugares muy 'tradicionales' de España (no en todos por fortuna), la mujer no podía entrar en la iglesia después del parto sin ser purificada, ya que la maternidad la contaminaba. El Cardenal Primado Gomá, actualizó en 1940 la bendición postpartum, un rito antiquísimo..." From www.mayores.uji.es/proyectos/proyectos/lamujerbajofranquismo.pdf (viewed February 22, 2010). A Spanish friend told me that her mother gave birth at home both to her brother and to herself. Of course she stayed home for the quarantine, and of course she went to church at the end, and not before, and of course there was a ceremony at the door of the church with water. But that was in Franco's time, and now no one does it anymore, she said.
- 37 S.C. Halevy, 'Jewish Practices among Contemporary Anusim', *Shofar* 18, 1 (Fall 1999), pp. 93-94; and Idem, *Descendants of the Anusim (Crypto-Jews) in Contemporary Mexico*, Ph.D. thesis, Department of Jewish History, Hebrew University, Jerusalem 2008, pp. 131-133. See also: M.S. Edmonson, *Los Manitos: A Study of Institutional Values*, Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, New Orleans 1957, p. 24; E. Katz, 'Recovering after Childbirth in the Mixtec Highlands (Mexico)', *Actes du 2e Colloque Européen d'Ethnopharmacologie et la de la Conférence internationale d'Ethnomédecine*, Heidelberg 1993, pp. 99-111; J. Liebman Jacobs, 'Women, Ritual, and Secrecy: The Creation of Crypto-Jewish Culture', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35, 2 (Jun. 1996), pp. 97-108. Tomas Atencio speaks of other aspects of the same "diet" in 'Resolana: A Chicano Pathway to Knowledge', *Third Annual Ernesto Galarza Commemorative Lecture, Stanford Center for Chicano Research*, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 1988. For modern Portugal, see the references in Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit*, p. 210.
- 38 See A. Kevin Reinhart, 'Impurity/No Danger', *History of Religions* 30, 1 (Aug. 1990), pp. 1-24; 'Qur'an, Hadith and Scholars: Women', *WikiIslam*, www.wikiislam.com/wiki/Qur'an,_Hadith_and_Scholars:Women (viewed May 13, 2010); 'Islam Question

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these Islamic restrictions in Inquisition edicts regarding Moslem “backsliding”.³⁹ Karaite women follow similar rules.⁴⁰

Jewish Background

Let us examine the supposed Jewish origin for these behaviors. Was it really forbidden for a Jewish woman to enter a synagogue during her *regla*, or during forty days, or any other number of days, after birth? What was the opinion of the pre-Expulsion Jewish sages of Spain on this matter? What was the prevalent custom?

Restrictions on the menstruant make an appearance in the non-authoritative old Palestinian *Baraita deNidah*, including not to greet her, not to speak with her, and not to follow her.⁴¹ These are brought as “nice”, but non-binding, practices by a few medieval Rabbis.⁴² Nahmanides, of 13th century Catalonia, did in fact take a very dim view of female blood:⁴³ “It seems right to me”, he says, “that the menstruant woman should be called *nidah*, since men and women stay away from her, and she sits alone, not speaking with anyone. Even her speech is considered contaminated, as is the dust that she walks on...”, and so on. Meir HaKohen in 13th century Germany noted that Ashkenazic women were extra pious and removed themselves during menstruation, and would not go to the synagogue. And even while they pray, they did not do so in the presence of their friends. “The same I saw in the writings of the Geonim, and this is a kosher custom [...]. I heard some

and Answer’, www.islamqa.com/en/ref/128576 and www.islamqa.com/en/ref/33649 (viewed February 22, 2010).

