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# The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth Century Spain

*By B. Netanyahu*

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Bringing to life the tragic history of the Jews and their Christianized descendants in Spain, Professor Netanyahu gives us a new interpretation of the Spanish Inquisition and the origins of modern anti-Semitism.

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## **Editorial Review**

From Library Journal

Modest in title but monumental in scope, this book is easily the finest study of the Inquisition to appear in this, or arguably any, century. Netanyahu (*A Place Among the Nations: Israel and the World*, Norton, 1993) traces the origins of anti-Semitism not to Christianity or Europe or the 15th century, but to 525 B.C.E., when Jewish support for the Persians against Egypt led to Egyptian hostility to Jews and "the first written anti-semitic piece." The importance of Netanyahu's work rests on its powerful revisionist interpretation. He argues with enormous evidence that Spanish Jews, though forced to convert, had become "devoutly Christian" and thoroughly assimilated into Spanish society. What was new in the 15th century was the Spanish monarchy's practice of defining Jews not religiously but racially, which served as a prototype of 20th-century persecutions. Netanyahu's magisterial achievement is prodigiously researched and lucidly written; it should be in every research, academic, and public library.

*Bennett D. Hill, Georgetown Univ., Washington, D.C.*

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## **Review**

The Spanish Inquisition was responsible for one of the fiercest repressions in human history. It fused the triple evil of a police state, a totalitarian ideology, and racial persecution. Its terrible reverberations have been felt in our own century, and are likely to be felt in the next. Yet for all its notoriety, its origins have never been fully explored or clearly understood before now. What caused this monstrous attack upon Spain's so-called "conversos" -- the Christian descendants of the Jews who had been forced to convert during the anti-Semitic riots that swept across Spain at the end of the fourteenth century? Were the thousands of conversos who died at the hands of the Inquisition in fact secretly still Jews, only pretending to be good Christians, as the inquisition charged and as most scholars continue to believe? In this magnum opus, B. Netanyahu shows us that this claim is groundless. After a lifetime of research in long-unexamined Spanish sources, he reveals that at the time of the Inquisition, almost all conversos were in fact full-fledged Christians, and that the few Judaizers among them had dwindled into insignificance. The vast machinery of the Inquisition could not have been founded to kill a dying movement. What, then, was its purpose? "The Origins of the Inquisition" answers this question definitively. By examining Spanish anti-Semitism from its origins, Professor Netanyahu demonstrates that the brutal anti-converso movement that led to the Inquisition was the same one responsible for the massacre of Jews in Spain in 1391 and the ensuing mass conversion of Spanish Jews (at sword-point) to Christianity. The rapid rise of the conversos to high royal offices (higher, even, than those attained by their Jewish forefathers) made them the target of the same forces that had persecuted the Jews. It was to remove the conversos from their influential positions, and to prevent their intermarriage with the Spanish people, that they were accused of being secret Judaizers and members of a "corrupt" race that would "pollute" the Spanish blood. This was the first time that extreme anti-Semitism was wedded to a theory of race -- a union that would dramatically affect the course of modern history. Steering the reader through the labyrinthine politics of Church and State in fifteenth-century Spain, Professor Netanyahu develops his startling thesis within the context of a careful consideration of Spanish culture and society. The conversos, like their Jewish ancestors, were intimately linked with the Spanish monarchy, and, unlike the Jews, also with the Papacy, but by the end of the fifteenth century, both Church and State left their erstwhile allies to the mercy of the Inquisition. As Professor Netanyahu brilliantly shows, the Spanish sovereigns let the conversos be attacked in order to distract the outraged city masses and their leaders from turning against the royal establishment itself. "The Origins of the Inquisition" is a seminal work that will alter our understanding of the Spanish Inquisition and its place in the history of anti-Semitism, of Spain, and

of Europe. It is required reading for anyone who wishes to understand one of history's darkest movements, the terrible shadow of which persists to this very day. Professor B. Netanyahu has been editor in chief of the "Encyclopedia Hebraica", general editor of the "World History of the Jewish People", and co-editor of the "Jewish Quarterly Review". He is a fellow of the American Academy for Jewish Research, a member of the Real Academia de Bellas Artes y Ciencias Historicas in Spain, and professor emeritus at Cornell University.  
-- *Midwest Book Review*

From the Inside Flap

Bringing to life the tragic history of the Jews and their Christianized descendants in Spain, Professor Netanyahu gives us a new interpretation of the Spanish Inquisition and the origins of modern anti-Semitism.

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