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**THE JEWS OF MEDIEVAL WESTERN CHRISTENDOM**

**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 societal participation and to an elevated lifestyle.

The conditions for Jews under Christian rule were like those under Muslim rule. However, there were also significant differences. The Muslims 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 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.