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Review of Yosef Kaplan, Henry Méchoulan, and Richard H. Popkin, *Menasseh ben Israel and His World*

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At the time of this publication, Dr. Ruderman was affiliated with Yale University, but he is now a faculty member of the University of Pennsylvania.

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Review of Yosef Kaplan, Henry Méchoulan, and Richard H. Popkin,
Menasseh ben Israel and His World

Abstract

This volume is the result of a conference held in Israel in 1982 on the many aspects of the life and career of Menassh ben Israel (1604-57), described by Richard Popkin in his introduction "as a popular Jewish preacher and publisher, as a point of contact for the Jewish and Christian worlds, especially in Holland and England, as an intriguing actor in the messianic and millenarian dramas of the time, and as a thinker in his own right" (p. vii). Because of considerable scholarly interest in Dutch Sephardic Jewry in recent years (ably summarized by Yosef Kaplan in this volume, unfortunately without accompanying annotation), and because Menasseh, probably the best-known Jewish scholar of seventeenth-century Amsterdam other than Spinoza, represents "a natural and ideal focus for the encounter between Jewish and general history," in the words of Michael Heyd (p. 262), the book is certainly a welcome contribution to the study of both the Christian and Jewish communities and their intense interactions.

Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | History | History of Christianity | History of Religion | Intellectual History | Jewish Studies

Comments

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underplay the development of urban oligarchy which is as striking a feature of this period of Castilian history as the process of urban emancipation which she so vividly describes. Until we understand better the character of these urban oligarchies, and their relationship with the townspeople on the one hand and the central government on the other, we shall not be able to assess adequately the significance of the artificial urbanization of large areas of Castile. But in laying bare for us that process, Nader has written an important, and pioneering, book.

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J. H. Elliott

Yosef Kaplan, Henry Méchoulan, and Richard H. Popkin, eds. *Menasseh ben Israel and His World* (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, v. 15). Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989. ix + 278 pp. \$80.

This volume is the result of a conference held in Israel in 1982 on the many aspects of the life and career of Menasseh ben Israel (1604–57), described by Richard Popkin in his introduction “as a popular Jewish preacher and publisher, as a point of contact for the Jewish and Christian worlds, especially in Holland and England, as an intriguing actor in the messianic and millenarian dramas of the time, and as a thinker in his own right” (p. vii). Because of considerable scholarly interest in Dutch Sephardic Jewry in recent years (ably summarized by Yosef Kaplan in this volume, unfortunately without accompanying annotation), and because Menasseh, probably the best-known Jewish scholar of seventeenth-century Amsterdam other than Spinoza, represents “a natural and ideal focus for the encounter between Jewish and general history,” in the words of Michael Heyd (p. 262), the book is certainly a welcome contribution to the study of both the Christian and Jewish communities and their intense interactions. As is often the case with volumes based on conference proceedings, the essays vary considerably in quality and in importance. In this case, the volume also appears to be weakened by the omission of several papers of key contributors, including “a very controversial” paper by Daniel Swetchinski which, according to Popkin, stimulated the idea of the conference in the first place (p. vii).

In the short space of this review, I shall mention only a few of the volume's most significant papers. Yosef Kaplan convincingly demonstrates how Menasseh and his co-religionists in the Amsterdam community appropriated, in the face of their own communal instability, political concepts such as "conservation," and even notions of chosenness and ethnocentricity ironically drawn from the mental world of their Iberian oppressors. Richard Popkin traces the fascinating rise and fall of the theory identifying the North American Indians with Jews, from the time of Menasseh until our own century. David Katz presents an engaging portrait of Henry Jessey, the English Baptist and philo-Semite, and his personal ties with Menasseh ben Israel. Jonathan Israel persuasively links Menasseh's messianic agenda and his English mission on behalf of Jewish resettlement with contemporary economic and demographic developments throughout the Western Sephardic communities, namely, the emergence of a Jewish colonizing movement emanating from Amsterdam, Hamburg, and Livorno, attempting to cope with the problem of absorbing surplus populations of Sephardic Jews into the economies of Holland and Italy. Finally, Moshe Idel carefully delineates Menasseh's understanding of kabbalah against the background of European Neoplatonism in general and Jewish and Christian notions of "ancient theology" emerging in the Italian Renaissance in particular.

Perhaps the most useful contribution to the entire volume is Michael Heyd's lucid summary. He first attributes the remarkable encounter between Jewish and Christian cultures in Menasseh's era to the special character of Dutch Jewry (a community of former Christians), to the role of Jews in Christian millenary thought and to the concomitant rise of Jewish messianism. This rise, he suggests, is more than a mere coincidence and should be understood in relation to its Christian counterpart. Despite the affinity between Christian and Jewish mystical and millenarian ideas, however, Heyd also underscores the differences between the two perceptions and the consequent limitations of the dialogue between the two communities.

Messianic thought should also, Heyd argues, be studied against the background of the political, social, and intellectual crises of the period affecting both Jews and Christians, weakening the traditional boundaries of each community and stimulating a search for new cultural identities. To set Menasseh's period in context, he

suggests a closer look at the period between 1670–1710 following Menasseh's death, one of growing political stabilization in Europe. In this era the Christian establishment asserted its authority by fighting on two fronts: against deism and atheism on the one hand, and against enthusiasm and false messianism, on the other. The Jewish community's negative response to Spinoza and to the false messiah Shabbetai Sevi offers an intriguing parallel to that of the Christians and should be compared and integrated within the larger picture. Heyd's wise remarks suggest the great potential of interdisciplinary projects such as this one in sharing perceptions of a common subject among Jewish and general historians, and in mutually stimulating each other.

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David B. Ruderman

David Cressy. *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989. xiv + 271 pp. \$30.

David Cressy's *Bonfires and Bells* is a social and ethnographic history of the calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England. Cressy begins with the pre-Reformation Tudor calendar, and shows how it changed over time; the close connection between the traditional Church year and the agricultural year meant that even after the Reformation saints days retained a calendrical, if not religious, place in society. The study which follows looks at celebrations and their vocabulary, the continuing political (and religious) struggles over the calendar through the Stuart period, and the transmission of the English calendar to the American colonies. In doing so Cressy pulls together information that has been scattered; readers may have a sense of familiarity with some of the material, but they will be grateful to him for placing the fragments into a larger context.

Cressy's study focuses on celebrations—usually accompanied by the bonfires and bells of the title. Coronation Day, Guy Fawkes, the return of Prince Charles from Spain, and—later in the century—May 29 were all so celebrated; only the defeat of the Spanish Armada and the execution of Charles I were celebrated more solemnly. The calendar changed with politics, history, and rulers. Some events—like the return of Prince Charles from Spain—were celebrated for only a few years. The popular rejoicing at the Prince's