39 The edicts from Valencia in 1519 (<http://www.gabrielbernat.es/espana/inquisicion/ie/proc/edictodefe/efevalencia/efevalencia.html>), from Panama in 1569 (Alfredo Morin Couture, *Apuntes de Historia de la Iglesia de Panamá, período colonial, antología documental*, vol. Ib, Panama 2007, pp. 110-111), and from Bolivia, Paraguay, and Chile (*Documentos del Santo Oficio*, compiled by Domingo Angulo for the Archivo del Convento de Santo Domingo, 1905; online at www.congreso.gob.pe/museo/inquisicion/anatemas.pdf) all mention a postpartum quarantine regarding Jews, but not regarding Moslems.

40 R. Tsoffar, *The Stains of Culture: An Ethno-Reading of Karaite Jewish Women*, Detroit 2005, pp. 81, 132-133.

41 *Baraita deNidah*, in Chaim M. Horowitz, ed., *Tosfata Attikta: Uralte Tosefta's (Borajta's)*, Chaim M. Horowitz, ed., vol. 5, Crakow 1890, pp. 37-38. See Nahmanides' commentary to Gen. 31:35.

42 For example, Yitshaq b. Moshe of Vienna, *Or Zarua*, vol. IL, Zhitomir 1862, p. 360.

43 Commentary on Lev. 12:4. Nahmanides attributes these notions to Aristotle in *Torat ha-Shem temimah*, (*R. Mose ben Nachman's Dissertation*), A. Jellinek ed, Leipzig 1853, p. 30.

who are lenient regarding this, and others who are strict. And whoever is strict, his days and years will be prolonged, and the same goes for the others [who take upon themselves strictures of purity]”.⁴⁴

The Talmudic ruling, however, is to the contrary. It is said in the name of Rabbi Yehudah b. Bethaira, and quoted by the Geonim and the major codes, including Maimonides (born in Cordova in the 12th century and lived in Fez and Cairo) and Yosef Caro (of the generation of the Expulsion), that women even while menstruating, as well as men and women after intercourse, may read and study Torah, since “the words of the Torah cannot be defiled”.⁴⁵

Despite the overwhelming rabbinic stance against limitations, it appears that the competing negative attitude maintained a strong hold on some people.⁴⁶ The practice of avoiding the synagogue during the time of bleeding remains to this day well entrenched in some Jewish communities.⁴⁷ It is plausible that some women in Moslem countries – especially in North Africa – refrained from attending the synagogue during their menses, in imitation of their Muslim neighbors. On the other hand, Caro states explicitly that Sephardic women of his time – the generation of the Expulsion – did not refrain from going to the synagogue during menses.⁴⁸

Similarly, abstention from marital relations for a full forty days after birth was the subject of major dispute among medieval Rabbis. The Rabbinic interpretation of the forty or eighty days after birth in Leviticus is the opposite: these are *clean*

44 *Hagahot Maimoniot* on Prayer, 4:4. Cf. Moshe Isserles on *Shulhan Arukh*, Orah Hayim, 88:1.

45 *Babylonian Talmud*, Berakhot 21b-22a; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Tefilin, 10:8; Yitshaq Aboab, *Menorat Hamaor*, Talmud Torah, 5, p. 325; Yosef Caro, *Beit Yosef*, Yoreh Deah, 282; Hezekiah da Silva, *Pri Hadash*, Orah Hayyim, 88:1.

46 Regarding Jewish attitudes, see also: Nachmanides, *Sefer Hilkhhot Nidah leHaRamban*, ed. Pinhas Hayim ha-Levi Rubinfeld, Jerusalem 1986; Yedidya Dinary, ‘The Impurity Customs of the Menstruate Woman: Sources and Development’, *Tarbiz* 49 (1980), pp. 302-324 (in Hebrew); Ron Barkai, *Les infortunes de Dinah ou la gynécologie juive au Moyen Âge*, Paris 1991; Shaye J.D. Cohen, ‘Purity and Piety: The Separation of Menstruants from the Sancta’, in *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue. A Survey of History, Halakhah and Contemporary Realities*, Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut, eds., Philadelphia 1992, pp. 103-115; Evyatar Marienberg, *Niddah: Lorsque les juifs conceptualisent la menstruation*, Paris 2003.

