



México Interdisciplinario / Interdisciplinary Mexico

ISSN 2193-9756



## XIV. La experiencia judía en México

2018/2, año 7, n° 14, 156 pp.

Editores: **Jacobo Sefamí / Matthias Lehmann**

DOI: 10.23692/iMex.14

---

### Reimagining the *Sagrada Familia*: Family and Faith in the life of Luis de Carvajal, el Mozo (Mexico 1590s)

(pp. 33-47; DOI: 10.23692/iMex.14.3)

**Ronnie Perelis**

**Abstract:** Luis de Carvajal, el Mozo, was part of a large Converso family that moved from Spain to New Spain (Colonial Mexico) in 1580. While some members of his family, like his brother Gaspar, a Dominican friar, and his uncle, Luis de Carvajal, el Viejo, a regional governor, were devout Catholics, Luis and most of his immediate family were passionately devoted to crypto-Judaism. Luis crafts a powerful narrative of religious sacrifice and creativity in his spiritual autobiography (1589-95). His family members play a central role in this religious drama. As Luis is writing his autobiography the Church is reinvigorating the centrality and religious vitality of marriage and family life. Joseph, the husband of Mary, undergoes an image transformation turning the often sidelined, frail yet pious companion of Mary, into a vigorous, handsome man who provides for and protects his wife and child. This reinvigoration of the image of Joseph is part of a larger post-Tridentine push to emphasize the importance of the sacrament of marriage and the sacred nature of family life. In this essay, I explore the matrix of ideas and images operating within the post-Tridentine Iberian religious imaginary, both in its hegemonic Catholic and its subversive crypto-Jewish iterations.

**Keywords:** Holy Family, Luis de Carvajal, self-fashioning, Inquisition, Crypto-Judaism, Colonial Mexico



Licencia Creative Commons Atribución-CompartirIgual 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-SA 4.0)

[Website:](#)

[www.imex-revista.com](http://www.imex-revista.com)

[Editores iMex:](#)

Vittoria Borsò, Frank Leinen, Guido Rings, Yasmin Temelli

[Redacción iMex:](#)

Hans Bouchard, Bianca Morales García, Ana Cecilia Santos, Stephen Trinder

## **Reimagining the *Sagrada Familia*: Family and Faith in the life of Luis de Carvajal, el Mozo (Mexico 1590s)**

**Ronnie Perelis**  
(Yeshiva University)

The story of the Carvajal family functions as an origin story for Mexican Jewish history. They have been seen as something like the founding fathers and mothers of Jewish life on Mexican soil, and in some respects for Jewish life in the Americas at large. However, they were not the first people of Jewish origin to have found their way to the newly conquered territory, quickly renamed New Spain. Seymour Leibman, for example, discussed the case of Hernando Alonso, Gonzalo de Morales y Diego de Ocaña. These New Christians fought alongside Cortés and were convicted of Judaizing in 1528 in what was probably a politically motivated trial once they sided with the enemies of the Marques del Valle.<sup>1</sup>

There is, however, something particularly compelling in the story of this large and complex family<sup>2</sup> in consideration of colonial Mexico and the Jews. The uncle, Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva the Elder, received the title of governor of the Nuevo Reino de León in compensation for his bravery in the wars against the natives. He brought a large group of settlers to the area to assist him in the development of the region, which was marked not only by fierce deserts and sweltering swamplands but also rich silver mines. Among these immigrants looking for opportunity we find Carvajal's extended family: At the center of this group was the governor's sister, Francisca Nuñez and her family. Carvajal, the Elder, had no children and he named his nephew Luis as his heir. Luis worked closely with his uncle in administering the territory and he went out on patrols and engaged the nomadic "chichimecas" in battles of "pacification". Luis

---

<sup>1</sup> See Liebman (1963: 291-296). A brief word about Inquisitorial terminology. The Inquisition was interested in Christians who engaged in acts of heresy. The Carvajal family descend from Jews who converted to Catholicism several generations earlier. They would be categorized by the society at large and the Inquisition in particular as Conversos or New Christians as opposed to the Old Christians who did not descend from Jewish converts. A Christian who engaged in Jewish practices or embraced certain Jewish beliefs was considered a Judaizer, *Judaizante* in Spanish. While the majority of Conversos eventually embraced Catholicism there were individuals living under the eye of the Inquisition in Spain, Portugal and their overseas colonies, who maintained a commitment to the religion of their fathers, to the Law of Moses, these individuals were often referred to as Marranos or Judaizantes. We will refer to those conversos who maintained a commitment to Jewish practice and/or belief as Crypto-Jews.

