

THE *ESPERANÇA DE ISRAEL*: A MISSION TO CROMWELL

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Historical Background

Research conducted in recent years has strongly suggested that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries represented a new wave of millenarian thought and eschatological expectation within the Iberian world.¹ Given events such as the Jewish expulsion from Spain in 1492 and the Iberian Union (1580–1640), it is easy to understand why such eschatological hope was flourishing and was stronger than ever in the Iberian world. On the one hand, it is necessary in order to account for the strength of both Iberian Inquisitions—Spanish and Portuguese—and how the persecution of New Christians for their supposedly Judaizing practices is normally associated with the ‘Black Legend of the Inquisition’. At the same time, and particularly when it comes to Portugal, one should remember how people were dealing with the consequences of sixty years of Spanish dominion (1580–1640), and subsequent challenges in the aftermath of the Portuguese independence.

To achieve a more thorough view of the Iberian environment, particularly Portugal, further analysis of Jewish belief in the imminent coming of the Messiah is required. Only then may a historian understand how eschatological hope was essential for these two nations—the Sephardic Jews and the Portuguese—as it represented the anticipation of a better future and the end-times thought to be immediately at hand.² Such expectation

¹ Maria Ana T. Valdez, ‘Revival of Biblical Motifs in the Early Modern Period: The Iberian Eschatological Hope in the 16th and 17th Centuries’, in *From Antiquity to the Present: The 2008 European Association of Biblical Studies Lisbon Meeting* (ed. Ph. R. Davies, J. A. Ramos and M. A. Valdez; Porto: Centro de História da Universidade de Lisboa, 2009), pp. 81–94.

² The concept of *nation* used in this paper is the one utilized by Miriam Bodian to describe the settlement and development of Sephardic communities in Amsterdam of Portuguese and Spanish origin. See Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

The idea of an imminent eschatological end was so pressing that it originated movements as the one led by Sabbatai Zvi, among others. See David S. Katz, *Philo-Semitism and the Readmission of the Jews to England, 1603–1655* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

regarding the end of time represents a phenomenon traversing all boundaries within the Portuguese world. Examples and expressions of such expectations may be found not only among different religious groups, but also among different social strata. From the well-educated man to the cobbler, from the Jesuit to the Sephardim, many believed that the end of time was at hand and that either Christ, for the former, or the Messiah, for the latter, was about to come.³

*Amsterdam: Menasseh ben Israel, António de Montezinos,
and the Portuguese Nation*

When António de Montezinos arrived in Amsterdam in 1644 and reported how he had found the 'Lost Tribes' of Israel' in South America (in 1642), many thought that the end of time was finally at hand.⁴ 'Montezinos' report', as it was generally known, became influential for Sephardic Jews and Christians by further emphasizing eschatological hope in the midst of Catholics, and English millenarians.

According to the tradition of the 'Lost Tribes', ten tribes disappeared following the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Those so-called 'Lost Tribes' were scattered all over the world and their identity lost. In due time, however, they were supposed to be revealed, thereby allowing for the final reunion of the Israelites before the end of this world and the Last Judgment could take place. The motif of a close reunion of the 'Ten Tribes' was, at the time, a recurrent and influential subject within Jewish messianic groups, as described by Gershom Sholem.⁵ Hence one can understand the importance given to the stories told by Montezinos, as his account represented *per se* a sign of the End. Moreover, this context makes the subsequent agitation and questioning arising among both

³ Examples of this Portuguese eschatological hope can be found in the works of Gonçalo Annes de Bandarra, Fr. Sebastião de Paiva, Isaac ben Abravanel, Fr. António Vieira, etc.

⁴ António de Montezinos, also known as Aaron Levi, was a New Christian, born around 1604 in Portugal. He was the descendant of Jews who converted in 1497. He left his hometown of Vilaflor and travelled to the West Indies, where he lived until 1644. Then he moved to Amsterdam, where he stayed for approximately six months. Following this, he returned to Brazil, probably living either in Pernambuco or in Recife, two cities historically known for their Jewish communities. He died in Brazil in the summer of either 1647 or 1648. Montezinos' report can be found in the initial chapter of the different editions of *Esperança de Israel/Spes Israelis* by Menasseh ben Israel.

⁵ *Apud* Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676* (Bollingen Series 93; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).