

Jews in Medieval Christendom:

The highs and lows of the Jews in the Middle Ages

Peter Schattner
U3A Stonnington
2023



INTRODUCTION

The Middle Ages is the period of history from the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century to the Renaissance in the 15th century. Jews lived in Europe during this time, although their history does not quite fit the standard classification of the Middle Ages (the early, high and late Middle Ages). Jewish medieval history more correctly ends with the pre-modern period.

This series concentrates on Western Europe (Western Christendom) and especially the traditions of northern Europe (Germany and France). The Golden Age of Spain is an entirely different story and some areas of southern Europe, e.g. Provence in southern France, were heavily influenced by neighbouring Spain. Other areas such as Italy were more 'independent' and the story of their Jews is more complex; these areas will receive less attention as it would become too confusing. This history ends with the Golden Age in Poland as this country was able to continue the traditions of 'Ashkenaz' (Germany and northern France).

The era is well known for its 'lows' which meant repeated massacres, expulsions, discrimination and virulent antisemitism. In spite of this, and perhaps surprisingly given their hardships, Jews in Western Christendom achieved major intellectual and spiritual initiatives. Their legacy, through a series of talented sages and rabbis, has survived and indeed shaped Judaism and Jewry down to the modern era.

These notes provide very brief explanations about terminology, people, places and events that are difficult to memorise and probably unfamiliar. You might want to have them with you when you listen to the lectures or refer to them later as an aide-memoire.

LECTURE 1: JEWS SETTLING INTO EUROPE

Jews in the Middle Ages – Jews were all 'traditional' (now called orthodox). No secular 'space'.

Christendom – Catholic Church ruled (Western Europe).

Medieval = Middle Ages (5th – 15th centuries)

Middle Ages classification = Early (500 – 1000) = 'dark', High (1000 – 1300) and Late (1300 – 1500)

Pre-modern age = 1500 – 1700s; also called early modern.

Eras of the Middle Ages - Feudalism 800s – 1400s; Renaissance: 1300 – 1600; Reformation 1517 – 1648; Counter Reformation 1545 1648; Age of Discovery ('early modern') 1400s – 1600s

Jewish Middle Ages – 4th C. to (end of Roman Empire) to the pre-modern era (18th C. enlightenment or 'Haskalah')

Rabbinic Judaism - the normative form of Judaism (faith and practice) that developed after the fall of the Temple of Jerusalem (70 CE). It originated in the work of the Pharisaic rabbis. Based, on the Talmud, it set up a mode of worship and a life discipline that is practiced by Jews till today.

Rishonim ('the first ones') – Commentators and codifiers of Talmudic law who lived approximately during the 11th to 15th centuries, in the era before the writing of the 'Shulchan Aruch', a common printed code of Jewish law (1563 CE) and following the Geonim (589-1038 CE). Rabbinic scholars subsequent to the Shulchan Aruch are generally known as Acharonim ("the latter ones")

Ashkenaz ('Germany') - Jews who lived in the Rhineland valley and in neighbouring France before their migration eastward to Slavic lands (e.g., Poland, Lithuania, Russia) after the Crusades, and their descendants.

Ashkenazi vs Sephardi – former = descendants of Ashkenaz and Poland; latter = Spanish origin

Rabbeinu Gershom (ben Judah; 960 - 1040) – known as Meor ha-Golah, the Light of the Exile. The first notable Jewish scholar of Ashkenaz. Commentator on the Talmud and the issuer of legal decisions.

LECTURE 2: JEWISH SOCIETY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Feudalism – political and economic system (9th – 13th centuries) in which people worked and fought for nobles who gave them protection and the use of land in return.

Radanites – Jewish merchants of the 9th century who travelled between southern France and China.

Servi Camerae Regis ('servants of the royal chamber') = the status of the Jews in medieval Christendom. The Jews themselves and all their chattels belonged to kings who protected them.

Moneylending – Jews excluded from trade and handicrafts and therefore became moneylenders, especially in northern Europe during the 12th – 13th centuries. Christians were disallowed.

Monti di Pieta ('mount of piety') – an institution which originated in 15th-century Italy, giving poor people access to loans with reasonable interest rates. Allowed Christians to practice minor moneylending. A predecessor to the modern banking system.

Kehillah – an organised Jewish community, also called a Kahal; the basis of most European towns with Jews. Allowed communities to be autonomous. Supported by kings and municipal leaders for taxes.

Rashi (R. Solomon Yitzchaki; 1040 - 1105) – French scholar; greatest commentator on the Bible and Talmud of all time. His commentaries are the basis of all that followed in the Jewish world of sages.

The Tosafists ('additions', i.e. to Rashi) – commentators on the Talmud using a more deeply explanatory style than Rashi. In 12th – 14th C. France and Germany. Hugely influential 'school'.

