

*Providencia de Dios con Ysrael*

Saul Levi Morteira

Manuscript B 16 of the Ets Haim Library, Portuguese Synagogue  
AmsterdamEdition, Transcription, Translation and Introduction by Gregory B. Kaplan, Professor of Spanish,  
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Little is known about the early life of Saul Levi Morteira (c. 1596-1660), who may have been born in Germany, Italy or Portugal.<sup>1</sup> After several years in Paris in the retinue of Dr. Elijah Montalto, Morteira arrived in Amsterdam in 1616 and in 1618 became the rabbi of Beth Jacob, a Sephardi synagogue that had been established in the city. Sometime shortly before 1660, the year of his own death as a septuagenarian, and after more than four decades as a leading rabbinical figure in the thriving Jewish community of Amsterdam, Morteira finished his *magnum opus*, a Portuguese text titled *Tratado da verdade da lei de Moisés*. Soon after *Tratado* was completed, the work was translated into Spanish on several occasions under the title *Providencia de Dios con Ysrael*, a process described by Herman P. Salomon:

[The work was] translated into Spanish by Chacham Moses Raphael de Aguilar. Five splendid decorated manuscript copies of this Spanish translation ... were produced in Amsterdam between 1662 and 1664 by the Dutch-Portuguese master calligrapher Luis Nunes Dovale (alias 'Iehudah Machabeu'). Little evidence remains of this scribe's life except for his signature as witness at the wedding of his sister, Debora Israel Machabeu, to David Pereira at Amsterdam in 1627 and his presence in Pernambuco, Brazil, in 1646.... The five copies of Morteira's work are Machabeu's masterpieces. The first one, dated 20 June 1662., belongs to the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, the second, dated 10 July 1663, is in the Bodian Library, Oxford, the third, dated 25 July 1663, is in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, the fourth, dated 1664, is in Ets Haim and the fifth, also dated 1664, is in the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana. While the five manuscripts seem similar, each one has its own distinctive artistic quality. (Salomon, "Saul Levi Morteira")

In 1988, Salomon became the first scholar to edit the Portuguese version of *Providencia de Dios con Ysrael*, while the Spanish versions of the work have remained unedited. The present edition is the first translation into English of *Providencia de Dios con Ysrael*.

The Columbia University Libraries, which houses three Spanish manuscripts of *Providencia de Dios con Israel* provides a description of the works content in its online catalog:

The Ms. consists of two parts. The first, comprising 46 chapters, is devoted to a discussion of God's providence, which did not end with the miracles of ancient days but manifests itself continually. Chapters 36-46 are polemical trying to demonstrate the artificial character of early Christian history and religion and to point out the contradictions in the Gospels. The second part of the work undertakes to show the perfection of the Law of Moses, its fullness of scope and its eternity. In this connection, he again plunges into a polemical and apologetic argument to prove that the fundamental Christian beliefs are false and that the New Testament is inadequate to guide the conduct of man. He classifies the

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the theories concerning Morteira's birthplace, see the discussion by Salomon (*Morteira* xxxvii-xxxix).

precepts of the Mosaic Law into nine Categories. The author is very vehement in regard to the Roman Catholic Church, against whom John Calvin supplied him with violent criticisms, but he goes further and also directs several criticisms against Calvin.

The present transcription and translation into English of *Providencia de Dios con Ysrael* is based on an early eighteenth century manuscript, which is catalogued as B 16 in the Ets Haim collection of the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam. This manuscript was copied in 1718-19 by Michael López (whose full name was Michael López Pinto), one of the preeminent scribes of the period. In order to facilitate the reading of *Providencia de Dios con Ysrael*, modern accent marks and capitalization have been added to the Spanish text in the preparation of the present edition. The orthography and punctuation of the Spanish text have been preserved (except in the case of the abbreviated form of “cristiano” [“Christian”], which has been expanded. Additions to the English translation made to enhance the clarity of the original are indicated by words in brackets.

The fact that *Providencia de Dios con Ysrael* continued to be circulated in volumes that had been copied by hand, rather than printed on one of many existing presses (including those operated by the Jewish community), was because of the provocative nature of the work. With respect to treatises such as *Providencia de Dios con Ysrael*, which openly challenge Christian tenets, Yosef Kaplan has observed that virtually “all theological and polemical works written in the Iberian languages, and especially works directed against Christianity, were kept out of print because of the internal censorship of the [Amsterdam Jewish] community, but were circulated in manuscript” (“The Jews” 139). Indeed, the title page of *Providencia de Dios con Ysrael* contains a statement (“Eternity of the Law of Moses. Nullity of the other laws in Amsterdam that are called divine”) that would have undoubtedly caused offense, in particular among Calvinists, with whom Morteira engaged in dialogues and who “viewed debates with Jews as an important means of convincing them of the truth of Christianity and hence converting them to it” (Kaplan, “The Jews” 158).

At the same time, it is logical to ask why a work that had been already copied on a number of occasions, and that had been circulated for almost sixty years, was commissioned by some still unknown patron during the second decade of the eighteenth century. Morteira had been a widely respected authority during his lifetime but others had followed him as rabbis to a community that had passed its “golden age” but that continued to prosper in the 1700s. In the decades following Morteira’s death the spiritual climate among Amsterdam’s Jews was influenced by ideas (ultimately deemed heretical) espoused by Daniel de Prado (c. 1612-c. 1670) and, ironically, Baruch Spinoza (1632-77), Morteira’s most famous student. In light of the spread of such ideas, which refuted Jewish doctrines, *Providencia de Dios con Ysrael* would have been seen in the early eighteenth century much as it had when it was first written, that is, as a guide composed in order to inspire the Jews of Amsterdam (and *conversos* who had not returned to Judaism) to adhere to rabbinic authority and live by *halachik* norms. Morteira, who was not fully accepted into the Sephardi synagogue whose pulpit he occupied apparently due to his non-Iberian origins (an aspect of his biography that has yet to be fully explained), dedicated his life to bringing Jews closer to their faith, and this was the message that continued to resonate each time *Providencia de Ysrael* was copied.

Written<sup>2</sup> by Michael López  
The Providence of God with Israel

Eternity of the Law of Moses. Nullity of the other laws in Amsterdam that are called divine.<sup>3</sup>

Composed<sup>4</sup> by the very learned gentleman, H:H: Saul Levy Morteira,<sup>5</sup> in praise of blessed God.

