



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

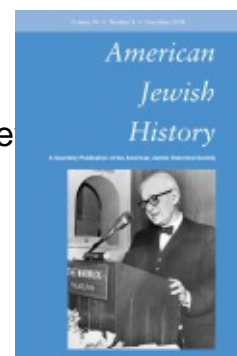
To the End of the Earth: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico

Ben-Ur, Aviva.

American Jewish History, Volume 93, Number 2, June 2007, pp. 264-268 (Review Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/ajh.2007.0033](https://doi.org/10.1353/ajh.2007.0033)



For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ajh/summary/v093/93.2ben-ur.html>

inspire more research. I won't live to see it, but I hope in fifty years someone will have looked closely at southern Jews who left tiny towns for big southern cities, where they are probably outnumbered by northern Jews. Will they still say "it feels different to be Jewish and southern" (*Jewish Roots*, 20)?

Dale Volberg Reed
Chapel Hill, NC

To the End of the Earth: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico. By Stanley M. Hordes. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. xxi + 348 pp.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, thousands of Jews in the Iberian peninsula converted to Catholicism under duress. An indeterminable number of their descendants retained Jewish identity or practices in secret, while others sincerely embraced the new faith or remained in an ongoing state of syncretic transition. Despite the 1501 ban against immigrants of Jewish and Muslim origin to Spanish America, periodically reissued through the next three centuries, Iberians of Semitic ancestry continuously settled in that region. It is indisputable that a portion of these early modern Sephardic descendants cultivated a Jewish identity or embraced Mosaic laws and customs. Among the best-known examples is Luis de Carvajal the Younger, a peninsular immigrant who settled in New Spain in the latter half of the sixteenth century and detailed his occult convictions and practices in an autobiography and series of letters. These were recorded not under compulsion—a fundamental methodological problem of Inquisitorial testimony—but rather of his own free will.¹

Stanley Hordes's main goal is not to assert the historicity of early modern crypto-Judaism in New Spain, nor the reliability of the Inquisitorial testimony upon which he heavily relies in the first half of his book. Rather, in *To the End of the Earth* Hordes tackles an intriguing question: is there an unbroken thread of identity or practices linking twenty-first century "Hispanos" (defined as descendants of Spanish colonists) with their alleged sixteenth-century crypto-Jewish ancestors in what is today New Mexico? The question is valid and worthy of extensive attention, particularly given other, confirmed cases—most famously Belmonte,

1. Martin A. Cohen, *The Martyr: The Story of a Secret Jew and the Mexican Inquisition in the Sixteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973).

Portugal—where twentieth-century descendants of forced converts to Catholicism did indeed retain a historic Jewish self-awareness or praxis, however transformed.

The first two chapters of this book are derived from research the author conducted during the 1970s for his doctoral dissertation (Tulane University, 1980), which focused on a thirty-year slice of crypto-Jewish history in seventeenth-century New Spain. These and the next three chapters, which collectively cover the period from 200 B.C.E. through 1680, survey Iberian Jewish, Mexican, and New Mexican crypto-Jewish history and set the stage for the author's unwavering contention that modern-day Hispanos who claim crypto-Jewish roots are heirs to an unbroken chain of transmission.

Hordes makes it clear from the outset that his topic is no armchair inquiry, but rather a controversial matter that continues to pinch the nerves of scholars and laymen alike. Ironically—and perhaps revealingly—the leading scholars involved in this debate have themselves experienced “conversion experiences.” These include the author himself, who initially dismissed his contemporary subjects as “cranks” (xvi) and Judith Neulander, an ethnographer who, during the course of her fieldwork, came to negate what she had once accepted as the authentic, historical transmission of New Mexico crypto-Judaism, and for whom Hordes reserves his most vitriolic critique (8). It cannot be inconsequential that this topic is not only intellectually, but also emotionally controversial, and that the debate has often culminated in a volley of accusations of cupidity, racism, and the quest for self-promotion. Caught in the midst of this crossfire, the editor of *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* noted in 1996 that the topic “has stirred more controversy and more emotion than any other topic” in the journal's twenty-year history.²

