

U R I E L A C O S T A

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A C C O U N T

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[EXEMPLAR HUMANÆ VITÆ]

U R I E L  
A C O S T A

A  
Specimen  
of  
Human Life

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WAS born in *Portugal*, in a city of the same name, but commonly called *Oporto*. My parents were of the nobility, and originally descended from those *Jews* who were constrained to embrace the Christian religion in that kingdom. My father was a true *Christian* and a man of strict honour and integrity. I had a genteel education at home, servants always to command and a managed *Spanish* gennet to perfect myself in that exercise of the great horse in which my

father was completely skilled, and I endeavoured to follow his steps to the utmost. At length being grown up, and as well accomplished in the liberal arts as young gentlemen generally are, I applied myself to the study of the law. As to my genius and disposition, I was naturally very pious and compassionate, insomuch that I could not hear the story of any person's misfortunes without melting into tears; and had such an innate sense of modesty, that I dreaded nothing so much as to suffer disgrace. Not that I had the least cowardice in my temper, or was free from resentment when a just occasion offered; for which reason I always had an aversion to that haughty and insolent race of men, who are apt to despise and trample upon others, and therefore took all opportunities to defend the oppressed, and to make their cause my own.

By religion has my life been made a scene of incredible sufferings. I was educated, according to the custom of that country, in the *Popish* religion; and when I was but a young man, the dread of eternal damnation made me desirous to keep all its doctrines with the utmost exactness. I employed my leisure time in reading the gospel, and other spiritual books, ran through *Breviaries of the Confessors*, and the more time I bestowed upon them,

the greater difficulties still rose upon me. Which by degrees threw me into such inextricable perplexities, doubts and difficulties, as overwhelmed me with grief and melancholy.

It seemed to me a thing impossible by confessing my sins (after the custom of the *Roman Church*) to obtain my virtue thereof a plenary absolution, and to have fulfilled all the things that were required; and this consequently made me despair of salvation, as it was to be obtained only by such particular rules. But as it was a very difficult thing to shake off at once a religion which I had been educated in from my infancy, and which by a long implicit faith had taken deep root, I began, when I was about twenty years old, to question with myself, whether or no it was not possible for those things which were related of another life, to be forgeries, and whether a belief of them were consistent with reason; forasmuch as my reason did perpetually suggest to me things that were directly contrary. Under this doubt I continued some time; and at last came to this settled persuasion, that salvation was not to be obtained in the way that I was in. During this time, I applied myself to the study of the law, and, when I was in my twenty-fifth year, an opportunity offered by which I

obtained an ecclesiastical benefice, viz the dignity of treasurer in the Collegiate Church.

Not being able to find that satisfaction I wanted, in the *Romish Church*, and being desirous to attach myself to one, knowing also there was a very great dispute betwixt the *Christians* and *Jews*, I went through the Books of *Moses* and the Prophets, wherein I found some things not a little contradictory to the doctrines of the *New Testament*; and there seemed to be the less difficulty in believing those things which were revealed by God himself. Besides the *Old Testament* was assented to both by *Jews* and *Christians*, whereas the New was believed by *Christians* only. Hence I was induced to become a convert to the law of *Moses*, and as he declared himself only to be a deliverer of what was revealed by God himself, being called by him to that office, or rather constrained to accept it (so easily are the ignorant imposed on), I thought it my duty to make the law the rule of my obedience. Having entered upon this resolution, and finding it was unsafe to profess this religion in that country, I began to think of changing my habitation and leaving my native home. In order to this, I immediately resigned my ecclesiastical benefice in favour of another, unbiassed either by

the profits or honour of it, which are two prevailing motives with the people of our nation. I also left a handsome house situated in the best part of the city, that my father had built. Which having done, my mother, brothers, and myself embarked on board a ship, though at a very great hazard (it not being lawful for those that are descended from the *Jews*, to depart the kingdom without the king's special license). I must acquaint the reader, that, from a principle of natural affection, I had communicated to them my sentiments on the falsity of our religion, though such a discovery might have proved fatal to me. So dangerous a thing is it in that country to speak freely on this subject, though to the dearest of friends. Having finished our voyage, and being arrived at *Amsterdam*, where we found the *Jews* professing their religion with great freedom, as the law directs them, we immediately fulfilled the precept concerning circumcision.

I had not been there many days, before I observed, that the customs and ordinances of the modern *Jews* were very different from those commanded by *Moses*. Now if the law was to be strictly observed, according to the letter, as it expressly declares, it must be very unjustifiable in the *Jewish*

doctors to add to it inventions of a quite contrary nature. This provoked me to oppose them openly, nay, I looked upon it as doing God service to defend the law with freedom against such innovations. The modern *Jewish Rabbins*, like their ancestors, are an obstinate and perverse race of men, strenuous advocates for the odious sect of the *Pharisees* and their institutions, not without a view to gain, and, as is justly imputed to them, vainly fond of the uppermost seats in the synagogue, and greetings in the market. Men of this character could not bear that I should differ from them, though in the most minute points, insisting upon my following their steps exactly in every thing, or else threatening to exclude me from their synagogue, and to pass full sentence of the greater excommunication upon me.\* But as it was unworthy of him, who had so lately left his native country, and been

