

Great Controversies



**Medieval Period
700's - 1400's**

**The Spanish Inquisition:
Exiles and Marranos**

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Great Controversies in Jewish History

Exiles and Marranos

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I. Historical Background

- A. Christian Re-conquest of Spain, begun in 800-900, completed in 1248
 - a. From the north pushed Muslims out, leaving small pockets in the south and elsewhere. Inherited many Jews, who had come under the Muslims and established power, wealth, influence, culture (particularly philosophy).
- B. Inquisition
 - a. Established to deal with heresy and heretics. Earliest records in 1180s, but strengthened by Pope Gregory IX (reigned 1227-1241) who authorized Dominican friars as agents, and Pope Innocent IV (1252), who explicitly authorized the use of torture for eliciting confessions; by 1256 inquisitors were given absolution for torture.
 - b. Not established for Jews but for punishing heretics within Christian world, mostly in Europe
- C. In 1242, King James I of Aragon
 - a. issued an edict requiring all Jews to attend the conversionist sermons of Dominicans and Franciscans. (see quote from Pope Innocent IV). Soon after they began forcibly entering synagogues as well, forcing participation in debates whose outcomes was predetermined, to eliminate Jewish presence in Christian Spain, through conversion or death.
 - b. 1263 famous debate between Ramban and Pablo Cristiani before King James
- D. Black Death (1348-1351)
 - a. Blamed on well-poisoning by the Jews, confirmed under torture by Jews in Geneva, and pogroms broke out throughout Europe, particularly Germany. By 1351, 60 major and 150 smaller Jewish communities were destroyed.
- E. Civil War for the throne of Castile (1355-1369)
 - a. In 1369, Henry II murdered brother Pedro the Cruel (who the Jews supported), promised to enforce an old rule prohibiting Jews from positions of power, quickly rescinded and angered clergy and the masses
- F. Ferran Martinez (1378-1391)
 - a. Preaches ferocious anti-Jewish sermons identifying Jews as obstacles to wealth and prosperity. In 1390 both King and archbishop, who would not tolerate calls for violence, die, and half a century of pressure exploded. "June 6, 1391 is the first terrifying date in the Judeo-Spanish calendar." (Carroll, 341, quoting Spanish journalist)
 - b. Pogroms spread throughout Spain; 50,000 are slaughtered
 - i. Legitimized organized violence which continued for decades
 - ii. By end of 1412 pogroms, Jewish Spain in shambles
 - 1. At the debates of 1414, 12 of 14 rabbis converted on the spot

II. The Turning Point - The Conversos

- A. Beginning in 1391, tens of thousands of Jews flocked to the baptismal fonts. By 1425 it is estimated that close to 200,000 Jews, between a third to a half of the Jewish population, had converted (R Wein finds that improbably high).
- B. Never before or since phenomenon
 - a. All classes: rich, poor, scholarly, ignorant, notable and common. No one was immune. Rabbis of communities converted
 - b. Marranos - swine or pig
 - i. Unclear who first called them
- C. Laws and History of Martyrdom
 - a. Avraham, 3 Prophets, Channah (see addendum), Talmud, Crusades
- D. Causes of those who truly defected
 - a. Educated Jews influenced by Rationalism that swept Europe spurring unprecedented skepticism (Carroll)
 - b. Subject to generations of Christian preaching (Carroll)
 - c. R Yosef Yaavetz (exiled himself) blames those whose beliefs were nurtured by philosophy rather than simple faith as victims, a thought commonly referenced during the 16th century rabbis
 - d. Introduction of Kabbalah, messianic fervor created by suffering and disillusionment with the Messiah's delayed arrival
- E. Many, if not most, never intended or internally converted

Verily, one who preferred to suffer martyrdom in order not to pronounce the Mohammedan confession, has done nobly and well and his reward is great before the L-rd. He may be regarded as supremely virtuous as he was willing to surrender his life for the sanctification of the name of G-d, Blessed by He.

Should one, however, inquire of me: "Shall I be slain or pronounce the Mohammedan confession," my answer would be: "Utter the formula to live!" To be sure one should not continue to live in such an environment, but until the opportunity presents itself to leave one should be confined to the privacy of his home and conduct his transactions in secret.

Rambam, Letter on Apostasy

- a. This was simply a means of surviving until conditions improved
- b. Regardless, a new large class was born, one that did not fit in with their Christian hosts nor with the Jewish brethren: the Conversos
 - a. Remaining Jews were stripped of most rights, opportunities

III. Ramifications for Church - Failure of Success

- A. Regardless of its causes, Church was ill equipped to deal with them
 - a. The Jews didn't know what it meant to be good Christians and there was no way of keeping track of all of them
 - b. Still envied and prominent; worse, now was responsible for protecting them

- B. Serious doubts about their convictions arose; "Old Christians" were distinguished from "New Christians,"
- C. Birth of Racial Anti-Semitism
 - a. Until now Jews were identified by their *belief*;

"Where Christ-killers gather, the cross is ridiculed, God blasphemed, the father unacknowledged, the son insulted, the grace of the Spirit rejected. . . .If the Jewish rites are holy and venerable, our way of life must be false. But if our way is true, as indeed it is, theirs is fraudulent."

