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# Landscape into Legend: Tracking Lost Tribes and Crypto-Jews across New Mexican Terrain

JUDITH S. NEULANDER

The essay traces the “Lost Tribes of Israel” legend to the purported academic discovery of lost and hidden “crypto-Jews” in contemporary New Mexico. The essay explores perceptions and beliefs of Jewish diasporic survival and identity in folkloristic, religious, historical, and genomic contexts. Analysis exposes pseudo-ethnography and pseudoscience as the basis for New Mexican claims, influenced in part by habitual association of the regional landscape with lost, hidden, and/or “wandering” Jews.

Unlike topography, which is a natural phenomenon, cultural landscapes are constructed by people and can be read as texts, or narratives, of ethnic specificity. As a folklorist doing research in the American state of New Mexico, my gaze would normally focus on narratives embedded in the cultural constructions of different local peoples. But Mary Louise Pratt, Professor of Spanish and Portuguese Languages and Literatures, writes of a different gaze, one that is itself open to folkloristic scrutiny. She describes it as the gaze of colonial imperialism, of those “whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess . . . seeking to secure innocence in the same breath as exerting hegemony” (1992, 7). As I would learn in my New Mexican studies,

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colonial Spanish Catholics and Anglo-Protestants first gazed upon New Mexico through the same imperial eyes that Pratt describes. They ignored the constructed landscape of native peoples, registering only the topography of a strikingly biblical wilderness. Through this imperial lens, they defined native peoples not as Native Americans but as Lost Tribes of Israel, a wilderness people and a tribal culture they believed themselves ordained by God to supersede. In this essay, I argue that claims of a modern crypto-Jewish discovery in New Mexico comprise a variant of the ancient Lost Tribes discovery. I find that the same habitual association of wilderness with lost, hidden Jews is empowering repatriation of an ancient legend and misrepresenting the legacy of a local people, while still professing innocence in the same breath as exerting hegemony.

Grounds for linking desert landscapes with ancient Israelites can be traced to Genesis 32:29, where the patriarch Jacob is given the name “Israel.” Thereafter, the first “Children of Israel” included twelve sons, each of whom formed a sovereign tribe. History is more nuanced than legend on the exact division of tribes, but legend prevails at the popular level, dividing the Children of Israel into two discrete factions: ten tribes in the nation’s north, known as “Israel,” and two small tribes in the south, known as “Judah.” History allows that over time, the northern tribes evolved into an assimilationist population, breaking away from the small, traditionalist tribes in the south. In 721 BCE, Assyrian conquerors invaded the north, exiling and dispersing the ten tribes into northern Mesopotamia, where it is only reasonable that they continued their assimilating errand into the pagan mainstream, and in that way, were finally lost to Judaism. But for the tiny traditionalist population of Judah, traumatic loss of many times their number, along with the greater part of their national real estate, may account for the birth of a legend in which the lost tribes never relinquished the faith, rendering them geographically rather than spiritually lost. A vast body of travel literature developed around their survival, reinforcing the indomitability of the ten tribes who, by keeping the faith, found sustenance and reward in the Hebrew God, albeit driven out, forever lost, and hidden beyond the borders of the known, cultivated world.

In the ninth century CE, a traveler named Eldad Ha-Dani claimed to have located a number of lost tribes in a distant wilderness of supernal wonders. His

tale both confirmed their religiosity and explained their failure to emerge, once discovered. According to Ha-Dani, the lost tribes lived beyond the banks of the legendary River Sambatyon, a turbulent dry bed of roiling rocks and crashing boulders preventing passage except on the Sabbath, the only time when the tumult rested. But this was also the only time when observant Jews could never cross, lest they violate the law against travel on the Sabbath (Ausubel 1948, 526–27). Ha-Dani's ingenious tale accounted for the lost tribes' continued seclusion, while reinforcing their indomitability and, perhaps by extension, that of all Jews who would similarly keep the faith.

Upon occasion, other adventurers would repeat Ha-Dani's discovery, all distracting from their questionable veracity with shiny items of exotica. None did this better than the seventeenth-century author, Reb Aaron Halevi, who wrote of high seas and lowland deserts, of hairy wild men and islands cloaked in smoke from the underworld. He described faithful kingdoms ruled by Jewish kings beyond the Sambatyon, the tribes leading great armies, living amid fabulous flora, fauna, precious gems, and monstrous races:

At the time when I was there [1631], the king of India sent King Eliezer an embassy of three great lords bearing a gift of peace. The king received them with great honor. The gift they gave him was a savage who had no head, his eyes and mouth were set in his breast. He wore forty pearls that were pure and clear. They dazzled like the sun on a gem called sapphire which is indeed wonderful to behold. (Ausubel 1948, 528)

As Halevi's tale indicates, the Lost Tribes were associated with unchartered habitat, and it was during the Age of Exploration that concepts of the unchartered wild expanded to include the wilderness territories of newly discovered lands. Not surprisingly, when tribal peoples were discovered in the unchartered Americas, they were widely believed to be lost tribes of Israel.

Among the first Jews to discover the lost tribes in America was a traveler and former Portuguese crypto-Jew living openly in Amsterdam, using the pen name Antonius Montezinus. In 1651, Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, respected scholar and

leader of Amsterdam's Portuguese Jewish community, published a commentary on Montezinus's account, legitimating the American discovery (Ausubel 1948, 520):

But I having curiously examined what ever hath hitherto been writ upon this subject doe finde no opinion more probable, nor agreeable to reason than that of our Montezinus, who saith, that the first inhabitants of America, were the ten Tribes of the Israelites.

Jewish travelers were far from alone in making this discovery. As historian Egal Feldman writes, Anglo-Americans were inclined to follow William Penn, who in 1681 suspected Native Americans to be ancient Israelites (1990, 10). The same belief is well documented in the Church of Latter-day Saints, and it is noteworthy that the Saints' teachings preceded other Anglo-American ministers to the Four Corners region by a good twenty years (Szasz 1988, 153).