\* There are two degrees of excommunication among the *Jews*, the lesser, which only excludes the person from some particular society or congregation till he repents, which he is allowed to do in thirty days; and if he does not, then is pronounced the greater, which affects his goods, confiscates them to sacred uses, and deprives him of any dealings with or support from his nearest relations, as well as subjects him to many other grievous penalties.—*Vide Abendana's Jewish Polity.*

[The Editor]

content to forego many other temporal advantages for liberty of conscience, to be overawed and forced to submit to men, who had no right to such a power; besides, I thought it both sinful and beneath a man to be a slave in things pertaining to conscience; therefore I resolved rather to suffer the worst they could inflict rather than recant. Accordingly they excommunicated me from their society, insomuch that my own brothers, who before took me for their teacher, in spiritual things, durst not take any notice of me as they passed by me in the street for fear of the *Rabbins*.

This situation of affairs put me upon writing a treatise in defence of myself, and to prove plainly out of the law of *Moses*, that vanity and invalidity of the traditions and ordinances of the *Pharisees*, and their repugnancy to that law. After I had begun this work (for I think myself obliged to relate everything plainly and circumstantially) it happened that I entirely agreed with the opinion of those, who confine the rewards and punishments proposed in the *Old Testament* to this life only, and seem to be little concerned about a future state, or the immortality of the soul; being induced to embrace this opinion by the following argument urged by others, because the law of *Moses* is quite

silent as to the two last points, and only proposes temporal rewards and punishments to the observers and transgressors thereof. This was no small matter of triumph to my adversaries, to find that I had entertained such opinions, thinking they had thereby gained the Christians to their party, who by their Faith in the Gospel, which expressly mentions eternal rewards and punishments, do believe and maintain the immortality of the soul. It was with this view of rendering me odious to the Christians, and to silence me entirely, that, before my book was put to the press, they employed a certain physician to publish a treatise,\* entitled, *Of the Immortality of the Soul*, in which the doctor inveighed bitterly against me as one who defended *Epicurus's* principles, and who by denying the immortality of the soul, did in a manner dispute the being of a God. Whereas at that very time I had conceived but an ill opinion of *Epicurus*, and being prejudiced by the unfair relations of other people, without

\* This treatise was published in the Year of the World 5383, according to the *Jewish* calculation of time, which answers to the year of the Christian Aera 1623.

N.B. The author was, I believe, *Menasseh ben Israel*.

[The Editor]

hearing what he had to say for himself, did not scruple to censure him with great freedom. But having heard the sentiments of some impartial lovers of truth, concerning him and his doctrine, I have found reason to change mine, and to be sorry for the injustice I did him then, in pronouncing so great a man to be both absurd and mad, when at this very time I am so far from being a competent judge of his opinions, that I am an utter stranger to his works. The next step they took was to set their children upon me in the streets, who insulted me in a body as I walked along, abusing and railing at me, crying out, "There goes a Heretic, there goes an Apostate." At other times, they assembled together before my doors, flinging stones at the windows, and doing everything they could to disturb and annoy me, so that I could not live quiet in my own house. After the doctor's book I have mentioned was published, immediately I set about my own defence, and wrote an answer to it, in which I opposed the doctrine of the soul's immortality with all the strength I was able, glancing by the way at the deviations of the *Pharisees* from the Mosaic Institution. No sooner had this appeared in print, than the senators and rulers of the *Jews* agreed to lay an information against me

before the public magistrate, setting forth that I had published a book to disprove the immortality of the soul, and that with a view to subvert, not only the *Jewish* but also the Christian religion. Upon this information I was apprehended and sent to prison, from whence, after a confinement of eight or ten days, I was discharged upon giving security, for I was fined by the magistrate, in the penalty of three hundred florins, besides the forfeiture of my books lately published.

Some time after this, as age and experience are apt to occasion new discoveries to the mind of man, and consequently to alter his judgment of things (let me here declare my mind freely, for what should hinder a man from speaking the truth without reserve, who is just going to make his exit, and to leave behind him a sad, though true example of human misery?); it was some time after this, I say, that I began to question with myself, whether the law of *Moses* ought to be accounted the law of God, seeing there were many arguments which seemed to persuade, or rather determine the contrary. At last I came to be fully of the opinion, that it was nothing but a human invention, like many other systems in the world, and that *Moses* was not the writer; for it contained many things

contrary to the law of nature. And God, who was the author of that law, could not contradict himself, which he must have done, had he given to men a rule of obedience contrary to that first law. Having thus determined this point, I began to reason with myself in the following manner (I wish I had never entertained such a thought!): What can it profit me to spend all my days in this melancholy state, separated from the society of this people and their elders, especially as I am a stranger in this country, destitute of any acquaintance with its inhabitants, or even knowledge in its language? How much better will it be for me to return to their communion, and conform to their ways, in compliance with the Proverb, which directs us at *Rome* to do as they do at *Rome!* These considerations prevailed with me to return to their society; accordingly I made a formal recantation, and subscribed such articles as they were pleased to impose upon me, after having lived fifteen years in a state of separation from them. I must observe, that a certain cousin of mine helped to mediate this reconciliation betwixt us.

