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978-0-521-84666-0 - The Jews of Medieval Western Christendom, 1000-1500

Robert Chazan

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The Jews of Medieval Western Christendom, 1000–1500

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.

ROBERT CHAZAN is S. H. and Helen R. Scheuer Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies in the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, New York University. His numerous books and articles on medieval Jewish history include *Fashioning Jewish Identity in Medieval Western Christendom* (Cambridge, 2004).

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For
Jonah and Adam
Gabriel and Nathan
Arlo and Eve

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PREFACE

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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,

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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

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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

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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

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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