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Journal

Mester, 17(2)

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Publication Date

1988

DOI

10.5070/M3172013996

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Mester, Vol. xvii, No. 2 (Fall, 1988)

Pablo de Santa María, the Purim Letter and *Siete edades del mundo*

Pablo de Santa María, a *converso* whose original name was Solomon Halevi, was born in Burgos in the middle of the fourteenth century. A teacher, scholar and chief rabbi of Burgos before his conversion to Christianity, he later became an important member of the Castilian establishment and a high-ranking Christian prelate. While still a Jew, he engaged in the popular medieval Jewish practice of Hebrew epistolography, wherein Jewish scholars throughout the Diaspora exchanged letters in Hebrew on a variety of learned topics. As a *converso* he continued to cultivate the written word, producing historiographic works in Spanish and theological treatises in Latin. In this article we shall briefly examine Pablo de Santa María's life and times, and in relation to this we shall discuss two of his literary works: his pre-conversion Purim letter and his post-conversion *Siete edades del mundo*.

Pablo de Santa María was born sometime between 1350 and 1355 into a family which for generations had been engaged in tax farming and other state business.[1] The eldest of eight children, he was educated in a manner similar to that of the majority of his Jewish peers. He studied the Old Testament, Talmud, rabbinical wisdom and Jewish and Arabic philosophy. Unlike most of his Jewish contemporaries, he knew Latin and was familiar with Christian scholastic literature. He opted for a rabbinical career; and although no documents from his Jewish period attest to it, it has been suggested that he established in Burgos an institute of rabbinical, scriptural and legal studies which was attended by Spanish Jews throughout the Peninsula (Serrano 11). He married at 26 and fathered five children. An intelligent and ambitious man, he was appointed chief rabbi of Burgos in 1379 by John I of Castile, and in addition to serving the Jewish community he served in John I's court.

His world, that of late medieval Castile, was one in which political turmoil was rampant and anti-Semitism was on the rise.[2] Incessant power

struggles between monarchs and nobles had resulted in a civil war (1366 to 1369) and in countless political assassinations, including that of Peter I (1350–69). The general welfare of the Jews of the period was linked closely to that of the Jewish favorites at court.[3] Physicians, diplomats, administrators and fiscal advisers, the elite of the Jewish community offered services to the crown which it deemed essential. The favored status accorded to these elite Jews translated generally to an official policy of royal protection of the Jews at large. Around the beginning of the fourteenth century, however—royal protection notwithstanding—the situation of the Jews began to deteriorate. Their favored court status, the prosperity of a relatively small percentage of their community and their perennially unpopular roles as royal tax collectors and moneylenders resulted in increased anti-Jewish feeling. By the end of the century anti-Jewish sentiment had proliferated, and in June of 1391 anti-Jewish pogroms occurred throughout Spain. Jews were slain, Jewish property and communities were destroyed, synagogues were converted into churches and forced baptisms were performed by the hundreds. At the time of these pogroms Pablo de Santa María was about 40 years old and had reached mid life.

It is not known whether Pablo de Santa María converted to Christianity before or after these pogroms.[4] A letter written to him shortly after his conversion by his former pupil, Joshua Halorki, strongly suggests that he converted after the pogroms.[5] Halorki writes: "Perhaps upon seeing our homeland lost, with all the sorrows that have befallen us recently, and God having almost hidden His countenance from us, and our being given as food for the birds of the sky and the animals of the land, it occurred to you that the name of Israel would be remembered no more" (Baer 2:143). If he did convert after the pogroms, it could be concluded that his conversion was more a product of necessity than choice. In either case, it is safe to say that once converted, he severed all ties with the Jewish community. In August of 1391, having been baptized with considerable pomp in Burgos Cathedral, he left for Paris where he began to study for a doctorate in theology.