<sup>2</sup> The pioneering scholarship of Alfonso Toro (1944) and Martin A. Cohen (2001) lay the groundwork for all subsequent scholarship on the Carvajal family. In addition, Seymour Leibman's investigations and translations of Carvajal's writings have also added to our understanding of this fascinating family. Miriam Bodian's chapter on Carvajal in her *Dying in the law of Moses* explores the roots of his intellectual and religious world view, particularly as it relates to martyrdom (see Bodian 2007). I trace the lines of the above described socio-economic web in chapters three and four of my *Narratives from the Sephardic Atlantic: Blood and Faith* (Perelis 2016).

the Younger, *el mozo*, was groomed to take over his uncle's position, to become a New World hidalgo, a man whose position in society was based on his title and valor.

This socio-economic vision stands in stark contrast with the values and patterns of the Carvajal family and its wider ethnic circle. After all, this was a Converso family with roots in Portugal where most members were involved with commerce. Carvajal the governor began his life as perhaps a prototypical Converso merchant, working the West African coast, contracting slaves and selling them in the Caribbean. He eventually married his business partner's daughter Guiomar Nuñez. Guiomar was of Portuguese origin, but her family moved to the bustling Atlantic trade center of Seville like so many other "Portuguese" merchants looking to cash in on global trade networks. The move across the border to Spain had another surprising advantage; at this point in time the Portuguese Inquisition was ruthlessly attacking the Portuguese conversos at a time that the Spanish Inquisition was turning its attention to other forms of heresy.<sup>3</sup> So our governor, a zealously Catholic conquistador, began his life as that most stereotypically New Christian social type, the Atlantic merchant.

Despite what seems to be the Governor's sincere commitment to the Church he could not escape his socio-economic "marranism," although that did not stop him from trying. The wider Carvajal family, the cousins and nephews and nieces he enticed to cross the Atlantic and settle in the new territory, conformed to typical converso socio-economic patterns: almost all of them married other conversos and they continued working in commerce – both petty and grand – that connected them to the circuits of the emerging global, trans-Atlantic economy. In these fundamental ways they would be easily identified as typical New Christians, and despite the stigmas associated with that status we do not find evidence of them trying to shed those markers of otherness. To some extent this is precisely the tension at the heart of their family drama – between the uncle's dream of using his governorship as a means of transforming his family into part of the Old Christian elite, landed hidalgos living off of land gained through military valor, not the dirty Jewish arts of commerce and finance – and the rest of his family who were content to continue life as New Christians, engaging in commerce, marrying among themselves and nurturing the tight bonds of this global commercial network.<sup>4</sup>

What I have not mentioned yet is religion. To what extent can this family drama driven by these clashing world-views and socio-economic patterns be connected to religious faith and commitment? Specifically, to what extent is this a clash between Carvajal, the governor's

---

<sup>3</sup> See "Processos de Luis de Carvajal, Gobernador" in Toro (1932: 140f.). For a more expanded discussion of this wider phenomenon see notes 10 and 11 in Chapter Four of my *Narratives from the Sephardic Atlantic* (Perelis 2016: 140f.).

<sup>4</sup> For more on Converso socio-economic networks see Studnicki-Gizbert (2007) and Israel (2002).

passionate embrace of Catholicism and his relatives' secret devotion to the Law of Moses? This is in fact the part of the family drama which –rightfully so – has received the most attention: a family torn apart by a religious rift, caught in the cruel net of the Inquisition, a family featuring such dynamic personalities as the governor; his nephew, the searching spiritual visionary; the sisters with their outbursts of religious passion; and the mother, the stalwart, pious matriarch; and many others, who make this a dramatic story perfect for the silver screen or the stage. The Mexican director Arturo Ripstein told the story of the Carvajals in his *El Santo Oficio* of 1973 and the Mexican playwright Sabina Berman creatively refashioned the story of the Carvajals in her drama *Herejía* of 1985.

