

INTRODUCTION

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The term “early modern” is notoriously ambiguous, if not oxymoronic. It also remains, even a half-century after its introduction into historical studies, controversial. As one recent critic has complained, the world between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries “was not in any way ‘modern,’ and certainly not in any way an ‘early’ form of modernity.”¹ “Early modern” is indeed a cumbersome and loaded term, but nevertheless not one likely to be soon displaced or replaced. This is because the period covered under this rubric, from the age of Renaissance and Reformation at the beginning to the era of the Atlantic Revolutions at the end, is too distinctive and integral to be subsumed under such labels as “medieval” or “modern.” It is an age in its own right as far as such matters as international trade, state building, religious transformation, communications, global exploration, and the development of political thought are concerned. In this sense, however legitimate the terminological criticisms leveled against it, “early modern” really only serves as a convenient shorthand designation for a necessary and essential periodization.

Does this periodization make sense, though, in the specific context of Jewish history? It is not obvious that the landmark moments in Christian religious or European cultural history that open the period should coincide with those of Judaism, or that the revolutions of the late eighteenth century, at its close, were of great transformative consequence for Jews, most of whom lived far from the places where those events resonated most strongly. The implicit teleology in the very term “early modern” also raises particular questions in relation to Jews, whose relationship to modernity has been, both during this period and since, notably complex and contested. While “the early modern period” started to become a fashionable designation among historians in the 1940s and 1950s, it has only quite

¹ Jack A. Goldstone, “The Problem of the ‘Early Modern’ World,” *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41, 3 (1998), 294; see, similarly, Randolph Starn, “The Early Modern Muddle,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 6 (2002), 296–307.

recently become widely employed by Jewish historians. Prior to the 1985 publication of Jonathan Israel's *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism*, the first work to put forth a coherent and self-conscious claim for an early modern period in Jewish history, a number of Jewish historians had focused on this period (roughly 1500–1800) and discussed its outstanding features. What is interesting is that to one degree or another all characterized this age as both essentially medieval and, despite moments of creative efflorescence, one primarily defined by crisis. That which was incipiently modern in the period, these historians suggested in various ways, was more the internal crumbling of the older forms of Jewish society than the construction of anything genuinely new, while that which was truly new and progressive was by and large only what managed to seep into an insular Jewish society from general European culture and ideas.

For the pioneering nineteenth-century Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz, these centuries were marked above all by intellectual decline and the rise of superstition, what he labeled “a general demoralization of Judaism,”² while for the great Russian-Jewish historian Simon Dubnow the contrast between general European cultural dynamism and Jewish persecution and stagnation could not be sharper. “At the time,” Dubnow observes, “when the medieval period had formally come to a close for occidental Christendom . . . the middle ages continued in unmitigated brutality for the Jews.”³ True, the twentieth-century sociologist and historian Jacob Katz did present a somewhat more balanced view. Appearing in Hebrew in 1958, Katz's *Tradition and Crisis* has sometimes been taken as the first work attempting to come to terms with a Jewish early modern period, but such an assessment is exaggerated. As its title indicates, Katz's volume, in so far as it deals with the roots of modern Jewish life, focuses overwhelmingly (in its second half) on the erosion of traditional structures, such as rabbinic authority. When it does report on new trends, particularly in the form of the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah) in western and central Europe and Hasidism in the east, it offers no clear analysis of how these key developments emerged, but instead only a treatment of how they further contributed to tradition's displacement.⁴

In understanding the dynamics of late medieval “crisis,” Katz relied heavily on the revolutionary scholarly insights of Kabbalah scholar

² Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. V (Philadelphia, 1895), 199–232.

³ Simon Dubnow, *Nationalism and History: Letters on Old and New Judaism*, ed. Koppel S. Pinson (Philadelphia, 1958), 306. To be fair, Dubnow provides a more nuanced depiction in his *History of the Jews*, vol. IV (South Brunswick, NJ, 1971), 17–21.

