



Jonathan I. Israel. *Diasporas within a Diaspora: Jews, Crypto-Jews and the World Maritime Empires, 1540-1740.* Leiden: Brill, 2002. 613 pp. \$226.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-12765-4.

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Published on H-Atlantic (May, 2006)

Sephardic Jews in the Atlantic World: Agents and Victims of Empire

Covering an intrepid and impressive range of intellectual, economic, military, and social history, Jonathan Israel has in recent years established himself very much as a scholar of the early modern Atlantic world, although none of his book titles specifically announce this provenance and I doubt he himself would claim it. In this recent work, Israel comes perhaps closest to an explicit treatment of an Atlantic-world phenomenon (though one by no means purely so), the international maritime trading networks of the Sephardic Jews—Jews of Spanish and Portuguese extraction—and their (forcibly) converted kin, the New Christians or *conversos*. In a series of eighteen interlinking studies—nine new essays and an equal number of reworked versions of previously published essays—Israel delineates (with remarkable thoroughness, innovative conceptualization, efficient and muscular writing, and convincing argumentation) the contours of the Sephardic/crypto-Jewish trading networks between around 1500 and 1750 and their political, religious, economic, and social contexts. Israel's topic, the Sephardic/crypto-Jewish diaspora and trading networks, comprises a wonderfully representative Atlantic world theme, one which has been strangely marginal to, yet is also typical of, the concerns of this young and still-unfolding field. Though Israel devotes much attention to developments in the Mediterranean region and eastward, I will here concentrate on the Atlantic side of things. In so doing, I am not trying to force Israel or his analysis unfairly into an Atlantic studies rubric, but wish only to examine it from such a perspective.

Israel lays out the general causes of Sephardic success succinctly and elegantly in his introduction. His survey, like other important recent works (some of which are mentioned below), disproves conclusively the notion famously maintained by the late historian of the Jews Cecil Roth that the Jewish element was

“inevitably ... the active factor in the main before the fifteenth century and the passive one thereafter.”[1] This old-fashioned, Eurocentric perspective is one of several challenged by the introduction of an Atlantic-world vantage point.

Unlike their medieval counterparts elsewhere, the Jews of the Iberian peninsula remained fairly well off despite the systematic persecution directed against them. By the time of their expulsion from the Spanish peninsular provinces in 1492, many had (been) converted to Catholicism, thus keeping their property and valuables, while also gaining emancipation from the “oppressive restrictions and pressures” they had faced as Jews, and which their still-Jewish relatives continued to face (p. 7). Secondly, the majority of those expelled fled either to Portugal (where they faced forcible conversion en masse in 1497, the reason scholars give for their later unity and Jewish allegiance) or to the Ottoman empire, precisely the two national entities poised to transform the world's economic configuration. In the former country and, later, its colonies, members of this population operated as Christians, while the Ottoman sultans, out of economic self-interest, generally freed the arriving Sephardic Jews of any anti-Jewish economic handicaps. Finally, the increasingly widespread Sephardic/crypto-Jewish diaspora maintained easy internal communications due to shared “Iberian background, speech, and culture,” and frequent “close social and family ties” (p. 7). With these advantages, as well as the Sephardic/crypto-Jewish experience and skill in negotiating multi-confessional and cross-cultural situations, they handily outmaneuvered other ethno-religious trading diasporas (such as the Huguenots, Armenians, Greeks) and found productive niches within or between the trade orbits of many nations. According to Israel, the Sephardic/crypto-Jewish networks alone managed to

traverse all of the continents, all four of the major religious zones (Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, and Muslim) and all six of the major European overseas and colonial powers (Venice, Portugal, Spain, Holland, England, France).

Though restating with perhaps unprecedented force and creativity the commercial success of the Sephardic/crypto-Jewish diaspora, the real glory of Israel's study resides in the details, which follow for roughly six hundred pages and remain beyond the power of any one reviewer to summarize. (Those interested in an excellent overview of the Sephardic/crypto-Jewish trading networks should simply read the introduction.) This study goes well beyond mere economic history, however, shedding light on the active and confident diplomatic and political efforts of various Sephardic communities and leading individuals. Israel additionally contemplates the relations the above factors bore at times to Sephardic and crypto-Jewish millenarianism. Based on decades of research, Israel has expertly mined archival sources from a variety of continental and colonial settings, as well as primary and secondary literature in several European languages and covering several geographical theaters. Because of his vast knowledge of the historical terrain of numerous locales from numerous perspectives, he is able to see things and make connections narrow specialists might well miss, indeed have missed. Israel also integrates new research, often to admirable effect.