But Catholic Spain was the first to conquer and to identify indigenous Americans in the regions of Spanish conquest. Throughout the Age of Exploration, native tribes in the Spanish territories were routinely and vividly depicted both as lost tribes of Israel and as wild, uncultivated "savages." Seen as a people of the "selvage" or "wilderness," the Israelite tribes were believed to have regressed to a state of savagery, or "wilder-ness," concomitant with their habitat. Anthropologist Howard Eilberg-Schwartz explains the conflation of Jew with savage according to a shared Christian anti-type, "both pictured as less than human" (1990, 37). Seen in the context of conquest, the anti-type would certainly have helped justify acts of European savagery, committed in the name of Christian civilization. In New Mexico, for example, Alejandro Mora, a resident of Bernalillo in 1751, gave what was then a socially acceptable response when called upon to justify brutal abuse of a female Indian slave. "God has given me life," Mora explained, "so that I might do to these Jews what they did to our Holiest Lord" (Gutiérrez 1991, 195).

Book illustrations of American natives were typically based on travelers' tales, rendered by European artists who had neither traveled to nor seen the places or peoples they portrayed. Among the most famous are those that conflate indigenous tribes with ancient Israelites by depicting native peoples practicing Jewish

rituals. In an example of this gaze, a reasonably accurate illustration first published in 1723 by Bernard Picart shows exiled Portuguese Jews attending a circumcision ceremony in Amsterdam (figure 1). In this depiction a woman on the right advances into the scene, a figure kneels, and an infant seated on a man's lap is being circumcised. But significantly, the same artist repeats this composition in a rendition of Aztec Indians (figure 2). In this frame a woman holding a child moves forward into the picture, a figure kneels, and an infant is being circumcised—*although Aztecs did not practice infant circumcision*. Grown Aztec males practiced ritual blood sacrifice on a number of body parts including their genitals, which—given the association with circumcision—was seen as a manifestation of Judaism by Europeans, as asserted in the French illustration of 1723. In the English-speaking world, Thomas Thorowgood argued for a survival of the lost tribes in *Jewes in*



Figure 1. *Circumcision of Infant by Portuguese Jews*, by Bernard Picart. Reprinted from J. F. Bernard. *Cérémonies et costumes religieuses de tous le peuples du monde* (Amsterdam, 1723). Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.



**Figure 2. Ceremonies of the Mexicans Practiced on Their Infants, by Bernard Picart. Reprinted from J. F. Bernard. *Cérémonies et costumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (Amsterdam, 1723). Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.**

*America*, citing “vestiges” of purported Judaism, listing first and foremost: “Circumcision is frequent among the Indians . . . we have so many witnesses that the Americans be circumcised, as it becomes not a modest man to deny it” (1650, 9). Significantly, Thorowgood was not one of the purported witnesses, since he never visited the New World (Cogley 2005, 312). Diego de Landa (1524–1597), a Franciscan priest and Bishop of Yucatán, is an eyewitness who saw native peoples through the same culture-cloned imperial eyes as fellow Spaniards in his own time. But he differed by recording only what he saw firsthand, without adjusting facts to fit assumptions. Not surprisingly, his work is still considered an ethnographic masterpiece (Wells 1996, 291). In 1566, he wrote specifically of ritual blood sacrifice among both Maya- and Nahuatl-speakers (Aztecs), commenting on an instance when a designated authority did adjust facts to fit assumptions. Whether or not

this authority ever witnessed blood sacrifice, his description accounts for images of Aztecs practicing infant circumcision, as seen above, and even for persistence of the same belief in contemporary times. Conversely, de Landa reported accurately:

At times they sacrificed their own blood, cutting all around the ears in strips which they left to hang as a sign. At other times they perforated their cheeks, or lower lips; again they made cuts in parts of the body, or pierced the tongue crossways and passed stalks through them, causing extreme pain; again they hewed the superfluous parts of the penis, leaving the flesh in the form of two flopping ears. It was this custom that misled the Historian-General of the Indies to report that they practiced circumcision. (de Landa 1864 [1566], 162)

The illustration of Aztecs circumcising an infant shows them in Romanesque garb and hairstyle because the ten tribes of Israel were considered ancient, and most things ancient in Spanish colonial context were equated with Rome. More importantly, the Aztecs are depicted as Jews, in part because of their shared Christian anti-type as noted by Eilberg-Schwartz, but in addition, Europeans had, for generations, conflated any “ethnic” population in any uncultivated wilderness with lost tribes of Israel, habitually adjusting facts to fit assumptions about native origins. The colonial artist’s task, above all, was to illustrate reports according to any authority so designated by official rank and privilege, like the Historian-General of the Indies. More than 400 years later, in the 1980s, the same habitual association of wilderness landscape with lost and hidden Jews would similarly identify ambiguously Judeo-Christian practices found among modern local Hispanics as “cultural manifestations of Judaism” (Hordes 1993, 137), but this time, legitimated by the authority, rank, and privilege of New Mexico’s State Historian.

Originally a remote outback of the Spanish Empire, New Mexico would not become an American state until 1912. But in 1821, the Santa Fe Trail became a gateway to the region. By 1846, New Mexico had become an American territory, and the Anglo-Protestant population began increasing. The fact that Anglo-Americans inherited the same European association of wilderness landscape with lost, hidden Jews is abundantly clear in their rhetoric, which historically described America as



the “New Israel,” the “New Jerusalem,” and the new “Promised Land” (Richmann 2020). Given this religiously charged gaze, Protestant arrivals were strongly predisposed, as historian Sacvan Bercovitch wrote, to discover America “as a believer unveils scripture” (1981, 6). Not surprisingly, in 1896, a contestant won ten dollars from the Eastman Kodak company for a photo of a Pueblo woman with a water jug on her head, titled “New Mexican Rebecca,” an obvious reference to the biblical matriarch at the well (Babcock 1990, 406; 424). But Anglo-American travel writing would reflect the habitual association in even more startling terms, describing Pueblo men as using “digging sticks of Moses” and Pueblo women as “maids of Palestine” (Babcock 1994, 46). Sociologist Michael P. Carroll, in research on religious practices among New Mexicans of Hispanic backgrounds, noted that modern crypto-Jewish claims are made “independent of evidence,” as a function of what he called “ethnographic allegory” and habitual “orientalizing” in local Anglo rhetoric (2002, 1–2; 16).