Because of his abilities, his intelligence and his drive he attracted the attention of the highest ranking members of the establishments of both church and state early in his career. The Avignon pope, Benedict XIII—pleased with Pablo de Santa María's service—awarded him with a number of religious appointments, including archdeacon of Treviño, canon of Seville, papal representative at the Castilian court, bishop of Cartagena and bishop of Burgos. Henry III, equally impressed with his talents, appointed him to be chief court chaplain and sole tutor to his son, the future John II. He also named him to be one of four executors to his will, chief witness to its signing, one of its two official interpreters and high chancellor of Castile. Following Henry III's death Pablo de Santa María

continued to serve at court. In addition to his duties as royal tutor and high chancellor he served on the politically powerful Consejo Real and in 1414 was appointed one of four executive and political governors of Castile. For political reasons, he retired after 1416 from court life and spent the remainder of his days exercising his religious duties. He died in 1435, having been elevated to the rank of archbishop of Philippi in Macedonia just prior to his death. According to his tombstone he died at the age of 83.

Pablo de Santa María's literary works faithfully reflect the circumstances of his life. As mentioned earlier, as a Jew he wrote in Hebrew on Jewish subjects; and as a court servant and a *converso* prelate he wrote historiography in Spanish and theology in Latin.

His Purim letter is, unfortunately, the only extant Hebrew text remaining to us from his Jewish period.[6] Written probably in 1389, it is so called because it was written at the time of the Jewish festival day of Purim, and Purim is its theme. It is a shining example of Jewish epistolography, a form of Hebrew written expression which had developed into a specific genre in medieval Spain.[7] Although addressed to Rabbi Meir Alguadex—then physician to John I of Castile—it was, as were most examples of its genre, meant to be shared. It is an exuberant and erudite combination of prose and poetry interspersed with scriptural quotations. It is infused with wit and humor and at the same time sounds the poignant and personal cry of a man in pain. It opens with an eloquent lament in prose in which Pablo de Santa María, then Solomon Halevi, informs us that he is on foreign soil, that he has been put into a dungeon, and that he has been unable to observe any of the Jewish rituals or to fulfill any of the traditional obligations of a religious Jew. On this day he is particularly pained because it is Purim, a Jewish holiday which celebrates the Persian Jews' miraculous escape from destruction in ancient times. Because he has no access to wine, he will be unable to celebrate properly this day during which it is customary to engage in much merriment and to drink heartily. After bemoaning his sobriety with a lengthy harangue, he reaches deep into his heart and emerges with a temporary solution to his problem. His own spirit will serve as intoxicating drink, and he will celebrate Purim and God Almighty with songs of his own creation.

Prose and poetry sections follow in which he reiterates his plight and dreams of his family and friends back home in Burgos who are happily weaving and swaying under the influence. In a 24-stanza poem towards the end of the letter he delineates God's power and glory and celebrates simultaneously the important part played by wine at key moments in man's Old Testament history. Each stanza consists of four lines, the first three of which are monorhymed, and the fourth of which is an Old Testament verse which ends in the word "wine". The first letters of each of the first eleven stanzas spell out the acrostic "I, Solomon Halevi". He ends his letter with

an elaborate expression of affection and respect towards his friend, Rabbi Meir Alguadex.

Not surprisingly, this letter has provoked considerable debate (Abrahams 255–56; Cantera Burgos, *Alvar García* 294; Baer 2: 139–40). It is simultaneously alarming (Pablo de Santa María is in an unknown land in a dungeon), humorous and witty (his biggest problem is that he has no wine to drink on Purim) and elevated and erudite (it combines original poetry and prose with Biblical passages). Scholars have argued inconclusively over such matters as whence the letter came, whether or not Pablo de Santa María was actually imprisoned, if the incarceration had to do with a possible forced conversion, why he was being humorous if he was in prison and whether the letter was a cryptic cry for help. We shall not discuss here the intricacies of the debate except to say that a plausible research hypothesis is that Pablo de Santa María wrote the letter from England where he was a temporary political hostage (following the Duke of Lancaster's bid to gain the Castilian throne) and that his detainment was more in the service of the political interests of John I than of captors demanding his conversion. What distinguishes this remarkable example of medieval Jewish epistolography is that it virtually pulsates with its author's presence and at the same time epitomizes medieval Jewish life. A Jew, Solomon Halevi, is isolated from his loved ones on an important Jewish holiday and is unable to celebrate according to his custom. His substitute for Jewish companionship and traditional celebration is his Jewish education. Alone with his erudition he celebrates in song the Almighty who delivered the Jews and caused them to rejoice on Purim.

