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Robert Chazan

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## Introduction: The Emergence of Medieval European Jewry

**I**N THE YEAR 1000, THE AREAS OF EUROPE LOYAL TO THE ROMAN Church were limited in size and population and were backward in economic achievement, military strength, political stability, and cultural creativity. They constituted the least of the three Western religio-political power blocs at the time, far inferior to the largest and strongest power bloc – the far-flung Islamic world – and considerably inferior to the Greek Orthodox Byzantine Empire. Some of the richest areas of southern Europe on the Iberian and Italian peninsulas were under the control of Islamic rulers, and additional areas of Italy were governed by the Byzantines. Northern Europe remained mired in its historic backwardness.

These weak sectors of Europe endured incursions from every direction by powerful external enemies. From the south, they faced constant danger from the Muslim forces that controlled North Africa and the Mediterranean Sea; from the east, they encountered the pressure of their Greek Orthodox rivals; from the west and the north, they suffered devastating raids by the seagoing Norsemen, who regularly wreaked havoc all across the northwestern coast of the continent. In a vicious cycle, the weakness of western Christendom opened it to these incessant pressures and dangers, while the external threats and incursions contributed to the ongoing weakness and backwardness. Only the most optimistic could have dreamed of better days to come, of a period when Latin Christendom might equal its more powerful neighbors or perhaps even surpass them.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Works that clarify this process include: William Chester Jordan, *Europe in the High Middle Ages*; Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Europe*; Christopher Brooke, *Europe in the*

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The Jewish world of the year 1000 reflected the broad distribution of resources and power just now indicated. The overwhelming majority of the world's Jews – perhaps as much as 80 percent of world Jewry – lived in the realm of Islam. Major Jewish settlements stretched from Mesopotamia through the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, all across North Africa, and over onto the Iberian and Italian peninsulas. Within this vast territory, Mesopotamia housed the largest concentration of Jews, as had been the case since the third century. There remained a considerable set of Jewish communities in Palestine and adjacent areas. Important Jewish settlements dotted the coast of North Africa. On the European continent itself, the largest Jewish populations inhabited regions under Muslim control, especially in the extensive areas of the Iberian peninsula dominated by Islam and in Sicily. The Byzantine Empire continued to host venerable Jewish settlements, although it lagged far behind the Islamic world in its Jewish population.

The Jewish population of Catholic Europe was miniscule in comparison to that of the Islamic realm and the Byzantine Empire. Small Jewish populations lived in the weak Christian principalities of Spain that huddled in the northern sectors of the peninsula, in the Christian territories of southern France, and in the Christian sectors of Italy. None of these sets of Jewish communities was large, powerful, or noteworthy from a cultural perspective. The backward areas of northern Europe hosted almost no discernible Jewish population, as had been the case from time immemorial. Once more, no observer in the year 1000 could have predicted radical change, with the Jewish population of Roman Catholic Europe eventually equaling or even surpassing that of the Islamic and Byzantine spheres.

The kind of change that could not possibly have been envisioned in the year 1000 in fact took place. By the year 1500, the distribution of population, wealth, and power in the Western world had changed dramatically. Western Christendom had come to dominate its rivals in every way. Christian forces had by 1500 driven the Muslim enclaves of 1000 off the European continent entirely. The Mediterranean coastline from Spain to the westernmost borders of Byzantine rule in Asia Minor lay entirely in

*Central Middle Ages*, John H. Mundy, *Europe in the High Middle Ages*, Denys Hay, *Europe in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*.

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the hands of Catholic rulers. Northern Europe was no longer backward. It harbored some of the most powerful and successful principalities of western Christendom, indeed of the Western world. The remarkable voyages undertaken at the end of the fifteenth century by explorers based in Catholic Europe opened a new chapter in its dominance, as vast new territories were colonized and subsequently contributed markedly to the accelerating strength of Latin Christendom.

The process of change was slow and steady, stretching over the five centuries between 1000 and 1500, and was distinguished by no dramatic events or obvious turning points.<sup>2</sup> During the latter decades of the tenth century and on into the eleventh century, western Christendom began to rouse itself and to expand on every possible level. The population grew; the economy developed; political stability was achieved; military strength was augmented; the beginnings of impressive cultural creativity appeared. Progress on each of these planes reinforced positive developments on the others. Over the course of the eleventh century already, Latin Christendom was no longer protecting itself from outside incursion, but had begun to attack its enemies, first on the European continent itself and then beyond.

The aggression began on the Iberian peninsula, where Islamic control of major territories was challenged and in many areas successfully supplanted. Christian forces reconquered territories long held by the Muslims. The process would not be complete until almost the year 1500, but by the end of the eleventh century it was well under way. The same is true on the Italian peninsula, where Norman forces from the north made their way southward during the eleventh century and broke Muslim control over key areas of Italy. By the end of the eleventh century, western Christendom had become strong enough to launch an assault on Muslim holdings in the Near East, beyond the perimeter of the European continent. While the successes of the First Crusade proved evanescent, the audacious assault is a measure of the remarkable progress of this rapidly developing society.

