

Netanyahu, B (Benzion), *Toward the Inquisition: Essays on Jewish and Converso History in Late Medieval Spain*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997 (xi, 267 p.)

(Book review by Miguel A. Torrens, University of Toronto)

A collection of seven essays on Jewish and /converso/ history by B. Netanyahu, Emeritus Professor of Judaic Studies at Cornell University, originally published between 1976 and 1995. The essays aim at clearing up "the puzzling problems related to Spanish history, and more particularly to Jewish and /marrano/ history in Spain from the middle of the fourteenth century to the end of the fifteenth" (p. ix). They are a result from the preparation of his 1995 work, \*\_The Origins of the Inquisition\_\*, and "they seek to clarify intricate problems related in some way to the history of the Inquisition, [...] they do away with wrong solutions, divert us from erroneous paths of exploration, and help steer our inquiries in the right direction" (p. xi). The essays range in methodology from the tightly documented piece dealing with Alonso de Espina's alleged /converso/ roots to a rebuttal of criticism of his 1966 \*\_The Marranos of Spain\_\* and to a vehement attack on Sánchez-Albornoz' theses on the history of the Jews in Spain.

"The Racial Attack on the Conversos"<sup>(1)</sup> <#N\_1\_> is an argument against Américo Castro's thesis that the /limpieza de sangre/ concept is rooted in Jewish traditional law and practice. Netanyahu uses Hebrew sources to argue that there is no basis whatsoever to Castro's claim. The essay includes an interesting study of the term /hidalgo/ that opposes Castro's own definition on etymological grounds and concludes that, like the French /chevalier/, the Germanic /ritter/ and the English /knight/, he was "essentially a product of medieval warfare". Netanyahu posits that, contrary to the opinions of many historians, tolerance of Jews and Moslems in late medieval Spain was a very one-sided affair and overwhelmed by a seething racism that later targeted the /conversos/.

In "Alonso de Espina: Was He a New Christian?"<sup>(2)</sup> <#N\_2\_> Netanyahu dismisses the belief held among earlier scholars that Espina was a /converso/. Using well-documented textual analyses Netanyahu shows that Espina, a high-ranking radical Franciscan preacher and confessor to Enrique IV, was neither a /converso/ nor a Hebrew scholar but, rather, an Old Christian zealot who re-hashed De Lyra's, Lorki's and others' theses in his /Fortalitium Fidei/. Netanyahu further makes a case for the existence of a racial problem in Spain, not just a religious one as has been often stated by Spanish scholars.

The third essay, "Did the Toledans in 1449 Rely on a Real Royal Privilege"<sup>(3)</sup> <#N\_3\_> , addresses the question of whether or not the /Estatuto/ issued by the rebel leaders of Toledo on June 5, 1449, was indeed based on a royal privilege as the leaders claimed. The /Estatuto/ prohibited converts of Jewish origin from holding any office or benefice in the city, its territories or jurisdictions. Based on a belief that the cited privilege was the one granted by Alfonso VII on December 16, 1118 -right after the 1109 riots-, some scholars have denied that the city had the right to issue such a decree. Netanyahu, however, proposes that the /Estatuto/ must have referred to another privilege -now lost- by the same monarch, a privilege that would have stated specific restrictions and penalties on /conversos/.

"The conversion of Don Samuel Abravanel"<sup>(4)</sup> <#N\_4\_> (later Juan Sánchez de Sevilla, /contador mayor del reino/), a significant figure among Spanish Jews and grandfather of the famous leader of Spanish Jewry, Don Issac Abravanel, has never been satisfactorily explained. Netanyahu offers his own version. Although he admits it to be purely hypothetical, it is "as legitimate as the explanation given that conversion by Baer, and in some respects superior" (p. 125). Netanyahu argues that powerful Jews on the side of king Pedro and against Enrique of Trastámara conspired to execute the /contador mayor /Joseph Pichon, a Jew who had sided with Enrique, under the false accusation of /malshinim/ (informer/ malignant). Abravanel, adds Netanyahu, became ostracised and alienated in the ensuing quarrels, which, combined with his skepticism on religious matters and with the desire to retain and advance office and position at court, led to his conversion.