In my *Narratives of the Sephardic Atlantic: Blood and Faith*, I have argued that within the converso and crypto-Jewish world, it is very hard to separate socio-economic realities and ethnic affinities, what I refer to as bonds of blood and faith. Do conversos seek out converso marriage partners because they desire to practice the "Law of Moses" in secret or are these marriages the products of the particular businesses these individuals are engaged in? Does faith in crypto-Judaism develop out of seeing oneself as part of a distinct ethnicity, being bonded to other conversos, being seen as an "other" by Old Christians? Blood and faith are entangled and hard to ever unravel. In the case of the Carvajals we see a synergy between family bonds that energize commitment to crypto-Judaism and in turn crypto-Jewish commitments that encourage endogamy with other conversos. But we also see how family members can sometimes turn into mortal enemies. I am thinking primarily of the governor and his more outspoken nephews and nieces. When Isabel, his oldest niece, once approaches him to induce him to come to the Law of Moses, he strikes her with such a fury that he knocks her to the ground. Luis describes his uncle as "miserable and blind", a "mortal enemy". Alternatively, people outside the inner kinship circle, outside the socio-economic and genealogical network of blood family, sometimes join the faithful; embracing the Law of Moses, they become "faith brothers". There is a dialectic between these spiritual and material affinities, between bonds made up of blood and treasure and deep-rooted social patterns, and those bonds that are defined and energized by spiritual drives, by religious passion and sacrifice.

In this essay I want to think about the way family is invoked and utilized within the writings of Luis de Carvajal in light of the post-Tridentine Catholic Church's use of the "Holy Family" as an operative moralizing category. In the sixteenth century, the Church moved to sanctify the rhythms of family life, and with that shift the image of the Holy Family – the *Sagrada Familia*, with the Virgin Mary, her husband Saint Joseph and the baby Jesus – changed and became more prominent. I want to consider the ways that this renewed emphasis on the Holy Family and the

messages about parenthood and masculinity that were broadcast through a profusion of visual and textual depictions informed the way in which Luis de Carvajal envisioned his own sense of family and his role within that earthly and divine social structure. I will not argue for any sort of direct influence on Carvajal's writing and thought. However, because Carvajal's peculiar form of crypto-Judaism is to a great extent a reaction to Catholicism, as much as it is his idiosyncratic embrace of Judaism, it is worthwhile to consider how a phenomenon that had such a diffuse penetration into the fiber of everyday life in the early modern Iberian world would inform Carvajal's thinking.

In her insightful *Creating the Cult of Saint Joseph: Art and Gender in the Spanish Empire* and elsewhere, art historian Charlene Villaseñor Black traces the shift in the conceptualization of the Holy Family as a result of the reforms proposed by the Council of Trent.<sup>5</sup> For much of the Church's history, the Holy Family focused on the Virgin and Child – Mary and Jesus. Joseph, Mary's husband, was often depicted as a frail old man in the shadows. In the sixteenth century, however, we start to see depictions of the Holy Family where Joseph is a vigorous and handsome man at the center of the action. The Council of Trent sought to reinvigorate the role of the Sacraments and their centrality to the religious life of the individual. One area where there was a conspicuous push was the sacrament of marriage and the Church sought to make clear the importance and religious value of marriage, partially in reaction to Luther's desacralization of marriage. As a way to inspire individuals to embrace the marriage sacrament, we see a proliferation of depictions of the betrothal of the Virgin to St. Joseph. And in general there is an interest in depicting Joseph as a man at the prime of his life, in a marked break with the tradition of depicting him as an old man lurking in the background. A later authority, Fray Juan Interián de Ayala, crystalized this new approach in his *El pintor Christiano*, where he roundly rejected the previous model of Joseph as "old and decrepit":

Dixe de propósito, como á varon, y no como á mozo, ni tampoco (lo que hicieron algunos, y sobre que hemos tocado algo arriba, tratando de las Pinturas del Nacimiento de Christo) como a viejo lleno de años, y decrepito. Este ha sido el principal escollo en que han tropezado, no solo los Pintores, sí tambien hombres doctísimos; pensando, que quando S. Joseph se desposó con la Santísima Virgen, no solamente era hombre ya de alguna edad, sino que era viejo (Ayala in Villaseñor Black 2001: 450).

