Review of "Reconstructing Ashkenaz: The Human Face of Franco-German Jewry, 1000–1250", by David Malkiel

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Reviewed by: Magda Teter, Wesleyan University

David Malkiel’s *Reconstructing Ashkenaz* seeks to challenge the prevalent perception of sharp cultural divisions between Jews of northern Europe, or “Ashkenaz,” and Jews of the Mediterranean world, mostly the Iberian Peninsula, or “Sefarad.” To argue that the divisions were not as stark, Malkiel focuses on several themes: martyrdom, obedience to rabbinic authority, and interactions with non-Jews. The traditional, though now increasingly challenged understanding of the culture of Jews in northern Europe in the medieval and later periods has stressed their insularity, piety, and readiness for martyrdom. Sephardic Jews, on the other hand, were considered culturally more open to outside influences, balancing their “Jewishness” with their engagement in non-Jewish culture, sometimes transgressing religious precepts and disobeying rabbinic authority. This dichotomous representation of medieval Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews has its roots in the modern period, when Jews in Germany and other northern European countries began to look for ways to integrate, culturally and politically, into the emerging modern states. By the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, differences between Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews were indeed starker, and their experience of modernity different, in part because of each group’s experience of the past.

There is no doubt that there are differences, sometimes even quite acute, between the cultures of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, but Malkiel is right that these distinctions may have been exaggerated and misunderstood by historians. The book seeks to challenge the myth of Ashkenazi isolation and communal autonomy, and present Ashkenazi Jews as much more textured historical actors, actively participating in the social and cultural developments of the larger society in which they lived. The differences, Malkiel argues, are much softer than has been accepted until recently. The premise of the book is, thus, important, the execution, however, more disappointing.

The book’s important contributions are often lost in long-winded discussions of scholarly debates that contain numerous quotes and details, too internal and specific to Jewish historiography that may leave scholars not familiar with all the characters—who are often not introduced, except in shorthand by their last names—lost. At one point, the author admits in passing, “The object of our study turns out to be the historians as much as or more than subjects of their investigation” (72). Although it is important to discuss historiography to correct our understanding of history, such corrections cannot be made effectively without telling the history through primary sources. Yet, primary sources in this book seem like a prop used to score historiographic points rather than tell the (corrected) story. The book and its historiographic impact would have been stronger if the balance were reversed and the story were told through the sources, allowing the author to highlight problems within historiography. As is, however, the debates with historians take precedence over telling history; quotes from historians predominate, obscuring the “human face” of the book’s medieval subjects. And so, for a book that seeks to tell the story of medieval Ashkenazic Jews anew there is not enough storytelling. For example, discussing “apostasy” (itself a loaded term), the author challenges earlier historians’ apologetic approach to Jewish conversions to Christianity, arguing that the “apostasy” was a more common phenomenon; but again, primary sources supporting this important statement are nearly missing. Rabbenu Tam,
a medieval Jewish leader, is cited, and one paragraph is devoted to “the volume of legal sources about the apostate’s right to inherit.” It seems that a more effective challenge to earlier historians would have been inclusion of the stories of these converts and a detailed discussion of primary sources supporting the author’s claims (118–21, 138.) Because of this focus on minute points within internal debates in Jewish historiography, sometimes in a tone that reads unnecessarily as attacks on other historians, the book often appears as if it were a fruit of discussions in a graduate seminar on medieval Jewish history.

Historiographic books, of course, have an important place in scholarship. The best ones take works of historians and locate them in historical contexts of the authors’ lives. Reconstructing Ashkenaz is a hybrid; it wants to be a book about medieval Jewish history and a historiographic critique of earlier historians’ works. Being so, the book does not accomplish most effectively what either more narrative, if still revisionist historical or historiographic works could accomplish separately. (Some of the problems with the book could have been perhaps remedied in the editorial process.) Although the book addresses an important subject of stereotypes in representing Jews of “Ashkenaz” and “Sefarad” that had been skewed by decades of sometimes ideologically motivated studies and although the book does reach valuable conclusions, its format—far too insular for a broader, even scholarly, audience—will limit the book’s appeal as a possible text to be adopted in classrooms and thereby its potentially broader impact.


Reviewed by: Jessica A. Boon, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill

The field of biblical reception history emphasizes interdisciplinary work between biblical studies and the history of Christian thought and practice, yet usually configures its field of inquiry around the Bible as a whole or around individual books of the Bible. As a result, it leaves aside the multiple and rich arenas of literature, art, and drama that in certain eras depended on a cultural framework imbued with biblical language and stories. O’Reilly, a scholar of Spanish Golden Age religion and the arts, articulates in his book what can be termed a new method of biblical reception history; he acknowledges the different levels—latinate and vernacular—of biblical literacy that authors and audiences held in common and posits that no intellectual history of any piece of literature or art in the early modern era is complete without attention to its biblical sources. Of particular interest is his insight that an author’s allusions to the Bible may not always have been intentional, but can nevertheless be tracked to a common trope initially disseminated by devotional literature as well as by theologians and biblical exegetes. O’Reilly thus argues in part that no type of literature or art in the Golden Age can be fully analyzed without crossing disciplinary boundaries, for religious literature generated components critical to various types of apparently secular works. As he states in the introduction: “Normally [biblical images] function as part of the matrix of symbols and myths by which Golden Age Spaniards interpreted the world in which they lived.” Yet he does not consider only putatively secular works, but also religious art and texts whose biblical framework has so far escaped scholarly notice.

The six chapters of the book contain six case studies—travelogues, devotional guides, picaresque fiction, religious poetry, drama, and painting—all of which he suggests are