A few days after this I was accused by a lady my nephew; whom I kept in my house, in relation to the manner of directing them, and other

ceremonies of the like nature, by which it appeared that I did not conform to the customs of the *Jews*. Upon this information new and cruel proceedings were commenced against me; for my cousin, whom I mentioned before as a sort of mediator between us, thinking that this behaviour of mine reflected dishonour on his mediation, and being besides a proud, resentive, bold fellow, and very hasty, declared himself openly my inveterate enemy, and seducing all my brothers over to his side, left nothing unessayed that might ruin me in my reputation and fortune; and by consequence that might deprive me of life itself. He prevented a marriage which I was then just upon the point of concluding; for I had lost my wife lately. He was likewise the occasion that one of my brothers detained from me my effects which he had in his hands, and also put a stop to the dealings which subsisted between us, by which means I suffered a prodigious detriment in my affairs; in a word, he was a most implacable enemy to my reputation, fortune and life. Besides this domestic war (if I may so call it) another of a more public nature, was carried on against me by the Rabbins, and the people who began to persecute me with fresh hatred, behaving with such insolence to me as raised my just abhorrence and

detestation of them. At this time a new affair broke out, as follows. I happened one day to be in company with two men who came from *London* to *Amsterdam*, the one a *Spaniard*, the other an *Italian*, both Christians, and not so much as related to the *Jews* by descent, who taking an opportunity to declare to me their necessitous condition, asked my advice touching their becoming proselytes to Judaism. Whereupon I dissuaded them from any such purpose, advising them rather to bear the inconveniences of their present condition, than to subject themselves to so heavy a yoke, the grievousness of which they were unacquainted with, cautioning them at the same time, not to make the least mention to the *Jews* of what had passed between us, which they faithfully promised me. But these perfidious wretches, induced by the hopes of filthy lucre instead of returning me thanks went and disclosed all to my dear friends the *Pharisees*. Upon this the rulers of the synagogue sent the Rabbins were fired with rage and resentment, and the insolent rabble cried out with one voice, crucify him. In a word, I was cited to appear before the *Sanhedrim*, where the articles of my charge were read with as solemn and awful voice as though I had been upon my trial for life; and

then it was determined, that if I was really a Jew, I ought to be resigned and submit to their sentence, otherwise I must be excommunicated again. Very just and equitable judges, who assume to yourselves the power of condemnation and punishment, but if I appeal to your authority for protection against oppression and wrong, then indeed you pretend that you have not authority to interfere in those matters, and are only servants and subjects to the civil power. Of what validity then is your judgment that I should obey it? Then was read out of a little book my sentence, which was "that I must make my entrance into the synagogue dressed in a mourning vestment, holding a black wax taper in my hand, and there to read distinctly before the whole congregation a form of recantation penned by them in which they had described in black and odious colours, the great enormity of my crimes. Then I was to submit to be whipped in the same public manner, with a scourge made of leather thongs. After that to prostrate myself at the door of the synagogue, that they might all pass over me, and moreover to fast certain days." I had no sooner heard my sentence, but I was fired with indignation and a just resentment. However containing my passion as well as I could, I only answered,

that I could not prevail with myself to undergo such a severe sentence. When I had given in my answer, they consulted together, and proceeded to a second excommunication of me; but not content with this, many of them spit upon me as they passed by me in the streets, and encouraged their children to do the same. In short, the only reason they did not stone me, was because they wanted power. This persecution lasted the space of seven years, during which time should I relate all that I suffered, it would appear incredible; for two parties violently persecuted me, one the whole Jewish body, the other my relations, who fought for their revenge in my disgrace; nor would they be satisfied, till they got me into their own power and jurisdiction, saying among themselves, he is stubborn, he will do nothing till he is forced, and therefore ought to be compelled. If I was sick, nobody would attend me; if I laboured under any other misfortune, it was a matter of triumph and joy to them; if I proposed any one of their own body to be a judge between us, the proposal was rejected; and as to disputing things of this nature before a public magistrate, which I began to do, I found it very tedious and difficult, for judicial proceedings are at least both dilatory and expen-



sive.\* During these my troubles they would often exhort me to submission, saying, "We are all your fathers, and therefore you need not fear that we shall act an unfair or unkind part towards you; only say, that you are ready to perform whatsoever we enjoy you, and leave the rest to us, and all shall be made easy. This was the very point in dispute, and I was also sensible how disgraceful it was to surrender at discretion, and depend on their mercy; yet being desirous to put an end to this long affair, after much reluctance, I prevailed with myself to submit to their own terms, and make trial of their honour. For thus I argued with myself; if they deal dishonourably by me, they will stand convicted by their own proceedings, and make evident their implacable disposition towards me, and how little trust is to be reposed in them. And at length this execrable and detested people, did plainly shew what their religion and principles are,

\* If they were so in *Holland* a hundred years ago, when this author wrote, I fear they are no better now, too many in *England* can witness the truth of this assertion, where it is generally more profitable to give up ones right to many advantages, than to contest it with a stubborn adversary, who can produce arguments from the law, not to be found in any system of ethics sacred or profane. [The Editor]

by treating men of honour and character in as scandalous a manner, as if they had been the vilest slaves upon earth. In a word, I said to them, behold I depend upon your mercy, and am ready to undergo whatsoever you are pleased to impose on me! Now let every man of candour and humanity attend to my relation, and judge of the sentence, which a particular set of people, and under a foreign jurisdiction, passed upon an innocent man.

