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LITERATURE, POLITICS, ECONOMY:
THE SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE LITERATURE
OF THE SEPHARDIC JEWS OF AMSTERDAM

Considerable progress has been achieved in the study of the social, economic, and intellectual history of the Sephardic Jews of Amsterdam, and several important aspects of their culture have been studied in depth (Kaplan, 1989; Fuks-Mansfeld, 1989). Our knowledge of their literature in Spanish and Portuguese, however, still remains fragmentary. Extant surveys provide us with a general and incomplete picture, in spite of the valuable monographs published that deal with a single author (Yerushalmi, 1971; Salomon, 1982; Y. Kaplan, 1989; see also Costa, 1993); existing studies do not usually go beyond the limited concept of a conflicting dualism represented by the "Jewish" and "Iberian" elements of this literature (Kayserling, 1859; Van Praag, 1950; Méchoulan, 1987). Its Spanish and Portuguese elements are commonly characterized as "remainders," and rarely as representing a living and constructive force.

Elsewhere I have aimed at an evaluation of the Sephardic literature of Amsterdam within its social and historical context (den Boer, 1992). A bibliography of the Spanish and Portuguese literary works published by or on behalf of the Amsterdam Sephardic Jews was its requisite starting point; it is, in fact, the first comprehensive analytical bibliography of these works, based on a direct description of extant copies in the most important public collections (den Boer, 1992: pp. 375-544).

A somewhat neglected aspect of the Sephardic literature is its intended readership. Considering the presentation of certain editions, their title pages as well as dedications and prefaces, we can discern works intended for a "Jewish" audience from others addressed to a more general Spanish- and

Portuguese-speaking and reading audience. It is remarkable that not only authors with a Christian background, such as Miguel (Daniel Levi) de Barrios, but also those born and educated in the bosom of the Amsterdam Sephardic community, quite commonly addressed a Christian readership, in both profane and religious works. It can be proven that the interest which these Iberian Jews took in addressing non-Jewish readers and employing non-Jewish elements in their works, has little to do with their origins, as much as with the growing Christian-Jewish "dialogue" in the 17th century (van den Berg & van der Wall, 1988).

This applies also to the "Jewish" element of Sephardic literature. I refer to the numerous doctrinal works that mainly focused on the education of the *conversos* who, when they returned to Judaism, did not know Hebrew and needed instruction in the basic principles of their religion. We should take into account that, even within this religious literature, there were works addressed to a Christian readership, a feature which can be understood if we consider the context of 17th-century Protestant society, in which theologians and scholars were frequently in contact with Sephardic rabbis. As the studies by Richard H. Popkin have shown, the atmosphere of millenarian expectations among Christians was a decisive factor in the Christian-Jewish rapprochement of the 17th century (Popkin, 1987; 1988).

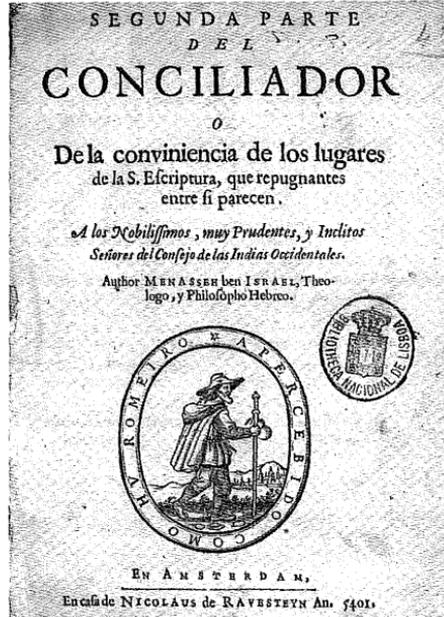
The works by Manasseh ben Israel, translated into Latin and other languages (Copenhagen, 1990), cannot be taken out of this context. *El Conciliador* (1632-51) (den Boer, 1992: pp. 385, 388, 393, 395) is considered a compendium of Judaism, but it was far too scholarly a work to be used for the education of former *conversos*; from various details of its appearance, we may conclude that it is more logical to regard it as an effort to make an impression on the Christian reader. Works by Manasseh like *Esperanza de Israel* (1650), *Piedra gloriosa, sobre la estatua de Nabucodonosor* (1655) (den Boer, 1992: pp. 393-94, 398) or Jacob Judah Leon's descriptions of the Temple of Solomon, the Cherubs and the Ark of Moses (Offenberg, 1978; den Boer, 1992: pp. 389, 395-97) are clearly Jewish works and were read by the Sephardic Jews, but we would miss their true significance if we were to consider them merely as examples of an exclusively Marrano Messianism.

