Medieval Sourcebook:
Las Siete Partidas: Laws on Jews,
1265

[Marcus Introduction] Las siete partidas, the Seven-Part Code, is one of the most remarkable law codes of medieval times. The code, written in the Castilian vernacular, was compiled about 1265, under the supervision of Alfonso X, the Wise (1252-1284), of Castile. Its laws, however, did not go into effect until 1348, and then only with certain reservations. From Castile they spread to all of Spain and thence into the Spanish possessions in the Philippines, Porto Rico, Florida, and Louisiana. The sources of this code are largely Visigothic, later Roman, and Church law, all of which were hostile to the Jew. This hostility did not, however, deter the Castilian state from protecting scrupulously the Jewish religion as well as the person and property of the Jews. The Jews and Moors, national minorities, were too numerous and too important to be mistreated as yet by the new Castilian state.

TITLE XXIV: CONCERNING THE JEWS

Jews are a people, who, although they do not believe in the religion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, yet, the great Christian sovereigns have always permitted them to live among them....

LAW I. WHAT THE WORD JEW MEANS, AND WHENCE THIS TERM IS DERIVED

A party who believes in, and adheres to the law of Moses is called a Jew, according to the strict signification of the term, as well as one who is circumcised, and observes the other precepts commanded by his religion. This name is derived from the tribe of Judah which was nobler and more powerful than the others, and, also possessed any other advantage, because the king of the Jews had to be selected from that tribe, and its members always received the first wounds in battle. The reason that the church, emperors, kings and princes permitted the Jews to dwell among them and with Christians, is because they always lived, as it were, in captivity, as it was constantly [La token] in the minds of men that they were descended from those who crucified Our Lord Jesus Christ.

LAW II. IN WHAT WAY JEWS SHOULD PASS THEIR LIVES AMONG CHRISTIANS; WHAT THINGS THEY SHOULD NOT MAKE USE OF OR PRACTICE, ACCORDING TO OUR RELIGION; AND WHAT PENALTY THOSE DESERVE WHO ACT CONTRARY TO ITS ORDINANCES

Jews should pass their lives among Christians quietly and without disorder, practicing their own religious rites, and not speaking ill of the faith of Our Lord Jesus Christ, which Christians acknowledge. Moreover, a Jew should be very careful to avoid preaching to, or converting any Christian, to the end that he may become a Jew, by exalting his own belief and disparaging ours.
Whoever violates this law shall be put to death and lose all his property. And because we have heard it said that in some places Jews celebrated, and still celebrate Good Friday, which commemorates the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, by way of contempt: stealing children and fastening them to crosses, and making images of wax and crucifying them, when they cannot obtain children; we order that, hereafter, if in any part of our dominions anything like this is done, and can be proved, all persons who were present when the act was committed shall be seized, arrested and brought before the king; and after the king ascertains that they are guilty, he shall cause them to be put to death in a disgraceful manner, no matter how many there may be. [Christians already believed that Jews kidnapped and killed Christian children for religious purposes.]

We also forbid any Jew to dare to leave his house or his quarter on Good Friday, but they must all remain shut up until Saturday morning; and if they violate this regulation, we decree that they shall not be entitled to reparation for any injury or dishonor inflicted upon them by Christians. [Christians were prone to commit violence on Good Friday, the anniversary of the crucifixion of Jesus.]

**LAW III, NO JEW CAN HOLD ANY OFFICE OR EMPLOYMENT BY WHICH HE MAY BE ABLE TO OPPRESS CHRISTIANS**

Jews were formerly highly honored, and enjoyed privileges above all other races, for they alone were called the People of God. But for the reason that they disowned Him who had honored them and given them privileges; and instead of showing Him reverence humiliated Him, by shamefully putting Him to death on the cross; it was proper and just that, on account of the great crime and wickedness which they committed, they should forfeit the honors and privileges which they enjoyed; and therefore from the day when they crucified Our Lord Jesus Christ they never had either king or priests among themselves, as they formerly did. The emperors, who in former times were lords of all the world, considered it fitting and right that, on account of the treason which they committed in killing their lord, they should lose all said honors and privileges, so that no Jew could ever afterwards hold an honorable position, or a public office by means of which he might, in any way, oppress a Christian. [Nevertheless Alfonso entrusted his body and purse to Jewish physicians and financiers.]

