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David B. Ruderman

University of Pennsylvania, RUDERMAN@SAS.UPENN.EDU

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## Review of Jonathan I. Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism 1550-1750*

### **Abstract**

The study of Jewish culture and society in early modern Europe has advanced notably in recent years, but until now no one has attempted to provide a general synthesis of the period or a coherent scholarly interpretation of its historical meaning. As Jonathan Israel rightly contends, earlier historians have usually treated the era as merely an extension of the Jewish middle ages. In contrast, many have attempted to define the specific meaning of the modern period in Jewish history,<sup>1</sup> and recently initial assessments of the Renaissance<sup>2</sup> and baroque<sup>3</sup> in the context of the Jewish experience have also been proposed.

### **Disciplines**

Cultural History | History | History of Religion | Jewish Studies | Social History

ISRAEL'S EUROPEAN JEWRY IN THE AGE OF MERCANTILISM\*

THE STUDY OF Jewish culture and society in early modern Europe has advanced notably in recent years, but until now no one has attempted to provide a general synthesis of the period or a coherent scholarly interpretation of its historical meaning. As Jonathan Israel rightly contends, earlier historians have usually treated the era as merely an extension of the Jewish middle ages. In contrast, many have attempted to define the specific meaning of the modern period in Jewish history,<sup>1</sup> and recently initial assessments of the Renaissance<sup>2</sup> and baroque<sup>3</sup> in the context of the Jewish experience have also been proposed.

Does the term “early modern” demarcate a unique epoch for Jewish history? Did Jews of the late sixteenth to the eighteenth century, living in such diverse communities as Cracow, Amsterdam, Venice, Constantinople, and Safed, share a common historical experience distinct from that of earlier or later Jewish societies? And if such a unified experience did exist, what is its import in understanding the evolution of both European and Jewish history?

Jonathan Israel offers some answers to these questions in his new book by arguing in favor of the “drawing of a firm dividing line between the medieval and early modern epochs in the historical experience and consciousness of western Jewry” (p. 1). He proposes to define the period between 1570 and 1713 as signifying the reintegration of Jews into western Europe and the positive transformation of their social and economic status. The era constituted a dramatic reversal of trends which had culminated in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries with the virtual removal of the majority of Jews from the major centers of western Europe. As a result of their re-entry in this later period, they began to exert “a most profound and pervasive impact” on the west in both the cultural and economic spheres (p. 1). And unlike their re-emergence into western Europe in the late eighteenth century “as uprooted individuals, stripped of their former political and social autonomy and culture,” this “first great emancipation” (p. 3) was achieved “whilst still retaining a large measure of social and cultural cohesion,

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\* Israel, Jonathan I. *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism 1550–1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). Pp. vii + 293.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, M. Meyer, “Where does the Modern Period of Jewish History Begin?,” *Judaism* 25 (1975): 329–38.

<sup>2</sup> For a most recent summary and evaluation, see D. Ruderman, “The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought,” *Renaissance Humanism: Foundation and Forms*, ed. A. Rabil Jr. (Philadelphia, 1987) I: 382–433.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, G. Sermoneta, “Aspetti del pensiero moderno nell'Ebraismo italiano tra Rinascimento e eta barocca,” *Italia Judaica II: Gli Ebrei in Italia tra Rinascimento ed Eta Barocca* (Rome, 1986), pp. 17–35.

that is to say, whilst still displaying a recognizably national character," deriving "from a still largely traditional framework of Jewish activity and thought" (p. 1).

The author charts these economic and political advances through the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) and argues that the war engendered wider Jewish involvement in European statecraft and finance and in the large scale provision of military supplies. Following the war, between 1650 and 1713, the Jews reached "the high point" of their impact on early modern Europe through the international activity of the "Court Jews" in central Europe, the upsurge in Marrano and Sephardic immigration into western Europe, and the expansion and political cohesion of Jewish life in Poland and Lithuania. Only after 1713 was this development arrested with the general political, economic, and demographic decline of western Jewry through the mid-eighteenth century.

Israel accounts for this transformation by the political and spiritual upheaval which engulfed European society at the end of the sixteenth century, and by the outcome of the prolonged and painful religious wars between Catholics and Protestants, which seemingly had ended in a virtual stalemate. With the rise of new secular political philosophies, the flowering of *raison d'état* and mercantilism, which Israel defines as "the deliberate pursuit of the economic interest of the state, irrespective of the claims of existing law, privilege, and tradition, as well as of religion" (p. 2), the re-integration of the Jews into the mainstream of European society became possible. In other words, this positive turn of Jewish fortunes was directly attributable to "a wider release from the doctrinal and legal shackles of the past" (p. 2), the decline of the pervasive influence of organized religion, and the secularization of European culture. Europe in turn benefited greatly from what Israel calls its new "political and economic Philosemitism." The Jews were uniquely situated "to control precious metal circulation in central and eastern Europe, to influence the flow of both gold and silver in and out of Holland . . . and to transfer capital from one part of Europe to another" (p. 256). Besides this economic function the Jews also exerted a profound cultural influence in art, literature, and scholarship on the baroque culture of seventeenth century Europe.

