

## COLUMBUS: MYSTIC, ZIONIST

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Columbus (died in Valladolid in May 20, 1506) is a man shrouded in mystery. On the one hand, he is the most important individual in modern history: single handedly he changed the face of the globe. On the other hand, little is known about his background and early life. There is a twofold reason for this mystery. First, Columbus and his contemporaries deliberately clouded highly significant biographical data. Second, modern historians went out of their way to exclude key phrases used by Columbus and his contemporaries, and glossed over documentary evidence concerning crucial aspects of his biography and beliefs. What is commonly taught about him is neither consistent with, nor stands up to, critical investigation. The data offered by historians do not jive with the information given by Columbus about himself or with what his contemporaries in Spain said. To avoid asking plain questions about the history and life of the great Discoverer, specialists perform all type of mental acrobatics. Both, the cryptic character of Columbus' life and modern scholarship coincide in their efforts to becloud his biography; the motivation springs from a single source: prejudice. An investigation of the documentary evidence, particularly what Columbus wrote, shows that the great Discoverer came from a Jewish background. Américo Castro had shown that at the time of Columbus and throughout much of Spanish history, to acknowledge the Jewish background of anyone credited with a major contribution was anathema. Steeped in deep

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prejudice, Spanish historians –past and present--piously conceal the Jewish background of some of the most important minds to have graced the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>1</sup> For this type of historian, to acknowledge the Jewish ancestry of someone who made monumental contribution to the development of Spain, would tantamount to a national disgrace. It took the efforts of Américo Castro and his students in America; of Marcel Bataillon and his school in France; and of a few intrepid souls in Spain, to show the enormous contributions made by people with Jewish ancestry, in the religious, cultural, and scientific life of Spain.<sup>2</sup>

We will now proceed to probe into Columbus's biography. First, although he may have been born in Genoa, Italy, his background was *not* Italian.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, he did not know Italian as a first language. His numerous notes and marginal comments are either in Spanish or Latin. His entire correspondence, including what he wrote to his brother Bartolomé, who was from Genoa, and to Nicolo Oderigo, the Genoese Ambassador to Castille, was in Spanish, not Italian. Furthermore, the grammatical and spelling errors made by Columbus in Latin are those of someone who speaks and thinks in Spanish, not of someone speaking Italian as a first language.<sup>4</sup> Concerning this fundamental issue, Cecil Roth remarked:

Moreover, though a mass of documents written by him have survived, there is not the slightest evidence that he wrote Italian. The one document that may be brought up as evidence against this is in fact a comic concoction of Italian, Castilian and Portuguese, in which Italian words are not even in the majority. Even when he communicated with the Bank of St. George in Genoa, he used Spanish. What was more, he spoke and wrote Spanish before he came to Spain, for marginal notes from his hand, clearly dated 1481, are in that language.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See my “Don Quixote: Talmudist and *mucho más*,”*RRJ* 4 (2001), 139-157.

<sup>2</sup> See my *In the Shadow of History: Jews and Conversos at the Dawn of Modernity* (Albany: SUNY, 1986).

<sup>3</sup>Although this statement may appear self-contradictory to people living in a modern society, up to recent times it was not uncommon for the descent of foreigners in general and people with a Jewish background in particular, to be regarded as aliens and be culturally and linguistically disconnected from their country of birth.

<sup>4</sup>See Salvador de Madariaga, *Christopher Columbus* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1940), pp. 50-51.

<sup>5</sup>Cecil Roth, *Personalities and Events in Jewish History* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1953), pp. 197-197.

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While in Italy, the name of the great Discoverer was “Colombo,” a common appellation in Jewish onomastic. In Judeo-Spanish *colombo* translates ‘pigeon,’ the Hebrew *yona*.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the last Chief Rabbi of Leghorn before World War II was R. Samuel Colombo (1868-1923).

A final note concerning Columbus’s linguistic background. He and his brother were accused of writing in “unknown characters.”<sup>7</sup> Probably, this script was used to protect sensitive material in case it fell in enemies’ hands. The script could not be the common Hebrew alphabet, as this would have been immediately recognized. Most probably, it was written in the cursive Hebrew script known in Judeo-Spanish as *media letra* (Hebrew: *hasi qolmos*)--a kind of short-hand script used by Sephardim to write Hebrew, Arabic and Judeo-Spanish.

