

BETWEEN EAST AND WEST
THE JEWS IN THE LATIN KINGDOM OF JERUSALEM 1099-1291

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“My heart is in the East and I in the uttermost West” wrote one of the greatest Hebrew poets of the Middle Ages, Judah Halevy of Spain, who went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land but never settled there¹. Thus for the rest of his life he remained divided between East and West. This state of division between the Christian West and the Muslim East is typical of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. Like most colonial states throughout history, this Kingdom was a society whose ruling class, the so-called Franks, — mainly the warriors of the First Crusade and their descendants — wanted their state to be a replica of the one they had left in the Christian West. They felt as if they had been transplanted by God from West to East and they therefore transplanted the institutions and norms of eleventh-century Europe to their Kingdom². But neither the real location nor the native population could be totally ignored and rejected. Fulk of Chartres who wrote his *Historia Hierosolymitana*, a history of the First Crusade and the Kingdom of Jerusalem up to the year 1124, expressed this idea as follows:

“Consider, I pray, and reflect how in our times God has transferred the West into the East ... Our parents and relatives ... come to join us, abandoning, even though reluctantly, all that they possess ... You see, therefore, that this is a great miracle and one which must greatly astonish the whole world. Who has ever heard anything like it?³”

¹ *Selected Poems of Jehuda Halevi*, English trans. Nina Salaman (Philadelphia, 1946), no. 1; cf. “Ode to Zion”, no. 2; see J. Prawer, *The History of the Jews in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 143-146.

² J. Prawer, *The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem: European Colonialism in the Middle Ages* (London, 1972), pp. 503-533. *Idem*, “The Roots of Medieval Colonialism”, in *The Meeting of Two Worlds: Cultural Exchange between East and West during the Period of the Crusades*, ed. V.P. Goss *et al.* (Kalamazoo, 1986), pp. 23-38. “The Crusading Kingdom of Jerusalem: The First European Colonial Society? A Symposium”, in *The Horns of Hattin: Proceedings of the Second Conference of the Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East — Jerusalem and Haifa 2-6 July 1987*, ed. B.Z. Kedar (Jerusalem and London, 1992), pp. 341-366. Thus e.g. Guibert of Nogent (d. 1121), referred to the Kingdom as to “Holy Christendom’s new colony”: Guibert of Nogent, *Gesta Dei per Francos*, 7, 25, RHC Occ., I, p. 245.

³ Fulk of Chartres, *Historia Hierosolymitana*, 37, RHC Occ., III, pp. 467-468.

As a result, the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem emerged with a character formed both by the East and the West. The history of the Jews in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem runs parallel to that of the Kingdom. During the two hundred years of crusaders' rule in the Holy Land, it had undergone profound changes, a transformation whose main feature could be defined as westernization. During the Crusading period, the predominantly Oriental character of the Jews of Palestine turned into a predominantly western one. When the armies of the First Crusade conquered the country, the Jews of Palestine, like all the other inhabitants, including the Christians, had already been totally Arabized. I refer here to a process of Arabization in which the material culture of the Arabs is adopted, in contrast to a process of Islamization in which the religion of Islam is adopted. One may say that, during the Early Muslim period, the population of Palestine had undergone a total process of Arabization but only a very partial one of Islamization. This resulted in adoption of the Arabs' material culture as well as their language. Documents found in the Cairo Genizah (now in Cambridge) reveal that, during the Early Muslim period, the Jews of Palestine used to write in Hebrew letters but in three languages: Arabic-Hebrew, Hebrew and Aramic. This process of Arabization was strengthened by the fact that at that time most new settlers came from the Muslim East and none at all from the West⁴.