From the Atlantic perspective, the major Sephardic entrepôts—Amsterdam, Hamburg, and Livorno—all began in the 1590s. Among other things, the Sephardic merchants in these cities linked Brazil and Portugal with northern Europe. However, it was in contemporary Venice, the fourth main Sephardic center, where, for the first time, the exiled Portuguese *conversos* returning to Judaism merged with the established Sephardic community to forge a unified Sephardic congregation, one not based on specific place of origin, as had previously been the practice (pp. 76-77). Israel astutely argues that as this new Levantine-Ponentine “western” alliance became the norm throughout the Sephardic diaspora, it led, in part, to the well-known close-knit commercial cooperation between New Christian and openly Jewish individuals.

The Sephardic contribution to seventeenth-century Dutch maritime commercial and colonial success is already well known, though Israel, himself par-

tially responsible for this knowledge, manages to recapitulate it here with fresh insights into the global context. He does this especially well in his essays on the Sephardim of Curacao (chapter 16) and on Sephardic involvement in the struggle over Spanish Succession at the beginning of the eighteenth century (chapter 17), the latter constituting the beginning of the end of Sephardic international commerce. One essay (chapter 14) offers a compelling and insightful examination of the Amsterdam stock exchange, perhaps the central hub of late-seventeenth-century global capitalism, and the significant role the Sephardim played in and around it, a role not always seen positively by their contemporaries. In the first half of the century, some of these same Sephardim, along with local Jews, supplied munitions to the corsair republic of Saleh, aided in the resale of goods captured from European ships and the ransoming of captives, and even sponsored some of the pirate vessels. Crypto-Jews and Sephardim in southern France played major roles at various points in importing and processing colonial goods, shipping wool from Spain, and trading French goods into Spain, as well as in the trade in wine and other goods with the Canary Islands. For a time in the mid-seventeenth century, the Sephardim also played a role in the French Caribbean islands. English Sephardim contributed their share as well, from both the motherland and the colonies, though never equaling the central role of their Dutch counterparts, a gap Israel convincingly explains (chapter 16).

Between 1580 and 1640, Portuguese New Christians flourished in the trade, licit and often illicit, linking Potosí (the silver center and hence economic engine of the Spanish Americas), Tucumán, Buenos Aires, and the Río de la Plata with Europe, frequently via Brazil, and often in partnership with Dutch interlopers and Sephardim in Amsterdam. In seventeenth-century New Spain, Portuguese New Christians established a “remarkable and flourishing” (p. 97) trade network between Mexico City, Veracruz, Guadalajara, Puebla, and Zacatecas, trading goods from and to places as far away as Seville, Central America, Cuba, Brazil, Peru, Buenos Aires, the Canaries, and the Philippines. This network, dealing in both legal and contraband items such as textiles (linens, woolens, Chinese silks), cacao, and slaves, collapsed with the inquisitorial persecutions of the middle of the century.

New Christian commercial success appears all the more incredible given the religiously and politically motivated persecution thrown their way in Iberian

territories, though which followed which remains a matter of much debate. Israel's remarkable command of archival and other primary sources allows him to show the ways in which New Christians and Sephardim worked with one another across political, religious, and cultural boundaries, often succeeding precisely because these boundaries created a need for their very activities to begin with. Dutch efforts to ensure that the goods of Sephardim in their dominions would not be confiscated by the Inquisition if found in the possession of Portuguese New Christians in Iberian territories hint at one means of Sephardic success. Through examples such as this, Israel reveals once again the manner in which the two related populations—Jewish and New Christian—were used by various European powers for internal reasons of state and economy, and contained or ousted when reasons of state, religion, or economy dictated, as well as, contrarily, the likely motivations Sephardim might have had for undermining Spanish and Portuguese efforts, or backing Portugal when it struggled against Spain.

From the perspective of Jewish or even religious studies this book could be stronger. Israel never defines some of the basic demographic terms he uses throughout the work; it is unclear whether he uses “*conversos*,” “New Christians,” “crypto-Jews,” and “marranos” as synonyms or agrees with Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's famous ideological and sociological distinction between the first two terms and the latter two, in which the latter two refer to those with “Jewish” loyalties, affiliations, or beliefs. Early on, Israel uses “crypto-Jews” in Yerushalmi's sense (p. 19), but he does not reveal whether this is the meaning readers are to assume elsewhere in the text. Israel often assumes that readers know as much as he does. Thus, he alludes to the “ambivalence, confusion, and hesitation pervaded with underlying contradictions” regarding Judaism in the famous Portuguese text of the marrano Samuel Usque, *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel* (1553), but gives no concrete examples (p. 44). Considering that Israel's topic focuses on a population whose Jewishness remained (and remains in scholarship) extremely complex, exploration of the sociology and identity formation of this population would have been welcome, based on work by investigators such as Jose Faur or Thomas Glick. Israel at one point refers to *conversos* living in Italy “within *orthodox* Judaism” (emphasis added, p. 116), an anachronistic term from the nineteenth century that did not exist at the time. When treating North

