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The Jews of Medieval Western Christendom

1000-1500

Robert Chazan

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Between the years 1000 and 1500, western Christendom absorbed by conquest and attracted through immigration a growing number of Jews. This community was to make a valuable contribution to rapidly developing European civilization but was also to suffer some terrible setbacks, culminating in a series of expulsions from the more advanced westerly areas of Europe. At the same time, vigorous new branches of world Jewry emerged and a rich new Jewish cultural legacy was created. In this important new historical synthesis, Robert Chazan discusses the Jewish experience over a 500-year period across the entire continent of Europe. As well as being the story of medieval Jewry, the book simultaneously illuminates important aspects of majority life in Europe during this period. This book is essential reading for all students of medieval Jewish history and an important reference for any scholar of medieval Europe.

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THE JEWS OF
MEDIEVAL WESTERN
CHRISTENDOM,
1000–1500

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ROBERT CHAZAN

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For
Jonah and Adam
Gabriel and Nathan
Arlo and Eve

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PREFACE

This book began with an invitation extended by Cambridge University Press to write a one-volume history of the Jews of medieval western Christendom for its Cambridge Medieval Textbooks series, a series I have long used and admired. The desire of Cambridge University Press to include a volume on the Jews in its distinguished series seemed to me to reflect a sea change in perceptions of the place of the Jews on the medieval scene. Fifty years ago, such an invitation would have been unthinkable, for the broad academic community exhibited little interest in Jewish life in medieval Latin Christendom.¹ Over the past half century, however, scholarly – and even popular – perceptions of the Middle Ages have changed considerably, with the prior sense of a homogeneous and static period giving way to accelerating interest in the diversity and evolution of medieval society, the fracture lines that afflicted it, and its variegated minority communities.

These changes in the study of medieval history have in fact been characteristic of the recent study of Western history in all its periods. Augmented interest in the history of minority communities in a variety of settings and epochs has resulted in the opening of academic portals *inter alia* to historians of the Jews. Jewish history has become an accepted specialty in universities, and academic presses regularly publish scholarship on the Jews of the ancient, medieval, and modern periods. As a result of this new openness, research into the Jewish experience in general and the medieval Jewish experience in particular has proliferated. Scholars in North America, Israel,

and Europe have investigated increasingly diverse aspects of medieval Jewish life, resulting in an impressive corpus of new books and articles on the Jews of medieval western Christendom. Innovative questions and perspectives have surfaced regularly, and knowledge of medieval Jewish life has increased exponentially.²

The importance of the Cambridge Medieval Textbooks series and the challenge of presenting the new scholarship on medieval Jewry in western Christendom warranted a positive reply on my part to the Press's generous invitation. I very much agreed with the sense that a one-volume history of the Jews in medieval Latin Christendom would be most useful at this point in time. While the Jewish experience in medieval Europe has been treated in the context of overall histories of the Jews and while two one-volume histories of medieval Jewry have recently appeared, the time seems ripe for a new introduction to the Jews of medieval western Christendom.³

More personal factors as well influenced my decision to proceed with this project. The first has to do with my prior books. They have all involved carefully delimited topics and manageable bodies of source material. At the same time, I believe – or at least hope – that they have addressed issues of critical significance to the medieval Jewish experience, for example Christian and Jewish imageries of one another, Christian pressures physical and spiritual and Jewish reactions, neglected aspects of medieval Jewish intellectual and spiritual creativity. The challenge of absorbing these earlier studies into a comprehensive treatment of the medieval Jewish experience was appealing. Readers familiar with my prior work will see these earlier investigations reflected throughout this book.

Over and above my writing, my teaching played a critical role in moving me to undertake this book. I have been teaching medieval Jewish history at university level for over forty years now and have taken this teaching responsibility very seriously. I have experimented with a range of organizational schemes for presenting medieval Jewish history and have tinkered with a variety of topical approaches. These teaching efforts have left me with a full appreciation of the difficulties associated with conveying the medieval Jewish experience and with a number of ideas as to how to do so effectively. More than imparting satisfaction with conveying medieval Jewish history, my teaching experience has inspired me to attempt a more focused effort at “getting it right” at last. A voice deep inside assures me that the effort is worthwhile; to be sure, the same voice also suggests

that, when this project is finished, I shall still remain somewhat dissatisfied.

I undertook this project fully aware that it would constitute a new experience, in fact a very challenging new experience. I committed myself, for the first time, to writing an extended synthetic history. All my prior books have addressed carefully defined aspects of medieval Jewish history. I have regularly set manageable parameters for these studies and have felt capable of examining all relevant sources in investigating these focused issues. Essentially, I have gathered extensive data, have analyzed them, and have then followed them where they led me. While I have aspired to present important developments on the medieval Jewish scene, my studies have all been limited to specific times and spaces.