Siete edades del mundo (hereafter *Siete edades*) is one of two Spanish works written by Pablo de Santa María after his conversion. As Deyermond and Sconza have pointed out, there is a great need for a critical edition of the work because the existing editions are not satisfactory.[8] Until a critical edition is established, we shall base our comments on Eugenio Ochoa's edition found in *Rimas inéditas de don Iñigo López de Mendoza, Marqués de Santillana, de Fernán Pérez de Guzmán, Señor de Batres, y de otros poetas del siglo XV* (Paris, 1844) 97–240.

Ochoa's edition of *Siete edades* consists of 332 ½ stanzas of *arte mayor* verse and is introduced by a prologue dedicated to John II. The work is generally considered to have been written for pedagogical purposes for John II (as mentioned earlier, Pablo de Santa María was his tutor) (Amador de los Ríos, *Obras de don Iñigo* clxxvi), and it probably was written in the second and/or third decade of the fifteenth century (Krieger 137–40). It is an example of the genre of historiography, a type of literature concerned with the narration of historical events.[9] First cultivated in the western world by the Greeks, historiography consisted of general and national history, individual and collective biographies, annals, military memoirs and more. When it came to be cultivated by medieval Christian

historiographers, its pagan doctrines were subjected to Divine Providence, but its basic components remained in tact (Barnes 41–42; Patrides 7–8).

Siete edades is a combination of general and national history. In accordance with the traditions of its day the general history section relates Biblical, church and secular history; and the national history section narrates the history of the country of the author, in this case, Castile. As the title suggests, Pablo de Santa María divides the history of mankind into seven ages. Somewhat unusual in that medieval historiographers generally preferred six ages in the tradition of Saint Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, his decision was sufficiently traditional so as not to violate the integrity of his genre (Deyermond 316–17). His prologue is also unusual in that instead of stressing the importance of historical writing, as was traditional in historiographic prologues, it discusses the style and method which the author plans to follow (Krieger 141–42). Pablo de Santa María promises to be brief and to relate only true facts. He assures the reader that he will not bore him, and he explains the septenary chronological scheme which forms the structural basis for his work.

The seven *edades*, in fact, relate the events of general and national history according to the scheme proposed in the prologue. The *primera edad* describes the Creation and other events of Biblical history through the birth of Noah. It contains 39 stanzas and parallels the contents of the first six chapters of Genesis. The *segunda edad* describes the Flood and the lives of Noah and his descendants through the birth of Abraham. It contains 26 stanzas and roughly parallels chapters seven through eleven of Genesis. In addition, it makes the poem's first reference to secular history: the emergence of the kingdoms of Egypt, Ethiopia, Assyria and Media. The *tercera edad* depicts Old Testament history from Abraham to Moses, corresponding to chapter 15 of Genesis through chapter 14 of Exodus, and relates secular history concerning the beginning of the kingdom of Athens. It consists of 40 stanzas. Depicting Old Testament history from the time of Moses to David and secular history from the time of the Trojan wars to Aeneas' arrival to Rome, the *cuarta edad* consists of 25 stanzas and extends from chapter 15 of Exodus through 1 Samuel. Extending from the reign of King David to the Babylonian exile and paralleling from 2 Samuel through 2 Kings, the *quinta edad* contains 27 stanzas. Of these 27, 17 deal with the Old Testament and the rest relate the history of the Roman republic. The *sesta edad* narrates from the Babylonian captivity to the birth of Jesus and relates Old Testament history as found in the books of Esther, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemia. Of its 40 stanzas, 33 depict secular history, that of ancient Greece and Rome's ascendancy in Judea. The *setena* and final *edad* is different from the other *edades* in that it is longer—it consists of 134 stanzas—and it is divided into two distinct sections. In the first it relates secular history from the time of Jesus through the beginning of the church schism of the fourteenth century; and in the second it describes

Castilian history from Noah through the reign of John II. It concludes with a depiction of John II as the political redeemer of Castile (Deyermond 318).