⁴ Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages*, ed. and trans. Bernard D. Cooperman (Syracuse, NY, 2000).

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Gershom Scholem. Like Katz, Scholem did not employ the term “early modern,” but he did likewise view the centuries following 1492 as ones of crisis and creativity. In Scholem’s imaginative rendering, an unfolding and dynamic response to the theological problem of Jewish exile led, in a pattern of “dialectical” twists and turns, to the widespread dissemination of new, redemptive forms of Kabbalah (especially that created by the sixteenth-century mystic Isaac Luria) that crystallized in the failed messianic mass movement of Sabbatai Zevi (1666) and thence splintered into a host of movements as disparate as Hasidism and Reform Judaism. Even more so than Katz, Scholem’s historical outlook was shaped by Zionism, by its characterization of Jewish diaspora existence as rooted in exilic crisis and its understanding of the period immediately preceding the modern as one in which exilic tensions finally became unbearable.⁵

Desiccation, decay, atrophy, and above all crisis – these are the terms and concepts which long tended to dominate depictions of the early modern era *avant la lettre*.⁶ One of the important developments in historical scholarship of the last several decades – broadly reflected in the present volume – has been to offer a more variegated and frequently more positive, or at least more balanced, picture. This re-evaluation was first crystallized in the aforementioned study by Jonathan Israel, a specialist in the history of the early modern Dutch Republic. Unlike his predecessors, Israel did not see this epoch as a mere extension of the Middle Ages (or an extended crisis marking medieval decline) but rather as “an essentially new phase.”⁷ From the mid sixteenth to mid eighteenth centuries, he argued, the standoff between the Reformation and Counter-Reformation opened up space for the more religiously neutral policies of *raison d’état*, including, in the economic sphere, mercantilism, which proved transformatory and overwhelmingly beneficial for the Jews. In this context, Jews’ commercial utility enabled them to win new freedoms and opportunities, not least of

⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676* (Princeton, 1973).

⁶ To be sure, earlier scholars certainly emphasized positive elements within this overall negative picture – for example, Cecil Roth on the period of Jewish “Renaissance” in early modern Italy in *The Jews in the Renaissance* (Philadelphia, 1959); Dubnow on the crystallization of Jewish autonomous institutions and Talmudic learning in sixteenth-century Poland in *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland from Earliest Times until the Present Day*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1916–20); Shmuel Ettinger on the seventeenth-century growth of religious toleration in “The Beginnings of the Change in the Attitude of European Society toward the Jews,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 7 (1961), 193–219; Selma Stern on the benefits (and dangers) brought about by the Court Jews phenomenon in *The Court Jew: A Contribution to the History of the Period of Absolutism in Central Europe* (Philadelphia, 1950).

⁷ Jonathan Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550–1750*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1989), 1.

all the opportunity to resettle in parts of western Europe from which they had been excluded for centuries. Indeed, Israel went as far as to describe the age as marking a kind of first Jewish emancipation, one applied to Jews as a collective, that preceded the later and better-known emancipation of the French Revolution era that granted rights to Jews, but as individuals alone.⁸

As noted, Israel's positive assessment marked a clear break with earlier, more "lachrymose" depictions. It highlighted the Jews' experience between 1650 and 1713 as reflecting "the most profound and pervasive impact on the west which they were ever to exert." Although the aftermath of this high water mark entailed a century of rapid decline – characterized by widespread economic dislocation and "creeping intellectual paralysis" – Israel's sweeping integrative depiction of early modern demographic transformation, autonomous Jewish self-rule, and above all interlocking semiglobal commercial networks, cast this formerly rather bleak period of Jewish history in a strikingly triumphant glow.

