

REVIEW

Miriam Bodian

Dying in the Law of Moses: Crypto-Jewish Martyrdom in the Iberian World

(Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007) xvii + 278 pp.

Reviewed by Steven J. McMichael, OFM Conv., University of Saint Thomas

In late October 1998, a meeting of the International Symposium on the Inquisition was held at the Vatican. The final report of the conference pointed out that the Inquisition was not as terrible as had been believed. The report claimed that less than two percent of those interviewed by the Inquisition were turned over to the secular powers to be executed. This statistic may offer consolation to some contemporary Christians and Jews who are knowledgeable about this shocking stage of history. But, in fact, it is no source of comfort.

Those who study the Inquisition are used to dealing with questions about how many were arrested, tried, tortured, and handed over to secular authorities for execution. Such discussions usually focus on categories of persons actually tried; for example, Jews, Crypto-Jews, judaizers, etc. We are not used to examining individual cases in which we see first hand the reality of the inquisitional process and what effect it had on its victims. It is in this regard that Miriam Bodian, professor of Jewish History in the Graduate School of Jewish Studies at Touro College, provides us with a valuable resource. *Dying in the Law of Moses* offers significant insight into the history of the Inquisition by focusing on four individuals who were tried and condemned to death.

Chapter One is a very informative presentation on the background of Crypto-Judaism. It develops relevant themes including martyrdom and its role in Jewish history, especially in Spain and Portugal during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Bodian provides an overview of the forced conversion of Jews in 1391, the Tortosa Disputation of 1413-1414, and the beginnings of the *converso* trials in the 1460s. She describes how Jews, at the end of the fifteenth century, were forced to choose between leaving Spain (the Expulsion of 1492) or accommodation (through conversion to Christianity). Some Jews converted and left Judaism completely. Certain others, the Crypto-Jews or *conversos*, remained in Spain but secretly practiced their Jewish faith. Those who were discovered to be judaizing (one of the main targets of the Inquisition) had the choice of recanting and returning to true Catholic belief and practice or being martyred.

Chapter Two shows how complex Jewish life was in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The four individuals who are the main focus of the book are called "Dogmatic Crypto-Jewish Martyrs." They did not (and could not) live a traditional Jewish life centered around the synagogue and traditional ritual practices. These individuals also shared an almost complete ignorance of rabbinic learning because rabbinic texts were for the most part unavailable to them. They therefore embraced a "crypto-Jewish Biblicism" which emphasized *peshat* or a literal reading of the biblical texts. This led to a new type of martyrdom because of the circumstances of Jewish life and the emergence of the Inquisition as an institution in Catholic Europe and the Americas. This raises an important issue regarding the influence of the Christian Reformation on inner Jewish life. Bodian asks whether defiant Protestant martyrs in Roman Catholic lands (and defiant Catholic martyrs in Protestant lands) provided a stimulus to Crypto-Jews to die a similar death at the hands of the Inquisitors (p. 26)? This question has come to the

forefront in other contemporary studies concerning this period of history. In terms of inner-Jewish life itself, Chapter Two shows the multifaceted reality of Judaism at that time.

Chapters Three through Six provide a very detailed look at four individuals who experienced inquisitional procedures and who, in the end, chose martyrdom. Each of these individuals embraced a particular brand of Judaism through a literal reading of the Bible and not through traditional rabbinic learning and practice. A common characteristic of these Crypto-Jews is a type of Protestant approach to the Bible (the Bible as the sole authority) and to theology (*sola fide*). They focused more on their personal experience of God within and through their hearts rather than on the observance of traditional Jewish practices. However, many also began to observe Jewish food laws during their time under the Inquisition. They based their desire for martyrdom on their reading of Maccabees (which many read in the Latin Vulgate) rather than on rabbinic materials. Some even circumcised themselves during their ordeal, taking a Hebrew name along with a descriptive epithet. They chose to defend their faith by debating with the Inquisitors. These debates had the effect of increasing their sense of a divine call to embrace martyrdom rather than “backslide” into erroneous Christian beliefs.

Dying in the Law of Moses offers a very informative inside view not only of the inner-Jewish life of those who endured the inquisitional process but also of the Inquisition itself. This fascinating book demonstrates how the Inquisition operated in terms of questioning suspects, the techniques employed to obtain confessions, and the pressure placed on victims to get them to recant. It also allows us to see how actual individuals endured these inquisitional procedures and emerged as faithful Jews and heroes of modern Judaism. The book also shows us the complexity of Jewish-Christian relations in the early modern period and it should serve as a model of how to appraise this same relationship today.