On the other hand, Sephardic literature had a secular element that shows a conspicuous absence of any Jewish interest. It includes works like "cloak-and-dagger comedies" by Miguel (Daniel Levi) de Barrios (included in *Flor de Apolo*, 1665; see also Barrios, 1970) or short novels by Joseph Penso de

la Vega (1650-92), *Rumbos peligrosos* (1683), that should be regarded as a continuation of the Iberian literary tradition; attempts to explain these expressions of "Marrano" identity are hardly convincing (Litovsky, 1991). We could relate these works, however, to other manifestations of literary life among the Amsterdam Sephardic Jews, such as the theater and the literary academies. The Iberian theater had been in vogue for some considerable time,



**Title Page of *Esperanza de Israel*
by Manasseh ben Israel**



**Title Page of *El Conciliador*
by Manasseh ben Israel**

but towards the end of the 17th century the "comedia española" appears to have reached an immense popularity, closely linked with the lifestyle cultivated by an élite of wealthy merchants with aristocratic aspirations (den Boer, 1989). The same applies to the literary academies which flourished towards the end of the 17th century. Daniel M. Swetschinski and Yosef Kaplan have demonstrated that these salons were largely an imitation of literary encounters in Spain and Portugal, and were part of the background of the aristocratic lifestyle which characterized some of the Sephardic élite (Swetschinski, 1982; Kaplan, 1989).

An outstanding example of the complex dynamics which governed Sephardic literature is the panegyric literature in Spanish and Portuguese, addressed to Christian kings, princes, and statesmen; a literary phenomenon which also belongs to the end of the 17th century. In this article, I intend to present a short analysis of poems and letters which Miguel (Daniel Levi) de Barrios (1635-1701)¹ addressed to the King of Spain, Charles II.

I refer to poems and letters included in *Bello Monte de Helicon*, published in Amsterdam in 1686,² in which the admiration professed by the poet towards the Spanish king must seem astonishing to more than one reader. After all, such superlatives as "Catholic, Strong, August Monarch of Spain and the Indies, Champion of Liberty, Avenger of Peace" who "shows strength and courage declaring war on France"³ seem rather an ironic appreciation of the last Habsburg king of Spain, who is still remembered as "the Impotent" or "the Bewitched" (Maura, 1954; Kamen, 1981). It is clear from his works, however, that Barrios had no intention of mocking the king.

In his loyalty towards Charles II and Spain, Barrios seems to reflect the contradictory attitude of an expatriot who cannot detach himself from the country where he suffered persecution. In this respect, Barrios went much further than mere patriotic loyalty when he praised the Spanish monarchy for having established "Religion in the New World"⁴ or when he affirmed that "the praiseworthy Religion, never changed by time" was breaking "the French altars."⁵ These are hardly terms to be expected from a professing Jew, who no doubt remembered that Charles II had presided over the great *auto de fé*, of Madrid in 1680, in which 104 persons were condemned for "Judaizing."

1 For studies on Barrios and his works see Scholberg, Pieterse, and Lieberman.

2 A bibliographical description of the contents of the volume is to be found in my Ph.D. thesis, *La literatura hispano-portuguesa...*, pp. 447-48.

3 "A Carlos Segundo, católico, fuerte, agosto monarca de las Españas y de las Indias, defensor de la libertad, vengador de la paz, sujetos los monstruos defendidos, restituído y aumentado del Imperio," *Bello monte...*, p. 5. There are different editions of this work, I shall refer to the copy found at the *Biblioteca Nacional* (Madrid), R. 10386.

4 "La rectitud en las virtudes luce / de que, asistida con poder facundo, / la Religión constante, en i [*sic*] reduce / a la Gentilidad del Nuevo Mundo," in "Dos retratos de su Magestad Católica," *Bello monte...*, p. 3.

5 "Bélico inculcará auríferos climas, / anublará las otomanas lunas, / romperá aras francesas la loable / Religión que jamás el tiempo muda," in "Panegírico acróstico a Carlos Segundo," *Bello monte...*, pp. 5-6.

Is this, then, to use the words of the late I.S. Révah (1965: p. xc), another example of "typical Marrano insincerity"?