Summing up our discussion so far. An investigation of Columbus linguistic background clearly shows that his first language was Spanish, and that he did not know Italian sufficiently well to maintain a correspondence in that language. This situation strongly suggest that his family was one of many Jewish families that escaped Spain after the massacres taking place during the last hundred years before the Expulsion in 1492, settling in Italy. Originally, the family name may have been “Colón” or “Colom,”<sup>8</sup> a name that he used upon his return to Spain.

It is a remarkable fact that *all* of Columbus supporters in the Spanish Court and close associates had Jewish background.<sup>9</sup> Special mention should be made of Fray Diego de Deza, future bishop of Jaen and Palencia, archbishop of Seville and Inquisitor General of Castile and Aragon.

<sup>6</sup>See *ibid.*, pp. 203-05.

<sup>7</sup>See *Christopher Columbus*, p. 349.

<sup>8</sup>Concerning the possible Catalan origin of the Spanish name ‘Colón’ see R. Carrera Valls, *Los Catalanes Juan Cabot y Cristobal Colom* (Barcelona: Impresa Altes, 1931).

<sup>9</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 154; and Cecil Roth, *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization* (London: The East and West Library, 1956), pp. 63-65.

He was one of the main forces making sure that the Queen would grant Columbus' requests.<sup>10</sup> An important friend and strong supporter, was the *converso* Andres Cabrera. His wife Beatriz was one of the closest and most intimate friends of the Queen. In a famous *copla* of the time, he was referred to as the “son of Pedro Lopez de Madrid; in Cuenca, Rabbi David.”<sup>11</sup> Another highly influential friend was the *converso* Juan Cabrero, Chamberlain and confidant of King Ferdinand.<sup>12</sup> The two high officers supporting Columbus in the Court, were Jewish. Gabriel Sánchez was the General Treasurer, and Luis de Santangel was the equivalent of the minister of finance. Before his conversion, Santangel's name was Azaria.<sup>13</sup> In the house of his first cousin, also named Luis de Santangel, was planned the assassination of Arubes, the first Inquisitor General of Spain.<sup>14</sup> Our Santangel and his family were always suspected of being secretly Jewish. On May 30, 1497, in reward for his services to the Crown, the king granted Santangel and his children Fernando, Gerónimo, Alfonso, and Luisa, an official decree protecting them from any charges of heresy or apostasy. An special admonition was issued to the Inquisition of Valencia not to molest Santangel or any of his descent.<sup>15</sup> Finally, there were two prominent Jews in the Court, Abraham Senior and R. Isaac Abarbanel, who used their influence to champion Columbus' cause in the Court.<sup>16</sup> Diego de Deza introduced him to the most distinguished scientific mind of the time, the famous Jewish astronomer R. Abraham Zacuto.<sup>17</sup> R. Abraham Zacuto threw his scientific reputation behind the great Discoverer and fully supported his enterprise.

<sup>10</sup>See *Christopher Columbus*, pp. 49, 155.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p.163.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>See ibid. pp. 60, 61.

<sup>14</sup>See ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 124-25.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>17</sup>See *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization*, p. 63.

The standard version, depicting Columbus as an Italian new comer, struggling alone in the Spanish Court, is impossible. No one could have assembled a powerful circle of friends like that mentioned above in three years. Like much that was circulated about Columbus, the story that the Queen had pawned her jewels is false. Neither the Queen nor the king had the funds for such an enterprise.<sup>18</sup> It was Santangel who advanced 1,140,000 *maravedis* to carry on Columbus plan. Modern Spanish historians, eager to discredit anyone with Jewish ancestry fabricated the story that he received 17,000 *maravedis* in interest for this loan. The allegation was proven false.<sup>19</sup> Remarkably, Columbus first announced the discovery of the New World to Luis de Santangel, *not* to the Spanish monarchs!<sup>20</sup>

After examining some of these data, a prominent Spanish historian concluded:

[I]t is impossible to say that Colón was unknown and that he lacked friends at the Court. Later events are to show so imposing an array of powerful officials and members of the royal household on his side that it is difficult to see how Colón could be utterly devoid of some kind of a link with most of them just three years early. These friendships could not all have sprung up by a miracle at the last moment.<sup>21</sup>

In conclusion. Columbus had strong contacts with, and counted with the support of *conversos* and Jews. Many of Columbus' crew were Jewish. To mention just a few: the interpreter Luis de Torres; Alonso de la Calle who died in the island of Spañola in 1503; Rodrigo Sánchez de Segovia, a relative of Gabriel Sánchez; and the ship physician Maestre Bernal.

