In order to explain why Iberian New Christians or Conversos — along with Western Sephardim “New Jews” from Converso origin — became so prominent in early modern world economies, Jonathan I. Israel depicted them as being “simultaneously agents and victims of empire.” On the one hand, they were Catholic offspring of medieval Sephardic Jews, often baptized through violence and mass coercion under Inquisitorial duress and social exclusion based on ethnic “purity of blood” criteria. On the other hand, their genuine or feigned Catholic public religious identities enabled them to play pivotal roles in far-reaching economic networks, which included the vast and rich Iberian imperial domains, mostly forbidden to professing Jews. Even those who returned to Judaism in the Western Sephardic diaspora continued to develop strong family and economic ties with the Iberian domains, undermining the tireless efforts made by Western Sephardic rabbis and “parnassim” leaders to guarantee the Jewish-rabbinic character of their communities. I will argue that this interdependence was one aspect of a paradoxical relationship. Another one was that some Conversos and ex-Converso Jews became thinkers of empires. The most radical thinker was the ex-Converso Sephardic Jew Fernando / Isaac Cardoso (ca. 1603–1684).

In his classic study, From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto (1971), Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi produced a masterful reconstruction of the life and thought of Cardoso: his early emigration from his birthplace in the Northeastern Portuguese Beira region to Castile, his studies at the University of Valladolid, his prestigious career as a physician at the Court of King Philip IV, and his deep involvement in Madrid’s literary life. After a sudden disappearance from the Iberian-Catholic scene in the middle of the 1650s, Cardoso briefly reappeared in Italy as a professing Jew in the Ghetto of Venice,
Las
EXCELENCIAS
DE LOS HEBREOS.
Por el Doctor
YSHAC CARDOSO.

Impreso en AMSTERDAM en casa de
DAVID DE CASTRO TARTA;,
El Año de 1679.

The cover of Isaac Cardoso’s Las excelencias de los Hebreos (Amsterdam, 1679). Centered in the illustration is the motto: “He who dispersed me, will gather me”
and thereafter, in that of Verona. According to Yerushalmi, Cardoso “returned” to Judaism in adulthood, and much of his education—general and Jewish alike—was built upon books and ideas available in the Iberian Peninsula. The mostly Iberian character of Cardoso’s weltanschauung appears in his major and last literary achievement: The Excellences of the Hebrews (1679), which was a Jewish counter-narrative to the Catholic Iberian apologetic genre of the “Excellences.” Divided into two parts—a celebration of ten “excellences” of Jews and Judaism and a refutation of ten “calumnies”—Cardoso’s Excellences was a major Jewish ex-Convexo theological-political project. It explained Jewish religious particularism and social isolationism in the Holy Land and in the diaspora, and endorsed an all-encompassing and compelling theology of sanctity, based on the premise that the Jews constitute what he called “a republic apart”: a sort of ultimate alternative to non-Jewish religion and politics then embodied by Spain’s imperial “Universal Monarchy.”

Yerushalmi rightly observed that Cardoso’s book responded to Fray Benito de Peñalosa y Mondragón’s Book of the Five Excellences of the Spaniard (1629) and its main argument that claimed that the Catholic Spaniards were God’s new “chosen people.” However, Yerushalmi overlooked another probable source of inspiration: the better-known and influential Excellences of the Monarchy and Kingdom of Spain (1597), written by one of the most authoritative jurists in Philip II’s times, Gregorio López Madera. Contrary to Peñalosa y Mondragón’s biblical-providential argumentation, López Madera insisted that Catholic Spain was the most “excellent” monarchy because it ruled over more kingdoms and provinces. For this reason, Spanish kings adopted the difficult task of spreading the faith among heathens around the world and defending Catholic faith against its inner Christian heretics and hostile Muslim neighbors.

Most likely, López Madera’s main purpose was to legitimize Philip II’s imperial ideology of “Universal Monarchy,” which was challenged by the expansive imperial policies of Protestant countries and even by Spain’s Catholic enemy, France. For Cardoso, López Madera’s imperial argumentation enabled him to expose more clearly how Jews were a “republic apart.” Thus, in the ninth “excellence of the Hebrews,” Cardoso celebrated the uniqueness of the Holy Land, because, he said, it was given by God to the Hebrews, while the lands of the other nations were obtained by the “conquering sword,” “deceitful cunning,” or by “voluntary surrender.”

Echoing Jewish (e.g. Isaac Abravanel) and Iberian-republican thinkers (probably Fray Alonso de Castrillo), Cardoso evoked the biblical wicked character of Nimrod (Genesis 10:8–9), as the founder of the first human monarchy. Thus, while human regimes are inherently tyrannical and oppressive, God limited the power of Jewish leaders through His Law. Cardoso reminded readers that the limits of the Holy Land were geographically reduced, for “the Lord wished to show that great realms are great plunders,” because “the domination of foreign territories is more the result of violence and force than of justice and equity.” Moreover, in the “fifth calumny,” in which Cardoso refuted accusations of Jewish proselytism, he insisted that “God does not command that His law will be preached around the globe.” According to Cardoso, religious universalism was the cruelest and most cynical companion of expansive politics because “with the vanquishing sword and the insatiable ambition of their conquests, they persist in reducing to their faith [ley] the subjects they possess, and under the pretext of spreading their faith [ley] they disguise the covetous purpose of their enterprises, by
imposing the faith by force, deserving to be always voluntary and non-violent.” That is why, he said, Judaism remained a self-secluded “republic apart,” since: “[b]y the same reason that God didn’t command to conquer strange lands, He also didn’t send prophets to teach His law around the world, thus closing the door to ambition and to perils.”

This excerpt explains why Cardoso did not explicitly mention the names of Spain and Portugal: he perceived them as the most poignant but not exclusive antithesis to the correct ways to approach political power and religion. Already particularistic in the Holy Land and now dispersed in the diaspora after Nebuchadnezzar’s conquest of Jerusalem, Jews became “pilgrims scattered in the world by God to teach the Gentiles the knowledge of one God and witness His Unity.” No wonder that the emblem on the frontispiece of The Excellences of the Hebrews elaborated upon Jeremiah 31:10: “Hear the word of the Lord, O ye nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock.”

For the ex-Converso early modern Sephardic Jew Fernando/Isaac Cardoso, Judaism was the ultimate counter-empire. For us, whether living in Israel, the United States, or in the rest of the diaspora, Cardoso’s anti-imperial views still remain a challenging caveat.