47 When praying in a synagogue in southern France, and the cloth wrapping the Torah scroll was lifted to the ladies’ section for kissing, I was told by an elderly Sephardic local lady not to kiss it if I was with my “way”. A Sephardi woman from Jerusalem reported to me that her mother did not go to the synagogue when she was ritually impure because of her monthly periods. Similarly, a Russian woman in the U.S. told me that her mother begged her not to go to the synagogue for her son’s circumcision for she was “unclean”.

48 Yosef Caro, *Beit Yosef*, Orah Hayim, 88.

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days; blood flowing during these days is not considered impure and the couple may continue having relations even if bleeding resumes. But the alternate interpretation of Leviticus 12:4 was well known in Spain long before the Expulsion; Maimonides attributes its origins to the Karaites.⁴⁹ Yeroham b. Meshullam (of the 14th century, born in Provence or Languedoc, but – when the Jews were expelled – moved to Toledo) also rails against women who avoid attending synagogue after childbirth, basing themselves on this biblical prohibition.

He writes:⁵⁰

Some [women], all this time will not enter a synagogue – this is an erroneous custom, and great apostasy, and one must protest against them, for on the contrary, according to the Torah any blood that is seen on those days is considered pure, and she may have intercourse with her husband, except that she is considered impure for the Temple and sacred foods until she brings her sacrifice, and this, while the Temple stood....

Caro quotes Yeroham approvingly, that staying away from the synagogue after giving birth is an erroneous custom and must be corrected.

To sum matters up, it was not the custom among Spanish Jewish women at the time of the Expulsion to avoid the synagogue during menstruation. Both that notion and the related avoidance of the synagogue for forty days (or eighty days for a baby girl) after childbirth, although prevalent in some places until recent times,⁵¹ were opposed by most Sephardic Rabbis over the centuries.

Conclusion

Back to our *pobre* Hernando Alonso. He was convicted of having practiced

49 Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Forbidden Intercourse, 11:1300-15. For the evolution of restrictions on postpartum intercourse, see Eric Zimmer, ‘*Olam k'minhago noheg*, Jerusalem 1996, pp. 220-239.

50 *Toldot Adam ve-Havah*, 26:3, p. 223d.

51 I have met women from the former Soviet Union who had to fight against their mother's sense of propriety in order to go to the synagogue to attend their son's circumcision. Special attention is given nowadays to call the woman's husband to the Torah at the end of the forty or eighty days, even if she cannot also attend services. The 17th century Ashkenazic Abraham Gombiner, in his standard commentary, *Magen Avraham*, on the *Shulhan Arukh*, says: “The husband of a woman who has given birth forty days prior for a boy and eighty for a girl, but has not yet been able to attend services at the synagogue herself, must be called up to read from the Torah on the Sabbath, since this would be the appropriate time to bring the birth offerings”.

Judaism, despite the lack of any evidence that he was of Jewish origin. After the second investigation, as it appears in the summary of the first auto de fe by the first *official* tribunal of the Inquisition in Mexico in 1574, Alonso is listed as a judaizer, while his fellow victim, Gonzalo de Morales, is explicitly said to be of Jewish origin. Indeed, the inquisitors wrote back to Spain that evidence of Jewish origin for Alonso was lacking.⁵²

In the final analysis, forty-three years later, based upon testimony of old individuals, some perhaps with interests of their own, others with fears and matters to hide, the picture remains most unclear. One is left wondering why the second set of inquisitors announced any conclusion, based on the evidence they heard, especially as there had been so much criticism against the friar who had conducted the original trial and auto, and who had long been removed from his post.⁵³

Did our Hernando Alonso “sin” at all? Besides the issue with his wife going to church while menstruating, Alonso is said to have confessed to two affronts to the sacrament of baptism. The first, baptizing his son a second time in a more respectable place and by a more respected priest, is something to which he admitted from the outset. He had arranged the re-baptism with the knowledge and cooperation of the second baptizing priest, and presumably was ignorant of any prohibition against doing so. He sought to improve the “fly-by-night” baptism the baby got en route; that’s all.