The Genizah, so rich a source of the history of the Jews of Palestine during the Early Muslim period and particularly the eleventh century, dries up almost entirely in the twelfth century. This is partly due to the general impoverishment of the Palestinian communities, but mainly to the change in their demographic and cultural composition, bringing them culturally closer to Europe than to the Levant. As has already been mentioned, this can be explained by the character of the Crusader Kingdom, but there are additional factors. During the entire period, contacts between the Jews of Palestine and the Christian West increased. During the Early Muslim period, the Jewish communities of Palestine were ruled *inter alia* by the 'Head of the Diaspora' who lived in Babylon, together with the great Babylonian Academies of Sura and Pumbedita. In the twelfth century, the influence of these institutions diminished, as did that of the so-called Jerusalem Academy in Tyre, later (1124) in Damascus, and the main authority in religious and legal disputes became Maimonides in Egypt. In the thirteenth century, however, the main authorities were Nahmanides in Spain and the so-called Tosafists, European rabbinical

⁴ Prager, *The History of the Jews* (see n. 1), pp. 1-18.

authorities from the school of Baalei Tosafoth. Thus both the cultural and religious centres of the Jews of Palestine moved from East to West during the two hundred years of Crusading rule⁵.

The western character of the Jewish population of Palestine was strengthened by the immigration of western Jews. Up to the time of the crusader conquest, new settlers came mainly from the Muslim East, as did Jewish pilgrims. This continued after the conquest, but additionally immigration from the Christian West began; thus the famous Spanish Jewish traveller, Benjamin of Tudela, who came to the Holy Land on a pilgrimage between 1169 and 1171, found in Tyre, for example, Jews from Fustat, i.e. Old Cairo, as well as from Southern France. Immigration from the West increased substantially towards the end of the twelfth century and continued almost until the fall of the Crusader Kingdom in May 1291. The key to this new phenomenon is held by both the East and the West, the place of origin of the movement. Following the conquest of Jerusalem by Saladin in 1187, the crusader ban on Jewish settlement in Jerusalem was abolished and Jerusalem became the destination for immigration from both East and West. Around 1200, the once more flourishing community consisted of newcomers from France, Ascalon and the Maghreb. In 1209-1211 a group of Jews arrived in the city, part of the big migration wave from France and England, the so-called 'Migration of 300 Rabbis'. In 1267 Nahmanides emigrated from Spain and settled in Jerusalem⁶.

Another factor which contributed to this movement was the persecution and exploitation of the Jews in Europe. This is, however, marginal as there was similar persecution in the late eleventh and twelfth century which did not produce recurrent migration. Moreover, even the late thirteenth and fourteenth century, the darkest pages of Medieval Jewish history which included expulsions from England and France and persecution during the Crusade of 1309, did not produce any recurrent, let alone extensive movement of migration. This did not occur until the fifteenth century⁷.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-18, 93-127. For the Cairo Geniza see S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, vols 1-3 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967, 1971, 1978). M. Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations from the Cairo Geniza* (Leiden, 1976).

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-92. S. Schein "The Jewish Settlement in Palestine in the Crusader Period (1099-1291)", in *The Jewish Settlement in Palestine 634-1881*, ed. A. Carmel *et al.* (Wiesbaden, 1990), pp. 24-33. For Benjamin of Tudela see *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, ed. M.N. Adler (London, 1907).

⁷ S. Schwarzfuchs, "The expulsion of the Jews from France, 1306", *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 75 (1967), pp. 482-489. S. Menache, "The King, the Church and the Jews: Some

The key factor which can explain the new phenomenon is a transformation in the attitude of western Jewry to the Holy Land and Jerusalem. The catalyst of this transformation was the confrontation, now almost a century old, between the Cross and the Crescent, between the Christian Holy War and the Muslim Jihad, the fight for possession of the Holy Land. This confrontation between Christendom and Islam, between West and East, turning the Holy Land into a battlefield, created new hopes and claims in European Jewry. On the one hand there were Messianic expectations and on the other the view that the commandment to live in the Land of Israel outweighed all other commandments. Moreover, according to God's will, no other nation but the Jews had been chosen to inhabit the Holy Land⁸.

This new approach was defined by the great Spanish scholar, Nahmanides, who had himself emigrated from Spain to Jerusalem in 1267 or 1268. Commenting on Leviticus 26, 32, "I will destroy your land and the enemies who occupy it will be appalled", he argues as follows:

"And those are good tidings proclaiming in all the lands of the Diaspora that our land does not accept our enemies. And this is a decisive proof and a great promise, because you will hardly find in all the inhabited world a country which is so fair and spacious, settled from time immemorial, and which is as much ruined as this one. For ever since we [the Jews] departed from it, it has not accepted a single other nation or language. They all try to settle it, but it is beyond their power⁹."