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<sup>18</sup>See *Christopher Columbus*, p. 74.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 74-9.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 162-62.

Columbus trusted Jewish scientific knowledge. Before Columbus nobody tried transoceanic travel, simply, because sailors had no means by which to fix their position. Zacuto's *Almanach Perpetuum* made possible to determine the exact position from any place, at any time of the year; thus opening the possibility of sea exploration. Columbus used Zacuto's *Almanach Perpetuum* for his transoceanic navigation.<sup>22</sup> In one of his entries, Columbus acknowledged his indebtedness to this *Almanach*. Thanks to it he was able to predict an eclipse of the moon on February 29, 1504 and save his life and that of the crew.<sup>23</sup> An important instrument used by Columbus was the quadrant invented by the famous R. Levi ben Gershon (1288-1334). The instrument, named "Jacob's Staff" served to determine the exact latitude and local hour from any place in the world, including the sea.<sup>24</sup>

Columbus was one of the great seamen of all time. A pivotal point of his enterprise was the theory that there were indeed new lands to discover. What was the basis for this theory? Columbus did not premise his theory on standard scientific observations, but, rather, on Isaiah's "the new" (66:22). In a letter addressed to the Spanish monarchs in 1501, he stated:

I already told you that for the execution of the enterprise of the Indies I did not take advantage of reason, mathematics, or world maps; plainly, it was a fulfillment of what Isaiah [66:22] had said.<sup>25</sup>

A crucial element for the feasibility of his project was his thesis concerning the duration of the journey. Rejecting the authority of Marinus, Ptolemy and Toscanelly--the most prestigious scientists of the time-- Columbus maintained on the basis of *Esdras* 4:6, that the distance between

<sup>22</sup>For a glimpse on Zacuto's contribution to maritime navigation, see *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization*, pp. 65-67.

<sup>23</sup> See Cristobal Colón, *Textos y documentos Completos*, ed. Consuelo Varela (Madrid: Alianza Universidad, 1982), p. 262.

<sup>24</sup>See *Jewish Contribution to Civilization*, pp. 56-58.

<sup>25</sup>*Cristobal Colón*, p. 255.

Spain and the New World was only 2550 miles, not 8159.<sup>26</sup> To ascertain his absolute conviction on the validity of this information, this master seaman took provisions for only 2550 miles.<sup>27</sup>

Columbus was a superb seaman. For reasons unknown to us, he chattered what in fact was the best possible route. He chose the 28th parallel, faithfully and obstinately. He first sailed North-Eastward until he reached the Azores, and then at the Canaries Islands he Headed Westward. Thus, discovering the two ocean routes. A modern investigator refers to this discovery as a "miracle."<sup>28</sup> Another monumental discovery was made by Columbus on September 13. Somehow, he realized that the needle of the compass was pointing to the northwest, rather than the north, thus discovering the magnetic variations of the earth.<sup>29</sup> Obviously, Columbus was privy to a maritime tradition unknown to the West. It is reasonable to assume that he obtained this information from the Jews of Majorca. These Jews, heirs to a long scientific tradition in the fields of astronomy and mathematics, were superb cartographers and navigators. They enjoyed the highest scientific reputation, and were directly involved in the production of maps and the charting of new routes, resulting in some of the most spectacular discoveries of the time.<sup>30</sup>

In conclusion. Columbus seemed to have had special regards for Jewish tradition. The conception, planning, and execution of this project, were expressions of his steadfast belief in the preeminence of Jewish knowledge and Jewish scientific thought.

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<sup>26</sup>See *Cristóbal Colón*, pp. 219-20, 222; *Christopher Columbus*, pp. 100-01; and Carlos Esteban Deive, *Heterodoxia e Inquisición en Santo Domingo* (Santo Domingo: Colección Ensayo, 1983), p. 19.

<sup>27</sup>See *Christopher Columbus*, p. 327.

<sup>28</sup>See *Christopher Columbus*,

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 202.