The personal experiences and psychology of Miguel de Barrios do provide a partial explanation for this attitude. Thus, we could take into account the fact that Barrios, nowadays remembered as the poet laureate of *Talmud Torah*, in reality led a difficult existence in the Sephardic community of Amsterdam, where on more than one occasion he needed financial support and lived on charity. At the same time, he continued to be highly esteemed by his Spanish and Portuguese Christian readers (Scholberg, 1962). It is, therefore, only logical that he should continue to address himself to the influential Spanish and Portuguese noblemen he had known when he was still a Captain of the Spanish army in Flanders. Nor should we be surprised by the excessive flattery displayed in the poet's panegyrics, for these were a common feature of 17th-century Iberian literature.

Before making any further judgments, let us first examine the literary context in which Barrios included his letters and poems addressed to the king of Spain, i.e., the volume published as *Bello monte de Helicon* (1686). The title, a good example of the baroque fashion which characterizes Barrios' style, contains a play on words which links one of the leading members of the Sephardic community of Amsterdam, Manuel de Belmonte (Swetschinski 1979: pp. 243-72) with the classical world of the arts. The title page in fact mentions that the work as a whole was dedicated to the "illustrious gentleman *Don Manuel de Belmonte*, Count Palatine of the Sacred Empire, Resident of the Catholic Majesty in the Low Countries with the States General of the United Provinces." Belmonte was thus portrayed in terms of his secular status, not as a Jew.

Barrios himself appears with his Christian name preceded by the title "El Capitán don," by which, in the very same way, he stressed his social status and concealed his Jewish identity. Furthermore, the work appears to be printed in "Brusselas, año 1686," whereas in reality it was printed in Amsterdam — clearly a strategy aimed at the Christian reader.

Though dedicated to Manuel de Belmonte, *Bello monte de Helicon* is in reality a volume of miscellanea. Apart from some works written specifically for the occasion, it consists of poems, letters, and short treatises which the poet had already previously published or which he later included in other volumes.⁶ The Sephardic patron and the Spanish monarch were, therefore, not

6 See the bibliographical description in den Boer (1992), pp. 447-48.

the only addressees of *Bello monte*. Others included:

- Spanish personalities: military governors and officials residing in the Spanish Low Countries; Spanish noblemen and friends of the poet;
- Portuguese noblemen related to the Spanish crown or with whom the poet was acquainted;
- European sovereigns: John III Sobieski, the king of Poland; Leopold, the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire; Louis XIV of France;
- Relatives and personal friends of Barrios, who either were living as Christians or are mentioned with their Christian name (the poet's uncle Francisco López Puerto, Nicolas Oliver Fullana, Thomás de Pinedo...).

After this inventory, however, we should not think of *Bello monte* as merely being a collection of literary compositions. The work was presented as a whole, and should be regarded as such. As for its contents, the poems and short prose works belong to the panegyric genre of occasional verse. Yet, apart from the personal flattery they contain and in which the author showed unsurpassed ability, their greater part centers on contemporary events which were viewed as important by either the poet or his addressees.

In fact, what many of these events share is their military and political significance for the anti-French coalition. Significantly, *Bello monte de Helicon* opens with a poetical prologue in which Barrios celebrates the Emperor's victory over the Turks at Buda in 1686, and praises the "belligerent Agurto" (Francisco Antonio de Agurto, Marquis of Gastañaga, military governor in the Spanish Low Countries); he dedicates the eulogies contained in the volume to the person of Manuel de Belmonte.⁷ In the dedications themselves, Barrios praises his patron for his love of the arts, his nobility, his vigilance on behalf of the interests of Spanish monarchy, his charity towards the needy, and his refined aristocratic behavior as a diplomat.⁸

The anti-French tone of *Bello monte* is patent from the way the poet presented himself to the king of France. In a sonnet titled "Sol y amparo el señor," in which Barrios plays semantically with the emblem of the sun illuminating the world, accompanied by the text *Nec pluribus impar*, the

7 "Prólogo en ocasión que los imperiales conquistaron a Buda, corte de Hungría," *Bello monte...*, unnumbered page on the verso of the title page.

8 "Bello monte de Helicon, dedicado al ilustrísimo señor don Manuel de Belmonte..." four unnumbered pages (*2), and pp. 1-2.

poet warns the king that God is the only Sun and Shelter.⁹ In a letter from *El Tusón de Oro*, which we will examine later, Barrios uses conceptual wordplay to remind the king of his humble origins. Paris, he affirms, was once called "Lutecia," and "Lutecia" derives from "Lodo," the (Spanish) word for "mud," and Man — *Adam* — was made out of this "dust of the ground" (Gen. 2:7).¹⁰ He then insists that God is the only true Sun, and that Louis XIV should remember that the "earthly" Sun has but a limited course, confined between the Tropics. The poet concludes that "to want your Highness to seize what belongs to the Spanish Monarchy is to controvert being like the Sun in obedience."¹¹ Barrios offers a special, "providential" reading of Isaiah 16 in order to demonstrate to the Sun King that he should not pass beyond the limits of northern France in the north and, in the south, the Duchy of Burgundy.

