Scion of a rabbinic family heavily involved in legal deliberations pertaining to the Jewishness of the *conversos*, Simeon Ben Zemah [1361-1444] composed an anti-Christian polemic that is striking in a number of ways. The passage in question is methodologically noteworthy in that invokes -- and cites -- passages from the New Testament alongside contemporaneous rabbinic sources. Duran concludes that the practice of baptism among the earliest (non-Jewish) followers of Jesus, was intended as a way of initiating pagans into the Jewish legal category (of biblical origin) of "resident alien". He claims, in other words, that the earliest missions to the Gentiles were designed (by rabbinic Jews) to bring non-monotheists into a legally-recognized "outer circle" of Judaism.

This extraordinary passage should be considered within the following historical contexts:

1. The efforts by humanists -- Jews as well as Christian -- to reconstruct the historical and doctrinal origins of Christianity by mining ancient sources without overt theological bias.
2. The effort of certain Jews who were learned in Christian sources -- and particularly of those involved in "reclaiming" conversos -- to evaluate Christianity both historically and theologically, in order to determine whether it warranted the label of "idolatry".

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But [Jesus's] intention was that [the gentiles] fulfill the Noahide commandments. And thus they wrote that Jesus commanded the gentiles to undergo baptism [in the name of] the Father, the Son and the Spirit, and that, by means of this baptism, they would be saved -- after acceptance of [the prohibitions against] idolatry and against sexual immorality, and [the doctrine of] Free Will. And in this they relied on our Rabbis, of blessed memory, who said [BT, Yeb. 46b] that if one underwent circumcision but didn't undergo immersion, it is as if he was not circumcised. Therefore, they established baptism as a principle in accepting converts. And it seems that his [i.e., Jesus'] intention was to accept [each] as a resident alien, whom we call "an uncircumcised convert" -- who takes upon himself the seven Noahide commandments.

That which demonstrates that they only did this to attract gentiles to their faith is what one of them sent in an epistle to another, regarding one who had written him saying: [Galatians 5:2] "I, so-and-so, say to you that if you undergo circumcision, the Messiah will be of no avail to you." Now, how would it hurt them them if they were circumcised? Rather, he wrote this to them to reassure them, lest they feel fearful because they were uncircumcised.

He also wrote to them testifying to them that anyone who was circumcised is bound by the entire Torah -- and in this he taught the eternality of the Torah for Israel. For inasmuch as one who is circumcised is bound by the entire Torah, he must circumcise his son, in keeping with the Torah's commandment. And this will continue from son to the son's son, until the end of the world [i.e., forever].

And it is also written by him[1] [Acts 28:17-18] that when one of the Apostles was brought to Rome, bound in chains, he called to the Jews who were there and said to them that he had not done anything against the Jews, and that he did not differ at all with their ancestral custom. He also said that the Jews of Jerusalem had not found in him anything deserving of the death-penalty. And had he differed with the Torah, he would have been deserving of the death-penalty.

And similarly, he wrote in one of his books that he believes in everything which is in the Torah.
And in another place he wrote that he had not sinned against the Torah of the Jews.

He further wrote, rebuking the Jews, in the *Epistle to the Romans* (2:17-26):

If you call yourself a Jew and rely upon the Torah, and boast of [your relationship to] God, and recognize His will, and discern that which is useful because you are an expert in the Torah. And if you are sure that you are a guide for the blind, and a light for those who walk in darkness; and that you can teach those who do not know, having, in the Torah, the form of wisdom and truth: Why should you then rebuke others, and not rebuke yourselves? You preach, "Do not steal", but you steal. "Do not commit adultery", but you commit adultery. "Distance yourself from idolatry", but you steal from the sacred. "Glory in the Torah," but by sinning against the Torah, you diminish the Divine Glory. And the Divine Name is desecrated among the gentiles on account of you, as it is written.[2] Circumcision will, indeed, benefit you, if you observe the Torah. But if you sin against the Torah, your circumcision will be considered uncircumcision. And if the uncircumcised one observes the covenant of the Torah, his uncircumcision will be considered as circumcision."

Until here, Romans. He thus teaches that the Jewish people are obligated to observe the Torah -- and that if even the uncircumcised observe the Torah, it will be reckoned to them as if they were [bound by a] covenant.