I made my entrance into the synagogue, which was filled with men and women out of curiosity to be spectators. And at the time appointed I went up into the desk, which stood in the middle of it, and with a distinct voice read over the form of confession, which they had drawn up for me, *viz.* that I deserved to die a thousand deaths for the crimes and misdemeanors I had committed, such as prophanation of the Sabbath, breach of my religious vows, etc. which I had so far violated, as to dissuade others from being converts to Judaism; to atone for which Impieties I submitted to their sentence, and was ready to undergo whatever they were pleased to lay upon me, promising not to be guilty of the like crimes for the future. When I had finished my lesson, I came down from the desk, when the chief priest came up to me, and

whispering in my ear, bid me go to a certain corner of the synagogue, which having done the door-keeper bid me to strip; accordingly I stripped myself naked down to the waist, tied a napkin about my head, pulled off my shoes, and holding up my arms above my head, clasped a sort of pillar in my hands, to which the door-keeper tied them with a band. Having thus prepared myself for my punishment, the virger came to me, and with a scourge of leather thongs gave me nine and thirty stripes, according to the custom of the *Jews* (it being a precept of their law, that the number of stripes shall not exceed forty). For these very scrupulous and religious gentlemen, take due care not to offend by doing too much. During the time of my whipping they sang a Psalm. This correction being over, I was ordered to sit down on the ground, and then the doctor came to me and absolved me from my excommunication; so now the gate of heaven, which was doubly locked and barred against me before, was flung open all on a sudden. O the ridiculous notions and conceits of mortals! After this I put on my clothes, and went to the door of the synagogue, where I prostrated myself, the door-keeper holding up my head, whilst all both old and young passed over me, stepping with one

foot on the lower part of my legs, and behaving with ridiculous and foolish gestures, more like monkeys than human creatures. When they had all done, I got up, and being washed and made clean by the man who stood by me for that purpose, I went home. Now let nobody say that they did not do me honour, for if they scourged me, yet they lamented over me and stroked my head. O shameless race of men! O detested fathers! You from whom I had nothing dishonourable to fear! You, who said, far be it from us to use you indelicately. Now let anyone who has heard my story, judge how decent a spectacle it was to see an old man, a person of no mean rank, and who was moreover naturally exceedingly modest, stripped before a numerous congregation of men, women, and children, and scourged by order of his judges, and those, such as rather deserved the name of abject slaves. Let him imagine the confusion and anguish, such a one must suffer, by being obliged to lay at the Feet of his bitterest enemies, and be trampled on by those persons who had already loaded him with injuries and insults. Farther let him think, he sees his own brothers (O monstrous, inhuman and shameful treatment) who were educated in the same house with him, joining in an unnatural

URIEL ACOSTA'S Account

confederacy with his persecutors, unmindful of that natural affection with which I always loved them, and which was so peculiar to me; and regardless of the many good offices I had done them, requiting all my tenderness and kindness with shameful injuries and disgrace.

My detested persecutors said in defence of themselves, that they only made me a just example of punishment, to deter others of their communion from open rebellion against their ordinances, and from writing against their doctors. Most wicked wretches and fathers of all untruth! With how much more justice could I have made you a public example of punishment, to deter you from practising the like abuses on men who are sincere lovers of truth, haters of fraud, and indifferently the friends of all mankind, of whom you are the common enemies, esteeming all others but as the beasts and scum of the earth, whilst you arrogantly extol yourselves with vain encomiums, as the only favourites of heaven. Whereas you have really nothing to boast of, unless you think it praiseworthy to live as vagabonds, banished from the society of men, despised and hated by all for those ridiculous and absurd customs, by which you distinguish yourselves from the rest of the world. If you rely

of his own LIFE

on a greater simplicity of manners and integrity of life than other men, your pretences are very false, who visibly fall short of many others in these respects. I affirm therefore, that if I had not wanted power, I might with just cause have revenged myself of this contemptible crew, for the great injuries and mischiefs they did me, and which rendered life a burden; for who that has any regard to reputation, could bear to lead an ignominious life? For (as a certain heathen very well observed) it is the duty of every man either to live with honour, or to die bravely. My cause is as far superior to theirs, as truth is more excellent than falsehood. For whereas they are advocates for a fraud, that they made a prey and slaves of men; I contend nobly in the cause of truth, and assert the natural rights of mankind, whom it becomes to live suitably to the dignity of their nature, free from the burden of superstitions and vain ceremonies. I confess it would have been more for my advantage, to have been silent from the first, and to have acquiesced under things just as I had found them. This is a more politic way for men, who would live free from the insolence of the rabble, and the oppression of tyrannical governors; for everyone that is intent on self interest, is industrious to suppress