[in the year] 5479.<sup>6</sup>

Presentation of the introduction to this treatise and the reason that the author was inspired to write it

Chapter one

Today's wars are so contentious and never-ending<sup>7</sup> that it is often the case that those involved, after having made every effort to avoid defeat and, not finding any other solution, try to finish themselves off and elude a conflict rather than accept subordination. We see this quite often in naval battles, during which the crew<sup>8</sup> of a ship that has been defeated scuttles it, choosing as the better option that of destroying themselves and thus finishing the fight rather than surrendering and becoming slaves. I find that this same type of stubbornness is at the root of today's spiritual and religious conflicts with those of the so-called reformed Church who,<sup>9</sup> after having fought valiantly and righteously, and after having expunged themselves of abuses and

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<sup>2</sup> The term "written" ("escrito") should be understood to mean that Michael López transcribed, and perhaps even translated *Providencia de Dios con Ysrael*. The reader will notice a difference in style between chapter one and subsequent chapters. The choppiness of Morteira's discourse in chapter one could be the result of the fact that he composed it shortly prior to completing the work, whereupon he may no have had a chance to review the text before his death in 1660.

<sup>3</sup> This is very daring statement insofar as it calls into question the legitimacy of both Catholicism (and, by extension, Spain and the Spanish Inquisition) as well as Calvinism in Amsterdam.

<sup>4</sup> The term "composed" (*compuesto*) clearly indicates that Morteira was the author of *Providencia*.

<sup>5</sup> The family name "Morteira," here with the typical Portuguese diphthong "ie," often appears in critical studies as "Mortera," which is the Spanish form of the term.

<sup>6</sup> The year 5479 refers to the Jewish lunar calendar and corresponds to the years 1718-19 on the Gregorian calendar.

<sup>7</sup> Morteira may well be alluding to the Eighty Year War, which was waged in the Low Countries between 1568 and 1648 and involved the Dutch as part of a group of nations that fought against the religious oppression and heavy taxation of the Spanish Empire. The Dutch ultimately gained their independence upon signing the Peace of Münster treaty with Spain in 1648. Morteira may also be evoking the memory of another conflict, the Thirty Years War, which took place (mostly in Germany) between 1618 and 1648 between Protestant and Catholic nations.

<sup>8</sup> As pointed out above, Morteira's use of "gente della" to refer to the "crew of a ship" is curious.

<sup>9</sup> This is the first time Morteira refers to the Protestant Reformation, which was led by Calvinists in the Netherlands. It is interesting to speculate that Morteira's reference to "those of the so-called reformed Church" may be an allusion to allusion to a radical Protestant sect known as the Collegiants, with which Baruch Spinoza, one of Morteira's pupils, has been associated (see Meinsma). Morteira could also be alluding to another group of Calvinists known as the Remonstrants, whose preachers were removed from office by Calvinists through decrees made at the Synod of Dort in 1818-19.

their cruel enemies—such as the tremendous idolatry that is the Host, the worship of the Cross and other images, which is strictly condemned by the word of God, the notion that it would be pleasing to God to refrain from holy matrimony (with [Catholic] priests being expressly prohibited from marriage), as well as other grave errors—have not stopped their fight even as they have been continuously attacked, day and night, by other foes of their devout knowledge[.] [Upon] not being able to endure this any longer, [they] courageously, after much opposition, and stubbornness, rejected these [foes], sweeping them under their feet, freeing themselves from their tyranny, denying all kinds of plurality, even the most far flung notions of divinity, not adhering to or professing anything but one source for everything, without any exceptions[.] [A]nd all the rest [of their enemies] are [like this] aside from the kind that is naturally, excellently and sublimely [better than] images in distinguishing all materiality, corporality, and the birth, passion and death from this first and only cause[.]<sup>10</sup>

All these points are illustrious victories and freedoms that the reformers of our times achieved upon defending their consciences and understanding, managing to evade not only the biting and cutting decrees of Rome, to which they are only chaf, but also from the words of the Gospels that they disprove with clear reasoning so that they achieve victory and freedom from such hurtful enemies [although they] lowered themselves to such a state so that they do not pertain to the seed of Israel, who were eternally trusted with God’s Law, as the [biblical] verse says: “Inform Jacob of his words, and tell Israel of his laws and judgements[.]”<sup>11</sup> [But] he [Jacob] did not tell these things to all the people,<sup>12</sup> and [for the] judgments that they did not know, [we say] Halleluiah, due to their observance of the Seven Laws of the sons of Noah,<sup>13</sup> with which Salvation can be achieved just like it used to be achieved by other good people in the world, before, on Mount Sinai, blessed God gave the Law to his people, who had arrived to this state

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<sup>10</sup> Morteira may be attempting to establish a theological point here, namely, that Judaism is superior to Christianity in “distinguishing all materiality” from the “first and only cause,” that is, God.

<sup>11</sup> Here Morteira paraphrases Isaiah 9:8, which reads as follows in the American Standard Version: “The Lord sent a word into Jacob, and it hath lighted upon Israel.” The spirituality of Amsterdam’s Jewish community is placed on a plane with the Reformation, in opposition to Spain. While this is a logical vision in light of the contemporary conflict between Spain and the Netherlands, it is also an ironic assertion insofar as the Sephardic community led by Morteira maintained an aristocratic attitude and did not fully accept as those of non-Spanish lineage. The existence of this attitude is discussed by Miriam Bodian, who finds that “Iberian concepts of blood” (131) helped to “perpetuate a self-image of social superiority” among Amsterdam’s Jewish community.

<sup>12</sup> Morteira may be making an interpretation here of Isaiah 9:9, which reads as follows in the American Standard Version: “And all the people shall know, even Ephraim and the inhabitant of Samaria, that say in pride and in stoutness of heart”). Morteira appears to be inferring that not all the people of Israel were informed by Jacob of God’s prophesy and, by extension, may be comparing the Israelites who were not informed to *conversos* living in Spain and Portugal, who are likewise ignorant of Judaism.