Saint John Chrysostom, bishop of Antioch (c. 347–407)

- b. for the first time in History a Jew was identified by his race even as he professed the same Christian beliefs
- c. Idea arose by 1450 of the defiled pure blood of Christians by the Jewish race; edicts passed in 1451 by King of Castile against conversos holding office; the Jewish assimilated insider was to be more feared as a dissenting outsider (Carroll, 348)

"We can learn much from the newly opened archives. The explanation of what made the Holocaust possible is to be found in no small part in the files of the Inquisition. Those documents will deepen our knowledge of how for centuries the Roman Catholic Church conditioned the European population to view the Jews as inferiors."

Brown University historian David Kertzer, New York Times editorial, 1998

D. Spanish Inquisition

- a. 1469 Ferdinand and Isabella marry, uniting Aragon and Castile, creating the Catholic monarchy. They set out (as a State policy of the Crown, not the Church) to rid the Jewish crypto problem and establish Inquisition (1482), under authority of Fray Tomas de Torquemada
 - i. For 12 years persecuted conversos with untold cruelty. "The savagery of the onslaught against the conversos was without equal in the history of any tribunal in the Western World" (Carroll, 357). No one was safe; everyone was suspect. Secret informers, sudden disappearances, preemptory secret executions, public executions, torture.
 - ii. Soon turned to persecuting Jews as well, who were abetting conversos by their presence and synagogues
- b. Decree in 1492 to either convert or leave. Out of the 400,000 Jews, half left and another 200,000 converted. (Don Abraham Senior and Don Isaac Abarbanel)
- c. Majority went to Portugal, where they were exiled a few short years later, 1497.
 - i. Settled all over the globe, mostly in the Muslim world and new Ottoman empire, many in Holland, Italy, Israel, and the New World
- d. Inquisition continued for 300 years
 - i. Not abolished in Portugal until 1821 and in Spain until 1826

IV. Ramifications for Jews

- A. Exiles naturally resented conversos. Throughout 1500s and 1600s, thousands escaped Spain and tried to rejoin Jewish communities. Great hostility was common. Rabbis ruled over and over again to graciously accept them, but the masses could not be forced to comply. Many would not allow marriages with converso's descendants nor allow them public office. (The letters "samech tet" appear at the end of family names, believed to be sefardi tahor.)
- B. Marrano communities soon integrated and disappeared; individual stories would last for centuries

Question: A woman obtained a get. Both she and her husband were Marranos, as were all the witnesses to the divorce. Now this woman, by the grace of G-d and her own efforts, left the land of *shmad* and came to the Arab lands to worship G-d in freedom, without fear. She says the witnesses were known to observe the Torah, but because of many reasons, they were unable to leave. Must these Marranos be considered transgressors and, as such, invalid witnesses, because it is evident that they remained in Spain only out of lust for money?

Teshuvot Rivash, no. 11 (1326-1407)

Question: Two brothers, Avraham and Efraim, are living in the city of Oven. Their father, formerly known as Shnei'ur, renounced his faith and converted to Christianity. Since the day of his conversion, his decent and upright sons have not been called up to the reading of the Torah. They are ashamed to be called up by the name of their grandfather; this would publicize their humiliation, since before that time they were called up by their father's name. Would it be permissible to call them by their father's name?

Teshuvot Maharam Padua, no. 87 (1482-1565)

Question: Is the testimony of a former Marrano regarding events that occurred while he was a Marrano acceptable in a Bet Din?

Teshuvot Mabit, no. 1:170 (1500-1585)

Question: Fifteen years ago Yaakov Francis suddenly renounced Judaism and converted to Christianity. He immediately regretted his deed and repented. He has kept his face covered for the last fifteen years as a sign of remorse and has been steadfast in his repenance ever since. Is he qualified to be appointed as chazzan and shochet?

Lechem Rav, no. 3 (1545-1588)

Question: Forty years ago Yaakov and his family, refugees from Portugal, found a safe haven in Turkey. They were Marranos, Jews forced to convert to Christianity by the Portuguese government, and upon arriving in Turkey they settled in Salonica. There they were blessed with two upright sons, Reuven and Shimon, who went to yeshivah

in Salonica. About five years ago Reuven was elected to serve as rabbi in another city. One of the members of that community, who deems himself a scholar and feels overshadowed by the new rabbi, began to malign him, stating that Reuven was not qualified to be a rabbi because not only was Reuven's father a Marrano but his mother was in fact non-Jewish. He is spreading this libel wherever he goes, to the point that some of the members of the community are beginning to have doubts about their rabbi. They want to ask you what is Reuven's status. In Salonica it was always assumed that both his parents were Marranos, and that even his grandparents were Marranos. If indeed you find this rumor to be unfounded, how shall we deal with the man who spread this false rumor?