Upon contemplating Pablo de Santa María's pre-conversion and post-conversion works we are tempted to try to find in them some clue as to his true state of mind regarding his conversion. It is inevitably difficult to comprehend such a dramatic reversal of faith as was his. On the surface each of the works examined here expresses what one would expect it to express. The Purim letter is a scholarly literary work which embodies all that is representative of Jewish life. It is about the Jews' faith in God, their love of education, their respect for tradition, their need of community and their sense of humor. It is an exuberant, ebullient and witty work; and Solomon Halevi's irrepressible Jewish spirit and presence are strongly felt in it. *Siete edades del mundo* appears to be a conventional example of late medieval Castilian historiography whose significance rests primarily in its traditionality and its historicity. It seems an appropriate work to have been written by the king's royal tutor. It is an impersonal history in which Pablo de Santa María makes no mention of his former life as a Jew, the increasing anti-Semitism of his age or of his considerable involvement in the affairs of the Castilian establishment. It is a dry and emotionaless work written in a perfunctory and unaesthetic style.

Initially we attribute no particular significance to the dryness and emotionless quality of *Siete edades*. Its lack of energy and passion is merely acknowledged in passing. Soon, however, we are reminded of the energy and the exuberance of the Purim letter and we wonder at the absence of these qualities in *Siete edades*. In the Purim letter, for example, Pablo de Santa María dramatically describes his incarceration:

> *From the house of the king* [Esth. 2.9], God of the hosts, whose name dwells in the council of the just, I sit deserted *and outside of the camp* [Lev. 13.46] of the Divinity of the Levite and Israel. And even the commandments of the Almighty, that Adam treaded upon with his footsteps, such as the obligatory blessings, the kiddush cup on Friday evenings, the Havdala, I am unable to fulfill. My heart knows how many times wine gratified me and how many times I blessed the bread (Krieger 245–47).

By contrast, in his *Siete edades* he not untypically narrates in the following fashion:

> De otro cathólico Rey fallaremos
> Que por nombre fue llamado Recaredo,
> Mas sinon de como muriera en Toledo
> Ninguna otra cosa aquí dél diremos,
> Por que dellos todos aun tenemos

Después adelante mucho de contar
Así que avremos por esto de abreviar
Todas sus estorias en quanto podremos.
(stan. 290)[10]

It soon becomes clear that the contrast between the energetic and exuberant Purim letter and the dry and emotionless *Siete edades* provides the key to the comprehension of Pablo de Santa María's conversion to Christianity. *Siete edades*, in its lifelessness and its silence concerning everything having to do with its author, bears witness to the contorted accommodation he was forced to make. It attests to the tragic historical circumstances which pressured him and thousands of others into conversion and the suppression of their ethnic identity. There is little doubt that Pablo de Santa María consciously embraced his *converso* identity with sincerity and zeal, but there also can be little doubt that unconsciously he coexisted with an assaulted and a dispossessed Solomon Halevi. While his conscious intention upon writing *Siete edades* may have been to instruct and honor his king, what he accomplished instead was the expression of his own depression and fear. The Purim poem and *Siete edades del mundo* tell not only of medieval Jewish life and the history of the world and Spain respectively. They tell also of Solomon Halevi and Pablo de Santa María and of the artistic sterility born of the usurpation of man's freedom.

Judith Gale Krieger

NOTES

1. For details about Pablo de Santa María's life see Luciano Serrano, *Los conversos D. Pablo de Santa María y D. Alfonso de Cartagena, obispos de Burgos, gobernantes, diplomáticos y escritores* (Madrid: CSIC, 1942) 5-117, and Francisco Cantera Burgos, *Alvar García de Santa María y su familia de conversos: historia de la judería de Burgos y de sus conversos más egregios* (Madrid: CSIC, 1952) 274-303.