Before turning to a closer consideration of the thesis of this well written and well conceived book, some preliminary remarks about the nature of Israel's bold scholarly enterprise are in order. As the author clearly states in his introduction, this is a work written for the general reader by a nonspecialist in Jewish history. Professor Israel teaches Dutch history at the University of London and claims also a general expertise in western European political and economic history. As a nonspecialist, he proposes to say nothing new about "religious history" and also to rely heavily on secondary materials in describing economic and political events outside his specific area of competence. It goes without saying that the author is limited by his control of the sources. He is especially strong in his command of scholarly works in western languages, but is relatively less informed about recent works, some critically important, written in Hebrew. Furthermore, Israel never claims to be writing a history of Jewish culture and society in early modern Europe, and instead chooses to focus only "on general patterns of political and

economic interaction between Jewish and general society" (p. v). This latter emphasis is important in clarifying the book's "outer-directed" rather than "inner-directed" perspective. Accordingly, readers anticipating a full accounting of the evolution of Jewish culture and institutions in this era are expecting more than Israel himself purports to deliver.

Notwithstanding the author's own limited objectives and his own demurral in treating what he calls "religious history," his study does devote a considerable number of pages to the internal history of Jewish culture and society and to the impact of Judaism on European society; moreover, it attempts to relate the cultural picture which it depicts to the economic and political thesis of the book. To my mind, this attempt represents the most glaring weakness of the entire study and undermines to a considerable extent Israel's claims regarding the periodization of the early modern era in Jewish history.

Israel's chapters on cultural developments in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are unsuccessful, both because of the author's limited grasp of the subjects which he treats and because of certain confusing and misleading interpretations which he does offer. His treatment of Christian Hebraism is a case in point. Israel notes a new flowering of interest in postbiblical Jewish civilization which emerged in Italy, Germany, and France as early as the late fifteenth century, but he does not sufficiently explain it. Nor does it easily fit into his scheme of decline in the first half of the sixteenth century, followed by reintegration and revitalization in the second half. Thus, after noting this new Christian involvement with Hebrew literature, he generally discounts it: "All these scholars acknowledge that the Jews had preserved important texts, but deemed the entire body of postbiblical non-cabbalistic Hebrew commentaries as generally obdurate, wicked, and worthless" (p. 14). Elsewhere he writes: "None of the great Christian Hebraists of the age [early sixteenth century] ever doubted that Jewish interpretations were fundamentally perverse and misconceived" (p. 36). Yet Christian Hebraists of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries receive considerably higher marks. Their search "through oriental texts was quite different from the blinkered preoccupations of Reformation Hebraists" (p. 54). Their "philosemitic scholarship" was linked to "philosemitic mercantilism" and "the philosophic spirit of the seventeenth century," all being "fruits of the distancing from Christian tradition" (p. 56). Why were the latter scholars superior to the former ones in Israel's estimation? It is because the investigations of the earlier group "did not weaken, but, on the contrary, reinforced western Europe's adherence to Christianity" (p. 36). Since it is Israel's oft-stated assumption that anything that weakens western Europe's adherence to Christianity is good for the Jews (on this see below), the first brand of Christian Hebraism is depicted as relatively negative; the second as more positive.

I would take issue with Israel's underestimation of early Christian Hebraism as exemplified by Pico, Reuchlin, Fagius, Postel, Münster, and others. Their excursions into postbiblical literature were more comprehensive and deeper than Israel claims. No doubt researchers like Scaliger, and even later Bartolucci or Wagenseil,

had developed more critical scholarly methods in studying ancient Hebrew texts. But were they more favorably disposed to Judaism, and more importantly, were they more inclined to accept the validity of Jews as a distinct community? I think they were not. Rather one might even sense a relative slackening of emotional intensity, a diminished vigor in the Christian study of Judaism by the seventeenth century. It is precisely because of their strong Christian commitment that the earlier scholars took Judaism so seriously. Jewish texts represented more than mere *curiosa* of academic scholarship; they functioned as a means of rejuvenating their own Christian identities. Whether this impression is or is not accurate, it is nevertheless clear that either generation's scholarship had almost negligible impact in transforming the economic or political status of Jews. In both eras Christian Hebraists, from Reuchlin to Buxtorf to Eisenmenger, familiarized themselves with Jewish texts but continued to detest Jews.

When one turns to Israel's characterization of Jewish culture itself, one discovers even more confusing formulations. In order to correlate Jewish cultural transformation with that in the economic sphere. Israel unhesitatingly concludes that medieval and Renaissance Italian Jewish life was essentially talmudic, while between 1550 and 1650 it was "more rounded, complete, and coherent" (p. 71). Furthermore, he detects that in this latter period Jewish nationhood emerges as something distinct from Jewish religion. He notes: "As late as the early sixteenth century, some Italian Jewish scholars . . . had adhered to traditional Judaism rather than inhabited a specifically Jewish cultural world. Intellectually, they had immersed themselves in the learning of their non-Jewish contemporaries." However, in the later period, although they were more removed culturally from their neighbors, they paradoxically interacted closely with them. "Allegiance to traditional Judaism now fused with a whole package of new elements: a more intensified political and historical awareness: a new involvement in poetry, music, and drama; an urgent, if somewhat rambling, quest to incorporate fragments of western philosophy and science into the emerging corpus of Jewish culture; all welded by a far more potent current of mysticism than had ever pervaded the Jewish world previously" (p. 71).