<sup>13</sup> According to Jewish tradition, the Seven Laws of Noah are the basic laws that need to be observed by all peoples. These precepts include prohibitions against the worship of idols, blasphemy, murder, incest, theft, eating flesh of live animals, and a command to establish courts of justice.

having won such great and impressive victories and trophies,<sup>14</sup> contrary to the great errors that disturbed their consciences[.] [The Jews at Mount Sinai] wanted to receive peacefully, without questions or arguments, the divinity of the Gospels in order to serve them as proof of the [same] sovereignty and excellence that they want to attribute to the man they call the Messiah, of portentous birth,<sup>15</sup> and the doctrines and miracles that they tell about him[.] [B]ut by doing this they deny themselves—as has been convincingly argued in a long treatise on this subject that I have written,<sup>16</sup> and [which is proven by the fact] that we have not received divine Gospels from our ancestors who were present at this event—because they had previously contradicted them in writing and held doctrines contrary to God’s Law and his prophets and precepts.

They<sup>17</sup> threaten [us] by saying that if we deny the Gospels they will deny the Law of Moses, an argument that obviously springs from obstinacy and desperation, because this form of speaking is not different [from the discourse of those who], after having fought valiantly to repel various enemies, [and] seeing themselves as beaten, say that if their ship is not left in peace, they will scuttle it, and they extinguish themselves along with their enemies in this way, because in denying the Law of Moses the Gospels are denied insofar as the latter is based in the former, and they hold fast to this position so that if they do not get what they want they will deny it anyway[.] [T]he captain who is experienced in this type of fighting, who knows ways of protecting himself from danger, is able, when he should do so, to get his enemy to surrender by force so that he gains dominion[.] [T]he truth must be clear and evident to whomever is offered the pervasive judgment of Almighty God[.] [This is the same type of reasoning that] obstructs the truth which is so hidden, [as in the case of determining] who was the mother of the live child, and who was the mother of the dead one,<sup>18</sup> [and the type at the root] of the very cruel and desperate proposition made by the mother of the dead one,<sup>19</sup> who said: “neither for you nor for me [will have the child], divide [it],”<sup>20</sup> from which it was clearly learned that she was the mother

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<sup>14</sup> **Is Morteira referring here to the treasure taken by the Israelites when they escaped from Egypt?**

<sup>15</sup> Morteira may be alluding here to Jesus Christ, although an intriguing possibility is that he referring to Sabbatai Zevi, a polemic messianic figure who made an enormous impact on late seventeenth-century communities of *conversos* and Jews in Europe and the Mediterranean. While it is true that Sabbataism did not reach Amsterdam until the mid-1660s, it is still interesting to consider that Morteira was aware of the growing popularity of the movement.

<sup>16</sup> Morteira may be alluding here to a treatise (“Arguments Against the Christian Religion”) discussed by Joseph Kaplan (“Rabbi Saul Levi Morteira’s Treatise”), or to a lost work, *Sefer ha-Qeri ve-ha-Ketiv*, mentioned by Marc Saperstein (19).

<sup>17</sup> Morteira returns here to his focus on anti-Jewish diatribe directed at the Jewish community by Protestants and Catholics.

<sup>18</sup> Here Morteira is alluding to the biblical episode (1 Kings 3: 16-28) of the Judgment of Solomon.

<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to speculate whether Morteira is equating the biblical mother of the dead child to contemporary Christians (Protestants? Catholics?) or perhaps even the followers of Sabatai Zevi.

<sup>20</sup> The end of the biblical verse that Morteira is paraphrasing here (1 Kings 3: 26) reads as follows in the American Standard Version: “...But the other said, It shall be neither mine nor thine; divide it.”

of the live one[.] [I]t is a desperate act to propose that just because one can't<sup>21</sup> have something, than another shouldn't have it either, and thus the ruling was pronounced that one was not the mother of the live child since she consented to its death[.]

[A]nd the live one remained alive and the dead one remained dead even though one [woman] had proposed that both [children] should be dead. I say then that although these reformed people claim that if we deny to them the divinity of the Gospels they will deny the Law of Moses—both children [should be] dead as the mother of the dead [child] says<sup>22</sup>— for there are ways of using the truth and divine wisdom to find out quickly which is [the] live [one], and which is [the] dead one, which is divine, and which isn't.<sup>23</sup> This is our topic in this short treatise, [which is] as concise as possible, because each one of the points [made] and proofs [provided] can be [debated] extensively and supported by elaborate reasoning[.]

I have been moved [to write this book] after listening to and speaking with these men<sup>24</sup> daily, which has incited a fervor in me to put an end to this threat[;] [S]peaking about these things usually causes the arguments to become intertwined so that they get confused, which does not occur in writing, where the reader<sup>25</sup> can at his leisure read [the material] over and over again, and examine the material clearly[.] And I have heard much more that has incited me to write this book, [the topic of] which has become a threat and a dispute among papists, so much so that a

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<sup>21</sup> Contractions have been used in the English translation in order to convey the oral style of the original text.

<sup>22</sup> The Spanish phrase reads “y entre ambos quedan muertos,” which is difficult to translate, and which I have rendered as “both children [should be] dead” in order to capture the meaning of the text. It is interesting to speculate that phrases such as this one, which at times appear out of context, might actually derive from seventeenth century “recordings” of sermons transcribed by a member of Morteira's congregation and then perhaps given to Morteira, whereupon he incorporated them into *Providencia* verbatim.

<sup>23</sup> Morteira may be alluding here to the claim by Sabatai Zevi that he was the Jewish messiah.

<sup>24</sup> Morteira's use of a first person perspective in order to reinforce his point reveals the existence of contemporary discourse on religious ideologies between the Jewish community and “estos señores” (these men), a phrase that may allude to Calvinists. With respect to Morteira's engagement with the non-Jewish community, Edward Feld writes that “the bulk of his works ... are apologetic attacks on Christianity including a report of his conversations with Calvinist Dutch clergy. These works demonstrate that Morteira was quite aware of contemporary Christian theologies and was in contact with the non-Jewish world of the Netherlands” (108). According to Yosef Kaplan, “[l]etters and conversations between Christian theologians and scholars and Jewish intellectuals became a significant feature of the Dutch scene in the seventeenth century. These encounters developed at times into probing religious arguments about the differences between the two religions and about the different interpretations given to chapters and verses of the Bible that were a bone of contention between Jews and Christians” (“The Jews” 157).