Rabbeinu Tam (Jacob ben Meir; 1100 - 1171) – grandson of Rashi and one of the founders of the Tosafist school. Outstanding rabbinical authority of his day, sometimes critical of Rashi.

LECTURE 3: INSTABILITY AND DISASTER

Antisemitism – hatred of Jews. Types: 1) xenophobic – dislike of the foreigner, e.g. ancient Egypt; 2) theological – Jews as 'Christ killers'; 3) demonic – blood libels, host desecration and well poisoning fantasies of the Middle Ages; 4) racial – from 19th century, with Jews inherently evil; and 5) 'modern' – Jews as conspirators and oppressors, as in Zionism.

Crusades – a series of expeditions (11th – 13^h C.) to secure Christian rule over Moslem-controlled Palestine. Arousal of religious passion among lower class supporters led to hatred and violence against Jews.

Massacres in Ashkenaz - Rhineland massacres (1096) in the 1st Crusade, especially in Mainz, Worms and Speyer; Rindfleisch massacres (1298) – 20,000 Jews killed in mob pogroms in southern and central Germany following accusations by Lord Rindfleisch of host desecration by Jews.

Massacre in Clifford's Tower – The 150 Jews of York were besieged by a mob (1190). They escaped to Clifford's Tower, and rather than surrender, they martyred themselves.

Black Death (1347 – 1350) – most virulent plague ever; 1/4 – 1/3 of European population killed.

Blood libel – The false allegation that Jews murder Christians to obtain blood for Passover (to make matzah, or unleavened bread), or other rituals. 1st case in medieval era = William of Norwich (1144).

William of Norwich (1132 - 1144) - William was an English boy whose disappearance and killing was, at the time, attributed to the Jewish community of Norwich. This led to a rise in antisemitism.

Hugh of Lincoln (1246 – 1255) - Hugh was an English boy whose death in Lincoln was falsely attributed to Jews. Hugh's death is significant because it was the first time that the Crown gave credence to ritual child murder allegations; the king had 19 (innocent) Jews executed.

Simon of Trent (1472–1475) - Simon was a boy from the city of Trent (now Trento in northern Italy), whose disappearance and death was blamed on the leaders of the city's Jewish community, resulting in the murder of all the male Jews of the community (about 15) in the name of the local ruler.

Host desecration – Accusation that Jews defiled the elements consecrated by the priest during a Mass. The host is the bread that is used to represent the body of Jesus during the Eucharist (a Christian rite). Followed the Doctrine of Transubstantiation by the 4th Lateran Council (1215). Jews wished to renew the agonies of the Passion of Jesus. Led to Jewish massacres.

Well-poisoning – Between 1348 and 1350, Jews throughout Europe were accused of having caused the spread of the Black Death by poisoning the wells from which the entire population drank.

Expulsions from Western Christendom – From England (1290), France (1182, 1306, 1322 and 1394), Germany after 1348/50 and up to the mid-16th C., expelled from Spain and dominions (Sicily and Sardinia) in 1492, Portugal (1497), Provence (1512), Naples (1541) and other parts of Italy (1569).

Burning the Talmud (Paris, 1242) - Around 1240, a Parisian Jew named Nicholas Donin, who had converted to Christianity, convinced the king of France, Louis IX, that he would be able to prove the truth of Christianity through the Talmud. A disputation (debate) followed. Donin 'won' and in 1242, the king ordered the burning of 24 cartloads of Talmuds (some 12,000 volumes).

Isaac ben Asher haLevi (Riba; 11th century) – He is the earliest known Tosafist. Lived in Speyer.

R. Meir of Rothenberg (Maharam; 1215 - 1293) - German rabbi, poet and major Tosafist. Tradition has it that a large ransom was raised for him after his imprisonment, but he refused it for fear of encouraging the imprisonment of other rabbis. Died in prison and was only buried 14 years later when someone paid.

LECTURE 4: THE CHURCH, THE REFORMATION AND THE JEWS OF ASHKENAZ

History of Christian-Jewish relations till the Middle Ages – importance of St Paul, the Church Fathers and Augustine of Hippo, the Christianisation of the Roman Empire and the 'barbarians.

Pope Gregory I (590 - 604) – set the tone for the papacy till the Middle Ages; objected to Jews but recognised his role as their protector

Pope Alexander III (1159 - 1181) – Summoned 3rd Lateran Council (1179); it prohibited Jews from having Christian servants; he also re-issued the Bull *Sicut Judaeis*, protecting Jews (see below).

Sicut Judaeis - Were papal bulls which set out the official position of the papacy regarding the treatment of Jews. The bull forbade Christians forcing Jews to convert, from harming them, from taking their property, from disturbing the celebration of their festivals, etc.

