

ALFONSO DE ZAMORA A CRYPTO-JEW

By Dr. Ahuva Ho

Editors' introduction: a major focus of recent study in Jewish history has concerned the Conversos – the Jews forced to convert to Catholicism in Spain in 1391, and again in 1492, and in Portugal in 1496/1497¹ – and their descendants, many of whom subsequently returned to Judaism, or otherwise resisted the pressures that they faced for their religion.

Dr. Ahuva Ho, in the course of her research in medieval manuscripts on an unrelated topic, uncovered what struck us as the fascinating story of one Converso, long assumed to have become a devout Catholic, who actually used his position as a scholar of Hebrew to encourage other Jews to resist the Inquisition.

Dr. Ho has begun publishing her findings in essays for peer-reviewed academic journals, see [Iberia Judaica XIII \(2021\)](#), pp. 15-45; and see also [her article](#), available [online](#) with wonderful illustrations, published by the National Library of Israel.

¹ See, e.g., David Myers and Alexander Kaye, eds, [The Faith of Fallen Jews: Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and the Writing of Jewish History](#) (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2013), esp. chapters 7-9, and Marina Rustow, [“Yerushalmi and the Conversos”](#), [Jewish History](#) 28:1 (2014), pp. 11-49.

We asked Dr. Ho if she would both summarize her key findings to date, and also share some thoughts as to why she considered this subject to be important for us today. We are pleased to present her summary; and encourage those who are interested to further pursue these issues.

Living in the 21st century, 528 years after the 1492 Spanish royal edict demanding the expulsion or baptism of Spain's Jewish population, numbering perhaps 400,000,² it is hard to imagine the physical and emotional trauma experienced by either group.

Imagine yourselves positioned as they were. A Jewish community that traced its roots in Spain to the first century of the common era, before the Visigoths and before the Spanish nation was Spanish or a nation,³ faced an unfathomable "choice". Many of those who were baptized were forcibly dragged to the baptismal fonts. Circumstances eluding our contemporary conceptions preventing escape to other lands. How could they maintain their ancestral faith, that which defined and directed so much of their lives, under the vicious and zealous eye of the Inquisition? This is the story of one such Converso, who rose to intellectual prominence in plain sight of the Catholic Church, in stark contrast to others who found a variety of ways to remain practicing Jews in secret.

For the last 300-400 years, most Spanish historians insisted that Alfonso de Zamora was a devout Catholic scholar. They could not imagine a different possibility. They never analyzed his manifold annotations contained within the margins of the works he edited *for* the Catholic Church. Their knowledge of Hebrew was insufficient to recognize and understand the coded messages in those annotations. They were historians, not Bible scholars. And, ultimately, they were not Jewish. My research, however, has brought to light a very different picture of the very same Converso.

² Editors' Note: as there are no solid population statistics, we must rely upon evolving educated estimates. Perhaps as many as 100,000 of Spain's Jews were killed or forcibly converted in 1391; and between 200,000 and 400,000 were expelled or forcibly converted in 1492.

³ Editors' Note: probably most of those comprising the Spanish-Jewish community in 1492 were direct descendants of those who came to Spain following the Arab Conquest.

Alfonso de Zamora (1474-1545) is known in particular as one of the three main organizers and editors of the Complutensian Bible Polyglot (1502-1514). The project, conceived of and begun, by Archbishop Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, at the University of Salamanca, was later completed at the University of Alcalá de Henares. The Archbishop's main goal was to promote the study and understanding of the Hebrew Bible, the Targum of the Torah, and the Hebrew grammar of the Tanakh. The Septuagint, as well as the Latin Vulgate, were too, included in this comprehensive work, so that not only scholars, but all literate and interested parties, would be able to follow the Hebrew and Aramaic columns. This colossal undertaking was welcome in the unfolding era of the Renaissance, when the airs of scholarly tolerance became fashionable, and Christian-Jewish discourse began to flourish as a genre.

Zamora, where Alfonso de Zamora was born and raised, was a vibrant Jewish center with multiple synagogues and *Yeshivot*, including the famous Campanton Yeshiva. It was 1492 when, at the age of 18, Alfonso graduated from that most esteemed Yeshiva. He and his family, with the majority of the Jews of Zamora, traveled to Portugal, pursuing a way out of the Iberian Peninsula. In Portugal, King Juan II had promised to grant the Jews of Spain asylum in return for payment. He proceeded, however, to decree the enslavement of the Jews, and deported several hundred Jewish children to Africa. His successor, Manuel I, in 1497, required all the Jews still in Portugal to convert (or else to leave the country subject to extreme conditions).