I have quoted Israel at length here to underscore the enormous difficulty of defining the elusive, protean, complex, and often paradoxical character of Jewish culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and of relating any coherent description of it to the economic reintegration so forcefully argued in the book. Israel himself seems aware of the problem. The more Jews interact economically with the west, the more they turn in on themselves, culturally and psychologically, he concludes at one point (p. 31; also p. 207). This is not the place to offer a more nuanced depiction of Jewish civilization in this era. Suffice it to say that to anyone who has studied the cultural world of European Jewry in this epoch, Israel's descriptions will not prove satisfying. Distinctions that Jewish culture was more talmudic before 1550 but more coherent after 1550 are meaningless. All the disparate elements which Israel recalls, as well as others—the new political awareness, the new mysticism and pietism, the drama and music of the Italian ghetto,

the political and social cohesion of eastern European Jewry, the incipient scientific involvement of some Jewish intellectuals, and heterodoxy and messianism—may indeed have a common denominator, but Israel has failed to uncover it in this work. Thus, as it stands, this mixed bag of cultural proclivities can hardly be forced into the straightjacket of the author's thesis regarding reintegration and transformation. The early modern period may imply a real economic and political transformation for European Jews, but what it means for Jewish culture remains clouded and uncertain in Israel's cursory treatment.

I have already alluded to the author's persistent message that with the secularization and de-Christianization of European society, Jewish economic and political fortunes improved radically. One wonders whether this assumption is a bit simplistic, both in its discounting of the still powerful hold of Christianity on seventeenth and eighteenth century society and as a sufficient explanation of Jewish economic and political successes. The inadequacy of this explanation seems most apparent in the chapter on the period between 1713 and 1750. In this era, according to Israel, Jewish political autonomy collapsed, Jewish economic advances receded dramatically, and Jewish life generally experienced a "slow decay." Surprisingly, there is little explanation of why this reversal came about. Surely the secular tendencies of the pre-1713 period had not run their course. Europeans were even more free of Christian excesses; nevertheless, the Jewish situation in Europe had deteriorated. We are left with little insight to understand why the new eighteenth century freedoms offered the Jews less than what they had gained in the previous era.

What remains as the most useful and interesting part of the book is Israel's synthetic account of the economic and political reintegration of the Jews in Europe from the late sixteenth through the early eighteenth century. Whether the author has painted a convincing and coherent picture of the economic activities of the Jews across the European continent remains to be clarified by specialists on the various communities summarily treated in this work. One wonders whether the sweeping generalization about the economic and political upswing of Jewish communities from Amsterdam to Poland and Italy at precisely the same time—circa 1570—appears a bit too neat and simultaneous. Be that as it may, if Israel is right in linking the importance of Jewish economic activity with the re-entry of Jews into Europe,<sup>4</sup> why then explain their improved circumstances solely on the basis of "the undermining of Christian allegiance" in western Europe? Surely the overwhelming needs of Europe's developing economy in the seventeenth century, especially in the east, appear more relevant in accounting for Europe's more pragmatic attitude toward Jews. Any student of medieval Jewish history cannot help but note the striking parallel between the economic and political function of

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<sup>4</sup> Compare the earlier treatments of capitalism and the Jews by W. Sombart, *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben* (Berlin, 1911), and E. Rivkin, *The Shaping of Jewish History: A Radical New Interpretation* (New York, 1971). Note how Israel distances himself from both these interpretations (pp. 252, 256).

Jews in the developing economies of the early middle ages and those of early modern Europe. The so-called “frontier” theory of Jewish survival—that Jews fare better in underdeveloped societies, where they are needed economically and politically, but fare worse when they become increasingly expendable in more complex economic and political settings, as other groups rise to replace them in their economic and political roles—strikes me as a more sensible explanation than that of a diminished allegiance to Christianity, in accounting for both the rise and eventual decline of the Jews in the early modern era. It also might explain the pressing need for Jewish entrepreneurship, especially in the seventeenth century, an era characterized some thirty years ago by Trevor-Roper and others<sup>5</sup> as one of political and economic crisis throughout the European continent.

Whatever the deficiencies of Israel's book, however, one thing is clear: it is much easier to find fault with a new and bold reconstruction than to erect one from scratch. Jonathan Israel has written an original and challenging book, to be grappled with and refined by future researchers. Other historians may object to all or to parts of his thesis, but none of them can deny the service which he has performed in expanding our discourse on the place of the Jews in European civilization during this seminal period.

Yale University

DAVID B. RUDERMAN

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, T. Aston, ed., *Crisis in Europe, 1560–1660* (London, 1965).