Pope Innocent III (1198 – 1216) – Confirmed bulls which favoured the Jews, but also enacted 4th Lateran Council in 1215 which introduced many anti-Jewish restrictions.

Lateran Councils – 3 and 4 – See previous 2 popes. The 4th in 1215 stands out for its anti-Jewish role.

The Reformation - A major movement within Western Christianity in 16th-century Europe arising from what were perceived to be errors, abuses, and discrepancies by the Catholic Church. The Reformation was the start of Protestantism and perhaps marked the end of the Middle Ages.

Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) – German priest, theologian and author who was the seminal figure of the Protestant Reformation. At first favoured the Jews but turned against them later in life.

The Renaissance - The transition from the Middle Ages to modernity and covering the 15th and 16th centuries (or more broadly, the 14th to 17th), characterized by an effort to revive and surpass ideas and achievements of classical antiquity, in art and learning. Jews played some role in Italy.

Johann Reuchlin (1455 – 1522) - A German Catholic humanist and a scholar of Greek and Hebrew. Famous as the defender of the Talmud and Jewish scholarship against the attacks of Johannes Pfefferkorn. Reuchlin's defence (1513 – 14) was a precursor to the dissension of the Reformation.

Johannes Pfefferkorn (1469 – 1521) – Christian convert from Judaism. Campaigned to ban the Talmud in Germany and to expel Jews. Argued against Reuchlin in the 'Battle of the Books'.

Jewish printing – began in Italy in 1475 (Hebrew printing). Earliest famous family was Soncino (Italy), and then David Bomberg in Venice. Bomberg was a Christian but produced Hebrew works.

Holy Roman Empire (902 – 1806) - A political entity in what became Germany that developed from the accession of Otto I in 962 and continued until its dissolution in 1806 during the Napoleonic Wars. Until the twelfth century, the Empire was the most powerful monarchy in Europe.

R. Yoselman of Rosheim (1478 – 1554) - The greatest Jewish *shtadlan* (official advocate) in medieval Germany. Maximilian I, Holy Roman Emperor, appointed him governor of all the Jews of Germany.

R. Meir of Rothenberg (1220 – 1293) - Rabbi Meir ben Baruch, popularly known by the abbreviation 'MaHaRaM'. Rabbi Meir became universally acknowledged as the leading authority on Talmud and Jewish law in France, Italy and Germany. See entry above (for previous lecture).

R. Asher ben Yehiel ('Rosh') (1250 – 1327) – Probably born in Cologne and died in Toledo, Spain. Major Talmudist who became the acknowledged Halachic (legal) authority in Germany. Left there in 1503. Importantly, he introduced the French/German discipline of Talmud study to Spain.

Chasidei Ashkenaz ('German pietists') – Jewish mystical movement in the Rhineland during the 12th and 13th centuries. Fairly extreme asceticism (many fasts) and stressed humility and moral law. Their mystical beliefs in particular had an influence on the Tosafists.

LECTURE 5: THE JEWS FROM CHRISTIAN SPAIN AND PORTUGAL

Jews of Spain and Portugal – People who originated from the Iberian Peninsula are known as Sephardim. With the expulsion from Spain in 1492, many fled to Portugal where the majority were forcibly converted in 1497 (*conversos*). As these eventually escaped to other parts of the world, many reverted to Judaism. A number went to the Ashkenazi world and got absorbed there.

Samuel ibn Tibbon (c. 1150 – c. 1230) - Jewish philosopher and doctor who lived and worked in Provence. Best known for his translations of Jewish rabbinic literature from Arabic to Hebrew, e.g. Maimonides. Provence was eventually absorbed into the rest of France. Member of a famous family.

David Kimhi (1160–1235) – **Also from Provence**, a medieval rabbi, biblical commentator, philosopher, and grammarian and member of a famous family. Provence was a place influenced by Spain and the Ashkenazi world. Kimhi was a part of the ‘Chochmei Provence’ (wise ones of Provence).

Reconquista – This is a long series of wars and battles between the Christian Kingdoms and the Muslim Moors for gradual control of the Iberian Peninsula. It lasted for a good portion of the Middle Ages from 718 to 1492. The Christians won.

Conversos - Jews who publicly recanted the Jewish faith and adopted Christianity under the pressure of the Spanish Inquisition. Sometimes called New Christians. Many eventually reverted to Judaism.

Sephardim – Jews of Spanish or Portuguese descent, with their own distinctive dialect of Spanish - (Ladino), customs, and rituals, who after the Spanish Expulsion, ended up in North Africa, the Middle East, some European countries and the Americas. In contrast to Ashkenazim.

Gracia Mendes Nasi (1510 – 1569) – Portuguese (*converso*) very wealthy businesswoman, patron of the arts, and a formidable leader and supporter of the Sephardi world.