Progress was by no means limited to military achievement. Population increased steadily; forests were cut down and arable land expanded;

<sup>2</sup> The slowness of change was emphasized by R. W. Southern in his valuable *The Making of the Middle Ages*, which sketches the centrality of the twelfth century in this process of change.

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the economy of western Christendom matured; increasingly effective political and religious organization evolved; innovative intellectual and cultural directions coalesced; new intellectual and spiritual institutions were fashioned. The modern West is replete with the impressive legacy of medieval Latin Christendom, including such disparate elements as the English monarchy and political system, the powerful papacy, the university system of the West, the Gothic cathedrals, and a host of innovative forms of intellectual and spiritual creativity.

To a significant extent, the impact of medieval Catholic Europe can also be seen in the recoiling from some of its features in the Reformation and the Enlightenment. For not all aspects of this rapidly developing society were salutary. Medieval western Christendom exhibited a remarkable commitment to cohesion and uniformity. This drive expressed itself in an unusual level of integration of church and state. The medieval Church led the way in organizational sophistication and, as a result, exerted enormous influence on society at large. This influence led regularly to the suppression of new and creative thinking and spirituality, culminating in the creation of the inquisition, which did untold harm to many in western Christendom who were seekers of truth and new religious insight. The commitment to cohesion and uniformity also expressed itself in aggressive negativity toward “others,” meaning in the first place non-Christians and extending to alternative groupings within Christian society itself, such as gay people, persons with physical limitations, and women. This aggressiveness toward “others” eventuated in the proliferation of destructive stereotypes, which often led to popular violence. All these tendencies brought harm to the medieval scene and constituted – along with the positive developments – part of the legacy bequeathed to the modern West. The impact of the period between 1000 and 1500 has been in multiple respects both beneficial and harmful.

Christian Europe evolved by 1500 in ways that could not have possibly been anticipated five centuries earlier; the same is true for the Jews of western Christendom. By the year 1500, the expanded area of Christian control included a Jewish population that was no longer miniscule. To the contrary, it was close to parity with the older Jewish population of the Islamic world and was well on its way to superseding that population decisively. The center of gravity in Jewish life had shifted by 1500 in utterly unforeseen ways to Christian Europe – in numbers, in economic strength,

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in political and religious authority and creativity. Especially noteworthy is the emergence of an entirely new set of Jewish communities across northern Europe. Areas that in the year 1000 were devoid of Jewish life had by 1500 become centers of Jewish settlement and activity. This new northern European Jewry eventually became the largest element in world Jewish population by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Like the broader process that saw the evolution of Roman Catholic Europe move into its position of power, so too the evolution of western Christendom's Jewries was a slow and steady process, lacking drama and obvious turning points. This evolution was very much an offshoot of the larger changes in European life. The needs of this developing society convinced many European rulers that Jews could be useful in bringing the economic advantages and cultural riches of their more advanced competitors – the Islamic and Byzantine realms – into the orbit of western Christendom. The dynamism of this developing society and the rich opportunities it provided convinced many Jews that western Christendom offered options for a better life and stimulated such Jews to undertake the rigors of relocation.

Jewish population in Christian Europe expanded in two major ways. Many Jews were absorbed into western Christendom through the process of military conquest. In the year 1000, the largest concentrations of Jews in the western sectors of Europe were found in territories ruled by Muslims on the Iberian and Italian peninsulas. As these territories fell under Christian control, their Jewish populations faced a wrenching choice – to retreat with their former overlords or to remain under the rule of the new Christian authorities. These new Christian authorities were committed to persuading such Jews to remain in place and to contribute to the maintenance of societal stability after the conquest. These rulers attempted such persuasion in time-honored fashion, through the extension of appealing incentives that would convince these Jews to remain in place.<sup>3</sup> The new Christian rulers of the conquered territories seem to have been highly successful in their efforts, thus swelling markedly the number of Jews in Spain living under Christian rule.

<sup>3</sup> See Robert Chazan, ed. and trans., *Church, State, and Jew in the Middle Ages*, 69–75, for a number of the charters extended by conquering Christian rulers in order to entice Jews to remain in place.