truth, to lay traps for the ignorant and unwary, and to trample justice under foot. But after I was unwarily drawn into, and deceived by a false religion, and had gone so far as to enter the lists with these champions, I thought it more honourable to die bravely, than to have those mortifying reflections which must necessarily attend a base submission. It was a common argument with them, to appeal to their majority in number, objecting to me, that as I was alone in the opposition, I ought to submit to them. And indeed, gentlemen, you are so far in the right, that it is the safety and interest of a single person to submit to numbers, for fear of falling a sacrifice to their power; but because it is safe, it does not therefore follow it is right, ingloriously to quit the field to plunderers and robbers; you must therefore allow at least, that it is a glorious virtue to make the best stand we are able against the haughty invader, lest success and a tame submission, encourage him in his insolence and usurpation. It is indeed the part of a truly worthy, a good and generous man, to be meek and gentle with those of the same disposition; but to put on the simplicity of the lamb, when we are to engage with the fierceness of the lion, is foolish and absurd. If to die in our country's cause is de-

servedly ranked amongst the most glorious actions, because our country is a part of ourselves, ought it not to be esteemed equally glorious, to do the same in defence of our reputation and honour? Which are properly and peculiarly ours, and without which we cannot live as becomes men; unless, as you seem to think; to wallow in the dirt of filthy lucre can denominate us such. But say these vile scoffers, trusting in the strength of their number more than that of their cause; what availeth your contending with us? What can you do against so many! I confess it, and lament it as my great misfortune, that I am overpowered by your multitude. It is owing to this, and your bitter reflections on me, that my heart burns with resentment and indignation, and makes me think it unlawful to use fair play towards such wicked, arrogant and abandoned wretches. All I can say is, I want the power of revenge.

I know that these adversaries, in order to blacken my reputation and traduce me before the illiterate vulgar, would frequently say, this man, is neither *Jew*, *Christian*, nor *Mahometan*, he believes no religion at all. But take heed, blind *Pharisees*, what you say, for though your hearts be full of malice and cunning, yet being without light your tongues

betray you. Suppose I was a *Christian*, what then would you say? It is plain you would call me an idolater, and say, that the true God from whom I had revolted, would pass sentence of condemnation on me, together with *Jesus of Nazareth* the Teacher of the *Christians*. If I was a *Mahometan*, we all know what names you would honour me with then; so that it is impossible for me to escape your slander, and no refuge would be left me, but that of falling down at your feet, and embracing your abominable and carnal institutions. Now pray tell me, if you know of any other religion beside those already mentioned, the two last of which you hold to be false, and therefore call them deviations from the true one. But methinks I hear you allow one more religion to be truly and properly such, and by virtue of which men may please God; for, say you, if all nations, the *Jews* only excepted (for by the way, you must always distinguish yourselves from the common herd of mankind) keep the seven commandments which you affirm *Noah* to have observed, and others before *Abraham's* time, this is sufficient for their salvation. By your own confession then, there is one other religion that I may trust in, though I am descended from the *Jews*. Now let me beseech you, that I may be permitted

to take my chance among the uncircumcised; or if I cannot obtain this request, I shall take the benefit of that privilege of my own accord. O thou blind Pharisee, who unmindful of that primary Law which was from the beginning, and will be so to the end of things, only makest mention of other laws of a latter date, all of which thou condemnest except thy own; but of that, others will judge whether you will or no, according to the rule of right reason, which is the true standard of that law of nature, which you utterly disregard and would fain bury in oblivion, that you may lay a grievous and heavy yoke on other men, and divest them of their reason and sense. As I have touched upon this point, I shall dwell a little on the subject, and taking notice of the excellency of this primary law. Granting then that this law is the common rule of action to all men, and suitable to them as they are such; it does certainly link them together in the ties of mutual affection, and is an utter stranger of those divisions, which occasion hatred and animosity among men, and are the greatest evils that infest society. It is that which teaches us the art of living well, which distinguishes between right and wrong, and points out what is decent and indecent. What-ever is excellent in the law of *Moses*, or any other

institution, is perfectly contained in the law of nature, from which if we deviate never so little, contentions and divisions are the natural consequences; but if we err widely from it, who can describe the distraction, confusion, and terrible disasters that must result from such a defection? What are the most useful precepts in the law of *Moses* or any other religion, relating to human society, and conducting to a friendly intercourse with one another? They are chiefly those of honouring our parents, and not to invade the property of others, whether it be in their lives, their characters or fortunes. Now there is nothing in these which is not dictated by the law of nature, and does not entirely agree with that rule of right of reason. We naturally love our children, and children their parents, brother is affectionate to brother, and one friend to another. We cannot help desiring, that every thing belonging to us should be preserved safe, and consequently, hate those who disturb our quiet or endeavour to deceive us. From hence it necessarily follows, that we ought not to do those things which we condemn in others; for if we condemn those who deprive us of our property, the sentence turns upon ourselves if we invade another man's. We have here in one view,

