

Robert Chazan, THE JEWS OF MEDIEVAL WESTERN CHRISTENDOM

INTRODUCTION

Our reconstruction of Jewish history in Western Europe from 1000-1500 depends on the available sources, which are limited compared to later periods. However, it differs between periods and locations. During this period, the available sources increase over time, but it strongly depends on the region as well. To study our history well, we need to look both at Christian and Jewish sources. For Christian sources, it depends a lot on how far the administration in a certain place and time had evolved. First and foremost, we have the records from the office of the Pope which are extensive. Among them, there are thousands of documents that deal with the Jews.

CHAPTER I PRIOR LEGACIES

Even before the year 1000, there were already Jews living in Medieval Christendom but they were small in numbers, and we know very little about them. Nonetheless, later Jewish communities built upon the social and intellectual structures that these earlier minority communities had established. The Christian majority too, had, by the year 1000, already inherited a set of complex and ambivalent policies and perceptions related to Judaism. However, since most Jews who moved into western Christendom came from Islamic societies, we shall first describe the circumstances they left behind as this left a long-lasting imprint on these communities, even after settling in Christian lands.

THE MUSLIM LEGACY

The Muslim Legacy is a necessary backdrop to the study of Jewish life in medieval western Christendom. Most Jews had been living under Muslim rule prior to the year 1000, which means the Muslim world initially had more experience with the Jews than the Christian societies. As a result, they had more developed policies to deal with the Jewish minority. The Jews who were absorbed into medieval western Christendom brought with them the vibrant culture of the medieval Muslim world. In addition, knowing the situation of Jews in the Muslim sphere will offer a useful comparison with Jewish life in western Christian lands.

Islam emerged onto the world scene as a religious and a political entity at the same time. Muslim armies conquered huge territory, thereby creating one of the Western world's greatest empires. Its population was split into two groups, the Muslims majority, and non-Muslims (monotheistic) tolerated minorities (mostly Jews and Christians). These non-Muslim subjects were allowed to observe their own traditions in return for their loyalty to the Muslim regime, tax revenues, and the acknowledgement of their inferior status to the Muslim people.

During the Middle Ages, Jews enjoyed physical and spiritual security in Muslim societies for most of the time. The Jews for their part were loyal to their Muslim rulers and provided them with the required tax contributions. While Islam requires the Jews under their authority that they assume an inferior status, Jews from time to time evaded the prescribed restrictions and acquired great wealth, standing and even political power. One of the regions where this happened was the Iberian Peninsula, which would later be brought under Christian rule. Thus Christendom brought in large numbers of Jews that were accustomed to a high level of societal participation and to an elevated lifestyle.

The conditions for Jews under Christian rule were similar to those under Muslim rule. However, there were also significant differences. The Muslim world was highly heterogeneous and contained multiple minorities, whereas in the Christian world, Jews were the only minority community. That made the position of Jews among the Christian majority much tenser than it had been among Muslims.

Today many Westerners don't realize to what extent the world of Islam was superior to the Christian world during the first half of the Middle Ages, both militarily, economically, technologically and culturally. The Jews living in this vibrant Muslim society mastered the (Arabic) language and participated within their surrounding culture. When moving into western Christendom, they brought this developed Islamic culture with them.

The Jewish communities under Islamic rule were well established, deeply rooted and fully developed. The Jews' political leader (called the Exilarch), located in Baghdad, was believed to be a direct descendent of King David. The great Jewish academies of Baghdad were the same ones that had produced the Babylonian Talmud. In contrast, the Jewish institutions under Christian rule were new and had very limited authority.

This creativity within the Muslim society strongly enhanced the Jewish cultural legacy, especially in the areas of Talmudic study, and Biblical study (with a new emphasis on linguistics and grammar). Addition innovations were new forms of theological and philosophical speculation and secular poetry. Though most Jewish communities were quick to accept these cultural expansions, opposition to these changes occurred in some sectors of the Jewish community.