But this is only true for someone who was forcibly converted [*anus*] and was unable to be circumcised, or whose brothers died due to circumcision; or for resident aliens. The implication of these words is that Jesus and his students never intended to abolish the Jews' observance of the Torah.

**Endnotes**


[2] Isaiah 52:5: “And constantly, unceasingly, my Name is reviled”.

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Keshet U-Magen
Simeon ben Zemah Duran, 14th - 15th centuries

Prepared by Talya Fishman, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Endnotes

Introduction to Respuesta A Un Cavallero Frances

Talya Fishman, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Notes: Cited in Yosef Kaplan "Qelitatam shel gerim ba-kehilah ha-portugalit bi-Amsterdam ba-Meah ha-17: Parshat Lorenzo Escuerdo" in Proceedings of the Seventh World Jewish Congress (Jerusalem, 1981), vol. 4: 100

Orobio de Castro (himself a former converso) was heavily involved in the project of encouraging conversos to return to their ancestral faith in seventeenth century Amsterdam. The distinction made in this passage between "the seed of Abraham and Children of Israel" on the one hand, and Gentiles who recognize the God of Truth, on the other, illuminates two broad historical developments:

1. It reflects the emergence of a biological (dare I say, "racial?") definition of Jewishness among conversos and former conversos, a legacy of Iberian rhetoric about "limpieza de sangre."

2. It may be seen as evincing Jewish anxieties about accepting Old Christians as converts to Judaism at a time when religious identities were particularly labile. [See Introduction to Kol Sakhal.]

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Respuesta A Un Cavallero Frances
Orobio de Castro, 17th century

Translated by Talya Fishman, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Notes: Cited in Yosef Kaplan "Qelitatam shel gerim ba-kehilah ha-portugalit bi-Amsterdam ba-Meah ha-17: Parshat Lorenzo Escuerdo" in Proceedings of the Seventh World Jewish Congress (Jerusalem, 1981), vol. 4: 100

So too, the covenant between God and the seed of Abraham and the Children of Israel will last forever. And the gentiles who recognized the God of Truth and worshiped Him will be gerim in Israel, and beloved of God. But they will never become Israel, or the seed of Abraham. For Israel is not a spiritual entity, but rather, a nation -- for better or worse....

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Respuesta A Un Cavallero Frances
Orobio de Castro, 17th century

Prepared by Talya Fishman, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Notes: Cited in Yosef Kaplan "Qelitatam shel gerim ba-kehilah ha-portugalit bi-Amsterdam ba-Meah ha-17: Parshat Lorenzo Escuerdo" in Proceedings of the Seventh World Jewish Congress (Jerusalem, 1981), vol. 4: 100

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Between 1391-1492, large numbers of Spanish Jews underwent baptism, some under threat of violence, and some of their own volition. As Jewish husbands and wives, parents and children, found themselves intimately-related to kinfolk who professed Christianity, a range of rabbinic legal problems arose pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance and other matters of personal status. Rabbi Zemah b. Shlomo Duran of 15th century Algiers was from a family of rabbis who addressed many of these legal queries.

In the excerpted passage of the Responsum, R. Zemah reprimands the interlocutor for the term he had used in referring to former conversos. This population, he emphasizes, are of Jewish stock, and thus must not be perceived as converts to Judaism.

As in the excerpted passage from Orobio de Castro (of seventeenth century Amsterdam), R. Zemah's remarks point to the emergence of a "biological" definition of Jewishness (among Iberian Jews and conversos) and stresses the need to distinguish, theologically, between New Christians who revert to their ancestral faith and Old Christians who convert to Judaism.
Fez, to the learned Rabbi Nathan Busti and his colleagues, may the Rock preserve and keep them:

You asked, my brothers, regarding one who came and claimed that he was a kohen—whether or not one can believe him, for calling him first to read from the Torah.

Answer: ...

And even though there are a small number of them who mix with the idolators and take their daughters as wives, they are only the tiny minority—[Jer. 3:14] one from a town and two from a family. And one of them who does this is alienated from the rest and despised, and they subsequently refrain from mixing with his offspring/seed. For they consider this seed as idolatrous, as is the law, since his mother is an idolator...