In his later confession under threat of torture, Alonso admitted to an “un-baptism”. But that accusation is full of contradictions. One witness said it transpired in Mexico, another, on the Island of Hispaniola, a third, in Puerto Real. (It is unclear whether the town in Hispaniola is intended; Alonso had come to Mexico from Cuba.). Some said he poured wine, others water. It is also not clear whose baby it was. How strange! Most likely it was a complete fabrication, attributed to Alonso just to make the case for anti-Christian behavior more convincing.

The testimony about Alonso telling his wife not to go to mass while menstruating sounds clear: she would be desecrating the *church* thereby, and he wanted to avoid any such insult. This shows devoutness, even if deemed misplaced. Eva Uchmany understands Alonso’s behavior as the product of confusing the church with former behavior regarding the synagogue on the part of New Christians, who “within

52 Medina, *La primitiva inquisición americana*, vol. 2, pp. 106-109; Conway, *Hernando Alonso: A Jewish Conquistador*, p. xxxii.

53 Conway, *Hernando Alonso: A Jewish Conquistador*, pp. 17-18, points out that the very problematic tenure of Fray Vicente de Santa María seems to have ended with this *auto*. Don Sebastián Ramírez de Fuenleal, president of the second *audiencia*, had complained to the emperor, Carlos, about de Santa María in 1532. See also José Luis Soberanes Fernández, ‘La Inquisición en México durante el siglo XVI’, in *Revista de la Inquisición* 7 (1998), pp. 283-295.

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their consciences, desired to keep Jewish commandments”.⁵⁴ David Gitlitz thinks that as time passed after the Expulsion, *anusim*, who were “perhaps ignorant of post-biblical traditions”, reverted to a more literal reading of Leviticus 12.⁵⁵ These suggestions may perhaps explain where Conversos got their ideas, but they do not really explain why a crypto-Jew would undertake to observe them vis-à-vis attending church, and risk the wrath of the authorities. Were the motive adherence to Judaism, “defiling” the church would not have mattered to them. Moreover, the witness himself understood the entire event to have been motivated by spousal jealousy. Indeed, the very man from whom Alonso was trying to keep his wife from fraternizing is said to have been the one who denounced Alonso to the Inquisition.⁵⁶

In the edicts, the Jews were suspected of not entering their place of worship during quarantine. But just as some Jews had not gone to their synagogue after childbirth or during menstruation prior to the forced conversions, Catholics were not going to their church, Moslems to their mosque, and in the rest of the world many cultures were doing the same.⁵⁷ If anything, for New Christians to respect the church in this manner was Christian behavior, not judaizing. This, however, did not give the victims any grace on the part of the Inquisition. Something between ignorance and racism was at work for this behavior to be taken as an indication of insincere conversion. Jews might avoid their own synagogues, out of a religious sentiment, when they felt unclean for reason of blood. But no Law of Moses would induce them to avoid the *church* for such a reason.⁵⁸

Based on the extant testimonies, it appears that Hernando Alonso knew nothing at all about Judaism. None of the accusations contain any real Jewish customs,

54 Eva A. Uchmany, ‘The Periodization of the History of the New Christians and Crypto-Jews in Spanish America’, in *New Horizons in Sephardic Studies*, Yedida K. Stillman, George K. Zucker, eds., Albany, NY 1993, p. 114.

55 Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit*, p. 273.

56 This, according to the testimony of Pedro Vázquez, quoted above: “*El dicho Antón Ruiz lo tomó á malicia, y denunció de ello cuando vino á México el dicho Fray Vicente de Santa María*”.

57 Forty-day periods of postpartum recovery are not peculiar to Bible-fearing women and was prevalent, for example, in the eastern Amazon; see Barbara Ann Piperata, ‘Forty Days and Forty Nights: A Biocultural Perspective on Postpartum Practices’, *Amazon Social Science & Medicine* 67, 7 (October 2008), pp. 1094-1103.