While Islam was to some extent successful in attracting non-Muslims, including Jews, this was not the result of structural missionizing efforts. Jews were not regularly exposed to pressure to abandon their religion, and as they were not (often) forced to defend their faith, we have relatively few works of Jewish anti-Islamic polemical literature.

Medieval Islamic culture became greatly exposed by philosophy. As Greco-Roman thought in its origin contrasted the principles of monotheism, philosophers of the medieval period grappled with the challenge of reconciling their religious beliefs and traditions with the Greek and Roman philosophic legacy.

Jews lived all across the Muslim world, from the Middle East, to North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. Ideas could spread freely throughout the Islamic world. At the same time, gradually, more

Jews ended up living under Western Christendom. On the Iberian Peninsula, this was partially the result of Christian armies that added previous Islamic territory to the realm of Christianity; territory that came with existing Jewish communities. In other cases Jews voluntarily moved to western Christian lands, attracted by new opportunities. This influx of Jews helped strengthen the existing Jewish communities of western Christendom. Based on where they came from, these new segments of the Jewish minority came with a rich cultural heritage and with certain expectations how to participate within society. At the same time, the increase of the Jewish population enhanced Christian sensitivities and anxieties towards Jews.

THE CHRISTIAN LEGACY

Understanding about the Islamic legacy gives us an understanding of the background of Jewish life after the year 1000 in western Christendom as so many immigrants came from a Muslim society with a rich cultural heritage and brought with them certain political, social and cultural expectations. In addition, knowledge of the Islamic treatment of Jews shows us interesting contrasts with the treatment in Christian lands. It helps us understand the Jewish experience in the Christian world, how uncomfortable the relationship between the Jewish and Christian people has been, and also how Christianity encountered its Jewish rival with complex viewpoints.

Firstly, the differences are connected to the different origins of the two religions and their rise to power. Islam originated from early on as a system that incorporated both politics and religion in an inseparable, integrated way. Muhammad fulfilled both the role of a prophet and a military conqueror. However, the founder of Christianity, Jesus, possessed no worldly power, but merely sent his followers to teach the world a new truth. It was only centuries later that the message of Christianity became so successful that it took over the Roman Empire.

As Christianity provides no religiously prescribed way for running the politics of a society, the Jewish community found themselves in an environment with two separate systems of power: the leadership of the church (which reflected a certain level of continuation) and worldly powers (being more temporal and fluctuating). In a sense, this division of authority provided a small benefit for Jews as they could play off one authority against the other. On the other hand, the ecclesiastic (i.e. Church-related) authorities, as they were to some level detached from worldly power and responsibilities, could afford to impose limitations on Jews without worrying about the negative economic implications. In any case, the Jews had to struggle with the reality of divided and sometimes opposing authorities.

What had a much more important impact on the fate of the Jews was the importance for Christians to missionize and convert others to their faith. Christianity had spread through persuasion and this is an inherent and essential feature of the Christian faith. There were of course times where this drive to missionize was put on hold, but that never lasted long. There were good reasons not to target the Jews too much: they were such a small number anyway, and they were known for not being responsive to missionary effort. On the other hand, there were also reasons why Jews should be a missionizing priority.

A second difference between Islam and Christianity has to do with how they relate to Judaism in historical perspective. Islam was established on the Arabian Peninsula, in a new place, among a new group of people, with an entirely new revelation, and a new Holy Book. While acknowledging the prior religions, Judaism and Christianity, as authentic, it nonetheless claimed to have replaced it. Christianity on the other hand, developed *out of* Judaism. Being in some ways still connected to its Jewish origins but at the same time rejecting them, Christianity developed a complicated and troublesome relationship with Judaism. This attitude greatly impacted the development of Jewish communities in medieval Christendom. Initially, before Jewish communities were present, this complex relationship was merely theoretical thinking, with little practical effect on the Jews who were mostly absent, being located within the Muslim realm. With the increase of Jews in the Christian world, this complex relationship stopped being mere theory, and became practically important for the Christian majority, thereby actually affecting the history of the Jews.