Could a crypto-Jewish identity have been preserved in New Mexico until the present day? Even Neulander, Hordes's harshest critic, has clarified that what is in dispute is not the presence of crypto-Judaism in other parts of the world, nor even the theoretical possibility of an enduring secret Judaism in New Mexico, but rather the *evidence* Hordes and others have offered in support of a diachronic New Mexican secret Judaism.³ The emotion that has fueled much of the controversy has regrettably obscured just this point: the real problem is not historical plausibility, but rather methodology.

2. Guy H. Haskell, “From the Editor,” *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 18 (1996): 1.

3. Judith S. Neulander, “The New Mexican Crypto-Jewish Canon: Choosing to be ‘Chosen’ in Millennial Tradition,” *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 18 (1996): 19–58, esp. 21.

It is specifically in this sense that *To the End of the Earth* is unsettling. This is a book that often places the horse behind the cart: the evidence is tailored to the interpretation. Moreover, the bulk of the author's arguments represent leaps of logic, circular reasoning, conjectures built upon conjectures, and conclusions based on unverifiable oral testimony and material culture.

By far the most methodologically fraught chapters are the last two ("Adjustments to Anglo-American Society, 1846–1950" and "Vestiges of Crypto-Judaism in New Mexico at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century"), in which the author attempts to link the distant past with the present. Following the lead of sociologist Tomás Atencio, who bases many of his own theories on modern-day testimony about an unverifiable past, Hordes concludes that alienation from the Catholic Church and conversion to Protestantism are signs of crypto-Judaism (219–221). The problem with this theory is not only its hypothetical nature, but also the lack of any statistical compilation that would reveal a higher incidence of New Christian conversion to Protestantism than among other groups.

Many of Hordes's own arguments in the last two chapters rely on oral testimony that is likewise unverifiable. Some are based on post-1960s interviews with individuals attempting to explain family decisions of over one or two hundred years before, while other testimony relates to individuals who are either deceased (e.g., fathers and grandfathers who, according to their children, were circumcised as early as the late nineteenth century, 230), or who request anonymity (284n43, 284n47, 286n76, 286n78). It is, of course, understandable that the nature of crypto-Judaism sometimes forces the researcher to rely on ephemeral or anonymous sources. The problem is that nearly all of the author's sources are of this nature, while other affirmations of modern-day crypto-Judaism are based on unpublished statements or manuscripts that have not been through any kind of scholarly review process (283n34, 283n36, 285n60–62, 285n64).

Also peculiar is the author's explanations of silences. He observes that the diaries and letters of Ashkenazi immigrants from Germany and Poland are bereft of references to *conversos* and concludes that this is because crypto-Jews "escaped the notice" of these newcomers, particularly because Eastern European Jews lacked "a contextual knowledge of or interest in crypto-Judaism" (232). Hordes is apparently unaware of the prominent role the "marrano" motif played in both Central European Jewish and Yiddish culture and literature, particularly in forging a modern Jewish identity.

Hordes's use of material culture is likewise intellectually thin. An example is his use of headstone iconography (found in unnamed cemeteries,

256ff) as symbolic evidence of Jewish identity. While Hordes acknowledges that the Jewish star is not culturally specific to the religion (though sporadically used by Jews—and others—from antiquity to modernity), he points to the Star of David on isolated Hispano gravemarkers as plausible evidence of crypto-Judaism (252). One problem with this approach is the vacuum in which it develops—namely, there is no systematic survey of iconography in Catholic or Protestant Hispano cemeteries that would show the broader context. Again, the tendency is to assume that everything may be linked back to Jewishness, rather than to any other of the region's diverse cultures and religions, or to cultural osmosis. In isolation, these critiques of Hordes's scholarship may appear picayune. However, this type of single-minded speculation based on largely ephemeral or highly ambiguous evidence occurs on nearly every page of the last two chapters, wherein lies the crux of Hordes's argument.