58 Lewin, *Mártires y conquistadores judíos*, p. 151, followed by Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit*, p. 209, view not entering church as a transference of Jewish reverence for the synagogue. Liebman, ‘Hernando Alonso: The First Jew’, p. 294, states that there is no proscription on Christian women going to church during the period of their “uncleanliness”. Similarly, Uchmany, ‘De algunos cristianos nuevos’, p. 290, writes that Alonso confused the church for a synagogue in typical crypto-Jewish syncretism. Unaware of widespread Christian avoidance of going to church while menstruating, they conclude that Alonso must have been a secret Jew.

and he appeared to know nothing about this religion. There was no information demonstrating any connection between him and any Jewish ancestors. A good part of his business was selling pigs. He confessed to what he was told to confess, in order to be reconciled and spared. There is no credible evidence to suggest the least bit of a Jewish prayer, practice, or anything else.⁵⁹ He was a Catholic and seems to have cared about the baptism of his child enough to want it done respectfully – this much we do know. And if we are to believe that he was not just acting out of jealousy and making up an excuse to try and prevent his young wife from meeting a man at church, then it was simply out of Christian respect for the church, to not walk in while bleeding, which – as we have shown – was the custom of old. By comparison, the other person burned at the stake with him, Gonzalo de Morales, was accused of having deliberately desecrated Christianity by abusing a crucifix in rather uncomely ways.⁶⁰

There is also no reason to lend credence to Alonso's confession. He knew the "score": You confess the first time to whatever were the accusations, you beg for mercy, and you are reconciled.⁶¹ He was innocent, but did not relish the idea of torture. Little did he imagine that he would be burned at the stake on the very day he made his false confession, pleading for the mercy of the court. Many of his contemporaries felt the process to have been wholly unfair. Sebastián Ramírez de Fuenleal, who became President of the second Audiencia of New Spain, said that "the procedure in the trials of Alonso and Gonzalo de Morales had been improper, and they had been wronged by being denied the mercy they had implored".

We must, instead, look at the political background that surrounded Alonso at the time of his arrest. Liebman first pointed to the political grounds at the root of this trial, and Greenleaf provides many examples of politically-motivated prosecutions to prove his predecessor's point.⁶² There was friction between the settled landowners and the *conquistadores*, and the church authorities sided, conveniently, with the settled community. It was, therefore, to their advantage to harass the well-landed and well-to-do men of Cortés. Many of Cortés' men were regularly arrested for blasphemy, and other behavior unfit a good Christian. Cortés himself tried to fight the phenomenon, threatening his soldiers, but not to much

59 Arnold Wiznitzer, 'Crypto-Jews in Mexico during the Sixteenth Century', *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 51, (1961), p. 171, asserts, without elaboration, that there was nothing Jewish about any of the rites he was accused of. Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition*, p. 34, says it's "debatable". Martin A. Cohen, *The Martyr*, Philadelphia 1973, p. 286, n. 24, rightfully objects to referring to Alonso as being Jewish, since "he was born and raised a Catholic, and had at best a negligible knowledge of Judaism".

60 Toro, *Los judíos en la Nueva España*, p. 33.

61 Wiznitzer, 'Crypto-Jews in Mexico', pp. 171-172, 177.

62 Liebman, 'Hernando Alonso: The First Jew', pp. 295-296; Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition*, pp. 11-19.

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avail. The closer people were to Cortés, the harsher the treatment they got at the hands of the inquisitors.

Everything points to Alonso having been a practicing Catholic, falsely accused and burned as a judaizer by a politicized and unholy court, with many motives other than seeking truth. Would Alonso have done better had he been less of a staunch supporter of Hernán Cortés? Likely. Although Hernando Alonso – whose help in constructing the brigantines was indispensable in overcoming the *noche triste* – felt that he was not fairly awarded by Cortés, he remained faithful to his until the end. This, perhaps, was his downfall. The Inquisition wanted its pound of flesh, and, likely, along with it, a goodly sum of property from the confiscated estate of this prosperous businessman.