The works addressed to Charles II were clearly written in the same political context. Barrios opens with two poetical portraits of the king. In contemporary literary fashion, they are the literary counterpart of an engraving which the poet must have had before his eyes, but which unfortunately is not included in *Bello monte*. Charles II is depicted with his ancestor's sword, the one taken by Charles V from the hands of the French king Francis I during the famous battle at Pavia; the Spanish monarch thus presents a defiant posture towards the actual king of France, Louis XIV.¹² The Sephardic poet envisaged the Spanish king as a lion, a military hero courageously defending Spain and the southern Netherlands from French expansionism. In an "acrostical panegyric" which reads "I belong to don Miguel de Barrios, native to Montilla," Barrios went even further, stating that Charles II was to bring "justice, peace and abundance," and that neither the French, the Turks, nor the "Africans" were safe from his "royal fury."¹³ The role Barrios ascribed to "his" king evidently had no historical basis whatsoever.

9 "Sol y amparo el señor....," *Bello monte....*, p. 33.

10 "A París nominaron los latinos *Lutecia*, que se interpreta *lodo*, de donde formado el primer hombre, tiene en Vuestra Real Majestad un vivo retrato y en el nombre de Lutecia un continuo despertador del humilde origen humano, in "Epístola cuarta del Tusón de Oro. A la Majestad Cristianísima Luis Decimocuarto," *Bello monte....*, p. 80.

11 "Querer Vuestra Real Majestad tomar lo que toca a la Monarquía española es querer pasar de los trópicos de Francia y Navarra, y huir de parecer Sol en la obediencia," "Epístola cuarta....," *Bello monte....*, p. 81.

12 "Dos retratos de su Majestad Católica don Carlos Segundo....," *Bello monte....*, pp. 1-4.

13 "Panegórico acróstico," *Bello monte....*, pp. 5-6.

In a sonnet which appears in the middle of *Bello monte* the Sephardic poet of Amsterdam presented himself as an "arbitrista," a voluntary adviser of the monarch. His "arbitrio" or counsel was that the king should concede the commerce with the Indies and the Philippines to the Spanish Netherlands. In this way, Barrios argued, Flanders would need no further financial support and Antwerp would be the envy of opulent Amsterdam:

Señor
Si compañía mercantil tuviera
para Indias Amberes vigilante,
a Holanda que envidiar diera Brabante
y como Amsterdam, rica Antwerpe fuera.

La española en la América luciera
admitiendo al flamenco navegante.
Manila del comercio, ínclito Atlante
con el belga bajel enriqueciera.

El País Bajo, no necesitara
socorro pecunial del Reino Hispano,
porque lo mercurial lo sustentara.

Tenlo (porque no caiga) de tu mano,
serás, ¡oh Rey! con providencia rara
Salomón nuevo del Tarsis germano.¹⁴

It is possible that the Jewish poet, who had already made an unsuccessful attempt to establish himself in the Americas, secretly hoped for an opportunity to earn a living in the New World without the fear of being pursued by the Inquisition.

Finally, some letters to the Spanish king were included in a larger series

14 "Sir, if Antwerp had a mercantile company, Brabant would be the envy of Holland, and Antwerp would be as rich as Amsterdam. The Spanish [company], admitting Flemish seamen, would flourish in America. Manilla of commerce, illustrious Atlanta, she would prosper with Belgian vessels. The Low Countries would not need financial support from the Spanish Kingdom, because commerce would sustain her. Consider this [...] and, oh King, and, with extraordinary providence, you will be a new Solomon of German Tarsis" in "Altura de los Países Bajos. Soneto. Arbitria a su Majestad don Carlos Segundo, Rey de España, la conveniencia de conceder al País Bajo el naval comercio de las Indias, y de las Filipinas," *Bello monte...*, p. 330.