<sup>25</sup> It is significant that Morteira acknowledges a reading public for a text whose style is heavily infused with elements common to works (sermons, epic poetry, etc.) composed within primarily oral cultures. Morteira reveals here that he intended for his to be read (perhaps read aloud to groups of Jews or *conversos*).

Portuguese Jesuit,<sup>26</sup> seeing himself hounded by attacks, said in order to end the dispute that if they denied the Gospels to him he would deny the Law of Moses, as if denying the Law of Moses were not the same as denying the Gospels, just like an entire house falls once its foundation falls, and as if denying the Law of Moses were not the same as declaring oneself a libertine, without the Law of Moses or divine precepts, because these things can only come from that source. That is the tone of the obstinacy of this fight, in which they threaten to skuttle their ship and throw everything to the wind if they don't confess the truth[.] In the end I hope for divine favor if they don't confess to them, [because] in taking this risk each one receives what he deserves according to the just and divine sentence pronounced by [King] Solomon, and it is because he who has freed himself with the truth [will be able to be free himself] from so many errors and abuses, which can disappear as one becomes free from [these and] other [practices],<sup>27</sup> [as such] serving in the present as an example from the past.

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<sup>26</sup> According to Salomon (“Haham Saul Levi Morteira”), Morteira himself attempted to become a Jesuit but was denied a papal dispensation. In this light, Morteira’s reference to “vn jesuita portuguéz” (a Portuguese Jesuit) may be autobiographical (cf. *Morteira* xxxix).

<sup>27</sup> The phrase “passados avn se librara con ella, de otros que le quedaron” is unclear and I have translated it as “which can disappear as one becomes free from [these and] other [practices].”

## Chapter 10

Demonstrates that, just as God parted the sea in order to free his people from the clutches of their enemies, so he continues to do so frequently today when he parts the sea of danger with extraordinary works to free them.

The same passage<sup>28</sup> continues by saying that [you]<sup>29</sup> parted the sea in front of them, which is certainly an extraordinary miracle in itself as for its circumstances. [I say] in itself because it caused the freedom of Israel from the hands of its enemies who were pursuing them in order to destroy them, as is magnificently presented in the song about this victory sung by Moses and the children of Israel.<sup>30</sup> It is noteworthy as well due to its circumstances insofar as they [the Israelites] were without any hope of remedy or refuge because they were surrounded by the inhabitable and uncivilized desert on both sides, by the sea in front of them, and from behind by the large army of their enemies with numerous horses and chariots, and [because] they had not been shown beforehand the manner by which they were going to be saved, whereupon they suddenly saw the sea pull back and make a path for them in its midst, so that within the greatest danger they found salvation.<sup>31</sup>

On one occasion only did God do this with a clearly observable<sup>32</sup> miracle, and today he does it for the people of Israel many, many times by allowing them to pass freely through the sea of many troubles and dangers, by natural means, which should be called hidden miracles, although they are clearly observable to whomever considers and praises without prejudice<sup>33</sup> the ways of God[.] [C]onsider,<sup>34</sup> in the first place, that all foreigners outside their own lands maintain reverence for some prince and consideration for some lord or great person or religious

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<sup>28</sup> **Morteira is referring to the biblical verse discussed at the end of the preceding chapter.**

<sup>29</sup> The second person singular verb form is employed by Morteira in the original (“partiste”, you parted), indicating that he is directing his discourse toward God.

<sup>30</sup> Here Morteira is referring to the biblical episode (Book of Exodus 13:17-14:29) that describes the escape of the Israelites from the Egyptians with the help of the miraculous parting of the Red Sea. In particular, the allusion is to Exodus 15:1-15:18, known in Hebrew as “Az Yashir Moshe” and in English as the “Song of the Sea,” in which the Israelites praise God for destroying their Egyptian pursuers by drowning them in the Red Sea. It is interesting to note that the Song of the Sea is included among the prayers that Jews traditionally recite during the morning (during *shacharit* services), and as such might reflect Morteira’s desire to inculcate his congregants with references to Jewish practices performed on a daily basis.

<sup>31</sup> In recalling the biblical episode of the Jewish exodus from a period of slavery in Egypt Morteira reinforces a theme that runs throughout *Providencia*, namely, that Jews in seventeenth-century Europe also faced perils that threatened their existence. These perils include the Inquisition as well as the reluctance of those *conversos* who had escaped from Spain and Portugal to practice Judaism according to *halachik* norms as rabbis such as Morteira exhorted them to do.

<sup>32</sup> The Spanish term “manifiesto,” which literally means “obvious” and which I translate herein as “clearly observable,” is noteworthy in that it reveals that early manifestations of ideologies associated with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment (such as the importance of scientific observation) were circulating through northern Europe during the 1600s.

<sup>33</sup> The meaning of the Spanish phrase used, “sin pasión,” is unclear and I have translated it tentatively as “without prejudice.”

<sup>34</sup> In typical sermonic fashion Morteira directs his discourse here toward the public.

figure, who know that if they were to do injustice to those foreigners then they [the foreigners] would also do the same thing in their own land. But for the people of Israel there is no place<sup>35</sup> where they are scattered in any part of the world where there is a prince, people, or potentate who comes out in their favor or comes to their defense, [or] takes responsibility for those who live under another leader, so that [the Jewish people] does not have a country today or an organized people, or a leader who observes its Law or is even of its faith[.] [A]nd [the Jews] can't even hope to help themselves because they are dispersed and they lack the means wherever men get along and love each other, [and live] in matrimony, and eat and drink together, [which are] all things that separate the people of Israel from other nations, as the [biblical] verse says: The people who live alone are not counted among the people.<sup>36</sup> But they [the Jews] are<sup>37</sup> surrounded by the dessert, an inhabitable land, and they are being pursued by the enemy, and they don't have any hope other than for God to miraculously part the sea of danger so that they pass through it freely[.] [T]his is what the prophet says: "Israel and Judah are not forsaken,"<sup>38</sup> says God, as if [the prophet] were saying that Israel and Judah are forsaken [with respect to] all human types of assistance but not [with respect] to their God, who is always with [the people of] Israel<sup>39</sup> or [by revealing himself] through clear miracles as in previous times, or through hidden providence as in times of bondage, because this is what he promised in his Law [even] after the horrible threats were made to those who had transgressed his precepts, as it says [in the Bible]: "And after all of this neither did I abandon them nor did I destroy them so as not to break my oath to them, because I am the Lord your God."<sup>40</sup>

[A]t this point it is<sup>41</sup> necessary to compile and put forward numerous cases and several stories that certify this truth[.] [B]ut this is<sup>42</sup> a different task, and comprises an entire chronicle,

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<sup>35</sup> The use of the Spanish term "rezelo" (in modern Spanish "recelo"), a noun that can mean "suspicion," "misgiving, or "mistrust," is unclear in this context and I have chosen to translate it as "corner," that is, as if "rezelo" were an incorrect form of "recinto" (place).

