

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications, Classics and Religious
Studies Department

Classics and Religious Studies

2009

Book Review: Living Together, Living Apart: Rethinking Jewish-Christian Relations in the Middle Ages

Stephen G. Burnett

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, sburnett1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/classicsfacpub>



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

Burnett, Stephen G., "Book Review: Living Together, Living Apart: Rethinking Jewish-Christian Relations in the Middle Ages" (2009). *Faculty Publications, Classics and Religious Studies Department*. 75.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/classicsfacpub/75>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Classics and Religious Studies at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Classics and Religious Studies Department by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

BOOK REVIEWS

doi:10.1017/S0008938909000338

Living Together, Living Apart: Rethinking Jewish-Christian Relations in the Middle Ages. By Jonathan Elukin. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2007. Pp. xii + 193. Cloth \$25.95. ISBN 10: 0-691-11487-0. ISBN 13: 978-0-691-11487-3.

The theme of Jonathan Elukin's elegant and well-argued book is Jewish-Christian coexistence in medieval Europe—how was it possible given Christian prejudice and anti-Jewish violence? Older medieval Jewish history stressed the themes of “scholars and suffering,” embodying what the late Salo Baron termed a “lachrymose” view of Jewish history. In recent years historians have stressed how medieval Europe became a “persecuting society,” following the work of R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (1987), and David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence* (1996). Elukin argues for a different approach to medieval Jewish experience, eschewing a “one-dimensional narrative of victimization” (p. 4) for a more nuanced inquiry that explores the social and political ties that bound Jews to medieval society. While other medieval Jewish historians such as Robert Chazan and Ivan Marcus have made some of the same points in the past, Elukin is the first to write a sustained book-length argument along these lines.

The book consists of six chapters. The first three are chronological, covering late antiquity to the early Middle Ages, the Carolingians to the twelfth century, and the High Middle Ages. The final three chapters are more topical, covering social integration, violence, and expulsion and continuity. In making his argument, Elukin does not introduce any texts that were previously unknown to scholarship, but rather he discusses the usual texts cited in Jewish histories, while offering new insights concerning their context. For example, when discussing royal Jewish charters, Elukin asserts that such agreements should be understood as evidence of Jewish integration into medieval society. Since every medieval person was bound to more powerful people, the terms of these charters are indicative of a group's importance. Elukin points out that the provisions of these charters parallel those of the clergy, who were, after all, a privileged order of society (p. 63).

Perhaps the most novel argument that Elukin makes in the course of his book is his interpretation of medieval violence against Jews. Elukin asserts that it is critical to understand how Jews viewed generalized violence in medieval

society and how they measured it against their own experience. While we rightly feel horror at reading accounts of Jewish suffering, we must also understand that “they made decisions—when they could—about their safety and collective futures based on what they knew of their societies” (p. 90). He points out that the “background” violence of medieval society, both the physical violence that nobles directed against each other and against their dependents, and the verbal violence of personal invective that characterized Christian society, must be considered when assessing violence against the Jews (pp. 91–93). Elukin posits that violence against the Jews mostly consisted of “disconnected outbursts” (pp. 95–96). One surprising example that he adduced was the resettlement of German towns after the Black Death. Considering all the suffering that Christians had inflicted upon Jews during 1348–49, quite apart from the effects of the plague itself, one would hardly suppose that Jews would return to places where they had been persecuted. Yet, as Alfred Haverkamp noted, “in the majority of the approximately 500 locations where Jews resettled after 1349, often after an interval or more than a decade, they generally relocated to places they had previously occupied” (p. 109).

To cite another example of anti-Jewish hatred, during the fifteenth century there were ten public accusations that the Jews obtained consecrated communion bread from churches (Hosts) to “torture” and “desecrate.” Of these ten episodes, anti-Jewish riots broke out in six cases. Elukin notes, “Jews would have been aware of such accusations, but many must have lived their entire lives without direct experience of those accusations” (p. 99). Yet I would add here that Jewish “awareness” probably had a personal dimension. Ronnie Hsia demonstrated in *The Myth of Ritual Murder* (1988) that stories about Host Desecration accusations became popular “knowledge” during the fifteenth century through chapbooks, pilgrimages, the preaching of itinerant friars, and the like. This “knowledge” would almost certainly have resulted in periodic personal and social friction between Christians and Jews, even in those places where no Host Desecration trial ever took place.

In his final chapter on “Expulsion and Continuity,” Elukin asserts that historians’ emphasis on the 1492 expulsion from Spain and the epoch-making Renaissance and Reformation has actually served to hide a number of important continuities in Jewish-Christian relations. Certainly this is true in Germany, where most Jews during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries lived in small towns rather than in cities. In such small settings Jews and Christians interacted on a daily basis and formed bonds that might include eating together, celebrating holidays together, and even weddings (p. 128). In Italy where Jews were forced to live in ghettos in many places during the sixteenth century, the walls of the ghetto did not remove Jews from the lives of their communities as Leon Modena’s memoir *Life of Judah* (Princeton University Press, 1988) so vividly demonstrates.

Elukin's treatment of Jewish-Christian relations in medieval Europe is an excellent contribution to the discussion of the subject. He nowhere glosses over the friction that inevitably arose between Jews and Christians. Coexistence with Christians came at a price that was mostly paid by the Jews themselves. They had to "compartmentalize their own ambivalent feelings about Christians," something they were largely, though not always successful in doing (p. 59). Elukin's emphasis on the need to read the sources critically in the light of the medieval background is a salutatory reminder for professionals in the field, but it also makes this book an excellent choice for a textbook in medieval Jewish history.

STEPHEN G. BURNETT
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

doi:10.1017/S000893890900034X

Terror and Toleration: The Habsburg Empire Confronts Islam, 1526–1850.

By Paula Sutter Fichtner. London: Reaktion Books. 2008. Pp. 205.

Cloth \$45.00. £25.00. ISBN 978-1-86189-340-6.

There is considerable and growing interest in western perceptions of the Ottomans and of Islam in early modern Europe. The lively contribution reviewed here concentrates on the cultural and ideological dimension to the clash between the Austrian Habsburg and Ottoman empires. The first part investigates attitudes in the Habsburg monarchy toward the Ottomans and Islam from the early sixteenth to the late seventeenth centuries. Much has already been published on the central European construction of "the Turk" and his religion as the personification of evil and the antithesis of Christianity. The universalist pretensions of the Holy Roman imperial title held by the Habsburgs, and the claims of the Ottoman sultanate, left little room for mutual recognition. Political rivalry was underpinned by theology, since both Christianity and Islam claimed to represent singular, exclusive truths. Fichtner adds detail to the Habsburg perspective, especially on the fashioning of their image as innocent victims of Ottoman aggression that ran parallel to the better-known arguments advanced in Lutheran Germany of the Turks as the scourge of God, sent to punish Christian sinners. Attitudes were far from uniform. A minority of scholars continued the earlier Humanist interest in the Islamic world and were willing to recognize positive features within Ottoman culture. Economic and diplomatic exchange persisted with varying intensity. The view remained overwhelmingly negative, however, dominated by notions of Ottoman treachery and brutality. These sentiments were deliberately fostered by the Habsburgs to