

2014

# Prevenciones Divinas Contra la Vana Idolatria de las Gentes, vol. 1 By Isaac Orobio de Castro

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## Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Warshawsky, Matthew, "Prevenciones Divinas Contra la Vana Idolatria de las Gentes, vol. 1 By Isaac Orobio de Castro" (2014).  
*International Languages and Culture Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 3.  
[http://pilotscholars.up.edu/ilc\\_facpubs/3](http://pilotscholars.up.edu/ilc_facpubs/3)

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## ***PREVENCIONES DIVINAS CONTRA LA VANA IDOLATRÍA DE LAS GENTES, VOL. 1***

**BY ISAAC OROBIO DE CASTRO**

Critical edition by Myriam Silvera (original text in Spanish, commentary and notes in Italian). Florence: Casa Editrice Leo S. Olschki, 2013. lxxviii + 220 pp. Print.

**Reviewed by Matthew D. Warshawsky.**

Thanks to an influx from Iberia of at least two thousand Portuguese New Christians, that is, *conversos*, or baptized Catholics of Jewish descent, Amsterdam during the 1600s became a great center of Sephardic cultural and spiritual life. None of the émigrés personified the geographical and spiritual mobility characteristic of this group more than Isaac Orobio de Castro, whose biography encompassed nearly all the salient features of seventeenth-century *converso* life on the Iberian Peninsula and beyond. Orobio was born in Bragança, Portugal, in approximately 1617 to New Christian parents of likely Spanish ancestry who baptized him Baltasar Alvares de Orobio. While the youth was barely a child, the family joined many other Portuguese *conversos* in reversing the exile imposed upon their ancestors by returning to Spain. At the universities of Osuna and Alcalá he studied medicine, a profession common among New Christians, given that the purity of blood statutes in Spain excluded them, at least officially, from advancement in many other fields. During the years he resided in Spain—more than half his life—Orobio and his family moved frequently, living in Málaga, Cádiz, Seville, where he briefly held a university chair in medicine, and several smaller cities. Despite his family's history of secret Judaism, Orobio married an apparent Old Christian, Isabel Pérez de la Peña, and enjoyed commercial success with his father-in-law. After the Inquisition of Seville prosecuted him and other family members for Jewish heresy during the 1650s, they left Iberia via a route commonly followed by other *conversos*, residing briefly in Bayonne and Toulouse before establishing permanent residence in Amsterdam. The more tolerant environment of that city permitted Orobio to become a 'New Jew': he changed his name to Isaac; held leadership positions in the Jewish community supporting the sick and overseeing the religious education of young men; and wrote apologetic and polemical texts on controversial issues in Judaism, sometimes in opposition to the works of other prominent Sephardic scholars, and on his belief in the superiority of Judaism to Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

In light of the fact that the majority of the writings of Orobio de Castro are extant in manuscript only, Myriam Silvera has performed a great service to readers wanting greater insight into the intellectual ferment of Sephardic Amsterdam by publishing a critical edition of the first part of *Prevenciones divinas contra la vana idolatría de las gentes* [*Divine Forewarnings against the Vain Idolatry of Gentiles*]. Silvera, who teaches Jewish studies at the University of Rome Tor Vergata, has based her edition principally on the first manuscript version of the text, completed most likely in the early 1670s and housed at the British Library in London. A meticulous researcher, she also consulted other codices of the text while preparing her edition, and in the footnotes includes references to four of them—one each from The Hague and Munich and two from the Etz Haim Library in the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam—in cases of discrepancies between the various manuscripts. Provided they understand Italian, readers interested in manuscripts as historical and linguistic documents will find in the introduction a trove of details explaining why Silvera chose the particular versions of the manuscripts and the variance between them. The introduction also gives helpful background information regarding the intended audience of the work and its principal themes. Here, most interestingly, Silvera claims that the title *Prevenciones divinas* inverts the traditional argument of continuity between the Old and New Testaments; instead, she asserts that Orobio wanted to show that the Pentateuch contains a divine forewarning against what he felt were the false interpretations of Christianity.

In his preface to the book, Gianni Paganini situates Orobio within the cultural context of Sephardic Amsterdam as part of an effort to shine a light on writers who otherwise might be eclipsed by the most infamous member

(and then former member) of that community, Baruch Spinoza. Thus, the works of Orobio grew in part from an "intersecting triangular focus" connecting Catholic, Jewish, and Calvinist cultures in a place where the writing of polemical, often anti-Christian, literature was possible, at least in manuscript form (x). Although he only addresses *Prevenciones divinas* at the beginning and end of his foreword, Paganini highlights the breadth and importance of Orobio's contribution to this genre, calling special attention to his polemic with the Remonstrant theologian Philip van Limborch.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, Limborch called the treatise that arose from this discussion *De veritate religionis christianae amica collatio con erudito judaeo* (loosely, *Friendly Conferral with a Jewish Scholar on the Truth of the Christian Religion*). Even though Limborch clearly wished to show the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, the collegiality of this debate contrasted sharply with the hostility of previous disputations between Christian and Jewish theologians in the Iberian world, such as at Barcelona and Tortosa. Those debates unfairly favored the Catholic point of view and, as Paganini reminds us, provoked the "more or less forced" conversion of Jews (xii).