<sup>36</sup> **Morteira is paraphrasing ??????.** The precise meaning of this sentence in the context of Morteira's recounting of the Jewish exodus from Egypt is unclear.

<sup>37</sup> Morteira's use of present tense verbs—"están sercados" (they are surrounded) and "son perseguidos" ("they are being pursued")—infuses his rendition of the biblical tale with a sense of dramatic tension and, on a psychological level, may reflect his desire to equate the threats faced by the biblical Israelites to those faced by Iberian *conversos* during the seventeenth century.

<sup>38</sup> Morteira is paraphrasing Jeremiah 51:5, which reads as follows in the American Standard Version: "For Israel is not forsaken, nor Judah, of his God, of Jehovah of hosts; though their land is full of guilt against the Holy One of Israel." The Spanish term used, "viudo," is literally translated as "widower," although I have rendered it here as "forsaken" in order to capture the spirit of Morteira's discourse.

<sup>39</sup> The Spanish third person singular pronoun "él" has been translated here as a reference to the people of Israel.

<sup>40</sup> Although the first person singular pronoun ("I," referring to God) is used in *Providencia*, Morteira appears to be paraphrasing Nehemiah 9:31, which reads as follows in the American Standard Version: "Nevertheless in thy manifold mercies thou didst not make a full end of them, nor forsake them; for thou art a gracious and merciful God."

<sup>41</sup> The past tense verb "era" ("was") does not fit the context of the sentence (especially in light of the present tense verb "sertifican" ["certify"] further on in the same sentence). While the change from the past tense is typical of sermonic discourse (and, as has been noted, is a technique used

something that is beyond the scope of the present brief work and it would distract us greatly from our principal aim[.] [S]o we will [only] briefly put forward a few things that will serve as examples, and whomever wants to know the stories completely should try to consult them in their original form, because inasmuch as it is not possible to treat everything here in detail, as the [biblical] verse says<sup>43</sup>: *“the people showed their great hatred for Israel by uniting<sup>44</sup> and preaching against God[.] [A]nd they cut a firmament above his people, and they communicate skillfully, and they preach against those elected ones, and they said: ‘go forth and exterminate, no los de gente,<sup>45</sup> and don’t be called by the name of Israel[.]”*

[H]ere you all have the abbreviated story of Haman, who tried to destroy all the Jews in one day as recorded in the Book of Esther[.]<sup>46</sup> And [in the story she] informs the king [of Haman] in her request since there is no interior or exterior cause that can protect [them] from extinction[.] [As Haman] says: “there is a people [that is] scattered among [other] peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws [are] different than those of other peoples, and they don’t obey the laws of the king, and it is useless for the king to tolerate them[.]”<sup>47</sup> [For the one] who came to their aid during [a time of] such great danger, [and] who parted the sea of anguish that was in front of them so that they could be saved from such a cruel enemy, was no prince [and this] was not of their own doing but rather the providence of almighty God that freed them through hidden miracles.

See the admirable paths through which God freed from clear danger, on so many occasions, the Jews of Spain and Portugal, as is recounted in the book called *Vara de Juda*[.]<sup>48</sup> This is what happened when the king of Portugal, who couldn’t sleep one night, stood in front of one of the palace windows to get some fresh air, and he saw two men who were carrying a corpse[.] [A]nd later on he sent one of his pages who, spying on the men from afar, [found out] who they were, and saw that they were throwing it over the walls of the patio of a Jew, and that they were two monks who were returning to a certain monastery[.] In the morning, there was a riot [after] word spread that there was a dead Christian in the house of a Jew[.] [L]ater the law arrived and they found it and they went to the king with a great uproar[.] [A]nd the king told

to add a contemporary dimension to the sermon in the hopes of peaking the public’s interest), I have translated the verb “era” as “is” in order to provide greater clarity.

<sup>42</sup> For clarity, I have again translated past tense verb “era” (“was”) as “is.”

<sup>43</sup> **To which biblical verse is Morteira referring here? The next several sentences, whose meaning is unclear, may be allusions to biblical verses.**

<sup>44</sup> For the sake of clarity, I have translated “que se juntaran diferentes nações” (literally “that different nations might unite”) as “by uniting.”

<sup>45</sup> The meaning of “no los de gente” is unclear.

<sup>46</sup> Morteira’s allusion to the story of Purim is no surprising insofar as this festival, which centers on the salvation of the Jewish people from imminent danger by the actions of a heroine who must conceal the fact that she is Jewish, was one of the most popular among *conversos*.

<sup>47</sup> Morteira is paraphrasing the Book of Esther: chapter 8, which reads as follows in the American Standard Version: “And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from those of every people; neither keep they the king’s laws: therefore it is not for the king’s profit to suffer them.”

<sup>48</sup> Here Morteira is referring to *La vara de Yehudah*, which was composed by Solomon Ibn Verga in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries and which was reprinted in Amsterdam in 1744.

them<sup>49</sup> to calm down [and] that he would mete out justice, whereupon he ordered that some rabbis be summoned[.] [A]nd he asked them the meaning of the [biblical?] verse that says<sup>50</sup>: [“]the psalmist doesn’t sleep [and] neither does the protector of Israel get sleepy[.”] [T]hey responded that the meaning was not to sleep too little or too much[.] [T]he king replied that the true meaning of the verse was not to sleep, or allow [yourself] to sleep, which is what had occurred to him. [A]nd he told them the story [of what had really happened], whereupon he ordered that inquiries be made at the convent about which monks had gone out that night[.] [U]pon questioning them [the monks] the truth was discovered, and they were brought to justice while the Jews escaped from a great danger because the protector of Israel does not sleep or allow [himself] to sleep[.]