everything that is material and essential in any other law. As to the distinction of meats, let us leave that to the physicians, who will best instruct us, which are salutary and which hurtful. With regard to other ceremonials, rites and ordinances, such as sacrifices, tythes, and all that fraudulent trade, contrived to support the lazy with the profits of the industrious, this is the very cause of our complaint, these our misfortunes, that we are misled and deceived in these points by designing men. All true *Christians* must acknowledge what I have advanced, and are much to be commended where they have banished these impositions, only retaining those things which assist us in leading a good moral life; for we cannot be said to live well, when we observe many vain ceremonies, but only when we live like rational creatures. But it may be said, that the law of *Moses* or the Gospel do contain a more noble and perfect system of duty, than we are taught by the light of nature; one instance is, that precept which enjoyns us to love our enemies; to which I answer, that if we once deviate from the light of nature, and think to substitute something more perfect in its place, discord and disputes immediately ensue. For what signifies laying commands on me, which I have not in my power to

obey? For if it is naturally impossible for me to love my enemy, what effect can such a law produce, but dissatisfaction and uneasiness of mind? But if it appears not to be impossible to do good to enemies (which we may, and not love them, for man is naturally prone to humanity and compassion), we cannot from hence deny, but in this sense the law of nature is absolutely perfect.

Now let us consider the inconveniences that arise from deviating very far from the law of nature. We before asserted, that there is a natural affection between parents and children, between brothers and friends. Now any positive law, let *Moses* or who will be the author of it, which commands a father to kill or betray his son, a brother his brother, the wife her husband, or one friend another, for the sake of religion, does entirely dissolve and break that universal tie, and enjoins men that, which, if they do perform, will render them notorious offenders against the law of nature, which abhors such practices. But why need I instance in these crimes, when men have abandoned themselves to such a degree of infatuation, as to sacrifice their own children by way of burnt offering, to those idols which they ignorantly worshipped, so void were they of all humanity and natural affec-

tion. How much happier would it have been, if men had kept within those bounds which nature had set, and not given themselves up to such abominable inventions! Why need I mention the horrors and anxieties, with which some superstitious men have filled the minds of their fellow creatures, and which had they observed only the dictates of nature, they would have been entirely free from. How many die martyrs to various opinions, that have been instilled into them by others? How many devote themselves to a miserable life, tormenting their bodies, giving up themselves to solitude and sadness, perpetually disquieting their minds with dismal apprehensions, and making themselves wretched here, for fear of being so hereafter? To these and innumerable other evils, does false religion, invented by weak and wicked men, subject us poor mortals. I speak by woeful experience, for I am one of the deluded, who have been fatally deceived by such impostors, and ruined by credulity. But it is said again, if there be no other law than that of nature, and if men have not a firm belief of a future state, and are not awed by the dread of eternal punishment, what will be sufficient to restrain them from doing evil continually? These are inventions of your own

(which there is too much reason to apprehend) with a view to your own advantage, at least with the same design, that people tell stories to children of spirits and such like, to frighten them into a compliance with their wills, and to keep them in awe. These stratagems have the desired effect, whilst they continue children, but when they come to the use of their reason they laugh at the cheat, and no longer stand in fear of such tales. Just so ridiculous are your frauds, and only fit to impose upon children and fools, whereas they who see into them, deride both the cheats and the authors. I will not here examine the lawfulness of such frauds, seeing you who are the contrivers of them do allow in your own law, that evil is not to be done that good may come of it; unless you think it no evil, to invent lies to the prejudice of others in their most important concerns, and to frighten weak people out of their senses. Whereas, had you the least spark of true religion or awe in yourselves, you must be under the greatest dread of future punishment, for having introduced so much mischief into the world; for having excited so much discord and division among men, and for all your impious and execrable doctrines, whereby

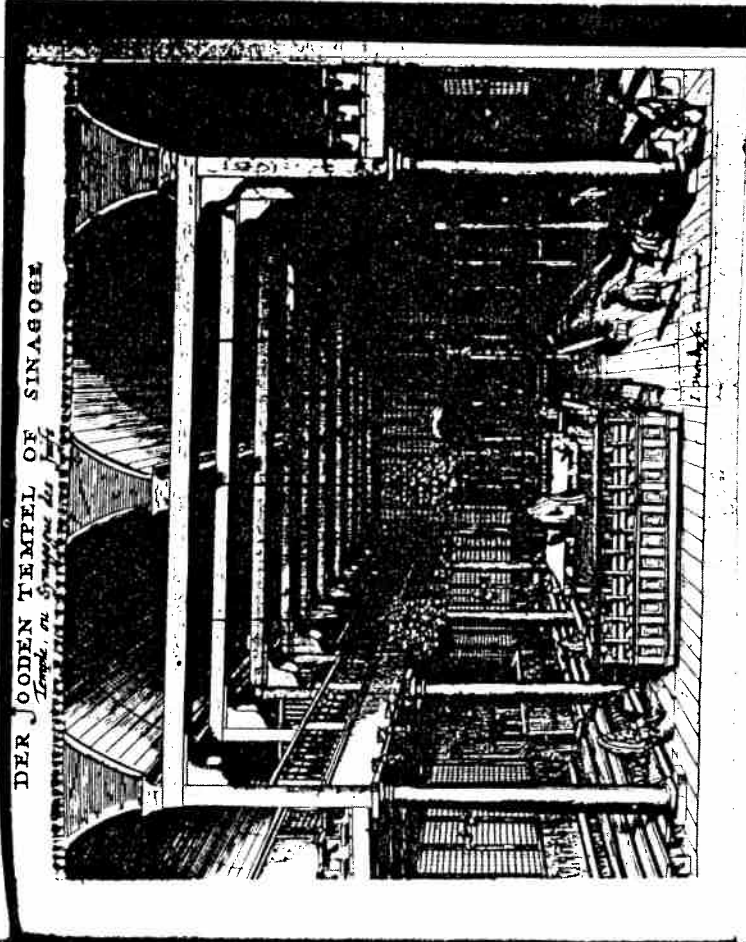
you are the occasion of setting parents and children against each other.