Because of its origins, Christianity had a complicated and ambivalent relationship with Judaism which included both elements of deep respect as well as deep hostility. Within Christian tradition, Jews have been viewed in some ways as the noblest of people, and in others as the most wicked.

Let's now trace the origins and early development of this ambivalent Christian attitude. One might think that it was only the teachings and policies of the Roman Church that affected the Jews of Medieval Western Christendom. However, at the same time, it was also the ideas that the common Christian population harbored about their Jewish neighbors. In other words, both the political decisions from the top and the images of the general population about Jews influenced Jewish life.

It is important to understand that Christian and Jewish relationships were not static between 1000 and 1500. Religious thinking generally develops and changes. We will see that both ecclesiastical policies and the general image of Judaism among the population gradually deteriorated, bringing about a decline of Jewish circumstances. But first, let's look at the period before the year 1000, which would determine the circumstances for Jews in medieval Christendom.

Because of the lack of objective data, we cannot describe the history of Jesus in a scholarly manner. The sources we do have all date from many decades after Jesus which was after the understanding of his message had gone through considerable change. But, one may ask, if we don't have objective sources, why are scholars so sure that Jesus' original message had been altered by the time it was written down in Christian scriptures? This insight is based on a number of historical facts.

It seems quite obvious that Jesus and his followers were an integral part of the Jewish community of first century Palestine, and shared its assumptions, its concerns, and its uncertainties. The Jews in that time and place lived under Roman domination. Some were comfortable with Roman rules, while others could not tolerate it. The Jewish community was politically and religiously divided.

Fortunately, we do have some texts from the time period of Jesus. First century Jewish historian Josephus informs us about the factions that were competing during that period. Furthermore we have the writings of the Dead Sea Sect, a split-off group of Jews who were wiped out by the Romans during the suppression of the Jewish revolt which began in the year 66. Their writings inform us that this community reinterpreted the age-old writings of the prophets as specifically relating to their community and predicting events in their time.

In the time of this Dead Sea community, Jesus of Nazareth preached his vision of the spiritual bond between God and Israel. His message was conveyed in the language of his (Jewish) community. Like the Dead Sea group, he may have been dissatisfied with the religious leadership, but he was considered a Jew by both friends and foes. However, unlike the Dead Sea community, Jesus and his followers did not leave us any of their writings.

The first writings from the Jesus movement were written by a Greek speaking diaspora Jew (i.e. who lived outside of the ancient homeland). His name was Saul of Tarsus, but once he was accepted to the vision of Jesus he took the name Paul. Having never encountered Jesus first hand, Paul did not write in the Hebrew or Aramaic that Jesus and his followers had spoken. Most of his teaching was addressed to Jews outside of the land of Israel or to non-Jews. While not familiar with Jesus' original message, Paul's transfer of Jesus' perceived message to another language and another social circle signifies a deviation from the teachings of Jesus and his Palestinian Jewish followers. Moreover, Paul's writings and his life as described in the Book of Acts show considerable disagreement between him and with the original followers of Jesus.

Paul's attitude towards Jews is both complicated and ambiguous. From the information on Paul provided by the New Testament we see both respectful and degrading elements towards Judaism. While respecting Judaism's past greatness and believing in its future redemption, Paul nonetheless condemns the Jews who refuse the truth of Christianity.

Gradually the Jewish component within the (originally Jewish) Christian movement dwindled, while the non-Jewish Christians came to dominate the new religion. This brought about certain changes, not just socially, but also culturally, linguistically and even spiritually. It is important to realize that the Gospels, from which we derive our information about Jesus, were written after these changes had taken place. As a result, the description of Jesus in the Gospels does not fully depict him anymore in his original Palestinian context.

