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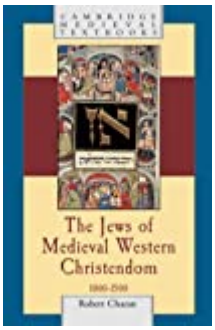

Robert Chazan. *The Jews of Medieval Western Christendom, 1000-1500.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xvi + 342 pp. $29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-61664-5.

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Confronting the Complexities of the Jewish Middle Ages in Western Europe

Robert Chazan's new book *The Jews of Medieval Western Christendom, 1000-1500* is one of the latest in a long line of distinguished publications that forms the Cambridge Medieval Textbooks series. This is the first book in the series that deals with Jewish history–a point that Chazan himself takes as a sign of the growing importance of and accomplishments within the field of Jewish history–and it is a fitting complement to works authored by such scholars as Horst Fuhrmann, Richard Kieckhefer, Anthony Black, and Gerd Tellenbach. Chazan's work is itself scholarly but approachable, clearly and engagingly written and well organized. The book provides Chazan an opportunity to synthesize some of his most important scholarly contributions and to summarize some of the more recent developments in the historiography of medieval Jewry. At the same time, the text reveals a facility in working with texts and ideas that Chazan has amassed over the course of four decades of teaching.

Chazan has set boundaries on this study that are both geographical and chronological. While he sticks to these rather consistently, he does allow a few side trips beyond both self-imposed limitations. Chazan argues that Jewry under western Christendom was diverse and changed over time, but that it represented a coherent and highly significant demographic. He believes that the period between 1000 and 1500 encapsulates significant changes, leading not coincidentally to an eventual ascendancy of western European Jewry in modern history. Chazan utilizes a helpful and imaginative approach of a traveler in 1000 and 1500, and he compares what they were likely to have seen of Jewish communities. By contrast, Chazan claims that between 1250 and 1500 Jewries within the Muslim world remained in place, but that "they were well on their way to losing their position of demographic and creative eminence" (p. 5). While that assertion may have some basis by the seventeenth century, it seems hard to justify for the sixteenth century and, indeed, one gets the sense that for much of the book Chazan has had to inflate the importance of western Jewry in order to justify the geographical and chronological boundaries. Even assuming an eventual European and Ashkenazic dominance, Chazan would have to wait some centuries for the explosion of Polish Jewry or the insertion of Jews into the Americas (both beyond the general scope of this book). While some scholars may find the beginning date chosen

by Chazan problematic, to this reviewer that date seems somewhat more defensible than the end date selected. Still, Chazan seems justified in his contention that the Jewish engagement with Christianity was of great significance for Jewish history and that the period he treats was "a critical element in the saga of the Jewish people" (p. 7).

While Chazan treats the whole of western Europe in this period, he provides a delicate and reflective balance between broad generalizations and more specific historical developments. He demonstrates a good deal of sophistication in pointing out the importance of context and the nature of particular situations, while always trying to present a manageable and coherent framework for his readers. Chazan also presents very stimulating reflections on the nature and scope of available sources for the study of medieval Jewish history, simultaneously demonstrating his argument for the importance of understanding Jewish history in part within the Christian context in which it was steeped. Chazan rejects out of hand the traditionally lachrymose approach to medieval Jewish history, though the balance of his presentation does, in some significant ways, actually reinforce that sense.

Chazan begins the book in earnest, in chapter 1, with a look at the "prior legacies" or context in the early Islamic and early Christian periods. Equally important, Chazan also addresses previous internal Jewish developments. Many themes raised in this chapter resonate with later concerns and the chapter as a whole serves a useful purpose by orienting the reader and anticipating later themes. Chapter 2 traces the rise of the Roman Catholic Church in the high Middle Ages and depicts clearly the important theological, ecclesiastical, political, and cultural developments within the Church and their impact on relations with and perceptions of the Jews and Judaism. In this context, Chazan introduces very illustrative and not frequently utilized sources. He cites Alexander of Hales, for example, who is presented both as a representative of the Augustinian approach to the Jews, while also challenging the Augustinian notion of toleration in the midst of contemporary twelfth- and thirteenth-century concerns.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 take a more regional look at the Jewries that developed in southern Europe (southern France, Christian Spain, Italy, and Sicily), northern France and England, and northern Europe (Germany and Poland). In each case, Chazan presents somewhat parallel descriptions of primary settlement patterns and changes, key interactions with the Christian world, and, to a somewhat lesser degree, internal intellectual and communal developments. In each case, the consistent and informative use of primary source documents makes the details being presented anchored and intelligible. Given the focus of the volume, it is not surprising that Poland receives comparatively less attention than the other Jewish centers of the period. In the last two chapters (6 and 7), Chazan assess the material and spiritual challenges, successes and failures facing medieval Jews in broader, more holistic strokes. Under the heading of material conditions, Chazan explores obstacles to and incentives for Jewish settlement in the Latin West, especially in terms of economic developments and Jewish relationships with governing authorities. He also outlines the more traditional interpretations of deterioration of Jewish conditions that many have seen by the beginning of the sixteenth century. Under spiritual conditions, Chazan assesses the nature and effect of Jewish encounters with Christianity and Christian culture, with special emphasis on polemics, missionizing, and conversion. But Chazan also takes the opportunity here to consider the important intellectual developments within Jewry itself during the Middle Ages. He reviews a wide range of literature, including approaches to exegesis and mysticism, while reflecting on Jewish creativity within a broader, often non-Jewish context.

While the volume does include important discussions about internal Jewish social, cultural, and religious developments, it spends a great deal more time on Jewish and Christian encounters, and primarily within the context of anti-Judaism. This observation is perhaps not terribly surprising given the focus and impact of Chazan's earlier scholarship. Still, it does present a very particular image of Jewish life in the West during the Middle Ages. Despite the contention that this volume synthesizes some of the most recent and important historical literature on aspects of medieval Jewry, not only is the bibliography relatively short and somewhat dated, but there are also some curious lacunae. For example, early on Chazan references two recent one-volume histories of the subject, citing Kenneth Stow's *Alienated Minority* (1998) and Leonard B. Glick's *Abraham's Heirs* (1999), yet he neglects to mention Mark Cohen's provocative *Under Crescent and Cross* (1995).

In the end, this book is highly readable and well conceived. While it covers a good deal of round that can be found in other volumes, it does so with a keen sense of system and cohesion and it adds impressive nuance through the use of materials that only a seasoned scholar and master teacher could pull together. The project must be judged to have been well worth the author's efforts and will repay incorporation into the survey curriculum.

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