Having established the will of Providence, Nahmanides calls upon the Jews "to go to Him from distant lands, and ask which is the way to the House of the Lord and you shall say to each other: 'Come and let us go to the mountain of God' (Isaiah, 2, 3) ... and the scriptures say: 'his habitation shall you seek and thither shall you come' (Deut. 12,15)." In his Jerusalem sermon, he describes the Holy Land in the somewhat florid style of the period: "And the fruit of the Land is a pride and adornment ... and it is still a land which flows with milk and honey for

Considerations on the Expulsions from England and France," *Journal of Medieval History*, 13 (1987), pp. 223-236. For the Crusade of 1309 see S. Schein, *Fideles Crucis: The Papacy, the West and the Recovery of the Holy Land 1274-1314* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 219-238. For the migration movement of the fifteenth century, see J. Hacker, "The Immigrations to Palestine of the Jews of Spain between the persecutions of 1391 and of 1492", *Shalem*, 1 (1973), pp. 105-156 [Hebrew].

⁸ M. Idel, "The Land of Israel in Medieval Kabbalah", in *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*, ed. L. Hoffman (Indiana, 1986); *idem*, "Jerusalem in the Jewish Thought in the 13th Century", in *The History of Jerusalem: The Crusader and Ayyubid Periods (1099-1291)*, ed. J. Prawer *et al.* (Jerusalem, 1990), pp. 264-286 [Hebrew].

⁹ Quoted after Prawer, *The History of the Jews* (see n. 1), p. 158.

those who dwell in her. ... the desolation in this fertile and spacious land ... is great because they [the enemies] do not deserve you and you are not fitting for them¹⁰.”

Nahmanides died in Acre in 1270. In 1972 his seal was found near Acre, not far from the large Jewish cemetery at the foot of Mount Carmel, a cemetery which served Acre because Acre was outside the ritual Talmudic boundaries of Eretz Israel. Nahmanides' views were, it seems, well known in certain circles and he obviously had followers. A generation after his death, the author of a Hebrew itinerary, the so-called *Tosoth Eretz Israel*, wrote as follows: “And now many are stirred and are willing to migrate to the Land of Israel. And many think that we are near the coming of the Messiah, and you see that the nations of the world are making everywhere the burden heavier on Israel.” To these words he adds an extraordinary statement:

“Let nobody think that the King Messiah will reveal himself in an unclean land; neither let him think that the Messiah will come to the Land of Israel amidst pagans. Whoever makes this mistake is simply not caring for the King Messiah. But the children of Israel who cultivate the Torah, men of piety and deeds from the four corners of the world ... everybody whose heart is dictating it and he is moved by the purity of spirit and the love of holiness to come to the Land of Israel — to those the King Messiah will reveal himself¹¹.”

This statement reminds one of another famous one, that of Guibert of Nogent who, commenting in his version of the speech of Urban II at Clermont on the prophecy of the Last Emperor, argues that the Antichrist, whose arrival in Jerusalem heralds the Events of the Last Days, “will wage war, not against the Jews nor against gentiles, but, according to the etymology of his name, will attack Christians. And if Antichrist finds no Christian there, just as it is today, there will be no-one to resist him nor any whom he may rightly attack¹².”

It is impossible to prove the direct influence of Guibert of Nogent but there are Hebrew translations of the Last Emperor Prophecy in fourteenth-century manuscripts¹³. To come back to Nahmanides and his

¹⁰ Quoted after *id.*, p.159.

¹¹ “Tosōth Eretz Israel (1270-1291)”, in *Massa'oth Eretz-Israel*, ed. A. Ya'ari (Tel-Aviv, 1946) (1976 ed.), p. 98 [Hebrew] and see Prawer, *The History of the Jews* (see n. 1), pp. 161-162, 233-250.

¹² Guibert of Nogent, *Gesta Dei per Francos*, II, 4, RHC Occ., IV, pp. 138-140.