In depictions of Mary and Joseph's courtship, Joseph is chosen from among the many suitors because the staff he is holding blossoms with almond flowers. This is a direct reference to the biblical story in Numbers 17, where after a challenge to Aaron's leadership, divine favor is shown when Aaron's staff bloomed with almond blossoms, while the staffs of his rivals

---

<sup>5</sup> See Villaseñor Black (2001, 2006).

remained bare. In the case of St. Joseph, the phallic imagery is not incidental – it is meant to show his procreative ability. The artists and theorist Francisco Pacheco makes the point explicit:

Porque el pintarle teniendo en sus manos una vara llena de flores, es cosa que suelen, y pueden hacerla muy bien, por denotarse con esto, no sola la purisima continencia de este varon santísimo; sino tambien su perpetua virginidad, la que sin ninguna duda atribuyó al castísimo Esposo de Maria, el insigne defensor de esta virtud S. Gerónimo (Pacheco in Black Villaseñor 2001: 647).

It was thus important for these early modern artists to show Joseph as someone who was chaste despite his obvious vigor and who lived with the beautiful Mary in purity despite his fecundity.



Figure 1: Vicente Carducho, *Betrothal*, seventeenth century. Oil on canvas (cited in Villaseñor Black 2001: 639).



Figure 2: Sebastián López de Arteaga, *Betrothal*, seventeenth century. Oil on canvas (cited in Villaseñor Black 2001: 640).

In the medieval period, the Annunciation almost exclusively featured the Virgin and the announcing Angel, with Joseph left out of the scene. In the new vision of the centrality of Saint Joseph, we see him receiving his own revelation of the good news, wherein his doubts and concerns about Mary are resolved.



Figure 3: Juan Montero de Rojas, St Joseph's Dream, seventeenth century. Oil on canvas (cited in Villaseñor Black 2001: 643).



Figure 4: José Juárez. St. Joseph's Dream, seventeenth century. Oil on canvas (cited in Villaseñor Black 2001: 644).

In addition to the evolution of the "double annunciation," we also find many depictions of Saint Joseph rearing the child Jesus, caring for him, teaching him the trade of carpentry. These images were meant to inspire fathers to greater involvement with their children. They were also meant to lend a stamp of holiness to honest work performed in order to support and protect one's family. These images reflected a new vision of the role of men within their families that the Church sought to inspire in the faithful: the importance of the father in honoring and protecting his wife, of caring for his children. The post-Tridentine reformers argued that the family was not just about having children and domestic comfort. Rather, family life and the intimacy of matrimony could be holy, inspired by the purity and devotion of the Holy Couple. And it was an attempt at inspiring Christians to model their family life on the virtuous model of the Holy Family.

Villaseñor Black has noted the centrality of the cult of St. Joseph in the Mexican context, pointing out the proliferation of churches dedicated to the saint, the widespread usage beginning in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century of the name Joseph for baby boys, the dedication of the first church in Mexico City to his name, and much more. She writes:

The most commonly depicted Saint in the early modern Spanish empire was Joseph, humble carpenter, earthly spouse of the Virgin, and foster father of Jesus. The subject appears in the oeuvres of countless artists, including the Spanish painters El Greco, Bartolome Esteban Murillo, and Francisco de Zurbarain as well as those of the Mexican artists Baltasar de Echave Orio, Cristobal de Villalpando, and Miguel Cabrera. In the early modern period, widespread devotion to Joseph came to constitute the most important saint's cult in the Spanish empire; churches prominently displayed depictions of Joseph, sacred plays praised him, and engravings popularized his image. Such was the esteem accorded Joseph that the Catholic Church made him Mexico's patron saint in 1555. In the seventeenth century, Spanish devotees launched a movement to make him Spain's official protector, an objective achieved in 1679 (Villaseñor Black 2001: 637).