Though vastly influential, Israel's formulation did not meet with universal approval. As critics noted, its weak point lay in its characterization of Jewish internal cultural and intellectual developments, which Israel viewed largely as subordinate to broader European trends. In fact, disagreements over Israel's approach on this count reflected long-standing divisions among historians between focusing on the Jewish past from the vantage point of external shaping conditions, on the one hand, and immanent internal ones, on the other. Most crucially, the scholar David Ruderman, while appreciating Israel's pioneering effort to map the period's broad contours, endeavored to complicate his portrait by identifying the cultural dynamics or "formations" of the Jewish early modern: "the interconnections among intellectual creativity and the political, social, and technological conditions shaping Jewish life in this era."⁹ Ruderman's specific insights can be found in the concluding chapter of this volume, among other places. Suffice it to mention here that his overarching project can broadly stand for (and builds upon) the work of a generation of scholars who came of age starting in the 1970s and 1980s, and who have collectively helped to transform our understanding of almost every aspect of Jewish history over the centuries from the Iberian expulsions to the development of Hasidism and Jewish Enlightenment. This scholarship includes, but is hardly confined to, the study of: the Sephardic diaspora after 1492 and its implications for the growth of a more expansive Jewish role in global trade; the imposition of ghettos, particularly in Italy, which, despite the

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Judaism, A New Cultural History* (Princeton, 2010), 11.

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hardships they imposed, also opened up a tolerated Jewish space within Catholic civilization where Jews at times culturally flourished; a host of intellectual developments that were hardly medieval in character, such as Jewish engagement with Renaissance humanism and the associated proliferation of both Hebrew publishing and “Christian Hebraism”; the appearance of new religious mass movements connected with the dissemination of Kabbalah; and the first signs of the rise of more secular attitudes among rulers and states toward Jewish subjects, and even of a fledgling Jewish secularization itself.

This explosion of new scholarship on early modern Judaism is reflected in the college classroom as well. As late as the 1970s, an undergraduate course devoted to early modern Jewish history (however designated) would have been hard pressed to find relevant quality textbooks, certainly in English; today the instructor will find a great wealth of accessible materials, from primary source readers to contemporary memoir literature to specialized monographs and a handful of solid period surveys (as noted above). The synthetic works of Israel, Ruderman, and Dean Phillip Bell offer stimulating, coherent, and accessible guides to the period as a whole.¹⁰ What is lacking, however, is a text that brings together both the depth and breadth of understanding that all of this recent scholarship has now made possible. It is our hope that this volume will satisfy precisely that need.

The shape of this volume reflects the broad consensus among current scholars that the early modern period is a meaningful unit of analysis in Jewish history. In some respects, it is fully appropriate to consider the period as one of transition, during which a range of phenomena broadly associated with “modernity” began, in varied ways, to impact upon Jewish lives: the rise of print culture; more complex commercial, financial, and production practices; increased migration flows; the growth of state power; and new forms of contestation of traditional orthodoxies and power structures. However, as almost all early modernists would also agree, change in this period was highly uneven and far from unidirectional, and the varied particularities of Jewish worlds from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries should be understood in their own diverse and locally contingent terms.

The chronological boundaries of the volume are therefore loose and flexible. 1500 is very much a soft opening date, inviting forays back into the late medieval period, but nonetheless signalling the rough start of various narratives that were important in Jewish as well as in “general” history (the rise of print; the European encounter with the New World; the denominational fracturing of Western Christendom), and also the key watershed

¹⁰ Dean Phillip Bell, *Jews in the Early Modern World* (Lanham, MD, 2008).

of Sephardic history in 1492. Our *terminus ad quem* of 1815 is less conventional. In Jewish history (as in European history), the modern period is often taken to begin with the French Revolution, if not slightly earlier.¹¹ This inaugural “era of emancipation” is thus yoked to the further advancement of the political inclusion of Jews later in the nineteenth century and the reactions against it, usually placed at the heart of the modern Jewish historical narrative. Yet this periodization entails certain distortions. It is not just the fact that, as a diaspora people, Jews were so dispersed geographically that no single watershed event reverberated in its effects to encompass all or most of them. It is also that modernity itself took different forms and developed at different times depending on the nature of the surrounding political culture and social structure. The major Jewish population centers, particularly in eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire, were at best only indirectly affected by the French Revolution of 1789. Polish Jewry – the most populous segment of the Jewish world – was impacted far more profoundly by the three partitions of Poland (1772, 1793, and 1795), though to the degree that these brought about disjuncture it was not necessarily or invariably in the direction of modernization. On the contrary, more recent depictions of eighteenth-century Jewry emphasize as much continuity as disjuncture. For Ottoman Jews, certainly, the modern era can in no sense be said to coincide with the European Enlightenment or the French Revolution, and properly only begins with the inauguration of the *Tanzimat* Reforms in 1839, which gradually eroded the traditional category of the tolerated alien, the *dhimmi*.