Lechem Rav, no. 5 (1545-1588)

Question: It happened in Italy that a Marrano was arrested by the Inquisition, who investigated him and found that he was circumcised and practiced Judaism. The verdict was for the Marrano to recant, renounce Judaism, and beg the priests' forgiveness. He would then have to confess his "sins" against their religion and divulge the identity of the person who had performed the circumcision. Thereupon the Inquisition would go after the mohel with all their might. The Marrano did indeed return to their faith; he revealed the name of the mohel, and the Inquisition pursued the mohel with their customary methods.

The mohel, who had learned of the impending danger, fled to a distant country and sent for his wife and children. Since he was highly skilled at his profession and also taught *milah* to others, he had been earning his livelihood in this manner. By betraying the mohel, the Marrano deprived him of his source of income. Is the Marrano responsible and can his property be attached to pay for the mohel's expenses in saving himself and having his family join him, and for the mohel's being prevented from earning his livelihood?

Teshuvot Maharam Lublin, no. 61 (1558-1616)

Question: A young man, Avraham Bueno, was taken captive by Christians, together with his uncle Yaakov Bueno. They applied pressure on him to convert, torturing him for three years, but he did not give in and persisted in his belief in the true G-d. But when he saw that they poisoned his uncle for refusing to convert, and he found himself in prison all alone, he professed to convert, but in his heart he remained a Jew. After three years of trying to escape, he risked his life swimming to a ship in the open sea, belonging to Jewish traders sailing for the West. His actions prove that his was a forced conversion. How can he repent?

Teshuvot Ohel Yaakov, no. 3 (1610-1698)

Question: A young Jewish man who since childhood has lived only among non-Jews and was completely alienated from Judaism married a girl of similar background. They had a son, and since *milah* was the only thing they knew of Judaism, they performed the *milah* themselves – but they did so before the child was eight days old. Driven by the desire to return to Torah Judaism, the [left Spain and] came to Holland to live freely as Jews. Should they make a symbolic *brit milah* by drawing a drop of blood? . . . The child is two years old and very frail.

Teshuvot Keneset Yechezkel, no. 42(1670-1749)

Additional sources:

"Indeed we believe that the Pope, who is the vicar of Jesus Christ, has the authority not only over Christians but also over all infidels, since Christ had the authority over all... Therefore the Pope can judge the Jews, if they violate the law of the gospel in moral matters, and also if they invent heresies against their own law."

Pope Innocent IV, (quoted by Carroll, pg. 333)

When they stood together, Channah kissed the boy, then said, "My son, I carried you in my body for nine months, I nursed you for two years and I have fed you until today. I have taught you to fear G-d and uphold His Torah. See the heaven and the earth, the sea and the land, fire, water, wind and every other creation. Know that they were all created by G-d's word. He created man to serve Him and He will reward man for his deeds. The king knows he is condemned before G-d. He thinks that if he convinces you, G-d will have mercy on him. G-d controls your life's breath and can take your soul whenever He desires. If only I could see the greatness of your glorious place where we would be illuminated with G-d's light and rejoice and exult together."

...As they removed him, Channah begged to kiss him one last time. As if speaking to all seven children, Channah said, "My children, tell your ancestor Abraham, 'You bound only one son upon an altar, but I bound seven.'"

The Story of Channah and her seven sons

Within the terms fixed by the edit of expulsion, the Jews sold and disposed of their property for a mere nothing; they went about asking Christians to buy and found no buyers; fine houses and estates were sold for trifles; a house was exchanged for a mule; and a vineyard given for a little cloth or linen . . . The rich Jews paid the expenses of the departure of the poor, practicing toward each other the greatest charity so that, except for a very few of the poorest, they would not become converts . . . in the first week of July, they took the hardship of the road upon themselves and left the land of their birth, children and adults, old people and youngsters, on foot, and gentlemen mounted on donkeys and other animals, and in carts. And they continued their journeys, each one to the ports to which they had to go, and they went along the roads and through the fields with great travail and misfortune, some falling, others rising, some dying, others being born, others falling ill, so that there was no Christian who did not feel sorry for them, and always, through wherever they passed, the Jews were invited to be baptized. And some, because of the hardship, converted and remained, but those were very few. The rabbis strengthened their resolve and made the women and young people play on pipes and tambourines to cheer the people and thus they left Castille and arrived at the ports of the sea . . . Those who were to embark at the port of Cadiz, as soon as they glimpsed the sea, let out louds shouts, men and women, the old and children. In their prayers they beseeched G-d for mercy and hoped to see some miracles of G-d, that He might open a path for them in the sea.

Eyewitness account, Catholic priest; quoted by Wein pg. 207