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Living together, Living Apart: Rethinking Jewish-Christian Relations in the Middle Ages

REVIEW

Jonathan Elukin

*Living Together, Living Apart:**Rethinking Jewish-Christian Relations in the Middle Ages*

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Jonathan Elukin, associate professor of history at Trinity College, presents here a conscious challenge to much of the Christian and some of the Jewish historiography on the relations between the Jewish minority and the Christian majority in the Middle Ages. He rightly labels as a vast generalization the tendency to view this relationship as everywhere and always as bad as it was actually only in some places and at some times. This makes scholars unable to explain either Jewish survival in the period or the continuing choice of numerous Jewish communities to stay within Christendom even when expelled from a particular country or region within it. The view of many that, following the First Crusade, Christian Europe became nothing other than an unremitting "persecuting society" against Jews and Judaism fails, he argues, to account for the continuing vitality and continual return of Jews to areas that had expelled them, or worse.

Chapter One on the early Middle Ages sets the scene of Jews and Christians interacting relatively peacefully within the context of a legal structure that allowed the Jews (but no other non-Christians) freedom of worship. Elukin tracks the situation of Jews and their interactions with Christians in Minorca, Merovingian Gaul, Italy and Visigothic Spain. He notes the role of St. Augustine in establishing the theological basis for Jewish freedom of worship in Christian societies and the role of Pope St. Gregory the Great in enacting that vision into canon law, an approach which made the popes through the ages up to the Counter-Reformation protectors of the Jews. He notes the normality of Jewish-Christian interaction not only commercially and socially, but also religiously, since the two communities shared "a common liturgical culture based on Scripture" which made them aware even of each other's hymns, so that they could sing them together.⁽¹⁵⁾ Elukin also duly notes, indeed stresses, the differences between the four societies' treatment of Jews, emphasizing again the inappropriateness of generalized statements about Christian abuse of Jews or suppression of Judaism. Efforts to entice or force Jews to convert, he shows, came and went with individual bishops and local nobility, and even at different times in these bishops' lives.

Chapter Two surveys the Carolingian period, marked by an attempt to establish a uniform Christian culture on the disparate areas of the empire. "Representations of Jews in Christian polemics," he concludes, "were relatively mild."⁽⁴⁴⁾ Jews were seen as Pharisees, not Israelites, so offered no challenge to the Carolingian claim to be in continuity with the ancient kings of Israel. Again, as in the early Middle Ages, Jews were able, with enterprise and flexibility, to weather the storms of occasional violence and create and maintain thriving communities in Christian Europe.

Chapter Three discusses the “High Middle Ages,” which for Elukin is the period from the middle of the eleventh to the middle of the thirteenth centuries. This period, he argues, saw a great rise in the population of Europe, victories over Muslims, movements to reform monasteries and Church life, and the development of new and varied “Christian identities,” which, in turn gave more room for the persistence of Jewish identities. Jewish and Catholic biblical scholars conversed over the sacred texts. Disputations showed that Jews could understand Christian discourse well enough to debate it. This was the period of what Elukin, following other scholars, calls “the discovery of the individual” or “the discovery of the self,” in which spiritual introspection came to the fore.(69) Again, the dynamic of individual spirituality allowed room for Jewish spiritual differences. Chapter Four continues with a discussion of the “social integration” of Jews in particular societies, especially Spain, Germany, France and Italy in the same period.

Chapter 5 analyzes the increasingly violent language against and violent attacks on Jews, including the great expulsions up to the end of fifteenth century. Elukin does not try to bowdlerize this period. He notes in passing, and I wish he had pursued the matter, that a walled area of one town in Germany was created for the Jews in order to protect them! I think this may be true, initially, in other parts of Europe as well. It is worthy of a separate, in depth study, given the deep symbolic nature of the European ghettos. With regard to verbal violence, Elukin notes that similar charges of murdering children, cannibalism, desecrating the host, being agents of the devil and depicting Jews as feral animals were commonly made in the period of many other groups than Jews: Cathars, Waldensians, Mongols, Muslims etc. So Elukin raises the question whether, in a period when anti-clericalism was quite popular, the general lay populace of Europe would have taken such high clerical rhetoric literally. Finally, Elukin again notes the consistency of the *sicut judeis* of papal protection (within limits) of the Jews in this volatile period as “quite remarkable.”(94)

Chapter 6, on “Expulsion and Continuity,” may be the most controversial of the book. Here Elukin argues that the expulsions were not inevitable outcomes of the ancient Christian teaching of contempt against Jews and Judaism, but discrete, individual acts of various monarchs, sometimes motivated by religious zeal, but most often motivated by the economics of ridding the monarchs and the nobility of debts to Jews. After a country by country analysis covering England, France (the most ambivalent and convoluted of all), Spain, Germany and Italy (where the few expulsions lasted at most a decade), he notes that only the expulsion from Spain was “final.” For the rest of Western Europe, Jews returned. though perhaps not in the same numbers, since many had moved to the more open and tolerant societies of equally Christian Eastern Europe. There, they were welcomed as benefits to the local economy and society. Hence, he concludes, the *convivencia* (“living together”) that Jewish memory ascribes solely to Spain before 1492, continued, in different ways and in different places, in much of the rest of Europe.

This being said, the real radical change in European attitudes toward Jews came, not, I think, as Elukin argues, with the Counter-Reformation, since he himself demonstrates Jewish abilities to adapt even to its harsher measures, but rather with the invention of a *novum* in European history: modern *racial* anti-Semitism. Throughout Christian history, Jews could convert from their “curse” by accepting Jesus and baptism and by and large be accepted into Christian society. The racial theorists of the eighteenth century, however, denied this “cure,” leaving only genocide as a “solution” to what they, in another discontinuity with European history, felt to be “the Jewish problem.”

This aside, Elukin’s approach makes great sense, and it is good to see his argument carried out in some detail. As I hinted above, however, it is not as novel as the author suggests. Similar

points have been made by a number of Jewish scholars before him, such as Yosef Yerushalmi, Marc Saperstein, Michael Signer, David Berger and others, none of whom are even listed in his bibliography. Similarly missing are Catholic scholars Edward Synan and Edward Flannery. Those writing today, I believe, have a duty to acknowledge the contributions of those who came before us.