Once railroads and motor cars opened the region to tourism, advertisers exploited indigenous “Rebecca” imagery, promoting sales of iconic crafts like the native water jug, known as an *olla*. In the first half of the twentieth century, with statehood conferred by 1912 and followed by the birth of Israel as a Jewish state in 1948, “Olla Maidens” replaced the label “Maids of Palestine,” but it would appear that New Mexico’s desert topography remained a biblical referent for native identity. In a typical tourist ad of 1987, for example, the Maiden’s Israelite association is still suggested by centering her body, olla on her head, in front of a large encircled image—not one of iconic state symbols or alluring tourist crafts but of wilderness habitat (Babcock 1990, 104). When two images are fused in this manner, they become visually inter-related. In this case, wilderness is neither the subject nor the foreground of the composition, but it forms the context in which the Olla Maiden is anchored. It is literally, as well as visually, her background.

In 1932, historian Cecil Roth published the best seller, *A History of the Marranos*. His book explored migration into the Spanish Americas by Iberian Christians of Jewish ancestry and was sensationalized for citing survivals of secretly professing Jews who fled the Spanish Inquisition into the New World. Roth seems to have opened the door to academic adventurism regarding a lost and hidden Israelite

survival, mindlessly practicing vestiges of Judaism, among equally clueless family members, friends, and neighbors in modern New Mexico. But New Mexico's biblical terrain would get an additional boost as an indicator of lost, hidden Jews with the arrival of Anglo-Protestant preachers who, at the turn of the twentieth century, would account for a number of Hebraized practices, having canvassed the state and created a newly converted population of born-again Israelites.

The preachers were there because Frederick Jackson Turner's famous essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), proposed that the American "national character" should be permanently "set" as both the century and the frontier simultaneously closed (1920, 55–56). He proposed that the national character should be Protestant, inspiring a major launch of itinerant Protestant preachers, including many from small and marginalized churches. These entered remote towns and villages in non-Anglo and non-English-speaking America, where they faced less competition from mainstream churches. By the early twentieth century, their outreach extended from the Spanish-speaking migrant fields of Michigan to the remote Spanish-speaking Southwest, their deeply Hebraized Protestant offshoots becoming active in many rural communities and in some disadvantaged pockets within cities. Consequently, the years flanking the turn of the twentieth century would leave a distinctly Hebraized footprint on New Mexico's rugged landscape, ripe for contribution to a modern variant of the Lost Tribes legend.

For example, offshoots of the Wesleyan church were instructing marginalized Hispanics, displaced by Anglo land grabs and disenfranchised by the Anglo mainstream, that they, and not traditional Jews, were the Children of Israel. According to religionist Charles Edwin Jones, biblical landmarks introduced the newly minted Israelites to (1) the "Red Sea Crossing" in forgiveness of sin, (2) the travails of "The Sinai Wilderness" in their disposition to cardinal sin, (3) "The Jordan Crossing" in their process of sanctification, and (4) the "Conquest of Canaan" in their defeat of sin through religious observance (1995, 25). Preachers traversed the region, spreading the call to a New Jerusalem, leading "Holiness brothers and sisters into the Apostolic Faith" (Jones 1995, 27). Similarly, within the multiplicity of "Church of God" organizations, some would deeply Hebraize their traditions

in fervent preparation for the Advent of Christ. This would distinguish them as Adventists. The idea of a Hebraized Christian faith, according to Jones, gained particularly receptive audiences among “ethnic and foreign language minorities who found in its stress on power and supernaturalism a strong antidote to lack of status and helplessness” (1995, 27). In the end, Protestantism made only moderate inroads into Catholic New Mexico. But Catholic backlash generated a spate of underground- or “crypto-Protestantism” among Hispanic converts, a historically documented phenomenon that persists in local memory but is still under-researched in the region. It appears on the surface that converts were absorbed back into their Catholic parishes once their itinerant preachers left for home. But below the surface, many cherished the faith they had accepted, maintaining their Hebraized Christian beliefs. They declared only in private—sometimes on their deathbeds—to be the true, spiritual Jews.

In 1980, New Mexico hired a new State Historian whose dissertation had examined Judeo-Spanish survivals in colonial Spanish America (although not in New Mexico). He assigned a crypto-Jewish motive to Protestant conversion, speculating that crypto-Protestant traditions would have been more attractive to secret Jews, being more Hebraized than Catholicism. But in Spanish New Mexico, before mid-century, the purportedly true spiritual Jews who claimed descent from the lost tribes of Israel “became associated with several groups that were actively and explicitly anti-Semitic and anti-Black, such as the Ku Klux Klan and, after World War II (1937–1945), the Neo-Nazi movement” (Melton 2009, 566). The notion of appeal to Jews is not convincing. Yet, interpreting Hebraized Protestant practices as “manifestations of Judaism” led the new State Historian to the lopsided assumption that Hispanic elders were passing down “knowledge of their secret Jewish heritage,” while lacking any such knowledge, except as provided by him (Hordes 1993, 137). In reality, those who embraced Hebraized practices were doing so to prepare the world for the Second Coming of Christ. Regional churches lending credence to the belief include members of the Adventist family and, in particular, Spanish-speaking derivatives of the Anglo-Israelist Church of God (Neulander 1996, 38–42). Anglo-Israelists believe they are descendants of the lost tribes, redeemed by accepting Christ, thereby co-opting from traditional Jews the

role of God's Chosen—an exclusivity they claim as the only Anglo-Saxons among the Lost Tribes of Israel. As sociologist William C. Martin explains:

