

Medieval Jewish Religion, Culture, and Practice

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- Problem of Diaspora: "Of" or merely "in" the wider society?
- Divergent Jewish traditions and their contexts.
- Divergent intellectual traditions in Islamic and Christian lands.
- Gender norms and practices
- Initiation (for boys) into Torah
- Appropriation, Polemic Parody?

Problem of Diaspora: "Of" or merely "In" the Wider Society?

- A broad problematic in the study of any diaspora.
- To great extent, focus on *diaspora* means attention to the experiences in the "host" society (enslavement, segregation and the African American experience; status, economic restrictions, persecution, for Med. Jews.
- Frequently tell us *much* about the "host" society's values, structures, politics.

Divergent Jewish traditions and their contexts

- Jews in Medieval society lived in a variety of social contexts:
 - Mediterranean Islamic/Arab societies
 - Christian societies of Northern Europe

[But also, Byzantine Empire, Eastern Europe (toward the end of the M.A.s), Persia and elsewhere]

 - Can see divergences in:
 - Intellectual developments
 - Gender norms and practices
 - Other features
 - Footnote: **Ashkenaz, Sepharad**



Divergent Jewish intellectual traditions in Islamic and Christian lands (i)

In the *Islamic* (and post-Islamic, e.g., Spain) lands

- Talmud is prolegomenon to a complete education
 - (See, e.g., presuppositions in Maimonides's *Guide*; curriculum handed out 11/27)
- Rational theology and Greek philosophy (Platonic and Aristotelian) studied and had an impact
- Influence also of grammatical studies (|| Qur'anic studies)
- Poetry, stylistics, esthetics, modeled on Arabic-language culture.



Divergent Jewish intellectual traditions in Islamic and Christian lands (ii)

- In the Ashkenazic lands
 - Bible, Talmud, law substantially made up Jewish education
 - Rashi (1040–1105) and Tosafot (a "school" including Rashi's grandsons) reflect both the internalist focus, **and** (esp. Tosafot) some features of wider Christian intellectual tradition (scholastic dialectic)
 - Some perpetuation of older Palestinian Jewish poetic tradition (*piyyut*)
 - A period of *peshat* (i.e., contextual interpretation) in 11th–12th centuries
- Scholars of So. France, 12th C onwards (e.g., Ramban = Moses b. Nahman = Nahmanides) harmonize these tradition



Gender norms and practices

- Medieval Christian world:
 - Greater public visibility
 - Monogamy ("ban [*herem*] of R. Gershom," 960-1028)
 - Ideal of child marriage (for boys and esp. girls) (Tosafot)
 - Greater openness to divorce
- Medieval Islamic world:
 - Ideal of seclusion
 - Accepted polygyny (negotiable in marriage contracts)
 - Marriage between girl in teens and older man
 - Less openness to divorce



Seclusion (or not) of women

- **Maimonides** on communal norms (12th C. Egypt)
- **Responsum** of Kalonymus of Lucca (10th C, in Mainz, to Moses of Arles)



Initiation (for boys) into Torah



Appropriation, Polemic, Parody?

- Appropriation: use of borrowed cultural elements—sometimes knowingly—for internal purposes (e.g., philosophy in the Islamic world)
- Polemic: using elements of “host” culture for critical, combative purposes (e.g., in **peshat** interpretation in Christian world)
- Parody: knowing and combative use of important symbols of the “host.”
 - E.g., imagining Haman as hanged on a cross.
 - Iconography in depicting the initiation into Torah

Iconography and Parody?



Initiation into Torah:
Leipzig Mahzor, Ms. Volders 1102, 13/14th C.
http://david.juden.at/images/69_Keil.jpg

Adoration of the Magi:
MS. LUDWIG VII 1, FOL. 25V, Regensburg 11th C.
<http://www.getty.edu/art/collections/images/00348601.jpg>