I will now return and respond to your words, in which you wrote ruling invalidation of the priesthood for those of the anusim who come and claim that they are held to be kohanim. First you wrote, using these words: Regarding the matter of these gerim who come from the Kingdom[s] of Catalan and Castile and Portugal to convert [lehitgayyer] and to enter under the wings of the Divine Presence. And each one of them says (that) "I am a kohen", etc. And this is the gist of your language.

One who examines your words will find in them a great error. For God forbid that Jews in all their places of residence would be stupid [enough] to call up first to the Torah, for the kohen’s portion, one who was an idolator and converted. For this is not done in Israel. And an idolator who converts can never claim and say that he is a kohen. For where would this priesthood of his come from? And how can you pose this question?

You must catch that these [conversos] are not called by the term gerim [i.e., "converts"] for they are [Isaiah 41:14] the worm of Jacob; they are considered [ibid] maggots of Israel, and
are not called "gerim" for this purpose, but rather, penitents...

And we have learned that they [i.e., the talmudic sages] only use the term "ger" for one who was an idolator and entered under the wings of the Divine Presence, and took upon himself the entire Torah. And someone who accepted the seven Noahide commandments, and agreed not to practice idolatry, is called a "resident alien." And he is called this because we are permitted to allow him to live among us, as it says in tractate Avodah Zarah [64b] in chapter ha-Sokher. This being the case, you were mistaken in referring to the penitents of the anusim as "gerim"...

I also see these words of yours as incorrect, and there is nothing in these claims that would invalidate the offspring from the status of priesthood. For we have not found that one who is born of uncircumcision is unfit to be a kohen. This is (also) because Israelites, though uncircumcised, are called "circumcised". And even though the uncircumcised one violates the law regarding one who does not circumcise himself, still, his offspring is [ritually] valid [for marriage to a Jew and for priesthood]. And he is regarded as one who is circumcised, as they say in Chapter HaNoder in tractate Nedarim [31b; in Mishna Nedarim 3:11]: One who vows [not to benefit] from the uncircumcised is forbidden [to benefit] from the circumcised of the nations of the world, and is permitted [to benefit] from the uncircumcised of Israel. For an idolator, even if circumcised, is called "uncircumcised", and an Israelite, even if uncircumcised, is called "circumcised", as it is said, [Jer. 9:25], "For all the gentiles are uncircumcised, and the Jews are uncircumcised of heart".

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She'elot u-Teshuvot Yakhin u-Vo'az
Zemah ben Shlomo Duran, 15th century

Prepared by Talya Fishman, University of Pennsylvania, USA

 şו"ת יביכי ובורת חלק ב סיפקל ג

פוא אל המשכלי רב או חותם וחברי"ש" עז קא ליה ל תלמודי לḳורא בחרות/בחורות/ראשון וא לאר.

שאולוין אחר בünküינו מי שמעו וארות כל על תלמודי לḳורא בחרות/בחורות/ראשון וא לאר.

שנודדו ידינו שאמינו ע"ז....

אוזור או אבישע דרביכם בה שמכות חסונה אנושה שב機會ים חסונא אנושה שב機會ים חסונה אנושה שבに戦ים חסונה אנושה שבに戦ים חסונה אנושה שבに戦ים חסונה אנושהضعفו.... איגו הדרך אין שמין ע"ז....

mateyot הדבריכם/בדבריכם/מעגו בה שכנעהدول שחקה והתחללה ליתו ישראל לכל פמוקים מחוסות יהודים חסונה אנושה שבului:

ל地中 פקא הח"ש ארשוק בחור.vel מי שלח הש"ע"ג נתריבה וכר לא נשע בישארו וכר_STRUCTURE"ו חטאת רוחול אחרים יוכל

לעתון ולומר שם הא детиיכם באול הלכת הווה הא כל התושה הקטינה אהנה....

باب יד התחפשים דא אנציקלופדיה בלושנ גרי לעל שם חполнить ייפק מתי ישראלי והשת疬י ורgrown קרכבים בין הגלעג נכניע הזרכו רעי...

ב próxima תשבויות....

או למדים שבאמסformData" בלושנ זראלא לי עם לי שין הש"ע"ג נבגון התחללה כולה ליתו ישראל לכל פמוקים מחוסות יהודים חסונה אנושה שבוי...