The bedrock of Anglo-Israelist belief is that the true Israelites are not the Jews but the Anglo-Saxons, who are descended from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, and are therefore the rightful heirs to the land and riches God originally promised to the offspring of Abraham. They, and not the Jews are the chosen people. . . . They follow kosher food regulations strictly, observe Passover and other major Jewish holidays, and keep the [Jewish] Sabbath as their day of rest, while forbidding observance of such “pagan” holidays as Christmas [and] Easter. (Martin 1973, 75)

The true “spiritual” Jews of Israelist churches believe that the “fleshy Israel” (a church euphemism for traditional Jews) will be exterminated on the Day of Judgment, since “the Jews alone are responsible for the crucifixion . . . [whereas], all the white Americans and the white English are hereditarily innocent” (Hopkins 1974, 221). Central to the belief, as Melton states, is the understanding that “different countries are associated with the different tribes. Britain and the United States are descendants of Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh” (Melton 2009, 565), who will become the head of all Israel. During the push for Protestant converts, Spanish-speaking branches of Anglo-Israelism emerged first in Mexico and later in the American Southwest.

The Church of God Adventist in West Virginia was never uniformly Anglo-Israelist, but it was heavily so when it became church headquarters in 1884, under Andrew N. Dugger (Neulander 1996, 38–43). Dugger’s church adhered to Mosaic requirements of circumcision, kosher foods, and celebration of Passover instead of Easter. It was Dugger who sent Spanish-speaking emissaries into Mexico and the American Southwest. Differences between Anglo church leaders led to a split in 1923, when Dugger changed his “Adventist” signifier to the more Sabatarian “Seventh Day.” Some Spanish-speaking congregations followed his lead, changing their name to *Iglesia de Dios, Septimo Dia*. In the twenty-first century,

Spanish-speaking branches, depending on who instructed them and when they originated, are known as the Church of God Adventist/Seventh Day/Israelite.

In 1993, an amateur ethnographer visited an *Iglesia de Dios Israelita* in Houston, Texas. Although influenced by the New Mexican misadventure, her essay suffered most by not tracing the instructional lineage of the church founders. She therefore missed any connection to Dugger's family of Hispanic emissaries and certainly missed the direct and startling correspondence of her findings to those of lauded ethnographer, Raphael Patai, who studied Mexican branches of Dugger's church in the 1940s–60s (1983, 447–461). However, her essay did provide useful documentation of Hebraized church décor, including use of hexagrams (six-pointed stars). And in a footnote, she made fleeting but significant mention that the IDI church also makes use of hexagrams to adorn their cemetery crosses (Levi 1993, 140 n. 1).

In the early 1970s, Judaic scholar Gershom Scholem traced the history of the hexagram, noting that for 800 years before the six-pointed star gained any Jewish religiosity, it was an integral part of Christian church décor (Scholem 1971, 257–281). In fact, hexagrams appear globally in Gothic church tradition and as prominent rose windows in major Spanish cathedrals in Valencia, Burgos, and Valladolid, the parent template for church décor throughout Spain and its colonies (Neulander 2016, 210–212). Church hexagrams appear in sacred context across all Christian faiths but did not enter sacred Jewish tradition until the years flanking the turn of the twentieth century. Previously, the hexagram had a traditional, if fuzzy, association with the Shields of David and/or Solomon, in Jewish folklore. The reason it became a valued logo for forward-looking Zionism was precisely because it carried no past religious meaning for Jews (Scholem 1971, 281). It first gained association with Jewish religiosity when Hitler noted a growing popularity of the Zionist logo on synagogue mastheads and as synagogue décor, and seized upon it as a badge of infamy. With Hitler's defeat, the hexagram would rise in triumph on the flag of Israel. But this would not occur until centuries after New Mexico's founders had installed Christian hexagrams in their churches and cemeteries. The issue is not simply one of being mistaken; it is that pseudo-ethnographic

interference, in which racial, ethnic, and religious identity are at stake, has consequences that are never socially benign.

In the early 1990s, based on items like church hexagrams, the lead proponent of crypto-Jewish claims stated as his mission “to help New Mexicans today to understand the complexity and rich diversity of their Hispanic and Jewish past” (Hordes 1993, 137). Not only was this mission undertaken, as Carroll notes, “independent of evidence,” but it represents the worst possible violation of ethnographic fieldwork ethics. Ultimately, the only people helped by such instruction are the academics themselves, who gain legitimating corroboration, either from Hispanic “pupils” unequipped to refute academic authority or from those who, like their instructors, have something to gain from making such claims. I originally found the vast majority of New Mexican Hispanics to be skeptical, some strongly rejecting the canon and more than a few resentful of its academic promoters. But moving to the present, it becomes clear that if one insists an apple is a banana, and does so frequently and for long enough, people will lose both resistance and perspective. Consequently, academics are increasingly preaching to a growing choir of Hispanics who, if not always convinced, are at best left unsure of their ancestry. Nevertheless, as one Hispanic woman recently put it, whether some of her ancestors were secretly Jewish or were all Christian is less important to her family than keeping a roof overhead, putting food on the table, raising kids, and caring for ageing parents. She described this view as typical of her neighbors and of the Hispanic community as a whole.

However, there are certainly many different and compelling reasons for some factions of New Mexico’s Hispanic community to claim Judeo-Spanish descent, including having been previously misdirected, and convinced, by academics with authoritative titles and degrees. Another pattern stands out, first noted by folklorist Raphael Patai in the 1940s and 1960s, when he found a race-based motivation for whitening one’s heritage through such claims. As he wrote of Mexico in the twentieth century: “It is a frequent phenomenon for an Indian to claim to be a mestizo [of mixed race], and for a mestizo to claim pure Spanish descent. . . . Spanish descent, even Jewish-Spanish descent, means a step up on the social scale” (1983, 461).