Jewish modernity has been variously measured by intellectual and spiritual developments – Italian Haskalah and Polish Hasidism in the eighteenth century, Russian Haskalah in the nineteenth – or by loose, unselfconsciously assimilative processes such as occurred for Anglo-Jewry starting in the early eighteenth century. In either case, broad efforts at periodization prove challenging.¹² As Michael Meyer dishearteningly concluded in his survey of different approaches to periodizing the modern age in Jewish life, “any endeavour to mark a borderline which will be

¹¹ For a classic statement of the various positions and their relative merits, see Michael Meyer, “Where Does Modern Jewish History Begin?” *Judaism* 23 (1975), 329–38.

¹² Among many others, see Isaac Barzilay, “The Italian and Berlin Haskalah (Parallels and Differences),” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 29 (1960–1), 17–54; Francesca Bregoli, *Mediterranean Enlightenment: Livornese Jews, Tuscan Culture, and Eighteenth-Century Reform* (Stanford, 2014); Gershon Hundert, *Jews in Poland–Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: A Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley, 2004); Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas II and the Jews: The Transformation of Jewish Society in Russia, 1825–1855* (Philadelphia, 1983); Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England 1714–1830: Tradition and Change in a Liberal Society* (Philadelphia, 1974).

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meaningful for all Jewries and embrace the origin or rise to normative status of all – or even most – of the characteristics of Jewish life as it presently exists seems . . . bound to fail.”¹³

And yet, Meyer goes on to say, if for organizational purposes alone, one must begin (and in our case also conclude) somewhere. We feel that the best solution is to close our volume with the end of the Napoleonic wars. By including the years up to the Congress of Vienna in our “long” early modern period, an alternative vista is enabled, in which the upheavals of the revolutionary era can be more readily understood in relation to the centuries and decades that preceded it. Continuing the story up to 1815 disrupts any easy demarcation with the modern period of Jewish history. It also brings into somewhat greater synchronicity the very different trajectories occurring in western, central and eastern Europe, as a result above all of the Napoleonic conquests, which helped extend modern trends regarding Jews (or at least debates about such trends) not just throughout Europe but also as far as the Ottoman world, where two decades after Napoleon’s fall a period of fundamental internal reform would begin.

The volume aims to offer an up-to-date and commanding survey of the field of early modern Jewish history, which has grown immensely since the late 1990s. The history of Judaism is necessarily also the history of the Jews: although religion will figure prominently, many chapters will approach the Jewish past from perspectives that emphasize social and political over religious developments. And the history of the Jews is necessarily also the history of the interactions of Jews with others, and so these interactions will be central to much of the volume. Some contributors are primarily affiliated with Jewish studies, while others are thematic specialists for whom Jews are not necessarily their primary expertise. Most contributors are historians, but this is an interdisciplinary volume, including contributions from scholars of religious studies, literary studies, art history, and material culture. We have consciously solicited contributions from North America, Israel, and Europe, in order to ensure that the volume captures current scholarly thinking from these three different regions, each of which tends to generate a somewhat different perspective on the Jewish past. We present, we hope, an authoritative history, but also one that reflects the diversity and internal debate that characterizes this vibrant field.