Consider<sup>51</sup> the recent admirable case in Ragusa [Italy], which happened to a certain Isaac Jesurún,<sup>52</sup> whom I know well, because of false testimony brought against him by a woman who had killed a little girl in order to steal the jewels [she?] was carrying, and hid [the little girl?] beneath the bed[.] [L]ater on, after being found by the law and confessing<sup>53</sup> they asked her why she had done this with such malice, [to which] she replied that the aforementioned Jesurún had persuaded her to [do] this so that she would give the blood to him[.]<sup>54</sup> [F]or this he was

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<sup>49</sup> The Spanish term used “dixé” (“I told them”), should read “dixo” (“he told them”). **What verbal form(s) is employed the other versions of *Providencia*?**

<sup>50</sup> **To what (biblical?) verse is Morteira referring?**

<sup>51</sup> In typical sermonic fashion, Morteira directs himself here to his public.

<sup>52</sup> The following is the story of Isaac Jesurún as presented in JewishEncyclopedia.com (under the heading “Jesurun”):

Victim of a false accusation in Ragusa in the seventeenth century; died in Jerusalem. Jesurun, an old man, was accused by a Christian woman, who had robbed and killed the daughter of a Christian merchant of Ragusa, of having persuaded her to commit the crime in order to provide blood for the celebration of the Jewish holy day. On Sept. 19, 1622, Isaac was taken prisoner and racked six times in the most cruel manner. Though he still insisted that the accusation was false, he was sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment in a cave. He was accordingly chained naked in a very narrow room specially prepared, where he was given as nourishment nothing but bread and water, which were passed him through a hole.... When several of the judges who had sentenced the innocent man died suddenly, the others regarded this as a punishment from God, and released Jesurun after three years' confinement. Jesurun, who survived all the tortures and hardships, traveled throughout Italy, where those who had heard of his sufferings looked on him with wonder. Several years later he died, as stated above, in Jerusalem.

<sup>53</sup> I have translated the Spanish term “convencida” (“convinced”) as “confessing” in this context.

<sup>54</sup> This is one of many examples of the blood libel that had been invoked since the Middle Ages in order to foment anti-Jewish sentiment and persecution. For more on medieval anti-Jewish legends, see Joshua Trachtenberg. Yosef Kaplan provides an overview of anti-Jewish discrimination in Holland during Morteira’s time:

Despite the expressions of hostility towards Jews that can sometimes be found in theological and polemical works written in the Republic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, physical attacks upon Jews were rare and had no serious repercussions. There were scholars, Voetius and Hulsius for example, who accepted the truth of the blood libels of which the Jews had been accused since the twelfth century in

imprisoned and punished with the most unspeakable tortures known to man[.] Afterwards, the Jewish ghetto was closed and no one was allowed to enter or leave, and everyone's life was at risk<sup>55</sup>, and only blessed God, with his great providence, freed them, as can be plainly seen in this story.

On another occasion during recent times, in one of the largest cities in Poland, a perverse Jew,<sup>56</sup> having decided to become a Christian because of the falling out he had with his Nation,<sup>57</sup> determined to get revenge[.] So before he went [to convert] he had the chance to put a vile<sup>58</sup> of blood in the box in the synagogue where they keep the books of the Law[.]<sup>59</sup> [A]fterwards he went to the Jesuits saying that he had come there to clean his conscience and become a Christian by revealing a great crime that the Jews had done, which was to hide a vile of blood from a Christian whom they had killed in order to use it for Passover[.]<sup>60</sup> [O]n the night when word spread of the case, the beadle of the synagogue,<sup>61</sup> who slept there, dreamed that there was a big fire in the box containing the books of the Law[.] He got out of bed and went to look and, upon not finding anything, went back to sleep and dreamed the same thing again[.] [H]e looked more carefully and found the vile, which he put in a secret [place.] In the morning, the friars, the law, and the New Christian entered the synagogue with great commotion and, looking with much diligence, didn't find anything, and the enemies of Israel were ridiculed.

Let us consider in detail the very severe [obstacles] in the kingdoms of Spain that prohibit any member of the Jewish Nation<sup>62</sup> from leaving those lands and the great difficulties faced by those who try to escape—the ship boardings, the scrutiny [of travelers] along the routes—in sum, the great energy that the Inquisition dedicates to this[.] [A]nd, at the same time, one will ponder how the providence of God parts the sea for them and frees hundreds of souls from the hands of these Egyptians who pursue them, [the effects of which continue to be] seen well in so many illustrious communities formed by [the descendants of] those who were freed: Constantinople, Salonika, Cairo, Jerusalem, Safed, many parts of Turkey, many others in Corfu, Leghorn,

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various Christian countries, and even Grotius believed this defamation, at least during part of his life. Yet there is no record of a single incident in which Jews were charged with this heinous crime in the Republic, except for an astonishing affair that took place in 1715, when an apostate Jew named Isaac Saxel accused the local community of murdering a Christian child for religious reasons. Though all the Jews of the city were arrested, they were released three weeks later, when their innocence was proved. (“The Jews” 161-62)

<sup>55</sup> I have translated the Spanish phrase “de su dicho” as “at risk.”

<sup>56</sup> The identity of this “perverse Jew” is unknown.

<sup>57</sup> The term “Nación” (“Nation”) refers here to descendants of Spanish and Portuguese *conversos*.

<sup>58</sup> I have translated the term “vedoma” as “vile” (as in “vile of blood”).

<sup>59</sup> It is curious that Morteira refers to the ark in a synagogue where the scrolls of the Torah are kept as a “box” (“caxa”). Did Morteira think that his public would not recognize the Sephardi (“hekhál”) or Ashkenazi (“Aron Kodesh”) terms by which the ark has traditionally been called?

<sup>60</sup> Morteira follows the story of Isaac Jesurún with another example of a blood libel accusation.

<sup>61</sup> I have translated the Spanish term “ministro de la sinagoga” (literally “minister of the synagogue”) as “beadle.”

<sup>62</sup> Morteira makes another reference here to the “Nation,” which, as mentioned above, included descendants of Iberian *conversos*. It is interesting that Morteira does not mention Portugal at this point since the Inquisition was also very active there.

