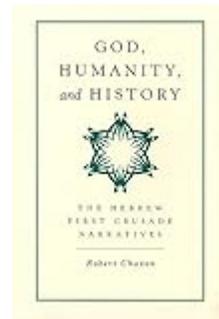


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Robert Chazan. *God, Humanity, and History: The Hebrew First Crusade Narratives.* Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2000. ix + 215 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-22127-7.



Reviewed by Carrie Hannon (Department of History, Florida Atlantic University)

Published on H-Judaic (August, 2001)

The First Crusade of 1096 instigated anti-Jewish sentiment among crusaders traversing to the Holy Land, one result of which was that several Jewish communities in the Rhineland suffered from violent assaults. Unfortunately, much of the Jewish documentation written during the First Crusade has not survived. In the late nineteenth-century, however, the discovery of three manuscripts—*The Mainz Anonymous*, *The Solomon bar Simson Chronicle*, and *The Eliezer bar Nathan*—stimulated new scholarship on the history of the Rhineland Jewry. These Hebrew First Crusade narratives poignantly and graphically detail the nascent crusading fervor and its destructive result on the Ashkenazi Jews.

Inspired by a graduate seminar with Gerson Cohen in the 1970s, Robert Chazan, currently Scheuer Professor of Hebrew and Judaic studies at New York University, became fascinated with the Hebrew First Crusade Narratives and has published numerous works concerning medieval Ashkenazi Jews. While much of his new book, *God, Humanity, and History*, recapitulates themes and arguments from earlier research, Chazan both clarifies some ambiguities that arose from his earlier book, *In the Year 1096: The First Crusade and the Jews* (1996), and at the same time offers a fresh thesis concerning the objectives of the narrators. Chazan employs a new method to discern the message of the authors' narrative.

For each narrative, he explores two primary objectives: the time-bound message, which provides the reader with the necessary facts of a particular event or tragedy, and the timeless meaning, which memorializes Jewish martyrs and places them with in the larger context of Jewish history. With clarity and skill, Chazan convincingly argues that the crusading atmosphere influenced the Hebrew narrators, which led to a novel form of historical writing. Although ephemeral, this innovative literary genre—which will simply be referred to as the Hebrew First Crusade narratives—incorporated a unique perspective on God, humanity, and history.

In the first part of the book, Chazan reexamines the dating, the reliability, and the authorship of these three Hebrew chronicles. He maintains that the *Mainz Anonymous* and the Trier unit of the *Solomon bar Simson* were produced subsequent to the First Crusade. Furthermore, he contends that the editor of the *Solomon bar Simson*, who also probably composed the Cologne unit in 1140, assembled the chronicle between 1140 to mid-1140s. Lastly, Chazan argues that the composition of the *Eliezer bar Nathan Chronicle* most likely occurred after the Second Crusade, and Eliezer bar Nathan, the infamous twelfth-century halakhist, must be the author of the narrative. Determining the precise author of the last narrative facilitates Chazan's argument for the dating of

the three narratives.

Another problem he addresses is whether these narratives provide historical facts and, if so, are they reliable? Ivan G. Marcus argues that these narratives are the work of literary imagination, and for the most part, these authors received their information from secondary sources; therefore, to search for historical “facts” within the narratives is futile.[1] Unconvinced by this argument, Chazan sets out to prove that these narratives do in fact provide a certain degree of historical accuracy on the events of the First Crusade. Following a careful examination of the three texts, Chazan concludes these narratives are the product of four or five different authors. He denies that the texts were “three related compositions” (p. 112). Instead, each narrator incorporated his own views on the 1096 tragedies.

In the latter part of the book, Chazan concentrates on the time-bound/ timeless objectives, historicity, and innovativeness of the texts. The *Mainz Anonymous* and the Trier unit of the *Solomon bar Simson* were committed to time-bound objectives; their goal was to provide readers with as much pertinent information on the tragedies that had ensued so future Jewish leaders could take preventive measures. The narrator described the events that led up to crusading and explained how Jewish leaders responded to this new threat. The author of the *Mainz Anonymous* depicted crusading as a novel development, but even more he emphasized that it could re-emerge. Thus, the central theme in the *Mainz*’s time-bound message was “that the crusade could arouse anti-Jewish hostility” (p. 115). Essentially, the time-bound objective provided guidance for the future, apologized for radical Jewish conduct, and commemorated the Jewish martyrs.