The present project differs markedly in its spatial and temporal scope. I propose to discuss Jewish experience stretching across almost the entirety of Europe and spanning five centuries. There is more even than simply vast territory and a lengthy time period. Neither the territory nor the time period is homogeneous. There were, as we shall see rather fully, enormous differences among the various Jewish communities of medieval western Christendom and wide-ranging changes through the centuries. Encompassing these differences and changes constitutes a profound challenge to the historian attempting to make sense of the diversified Jewish experiences in medieval western Christendom. Indeed, to complicate matters yet further, I intend to discuss major developments on both the material and spiritual planes. This study will begin with demographic, economic, and political realities and changes, but will include issues of Jewish identity and Jewish intellectual and spiritual creativity as well.

The vastness of the topic and the richness of the literature have necessitated painful decisions as to coverage or – more precisely – as to inclusion and omission. This book was not intended by the Press or by me to be excessive in length and exhaustive in coverage; it was intended, rather, to provide an overview of the diverse Jewish communities of medieval western Christendom and their material and spiritual experience and to offer analysis of the broad evolutionary patterns of Jewish life in medieval Europe and the key factors influencing those evolutionary patterns. None of the Jewish communities depicted and none of the developments tracked could be treated fully.⁴ Decisions as to inclusion and exclusion and the fullness in depiction of those topics covered have been extremely difficult.⁵

Ultimately, these difficult decisions have been made on the basis of an over-arching view of the medieval Jewish experience in medieval western Christendom, a view that will be articulated and will surely give rise to criticism on the part of respected colleagues. It is out of such articulation and criticism that historical knowledge progresses.

The conceptual framework underlying this work proposes that medieval western Christendom was highly ambivalent in its attitude to the growing Jewish minority in its midst, with some elements in Christian society accepting this minority, some rejecting it, and yet others accepting it with reservations and limitations. In response, the Jews themselves viewed the Christian environment with parallel ambivalence, acknowledging Christendom's dynamism and achievements while at the same time fearing it and denigrating it. On the spiritual plane, the same ambivalences are manifest. The Christian majority – heir to a rich set of views of Judaism and the Jews – despised Judaism and the Jews, respected both, and feared both. In turn, the Jews – heirs to a far less developed tradition with respect to Christianity and Christians – forged a new sense of the two, again made up of repulsion, attraction, and fear.

The divergences of the medieval Jewish experience in space and the changes in this experience over time flowed from the working out of the inherent ambivalences on the part of Christian majority and Jewish minority, conditioned by differing circumstances of place and time. Beyond these divergences, however, there is an overriding commonality: both the Christian majority and the Jewish minority were deeply affected by the mutual engagement that took place between 1000 and 1500 CE. Both sides emerged with altered perceptions of one another, for good and ill. Inevitably, minorities are more deeply affected by such interactions than majorities, and our case is no exception. Between 1000 and 1500, the Jewish world was radically transformed in both material and spiritual terms by its encounter with medieval western Christendom. A new constellation of Jewish life was created, and new forms of Judaism emerged.

At times, writing this book has felt like flying over the panorama of medieval Jewish history at 35,000 feet, perceiving and sketching the broadest of outlines, knowing that the fields and towns were filled with living human beings, but failing inevitably to discern and portray them in their full reality. Such of course is the nature of a survey. I have attempted to compensate a bit by introducing into this account of the Jews of medieval western Christendom an occasional

reconstruction of specific events and personalities and – perhaps more important – by citing recurrently the sources from our period. All this is done in order to recover somewhat the elusive sense of particularity that a survey risks losing. In general, readers would be well served by keeping at their side one or another collection of translated medieval sources, into which they might periodically dip.⁶

Like all volumes in the Cambridge Medieval Textbooks series, this one also is intended for an audience of literate and interested readers. Some of these readers will be university undergraduate and graduate students; some will be scholars of a variety of periods of the Jewish past or of medieval history; some will be interested lay readers. I hope that all these disparate groups of readers will find an account that is comprehensible, stimulating, and satisfying, albeit by no means exhaustive. The experience of medieval Jewry in western Christendom has taken on great symbolic significance in subsequent Christian and Jewish thinking. This symbolic significance has often led to gross over-simplification and distortion. I hope the present overview will contribute in some measure to a more balanced sense of the Jews as a vital element on the medieval scene and of western Christendom during the Middle Ages as a formative period in the evolution of subsequent Jewish life.