¹³ P.J. Alexander, “The Diffusion of Byzantine Apocalypses in the Medieval West and the Beginnings of Joachimism”, in *Prophecy and Millenarianism: Essays in Honour of Marjorie Reeves*, ed. A. Williams (London, 1980), pp. 55-106. Prawer, *The History of the Jews* (see n. 1), p. 161, n. 87, pp. 245-246 and n. 127-130, 258-259.

followers; their attitude was that the political upheavals in thirteenth-century Palestine, the constant state of war, the numerous invasions, in particular those of the Mongols, and the consequent desolation of the land were all signs that the land was destined by will of Providence to belong to the Jews. Moreover, that the land, though also destroyed by God's will, was a good land for settlement. Commenting upon Deuteronomy 8, 9, Nahmanides refers to the natural resources of Palestine: "And one can find there a mine of copper and iron, which indeed supply a great need of the inhabitants of the land. You shall not lack anything in it. There can also be found quarries of large stones, precious stones, hewn stones to build houses, city walls and towers." Expounding on Exodus 3, 8: "... a land flowing with milk and honey ...", he argues, in a similarly practical manner, that "the air is good and wholesome for human beings ... It has breadth; lowland, valley and plain are large and fair ... a land for cattle with good pastures, and there is good water, and the milk increases in the cows ... Its fruit is so fat and sweet that it is as if honey issues from the land¹⁴."

Immigration from Europe during the thirteenth century had turned crusader Acre into one of the greatest centres of Jewish studies in the Middle East. Some of the most important of the European Tosafists settled in the city, such as Rabbi Shimshon of Sens, who established a Yeshiva there in the 1230s. Acre became a new centre of study of both Kabbalah and Halakhah; a remarkable characteristic of the Kabbalah treatises composed in thirteenth-century Palestine in Acre, Hebron and Safad was their spiritual propinquity to the Muslim Sufi teachings. Most of their literary output was written in Hebrew, whereas during the previous period the most common language had been Arabic¹⁵.

The community of Acre and especially its spiritual leaders had close contacts with Jewish communities in both East and West, in particular with Baghdad and Mosul in the East and the communities of Italy, Germany, France, Provence and Spain in the West. There were also economic contacts, due to the fact that, in the thirteenth century, after a century's intermission, the Jews of Acre again entered into international maritime trade and were also increasingly engaged in banking¹⁶.

¹⁴ *Id.*, p. 156.

¹⁵ *Id.*, pp. 258-291. Schein, "The Jewish Settlement" (see n. 6), pp. 33-35.

¹⁶ See note 15 above.

To sum up: Rabbi Shelomo ben Rabbi Adret, i.e. Rashba, wrote in 1280: "It is a custom among the sages of the Holy Land and of Babylon [i.e. Egypt] that if a question should be asked nobody answers but they say: 'Let us be guided by the Sages of Acre'¹⁷." When, a decade later (May 28, 1291), Acre was captured by the Mamluks of Egypt, the Jewish inhabitants of the city were massacred with the rest of the population; only a very few managed to escape and some were taken to Egypt as captives. The Jewish world described it as "a tragedy as terrible as the day of the ruin of Jerusalem¹⁸." During the two hundred years of crusader domination of Palestine, factors such as the character of the Crusader Kingdom as a colonial society, the close links with the Christian West and especially the immigration from the West — Spain, France, Provence and Germany — strengthened the European/western character of the Jewish population. Its Oriental character persisted but the Franco-German character became more noticeable. With the Mamluk conquest, Palestine was once more cut off from Europe and again became part of the Muslim East. The fate of the Jews followed the general pattern of change, of Arabization. Their main contacts were now within the Muslim world, especially with the communities of Egypt, Syria and North-Africa. From the sixteenth century onwards, the native Jewish population was called *mustarabi* (from the word 'arab) or *muriskos* (from the word 'moor') as distinct from the European newcomers¹⁹.

¹⁷ Responsa of Shelomo ben Adret, part 6, par. 890 (Venice, n.d.); Schein, "The Jewish Settlement" (see n. 6), p. 34.

¹⁸ Praver, *The History of the Jews* (see n. 1), p. 291.

¹⁹ E. Rainer, "The Jewish Community in the Fourteenth Century", in *The History of Eretz Israel under the Mamluk and Ottoman Rule (1260-1804)*, ed. A. Cohen (Jerusalem, 1980), p. 64 [Hebrew].