עליל שמע מזמז משל בך انه שלח הלך ע"ז טוקא אנ חשב הקאר כל לעו לשונר ילב להושלח בידכתיי קארה מוכסח ע"ז:

בפרק השומכרו:"א נסיגה בה שקדאתא ליבעל תשבות פאנוסים בלושנ גרי....

ב כרביכם אל וראוה שואיב מכונים אוגים בשסנעה אוגל ש回來 פסול מחוסות להושלח בחנות כי לא מרגיעו מי שליחן מן העירה

גו דרביכם אל וראוה שואיב מכונים אוגים בשסנעה אוגל ש回來 פסול מחוסות להושלח בחנות כי לא מרגיעו מי שליחן מן העירה

שיהיו פסול מחוסות כל נגב כי שיראו אפג" שעה רולם קארסאמחוליםלאפג" שעה רומר עזרה הוראן על שארית מאלא אצפו לכל יזמה

ומ"ה ומנ חוא נסבכ מחולא מחולא" וכן חזרה במשכת דרגים תורןן מחולא מחוליםלאפג" שעה רומר עזרה הוראן על שארית מאלא

בכרו ירואל ששבוע"ו אפג" מחלא קארסא יירואל אפג" על קארסא מחלא price לכ חזרה עליל לכ הירואל רעד

לך....
Introduction to Kol Sakhal in Behinat HaKabbalah

Talya Fishman, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Notes: Based on Talya Fishman "Voice of a Fool": an Early Modern Jewish Critique of Rabbinic Culture (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 150.

Kol Sakhal, literally, "Voice of a Fool", is a critique of rabbinic culture written under cover of pseudonym by the colorful Venetian rabbi, Leone Modena [1571-1648]. Well-versed in Christian sources, Rabbi Modena interacted with learned Christians from all over Europe as teacher, preacher and interlocutor. Noblemen and clerics who went "slumming" in the Venetian ghetto raved about Modena's sermons, and Rabbi Modena referred to Paolo Sarpi, legal and theological consultant to the Venetian Senate -- who was denounced by the Church for his excessive contact with Jews-- as "my friar."

The passage in question, part of a revisionist code of Jewish law, envisions a world in which many people, inspired by their attraction to the Hebrew Bible, draw near to Judaism. Leone Modena's own environment was rife with religious seekers who fit that description: Apart from conversos who were negotiating their own relationships with normative rabbinic communities in Venice, Amsterdam and Hamburg, there were large numbers of Chretiens sans eglise in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, i.e., Old Christians of malleable confessional identity (among them, Michael Servetus, Jean Bodin, Guillaume Postel, Laelius and Faustus Socinus). Those who adopted anti-trinitarian perspectives were labeled judaizing heretics.

Kol Sakhal's iconclastic suggestion that conversion to Judaism be made easier for individuals already drawn to the Hebrew Bible raises the question of whether there may have been an underground Jewish proselytizing movement in this period, as claimed, in the 1640's, by the Portuguese Jesuit, Antonio Vieira.
Notes: Based on Talya Fishman "Voice of a Fool": an Early Modern Jewish Critique of Rabbinic Culture (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 150.

Converts. It was necessary to circumcise and ritually immerse every convert, according to their [rabbinic] arrangement.[1] But they did not understand and paid no attention to matters upon which the foundation of the nation, its greatness and success depend.[2] As they did with every order and arrangement they made, all is destruction and corruption. By this I mean that they ought to have explained regarding one who comes to convert that, after warning him[3] and [after] the investigation - by which it is made clear to us that his coming is for the sake of heaven and not for some external purpose[4] -- he should be informed of the virtue of circumcision and its reward.[5] If he wishes to circumcise himself, well and good, and if not, let him immerse himself and become a Jew.[6] And this will be sufficient for him to participate in testimony and marriage, inheritance and bequest--and everything else like the rest of the Jewish people. Not to make his property ownerless and the laws of Sodom that they commanded in this regard[7] -- go and check them. However, any sons born to him after his conversion are to be circumcised at eight days.

They would already have some support [for this lenient position] in the Torah, for a resident alien was not required to circumcise himself and it was not an impediment for him, except with regard to the eating of the paschal sacrifice, and nothing else.[8] And this is not mentioned regarding Jethro or anyone who converted [9] that he circumcised himself.