Tunisia, Algeria, many parts of the Barbary Coast, Venice, Hamburg and, finally, in Amsterdam, and a little while later in America, Barbados and other lands where individual Jews are scattered,<sup>63</sup> for whom God, in different and marvelous ways, parted the sea of dangers, and [the Jewish people] escaped from their pursuers[.] [E]ach of his deeds is spoken of with great admiration, and some of them deserve to be called clearly evident miracles[.] [F]or it would be an infinite undertaking to tell about all the examples of divine providence which, in this case, and in similar [circumstances?],<sup>64</sup> are with this people, insofar as they all human kindness has abandoned them, and they only receive divine protection, which is visible and evident proof that the law they observe is divine.

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<sup>63</sup> I have translated the phrase “y otras partes todas congregas compuestas de particulares” as “other lands where individual Jews are scattered.”

<sup>64</sup> The meaning (and spelling) of the word after “semejantes” in this manuscript is unclear.

## Chapter 11

Demonstrates and records three marvelous cases in our times, which centered on the soul, life and personal property and by which God manifests the unique care by which he treats his people.

I can't delve further into my material without lamenting our misery, which, among the other miseries that captivity has brought, is a ???[.]<sup>65</sup> [T]here isn't any book that records the great and remarkable cases that have happened, which are recounted in everyday discourse among our community members, in many or all of the places where we are dispersed[.] However, we don't have an organized people, nor our own leader, nor is there anyone concerned with the matter, and if someone does know [what to do?], usually the idea is immediately relegated to memory, except those [ideas?] that some author, accidentally, when referring to another case, makes not an intentional but a passing mention of them so that they serve as proof of what we are trying [to prove], [namely,] that blessed God defends us today with special care, with concealed miracles, as he would do in the past with clear [miracles][.] [We are] also [trying to explain this] so that this treatise records those [miracles] that blessed God performed for us in the recent past, in plain view, [which] I will relate briefly in this chapter[.] [A]nd before doing that I will mention a case that comes from the Talmud, which aside from serving as an example of what we are trying [to prove], will serve as a model for what I will describe afterwards about our times.<sup>66</sup>

And the thing is that among the different [forms of] persecution that the people of Israel suffered during Roman times, one that was enacted with severe punishments [for transgressors], which prohibited anyone from circumcising their sons, or keeping the Sabbath, or not sleeping with their wives during menstruation, [which are] three of the principal precepts of God's Law[.] [Having been] afflicted by this decree, the Israelites looked to their traditional prayers as weapons, as the [biblical] verse says[:] "They cried out and they escaped[.] They put their trust in you and were not ashamed[.]"<sup>67</sup> God heard them and through natural means delivered them from their anguish by motivating a senator to propose to the Senate that if the [anti-Jewish] decree received thorough consideration [it would be found] to be very detrimental to the State[.] [T]herefore, if the Jews were to be treated as enemies [for having] a different religion, [with the aim of] attempting to make them forget, little by little, the observance of their precepts, it would be seen that by such a decree they would, rather, favor them and they would [instead] further strengthen their enemies because it would be said, in the first place, that people should try to make their enemies poor, and not rich[.] [Because] if they were to prohibit the Jews from keeping the Sabbath, during which they refrain from all work, and business, they would get much richer[.] [T]hey would also say that, for the same reason, people should try to weaken their enemies physically, and not [make them] stronger, so they shouldn't prohibit the Jews from [performing] circumcision, which weakens them at that young age by reducing the essential blood with which they are engendered, [which is] so necessary for gaining strength during those

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<sup>65</sup> I have yet to decipher the meaning of the symbol used in the text at this juncture.

<sup>66</sup> **I have yet to identify the source for the Talmudic episode to which Morteira is about to refer.** Although the Romans were at times decidedly intolerant, as when they destroyed the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem (which is recounted in the Babylonian Talmud), tolerance was exhibited toward the Jews, who were exempted (albeit by paying a tax) from adopting the state religion of Rome (which deified the emperor).

<sup>67</sup> Morteira is paraphrasing Psalm 22:4, which reads as follows in the American Standard Version: "Our fathers trusted in thee: They trusted, and thou didst deliver them."

early years, and if they prohibited it they [the Jews] would be much stronger[.] [I]n the same way it was proposed that their enemies should be few and not many, as the Jews were an enemy [that was few in number], so they shouldn't have prohibited them from staying away from their wives during menstruation, because they would thus increase greatly in number since they usually were separated from them for almost half the year, and if it weren't this way they would procreate much more[.] [A]ll of the reasons [heretofore] considered comprised the reason for annulling that decree, and they [the Jews] passed freely through the sea of hatred.

I consider that these three precepts that they [the Romans] wanted to prohibit with this decree are perfectly exemplary of the three gifts that man possesses, which are soul, body and personal property[.] [B]y circumcision the soul is perfected, and in restraining from procreation with women during menstruation the body is perfected, and by keeping the Sabbath one's personal property is perfected. [T]hese three notions form the foundation of the cases [I will describe], in which, during recent years, blessed God has shown his immense providence through hidden miracles for us.

First, with respect to the soul, it is noteworthy what happened when Brazil was taken by the Portuguese, the ultimate enemies of the Jews, and especially of those who became Christians[.]<sup>68</sup> [These New Christians are] accustomed to the very cruel *autos de fe*,<sup>69</sup> in which, with much stubborn zeal and delight,<sup>70</sup> they make human victims of this persecuted people, who are like other Portuguese of the same [victimized] state, an army of soldiers comprised of blacks, mulattoes, the poor, the hungry, the destitute, [all] desirous of improving their essence and fortune in a nation that hates them so much[.] [A]nd almighty God, with his infinite power, prevented [danger] and saved his people from all of these imminent dangers [by] instilling Governor Barzeto<sup>71</sup> with the will to see [this anti-Judaism] in such a way that he ordered that it be proclaimed, with severe punishments [for transgressors], that no one should touch or bother any person from the Hebrew nation; aside from that he [the governor] also permitted them to sell their goods and 600 of our people who were there were given passage to Holland[.] Since they lacked Dutch ships they gave them Portuguese ones, so that they left in sixteen ships, many of them being beautiful ones, and everyone arrived safely by divine grace and providence[.] However, during the journey they took great risks, and before the Jews could be handed over to the Inquisition, God provided a French boat, which carried them away and brought them safely

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<sup>68</sup> Morteira is alluding here to *conversos* of Brazil who, in the early 1630s, fled from inquisitorial persecution to Pernambuco—where the occupying Dutch practiced tolerance—a region that also attracted Dutch Jews who sought business opportunities. Portugal regained control of Pernambuco in 1654, whereupon much of the Jewish community fled the region. Some of these individuals, who never reached Europe (according to some accounts after their boat was captured by pirates and they were rescued and taken to America by a French ship), eventually formed the first community of Jews in New Amsterdam, which was later renamed New York City. For more on Dutch tolerance in Pernambuco, see Israel and Schwartz.