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We will now proceed to examine some of the behavior and ideas of the great Discoverer. Columbus had everyone embark on August 2, which in that year happened to be *Tish'a be-Ab* --a day of Jewish National mourning, lamenting the Destruction of the Temple in Jersalem. Quite understandably for the Jewish point of view, but for reasons unexplained by historians, Columbus refused to leave on that day. He left the following day, Friday August 3, exactly, half an hour *before sunset*, the Jewish Sabbath.<sup>31</sup> As mentioned before, on the basis of Esdras, Columbus believed the journey to be of 2550 miles. According to this calculations he supposed he would reach land on October 12, the day which in fact he discovered the New World. It has been noted that on that year, October 12 was the day of *Hosha'na Rabba*—a holiday which in Jewish tradition symbolizes the apocalyptic redemption of Israel.<sup>32</sup>

The motivation for Columbus' discovery of the New World reveals his most intimate feelings. At the very outset we should point out that he had a contract signed by the Spanish monarchs, whereby ten per cent of all his discoveries would belong to him. Manifesting deeply ingrained anti-Semitic feelings, Spanish historians, moderns and old, accuse Columbus of greed and desire for power. Madariaga, insists that these are “typically Jewish,”<sup>33</sup> traits peculiar to the “Jewish race”<sup>34</sup> appetite for gold.<sup>35</sup> And yet, Columbus was quite unambiguous about his reason for wanting to undertake such an enterprise, and exact this payment from the Spanish monarchs. In what it appears to be the first call for modern Zionism, Columbus stipulated that with the proceedings of his discoveries, he would raise a cavalry of 10,000 horsemen, and an infantry of

<sup>30</sup>See *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization*, pp. 59-61.

<sup>31</sup>See *Personalities and Events in Jewish History*, p. 200.

<sup>32</sup>See M. Kayserling, *Christopher Columbus* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co.: 1894),

<sup>33</sup>*Christopher Columbus*, p. 114.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 90, 91, 106, 299, 301. As noted by Alexander Lee, *The Ugly Renaissance* (New York: Anchor Books, 2015), p. 298: “the very closeness of the two faiths [Christianity and Judaism] emphasized that [for Christians] the Jews

100,000 soldiers with the purpose to liberate Jerusalem.<sup>36</sup> In an unguarded moment, he wrote in his diary on Wednesday, 26 December 1492, that he hoped that the gold mine and species that he had found would help him persuade the Spanish monarchs, “that within three years they would carry on and be ready to go and conquer *la Casa Sancta*.<sup>37</sup> The expression *Casa Sancta* (Holy House) is not Spanish. It is, however, the exact translation of the Hebrew *Bet ha-Miqdash*, designating the Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>38</sup> The same hope was expressed in the famous document known as *Mayorazgo* written by Columbus in 1498, where he stipulated that his heir should use his wealth “for the conquest of Jerusalem.”<sup>39</sup> Columbus believed that he had been “elected” by God to undertake this mission. In a note that he wrote in 1503, during his fourth journey, he described a dream where a voice tells him:

Since you were born, He always had a very important mission for you. When He saw you at an age that satisfied Him, wonderfully He made your name known throughout the world. The Indies, that as the richest part of the world, He gave to you as your own...and you were obeyed in many land and you obtained honor and fame from the Christians. Did he do more for your people of Israel (*al tu pueblo de Israel*)?<sup>40</sup>

Columbus’ position on this matter cost him dearly. The monarchs and powerful members of the Church and the old-Christian establishment were determined to dislodge the Admiral from the newly discovered territories, and have his wealth confiscated. His enemies accused him of being

would for ever be the “the other.””

<sup>36</sup>Quoted in Martín Fernández de Navarrete, *Colección de los Viajes y Descubrimientos que hicieron por mar los españoles*, vol. 2 (Madrid: Imprenta Real, 1825), p. 282.

<sup>37</sup>*Cristobal Colón*, p. 101.

<sup>38</sup>On the messianic ideology of Columbus, see Juan Gil, “Colón y la Casa Santa,” *Historiografía y Bibliografía americanistas*, 21 (1977), 125-135; A. Milhou, “Notes sur le messianism de Cristophe Colomb,” *Cahiers du C. R. I. A. R.* no. 1 (Paris, 1981), pp. 121-201.

<sup>39</sup>*Cristobal Colón*, p. 199.

<sup>40</sup>*Cristobal Colón*, p. 199.