The transcription of the title page shows that Orobio states the hypothesis of the work in the subtitle itself: *Prevenciones divinas* "proves" that God forewarned the Jewish people in the Torah of "everything that would be invented in Christianity," so that, thus alerted, they not accept "such defects" in this invention (3). A series of pro forma adulatory poems by Miguel (Daniel Leví) de Barrios follows this bold declaration. Barrios was an excellent choice to author this kind of verse, not only because he had made a specialty of doing so, but also due to the fact that, like Orobio, he was an Iberian *converso* who openly practiced Judaism upon settling in Amsterdam. In the prologue, Orobio then writes that the impetus for the work came from friends who asked him to publish his response to an unnamed person of "great authority" regarding a disputation with Carmelite friars in which Orobio refuted what for him was the idolatry of Christianity (14). The prologue itself and 29 chapters that follow stay true to the intent of *Prevenciones divinas* declared in its subtitle by presenting a stinging attack on Catholic Christianity and a forceful defense of Judaism. Readers of Italian will especially appreciate the helpful synopsis of content that Silvera has inserted before each respective section of the book. For example, her commentary to chapter 1 explains how Orobio rejects the Trinitarian aspect of Christianity through his asking how God the father could have sent God the son into the world in order to die for humanity (20).

Throughout the text, Orobio repeatedly contrasts points of difference between Judaism and Christianity in order to assert the superiority of the former. After emphasizing in the prologue the elite status of Israel,<sup>3</sup> he then claims in chapter 1 that Christianity consists of "three Gods," not one represented in three distinct ways, (21-22); rejects the incarnation of God, asserting in chapter 2 that not even Moses, "the most holy, the most pure of all men," could see God with his own eyes (26); and argues in chapter 5 against the doctrine of original sin, saying that this concept is the root of making innocent children pay for the transgressions of their parents (35). Orobio grounds much of his argument on what he calls in chapter 12 the "divine Law," by which surely he means the Torah. The words there, in the form in which they are written, compose this law, obviating the need for the "affected interpretations" and "unreal mysteries" that he faults Paul and other Christian thinkers of associating with the holy text (72). Observance of the divine Law is perhaps the most omnipresent manner that Orobio uses to confront what he regards as the idolatry of Christianity, because obedience to the decrees of this Law will keep Israel as a people (chapter 13) and in fact sanctify it (chapter 27), given that such obedience makes a person "just and pleasing to God" (chapter 28, 190). Another means by which Israel may preserve itself depends not so much on its actions but rather its identity: Orobio claims in chapter 19 that the "hatred" and "universal disdain" directed towards the Jewish people maintain them distinct from others, and as a consequence, safeguard their rites (120). He further claims in chapter 26 that opprobrium directed towards Jews is beneficial, because without it they would intermingle with Gentiles and hence [here he writes in the first person], "we would not be persecuted more, nor [continue to be] the people of God, separate and chosen" (164). Today, at a distance of nearly 350 years, his recognition of the importance of this Jewish difference shows the prescience of Orobio, especially when one considers the importance many Jews attach to their identity and the opprobrious treatment some suffer because of their efforts to affirm it.

Not only does *Prevenciones divinas* declare unequivocally the superiority of Israel to Christianity, but it does so using criticisms of the latter religion unthinkable were Orobio to have written them from Iberia. For example, in chapter 6 he claims that the "false doctrines" of Christianity derive from its founding by "ordinary men . . . from the dirtiest and lowest dregs of the republic[:] fishermen, moneylenders or publicans [rent collectors], and women of known and public dishonesty and scandalous life" (42). Subsequently, in chapter 9, Orobio impugns Christ himself, referring to him disparagingly as "That Man" and then accusing him "of wanting to show himself more devout than the extreme devotion of his Maker" (55). Apart from their boldness, which at times borders on temerity, these aspersions indicate the ability of Orobio to use the knowledge of the religion in which he was

raised as an arm against it once he lived an openly Jewish life. As well, perhaps in a symbolic way, the attacks counterbalance the vitriolic criticisms of Judaism characteristic of the infamous disputations of late medieval Iberia, in which former Jews recently converted to Catholicism condemned their ancestral religion after apostatizing.

*Previsiones divinas* illustrates the distance traveled by Sephardim from repression of their beliefs in Iberia to detailed exegesis of them in Amsterdam. Additionally, the work opens a window into the worldview of a New Christian turned 'New Jew' whose zeal for Jewish theology and corresponding disdain for Christian faith reflected his own experience having practiced his religion secretly and suffering Inquisitorial punishments for doing so. From beginning to end of the work, Orobio refers to both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles in order to support his claims, showing thus how the fact of having lived more than half his life in a repressive environment affected his anti-Christian interpretation of the scriptural texts. The extended sentences, occasional repetitiousness, and prolixity of *Previsiones divinas* make it difficult reading, but a worthwhile endeavor for anyone wanting to grasp the heady intellectual fervor of Sephardic Amsterdam of the 1600s, when the community had reached its apogee.

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1. Likewise the wife of Orobio, Isabel Pérez de la Peña, publicly converted to Judaism and took the name Esther; the couple gave their five children Hebrew names and raised them as Jews. The source of the condensed background information about Orobio in this review is the monumental biography written by Yosef Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism: The Story of Isaac Orobio de Castro*, trans. Raphael Loewe, 1989 (Oxford: Littman, 2004).

2. Van Limborch was a leader of the Remonstrants (from "remonstrance," meaning protest or opposition), a group of Dutch Protestants whose beliefs differed from those of Calvinists on such matters as predestination and divine grace. For more information on the movement of Remonstrants, see Kaplan, 273-85; and "Remonstrants," Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed June 30, 2014, <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc09/htm/iv.vii.cliii.htm>.

3. Obviously, Israel used in this context describes a people and their belief system, not the state.

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