Map 1 Europe, circa 1000

INTRODUCTION

An observer viewing world Jewry in the year 1000 would have readily discerned an obvious Jewish demographic distribution and an equally obvious configuration of Jewish creativity. The oldest, largest, and most creative Jewish communities were located in the Muslim sphere, stretching from Mesopotamia westward through the eastern littoral of the Mediterranean Sea, across North Africa, and over onto the Iberian peninsula. Somewhat smaller, but still sizeable and venerable were the Jewish communities of the Byzantine Empire. Our putative observer might have noted, as an afterthought, the small Jewish settlements in western Christendom, huddled along the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, in Italy, southern France, and northern Spain; he might have – reasonably enough – not even bothered to mention them, for they would hardly have seemed worthy of serious attention.

Our observer would almost certainly have known that this pattern of Jewish demography and creativity had been established more than a thousand years earlier, long before the rise of Islam to its position of power during the seventh century. He would have been aware that, subsequent to the exile of the Jews from their homeland in the sixth pre-Christian century, two major centers of Jewish life had emerged, one as the result of Jewish resettlement in Palestine and the other as a result of the decision of Jews to secure for themselves a permanent place in Mesopotamia. He would have known that the great religious-political leaders of world Jewry had been the patriarchs of Palestinian Jewry and the exilarchs of Mesopotamian Jewry;

that the classical texts of post-biblical Judaism were the (Palestinian) Mishnah, the Jerusalem (Palestinian) Talmud, and the Babylonian (Mesopotamian) Talmud; that the distinguished rabbis whose teachings were enshrined in the Mishnah and the two Talmuds were all residents of either the Holy Land or the Mesopotamian territory that Jews anachronistically called Babylonia.

Our hypothetical observer would also have recalled that Palestinian Jews had, from a fairly early date, made their way westward, creating new centers of Jewish life all along the Mediterranean shorelines. He would have been aware that the centers in what are today Syria and Egypt were the oldest and largest of these western communities. Newer and smaller settlements stretched out all along the southern and northern coastlines of the Mediterranean Sea – across North Africa, through Asia Minor, and into what is today Italy, southern France, and Spain.

With the rise of Islam during the seventh century and its remarkable conquests, the overwhelming majority of world Jewry fell under the rule of the new religion and the empire built upon it. The only Jewries left outside the realm of Islam were the Jewish communities of the shrunken Byzantine Empire, along the northeastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and those of the relatively backward western Christian states in Italy, southern France, and northern Spain, along the northwestern shores of that same sea.

While we do not have the kind of observations just now suggested from the year 1000, we do possess the writings of a European Jew who traveled from west to east during the middle decades of the twelfth century. This Jew, Benjamin of Tudela, did not attempt the kind of assessments just now suggested. However, his travelogue – generally rather dry and boring – does provide a first-hand sense of the various areas of Jewish settlement he encountered.¹

Benjamin made his way down the Ebro River from his home town, reached the Mediterranean, visited some major Spanish port cities, traversed much of southern France, and crossed over into Italy and down the peninsula. Throughout this portion of his journey, he encountered a variety of Jewish communities. The largest of these numbered a few hundred souls or males or households.² When Benjamin reached the Byzantine Empire, he encountered much greater urban enclaves and much larger Jewish communities. In Constantinople, he found a city far exceeding in size, wealth, and culture anything he had seen further west. The Jewish community numbered some

three thousand. Again, it is not clear whether this means souls, males, or households. In any case, the Jewish community of Constantinople was many times larger than any Benjamin had encountered in the Roman Catholic sphere of southern Europe.

When Benjamin entered the realm of Islam, he was overwhelmed by what he found. The city of Baghdad, then arguably the greatest city in the Western world, captivated him. His description of the size and splendor of the city reveals an utterly enthralled visitor. The Jewish communities of the Islamic realm in general far surpassed in size and strength those of the Roman Catholic world from which he came. In Damascus, Benjamin found three thousand Jews; in Alexandria, seven thousand Jews; in Baghdad, the staggering number of forty thousand Jews.³ In Baghdad, according to Benjamin, there were twenty-eight synagogues and a Jewish officialdom that enjoyed remarkable prestige and respect in the caliph's court. While Benjamin limits himself to fairly specific and often pedestrian observations, his travelogue indicates clearly an Islamic realm far superior to Byzantium and Roman Catholic Europe, and Jewish communities that reflect the same ordering of size, strength, and creativity. Even though Benjamin traveled at a time when the balance of power had already begun to shift, he still found that the Jewries under Muslim domination were larger and more fully developed than those under Christian control.