How should the history of early modern Jewry be organized? Much of the historiography of the field takes the national or linguistic boundaries of the modern period as its primary demarcating logic. This is in part due to the nation-state-oriented structures that have governed and dominated the study of the Jewish past since the late nineteenth

¹³ Meyer, “Where Does Modern Jewish History Begin?” 336.

century, promoting the narration of French, German, Italian, American, and other state-shaped Jewish histories. While for certain purposes these divisions make adequate sense, the key differences across the Jewish world – most notably the distinctions among Sephardic, Ashkenazic, and other cultural realms – do not align with the political map of the early modern world, and indeed, Jewish communities in this period cannot be neatly geographically separated from one another. A more refined periodization also poses difficulties, as rhythms of continuity and change of course varied between areas of Jewish settlement. For some topics, it is useful to mark a separation between the earlier half of the period, up to approximately 1650, and the “long Enlightenment” period in Europe from roughly 1650 onwards. The former period is characterized by the impact of the Renaissance, the emergence of Christian inter-confessional competition and conflict, and the policies of so-called mercantile philosemitism, through which small numbers of Jews were encouraged to resettle some territories in western and central Europe (from which they had long been excluded), in order to fructify commercial life. The latter, in contrast, covers a period when new ideas increasingly fed into scientific and political thought, global interconnections grew more prominent in economic life, Jewish settlement spread farther into important new areas (notably Britain and North America), and, in the wake of the Peace of Westphalia (1648), the modern state system, so impactful on the future life of Jews, began to take shape. However, it is important also to highlight cultural continuities and connections across the 315 years covered by this volume, and across the breadth of the expanding Jewish world.

We have therefore divided the volume into three broad sections, while allowing for a blurring of the boundaries between them. In the first section, six ambitious chapters together offer a survey of the key features of European and Mediterranean Jewry in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The first three chapters cover the attitudes and policies toward Jews and Judaism in each of three main religious spheres in which they lived: Catholicism, in the late Renaissance and Catholic Reform eras; Protestantism, in its formative period through to the end of the Thirty Years’ War; and Islam, during the dramatic rise of Ottoman Jewry from 1492 through to the late sixteenth century. The next three chapters each cover a key aspect of the framework of Jewish existence in this period: the varied and changing legal and political status of Jewish settlements; the place of Jews in the European and intercontinental economy; and the institutional structures and practices of Jewish communities in the transition from the medieval to the early modern period. Taken together, the chapters in this

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section provide a broad but thorough overview of Jewish life across Europe and the Mediterranean basin in the first half of the early modern period.

The chapters in the second and longest section of the volume are thematically more tightly focused, but are often more chronologically ambitious, in many cases covering the full period covered by the volume, from the end of the fifteenth to the outset of the nineteenth century. The aim of this section is to cover as wide a range as possible of the historical processes shaping early modern Jewish life. Chapters are comparative across time and space when appropriate, but offer focused attention on key episodes in the period (such as the Sabbatean irruption) and on major centers of population (such as eastern Europe). Religious, cultural, intellectual, economic, and political topics are given equal priority, and often overlap with one another, with some chapters approaching related topics from different disciplinary or interpretive perspectives.

The first two chapters of this section both stretch back into the pre-1500 period in order to analyze and explain key particularities of the two European Jewish cultural domains: first, the impact of the Iberian inquisitions on Sephardic Jewry and on the development of “New Christian” identities; and second, the cultural and institutional flourishing of Jewish life in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth from the early sixteenth century onward. Two contributions then trace the linguistic transformations, across the early modern period, of the distinctive tongues of these two domains: Ladino and Yiddish. The next two chapters both focus on the transformations wrought by the advent of printing: in the development of Jewish book culture through to the early nineteenth century, and in the study of Jewish texts by early modern Christians. Three chapters then look at a range of aspects of the structures of religious authority in early modern Jewry: rabbinic culture and the development of religious law, or Halakhah; the particular challenges to communal authority across the Western Sephardic Diaspora, from Hamburg to the Caribbean; and the development of Jewish institutions and practices of education and of rabbinical homiletics. The next cluster of chapters explores various dimensions of Jewish mysticism in this period: the development of the Kabbalah across the early modern Jewish world; the place of magic and mysticism in Jewish popular beliefs and practices; and the particular case of the Sabbatean movement of the 1660s, and its afterlife. This is followed by a chapter on early modern Jewish scientific, medical, and philosophical thought. A pair of essays then focus on Jewish economic history, the first surveying the relatively recent historiographical concept of the early modern “port Jew,” and the second analyzing the particular role of Jews in the economy of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. The next four chapters approach early modern Jewish religious life from a range of perspectives. Staying in eastern

