

Turning points in Ancient and Medieval Jewish History

Lecture 5: the golden age of Spanish Jewry: 900 – 1200 CE



Before the Golden Age

- The arrival of the Jews – some arrived during the Roman Empire; community strengthened under the Moors (8th century on)
- The Visigoth era – ‘barbarian’ tribe from France; 5th – 8th centuries; Christian; succeeded by the Moors
- The beginning of the Moslem Age (711 CE = Moorish victory in Spain) – The Emirate of Cordoba (756 – 929) followed by the Caliphate of Cordoba
- Berbers were tribes from North Africa; Moors were mixtures of Berbers, Arabs and Spaniards

The Golden Age

1) Events

- *Reconquista* (8th century – 1492) – gradual Christian reconquest of Iberia
- Abd ar-Rahman III creates a caliphate (The Caliphate of Cordoba)
- The fall of the Caliphate and the era of the *Taifas* (1031) = independent Moslem principalities
- The Granada Massacre (1066) = anti-Jewish pogrom by Moslems
- The beginning of the end: Berber invaders - the Almoravides (1086) and the Almohads (1148)
- Christian conquest of all of Spain minus Granada (1248)

2) Sages

- Hasdai ibn Shaprut (915 – 970) -soldier, physician, statesman, writer, initiated Golden Age
- Menachem ibn Saruq (920 – 970) – wrote early Hebrew dictionary
- Dunash ibn Labrat (920 – 990) – grammarian and poet; disagreement with ibn Saruq
- Samuel ibn Nagrela (993 – 1056) – scholar, poet, soldier, politician, vizier in the Caliphate
- Solomon ibn Gabirol (1021 – 1070) – poet and Neoplatonic philosopher
- Bahya ibn Paquda (1050 – 1120)- rabbi, philosopher, poet
- Isaac Alfasi (the Rif) (1013 – 1103) – originally from Algeria; Talmudist and expert in Jewish law (‘halacha’)
- Moses ibn Ezra (1058 0 1138) – major poet (in Arabic), philosopher
- Abraham ibn Ezra (1089 1167) – biblical commentator and philosopher
- Benjamin of Tudela (1130 – 1173) – traveler to Europe, Asia and Africa; described many Jewish settlements

3) Mega-sages

- Yehuda Halevi (1075 – 1141) – physician, major poet and writer, philosopher; died in Israel.
- Maimonides (1138 – 1204) – most prolific and influential Bible scholar of the middle ages
- Nachmanides (1194 – 1270) – physician, scholar, kabbalist and philosopher. Died in Israel.

After the Golden Age

- The Spanish Inquisition (1400s) – originally aimed at combating heresy but targeted ‘conversos’
- The Spanish Expulsion of the Jews (1492) – the biggest of the expulsions in the middle ages
- The spread of the Sephardim – Jews left Spain in 1492 and settled in various countries

The major turning points of this era

- Jewish creativity in the Hebrew Bible, philosophy, poetry and literature (a ‘golden age’)
- The Sephardim and their legacy
- Maimonides
- Striking a balance in the diaspora: ‘a Jew in the home and a citizen on the street’



Yehuda Halevi



Maimonides