The newly founded Christian faith perceived itself as somehow still connected to its Jewish origins. Aspects of Jewish thinking had been integrated into Christianity. Christians realized that Jesus and his initial followers all had been Jews, that they abided by the Hebrew Bible, and that they expected the fulfillment of the Jewish prophets' predictions. On the other hand, Jesus had criticized the established Jewish leadership, which naturally did not mean he wasn't part of Judaism anymore.

While the original Jesus movement had identified themselves as Jewish, this rapidly changed when the movement evolved into an overwhelmingly gentile Christendom. When it became clear that

the vast majority of Jews rejected Jesus' message and did not accept its followers and leaders, adherents to the new movement felt the need to break away from Judaism, define themselves as a separate religion, and to prove the superiority of their new faith over the old one. What follows was to the conviction that the Jews were in error, unable to recognize evident proofs that Jesus was the Messiah.

The Jewish refusal to acknowledge Jesus as the predicted Messiah was exacerbated by the Jews' involvement in Jesus' death. Even though the crucifixion of Jesus was brought about by the Romans, the accounts in the Gospels minimize the role of the Romans and place the responsibility on the Jews. From Christian perspective Jews' refusal of Jesus was not an internal Jewish affair anymore; instead the Jews committed an unprecedented grave sin which evoked divine anger. God rejected his initially chosen people and transferred his blessings unto his new people, the Christians.

The decision Christian scholars ultimately made (called Canonization) which writings to include in their Scripture, strengthened the ambivalent attitude of Christianity towards Judaism even more. The Christian Bible was now composed of both an Old Testament (the Jewish Bible) which provided the predictions of what was to happen in the later part, the New Testament. The first part however, centered around the Jews as God's covenantal people while the New Testament contested the Jewish understand of the Old Testament, i.e. the Jewish Scriptures. In Christian perception, Christianity came to teach the true meaning of the Hebrew Bible which the Jews failed to understand correctly. In comparison, Islam had produced an entirely new Holy Book and did thus not feel the necessity to bother with Jewish (and Christian) Scripture.

As Christians identified their belief system as superior to Judaism, this came with a negative imagery of Judaism and Jews. Before the year 1000, when most Jews lived under Islamic rule, this negative Christian attitude had minimal impact on Jews¹. However, as a larger number of Jews settled in the lands of Christendom, this attitude had an ever bigger impact. Jews were seen as the people who once were cherished by God, but who had lost their spiritual position and mission. Especially recalling the crucifixion² generated strong anti-Jewish feelings.

On another topic besides religious arguments and images, by the early fourth century, the Christian community had grown considerably, and was ready to organize itself and protect its interests. At the Council of Elvira, a number of decrees were issued to curtail the influence of the Jews. They were not to cohabit with Christians, nor to bless Christian fields. Eventually, any possible situation in which Jews could exercise power over Christians was removed, such as slave-owning, public office, and marriage.

¹ Even though in Islam too, there is a negative imagery of Judaism as being corrupted. Yet somehow, before the year 1000, the effect on Jews of this imagery had often been less under Muslim rule than it would be under Christendom.

² Islam doesn't believe that Jesus was crucified, so this argument did not play a role in Islam. However, in anti-Jewish texts and polemics you do find the imagery that Jews have killed prophets, and tried to kill Muhammad.

It was perceived that the Jews could incur special dangers upon the Christian faith, the reason being that the Christian faith had its roots in the Jewish scriptures. Due to this, it was feared that Christians could be open to the Jewish arguments for rejecting the Christian message. If Christians were exposed to Jewish thought, they might be influenced and lured away from the true (Christian) faith. Therefore the Christian community had to be protected against this Jewish threat.