Pressed to predict what the future might hold, our hypothetical observer in the year 1000 would have assumed that the known configuration of Jewish life would surely last into the indeterminate future. In general, of course, most of us have great difficulty in imagining radically altered circumstances. Such a lack of imagination would have hardly been the only factor influencing our observer, however. For there was nothing in the year 1000 to suggest that radical change was in the offing. The constellation of world power appeared remarkably stable. Islam's domination seemed to be challenged seriously by no one, neither the Greek Christians of the eastern sectors of the Mediterranean nor the Latin Christians of the western sectors of Europe. Our observer of the year 1000 would surely have concluded that the contemporary power structure was unlikely to shift and that Jewish life would thus continue along the lines currently discernible.

Benjamin, traveling and writing in the middle of the twelfth century, had the benefit of a century and a half of change. By time he made his journey, western Christian forces had driven the Muslims



Map 2 Europe, circa 1250

out of their Italian strongholds and had begun to push the Muslims southward on the Iberian peninsula. Western Christian armies had even managed to journey eastward and conquer portions of the Holy Land, including the symbolically important city of Jerusalem. Yet it is unlikely that even Benjamin could have envisioned the further changes in the offing.

Were our hypothetical observer of the year 1000 in a position to view world Jewry in the year 1250, halfway through our period, and again in the year 1500, he would have been stunned by the changes. While the Jewries of the Muslim world remained in place in the years 1250 and 1500, they were well on their way to losing their position of demographic and creative eminence. They were in the process of being supplanted in their physical and cultural primacy by the diverse Jewish communities of western Christendom. The rise of Latin Christendom to its central role in the Western world, achieved from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries, brought in its wake – not surprisingly – a parallel ascendancy of the Jewish communities it harbored and attracted.

Periodically – but not all that often – new powers have erupted from fringe areas and radically altered the power structure of the Western world. Such an unanticipated eruption and restructuring took place during the seventh century, when the forces of Islam exploded unexpectedly out of the Arabian peninsula and overwhelmed both the Neo-Persian and Byzantine empires. A more recent example of this restructuring has involved the rise of the United States to its central position in the West, in the process usurping the hegemony long associated with such European powers as England, France, Germany, and Spain. It was between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries that these European powers – especially England, France, and (Christian) Spain – emerged from their relatively backward state and began to dominate the Western world. The rapid and unexpected emergence of Roman Catholic western Christendom transformed the West and, in the process, realigned the pattern of world Jewish population, authority, and creativity that had remained relatively static for almost a millennium and a half. As a result of this seismic shift in the world power structure, the Jews became and have remained a European and eventually North Atlantic people.⁴

Herein lies the enormous significance of the period we shall study for Jewish history. This era of roughly five hundred

years – approximately 1000 to 1500 – established an entirely new pattern of Jewish settlement and civilization. The geographic lexicon of the Jewish people had heretofore been almost entirely Near Eastern; Jerusalem, Tiberias, Antioch, Damascus, Sura, Baghdad, Alexandria, Cairo were dominant and resonant names. Now, new names came to the fore – Mainz, Cologne, Paris, London, Toledo, Madrid, Cracow, Warsaw, Vilna, and eventually New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles as well. The earlier Semitic languages of the Jewish people – Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic – declined, to be replaced by the languages of the West – German, French, Spanish, and English. Political ideas and ideals underwent radical alteration, as did cultural and religious norms and aspirations. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of these changes.

The relocation of the center of Jewish gravity from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe involved, above all else, a new religious and cultural ambiance. During the period under consideration, the Jews established themselves firmly within the Christian orbit. To be sure, the history of Christian–Jewish relations did not begin in the year 1000. Christianity was, after all, born in the Jewish community of Palestine. Fairly quickly, however, the religious vision centered around the figure of Jesus of Nazareth won adherents beyond Palestinian Jewry. The original leadership of the Jesus movement had been entirely Jewish; as that movement evolved into Christianity, new and gentile leadership came to the fore. The rapid spread of Christianity took place outside of Palestine, across the length and breadth of the Roman Empire, and involved a largely gentile population. Despite its Jewish roots, Christianity established itself as a separate religious faith, the patrimony of a set of non-Jewish peoples.

So long as the vast majority of Jews lived outside the orbit of Christian power, the Jewish issue was muted for the Christian authorities. Church leaders, it is true, produced an extensive anti-Jewish literature during the first Christian millennium. Much of that literature, however, was theoretical, focused on buttressing convictions as to the rejection of Old Israel (the Jews) and the election of a New Israel (the Christians). Genuine engagement with real Jews was, however, limited. From the Jewish side, the lack of engagement with Christianity is yet more marked. Up until the year 1000 and well beyond, we possess not one single anti-Christian work composed by Jews living within western Christendom.⁵ Down through the end of the first millennium, the Jews of the world, concentrated

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