

The Fate of the Jews in the Early Islamic Near East

In this book, Phillip I. Lieberman revisits one of the foundational narratives of medieval Jewish history – that the rise of Islam led the Jews of Babylonia, the largest Jewish community prior to the rise of Islam, to abandon a livelihood based on agriculture and move into urban crafts and long-distance trade. Here, he presents an alternative account that reveals the complexity of interfaith relations in early Islam. Using Jewish and Islamic chronicles, legal materials, and the rich documentary evidence of the Cairo Geniza, Lieberman demonstrates that Jews initially remained on the rural periphery after the Islamic conquest of Iraq. Gradually, they assimilated to an emerging Islamicate identity as the new religion took shape, sapping towns and villages of their strength. Simultaneously, a small, elite group of merchants and communal leaders migrated westward. Lieberman here explores their formative influence on the Jewish communities of the southern Mediterranean that flourished under Islamic conquest.

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Phillip Lieberman

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**The Fate of the Jews in the Early
Islamic Near East**

Tracing the Demographic Shift from East to West

PHILLIP I. LIEBERMAN

Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee



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Acknowledgements

The impetus behind this project was my exploration of Jewish demography and migration in the medieval Islamic world that went into my essay in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, volume v. I was asked to write this article by Marina Rustow in 2009, and I therefore owe her a debt of gratitude for encouraging me to dig into an area of Jewish and Islamic history I had not studied until that time. Not long after I drafted that article, I encountered Michael Toch's *Economic History of European Jews: Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages*, a book that got me thinking about how foundational narratives of Jewish history often have a life of their own and the evidentiary base for these narratives is not often re-examined. His efforts in doing just such a re-examination have been inspirational.

In writing this book, I have benefited greatly from the keen insights of my colleagues. First and foremost, I must recognize the singular influence of my Vanderbilt colleague David Wasserstein, who has always been generous with his time and helpful insights. David's vigilance in beginning historical inquiry by asking what our sources *can* tell us has, I hope, had a palpable influence on my work. Others at Vanderbilt have been thoughtful, generous, and supportive readers and listeners as well – I presented on Chapter 3 at the Overlook Workshop in the Department of Religious Studies (for which Jay Geller's insights were very useful) and on Chapter 7 at the Islamic Studies Workshop, and on the project as a whole at the Economic History Workshop. I am very lucky to have colleagues so close to home who are willing to read my work and to think about it. Among these, I must note in particular William Caferro, who has always been

ready with a supportive and complimentary word. I hope that we will have opportunities to teach together from the material I offer in this book.

I presented on an early version of what would become Chapter 2 below at the Association for Jewish Studies conference in December 2012; that material was published as “Revisiting Jewish Occupational Choice and Urbanization in Iraq under the Early ‘Abbāsids” in *Jewish History* in 2015. I also presented on an early version of what would become Chapter 5 at a conference at Yale entitled “Everyday Writing in the Medieval Near East: Documentary History and the Cairo Geniza”; that presentation led to publication of “The Disappearance of the Early Phonetic Judeo-Arabic Spelling (EPJAS) and Sa’adya Gaon’s Translation of the Bible” in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* in 2014. I thank Eve Krakowski for including me in that conference. These presentations and a host of others on these and the other chapters in the book gave me the opportunity to draw on the collective knowledge of my colleagues to sharpen the ideas expressed therein. I am truly grateful to the folks who sat through these presentations and even more so to those who provided challenges to my work.

With this in mind, I express my deep appreciation for two readers for Cambridge University Press, among them Fred Astren, for their very helpful feedback on the manuscript. Fred was incredibly generous with his time as I tried to bring the richness of that feedback into the manuscript itself. Tom Cohen, too, read the entire manuscript very carefully and I am truly in his debt for his thoughts on it. I hope that the end result does justice to all their suggestions and comments. Finally, among my scholarly colleagues, I must mention and thank Yedida Eisenstat, who has heard more about medieval demography than she would probably otherwise have liked. I will note, however, that such conversations have encouraged her to think about such matters in medieval Ashkenaz, the geographic focus of her own work.

Bringing this project from manuscript to book would not have been possible without the stellar guidance and wisdom of Beatrice Rehl of Cambridge University Press. It was a privilege to work with an editor who is a scholar of the Near East in her own right. Under her watch, the process of bringing this book to light could not have been more gratifying.

In addition to the scholarly support I received from these colleagues, I am grateful as well for the financial support I received from the National Endowment for the Humanities in the form of a Summer Stipend in 2019. I am truly humbled by the willingness of the NEH to underwrite this project—a project entirely concerned with non-Western, premodern history.