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Jewish population grew in a second way as well. Rulers desirous of attracting Jews to territories heretofore limited in Jewish population or even devoid of Jewish settlement used essentially the same techniques. They too offered incentives to Jewish settlement. In this case, the issue was not convincing Jews to remain during a period of transition; rather, the objective was to entice new Jewish settlers. To an extent, this drive for new Jewish immigrants can be seen in southern Europe, in the older areas of limited Jewish habitation. More striking is the desire of northern European rulers to attract Jews into their domains, areas in which Jewish settlements had not previously existed. Early sources tell us of the invitation extended by the Duke of Flanders to Jews to settle in his domain, of the establishment of a Jewish community in London by William the Conqueror, newly installed as king of England, and of the efforts of the bishop of Speyer to implant a Jewish enclave in his town.<sup>4</sup> In all these cases, the conviction of the Christian authorities that Jewish settlers would be useful was matched by the conclusion of Jews that such movement would serve their interests as well.

The opportunities offered by western Christendom that attracted Jews were balanced by liabilities. Especially problematic for Jews was the drive toward cohesion and uniformity. To the extent that this drive involved the strengthening of church-state integration, it gave the restrictive policies of the Church great influence over the everyday lives of Jews. To the extent that the yearning for uniformity fostered suspicion and animosity toward non-Christians, it moved many in Christian Europe to adopt a hostile attitude toward Jews and often to engage in anti-Jewish violence grounded in such hostility.

Medieval western Christendom exhibited growth and development in positive directions and – at the same time – evolved in problematic directions as well, and the same is true with respect to Jewish life in this dynamic ambience. Out of the Jewish experience in medieval western Christendom emerged, first of all, the transition into the Christian world, which was destined to dominate the West for many centuries down to the present. Within that Christian world, the Jews made significant albeit not fully appreciated contributions to progress. Simultaneously, Christian Europe's intellectual and spiritual dynamism impacted the creativity

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 5 for details.

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of its Jewish minority in multiple ways, eventuating in a high level of creativity in multiple spheres of Jewish intellectual and spiritual life.

At the same time, the problematic aspects of medieval western Christendom took a heavy toll on its Jews. Entirely new dangers to Jewish existence appeared, including banishment of entire Jewish populations, wide-ranging popular violence that cost thousands of Jewish lives, and destructive stereotypes that portrayed Jews as an alien and dangerous element within Christian society. Both the positive and negative developments affected Jewish life profoundly between 1000 and 1500 and left a complex and multifaceted legacy for Jewish life in the modern West.



WHAT HAS BEEN SAID THUS FAR ABOUT THE STRIKING DEVELOPMENT of western Christendom between the years 1000 and 1500 represents an accepted consensus within the scholarly world. To be sure, these conclusions run counter to received popular wisdom. Citizens of the modern West find it difficult to comprehend that a thousand years ago the Islamic world was far advanced over Christian Europe in almost every way. The fact that in the year 1000 the major cities of the Muslim world – for example, Baghdad, Damascus, and Cairo – were large and prosperous at a level to which the inhabitants of London, Paris, and Frankfurt could not aspire, indeed could not even dream of, has been rarely emphasized by Western historians and thinkers, making it difficult for modern inhabitants of the powerful West to grasp these realities. Present-day Muslims have a much better grasp of the earlier circumstances of Muslim power and European weakness. They are fully aware of the achievements of their ancestors and of the extent to which the Muslim sphere in the year 1000 outstripped western Christendom. For present-day Muslims, this prior reality poses the difficult question of what went wrong. Identifying what it was that enabled the formerly backward areas of Europe to overtake the medieval Muslim sphere and to maintain superiority down to the present constitutes a vexing issue in the contemporary Muslim world.

With respect to the changing position of the Jews of medieval western Christendom, the scholarly consensus is less fully developed, and the alternative popular consensus is stronger. For most Jews and for most non-Jews interested in the Jewish past, there is a broad sense of Jewish

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life in Europe as implanted in antiquity and an ongoing reality ever since. With respect to the Jewish presence in western Christendom, the dynamic change just depicted is extremely difficult to absorb. Let us look briefly at two colorful presentations of the purported rootedness of Jews in Christian Europe, one from the Christian side and one from the Jewish side.

Some years ago, while in Paris collecting data for a study of the Jews of northern France during the Middle Ages, I perused local histories of northern French towns in hopes of finding occasional but useful documentary evidence on Jews. My efforts were successful, and I discovered in these local histories many valuable testimonies to Jewish life during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As I read through these local histories, written generally by town archivists or local historians, I was struck by a recurring theme. Repeatedly, the local writers included the following sentences or slight variations thereof: “The Jews of Jerusalem rejected our Lord Jesus Christ and occasioned his crucifixion. In punishment, the Lord caused the destruction of Jerusalem and condemned the Jews to exile. The Jews left the Holy Land and settled in X [the particular town in question], where evidence of their sojourn has survived.” The evidence of Jewish settlement in the towns of northern France presented in these local histories was in all cases from the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. However, widely accepted theological and folkloristic memories assumed Jewish presence in the many towns of northern France over the ages, stretching all the way back to the very first Christian century.