This was likely the situation facing the Zamora family, who converted, and then returned to Spain. The Catholic Church promised these New Christians, or Conversos, the return of property confiscated in acts of persecution prior to their initial departure—a promise, among others made, never to be fulfilled. The converted Jews who now

returned, continued to live in their *Juderias*,⁴ and to work in their previous professions. To get away from the Church, Alfonso, now 22 or 23, moved to Arcos, a short distance away, where he worked as a shoemaker. He married Guiomar, a 14-year-old Conversa, and together they had three sons. They lived as Jews in secret.

Archbishop Cisneros was searching for former Jewish scholars to help with the preparation of the Bible Polyglot, which began slowly in 1502. It is not known how Alfonso was chosen, but he began work under the Archbishop, at the University of Salamanca, in 1506. In addition to the Bible Polyglot, Alfonso worked as a teacher. After two years, he was reevaluated, and his salary was increased; so it went until 1512, when the newly built College of San Ildefonso in Alcala de Henares was completed. Here, the new Department of Oriental Languages was filled with former Jewish scholars, among them, Alfonso de Zamora. With two other Conversos, Pablo de Coronel and Alfonso de Alcala, their part of the Bible Polyglot came to a finish in 1514. Upon its completion, Alfonso's tasks encompassed not only teaching, but copying biblical texts, including Hebrew Grammars by David Kimhi, his brother Moshe, Ibn Ezra, and Ibn Kaspi; biblical commentaries by Radaq, Ibn Ezra, Abravanel, Ramban, Rambam, Ba'al HaTurim, HaMeiri, and Ralbag, as well as philosophical works by Muslims including Averroes. A major aim of Archbishop Cisneros was to find hidden references in the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud that might be understood as foretelling of the coming of Jesus. The Catholic Church firmly believed that such references existed, but that they were known only to scholarly Jews. Ironically, the Church simultaneously maintained that the Talmud was irrelevant and nonsensical as scholarship.

⁴ Editors' Note: Judairias, or Judairias, were the houses expressly designated for Jewish habitation, not unlike the later Ghettos of Italy and Eastern Europe. Established by monarchs in Spain and Portugal in the 14th century, they functioned not only to contain those countries' Jewish communities geographically, but too, to limit the movements of Jews, setting curfews, and establishing laws preventing them from entering areas designated only for Christians.

There is one case when Alfonso was asked to translate a Ketubah discovered in the foundations of a ruined house. His patrons, for whom he copied biblical texts in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Latin, came mostly from the top clerics of the Catholic Church, among them known descendants of Jews, like Bishop Francisco de Bobadilla y Mendoza.

In addition, Alfonso wrote two books of his own: one titled *Loor de Virtudes* (1524), a compendium of wisdom proverbs, and *Tratado en el Tiempo de Peste* (1537), advice on how to prevent and overcome the plague. The first was based mostly on Jewish proverbs, and the second on his own maladies, which were many. He was also ordered to write three anti-Jewish polemics. One was an *Epistle to the Jews of Rome*, in which he quoted numerous biblical, Rabbinic, and Kabbalistic texts aimed at convincing Jews to abandon their religion (1526). The second, titled *Sefer Hokhmat Elohim, God's Book of Wisdom, or God's Theology* (1532), was actually a back translation from Latin to Hebrew of the 13th century Raymond Martin's *Pugio Fidei*. *Pugio Fidei* was a massive collection of Rabbinic sources intended to demonstrate the truths of Christianity, and which served as a primary source in Christian disputations with Rabbis. The reverse translation to Hebrew was intended, probably, to be read in the Churches where the Conversos had to attend Sunday Mass. The third was composed to be presented to the zealously anti-Jewish, newly appointed, Archbishop Juan Tavera (1535), who was officially in charge of the Alcala University. The motive was to avert his intention to fire the Converso teachers. There is no evidence that these polemics were either sent to, and received, by any Jewish communities, nor that these works changed the opinions of the listeners.