The idea of a virtuous and holy family, one touched by prophetic revelation and the guiding hand of providence, could also be used to describe how Luis de Carvajal conceived of his crypto-Jewish family.

One of the hallmarks of crypto-Judaism in the Iberian world was its reactive nature. It constructed its rituals and beliefs, and even the formulations of its language, in a conscious and sometimes unconscious dialogue with Catholicism. Crypto-Jews believed that they would be "saved in the law of Moses". Biblical figures became "Santo Moisés" and "Santa Esther," and we have numerous cases where the entirety of a person's "Judaism" amounted to a rejection of Christianity – whipping and denigrating of statues of saints, avoidance of the Eucharist, rejection of Christ in one's heart, and a silent embrace of the Law of Moses, often without any ritualistic content attached to this belief.

Even someone as deeply committed to crafting his Judaism out of a mixture of textual analysis and deeply personal inspiration as Luis de Carvajal, to some extent was creating a Judaism in dialogue with the Christianity that permeated his world. To illustrate the point, consider the description of his auto-circumcision as he recorded it in his spiritual autobiography:

Reading one day in chapter 17 of Genesis, where the Lord commanded Abraham our holy father to circumcise himself, especially those words which say "the soul, the soul which would be uncircumcised will be erased from the book of the living," it gave him (Luis) a shock of fear that without any delay he betook himself with the execution of the divine inspiration, moved by the "Most High" and by his good angel, and in this way he picked himself up from where he was reading in the house and even leaving the Holy Bible open, he took some blunted and worn scissors and he went to the banks of the Pánuco river where with great zeal and burning desire to be inscribed into the book of life – which without this

holy sacrament it is impossible – he cut himself and placed the seal upon his flesh [...] (LCMA: 465).<sup>6</sup>

Neither the Vulgate nor the Hebrew Bible use the term "sacrament": this is an unwitting Christianization of the Hebrew term *ot*, or "sign". Another curious transformation occurs in his reference to the "book of life". This image is central to medieval Jewish liturgy, especially as it appears in the prayers surrounding the ten days of repentance between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, however Carvajal had no direct exposure to normative Jewish liturgy. In Hebrew scripture, which Carvajal read assiduously in Latin translation, the Book of the Living is only mentioned once (Psalms 69:29). However, it is a central image in the Book of Revelations where it is mentioned seven times. In line with the reactive and idiosyncratic nature of Carvajal's crypto-Judaism, we see him wrap his retelling of this act of profound Jewish sacrifice and commitment in distinctly Christian imagery.

Keeping this sort of reactive yet subversive dialectic in mind we can turn to the Holy Family and explore how it was transformed by Carvajal in his self-presentation in the *Vida* – the spiritual autobiography written after his first arrest in 1589 and continued up to his second arrest in 1595, along with some letters and the testimony of his family members. I believe that in his *Vida*, Carvajal crafted an alternative vision of a Holy Family, one where his prophetic leadership was at the center of a spiritually powerful family unit. Instead of Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus we have Luis' intimate family unit – his mother, sisters and brothers, along with a more extended web of "soul brothers", forming a sacred bond that is configured in both temporal and spiritual terms. It is as though Luis rejects the centrality of the Catholic Holy Family and argues that the real Holy Family is the one, like his own, which despite the challenges and dangers stays faithful to the true Law, the Law of Moses. And it is this family that is touched with the grace of Divine Providence even in its darkest moments.