The narrators wanted to justify the extreme Jewish reactions to the violence of 1096, which included killing one’s family members, committing suicide, murdering Christians, and converting to Christianity. For the Jews who proselytized to the Christian faith, these narrators offered an apology for their behavior. By detailing the desperate conditions that the Jews faced, the authors depicted these converts as martyrs who deserved to be highlighted with the other 1096 heroes. Forcibly converted, these Jews remained disingenuous towards their new religion. The editor of the *Solomon bar Simson*, for instance, noted that recent converts did not frequent church or participate in Christian festivities; they only did so when they feared reprisals from local Christians. Excused for this treacherous act, the narrators elevated the Jewish converts to martyrdom.

The final aspect of the time-bound message was to commemorate those radical Jewish martyrs and place them on the larger plane of Jewish history. One story in the *Solomon bar Simson* detailed Meshullam ben Isaac’s drastic reaction to the onslaught. Instead of dying at the hands of the crusaders, Meshullam sacrificed his son, murdered his wife, and finally committed suicide. Imbued with biblical references to Abraham, the narrator compared Meshullam’s extreme behavior with the patriarch – even though Abraham did not sacrifice his son. Meshullam’s actions, the author explained, surpassed his predecessor’s because he had performed the ultimate sacrifice without God’s intervention. Chazan admits that these accounts are to some extent exaggerated; however, after briefly comparing the Hebrew narratives with contemporary Christian sources, he found that the Christian chroniclers recorded similar Jewish behaviors. Thus, the Hebrew narratives, Chazan argues, do retain a degree of historical accuracy.

Not only did the narrators document the varied Jewish responses to the tumultuous events of 1096, but they also noted the range of Christian behavior. From the archbishop to the burgher, the narrators reported and analyzed Christian actions. Some narrators mentioned martyrdom as an incentive for German crusaders. The *Mainz Anonymous* also remarked to the concept of indulgence, which cleared the crusader of any sins incurred while on the Crusade, an idea, according to Chazan, that was “foreign to Jewish tradition” (p. 131). For both the *Mainz Anonymous* and the *Solomon bar Simson*, the 1096 martyrs occupy most of the narrative; it is through their individual stories that the tragedies are reenacted. The narratives, however, extended beyond didactic purposes, they also tackled the meaning of tragedy.

The narrators’ timeless objective, directed to both God and humanity, sought to explain the reason for the 1096 tragedies. Since Christians had developed their own theory for the violence perpetrated against the Jews—supposedly, God had abandoned Jews for their sinfulness—the narrator endeavored to provide a more meaningful explanation that would counter the Christian argument. Chazan argues that the timeless message conveyed in these narratives reveals a unique perspective on God, humanity, and history. Contemporary Christians viewed Jewish suffering as the result of retribution for Jewish malice because they had “reject[ed] the promised Messiah... [which] set the cycle of persecution and suffering into motion” (p. 143). Christians understood that success reflected divine approval whereas affliction revealed divine denunciation. The author of the *Mainz*

Anonymous suggested a new explanation for the violent assaults of 1096. It had nothing to do with the sin of deicide, the narrator explicated, rather the martyrs of 1096 needed to satisfy divine decree in order to reinforce the covenant with God.

The Cologne unit of the *Solomon bar Simson* took a slightly different approach to the 1096 tragedy. The 1096 martyrs were chosen to endure the punishment for the historical sin of the golden calf. A sin that God claimed must one day be accounted for, and so, picked for their courage and rectitude, the 1096 generation suffered the punishment for the ancient sin. Fundamentally, the timeless message of the Cologne unit strove to refute Christian notions of Jewish wickedness. But the timeless message went further than explaining the meaning of the tragedy, the narrators also petitioned God to exact vengeance on Christian sins. Since the martyrs remained loyal to God and satisfied their part in the covenant, then God would soon recompense Jews by punishing Christians for their egregious errors.

After examining classical Jewish sources, Chazan concludes that the Hebrew First Crusade narratives broke—though not considerably—with the traditional style of writing. Instead of being highly imaginative and folkloristic like their classical predecessors, the narrators opted to use a more natural style which emphasized the heroic stature of the martyrs. This innovative technique fostered a different understanding on “the interaction of God and humanity in the setting of the course of history” (p. 190). In these Hebrew narratives, God is not an active participant in the events of 1096. Though God initiated the course of history, the martyrs of 1096 seem to “emerge as the ultimate shapers of history” (p. 173). Influenced by the contemporary environment, Chazan contends, these authors incorporated similar “militant and audacious views” of their Christian neighbors (p. 174).