Even though he became known and respected as a scholar and teacher, Alfonso was repeatedly passed over for promotion to head the Department of Oriental Languages. The Inquisition did not allow New Christians to hold such a position. Moreover, the publisher of his book, *Loor de Virtudes*, refused to pay the royalties due Alfonso. The

ensuing court hearing was staged, and the judges, after hearing the testimony of the false witnesses, sided with the publisher.

I have located 70 of Alfonso's manuscripts, biblical books copied in Hebrew and Aramaic, and their translations, inter-linearly or in parallel columns, into Latin (and rarely in Spanish), the grammar books, biblical commentaries and so on. In beautiful square or semi-square scripts, and often featuring skilled artistic designs in red and black ink, his work shows meticulous attention to accuracy and respect for the holy text. His annotations cover almost every page, and set forth in the margins his own commentary, and those of the Jewish sages. Christian commentary is very rare, and those comments tend to reflect little knowledge of Christianity and its theology or philosophy.

In his commentaries, Alfonso praises the Patriarchs and the Judahite kings for their faith, righteousness, ethics, good actions, and beauty. With contempt, he compares these traits to the Popes, the King, and his advisors, to the Church hierarchy (including the nuns), and to every class in the Spanish society including the farmers, the businessmen, the mistresses, and the family members – all the way to the baby who is consoled only when he is given a coin. He calls the Gentiles fat, drunkard, glutton, greedy, uneducated, and boors. He curses Spain, in its might and haughtiness. He lists the biblical Jewish women as beautiful and smart; he identifies them as paragons for emulation in their dedication to the Jewish people. In particular, he praises Ruth for converting to Judaism.

Alfonso shows a vast knowledge of biblical scholarship, the commandments, the Talmud, and the Jewish calendar. In his teaching material he cleverly incorporates not only Jewish commentary, but also *piyyutim* for specific holy days like Yom Kippur and Shavuot, prayers and parts of synagogue services. He admits to crying aloud whenever he reads *Eikhah* (*Lamentations*) on the ninth of Av, or when he remembers the destruction of the Temples. He is angry at the Judahites who did not listen to Jeremiah and caused

the exile of his people. In his imagination he sees himself walking in the land of Israel among its trees and orchards.

In several essays addressed to the Conversos, he guides them on how to rebut the Inquisitors' accusations of heresy. The Inquisition's typical charges included: refraining from "eating pork, fat and blood, and fish without fins and scales and rabbit and hare, etc." The answer suggested by Alfonso should not be to deny doing so, but rather for the accused to claim that it was their physical nature that made it impossible to tolerate these foods; those foods will harm the body with trouble and disease; for they converted out of belief, and not in order to eat moldy foods. Indeed, in a long list of food purchased, probably, for the wedding of Alfonso's daughter, no non-Kosher foods, nor any combination of milk and meat, appear.

He advises that if the Inquisitors tell the accused that showing fear is a sign of guilt, let them admit that they are certainly fearful, because they do not trust the judges' objectivity and knowledge of man's thoughts like God. They should accuse the Inquisitors of hating them with prejudice. And as for lighting candles, let them respond that they "would not walk in the dark, because they lit the candles for their need, for personal necessities in the inner room of the house, or in the house, or in the animals' quarters, or in the kitchen, or to open the front door of the house for whoever calls." As for washing hands before and after a meal, respond that it is not just a Jewish commandment for it is also a practice generally observed "by officers and farmers for the sake of purity or the fear of disease... And who will judge and who can know a man's heart whether he did this for the sake of purity or fear, or whether he did this to observe a commandment, for this is up to God." And similarly, concerning the remission of debt after seven years [in the year of] "release, for perhaps he remitted the debt because he, the borrower, is poor, and not in order to observe the commandment of the remission."

Alfonso also advises his co-religionists to deceive their Inquisitors and mock them for being ignorant in the Holy Scriptures. He calls them “people who only know how to kill.” He also condemns them as ignorant compared to theologians. He also calls on the Conversos, probably naively or irresponsibly, to asseverate that they do not believe in Christianity, nor in the Anti-Christ. He also advises the Conversos against bigamy by commenting on the *Masorah*, saying: *whoever has two wives, is like preparing death for himself*. Bigamy was a Jewish custom in medieval Spain, but was a sin, prohibited by the Catholic Church, and punishable by execution. The preferable compromise was to take mistresses, for they held no legal status as wives. In general, Alfonso advises Conversos to act morally and ethically so as not to give the Inquisitors a pretext to harm them.