A radical change took place when the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (who ruled from 324 to 337) changed from persecuting the Christians to converting to Christianity, thereby paving the way for Christian power over the entire empire. When the Roman Empire turned into a vast state ruled in the name of Christianity, one of the decisions that had to be made was how to deal with the Jewish minority. Judaism remained a tolerated religion (as it had been before Constantine), but certain restrictions were put in place to protect the Christian community from Jewish influence. Jews were not allowed to accept converts, and they were not allowed to circumcise their slaves³. On the other hand, converts from Judaism to Christianity were enjoyed legal protection. The situation created within the context of the now Christian Roman Empire in which the Jewish rights were both recognized and restricted, became a blueprint for the future of Jewish life in western Christendom.

Very important in defining a way forward was the influential bishop of Hippo, Augustine. He formulated a Christian theology and a political theory based on a combination of Greco-Roman, Israelite and Christian principles. Augustine is much clearer than Paul was in his approach to Judaism, but he did incorporate Paul's ambiguous statements. Augustine understood Constantine's need to legitimize a Jewish presence within the Christian world, and he provided him with a theological foundation.

Augustine was aware of the greatness of early Jewish history. Because the Jews had recognizing the one true God, their history was blessed, especially as they positively stood out against Greek and Roman paganism. On the other hand, the Jews had misunderstood God's plans, which led them to reject Jesus as the Messiah and to insist on his execution. Both these positive and negative aspects are part of Augustine's teachings.

Augustine's theology provided the Roman Empire with a way to allowing Jewish presence within a Christian society. According to his theology God had punished the Jews, not by killing them but by expelling them from their homeland and scattering them. God did this for a specific purpose. Therefore Jews should not be killed, but allowed to live as a minority among Christians.

According to Augustine, God wanted the Jewish people to be preserved as a living proof of the truth of Christianity. This would work in two ways. Firstly, as all the predictions of Jesus had come from Jewish prophets, the Jews were the ones who could vouch for the divine origin of their prophecies. However the Jews themselves did not accurately understand the meaning of these prophecies.

³ As Jewish law requires

Secondly, the Jews showed the world what it means to be rejected by God. As a result of their sinful refusal to accept Jesus, God had punished them with their loss of independence, the destruction of their holy city, and with being exile from their promised land. Thus the Jews were a living illustration of the principles of sin and divine punishment.

Finally, Augustine makes the point that God is a God of mercy. Even though God has become furious with the Jews for their failures and has taken away their conventional role in history and given them over to harsh punishment, nonetheless, He still offers love and hope even for those He has severely punished. Therefore, the Jews have to be preserved within Christian society because eventually they will repent and embrace the Christian truth. Once again we see Paul's ambivalence continued in Augustine's teaching: There is an attitude of compassion in the expectation that God will once again embrace the Jewish people, but this comes at the price of them giving up their Jewish heritage.

Missionizing among the Jews thus was presented by Augustine as an act of love and a human extension of God's mercy towards the Jewish people. However, missionizing also had another motivation. By not being responsive to Christianity's mission, the Jews were perceived as an undermining threat. Successful missionizing would be the most effective way to remove this threat.

In short, Christianity's legacy in relation to Judaism was extremely complex and two-sided. It was both respectful of the Jewish past but also looked forward to a future in which Judaism would be surpassed. It did acknowledge Jewish rights within Christian society and at the same time set up limitations to these rights. Finally, it committed itself to preach among the Jews in an effort to dissuade them from their religious identity.

THE JEWISH LEGACY

Before the year 1000, the Jewish people had already gone through many changes. After having been a religious-political entity, the Jews had suffered a number of disasters that could have ended their history. Out of earlier military defeat and exile they had developed new organizational structures and religious insights. By the time tensions between the Jews and the Romans escalated in first century Palestine, leading to a decisive defeat, the destruction of the Jewish capitol and of their spiritual center (the Temple) in Jerusalem, the Jews already had developed ways to continue politically and religiously.