Jews have shared, to a significant extent, this perception of lengthy Jewish connections to Christian Europe. This conviction was recurrently articulated, nowhere better than in the post-1492 ruminations of Solomon ibn Verga in his *Shevet Yehudah*. There, ibn Verga laments the expulsion of the Jews of Spain by highlighting their long stay on the peninsula. He tells a delightful tale of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar encountering difficulties in his siege of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and calling in reinforcements, led by the king of Spain. After achieving victory, the conquering and generous Babylonian monarch offered his Spanish ally choice of the spoils of war. According to ibn Verga, the wise Spanish king chose as his reward the Jews of the finest neighborhoods of the conquered Jerusalem, was accorded his recompense, and led his



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new subjects back to Spain, where their descendants remained for more than two millennia.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for ibn Verga as for many Jews, the expulsions of 1492–97 constituted an illegitimate rupture in the age-old presence of Jews in western Christendom. In fact, ibn Verga's view of Jewish presence in southern Europe serves as a counterargument to the claims of the local northern French archivists and historians. Taken seriously, ibn Verga is arguing that Jewish presence in southern Europe predated the crucifixion of Jesus by many centuries, meaning that Jewish settlement could by no means have been the result of that momentous event and the Jewish malfeasance associated in Christian thinking with it.

The claims of long-term Jewish settlement in northern and southern Europe by local northern French historians and by Solomon ibn Verga have considerable charm and appeal. In fact, however, the recollections of the former are simply incorrect. Jewish presence in northern France (the area upon which my study was then focused) and other areas of northern Europe did not emerge in any serious way until the beginning of the second Christian millennium; it postdated the crucifixion of Jesus by almost a thousand years.

The situation in southern Europe – depicted by Solomon ibn Verga – is a bit more complex. Jewish presence did develop there in late antiquity, although not nearly so early as ibn Verga claims. By the time of the crucifixion of Jesus, there surely were small Jewish enclaves on the Italian and Iberian peninsulas. However, as noted, the largest centers of Jewish life in southern Europe, including Italy and Spain, during the first half of the Middle Ages were located in areas controlled by the forces of Islam. Jewish presence in Christian areas of southern Europe during the period that predated the year 1000 was quite limited, confined – as we have seen – to fairly small numbers in areas of the Italian and Iberian peninsulas under Christian rule and in sectors of southern France. Thus, ibn Verga's claim of lengthy Jewish settlement on the Iberian peninsula is not actually wrong, as was the case for the local town historians of northern France. Jews did in fact populate Spain from late antiquity on. However, this did not mean unbroken Jewish settlement in Christian Spain. Even in Christian southern Europe, the notion of significant and stable Christian-Jewish interaction over the past two millennia is unsustainable.

<sup>5</sup> Solomon ibn Verga, *Shevet Yehudah*, 33.

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The reality of ongoing Christian-Jewish interaction from the first century down through the twenty-first century has contributed substantially to the mistaken sense of unbroken Jewish presence in western Christendom. This ongoing interaction is indisputable, but its dimensions must be carefully understood. Given the role of Jews in the Gospels and the Pauline epistles, Judaism and Jews constituted a continuous and contentious issue for Christian thinkers and thinking, an issue that had to be regularly addressed, whether there was a significant Jewish presence or not. Thus, the thinkers of Latin Christendom consistently turned their attention to Jews and Judaism all through late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> These considerations of Judaism and Jews cannot, however, be taken as indices of significant Jewish presence.

In effect, while Christianity was born within the Jewish community of Palestine in the first century, the paths of the two rival religious communities diverged markedly. The remarkable spread of Christianity took place by and large west of Palestine, throughout the Roman Empire. In contrast, the subsequent expansion of Judaism took place from the third century onward largely east of Palestine, in Mesopotamia. Interestingly, while Christian sources are rich in consideration of the issues raised by Judaism, Jewish sources down through the twelfth century are almost devoid of interest in Christianity. It was only with the emergence of sizeable Jewish communities within western Christendom that Jews began to concern themselves with Christianity and Christians.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, the accumulated weight of Christian thinking vis-à-vis Judaism and Jews profoundly impacted the Jews who began to settle in western Christendom from the eleventh century on, as we shall see.<sup>8</sup> It is a mistake, however, to posit unwavering consistency in ecclesiastical doctrine, policies, and teachings from historical setting to historical setting. As the prior legacy of Christian thinking impacted the innovative circumstances of western Christendom, emphases and specifics changed, resulting in new doctrinal views, revised policies, and evolving imageries of Judaism and Jews. The interaction of Church and Jews in medieval western Christendom represents the amalgamation of older tendencies

<sup>6</sup> For valuable treatment of these early medieval thinkers, see Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law*, chaps. 1 through 4.

<sup>7</sup> See Robert Chazan, *Fashioning Jewish Identity*.

<sup>8</sup> See throughout Part II.