<sup>69</sup> The *autos de fe* were public ceremonies held in Spain and Portugal at which the punishments given to condemned heretics, including *conversos* and other victims of the Inquisition, were announced.

<sup>70</sup> I have not included a translation of the phrase, “como quien haze sacrefiçio,” whose meaning is unclear in the context of the sentence.

<sup>71</sup> **I have yet to establish the identity of Governor Barzeto.**

to Africa, or Niwenedezlandt,<sup>72</sup> from where they came in peace to Holland[.] [It would require] a very long story to relate in detail that which happened to each individual on this voyage[;] it is enough to say that all arrived safely, and God [allowed] their souls and consciences to escape from the hands of those who usually fight them so cruelly and with so much skill.

The second [case], [which] concern's one's personal property, was shown to the whole world when, mid way through the summer, on a Saturday morning in June, many brigades of soldiers suddenly tried to occupy the city of Amsterdam<sup>73</sup> and God, with clearly evident providence, stopped the progression of the seasons[.] [I]t was summer, in July, during the full moon<sup>74</sup>—it was that night<sup>75</sup>—before the morning when they tried suddenly to take the [city] gates, when the [clouds] parted [and there descended] a great darkness accompanied by rain, hail and wind, as if it were the middle of winter, which caused [the soldiers] to lose their way so that they were discovered before they could reach the gates after [trying for] a long time[.] [A]nd peace came, which assuaged public worry, [because] there isn't any doubt that in such a rich an opulent city there wasn't anyone capable of stopping the soldiers from looting, as they had done in the villages through which they had passed[.] [A]nd above all what was certain was the harm that was going to be inflicted on the Jewish nation, as much as for the renown of their wealth as for the religious difference, the latter being of a more profound significance[.] [A]nd this thing happened a few years [earlier during] the siege of Belduque,<sup>76</sup> [when they] conquered the Dutch by surprise with the consent of the burgers of the city of Wesel[.] [A]nd the victorious soldiers did not physically harm any residents or steal their property with the exception of one very rich Jew, whose house was ransacked and looted, which left him poor[.] [T]his would have undoubtedly happened during the surprise attack on Amsterdam if it were not for God who with such clear wonder stopped it and saved our homes.

The third [case] concerns life and the body, because after that [event] there was an epidemic in Amsterdam [that] was so widespread that for some months in the summer during the siege of [the city?]<sup>77</sup> almost 6,000 dies each week, and in all this time not one Jew died of the many who were in the city[.] [A]nd what was even more noteworthy was that, with such a large number of Jews from Germany who had fled from the cruel wars that had been [waged] for a long time, and who had lost all their goods—[these Jews] are very poor and without proper clothes, poorly nourished, and living in cramped quarters, in unclean conditions—not even one

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<sup>72</sup> I have yet to establish the location of “Niwenedezlandt,” although this may be a reference to “New Amsterdam,” which would be .

<sup>73</sup> Morteira may be referring here to an episode that occurred during the Eighty Years War. Although Morteira specifically mentions Amsterdam, it is interesting to speculate that he is actually alluding to the siege of Haarlem (located some 16 km from Amsterdam) by the forces of King Phillip II of Spain, which took place from December 1572 to July 1573. Spanish forces were unsuccessful in attacking the walls of Haarlem, and, although the city was ultimately forced to capitulate—an episode similar to the one described by Morteira—its briefly successful resistance inspired other Dutch cities to continue to resist Spanish domination.

<sup>74</sup> I have translated the phrase “en tiempo de luna” as “during the full moon.”

<sup>75</sup> The inclusion of this reiteration that the event he is describing occurred on “that night” is reflective of the oral sermonic style of *Providencia*.

<sup>76</sup> I have yet to identify the reference to the siege of Belduque.

<sup>77</sup> **The symbol used in the manuscript at this point is unclear, and appears to be an abbreviation for “the city.”**

of them died during all that time, even though, due to their destitution, they should have naturally been susceptible to this danger, and with great wonder the powerful guardian defended us.<sup>78</sup>

I remember reading a similar case in the *Vara de Juda* on page 10: King Alonso held a meeting with a doctor of his named Thomas, and with a certain purpose in mind the king pronounced these words[:]<sup>79</sup> [“]in my day as well there was a great [outbreak of the] plague during which hundreds of Christians died, but not one Jew, until eventually the Christians took their children to Jewish homes in the hopes of saving them[.”] And I’m not saying that it’s always this way, because many times they [the Jews] suffer like everyone else, and at times more than others, because everything is governed by divine providence, according to [one’s] merits or sins, and also by causes that are hidden to us and evident to divine wisdom, because during the [same] time when blessed God performed clear miracles for them [the Jews?] he [also] punished them [the Egyptians?] with fire from the sky, insects and venomous snakes[.] [B]ecause just like a father punishes his son on the same day that he gives him food and clothing, so does blessed God with the people of Israel, which is called his son as the [biblical] verse says[:] [“]and you will know with your heart that just as a father punishes his child so does God punish you[.”]<sup>80</sup> [N]o one, then, can deny that to the people whom God governs he gave his Law, like a father to his son, so they would obey it as if they were a son.

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<sup>78</sup> The reference to the poverty of the German Jews who had emigrated to Amsterdam is a topic that has been discussed by scholars such as Bodian (125-29).

<sup>79</sup> **I have yet to establish the identity of both King Alonso and Thomas.**

<sup>80</sup> **I have yet to establish the biblical verse in question.**

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