The Jewish people had already experienced the existence of a permanent diaspora community outside of Israel since their defeat by the Babylonian Empire in 586 BCE. Most Jews were exiled to Mesopotamia. Quite soon however Jews were allowed to return to their homeland, but many stayed in Mesopotamia permanently. The Jewish community in Mesopotamia eventually became the second important Jewish community, after the one in Palestine. After the defeat by the Romans, power shifted away from the Palestinian community to the Mesopotamian diaspora. By the end of the third century, the diaspora community had become more important than the community in Israel, in size,

creativity, and influence. It was the Mesopotamian Talmud (called the “Babylonian Talmud “), not the Palestinian, that eventually ended up dominating Jewish religious life.

By the year 1000, Jews were used to living under the rule of others. Even in the center of Jewish life in Palestine, the Jews were used to agreeing to the political will of ruling foreigners. During the period of the Second Commonwealth the Jews of Palestine enjoyed political independence under their own Hasmonean royalty for less than a century. During the rest of the period, the Jews lived under the control of Persians, Greeks, and Romans.

Being under control of another nation had taught the Jews to manage their affairs as a minority. The Mishnah and Babylonian Talmud both show that the communities had developed ways to organized themselves. By the year 1000, when Jews increasingly lived in Western Christian lands, they already had learned how to live a comfortable life as a minority community and to deal with the loss of independence.

Very little is known of Jewish existence and religious life in pre-1000 western Christendom. As we learn about the growing Jewish communities in this area, it becomes clear that they had deeply rooted literary traditions and long-established ways to organize themselves. Jewish religious life was rooted in the notion of divine revelation as recorded in Hebrew Scripture. The definite text of Scripture had been established and served for them as the source for behavioral guidelines and for understanding Jewish concepts of responsibility.

Although the biblical text itself does not change, the ways in which the text is read and understood can vary. By 1000 CE, traditional interpretations existed side by side with innovative ideas and philosophies which had been developed within the Muslim environment. These newer modes of interpretation were to become a controversial issue within the Medieval Jewish communities. Linguistic insights also were to play an important role. The question if a holy text was correctly or wrongly understood became an essential theme within Christian missionary activity among the Jews as well as for Jewish polemical literature in defense against these proselytizing efforts.

In the traditional Jewish faith, Scripture (called the Written Torah) is supplemented with an extra-scriptural tradition called the Oral Torah, both traced back to the event at Mount Sinai and thus regarded as divine revelation. This Oral Law was enriched through ongoing debates by Jewish scholars and further expanded by Jewish religious institutions. Over time, the Oral Law was written down, first in the Mishnah in late-second and early-third century Palestine. Since the Mishnah was quite vague in its legal instruction, it was taken on as an explication project by Jewish scholars in both Palestine and Babylonia, resulting in the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmuds. However, eventually the Babylonian Talmud became the dominate guide to Jewish academic life and behavioral norms.

Jewish life revolved around the synagogue and the home. When and where synagogues originated is unclear, but by the year 1000 it was a well-established institution. It was the place where communal rituals took place such as daily, weekly and annual prayers and celebrations. The leadership of the synagogue was in the hands of those who mastered the Torah and the Rabbinical writings, who

could guide the community in their practical implications, and who would encourage the community members to fulfill their obligations. The synagogue was a center for Jewish education and moral preaching. Family rituals, on the other hand, revolved around the home. Much of Jewish teaching and practice took place within the family. Besides the synagogue, the home is where everyday life was inspired with deep religious meaning. In short, when more and more Jews settled in western Christendom, they came equipped with the structures that would help them guide and enrich their lives and resist the pressures of the Christians majority.

Jews living under Christian rule around the year 1000 knew how to function as a subservient minority, and could justify the role they played in this subservient position. Any experience they had built up under Christian rule before the year 1000, of which we know very little, was supplemented with the much richer experience from living under Islam. Additionally, the Jews entering western Christendom from Islamic lands brought along what they had absorbed from the starting cultural and spiritual awakening that was later passed on to European civilization. These growing numbers of Jews in western Christendom would be faced with many challenges in centuries to come.