Three times Alfonso warns against being intimate with a woman while she menstruates, and three times he calls for the Conversos to keep the Torah Laws as much as they can. Twice he lists the biblical miracles God did for his people, and numerous times he expresses his trust in the God of Israel who will ultimately save them from the “Trouble” as he calls the Exile. Even though the Spanish Jews had lived in the land of their birth for centuries, Spain is still exile and a land of discrimination. As much as he prays and is concerned for the Conversos who remain Jews in secret, he scolds the judges among them who dissimulate their Jewish ancestry, who claim that Conversos should not be considered equal under the law, and who ignore the long history of the Jews in Spain.

This covert life took a toll on Alfonso’s health; often in his 70 years he recounts being sick, losing eyesight, weak body, skin diseases, and wishing to die. In one of his last compositions, he laments that he has had not even one good day in life. At the age of 42 he saw no hope for surviving longer and considered himself an old man. Frequently, he prayed to YHWH to heal him from awful diseases he believed beleaguered him. In his several poems he sounded depressed and helpless, alienated from the society among

whom he lived. In spite of his melancholy, he strongly believed in personal redemption, as he writes: “The God Shaddai will forgive all my sins.”

Life was stressful. Every day could be his last if he were found to be engaged in any small act that could be translated as Jewish or Judaizing. So why didn't he leave Spain? First, one needed financial backing. Second, the road to freedom was filled with dangers. Third, family circumstances, like old parents or grandparents, sickness, refusal to leave familiar communities, property and memories. Alfonso looked up to Daniel and Joseph, who remained in their exiled land and served foreign masters in order to teach the Gentiles about God and Torah. He expressed that in a variety of ways. However, no doubt he knew this was just an excuse, and he expressed his painful life and disappointments in his many notations.

In order to emotionally escape his fears and frustrations, subconsciously Alfonso built around him a make-believe world, a defense mechanism in which he imagined himself taking up arms against the Spanish authorities, for “it is better to gain freedom through resistance than to live in peaceful slavery.” Instead of leaving or resisting, he dug deeper in his furtive life as a Jew and survived until his dying day.

As he sums up his life, he writes: “No one knows what is in my heart,” and the only solution in life is to trust in YHWH, keep His commandments, live ethically, and hope for God's forgiveness and the return to Zion.

* * *

What can we today, living in a free world, either in the reborn Israel or in the diaspora, take away from this story? First, I suggest that we have no right to condemn the baptized Sephardim for staying in Spain or Portugal. God commanded us to choose

life. Many of their descendants did escape Spain and Portugal in the following centuries, and returned to public practice and expression of Judaism. Second, as Don Isaac Abravanel comforted, they and their offspring will forever be considered Jews. Third, let us bless and admire those who defied the Inquisition only to be burned at the stake. Fourth, let us appreciate how we can express our faith in God and Judaism in whatever channel we choose. Fifth, many who think of themselves as Ashkenazi Jews are, in fact, descendants of those brave Sephardim who bequeathed them life.⁵

So, let us remember them with pride.

Dr. Ahuva Ho was born in Tel Aviv. She holds a B.A. in Hebrew Bible from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, an M.A. in Hebrew Bible from the University of Judaism, Los Angeles, and a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible from the Claremont Graduate School. Her publications include "Sedeq and Šedaqa in the Hebrew Bible"; "The Targum of Zephaniah" (Brill Publishers); Alfonso de Zamora: His Life and Work; and a recently published historical novel based on de Zamora's writings, entitled Dagger in the Heart, which imagines the adventures of his children to leave Spain, the whereabouts of his diary, and the murder of Archbishop Cisneros of Spain. Her complete study of Alfonso de Zamora's writings is forthcoming. Dr. Ho has lectured internationally in Israel, the U.S.A., Mexico, Spain and New Zealand. Since its inception in 1996 until now, she has participated in the Tell Gath excavations, under the direction of Prof. Aren Maier of Bar-Ilan University.

⁵ Editors' Note: see Kevin Alan Brook, "[Sephardic Jews in Galitzian Poland and Environs.](#)" available [online](#).