The same concern persists in New Mexico, where the founders maintained a caste system ostracizing those of mixed Indo-Hispanic descent in calculated degrees of distance from “pure” (white) Spanish ancestry (Bustamante 1989, 70–77; Gutiérrez 1991, 196–206). In effect, they created what Chilean anthropologist Alejandro Lipschutz called a “pigmentocracy” typical of color-coded hierarchies throughout the Spanish Americas (1944). A local origin myth, claiming descent from a vaguely monogamous strain of whites—even from Spanish conquistadors—was all that protected darker-skinned family members from painful discrimination in New Mexico (González 1969, 27, 81). That is, since different shades of complexion existed between siblings in the same families, no one could confidently gauge anyone else’s distance from “pure” Spanish ancestry just by looking. As far back as colonial times, according to historian Ramón A. Gutiérrez, “Comments that a person ‘appeared to be,’ ‘was reputed to be,’ or ‘was known to be’ of a certain race indicated the degree to which racial mixing and passing existed on this remote fringe of Northern New Spain and complicated the classification system” (1991, 198).

Modern Hispanics lost their protective origin myth in 1975, when a local priest imploded the prestige lineage with a detailed history of the founding families (Chavez 1975). At that point, rumors of secret descent from (white) Spanish Jews, in circulation since Roth published his study of Marranos in 1932, first gained traction as a potential replacement lineage for purported descent from (white) Spanish aristocrats. Urgency mounted in 1980, when New Mexico’s Hispanics lost their majority to an Anglo ruling class that considered themselves white and saw Hispanics as people of color. Thus, New Mexican Hispanics became “ethnics” on their own turf at approximately the same time that a new State Historian designated a “significant number” to be a lost line of hidden Jews—notably, a fate long visited on any population seen as “ethnic” by whomever comprised the mainstream across New Mexico’s biblical terrain. In this shift, some Hispanics of mixed heritage, newly outnumbered and undervalued in an increasingly powerful (and prejudiced) white majority, embraced descent from overvalued whites through the timely vehicle of purportedly white, crypto-Jewish descent. As explained by a darker-skinned sister, who chose not to claim crypto-Jewish descent alongside her

lighter-skinned brother: “He can get away with it, but not me. I don’t think I look the part” (Neulander 2014, 87). Apparently, some claims of crypto-Jewish descent are what Pratt calls “instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer’s own terms,” hardly an unusual circumstance, she writes, but rather “a widespread phenomenon . . . important in unravelling imperial subjugation and resistance as seen from the site of their occurrence” (1992, 7, 9).

It was during the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s that local Native Americans took command of their own self-definition, as well as their own tourist product. To their successful art markets they would add a Cultural Center and Museum in the major city of Albuquerque, taking authorship of their own history, cultural identity, and public display. But in the process, they left the wilderness empty of lost tribes of Israel, a presence inevitably missed by what folklorist Albert Lord had famously termed a “tension of essences.” By this he meant when something associated with something else goes missing from a traditional narrative, the missing element must be reinstated, the two elements “held together internally both by the logic of the narrative and by the consequent force of habitual association” (1960, 96–97). Thus, seeing indigenous tribes as wilderness Jews was likely to be missed in association with a biblical terrain that habitually defined its “ethnics” as lost tribes of Israel. If not missed for that alone, the lost tribes would certainly be missed as lost tourist revenue. Clearly, when newly “ethnic” Hispanic Catholics became potential “replacement Jews” (i.e., bearers of a purportedly hidden or “crypto” Jewish legacy), it reinstated the lost tribes narrative and restored the basis for lost tribes tourism. Based entirely on misdirection about evidence such as Christian hexagrams, popular press clippings, and media-encouraged global tourism material, as I first documented in 1996:

. . . as far away as Gibraltar, a participant at an international conference written up by a Turkish newsletter suggested that “visiting Albuquerque could be considered a pilgrimage for Jews, since the early crypto-Jewish settlers of the city left indications of their Jewish roots in their churches and cemeteries.” (1996, 45; 2014, 74)



As early as 1994, academic promoters were charging members of the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society a whopping \$1,950 to “Meet Descendants of the Hidden Jews” ostensibly hidden in their midst. While “meet descendants” tours flopped with tourists, the claim of a crypto-Jewish discovery persisted. It is still generating headlines, speaking engagements, theatrical performances, TV films and documentaries, crypto-Jewish “archives,” mass media coverage, conferences, college courses, copious publications, and ongoing tourist attractions, such as street fairs and museum exhibitions—even a virtual event during the Omicron surge of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2021. Not surprisingly, fifteen minutes of celebrity (or less) remains the only remuneration for purported descendants. An analysis of what may have been the first research statement submitted to a scholarly folklore journal confirms an unstated agenda for promoting demonstrably unfounded claims:

Over the course of the past few years the scholarly community has become aware of an intriguing phenomenon—the emergence from the shadows of a secret Sephardic Jewish legacy in New Mexico, a legacy that dates back to the very founding of New Mexico in the sixteenth century, and even beyond, to the Golden Age of Jewish culture in Moslem Spain. (Hordes 1993, 137)

But the purported discovery had little recognition in academe, having appeared primarily in the popular press and media, reliant on terms like “shadows,” “intrigue,” and “secrecy” in place of data, with no attempt to secure or verify the Jewish identity claimed for items like the church hexagram. Instead, as seen above, reports of the discovery focused on literary mystique, regressions in time not borne out by history, and on shiny items of Muslim exotica—all distracting from questionable historicity in a manner reminiscent of a colonial traveler’s tale.