2. Some references for the historical background of the period are P. E. Russell, *The English Intervention in Spain and Portugal in the Time of Edward III and Richard II* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955) 13-148 and 258-494; Jaime Vicens Vives, *Aproximación a la historia de España*, 3rd ed., (Barcelona: Editorial Vicens Vives, 1962) 92-109; Luis Suárez Fernández, "Los trastámaras de Castilla y Aragón en el siglo XV (1407-74)," *Historia de España: Los trastámaras de Castilla y Aragón en el siglo XV*, ed. Ramón Menéndez Pidal, 37 vols. (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1964) 15: 6-213.

3. Concerning the history of the Castilian Jews of the period see José Amador de los Ríos, *Historia crítica de la literature española*, 7 vols. (Madrid, 1864) 5: 284-85; Cantera Burgos 17-21; Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, trans. Louis Schoffman, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1961) 1: 120-37, 354-78, and 2: 95-169; Julio Valdeón Baruque, *Los judíos de Castilla y la revolución trastámara* (Valladolid: Universidad, 1968) 15-43; Joaquín Gimeno Casladuero, *La imagen del monarca en la Castilla del siglo XV* (Madrid: Selecta de Revista de Occidente, 1972) 83-93.

4. According to Pablo de Santa María's first biographer, Cristóbal Sanctotis, in Pablo de Santa María, *Scrutinium Scripturarum*, ed. Cristóbal Sanctotis (Burgos, 1591) 24, Pablo de

Santa María converted on July 21, 1390. No documents from Pablo de Santa María's period which could attest to that have been found. H. Graetz, *History of the Jews*, 6 vols. (Philadelphia, 1894) 4: 185, and Baer 2: 474 feel that he converted on July 20, 1391.

5. For the original Hebrew text of this letter and Pablo de Santa María's answer to it see J. D. Eisentein, ed., *Ozar Wikuhim: A Collection of Polemics and Disputations* (Israel: N.p.: n.p., 1969) 98–104. For a Spanish translation of these letters see Francisco Cantera Burgos, *La Coversión del célebre talmudista Solomón Leví* (Santander: privately publ., 1933) 13–29. My English translation of these letters can be found in Judith Gale Krieger, "Pablo de Santa María His Epoch, Life and Hebrew and Spanish Literary Production," diss., U. of California, 1988, 263–317.

6. For the original Hebrew text of the letter see Isaac Abrahams, "Paul of Burgos in London," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 12 (1900) 255–641. My English translation of the letter is in Krieger 245–61.

7. Concerning medieval Jewish epistolography see Franz Kolber, *Letters of Jews Throughout the Ages*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: Ararat Publishing Society, 1953) 1: xlix–lviii.

8. Alan Deyermond, "Historia universal e ideología nacional en Pablo de Santa María," *Homenaje a Alvaro Galmés de Fuentes* (Madrid: Gredos, 1985) 314; M. Jean Sconza, "A Reevaluation of the *Siete edades del mundo*," *La corónica* 16 (1987): 96–97. Sconza gives an excellent summary of the 14 extant MSS of *Siete edades* and of the various editions of the work. She also mentions her forthcoming edition and study of the work (108, n.1), which will be warmly welcomed. See also Krieger 122–35 for details concerning the *Siete edades* MSS and editions.

9. For information concerning Greco-Roman historiography see Harry Elmer Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing* (Norman: U. of Oklahoma P, 1937) 26–40; B. Sánchez Alonso, vol. 1 of *Historia de la historiografía española* 2nd ed. (Madrid: CSIC, 1947) 1–42; R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946; Oxford: UP, 1951) 14–42; and the bibliographies therein.

10. The dry and unaesthetic style of *Siete edades* is seen in numerous other passages where Pablo de Santa María uses most of the stanza in order to explain how he is going to proceed. For example, see stans. 28, 29, 30, 34, 58, 151, 198, 220, 231, 290. Often he uses the stanza to explain that he is going to be brief and why. For example, see stans. 214, 215, 216, 222, 230, 293, 294, 307, 316. Frequently his stanzas read like perfunctory lists of kings or events. See stans. 218, 227, 235, 247, 289, 291, 292, 293, 307, 310, 311, 313, 320.

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