Africa, Israel repeatedly uses the term “ghetto”—a specifically European invention and moniker—to describe the separate Jewish habitations of many cities, when the Arabic-language term *mellah* would have been more accurate (it finally appears on p. 441). Though a master of the historical literature, some gaps inevitably appear. Israel seems unaware of the scholar of the Portuguese Inquisition, Elias Lipiner, who wrote on the Brazilian judaizer, Isaac de Castro Tartas, martyred by the Lisbon Inquisition; yet Israel discusses the latter at length (pp. 368, 376–77). When treating Dutch Brazil and the Sephardim there, Israel relies on older and to some degree out of date works, such as those by Jewish scholars (defined institutionally, not in terms of personal background or belief) Herbert Bloom and Arnold Wiznitzer, instead of also mining the more recent and, to my mind, more thorough studies by José Antonio Gonsalves de Mello, though he lists one of the latter in the bibliography.

Clearly, for instance, the commercial success of the Sephardic/crypto-Jewish trading networks stemmed from a combination of cultural, social, and mercantile ties. Yet readers gain a sense of this interplay only *en passant*, mostly in discussions of the lives of particular individuals. Given the very religious and cultural diversity of the Sephardic/New Christian population that Israel himself emphasizes, one would like to know more about how trading success derived from participants' “common background, experience and emotion” (p. 97), as he writes about the overwhelmingly Portuguese New Christians of New Spain, and what these factors actually meant. It may well be true that the crypto-Jewish sector shared an “experience of concealment, subterfuge and persecution” (p. 97), but surely sincerely devout New Christians understood all this rather differently, as Israel shows elsewhere in the book. Ultimately, the difficulty is precisely deciphering the often obscured and shifting religious motivations and allegiances of these individuals—which Israel himself recognizes. New Christians in Iberian territories, who traded and cooperated with open Jews elsewhere, cannot automatically be rendered thereby as crypto-Jews. The emphasis in Israel's implicit assumption of crypto-Judaism leads him, unfortunately, in my opinion, to maximize the Jewishness of New Christians. His uncritical reading of sources leads him to ignore distinct possibilities. New Christians in the Americas who remitted monies to Jewish family members in Amsterdam may have been motivated

by the strength of family ties and not religious loyalty. Those who traded with open Jews may have felt merely, as so many individuals told their inquisitors, that Catholic particularism and triumphalism, and Catholic segregationist attitudes, were obsolete, dangerous, and inhuman, especially if they harbored thoughts of the horrors wreaked by the Inquisitions on their own persons or families, and that therefore what they were doing in order to make a living was not problematic. Individuals who left Jewish locales in Europe for Catholic ones in the Americas might have cared as little for the stringencies of rabbinic Judaism as they did for those of Catholicism. As the vast library of Inquisition studies shows, witnesses to inquisitorial authorities, including the accused themselves as well as inquisitors, brought a slew of pressures and motivations with them that often make much of their testimony highly suspect. Ironically, Israel often acknowledges and examines precisely such dissonances when he comes to discuss the New Christians who fled to Sephardic centers or to southern France, though he consistently qualifies their alleged Jewishness. Perhaps this last move is a result of his standing as something of an autodidact when it comes to Jewish history. Or perhaps it results from a kind of willfully contrarian stance—neither necessarily bad. Ultimately, Israel does remind us to reconsider, even if perhaps against the grain of his thesis, the astonishing trans-Atlantic and, in some cases, fluid links between openly Jewish and New Christian sister communities, *despite* religious differences both sincere or strategic. Perhaps, then, Israel's title should have referred to Jews and New Christians instead of crypto-Jews. Still, in light of the very confluence of the Sephardic/New Christian diaspora and the Atlantic world (and other overseas colonies) that interests him, it is disappointing that he does not attempt the kind of speculations regarding the nature of New Christian life or crypto-Jewish religiosity or Jewishness and their relation to the novelty of Atlantic world existence or "modernity" offered by scholars such as Nathan Wachtel, Ellis Rivkin, Jose Faur, John Edwards, Thomas Glick, or Anita Novisky, which would have been most welcome. The one exception comprises his analysis of Menasseh ben Israel and the Dutch Sephardic movement for Sephardic colonization in the Americas and the readmission of the Jews to England (chapter 11).