To date, no one has yet provided any valid or reliable evidence of a “secret Sephardic legacy” in New Mexico, either extant in the 1500s or ever. It is true that the first colonists did enter New Mexico in 1598, completing the conquest in 1599. But their settlement lasted for the next 80 years, until they were slaughtered or expelled by the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. By spotlighting the entry years

1598–99, eclipsing the full 80 years of their *seventeenth* (not sixteenth) century settlement, and omitting the fact that this settlement did *not* establish the contemporary Hispanic community, the statement manages to be both true and misleading at the same time. Moreover, the Holy Office in Salinas spent much time and energy in that doomed settlement, acquitting those bullied for “judaizing” in what was acknowledged by the Inquisitors themselves, and later in formidable scholarship (Scholes 1942, 34–85), to be nothing more than a politicized, ignorant, and mean-spirited spate of local mud-slinging. After the Pueblo Revolt, the region was empty of Europeans for thirteen years; only then did the founders of today’s Hispanic community enter with a tiny fragment of original settlers, none of whom were ever suspected of judaizing. To be clear, the contemporary Hispanic community descends from a second group of founders who first arrived at the turn of the *eighteenth* century (Chavez 1975), with no connection to crypto-Judaism. Nevertheless, lines of descent were of paramount importance to them, since color-coded genealogies determined degrees of social inclusion or exclusion in the settlement. Thus, from “the very founding” of the contemporary Hispanic community in the eighteenth (not the sixteenth) century, the social structure was that of a stigmatizing pigmentocracy, and the only antidote was genealogy.

By the eighteenth century, instances of Jewish ancestry were long unknown by most, if not all Hispanic Christians with Jewish antecedents. In New Mexico, if such descent was known, it would have been eclipsed to the full extent possible. As Gutiérrez writes, harsh distinctions were drawn in New Mexico between Old and New Christians. The latter category included, as one citizen put it, Native American converts “and other castes which are held or reputed to be despicable in this kingdom” (1991, 195). The genealogical boast given by one New Mexican couple makes clear the social distinctions drawn by the community: “Our families are Old Christian Spaniards, descended of such, and pure of taint with the bad races—Moors, Jews, and those newly admitted to the flock of the Holy Mother Church” (Gutiérrez 1991, 195). In the twentieth century, a complete social reversal occurred, but what changed was not local concern with genealogy. Rather, distancing from Jewish descent was replaced by a rush to construct “onomastic” lines of specifically Jewish descent, which is to say, engaging in wordplay with Hispanic

family names to indicate genealogical descent from Jews. This normally involves Hebrew wordplay with ordinary Iberian surnames in what folklorist W.F.H. Nicolaisen termed “onomastic mythology” (1976).

For example, one Hispanic woman, not a member of the Abeyta family, having determined that she and most of her neighbors descend from crypto-Jews, explained to me that the name Abeyta is a “Hispanification” of the Hebrew *ha-bayit* (the house). Eerily resonant with the Christian “Wandering Jew” legend, she added, “The family chose the name because they founded a home wherever they had to wander. Abeyta-*ha-bayit*. Get it?” Upon investigation, however, the name Abeyta is a “Hispanification” of the name de Veita, which is etymologically unrelated to *ha-bayit* and is of Basque, not Hebrew, origin (Pearce 1965, 1). Whether posited at the popular or at the academic level, wordplay like this is evidence of onomastic mythology, not of crypto-Jewish descent. The same applies to purported crypto-Jewish descent based on matching one’s surname to those of individuals once persecuted for judaizing heresy. Historically, Hispanic surnames are so common, the same surnames and even the same first-and-last name combinations exist among countless unrelated families and individuals, impeding any level of confidence for name-based lines of secretly Jewish descent. In New Mexico, claims of crypto-Jewish descent, absent any valid or reliable evidence, are just as constructed as the “history” given in the academic research statement above. More significantly, by confusing rather than clarifying the regional past, the research statement above is not pursuing the conduct of academic inquiry but appears to be distracting from questionable historicity with shiny objects of exotica. In short, it duplicates the literary pattern of Lost Tribes legends, not the factual pattern of academic scholarship.

For example, the purported “Golden Age of Jewish culture in Moslem Spain”—roughly the tenth and eleventh centuries—was neither a golden age for Jews nor submerged in the more exotic “shadows” to which the archaic spelling of “Moslem” might transport us. Instead, historians have long reviewed and replaced “Golden Age” terminology with *Convivencia*, or “co-existence,” referring to a time of cultural exchange between the Abrahamic religions in Spain, but a time rife with mutual friction and rivalry, described by contemporary scholars as a period

of terrible insecurity for Jews. It was a time when a handful of wealthy Jewish courtiers served a few petty caliphates, producing Hebrew arts and letters influenced by Arabesque style, “which, interestingly enough,” according to art historian Vivian Mann, “went unnoticed by Muslim intellectuals” (1992, xii). As Benjamin Gamble informs us, it was instead a time when “most of the inhabitants of the Peninsula suffered constantly . . . [and] whatever the nature of the *convivencia* . . . it was always tenuous and at best enjoyed only by a tiny elite” (1992, 20). While it is true that global Hispanics date back to the not so “Golden Age of Jewish culture in Moslem Spain,” it is misleading to imply that a handful of medieval court Jews are the bedrock of ambiguous New Mexican traditions such as Christian hexagrams. By claiming a discovery of lost and hidden Jews in a geographical setting like New Mexico, and doing so in this manner, the entire research statement skirts off the edge of fact-bound scholarship into the realm of literary fiction.

In folklore studies, there are three criteria for determining if folk traditions found in literary fiction are identified accurately (Dorson 1957, 1–8). First, the author must be a primary source, so descriptions will come from firsthand knowledge. Since there is no extant crypto-Jewish practice to observe firsthand in New Mexico, neither the author of the statement above nor anyone else can be a firsthand observer. Next, while the statement does go on to list a number of purported “cultural manifestations of Judaism,” no attempt is made to secure or verify them in history or culture. This is actually fortuitous for him, since any attempt to do so immediately disconfirms all such claims, for which the hexagram will have to suffice here. Other examples can be found elsewhere in the literature (Neulander 1996, 22–34; 2014, 88–91; 2016, 210–215). Among them is the only inquiry I know of into the Spanish *Fiesta de Sta. Ester* (Neulander 2003, 185–189), often misrepresented as a local crypto-Jewish Purim festival.