Give me leave here to propose the following question: If these groundless fears which you instill into the minds of men, are contrived on purpose to restrain that natural malignity which is inherent in them, and to keep within the bounds of their duty, those who would otherwise lead immoral lives; must not you at the same time reflect that yourselves are men of like passions with them, naturally averse to what is good, prone to evil, injurious, without compassion or mercy? But I see every one of you filled with rage at so insolent a question, and justifying his own conduct. What, are we not all pious, and merciful, and strict adherents to truth and justice? I answer, what you thus boastingly say of yourselves is notoriously false; your accusation of all other men is scandalously unjust (whose natural propensity to evil, you pretend to correct with your fictitious terrors). Impiously you reflect on the majesty and goodness of God, whom you represent as a tyrant and cruel destroyer; and cast a severe reproach on human nature, in supposing it to be subjected to so deplorable and wretched a fate, as if the common



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calamities of life that happen to man, were not sufficient for his portion of misery. But granting the natural corruption of man is very great, which I readily allow (yourself being a sufficient proof of it; for otherwise you could not be capable of such scandalous forgeries); yet, upon this supposition, you ought to look out for a more effectual remedy, that may be sufficient to expell this general disorder without introducing a worse in its place. And to lay aside those impositions, which are only fit to frighten children and simple folk; but if the disorder is incurable, then cease your vain delusive pretences, and no longer, like impudent quacks, promise men that health which you are not able to give them; but be content with establishing among yourselves just and reasonable laws, providing rewards for the good, and suitable punishments for the bad; defending the cause of the injured against the violence of the oppressor, that there be no complaining that justice is not executed in the earth, and that there is none to deliver the weak out of the hand of the strong. In a word, if men would follow the dictates of right reason, and live according to the laws which nature dictates to them, they would all mutually love and compliance one another; every one would then contribute his



*Interior of the Spanish Portuguese Synagogue, Amsterdam 1639*  
Courtesy of The Jewish Theological  
Seminary of America (Frank J. Darm-  
staedter, Curator)

*of his own LIFE*

utmost to the relief of his neighbour under any afflictions, or at least, no man would injure another, for that would be acting contrary to human nature. Indeed many of the evils that happen in life do arise from hence, that Men have invented laws directly repugnant to those of nature; and thereby give occasion for one man to injure and persecute another. On the other hand, many deceitfully circumvent the unwary by their extraordinary pretences to piety, using religion as a cloak to make a prey of such as are superstitiously inclined. These may aptly be compared to a thief in the night, who treacherously attacks us when we are off our guard, and do not suspect any danger. Yet these are the men who are continually vaunting, I am a Jew, or I am a *Christian*, doubt not my integrity? Rely upon me, I will not deceive you. Infamous wretches! He who pretends to be neither of these and only calls himself a man, is far preferable to you; for if you will not believe him, you may stand upon your guard. But who can defend himself against you, hypocrites, who, under the mask of sanctity, like the thief before mentioned, come in by stealth and murder us in our sleep.

There is one thing beyond many others, that I wonder at, and very surprising it is; how the

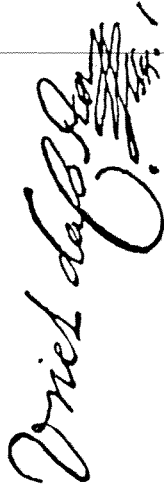
URIEL ACOSTA'S Account

*Pharisees*, living in a *Christian* country, come to enjoy so much liberty, as to judicial power and authority! For I may safely affirm, that if *Jesus* of *Nazareth*, whom the *Christians* worship, was to preach at this very time at *Amsterdam*, and it pleased the *Pharisees* to scourge him (as their forefathers did) for opposing and condemning their traditions, and hypocrisy, they might do it with freedom and impunity. This is certainly just matter of reproach, and what ought not to be tolerated in a free city, which profess to protect men in the peaceable enjoyment of their liberty, and yet does not screen them from the insolence and injurious treatment of the *Pharisees*; and therefore, where a man cannot be allowed an advocate to defend his cause, or a judge to punish the injuries done him, it is not to be wondered at, if he takes all opportunities to defend and revenge himself.