**LAW IV. HOW JEWS CAN HAVE A SYNAGOGUE AMONG CHRISTIANS**

A synagogue is a place where the Jews pray, and a new building of this kind cannot be erected in any part of our dominions, except by our order. Where, however, those which formerly existed there are torn down, they can be built in the same spot where they originally stood; but they cannot be made any larger or raised to any greater height, or be painted. A synagogue constructed in any other manner shall be lost by the Jews, and shall belong to the principal church of the locality where it is built. And for the reason that a synagogue is a place where the name of God is praised, we forbid any Christian to deface it, or remove anything from it, or take anything out of it by force; except where some malefactor takes refuge there; for they have a right to remove him by force in order to bring him before the judge. Moreover, we forbid Christians to put any animal into a synagogue, or loiter in it, or place any hindrance in the way of
the Jews while they are there performing their devotions according to their religion. [But Moors were not allowed to have mosques. Jews were not at the bottom of the social scale.]

**LAW V. NO COMPULSION SHALL BE BROUGHT TO BEAR UPON THE JEWS ON SATURDAY, AND WHAT JEWS CAN BE SUBJECT TO COMPULSION**

Saturday is the day on which Jews perform their devotions, and remain quiet in their lodgings and do not make contracts or transact any business; and for the reason that they are obliged by their religion to keep its no one should on that day summon them or bring them into court. Wherefore we order that no judge shall employ force or any constraint upon Jews on Saturday, in order to bring them into court on account of their debts; or arrest them; or cause them any other annoyance; for the remaining days of the week are sufficient for the purpose of employing compulsion against them, and for making demands for things which can be demanded of them according to law. Jews are not bound to obey a summons served upon them on that day; and, moreover, we decree that any decision rendered against them on Saturday shall not be valid; but if a Jew should wound, kill, rob, steal, or commit any other offense like these for which he can be punished in person and property, then the judge can arrest him on Saturday.

We also decree that all claims that Christians have against Jews, and Jews against Christians, shall be decided and determined by our judges in the district where they reside, and not by their old men. [Jewish courts have no jurisdiction if one of the parties is a Christian.] And as we forbid Christians to bring Jews into court or annoy them on Saturday; so we also decree that Jews, neither in person, nor by their attorneys, shall have the right to bring Christians into court, or annoy them on this day. And in addition to this, we forbid any Christian, on his own responsibility, to arrest or wrong any Jew either in his person or property, but where he has any complaint against him he must bring it before our judges; and if anyone should be so bold as to use violence against the Jews, or rob them of anything, he shall return them double the value of the same.

**LAW VI. JEWS WHO BECOME CHRISTIANS SHALL NOT BE SUBJECT TO COMPULSION; WHAT ADVANTAGE A JEW HAS WHO BECOME A CHRISTIAN; AND WHAT PENALTY OTHER JEWS DESERVE WHO DO HIM HARM**

No force or compulsion shall be employed in any way against a Jew to induce him to become a Christian; but Christians should convert him to the faith of Our Lord Jesus Christ by means of the texts of the Holy Scriptures, and by kind words, for no one can love or appreciate a service which is done him by compulsion. We also decree that if any Jew or Jewess should voluntarily desire to become a Christian, the other Jews shall not interfere with this in any way, and if they stone, wound, or kill any such person, because he wished to become a Christian, or after he has been baptized, and this can be proved; we order that all the murderers, or the abettors of said murder or attack, shall be burned. [This law was first issued by Constantine the Great in 315] But where the party was not killed, but wounded, or dishonored; we order the judges of the neighborhood where this took place shall compel those guilty of the attack, or who caused the dishonor, to make amends to him for the same; and also that they be punished for the offense which the committed, as they think they deserve; and we also order that, after any Jews become Christians, all persons in our dominions shall honor them; and that no one shall dare to reproach
them or their descendants, by way of insult, with having been Jews; and that they shall possess all their property, sharing the same with their brothers and inheriting it from their fathers and mothers and other relatives just as if they were Jews; and that they can hold all offices and dignities which other Christians can do.