In his autobiography, Luis refracts his family's experience through the lens of the narratives and imagery of the Hebrew Bible. He calls on his sisters to be like Yael and Judith, and his mother is referred to as a matriarch like Sarah. After having lost his way in the wilderness, Luis describes his salvation as miraculous and resorts to the Psalms to properly capture his gratitude. The effect of this Biblicizing is to turn the experiences of his family and the wider Mexican

---

<sup>6</sup> Carvajal's *Autobiography* can be found in González Obregón (1935). I will refer to the autobiography as LCMA (Luis de Carvajal el Mozo Autobiografía). The english translations of this text all originate from the author: "Leyendo un día en el capítulo 17 del Genesis donde el Sr. mandó circuncidarse a Abraham nro. Pe. Sto. Especialmente aquellas palabras que dicens lanima lanima que fuere incircuncidada será borrada del libro de los vivientes) diole tal golpe de temor en el con que sin mas dilatarlo acudió a la ejecución de la divina inspiración movido por el altísimo y por su buen angel, y ansi se lebanto de un corredor de la casa donde estaba leyendo, y dexando aun la sacra biblia abierta tomó unas tixerias de bien votos, gastados filos, y se fue sobre la barranca del rio de Panuco donde con cobdicia y encendido deseo de ser escrito en el libro de la vida que sin este sacramento sto. Es imposible, se selló con el y se cortó [...]".

crypto-Jewish circle into part of a prophetic narrative: they are active members of God's chosen "ecclesia"<sup>7</sup> (Luis' phrase) and God's hand guides their affairs. Each act of divine intervention points to their chosenness, despite the outward reality of their persecution.

The Gospels tell the story of Jesus with strong echoes of Old Testament narratives – the pre-figurations at the heart of Christological exegesis – as a way to mark his life as part of a divine plan; in fact it is the ultimate divine plan with roots back in Eden and winding its way through the Fall, the flood, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the servitude and salvation in Egypt, etc. The Church's move to emphasize the Holy Family in the early modern period sought to point the Christian husband and wife towards seeing their quotidian affairs as part of something loftier, as partaking of the religious power invested in the Holy Family. By living as good Christian husbands and wives, by emulating Joseph and Mary in their own way, the early modern Catholic couple is able to tap into the cosmic drama of Christian history.

Carvajal, I believe, uses a similar hermeneutic move. He envisions the members of his family as living out a Biblically inspired spiritual adventure. They themselves become Biblical: they are inspired by prophetic insights and their steps are guided by Providence; they suffer like so many of those dedicated to the true and living God. They become a reimagined Holy Family. Here, I will identify a few instances where this Biblicizing of his family's experience plays itself out in his narrative and forms part of Carvajal's self-fashioning of his family into a Judaized *Sagrada Familia*. I want to begin with a focus on his mother, Francisca Nuñez de Carvajal. The *Vida* opens with an exhortation to the God of Israel and praise for His Providence which has guided Luis/Joseph through his 25 years of wandering. After the initial exhortation, Carvajal begins with his youth and quickly moves on to tell of his initiation into the family secret:

On a special day, the one which we call "of the pardons," a holy and solemn day within our community, on the tenth day of the seventh moon; and as the truth of God is so clear and pleasant it was not necessary for his mother, older brother and sister and a cousin to [do more than] point it out to him [...] (LCMA: 463).<sup>8</sup>

His mother and older brothers and sisters key him in to the truth of their Jewish identity on a Yom Kippur around his 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> year. It is his mother who introduces young Luis to the divine truth: his father dies relatively early in his narrative and plays a minor role in Luis' life before his death. In the inquisitorial testimony, however, Luis credits (or blames) his father for introducing him to Judaism. Others also testify that Luis' father was a devout and active crypto-

---

<sup>7</sup> Carvajal uses it to describe Jews living freely in the diaspora (see LCMA 471).

<sup>8</sup> "Un día señalado que es el que llamamos de las perdonanças día santo y solemne entre nosotros a diez días de la luna séptima y como la verdad de Dios es tan clara y agradable no fue menester mas que advertirle de ella su madre hermano y hermana mayores y un primo suyo [...]" (LCMA: 463).

Jew – this image, though, does not surface in the autobiography. In my book I argue that this is an almost Freudian "killing off" of his father in order for Luis himself to emerge into his own. While he elides his father's role, he places his mother at the center of the family's religious life.