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Jewish and demand his dismissal.<sup>41</sup> With this purpose in mind, the monarchs sent Francisco de Bobadilla to “supervise” Columbus. Accompanying Bobadilla were a group of Franciscan Friars and well established old-Christians. A call was made to “Indians and *Christians*” [italics added] to rally against the Admiral. A priest in Bobadilla's entourage addressed a letter to Cardinal Cisneros in Spain, urging him to help in their fight against Columbus. Using the well known code-term “Pharao” to signal Jews, he argued that since the Cardinal had been instrumental in “freeing this land [i. e., Spain] from the sway of King Pharao,” he should also “see that neither he [Columbus] nor any of his *nation* [italics added] ever come to these islands.”<sup>42</sup> The term “nation” was a common appellative for Jews and “*conversos*.<sup>43</sup> Thus, Columbus returned home in irons.

The removal of Columbus from a position of power signaled a shift in policy towards native Americans, which culminated in the greatest genocide in recorded history.<sup>44</sup> Spaniards regarded native Americans as sub-human. Reflecting Jewish position on this matter,<sup>45</sup> Columbus regarded the inhabitants of the New World, as fullfledged humans, in no way inferior, either religiously or cultural, to Europeans. As long as he was in power, he opposed abusing the natives or taking advantage of them. Reflecting what may be properly discribed as the Jewish posture towards the “other,”<sup>44</sup> Columbus realized the moral and generous character of these people, as well as the love that they exhibited in their behavior with him and his crew. In a letter written on February 15, 1493 to Luis de Santangel, he described the high ethical standards of the natives. Once that they overcome their natural shiness and fear, they are extremely amicable and generous:

<sup>41</sup>See *Heterodoxía e Inquisición en Santo Domingo*, p. 40.

<sup>42</sup>See *Christopher Columbus*, pp. 355-57; *Heterodoxía e Inquisición en Santo Domingo*, pp. 40-1.

<sup>43</sup> See *In the Shadow of History*, p. 241 note 13.

<sup>44</sup> See my *Golden Doves with Silver Dots: Semiotics and Textuality in Rabbinic Tradition* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1986), p. 44.

<sup>45</sup>See *In the Shadow of History*, p. 7.

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It is true, however, that once that they loose that fear, they are so much free of deceit and are so generous with what they have, that it is hard to believe it unless one had seeing it. Whatever thing they may posses, if one would ask it from them, they would never say no, on the contrary they would offer it to the person, and show so much love that they would give the hearts, whether it is something<sup>46</sup> of value or of little worth, then if you would give them any thing in any manner for it they are happy.

Consequently, Columbus felt that it was necessary to protect them from the abuse of Spaniards. Therefore, “I prohibited that they should be given such worthless things” in exchange for objects of value.<sup>47</sup>

At the same time, Columbus was convinced that if poperly treated, the native Americans would become

good Christians as they tilt towards the love and service of the Highness and all the Castilian nation [Latin version: *all the nations of Spain*], and they try to give that which they have in abundance and that we need.<sup>48</sup>

Unlike other Spaniards, Columbus did not regard native Americans to be idolotrous or religiously inferior, “They do not know any sect or idolotry, except that all believe that the power and good are in heaven.”<sup>49</sup> He totally rejected the notion, shared by his countrymen, that the goodness of the natives reflected torpetude and cultural inferiority. The only difference between these people and the Spaniards, he proposed, is in their ships and they way they dress:

And this is not because they are ignorants, but they are of very subtle genious, and men who had traveled through all those seas, and they give a good account of everything, except that they never saw people dressed or such ships.<sup>50</sup>

Upon the removal of Columbus from power, Spain initiated a racist policy unprecedented in recorded history. People “polluted” (*impuros*), i. e., with even partial non-Christian blood, be it

<sup>46</sup>*Cristobal Colón*, p. 142.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

Jewish or Moor, were forbidden to come to the New World. A policy of genocide--the largest both in terms of absolute and relative numbers--towards the natives was carried on with unprecedented sadism.<sup>51</sup> In a short time, the local native population was depleted, and there was need to export slave work from Africa. To preserve Christian "purity" the Inquisition was established throughout the Americas, thus legitimizing the persecution of people on the basis of race.

The policies of racism, persecution, violence, plain despotism and authoritarianism, lingering till the present throughout much of Latin America, is the most important legacy first initiated by Columbus' enemies.

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<sup>51</sup>See ibid., 4-5.

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