**LAW VII. WHAT PENALTY A CHRISTIAN DESERVES WHO BECOMES A JEW**

Where a Christian is so unfortunate as to become a Jew, we order that he shall be put to death just as if he had become a heretic; and we decree that his property shall be disposed of in the same way that we stated should be done with that of heretics.

**LAW VIII. NO CHRISTIAN, MAN OR WOMAN, SHALL LIVE WITH A JEW**

We forbid any Jew to keep Christian men or women in his house, to be served by them; although he may have them to cultivate and take care of his lands, or protect him on the way when he is compelled to go to some dangerous place. Moreover, we forbid any Christian man or woman to invite a Jew or a Jewess, or to accept an invitation from them, to eat or drink together, or to drink any wine made by their hands. [Jewish law also forbade the use of Christian-made wine.] We also order that no Jews shall dare to bathe in company with Christians, and that no Christian shall take any medicine or cathartic made by a Jew; but he can take it by the advice of some intelligent person, only where it is made by a Christian, who knows and is familiar with its ingredients. [Alfonso probably had a Jewish physician the very time he issued this law.]

**LAW IX. WHAT PENALTY A JEW DESERVES WHO HAS INTERCOURSE WITH A CHRISTIAN WOMAN**

Jews who live with Christian women are guilty of great insolence and boldness, for which reason we decree that all Jews who, hereafter, may be convicted of having done such a thing shall be put to death. For if Christians who commit adultery with married women deserve death on that account, much more do Jews who have sexual intercourse with Christian women, who are spiritually the wives of Our Lord Jesus Christ because of the faith and the baptism which they receive in His name; nor do we consider it proper that a Christian woman who commits an offense of this kind shall escape without punishment. Wherefore we order that, whether she be a virgin, a married woman, a widow, or a common prostitute who gives herself to all men, she shall suffer the same penalty which we mentioned in the last law in the Title concerning the Moors, to which a Christian woman is liable who has carnal intercourse with a Moor [i.e., confiscation of property, scourging, or death].

**LAW X. WHAT PENALTY JEWS DESERVE WHO HOLD CHRISTIANS AS SLAVES**

A Jew shall not purchase, or keep as a slave, a Christian man or woman, and if anyone violates this law the Christian shall be restored to freedom and shall not pay any portion of the price given for him, although the Jew may not have been aware when he bought him, that he was a Christian; but if he knew that he was such when he purchased him, and makes use of him afterwards as a slave, he shall be put to death for doing so. Moreover, we forbid any Jew to convert a captive to his religion, even though said captive may be a Moor, or belong to some
other barbarous race. If anyone violates this law we order that the said slave who has become a Jew shall be set at liberty, and removed from the control of the party to whom he or she belonged. If any Moors who are the captives of Jews become Christians, they shall at once be freed, as is explained in the Fourth Partida of this book, in the Title concerning Liberty, in the laws which treat of this subject [but Christians, including the Church, were allowed to own Christian slaves].

**LAW XI. JEWS SHALL BEAR CERTAIN MARKS IN ORDER THAT THEY MAY BE KNOWN**

Many crimes and outrageous things occur between Christians and Jews because they live together in cities, and dress alike; and in order to avoid the offenses and evils which take place for this reason, We deem it proper, and we order that all Jews, male and female, living In our dominions shall bear some distinguishing mark upon their heads so that people may plainly recognize a Jew, or a Jewess; and any Jew who does not bear such a mark, shall pay for each time he is found without it ten maravedis of gold; and if he has not the means to do this he shall receive ten lashes for his offense. [This is an attempt to put into effect the "Jew-Badge" law of Pope Innocent III, 1215.]

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**READINGS FOR ADVANCED STUDENTS**

Graetz, 111, pp. 592-596, 615-617; GraetzRhine, 111, pp. 349 353; Margolis and Marx, pp. 419 429


**ADDITIONAL SOURCE MATERIALS IN ENGLISH**

Scott, S. P., *Las siete partidas*, an English translation of the code. This contains the complete body of laws dealing with the Jews, of which the above is but an excerpt.


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