Throughout the text of the *Vida*, Carvajal's mother is described as saintly and pious. When his sisters are engaged to two New Christian merchants, the occasion is portrayed as almost miraculous. Not only was it celebrated as a great event by the inner circle of the family, but their non-*Converso* neighbors – "foreign and gentile women"<sup>9</sup> – come to congratulate the family and turn to the matriarch with amazement.

Giving the good word to the blessed mother, many of the gentile women said to her: My lady what a great prayer you offered: [She responded] as Saint Sarah said, "it is not all up to the merits of Man- which are always few or nonexistent, but rather Divine Mercy."<sup>10</sup>

They want to know what sort of prayer she recited to receive such good fortune and she responds, as "Santa Sarah" said, "it is not all up to the merits of Man – which are always few or nonexistent, but rather divine mercy." Sarah the biblical character never utters these words, though this description echoes the sentiments of wonder and amazement expressed by Sarah the matriarch after the birth of Isaac. This is one of the many ways in which Carvajal weaves the strands of his family's experience in a *Biblicist* mode, shaping their individual personae into the cast of a providential drama.

Luis' brother Baltasar is generally depicted as a dedicated religious partner to Luis. Together they explore religious texts and risk their lives to perform the divine commands of the Bible. His sisters are faithful and pious but generally passive – they follow Luis' instructions and guidelines, they recite the prayers he has composed and even read the stories of travail and salvation that Luis was putting to paper in his unfolding autobiography. At the center of this *crypto-Jewish* drama, however, is Luis de Carvajal himself. In the *Vida* he refers to himself as Joseph Lumbroso, "the luminous" or "the enlightened". Whether he was given this name as part of his initiation or whether he himself chose it as his Jewish name, Carvajal weaves allusions to the life of the Biblical Joseph into his own: they are both dreamers and interpreters of dreams and Luis recounts visions where Jeremiah and Solomon come to him to bring messages of consolation while he is in prison. He interprets dreams and omens that his mother recounts to him in order to explain a new twist of fate and fortune. Joseph is also shown favor by those in

---

<sup>9</sup> "extraños y gentilicas mugeres" (LCMA: 468).

<sup>10</sup> "dando el parabien a la dichosa madre muchas de las gentilicas mugeres le dezian. Señora, y que buena oracion rezasteis: mas como dixo la santa Sara "no está a toda a los meritos del hombre, que siempre son pocos, o ningunos, la divina my[sericordi]a" (LCMA: 468).

power. For instance, when as part of his penitence he is placed in the monastery school at Santiago de Tlaltelolco, the rector, Fray Pedro Oroz, treats him with kindness, and grants Luis/Joseph a privilege to which he gave to nobody else: the key to the library. In the Biblical story of Joseph, Jacob's beloved son is revered by his master Potiphar and given extra responsibilities and access: "He left all that he had in Joseph's hands [...]" (Genesis 39.6).

Could it be that there is a subtle nod to another Joseph – the patron saint of New Spain and the husband of Mary? In the early modern version of St. Joseph, we find that he is also endowed with prophecy – as mentioned previously, the annunciation becomes a double scene of revelation with Joseph also receiving an angelic message. The figure of Saint Joseph is often depicted as protecting his wife and child – particularly in the scenes of the escape to Egypt. He is a provider for his family by plying his skills as a carpenter. Luis/Joseph also comes out as someone who watches out for his mother and sisters. Before his first arrest he was about to leave for Italy but couldn't bear to leave his mother and sisters behind. When it is time to raise funds to pay off the family's "penitence", again it is Luis who goes around the Mexican countryside to raise the funds.

As discussed earlier, central to the persona of the Counter-Reformation Saint Joseph is his chastity. Celibacy is not an ideal in Judaism. There are few major Biblical figures who were not married and most had children. However, sexual purity and the ability to control one's desires from indulging in forbidden relationships is certainly a value rooted in Biblical narratives and rabbinic tradition. Luis/Joseph never marries. From the inquisitorial files it seems that he maintained some sort of a relationship with Justa Méndez, a fellow crypto-Jew, but he never mentions her in his own writings.<sup>11</sup> The only point where he directly confronts sexuality in the *Vida* is a brief comment after describing his auto-circumcision:

It is worth noting that once Joseph received the seal of this holy sacrament upon his flesh, it served as a bulwark against lust and an aid to chastity. Prior to this he had been a weak sinner, who often merited the stroke of death which the Lord God sent upon a son our patriarch Judah and his consort Tamar for committing the same sin. [Now] God's mercy was upon him and with the holy sacrament of circumcision, he was henceforth delivered from the [perversity] of the sin [...] (LCMA 465)<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> See Cohen (2001: 210).