In "Sánchez-Albornoz' View of Jewish History in Spain"<sup>(5)</sup> <#N\_5\_> , Netanyahu launches a vehement attack on his work on the history of the Jews in Spain: his arguments are nothing but an apology of Spaniards; his choice of sources is totally biased; his claim to an understanding of the Jewish people and their character is a preposterous one given his scant knowledge of medieval Jewish sources, and the characterization of /spiritual Aryans/ (the Christians) versus /materialists/ (the Jews) is a racial thesis straight out of Ernest Renan. Hence, Sánchez-Albornoz' contention that Jewish mentality and constructs are at the root of the Inquisition is a travesty of interpretation, especially when the Papal Inquisition had already established a notorious /modus operandi/ much earlier in Languedoc, Italy, Germany, Bohemia and Aragon. Netanyahu states here his own views: that the persecutions, massacres, forced conversions and expulsions in medieval Spain resulted in a survival rate of 7 to 8% of the Jews, "a destruction of awesome proportions comparable in relative and collective, though not in absolute figures, to that undergone by world Jewry in World War II" (p. 127) and, further, that the much discussed /convivencia orgánica/ of Christians, Moslems and Jews may have existed in the early periods of re-settlement when the Jews and Moslems fulfilled essential services, but was increasingly undermined by the fact that Jews and Moslems (and /conversos/ later) were treated as alien minorities maligned and subjected to deep-seated prejudice.

"The Historical Significance of the Hebrew Sources Concerning the Marranos"<sup>(6)</sup> <#N\_6\_> is mainly a response to criticism by Albert A. Sicroff, Gerson D. Cohen and Vicente Cantarino of Netanyahu's *The Marranos of Spain* (1966).

The last essay, "The Primary Cause of the Spanish Inquisition"<sup>(7)</sup> <#N\_7\_> , presents an overview of the reasons put forth by influential scholars (Llorente, Ranke, Hefele, Amador de los Ríos, Menéndez Pelayo, etc.) for the establishment of the Inquisition. Netanyahu dismisses their validity and concludes instead that the Inquisition was created in Castile "to defame, degrade, segregate and ruin the whole group [the /conversos/] economically and socially, and finally eliminate it from Spanish life" (p. 198). This, continues Netanyahu, was done with the full authorization and support of the sovereigns, who had also decided that the Jews were already more a liability than an asset, not worth the trouble of resisting the rising tide of anti-semitism.

The essays are accompanied by 50 pages of end-notes, a corresponding bibliography and an index.

1. Originally published under the title "Américo Castro and his view on the Origin of the /Pureza de

Sangre/" by the American Academy for Jewish Research, *\_Proceedings\_*, 46-47 (1979-1980)

2. American Academy for Jewish Research, *\_Proceedings\_*, 43 (1976)

3. American Academy for Jewish Research, *\_Proceedings\_*, 44 (1977)

4. Appeared in *\_Between History and Literature: Studies in Honor of Isaac Barzilay\_*, ed. Stanley Nash (Tel Aviv: Ha-kkibbutz ha-Meuhad, 1997)

5. Appeared first in Spanish translation in *\_Judíos, Sefarditas, Conversos: la expulsión de 1492 y sus consecuencias\_*, ed. Angel Alcalá Galve (Barcelona: Ambito, 1995)

6. In *\_Hispania Judaica\_*, vol. 1, (Historia), ed. J.M. Solà-Solé, S.G. Armistead, J.H. Silverman (Barcelona: Puvill, 1980)

7. In *\_The Spanish Inquisition and the Inquisitorial Mind\_*, ed. Angel Alcalá Galve (Social Science monographs, 1987)