Menasseh ben Israel (1604 – 1657) - a Portuguese-Dutch rabbi, kabbalist, writer, diplomat, printer, and publisher. Settled in Amsterdam. Helped bring back Jews to England.

Baruch Spinoza (1632 – 1677) - Dutch philosopher of Portuguese-Jewish origin, born in Amsterdam. Was excommunicated from the Jewish community but did not become a Christian. A pantheist.

David Reubeni and Solomon Molcho – Messianic figures. Reuveni (1490–1535/1541?) was a political activist, known as a ‘half-mystic, half-adventurer’. Molcho (c. 1500 – 1532) was a Portuguese Jewish mystic and messiah claimant who ultimately tried to join forces with Reubeni.

Sabbatai Zevi (1626 – 1676) a Jewish mystic and ordained rabbi from Smyrna in Turkey. A kabbalist Zevi, who was active throughout the Ottoman Empire, claimed to be the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. Created a mass movement of near hysteria among Jews. Finally converted to Islam.

LECTURE 6: THE PRE-MODERN ERA: JEWS MOVE EAST TO POLAND

Casimir III (1310 – 1370) – Casimir the Great reigned as the King of Poland from 1333 to 1370. He allowed Jews to settle in Poland in great numbers and protected them. About 70 percent of the world's European Jews (Ashkenazi) can trace their ancestry to Poland due to Casimir's reforms.

Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – a federation of Poland and Lithuania ruled by a common monarch in a real union, who was both King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania. Existed from 1569 – 1795. One of the largest and most populous countries in 17th-century Europe.

Jewish Golden Age in Poland – from the 13th to the 17th centuries, when the Jewish population increased tremendously, Jews were relatively free and there was an intellectual and religious flourishing.

Council of Four Lands - the central body of Jewish authority in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth from the second half of the 16th century to 1764, located in Lublin. Comprised Greater Poland, Little Poland, Galicia (with Podolia) and Volhynia. It was also called the Jewish *Sejm* (congress).

Shtetl - means ‘little town’ (Yiddish). Shtetls were small market towns in Russia and Poland that shared a unique socio-cultural community pattern during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Jews were governed by a community council, a *kahal*. The kahal oversaw civil and religious affairs, from collecting taxes to dispensing charity.

R. Jacob Pollack (1470 – 1541) - rabbi and first Polish halakhic (legal) authority. Torah scholar.

R. Moses Isserles (1530 – 1572) - also known by the acronym Rema; eminent rabbi, Talmudist, and posek (expert in Jewish law). Famous for writing the Mapah (tablecloth) which modified the Shulchan Aruch (the set table). This remains the main Code of Jewish Law.

Rabbi Judah Loew (1525 – 1609) – also known as the Maharal of Prague, or simply the Maharal, an important Talmudic scholar, Jewish mystic, and philosopher who, for most of his life, served as a leading rabbi in Moravia and Prague in Bohemia.

Bogdan Chmielnicki (1595 - 1657) - leader of the Cossack and peasant uprising against Polish rule in the Ukraine in 1648 which resulted in the destruction of hundreds of Jewish communities.

Baal Shem Tov (1698 – 1760) - Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Baal Shem Tov or the Besht, was a Jewish mystic and healer who is regarded as the founder of Hasidism. Revolutionized Jewish thought and practice.

CONCLUSIONS

Legacy of the Jewish medieval lows

Jews lived in Latin Christendom as the only non-Christian element. The Church, while it believed that it had to retain some Jews to witness the ‘second coming’, nevertheless, increasingly thought that Jews were very wrong in their religious beliefs. And with the persistence of superstition, anti-Judaism took on ever more fantastic beliefs, including the blood libel, host desecration and well-poisoning. Antisemitism, often supported by the political rulers, led to untold misery for many Jews. Jews also faced expulsions from England, France and Germany, frequently for economic rather than antisemitic reasons. By the end of the Middle Ages, most of Western Europe was close to ‘Judenrein’. Probably, the main **negative legacy** of the Jewish Middle Ages was for the Jews to be treated as ‘the other’, with this morphing into modern antisemitism.

Legacy of the Jewish medieval highs

Some of the successes for the Jews of the Middle Ages included: 1) demographic growth, with a relatively huge population developing in Poland; 2) economic, with skills in trade and moneylending; and 3) political, with the development of the *kahal* or self-governing community which provided social security, education and other services for its population. These successes helped the Jewish people to survive in spite of facing adversity. However, probably **the main positive legacy** for the Jews of this era was the continuing study of the Hebrew Bible and the Babylonian Talmud. This gave rise to voluminous commentaries resulting in the creation of codes of Jewish law which are still in use today. Further, the spiritual developments that took place in Poland, a community founded by the Jews of Western Christendom, has helped ensure a lasting legacy.