Given that Atlantic studies is characterized by a high degree of theorizing, Israel's consistent reluctance to engage on this level lends these essays a

decidedly old-school feel of the so-called ships, guns, and ports approach. This is a history from the top down, even if part of the top entails the elites of still-marginalized groups. Perhaps not surprisingly, since the main topic is commerce, Israel shows the greatest interest in the wealthy and in the courtiers, diplomats, princes, and kings who people his accounts. Israel's essays are strong on the narrative recreation of historical scenarios, but short on the elaboration of analysis and abstracting phenomena from particular, concrete situations. Israel seems not to have been influenced by the burgeoning field of cultural studies, an especially significant approach in Atlantic studies. I would have liked to gain a better sense of how Israel conceives of the activities—commercial and political—of the Sephardim he considers. It is easy to see how they were both "agents and victims" of the various great colonial powers, as he felicitously puts it in his introduction (p. 1). They typically referred to themselves and were referred to as members of "the nation," a term that wavered between meaning "Portuguese New Christians" and "Portuguese Jews," but did they actually comprise a separate "nation" among other national players, acting in concert with a coherent "national" goal or policy? If so, to what degree, and in what ways? Such questions seem particularly pressing for a study that bridges both open Jewish communities and those living in disguise. (Ellis Rivkin famously wrote that the New Christians, with their troubled spiritual/intellectual pedigree, were more "crypto-individualists" than anything else.) Is this population, or cluster of populations, merely another, albeit tremendously successful, religio-ethnic group in the mongrel spree that constituted Atlantic-world demographic change? How do they compare, in these regards, to the Irish, Basques, Quakers, or Huguenots, not just in terms of their commercial success, but in terms of elements such as their communal self-consciousness, political self-organization, internal conflicts, and relations with dominant majorities and external powers? One potential avenue, fruitfully explored in a new book by sociologist Julia Adams, concerns the symbiotic connections between merchant capitalism and ruling families in the national spheres of seventeenth-century Holland, England, and France, a phenomenon easily comparable to the Sephardic world (which Adams completely neglects) and ripe for further analysis, though some important work has already been done.[2] Of course, Adams builds on Israel's positivist achievements, which she cites repeatedly.

Diasporas within a Diaspora is not so much an interdisciplinary work as one that stands uneasily between fields (economic, political, military, social, and religious history), a status that lends it both strengths and weaknesses. When it comes to overseas expansion, colonialism, and the world, Israel seems more interested in how things appear from the perspective of the European center. This is not a study of the development of the peripheries in their own right. On the other hand, Israel's nearly global focus reminds us that the early modern Atlantic world did not exist in isolation; and that the very question of what constitutes the Atlantic world remains fraught with inexorable perspectival issues. Israel implicitly reminds us too that conceptualizations of an Atlantic world cannot be severed from other global events. Still, in terms of David Armitage's well-known construction, Israel does achieve a Circum-Atlantic History, but not really a Trans-Atlantic History.

In light of his trans-national coverage, familiarity with Arabic, Turkish, and Hebrew materials would only improve and nuance Israel's already panoramic vantage point. (I say this as a mere mortal beset with my own great linguistic limitations.) To provide so much discussion of events in Jewish and Muslim spheres without access to their perspectives in their own languages strikes me as an unforgivable methodological lack (in terms of Jews, here I am referring to North African Jews, most of whom were not Spanish-speaking, but even among the Sephardim much of their writing was in Hebrew). Despite Israel's sympathetic approach, and tremendous and often successful efforts to provide Jewish or Muslim views of things, we are left by default circumscribed within a Euro-

centric gaze.

Perhaps an inevitable result of amassing free-standing essays, a certain amount of repetition of material remains. I find undemocratic and presumptuous the older style of leaving quotations in French or Italian without translation, as happens throughout the book, but here, even more unfairly, passages in Dutch sometimes remain untranslated. On a more picayune level, the volume, while, in general, excellently produced in the Brill manner, contains a disturbingly high number of editorial sins: missing commas, missing words, typos (all too many), and, particularly frustrating, a large number of sources named, only incompletely, in the footnotes, but which do not appear in the bibliography.

All in all, though, Jonathan Israel's book makes a welcome addition to the libraries of Jewish and Atlantic studies. It is rich in facts, details, and important new perspectives, all of which will serve future researchers in a number of fields as a basis for proceeding. It is chiefly a chronological survey, though unfortunately without an overview. Those seeking a cohesive and coherent summation of the commercial, social, and cultural faces of the Sephardic/crypto-Jewish diasporas will have to hope Israel or another equally qualified scholar returns to perform the task.

Notes

- [1]. Cecil Roth, *The Jews in the Renaissance* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1964), p. xii.
- [2]. Julia Adams, *The Familial State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

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Citation: Jonathan Schorsch. Review of Israel, Jonathan I., *Diasporas within a Diaspora: Jews, Crypto-Jews and the World Maritime Empires, 1540-1740*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. May, 2006.

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