under the collective title *El Tusón de Oro*.¹⁵ These are by far the most interesting documents, as they form part of a prophecy on Europe's political future which evidently reveals Barrios' most profound preoccupations. *El Tusón de Oro* ("The Golden Fleece") is a confused, far-fetched, and extremely ingenious prophetic vision based on Isaiah 16. Its purpose is to show the destruction of the reign of Louis XIV (seen as Moab) at the hands of the anti-French coalition. Interpreting Isaiah 16:1: "Send ye the lamb to the ruler of the land from Sela to the wilderness, unto the mount of the daughter of Zion," the poet identifies "the lambs" with the military order of the Golden Fleece. Barrios affirms that the Hebrew *sela midbara*, commonly interpreted as "the rocks of the desert," symbolizes Madrid, because the Hebrew word *midbar*, "desert" is supposedly composed of "*mid*" which means "blanket" (in Spanish: "manto") and "*bar*, which means "son." Madrid is sometimes called "Mantua, for being founded by a son of Manto, and can thus can be identified with *mid-bar*. The "mount" is "Burgundy," which derives from the Dutch word "Bergh" according to the etymology adopted by the poet. The prophecy speaks of "the mount of the people of Zion" because "those of Zion took it [the mount = Burgundy] when the prophet Obadiah says *that the host of the captivity of the Israelites went unto France [=Zarephat]* [Obad., v. 20]. The river Arar was called Zion, which divides Burgundy: today it is called Sona, a corrupted name for Zion."¹⁶

By now, Isaiah 16 is to be read "Send the Fleece to the Governor of the World, from the rock of Spain to Burgundy, of the people of Zion." Interpreting the prophet's words in this fashion, Barrios accumulates scriptural proofs to show how Spain will cause the ruin of the French monarchy; that is, if Louis XIV does not withdraw from Burgundy.¹⁷

In *El Tusón de Oro* we discover a unique combination of Iberian literary skill, the "conceptismo," and Jewish biblical exegesis — although we must admit that Barrios' scriptural readings were usually *sui generis*. Moreover, they reveal an attempt by the writer to harmonize his Iberian background

15 In the two editions of *Bello monte* there are different versions; for a bibliographical description of *El Tusón de Oro*, see *La literatura hispano-portuguesa...*, p. 443.

16 "El monte es Borgoña, derivado de *Bergh* que en germano significa *monte*, y llámale la profecía *Monte de la gente de Sion*, porque los de Sion la ocuparon cuando certifica el profeta Abdías, *que el ejército de los captivos israelitas llegó hasta Francia*. Llamaron Sion al río Arar, que divide a Borgoña y hoy se dice Sona, nombre corrupto de Sion," "Epístola cuarta...", *Bello monte...*, pp. 82-83.

17 "Epístola cuarta del Tusón de Oro," *Bello monte...*, p. 82.

with his newly acquired Jewish identity. The poet did not present himself overtly as a Jew to his Christian readership, but his peculiar political visions could easily be recognized as inspired by his faith in the Law of Moses.

Let us summarize the relationship between literature, politics, and economics as we see them in the examined works by Miguel de Barrios. With regard to literature, Barrios was aware in *Bello monte de Helicon* that he continued an existing Spanish literary tradition in composing elaborate, allegorical and extremely flattering panegyrics; at the same time, he also introduced a distinctively Jewish tradition of biblical exegesis, thereby creating an autonomous literary discourse. We have seen that he continued to nourish the friendships and the poetical prestige he had enjoyed in his Iberian past, but that the contents of *Bello monte de Helicon* are not mere personal expressions of esteem or pride dedicated exclusively to a Spanish or Portuguese readership. *Bello monte de Helicon* contains a distinct political message, directed against the French expansionism of Louis XIV. In a witty poem at the end of the volume Barrios claims that his animosity against France derived from the fact that three Frenchmen had treacherously killed his brother Antonio,¹⁸ but it is clear that the author saw the events of contemporary Europe in a wider context of apocalyptic proportions:

Será mi premio mayor,
por sólo el divino honor
un general concilio en rectos modos
para que una Ley firme sigan todos.

Césares convoco y Reyes
y estados de varias leyes,
para que todos con temor divino
busquen lo celestial por un camino

[...]

Diez caudillos campeones¹⁹
de recíprocas naciones
el ala tomarán de Tierra Sancta
para ponerla en la loable planta.²⁰

18 "Mataron mi hermano Antonio / tres franceses a trayción, / y sobre esta carga a Francia / en las mataduras doy," *Bello monte...*, p. 396.

19 "Diez caudillos campeones" is to be understood as "Ten contemporary sovereigns."

20 Cf. "Clarín de la antigüedad béglica," in *Bello monte...*, p. 212.

On the other hand, by aligning himself with the anti-French coalition — whose leadership Barrios attributes to Charles II of Spain, despite its actually being in the hands of Dutch William III of Orange — the author was also serving the interests of his literary patron, Manuel de Belmonte. After all, it was Belmonte who, despite being a Jew, had earned enormous social prestige as a result of his services to the Spanish Crown and the Holy Roman Empire.

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