<sup>12</sup> "A qui es de notar como desde el día que Joseph rezibio este santo sello y sacra[men]to sobre su carne le fue armadura fuerte contra la luxuria y ayuda a la castidad, porque aviendo de antes muchas vezes como fragil predicador merezido la herida que el Sr. D[ios] ymbio de muerte a una hija de n[uestr]o p[adr]e juda marido de tomar por el mismo pecado fue sobre el la diui[n]a my[sericordi]a y mediante el sacramento s[an]to de la circuncision y ella fue librado deste pecado. Y maldad". I believe that there is a problem in the transcription here, it was Judah's son (hijo), not daughter (hija), who was killed for not consummating his relationship with his brother's wife Tamar (not Tomar).

This reference to circumcision as a check against his libido has an older pedigree and the idea of a young, vigorous man who holds strong against temptation points directly to the Joseph in the house of Potiphar, where he successfully refuses the sexual advances of his master's wife. In Rabbinic tradition, Joseph is referred as *ha-tzadik*, the righteous, in direct reference to this act of self-control. This feature of Joseph's life was also celebrated by early Church fathers such as Origen. Both rabbinic and Christian authors drew on earlier apocryphal works such as the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* that portray Joseph as heroically chaste in the face of the wife of Potiphar's constant seduction. In the biblical account, Joseph's chastity is not about celibacy or a renunciation of earthly love. The focus is on self-control, proper sexual conduct, and about avoiding the sins of Er and Onen, the cursed children of Judah. Here again we see Luis/Joseph repurposing a Josephine trope in a Judaic key.

I will end by reiterating my disclaimer: I do not think that the flourishing of Josephine imagery and the renewed focus on the family within the Church in the 16th and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries is the hermeneutical "key" to unlock Luis de Carvajal's spiritual self-fashioning, however I think it is worth considering how this aesthetic and theological phenomenon might have informed Carvajal's vision of family and his role at the center of his reimagined crypto-Jewish *Sagrada Familia*.

## **Bibliography**

BLACK VILLASEÑOR, Charlene (2006): *Creating the Cult of Saint Joseph: Art and Gender in the Spanish Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

BLACK VILLASEÑOR, Charlene (2001): 'Love and Marriage in the Spanish Empire: Depictions of Holy Matrimony and Gender Discourses in the Seventeenth Century'. In: *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 32, 3, 637-667.

BODIAN, Miriam (2007): *Dying in the Law of Moses: Crypto-Jewish Martyrdom in the Iberian World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

COHEN, Martin A. (2001): *The Martyr: Luis De Carvajal: A Secret Jew in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

ISRAEL, Jonathan I. (2002): *Diasporas within a Diaspora*. Brill: Leiden.

LCMA= González Obregón, Luis (ed.) (1935): *Procesos de Luis de Carvajal (el Mozo)*. México: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación

LIEBMAN, Seymour B. (1963): 'Hernando Alonso: The First Jew on the North-American Continent'. In: *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 5, 2, 291-296.

PERELIS, Ronnie (2016): *Narratives from the Sephardic Atlantic: Blood and Faith*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

STUDNICKI-GIZBERT, Daviken (2007): *A Nation Upon the Ocean Sea: Portugal's Atlantic Diaspora and the Crisis of the Spanish Empire, 1492-1640*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

TORO, Alfonso de (1944): *La familia Carvajal: estudio histórico sobre los judíos y la Inquisición de la Nueva España*. México: Patria.

TORO, Alfonso de (comp.) (1932): *Los judíos en la Nueva España*. Mexico: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación.