

Three Sources of Textual Evidence of Columbus, Crypto Jew

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[Note: This is a translation of part of the closing lecture of an international conference on Columbus's origin held in Ibiza, Spain in April 2006. The rest of the lecture was on Columbus as Spanish-language poet.]

The purpose of this paper is to add new material, based on Columbus's writings, to the large body of historical research and forthcoming scientific analysis of DNA intended to shed light on Columbus's origins, specifically regarding indications of his identity as Crypto Jew. We address only textual sources from Columbus's writings, for as we have shown previously (Irizarry 1992), he was a prolific and talented writer and he wrote in Spanish. The keys to his religion are to be found in the *Book of Prophecies*, the *Diary of the First Voyage*, and in Columbus's triangular autograph. Another key, the influence of Ladino or Jewish Spanish on his expression, will be the subject of another paper.

A Crypto Bar Mitzvah

The intense Columbus of the voyages, diaries, and petitions to the royal monarchs had another side that showed through when he undertook an ambitious spiritual and literary project he called *The Book of Prophecies*, from 1501 through 1503, between the letters of his last two voyages, with the stated purpose of helping to recover Jerusalem for Christianity.

Columbus opted to keep the text in the original Latin, gathering selections from 44 books of the Old Testament—mainly psalms and prophetic texts—, along with the four Gospels, 23 Epistles, and some passages from classical authors. The work involved selecting and copying the Latin texts, without translating the originals. The book also contains several poems and marginal notes attributed to Columbus or in part to his younger son Fernando. This was Columbus's first openly "literary" venture in that it had no immediate practical purpose. It is a contemplative work that responded to his deepest spiritual needs, among them, his religious faith.

The poems in Spanish include a tercet, a didactic poem, a celebratory poem on the birth of John the Baptist and a moral admonition of preparing for death that appears in different versions with the verses reordered. Handwriting differences suggest that various scribes helped with the transcription. One was Father Gaspar Gorrício, of the Cartuchan Order, from Genoa. Most significant is the fact that Columbus wrote to him (and he answered) in Spanish, not the Italian of Genoa one would expect if Columbus

were from that place. Father Gorrício watched over Fernando, who was approaching the age of thirteen. In one of his letters to the clergyman, Columbus speaks of putting into rhyme examples by people of authority, though “rimar” (rhyming) also meant *concordar* or organizing (1501).

According to West and Kling, Columbus was an austere man of sincere spirituality and profound Christian faith; historians and biographers concur in speaking of his almost monastic discipline and exemplary Christian character in all the stages of his life (West and Kling 46). According to Fernando, he was moderate and modest in eating, drinking, and in his person. He neither cursed nor blasphemed (49). Another clergy friend, Father Las Casas, characterized him as modest and continent (Villar 118).

We would have to add other traits to that list, for Columbus was daring and clever, to the point of inventing a subterfuge that would confirm his image as a true believer Catholic devoted to promulgating the faith in the lands he would discover for the Spanish crown and at the same time allow him to educate his son Fernando in the study of the Holy texts of his true but hidden faith, Judaism. How he did this was nothing short of brilliant.

To the unsuspecting eye, Columbus’s *Book of Prophecies* is a Catholic project: written in Latin in a monastery with the professed purpose of honoring Christ and the Catholic Monarchs, but it really conceals a Hebrew pedagogical undertaking of Columbus for his younger son Fernando during approximately the same period that the Hebrew characters *bet hai* (for *Baruch Hashem*, or “Blessed is G-d”), appear in his letters to his older son Diego, as discovered in 1928 according to Villar (135)¹ and confirmed by the research of Nito Verdera. The subversion is supported by the following details::

(1) The repetition of the verses in the poem *Memorare* in different configurations represents a curious attempt to achieve permutations—reordering-- in the spirit of Kabbala. West and Kling order the lines thus: Non peccabis, In eternum, Tua, Memorare, Novissima”. In the manuscript in the British Museum, the order of the verses is 5 6 3 4 2 1 so that the initial words form an acrostic *Memorare novissima tua et in eternum non peccabis*. The manuscript of the Colombian Library shows evidence of attempts to change some words (Fernández Valverde 111).

(2) Columbus put Fernando to work copying (which was the method of study) the prophetic texts when the boy was approaching thirteen years of age. Columbus’s 1503 report from Jamaica on the fourth trip to America refers specifically to Fernando having reached thirteen years of age before joining his father on the trip. (Varela 318). In a letter to older son Diego a year later, he says that Fernando may seem young in age but not in understanding (“*el entendimiento*”, Varela 341). Fernando’s age is obviously an issue of concern. Thirteen is, of course, the age at which the Jewish child has been prepared to enter into the Covenant between God the Jewish people and to take on this responsibility as a man. It is indeed the age of “understanding”. The Crypto Jews usually waited to

¹ Villar says that Diego’s mother, Felipa Moniz Perestrello, who married Columbus in Portugal in 1479 perhaps was also of Jewish and Genoese origin” (102). She died in 1483.

reveal their faith to their sons when they approached that age, since a younger child might unknowingly give away his parents' secret and subject them to the suspicions of the Inquisition (Caro Baroja; Roth 173-74). Why would Columbus be so preoccupied with the religious training of Fernando in particular, and not with that of his older son? I believe the answer is in Oscar Villar Serrano's book, *Colón: El secreto mejor guardado* (Columbus: "The Best Kept Secret). It seems that in 1487, Columbus fell in love with a Jewess from Córdoba named Beatriz de Enríquez. Villar writes "The fruit of those relations, Fernando Columbus, was born August 15, 1488. It is known from the Admiral's writings that he deeply loved this woman who never was his wife " (Villar 113, translation mine) . Since Judaism is carried down through the mother's blood line, Fernando was in fact Jewish by birth on both counts. No wonder that Columbus, faithful to the memory of Beatriz, was concerned about the thirteen years of this son.

(3) The small pointing hand Columbus drew in the margins to highlight passages (similar to that of Microsoft when contacting hypertext), is in fact the *yad*-- the pointer used in the synagogue to read before the congregation, line by line, the Torah or scrolls of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible known as the Five Books of Moses. The pointer serves to keep human fingers from touching the word of God and the skin's oils from harming the hand-written inked letters on the parchment.

(4) Columbus had a predilection for the prophets during his whole life. Villar states "His preferred reading was *The book of Prophets*, which he continually cites in his diary and other writings and which he copied in part" (Villar 156). However, no one to my knowledge has noticed that the project of this book fulfilled a clandestine function from which the present-day synagogue practice of reading a Haftorah after the Torah reading is derived. Haftorah is a designated reading from the *Book of Prophets* of the Bible that is related, usually thematically, to the Torah reading assigned to that week. From the year 70 C.E. the Haftarot substituted for Torah subversively when Jews were forbidden from or prevented from reading the holy scrolls of Torah. Reading the Haftorah was equivalent to reading the corresponding section in the Torah to which it was linked and thus comply with the obligations of the Sabbath and study of Torah.²

²According to G. Robinson, the establishment of the haftarot, from Profesies appeared probably before the destruction of the Second Temple, in the antisemitic persecutions of the second century before the Common Era. The Syrian monarch Antiochus Ephiaphanes (against whom the Macabees rebelled) prohibited the reading and study of Torah. Jewish scholars introduced prophetic readings that were related thematically to the weekly portion of the Torah. Los haftarot came from all the books of Prophesies except Nahum, Zephaniah and Haggai. (Robinson 265-266].

The *Sh'ma* in the Trinity

Columbus knew how to keep a secret. One of the great enigmas surrounding him is the frequently mentioned handwritten anagram he used as part of his signature in closing his writings. The center or nucleus of the design is a triangle; an “S” surrounds each empty side of the “A”. Briceno Perozo sees the autograph as a reference to Christ, “a clear demonstration that the envoy of the Catholic Monarchs was perfectly identified with the religion of the Spanish monarchs”. Nito Verdera, author of several books on Columbus’s Catalan origin and crypto Jewishness, suggests that XMY could stand for *XRISTOFOR MARINER YVIÇA*, which is to say: “Cristóbal mariner of Ibiza ”

My own opinion is that the ever vigilant Columbus takes advantage of ambiguity to try out a bold game of double speak. A good Christian would have had no need to use an autograph to announce his faith. A Crypto Jew would, but rather to hide his faith, as Columbus did with the prophets, behind apparent Christian references. The letters form the most sacred, ancient, and repeated prayer of Judaism: the “*sh'ma Yisrael ..*” (Hear, oh, Israel) in a perfect triad. The “X” was pronounced as *sh* in English, and following to the reader’s right alongside is the letter “M” and above it, the “A” (subverting the correct order of making the sign of the cross which would be A-M-X-Y). The subversion doesn’t end there. Anyone who knows the prayer knows that the next line is “the Lord is our God and His Name is one”, so that Columbus’s triangle is the negation of the Catholic Trinity!