A broader methodological problem in these last two chapters is the author's reliance on the conclusions of social scientists. Most social scientists are not trained to assess the past, and are generally more preoccupied with self-understanding than with historicity and historical links (Hordes himself affirms this on xi; 244; 245). Despite this, Hordes seems to believe that social scientists—rather than historians—hold the methodological key to resolving the debate (245), and that their future research will “ascertain the nature and extent of the manifestation of crypto-Jewish symbolism in New Mexican Hispano society” (271).

Referring specifically to these scholars, Hordes points to a “consensus . . . among the majority” (243) of fieldwork researchers in New Mexico who have “confirmed the presence of a *converso* heritage in the region” and, unlike Neulander, have not found the New Mexican field too “contaminated” for meaningful research (251). This bandwagon fallacy (which implies that since most social scientists agree with Hordes, his position must be highly plausible or correct—see especially 246) would seem to suggest that strength of argument lies in numbers, and that others who have suggested an invented ancestry are not as convincing precisely because they are in the minority. (Interestingly, Hordes does not discuss the findings of renowned Judaic Studies scholar Raphael Patai, who postulated a fantasy heritage after carrying out extensive fieldwork in Mexico among Venta Prieta's self-identified crypto-Jews, nor those in the New Mexican Hispano community who vehemently reject the claim to a crypto-Jewish legacy.)

The third major drawback to this book is conceptual. The most recent, groundbreaking analyses of historical crypto-Judaism call for a more nuanced approach to religious and ethnic identity. Hordes's main question (“are they or aren't they?”) is reminiscent of an older, nationalist-idealist Jewish scholarship (e.g., Yitzhak Baer, Cecil Roth) that reinforces simple

binaries and has perhaps outlived its usefulness. By contrast, David L. Graizbord's recent work focusing on shifting identity in Spain and Portugal argues that allegiance to and from Judaism and Christianity in the late sixteenth- and early-seventeenth century had less to do with religious conviction or ancestral fealty than with economic pragmatism and the yearning for social and religious stability.⁴ This interpretation also heavily relies on Inquisitorial testimony, but exemplifies a more sophisticated approach to identity formation and the phenomenon of secret praxis. Natalie Zemon Davis's biography of Leo Africanus, a sixteenth-century Granadan-born convert from and to Islam, and the recent study on Moroccan-born Samuel Pallache, are also suggestive of pervasive cultural and religious border crossing and the psychologically complex inner world of Jewish *conversos*.⁵ Works focusing on the non-Hispanic world also reinforce the need for new paradigms. Peter Mark's research bearing on Senegal's seventeenth-century *converso*-origin community reveals that multiple identities were common to all groups inhabiting the Senegal Coast.⁶ Similar to Graizbord, Mark argues that these identities were not used or seen as duplicitous. Alison Games's current project on seventeenth-century English envoys overseas suggests a similar, widespread use of multiple identities by her subjects, whom she dubs "cultural chameleons."

Stanley Hordes's monograph also points to the need for a more global, comparative framework that would consider modern-day manifestations of crypto-Judaism in other parts of the world such as Italy, Brazil, Latin America, Portugal, and Spain. Such a cross-cultural survey should also consider the absence of this phenomenon in other places where New Christians of Jewish origin are known to have settled. The contemporary phenomenon of secret Judaism and its early modern antecedents must be investigated "to the ends of the earth," as a broad phenomenon whose present-day implications for communal belonging and ethno-religious identity have often hindered intellectually rigorous research and analysis.

Aviva Ben-Ur

University of Massachusetts Amherst

4. David L. Graizbord, *Souls in Dispute: Converso Identities in Iberia and the Jewish Diaspora, 1580–1700* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

5. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006); Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard Wiegers, *A Man of Three Worlds: Samuel Pallache, a Moroccan Jew in Catholic and Protestant Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

6. Peter Mark, "Portuguese" Style and Luso-African Identity: Pre-Colonial Senegambia, *Sixteenth-Nineteenth Centuries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).