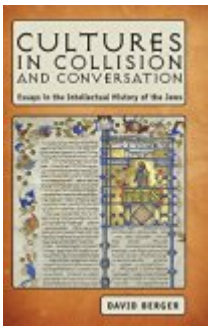
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



David Berger. *Cultures in Collision and Conversation: Essays in the Intellectual History of the Jews.* Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011. xiii + 367 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-936235-24-7.

Reviewed by Robbie Harris

Published on H-Judaic (April, 2012)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

The essays contained in this volume represent a crowning achievement in a life of scholarship that primarily has been devoted to exploring polemical interaction of Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages. In a career spanning nearly half a century, David Berger has dedicated himself both to studying the relationship of Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages, and to participating in that dialogue in contemporary times. Many historians of religion may know him first for his 1979 publication, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages*; this work (which contains an edition and translation of *Nizzahon Vetus*, an important Jewish anti-Christian polemic of the thirteenth century) certainly confirmed Berger as a prominent observer of medieval polemics. However, the intervening years have seen Berger continue to explore the nature and contours of Jewish and Christian interaction. Whereas an earlier collection of articles published in 2010, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations*, directly addressed the interplay of Judaism and Christianity, the present volume, *Cultures in Collision and Conversation,* explores a variety of subjects in the history of Jewish thought, more broadly construed. Thus, in a sense it may be seen as a companion volume to the previous collection.

Cultures in Collision and Conversation is composed entirely of previously published work; the only critique I would offer here is that the essays (or at least bibliographic references cited in the footnotes) were not updated to reflect emerging trends in contemporary scholarship. The volume is divided into four sections. The first, entitled "The Cultural Environment: Challenge and Response," is the longest, and contains eight essays: "Identity, Ideology, and Faith: Some Personal Reflections on the Social, Cultural and Spiritual Value of the Academic Study of Judaism"; "Judaism and General Culture in Medieval and Early Modern Times"; "How Did Nahmanides Propose to Resolve the Maimonidean Controversy?"; "Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides"; "Polemic, Exegesis, Philosophy, and Science: Reflections of the Tenacity of Ashkenazic Modes of

Thought"; "Malbim's Secular Knowledge and His Relationship to the Spirit of the Haskalah"; "The Uses of Maimonides by Twentieth-Century Jewry"; and "The Institute for Jewish Studies on Its Eightieth Anniversary."

The book's second section, "Interpreting the Bible," comprises two articles: "'The Wisest of All Men': Solomon's Wisdom in Medieval Jewish Commentaries in the Book of Kings"; and "On the Morality of the Patriarchs in Jewish Polemic and Exegesis." In the third section, "Yearning for Redemption," five essays are included: "Three Typological Themes in Early Jewish Messianism: Messiah Son of Joseph, Rabbinic Calculations, and the Figure of Armilus"; "Some Ironic Consequences of Maimonides' Rationalist Approach to the Messianic Age"; "Sephardic and Ashkenazic Messianism in the Middle Ages: An Examination of the Historiographical Controversy"; "Maccabees, Zealots, and Josephus: The Impact of Zionism on Joseph Klausner's History of the Second Temple"; and "The Fragility of Religious Doctrine: Accounting for Orthodox Acquiescence in the Belief in a Second Coming." The volume concludes with an epilogue entitled "The Image of his Father: On the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Death of *Hadoar* Author Isaiah Berger."

With such a wide variety of subjects addressed, a review such as this can really only touch on a very few aspects of the book, chosen somewhat arbitrarily. With that caveat in mind, let us consider Berger's treatment of King Solomon in medieval Jewish biblical exegesis. The most intractable problem with regard to the figure of Solomon for any traditional Jewish interpreter, of course, is 1 Kings 11, the biblical narrator's damning indictment of the negative dimensions of Solomon's rule. Contrary to the figure of "Solomon the Wise" or "Solomon, the builder of the Temple," as these are presented in other biblical texts in Kings and (especially) Chronicles, 1 Kings 11 evaluates Solomon as a sinful figure, both as one who married foreign women and, frankly, who functionally became an apostate (see vv. 4–10 in particular). Berger focuses first on Jewish approaches to understanding Solomon's wisdom and, in particular, evaluating this in light of the wisdom of Moses: if the former was the "wisest of all men" (1 Kings 5:11), how is this to be understood in light of the tradition's high regard for Moses as the conveyer of Divine Wisdom?! Berger contrasts the midrashically based comments about Solomon by some of the northern French exegetes (Rashi, R. Yosef Kara) with the more philosophically inclined approach of commentators from the Mediterranean world (e.g., ibn Kaspi, Ralbag, Radak); he concludes his survey with an examination of the fifteenth-century Spanish exile, Abarbanel. In particular, Berger points out the (unsurprising) lack of interest in "metaphysical insights" among the northern Europeans and contrasts this with the determination to find philosophical truths among commentators who were closer to the orbit of Muslim culture, science, and philosophy. As he transitions to consider the more problematic aspects of the figure of Solomon, Berger first raises the thorny issue of Solomon's marriage to Pharaoh's daughter (1 Kings 3:1) and, afterwards, the great difficulties of 1 Kings 11. Berger surveys the approaches of his chosen exegetes, and evaluates their appraisal both in light of Deuteronomic theology and rabbinic halakha. The final issue that he raises with regard to the character of Solomon is a kind of "political analysis," that is, to what extent were Solomon's administrative and taxation policies an ill reflection of the biblical statement about his "wisdom"? Berger finds that while the Provencal exegetes (Radak and Ralbag) comment on governmental policy dimensions of the biblical narrative, the northern French commentators do not reflect on this; he assays a guess that this deficiency is due to the literary nature of their commentaries. One might have hoped for a more extended consideration of this judgment but that is a minor quibble in the context of Berger's broader analysis. In this essay as much as in any of the others in

the volume, Berger's erudition shines through: completely in conversation both with classical sources and modern scholarship, Berger combines this expertise with an ability to write concisely and convey his ideas clearly--truly a ***berakhah kefulah***, a "double blessing."

Readers will find many other such treasures in this volume. Berger's essay on the patriarchs in medieval biblical exegesis and polemical literature is a case in point: in focusing on the moral behavior of what were for medieval Jewry in particular foundational religious figures, Berger brilliantly surveys such commentators as Ramban, Bekhor Shor, and the sixteenth-century exegete, Ephraim Lunshitz (the so-called ***Keli Yeqar***) and sources of polemical literature such as ***Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*** and the ***Nitzahon Vetus***. Not content to end here, Berger moves his purview into the twentieth century and encompasses a wide array of modern scholars in his effort to more fully understand the moral implications of biblical narrative. While some might regret his occasional foray here into what amounts to a modern polemic against the broader implications of historical-critical biblical scholarship, it is to be noted that Berger does so on academic grounds, which is, of course, his prerogative. ***Cultures in Collision and Conversation*** will find a proud place alongside his other scholarly publications.