

Rashi's Grandson and the Crusaders  
France, May 8, 1147

RABBI JACOB BEN MEIR (about 1100-1171), called Rabbenu Tam ("Our master, the perfect one"), was probably the outstanding Jewish scholar of France in his day. On his mother's side he was a grandson of the famous Rashi. He lived in the town of Rameru, near Troyes, in eastern France. He was by profession a money-lender; his leisure he devoted to his studies and to his communal activities. Because of his scholarship, his character, and his family prestige, his moral authority in Western and Central Europe was tremendous. Jacob lived through the terror of the Second Crusade (1146-1147) and, later, the burning of the Jews at Blois (1171).

The following account is taken from *A Book of Historical Records*, a Hebrew historical work by Ephraim ben Jacob (1132-about 1200), a German Jewish Talmudist and poet of note. It describes Jacob ben Meir's harrowing experiences during the trying days of the Second Crusade.

¶On the second day of the Feast of Weeks [*Shabuot*, May 8, 1147] the French crusaders got together at Rameru, entered the house of our teacher Jacob (may he live long), took everything he had there, and even tore up the scroll of the Law in his presence. They got hold of him, led him out to the fields, condemned him because of his religion, and conspired against him to put him to death. Five times on the head they wounded him, and in doing so they said to him: "You are the greatest man in Israel; therefore we are taking vengeance on you because of him who was hanged [Jesus], and we are going to wound you just as you Jews inflicted five wounds on our God." [The five wounds are the stigmata of Jesus: four on the hands and feet, and one on the right side.]

His pure soul would have left him had it not been for the kindness of our Creator who had mercy on His Torah, and brought it about that a high official, who was to prove of help to Jacob, should be on the road that led through that field. Rabbi Jacob called to him and bribed him with a horse worth five gold pieces. The official then turned and appealed to the crusaders and cajoled them saying:

"Leave him to me today; I'll talk to him. Perhaps he'll be persuaded so that we can allure him to our faith. If he doesn't consent, rest assured that I'll turn him over to you tomorrow." They did so and the danger was averted. Because God had compassion on His people, He was merciful to him who taught them His holy Torah.

As far as the other communities of France are concerned, we have not heard that a single man was killed or forced into baptism. [Bernard of Clairvaux, the man behind the Second Crusade, opposed any violence toward the Jews.] However they did lose much of their wealth, for the King of France had issued an order that every one who volunteered to go on the crusade to Jerusalem would be forgiven the debts he owed the Jews. Now since most loans of the French Jews were given on trust, without surety, they lost their money. [The King, in line with the papal decree of Eugene III, 1146, probably remitted the interest alone, but the crusaders no doubt refused to pay the principal as well.]

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

## READINGS FOR ADVANCED STUDENTS

Graetz, III, pp. 375-381; Graetz-Rhine, III, pp. 224-229; Margolis and Marx, pp. 363-369.  
*JE*, "Crusades, The"; "Jacob ben Meir Tam."

## ADDITIONAL SOURCE MATERIALS IN ENGLISH

Robinson, J. H., *Readings in European History*, I, pp. 337-340 cites the privileges granted to crusaders by Pope Eugene III in 1146, and Innocent III in 1215.

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ADDITIONS

## SURVEYS

Baron, 4:116-23 (on the Second Crusade and the narrative by Ephraim of Bonn), 6:118-19, 55, 129; Ben-Sasson, 525-27; Stow, 146-49; *EJ*: "Tam, Jacob ben Meir," "Crusades: The Second Crusade," "Ephraim ben Jacob of Bonn."

## STUDIES

Zinberg, Israel, *A History of Jewish Literature*, vol. 2 (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve Press, 1972), pp. 17-21 (on the Tosafists) [1929-37].  
Elon, Menahem, *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1994), pp. 1118-23 (on the Tosafists), 786-88 (on Rabbenu Tam's enactments) [1973].  
Chazan, Robert, *Medieval Jewry in Northern France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 30-62 (on Louis VII, esp. pp. 34-35).

- Taitz, Emily, *The Jews of Medieval France: The Community of Champagne* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), Index, s.v. "Tam, Jacob."  
 Chazan, Robert, "Ephraim ben Jacob's Compilation of 12th Century Persecutions," *JQR* 84 (1994): 397-416. On the work from which the passage is taken.

## ADDITIONAL SOURCE MATERIALS

- Freehof, Solomon, *A Treasury of Responsa* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1963), pp. 35-40: a responsum by Rabbenu Tam on divorce from an apostate.  
 Dorff, Elliot and Arthur Rosett, *A Living Tree* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), pp. 414-20 (enactments of Rabbenu Tam).

RABBI MOSES BEN MAIMON (RaMBaM) was the most eminent Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages. His most famous books are: an Arabic commentary to the Mishnah; a Hebrew law code, the *Mishneh Torah* ("Repetition of the Law"); and the Arabic philosophical work, *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Maimonides, who was born in Cordova in 1135, was compelled when still a lad to flee from Spain because of the persecutions of the fanatical Almohades. After a series of misfortunes and wanderings in northern Africa and Palestine he finally settled in Egypt, in Fustat-Cairo, in 1165, where he became a court physician.

The extracts from his letters that follow give a clear picture of the man and his activity. The first letter below is an answer to Joseph ibn Djabir of Bagdad who had written to Maimonides for enlightenment on certain questions. Ibn Djabir, who knew only Arabic, could not consult Rambam's Hebrew code, the *Mishneh Torah*. The second letter is in answer to Samuel ibn Tibbon of southern France, who was translating the *Guide for the Perplexed* into Hebrew and wished to come to Egypt to visit the famous philosopher. Both of these letters were originally written in Arabic.

## 1. Maimonides' Letter to Ibn Djabir, about 1191

☞ "I have set the Lord always before me."

We have received the letter of the honored and esteemed elder, the disciple Joseph ben Abul-Kheir (may his soul find rest in paradise) who is known as Ibn Djabir. He mentions in it that he is an ignoramus in Jewish things. However, it is clear to us from his letter that he is making a strong effort to study Jewish lore and that he is busying himself considerably with our Arabic commentary to the Mishnah, although he does not understand the code that we have written, that is to say, the *Mishneh Torah*, because it is in Hebrew. He also mentions that he has heard of certain scholars—may God protect them—who are there in Bagdad and who have attacked us in those things which he mentions and he wishes to