The second requirement is corroborative accuracy, in which the author’s narrative is consistent with or corroborated by the people and the age being described. But upon investigation, no Hispanics now corroborating crypto-Jewish descent had previous knowledge of such descent before receiving academic instruction to that effect. Moreover, the whole basis for Hispanic corroboration is questionable historicity and conflation of ambiguous Judeo-Christian symbols into a single,

overgeneralized “crypto-Jewish” category. Perhaps easier to accept in a less fraught context, one can surely see that swastikas woven into nineteenth-century Navajo blankets are not evidence of nineteenth century “Navajo Nazis.” Such overgeneralization is precisely what biblical scholar Samuel Sandmel termed *parallelomania*: an “extravagance . . . which first overdoes the supposed similarity . . . and then proceeds to describe source and derivation” (1962, 1). It is exactly what was done with Aztec blood sacrifice five centuries ago and with Christian church hexagrams in modernity.

The last requirement is internal literary accuracy, whereby the author has not altered the cultural or historical context to move the plot or serve other literary goals. Clearly, the research statement above is a model for sacrificing cultural and historical accuracy to serve literary goals. Consequently, whatever the reason for crypto-Jewish misdirection in New Mexico, my task remained the same: to lift crypto-Jewish claims from the genre of traditional literature by documenting the folkways of the lost and hidden Jews, according to folkloristic scholarship norms. But in that process, all purported “evidence” of a colonial crypto-Jewish heritage was categorically disconfirmed by the mid-1990s (Neulander 1996; 2014; 2016).

The most stable aspect of any tradition may be its ability to adapt, the better to remain timely and relevant for changing generations, in changing times and places. Hence, in response to disconfirmation by a trained folklorist, and apparently inspired by completion of the Human Genome Project in 2003, local academics adapted their narrative by adding twenty-first-century pseudoscience to the timeless pseudo-ethnography of Lost Tribes discoveries. The adaptation was an attempt to identify a significant number of New Mexican Hispanics as “genetically Jewish.” But based on the same naïveté that informed their cultural claims, their genomic claims were similarly doomed, since Jews do not compose a genetically distinct population or “race.” That concept exists only at the popular level, with no validity in human biology—not to mention that there are no markers for religious affiliation anywhere in the entire human genome.

Distinct markers, or mutations, exist specific to distinct geographical areas, and these are what distinguish populations from each other. Since Spain’s colonial migration into the Americas was overwhelmingly male, Spaniards of Middle

Eastern descent (who include Phoenicians, Arabs, and other non-Jewish populations) can be traced through distinctly Middle Eastern markers in the male Y-chromosome. Thus, in 2006, an independent DNA study at Stanford and New York Universities (Sutton et al. 2006) disconfirmed notions of the significant crypto-Jewish presence purported among modern New Mexican Hispanics. With the exception of 2.2 percent Native American admixture in New Mexico, Sutton found the genetic profile of modern males in Spain and New Mexico to be identical, down to 5 percent Berber in both groups. The finding shows that the founding fathers of the contemporary community were an identical slice of the parent population they left behind. Both populations have a Middle Eastern component of 10 percent. Since the 10 percent Middle Eastern component is mixed, and only partially Jewish, that means *more than 90 percent* of males in both Spain and New Mexico have no Jewish ancestry. Sutton reasoned, *if a significant component of crypto-Jews was added to the founding fathers who entered New Mexico, Middle Eastern heritage would be higher in modern New Mexico than in modern Spain. But identical distribution of Middle Eastern heritage in both Spain and New Mexico refutes the claim that a significant number of crypto-Jews was added to the founders of today's community, either when they entered the territory or at any time afterward. Moreover, there is still no historical or cultural evidence that Judeo-Spanish ancestry among Hispanics in New Mexico was specifically crypto-Jewish, crypto-Judaism being a predominantly Portuguese phenomenon. There were anecdotal instances of judaizing heresy in colonial Spanish America, but none occurred in New Mexico, and it is significant that the term "Spaniard" carried no Jewish connotation in the New World, while "Portuguese" and "Jew" were synonyms*" (Liebman 1974, 28).

Perhaps the most egregious of New Mexico's crypto-Jewish claims is that any unsuspecting non-Jew can be identified as genetically "Jewish by disease." Echoing Hitlerian propaganda on Jews as a "contaminated race" and coming from academics with no training in genomic medicine, the claim is mired in nineteenth-century race science. It reached an apogee of mass distribution in summer of 2009 when I happened to be in Albuquerque, able to document its welcome embrace into local antisemitic diatribe (2014, 95–6; 2015, 129; 2016, 224). While I was

there, the Jewish-by-disease assertion was televised as a special news report titled “Hidden Heritage Exposes Cancer Risk” (KRQE, July 16, 2009), which hovered over the medical record of a Hispanic family riddled with disease. The matriarch’s testimony both reflected and reinforced the belief being inculcated in the audience: “*That* confirmed that we really *were* Sephardic Jews!” The entire presentation made genetic assertions based on a significantly higher frequency of the disease in Jews than in non-Jews. But it overlooked the obvious: wherever Jews constitute a minority, no disease shared with non-Jews can ever be used as a Jewish ethnic marker. That is, the *non-Jewish* population will always be so much larger, the vast majority of affected people will *always be non-Jews*, even when frequency of the disorder is significantly higher in the tiny Jewish minority. For every one Jewish person affected by the disease cited on television, there will be roughly a dozen *non-Jews* affected by the same disease. That does not, however, make it a “Christian” disease. Just having the disease can tell us nothing about which population a patient belongs to, except for this: in the USA, the chance that any individual diagnosed with that disease does *not* descend from Jews, is greater than 90 percent.

Of particular interest here, the television news chose to underwrite the Jewish-by-disease narrative with the traditional signature of all Lost Tribes legends: the wilderness. It opened by showing a geological monolith inscribed with cryptic markings, originally said to be the Ten Commandments written in Phoenician. Notably, cryptic messages left on stone by indigenous ancestors are so highly valued in New Mexico that a large wilderness area rich in petroglyphs has been set aside as a National Monument. “Signs” etched in stone are so integral to signifying the indigenous past, it was perhaps inevitable that some natural wilderness formation, with some variant of ancestral petroglyph, would eventually become a “sign” of the lost, hidden Jews. That purpose would be served by cryptic inscriptions etched into a geological formation known as “Mystery Rock” (figure 3). Thus, to best substantiate its claim of a lost and hidden Jewish heritage, the television program brought viewers back to biblical terrain, to the uninhabited desert west of Los Lunas.