Europe, the first of these looks at Jewish practices of piety and devotion in this region across the early modern period, while the next offers an interpretive account of the eighteenth-century rise of Hasidism. The emergence, at roughly the same time, of the Haskalah, or “Jewish Enlightenment,” is the subject of the next chapter, which is followed by a more social-historical exploration of the popular religious world of early modern Jewry, with an emphasis on Italy but ranging comparatively across the continent. The final two essays of the section look at the visual arts and at music, broadening out the range of Jewish cultural experience and expression addressed in this volume.

The final section of the volume covers the period from the middle of the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century. It is in this section alone that chapters are primarily organized geographically, and are often focused on particular states – in recognition of the fact that in the latter part of the early modern period state policies toward Jews became an increasingly significant focus of debate, while national affiliations became an ever more significant component of Jewish identities. The section starts with German Jewry, and then moves on to the cognate, if still more heterogeneous, Jewries under Habsburg rule, including the small but growing community of Jews in the Kingdom of Hungary. We next turn to the Ashkenazic demographic heartland of Poland–Lithuania. Ottoman Jewry in the later early modern period was also demographically substantial (although by this time declining) and certainly of enormous cultural vitality, as the subsequent chapter covering Ottoman Jewry at this time makes clear. Like Germany, Italy – the subject of the next chapter – was also a region of multiple polities and numerous scattered Jewish communities, many with a continuous history through the early modern and modern periods, despite not infrequent local expulsions. In contrast, the Jewries of the Netherlands, France, and Great Britain – to each of which a chapter is dedicated – were effectively reconstituted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, developing in parallel despite the important differences in the status, economic activity, and cultural characteristics of these Jewish communities.

The volume then moves beyond Europe, with two chapters on the Jewries of the New World, the first on the Caribbean in the context of the wider Atlantic world, and the second on the early Jewish settlement of North America. A synoptic chapter then covers the various Jewries of Ethiopia and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as in Yemen and India; a separate short chapter is devoted to the Jews of Iran. Two comparative chapters round out the section and bring the volume to its close. The first explores the intellectual, political, social, and economic origins in this period of what came to be known retrospectively as “Jewish Emancipation”; the second

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looks back at the entire early modern period from the vantage point of the early nineteenth century, and offers a reflective reconsideration of the periodization of “modernity” in Jewish history.

As with any text of this scale, individual readers will use this volume in different ways, and we hope that most will find it serves a variety of purposes. The volume is designed equally as a work of reference, a high-level gateway into multiple fields of specialism, an overview of the inter-connections between different topics, and a tool and stimulus for further research. It is also a polyphonic interpretive summary of the current state of knowledge in the interdisciplinary field of early modern Jewish studies. Our mapping of the field is no doubt too vast to be readily taken in as a whole. A very different but equally valid map could also certainly have been produced. As editors we cannot claim to present anything like a comprehensive survey, but we hope that our forty-odd contributions reflect the current breadth, diversity, and dynamism of this exciting area of study. Some of the volume’s lacunae perhaps also reflect the current areas of weakness in the field – though different readers will of course identify and diagnose these differently. Despite undoubted imperfections, we hope we have succeeded in our aim of producing an unprecedentedly rich and detailed exploration of the textual, economic, political, cultural, and social history of the Jews from the start of the sixteenth century to the end of the Napoleonic era, and of the interweaving of these histories in the wider transformations of the early modern world.