I have here given the true history of my life, having fairly laid before you the part and character, I acted on the vain stage of this world, during the course of a most variable and unsettled life. Now, readers, judge impartially, and deliver your opinion on what I have written, like brave and honest men, with freedom and truth; and if there is anything in my story which moves your com-

of his own LIFE

passion, let it teach you to pity me, and to lament the miserable condition of mankind, in which yourselves are equal sharers. That it may be known who was the author of this, let me observe, that, whilst I lived in *Portugal* a *Christian*, I was called *Gabriel Acosta*; but when I came over to the *Jews* (which I wish I never had done) my name, with a little variation, was changed into *Uriel*.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Uriel Acosta". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

This facsimile of Uriel Acosta's signature is authentic. It was found in a notebook in which people who received blessings at the weekly reading of the Torah signed up for contributions.

## EXCOMMUNICATION

OF URIEL ACOSTA

*The Wording of the Proclamation of the Jewish  
Community in Venice Which Was Sent to all  
Jewish Communities Abroad*



AND NOW it was perceived the *Slandering Voice* of those men against themselves which maliciously is speaking against the angels of God who as the wisest of our Sages have orally explained the word of the Holy *Torah* and it was heard in our land and also outside our land that there are some wicked and sinful people who deny the words of our Sages and their interpretations and against whose words they step forth violently. If this leprous plague would have only

## The EXCOMMUNICATION

spread internally, if this would have touched their own senses only, we would have kept silent and would have said to ourselves: Their spirit and their soul will perish and they will surely be punished here in this world and in the after-world. Yet, a voice of militance we were hearing from their mouth! Their voice penetrates like a serpent which the corrupter created to corrupt and like a bunch of prophets are they passing through the towns with harps and cymbals, riding quickly after vanity, considering their words and frivolities eminent among Israel. And in all streets they talk of the un-true God: Those are your gods, Israel, because they falsify the Law. Among them as wisdom is considered all what is in variance to our Sages, and to the vexation of Israel do they tear down all protective walls of the Law. All words of our Sages they consider as nought and chaotic; calling names those who believe in the Word: "Fool believes everything." They think of themselves to be the only wise men. We are like cattle in their eyes and whoever does not follow them is in their eyes a horse and an ass without intelligence. Loudly they lament that a chaotic measuring-line were laid around all true measures. Therefore, when hearing their battle cry against God and His teachers and

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seeing a fire blaze, we, the undersigned have been afraid that this fire might spread all around and would probably find nourishing thorns, i.e., reaching people whose souls are empty and who are ignorant and who therefore might be hurt, and that the earth might become—God forbid—empty and desolate; because this generation is spoiled and likes to listen to leniencies and to neglect their worthy duty. To fulfill our obligation, we have to persecute them, we have to remove the abominations out of their teeth, in order to avoid that—God forbid!—the Holy Name be desecrated by their hands. Therefore you, you shields of the righteousness, you captains of the *Torah*, you men of true wisdom, and all the many at the different localities together with all the brethren of Israel: If it pleases our word in your eyes, since the bad thing which the others represent to mislead God's people towards sin cannot be of delight to you, please strengthen our hands, yourselves and also your messengers, and let us put on the fire on their nourishing, the poisonous gall of the snake which is within them. The voice of God is full of strength within the excommunication which the Raschb'a and his followers—the thirty-two men who agreed with him—have decided on, to lay in Ban and Out-

## The EXCOMMUNICATION

lawry everybody who does not believe in the words of our Sages (may their memory be blessed). The following is the text:

“On the Order of the Head of our Community, according to the Verdict of our Holy Ones, We Excommunicate them (“Manadin”) and lay them in Ban (“Mec-hairimin”) before the Heavenly as well as before the Terrestrial Court. They shall steadily sink deeper till they turn back in complete repentance and do not any more decay in their folly and do not desolate the Torah and its Sages, the authors of the glorious Talmud. And if they do not return to God from their wickedness they and all such who strengthen their hands shall rest Excommunicated and in Ban.”

Thus far is the official text.

And we, who got the power from this text, are renewing this ban and include in the ordinance the following: Everybody who overhears from the mouth of anybody a word against our Rabbis—may their memory be blessed—shall based on this resolution be bound to inform our leaders of the com-

## of URIEL ACOSTA

munity and our Rabbis of the town in which he resides about it. That brings peace on Israel and the Rabbis. And whoever turns back and repents will find mercy from heaven. We are setting our hope on God that shall let be heard in the camp of Israel the voice of the messenger of good tidings for the Jews that they turned back from the wicked road to our God and that He shall again have compassion for all of us and He shall rebuild the House of our Holiness and of our Glory. Amen. Thus speak the youngest of His sheep who are hereby setting down their signatures at Venice, in the third day of the week, the 23rd day in the month of Ab in the year 5378 (Tuesday, 18th of August, 1618) at time of the weekly reading which starts with “A blessing, if ye harken to these ordinances of the Lord thy God.”