The rock’s inscriptions were first noticed in the 1930s, when they were probably created. Since almost no one in New Mexico could decipher ancient alphabets,



Figure 3. Mystery Rock, located west of Los Lunas, New Mexico. Photograph by Judith Neulander, 1992.

the text was easily recast as ancient Hebrew, with no attempt by academic promoters to secure or verify that the text was indeed written in ancient Hebrew. Similarly foregoing confirmation, the television program plunged ahead, using Mystery Rock to establish the “hidden heritage” that exposes cancer risk. A five-minute internet query led me to Jo Ann Hackett, recognized Hebrew epigrapher and linguistic scholar, then at Harvard University on her way to the University of Texas at Austin to revise the classic *Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1892–1906). “I wish things were always so easy,” she responded, explaining. “This isn’t ancient Phoenician or Hebrew or anything else” (personal communication, 2009). Rather, it is a concoction of letters taken from the alphabets of many different ancient languages in conflicting historical time periods, as are sometimes published alongside each other in cheap printouts of ancient alphabets but can never be found together in legitimate historical texts. In addition, according to



Hackett, the rock's text is partially incomplete, some letters are written backwards or upside down, and some words are misspelled. Thus, the text makes no pretense at being either Phoenician or Hebrew and was apparently a fanciful linguistic lark.

Having established the rock as evidence of the lost, hidden Jews, the program then showed a Hispanic priest standing over it, masquerading in the sacred trappings of Jewish worship, laying his hands on an amateur alphabetical concoction, and mouthing sacred Hebrew prayer. The television journalist then misinformed the audience, "Just like the prayer, the words are written in Hebrew," after which (keeping in mind that there are no markers for religious affiliation in DNA), the priest added: "Eighty percent of my DNA is Sephardic Jewish." He is later seen in his church, establishing the same baseless claims of crypto-Jewish origin for his Hispanic Catholic congregants.

The program ended by turning to the spearhead of crypto-Jewish claims in New Mexico. But rather than inform accurately on Mystery Rock, or more importantly, on the disease in question, he emphasized what he called "intersecting" claims made on the program that supposedly "coalesce" to confirm local crypto-Jewish heritage. "It's absolutely fascinating to see the intersection of the historical and the cultural and the genetic and the genealogical," he said, "that all seem to coalesce" (KRQE, July 16, 2009). He continued, "We have an opportunity to save some lives here, and that to me is the most exciting part of this whole research." Here, the speech act Pratt cites as "seeking to secure innocence in the same breath as exerting hegemony" could not be clearer. Notably, he did not explain the excitement or health benefit of inventing a false and malignant genetic marker for Jews, or of convincing non-Jews they descend from Jews, by ignoring disease frequencies contrary to his claim. Rather, while this imperial gaze appears innocent—even benevolent in its accompanying rhetoric—it actually redefines all it surveys through eyes that passively look out and possess. It constitutes an imperial gaze, redefining subjugated populations in wilderness settings as lost, hidden Jews, an identity imposed upon its subjects by sheer power of academic fiat.

Upon reflection, Jewish embrace of what appears to be a modern variant of the Lost Tribes legend points to an underlying yearning for Jewish indomitability, persisting in a community routinely reviled, threatened, and still rocked by a near

genocide, a devastating loss not unlike that experienced by the tribes of Judah in 721 BCE. Not surprisingly, members of the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society constituted an early target group, willing to pay nearly \$2000 to meet “descendants of the Hidden Jews of the Southwest,” whose purported transcendence of Inquisitorial persecution is a convincing referent for Jewish indomitability.

Reasons for embracing crypto-Jewish claims among non-Jews can vary greatly beyond mere deference to academic authority. For some individuals, to a small but noticeable extent, feelings of sadness and of not belonging have found a revelatory explanation in descent from Jews. It is unclear what accounts for connecting Jews with feelings of alienation and unhappiness, but potentially it reflects a tradition still persistent in some Christian quarters (as in “The Wandering Jew” legend) that Jews are an outcast, unassimilable people who have nothing to be happy about (Oring 1983, 266–67). Thus, for some individuals, descent from Jews can valorize states of emotional distress perhaps better served by more rational paths to relief. In addition, claims of crypto-Jewish descent can spotlight people who are otherwise invisible, making them visible—and notably visible as Christians of (white) Jewish descent—a racially redefining escape-valve from the worst effects of Anglo domination. Thus, in 1980, when Anglo numbers overtook the Hispanic population, it was not ancestral crypto-Judaism but the Lost Tribes narrative that “emerged from the shadows.” It revealed a modern survival of colonial imperialism among those empowered by skin color, social position, or level of education (or all three) to redefine Hispanics as a commodity market. For example, the same summer that the *Hidden Heritage* program aired on television news, and based on the same demonstrably unfounded misdirection, museums in both Albuquerque and Santa Fe were planning crypto-Jewish exhibitions, and a crypto-Jewish festival was forthcoming, promoted by the priest seen on television.

It is no great stretch to recognize New Mexico’s crypto-Jewish discovery as a modern variant of the Lost Tribes narrative. But no matter how greatly the narrative adjusts to accommodate modernity, wilderness landscape remains the traditional context in which it unfolds and to which it repeatedly refers. We have seen the fantasy take root, cradled in biblical topography, evolving from tales of indomitable faith, into a modern discovery of religiously vacant, disease-based

Judaism, repatriating the bad science, quack medicine, and pseudo-ethnography of history's worst actors. At its core, the New Mexican crypto-Jewish discovery points to an old colonial gaze in modern academe, and through those imperial eyes, the powerful role of landscape in transforming subjugated peoples into modern variants of ancient legends.

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