To prove that the Hebrew narrators were influenced by the crusading milieu, Chazan analyses a Latin First-Crusade chronicle, the *Gesta Francorum*, and finds significant similarities with the Hebrew narratives. While the *Gesta Francorum* obviously supported the Christian cause, Chazan argues the Hebrew narratives and the medieval text “share common assumptions about God, humanity, and the workings of history” (p. 192). Familiar themes, for example, found in the texts include the narrators holding ambivalent attitudes towards enemies, God playing a passive role in the Crusade, human actions dominating the historical scene, apotheosizing the martyrs’ behavior, and believing in a divine reward.

By dissecting the time-bound and timeless objectives of the Hebrew First Crusade narratives, Chazan identifies a new style of historical writing that differed from traditional Jewish classical literature. This innovative method reflected a new understanding about the interaction between God and humanity which directly affected the course of history. This unique perspective on God, humanity and history was not a medieval Jewish phenomenon unto itself; on the contrary, the intense spiritual and militant atmosphere aroused by crusading influenced both Jewish and Christian notions on the relationship between the divine and humanity. The heroes of the First Crusade—the Jewish martyrs of 1096—dominated the Hebrew narratives. It was through their stories and speeches that the time-bound and timeless objectives were passed on to future generations. The new style of historical narrative, however, did not endure and soon writers returned to the traditional form of literature.

Robert Chazan exposes a new dimension in the continuing research of the Hebrew narratives. Perhaps the most laudable aspect of this work is how Chazan adeptly weaves through the complexities of the narratives, and demonstrates, once again, the significance of these texts. Chazan provides us with a new and important look at the objectives of the narrators and how they comprehended the meaning of tragedy. He includes a useful historiography on the Hebrew First Crusade narratives in Chapter One, and also provides an appendix summarizing modern arguments on the dating of these chronicles. While Chazan has summarized much of these narratives, it would have been better if he had also provided an appendix containing either extensive excerpts or even the narratives in their entirety so that readers could note particular similarities.

The reviewer’s main contention lies with Chazan’s disproportionate treatment of the *Eliezer bar Nathan*. While he successfully analyses the authorship and dating of the *Eliezer bar Nathan* in the first half of the book, the text seems to disappear from the latter part of the study. Of the three chronicles, Chazan argues that the *Mainz Anonymous* amalgamated the time-bound objectives with the timeless message much more effectively than the other two narratives. Thus, the *Mainz Anonymous* is the center of his study. The *Solomon bar Simson*, however, also receives extensive treatment because the author/s of the narrative were mainly interested in conveying a timeless message to their readers and one unit in the chronicle did include time-bound information. The *Solomon bar Simson* and the *Eliezer bar Nathan* contained many similarities which, Chazan argues, probably

means that the halakhist had some contact/knowledge of the *Solomon bar Simson*. He contends that the *Eliezer bar Nathan*'s time-bound objectives were distorted, and that narrator was more concerned with the timeless meaning of the 1096 Crusade; therefore, in the second half of the book (to avoid repetition with the *Solomon bar Simson*?) Chazan only periodically mentions the *Eliezer bar Nathan*. In Chazan's defense, he admits that he relies on certain sections of the *Mainz Anonymous* and the *Solomon bar Simson* because they provide better examples of both the time-bound and timeless objectives. As a result, this lacuna in the latter part of the study leaves

the reader with little information on either the time-bound or the timeless messages contained in the *Eliezer bar Nathan*.

Nevertheless, this is an excellent, cogent study on the Hebrew First Crusade Narratives and will surely intrigue the scholar well versed in this literature and provoke a lively discussion in a graduate seminar.

Note

[1]. See Ivan Marcus, "From Politics to Martyrdom: Shifting Paradigms in the Hebrew Narratives of the 1096 Crusader Riots," *Prooftexts* 2 (1982):42.

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Citation: Carrie Hannon. Review of Chazan, Robert, *God, Humanity, and History: The Hebrew First Crusade Narratives*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2001.

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