This would have made it easier for the nations, enabling them to enter under the wings of the Divine Presence[10] or[11] to assume the yoke of our Torah,[12] if it were most easy and pleasant, but always according to what was commanded by Moses, man of the Lord.[13] [And perhaps] an entire nation and kingdom would already have become Jews, or more than one, and our redemption would draw near, as I have hinted to you in the Second Essay, chapter 6; study it
and return and study it. I know that you will acknowledge that the sages of the Talmud are truly the pillars of Exile who support and keep us in the *Galut* [Exile] as long as there are still days on earth—if the God of heaven and earth does not send forth his hand and take us from it.

**Endnotes**


[2] *Kol Sakhal* wishes to present Judaism as universally appealing, and therefore accuses the rabbis of discouraging conversion by their insistence upon circumcision as a prerequisite. Cf. the claim in a medieval Hebrew treatise that Paul’s limitation of circumcision as a requirement for admission into the community of early Christians contributed heavily to Christianity’s success (*Proyat Duran*, *Kelimat ha-Goyyim*, p. 28). And see Modena’s assertion in two sermons that the convert’s entry into Judaism must be made easier, cited in Rosenzweig, pp. 537-38.

[3] The potential convert is to be warned about the drawbacks of throwing his lot in with that of the Jews, people who submit to the yoke of the commandments, for which they are ridiculed and persecuted by their neighbors (BT, Yeb. 47a).


[6] Cf. the position of R. Joshua, who asserted that the prospective convert need only undergo immersion in order to become a Jew. This position was rejected by the rabbis, however, in favor of R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus’s requirement of circumcision and immersion (BT, Yeb. 46a). However, cf. Yom Tov Lipmann Muelhausen’s statement in *Sefer Nizahon* that "one who believes correctly is a Jew even if he is not circumcised, although he is guilty of one transgression" (in Bem-Sasson, "Disputation and Polemics," EJ 6:94).

[7] This may be a reference to the rabbinic ruling that a convert’s descendants do not inherit his wealth, if they were conceived prior to his conversion to Judaism (BT, Kid. 19b; BB 149a. See Maimonides’s rationale for this rabbinic ordinance, MT. Hil. Nahalot 6:10). Some medieval scholars evinced uneasiness about the Talmud’s sstory of a Jew who tried to keep the property of a deceased convert. See, e.g. Ha-Heiri, *Beit Ha-Behira* on BB 149a.

[8] Exod. 12:45, 12:48. In identifying the *ger toshav* (resident alien) with an uncircumcised convert to Judaism, *Kol Sakhal* may be following the lead of Ibn Ezra, who understood the term *toshav* as a reference to an Israelite, inasmuch as the Torah had *earlier* excluded the uncircumcised from partaking of the paschal meal (Ibn Ezra on Exod. 12:45). Moreover, Karaites understood that the term *ger* appearing in Exod. 9:19 included the category of *ger toshav* (Weiss, *Melilah* 1, p. 41 citing *Ohel Yosef*). Cf. Philo’s understanding of *ger* in Wolfson, *Philo*, 2:364-74. Alternate rabbinic understanding of the term *ger toshav* are reflected in BT, AZ 64b and in Gerim 3, in Higger, p. 33.

[9] This passage reflects *Kol Sakhal*’s indebtedness to the rabbinic perspective, for the perception of Jethro as a convert is not biblical but midrashic (*Sifrei*, Num. no.80; *Mekhilta*,...
Yitro I, p. 582; Mekhilta de-Rabi Shimon ber Yohaii, p. 87; Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, 30; Tanhuma Yitro 6, Jerusalem Targum, Exod. 18:6).

[10] This term is used by the rabbis to describe conversion to monotheism in a pre-Sinaitic context, as in the case of Abraham's proselytizing activities. (See, e.g., Rashi on Gen. 12:5).


[12] I.e. conversion to Judaism proper.


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Kol Sakhal in Behinat HaKabbalah

Voice of a Fool

Anonymous (attributed to Leone Modena), 1623

Prepared by Talya Fishman, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Notes: Based on Talya Fishman "Voice of a Fool": an Early Modern Jewish Critique of Rabbinic Culture (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 150.

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