A
X M Y

By this theory, what Columbus achieved was risky but brilliant. As we have seen, his son was safe from suspicion and Inquisition, studying Torah in the form of substitute passages of the prophets in Latin in a monastery under the tutorship of a good clergyman from another country. Now an enigmatic signature tells us that his faith was steadfast, confessed in a trinity that was Catholic only in appearance. Ingenious precautions of the Crypto Jew, Columbus.

The High Holy Days and the First Voyage

In other articles I have pointed out Columbus’s tendency toward poetic metaphor, stemming from two sources: Crypto Jewish need to hide and the poetic impulse, natural in the Admiral. An example is the beautiful metaphor in his first Diary describing the “sea fatigued” and eleven years later his expression of a father’s pain at seeing his son of thirteen years of age likewise “fatigued”. Both of these texts are significant for evidence of Columbus’s secret adhesion to the Jewish faith.

Metaphoric language appears for the first time in the Diary of the First Voyage, and with the advent of Yom Kippur. Nito Verdera, with the aid of the Israeli Embassy, identifies October 2, 1492 as Yom Kippur; but others say it was October 1st. The discrepancies come from the differences between the Julian calendar of that era and the

Gregorian calendar in use since 1582.³ The discrepancy of a day, however, is not crucial because the period of repentance known as “Days of Awe” between Rosh Hashonah (two days)⁴ and Yom Kippur lasts ten days. Sunday, September 23 was either the second day of Rosh Hashonah, or the first, which is significant for the historical metaphor that the transcriber places in quotation marks as a textual citation of the Admiral: «So the high sea was very necessary, recalling the time of the Jews when they left Egypt and turned against Moses, who led them out of captivity». Varela comments: “Does Columbus identify himself here with Moses? Let’s not forget that he sets out the same day of the expulsion of the Jews, and on the rolls of this first voyage a large number of Hebrews are listed” (22).

Sunday, September 30, 1492 at sundown was the eve of Yom Kippur (October 1st) or, by the other calculation still the period of atonement. The most solemn chant of the Kol Nidre begins at nightfall-- “anochecer”—a word that otherwise appears rarely in Columbus but is repeated two times in this log. (References to dawn on the other hand are frequent throughout the diary.) For the first time we encounter the use of one of his poetic staples: a suggestive *double meaning* metaphor. Going back to Varela’s reference to “a large number of Hebrews”, the words take on additional meaning: “so many birds [read as metaphor for Jews] of a species together is a sign that they are not off the track nor lost”. Isn’t the proof in “the large number of Hebrews” on board who collectively keep their faith alive as in the desert of biblical times? Columbus spends the night under the protection of the stars called the Guardians. And the compass that was off course at nightfall straightens itself out on its own, which inspires this comment, which is also a metaphor: “it is as if the star moves like the other stars, and the needle always demands the truth,” metaphor that the converts look like they are Christian superficially but their internal faith “always demands the truth”. In other words, it is their true North.

A Spanish proverb says the fish dies by his mouth. One slip of the tongue could be fatal for a Crypto Jew, unless he was a master of mystery and subterfuge, both in language and in action.

³One Internet discussion on this subject established +9 as the adjustment factor for 1492 (the figure varies in each century) http://www.ottmall.com/mj_ht_arch/v36/mj_v36i09.html#CBU. The expulsion was August 3 Julian date, which would have been the Gregorian 12th of August, according to mathematician Robert Israel (<israel@math.ubc.ca> of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

⁴ Verdera, with the aid of the Israeli Embassy, cites the 2nd of October as Yom Kippur, when Columbus sees a white bird and gives thanks to God, both experiences which seem to go with the spirit of the occasion but which are, nevertheless, repeated on other days in the *Diary*.

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