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I am sure that my family will be happy to hear about something other than the migration of medieval Jews “from the sun’s rise in the East to where it sets in the West” (cf. Psalms 113:3) and to see this book between boards. I dedicate this volume to my son, Gabriel Isaiah Ackerman-Lieberman, with boundless affection and love.

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Preface

Problems in the field of Jewish history are, for the most part, different from corresponding problems in the field of Islamic history, because scholars of Jewish history – like those in the field of Jewish studies in general – are required to ask how Jewish history (or literature, or philosophy, and so forth) interacts with that of the broader world in which Jews have found themselves. Thus, preparation to pursue research in Jewish studies has by definition included the study of a wider field of which Jewish studies is a part – and so, for instance, a student of American Jewish literature must master American literature as well as Jewish literature in America. Much ink is shed determining precisely how *Jew-ish* that Jewish literature is as opposed to how *American* it is.

The practice of studying both “majority” and “minority” cultures does not always carry over to the wider fields in which students of Jewish studies find themselves. Scholars of medieval Jewish history study European or Islamic history as a matter of course, but medieval European or Islamic historians do not necessarily devote significant effort to studying Jewish history in their respective orbits.

In this book, I revisit a long-held narrative of medieval Jewish history concerning Jewish urbanization and migration not only to shed some light on the dynamics of the Jewish community of the medieval Islamic world, but also with an eye towards thinking about the Islamic world itself. This narrative has two parts: first, that under early Islamic regimes, Jews set aside the agricultural pursuits with which they had been engaged during the talmudic period and urbanized en masse (a process that picked up speed with ‘Abbāsīd founding of Baghdād in 762); second, amidst the favorable conditions for long-distance trade created by Islamic conquest

of the southern and eastern Mediterranean littoral, those erstwhile agrarian and newly urbanized Jews migrated to the West as part of a “commercial revolution.” These migrants would come to dominate Jewish life in the cities of the Islamic Mediterranean. This narrative was particularly useful for explaining a perceived numerical decline of Jewish life in the East and its corresponding rise in the West.

I present an alternative to this narrative: continued Jewish involvement in agriculture; atrophy of the Babylonian Jewish population as some Jews sought to raise their stature in early Islamic society through conversion and others suffered from declining agricultural, political, and social conditions in Iraq; migration of a small core of elites to the West; and expansion of Jewish life in North Africa as local conditions improved under Islamic rule from their nadir under Byzantine regimes.

Re-examining evidence for this widely held narrative of Jewish history encourages us to think about the Islamic world as a whole: How did the founding of garrison cities such as Baghdād affect the environs outlying those cities? What was the Islamic “commercial revolution” and when did it take place? Did economic opportunity have the power to motivate migration across long distances in the medieval Islamic world? My interventions in these questions and the others I engage throughout this book use data from sources that speak about medieval Jews, but my conclusions speak to the world as a whole which they inhabited. I hope, therefore, that historians of the medieval Islamic world will see these “Jewish” sources as nonetheless “Islamic” (or, more properly, “Islamicate”) – or at least of importance for understanding the medieval Islamic world. Among the chapters, this is perhaps clearest in Chapter 6, in which I trace the development of Jewish and Islamic commercial law from the rise of Islam to the high Middle Ages: the expansion of Jewish commercial law from the middle of the eleventh century points to changes in the marketplace of the Islamic world as a whole which would be invisible to someone studying Islamic law alone. My historiographic intervention, then, goes beyond what many of my colleagues using the documents of the Cairo Geniza have done – showing the importance of detail from the Geniza documents for understanding the medieval Islamicate world – to point to other materials that originated in Jewish hands that can also be used to shed light on Islamic history. It is with this in mind that I hope that this book is not only of interest to Jewish historians working on both sides of the Mediterranean thinking about the rise of the medieval Jewish community, but also Islamic historians who might come to see Jewish materials as a core rather than a marginal source for the study of Islamic history.

Abbreviations

- EI*² *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. Van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs. 2nd edn. 12 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1960–2005.
- EI*³ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Everett Rowson. 3rd edn. Leiden: Brill, 2007–.
- EJ*¹ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, gen. ed. Cecil Roth and Geoffrey Wigoder. 1st edn. 16 vols. Jerusalem: Keter; New York: Macmillan, 1971–72.
- EJ*² *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, gen. ed. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum. 2nd edn. Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007.
- EJIW* *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, exec. ed. Norman Stillman. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- PGP Princeton Geniza Project

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