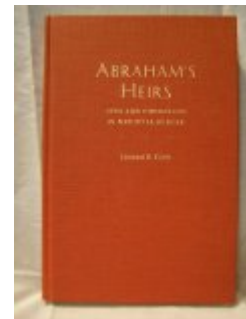


Leonard B. Glick. *Abraham's Heirs: Jews and Christians in Medieval Europe.*
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Reviewed by Adam Shear

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Leonard Glick, a cultural anthropologist at Hampshire College, has produced an engaging and well-written book which surveys the history of Ashkenazic Jewry in medieval Europe, with a particular focus on Jewish-Christian relations. Beginning with a summary of the Jewish-Christian split in late antiquity, Glick traces the fortunes of Ashkenazic Jews from the Merovingian period through approximately the end of the sixteenth century. His concentration is on Ashkenazim living in (what is now) northern France and Germany, but he also includes a chapter which summarizes the history of the short-lived Ashkenazic Jewish community in medieval England. Also, and by way of comparison, he occasionally discusses non-Ashkenazic Jews in Provence and Spain.

Glick's tale is a familiar one for most students of medieval Jewish history. In the Merovingian and early Carolingian period, Jews in France and Germany continued to enjoy many of the rights and privileges they had held under the Roman Empire. They were able to carve out a niche for themselves as merchants and traders and benefited from the stability brought by centralizing

monarchs like Charlemagne and his son Louis. However, as European society became more and more organized by feudalism and as Christianity took hold more deeply among the masses of Europeans, the position of the Jews weakened. At the same time, as the European economy became more commercialized, Jews gradually were squeezed out of mercantile activity and into moneylending, which in turn generated increased resentment of Jews in the general population. Finally, the massacres and martyrdom of Jews in the First Crusade marked the beginning of a four-century decline for Jews in Western Europe culminating in expulsions from England, France, and many cities in Germany. This process—along with the Spanish expulsion in 1492—led to an almost complete absence of Jews from Western Europe by 1500.

Glick's organizational scheme for the book is almost entirely chronological, with some analysis interspersed throughout his narrative. This makes for a very readable survey and is useful for orienting readers with limited knowledge of medieval European and Jewish history. This ap-

proach stands in contrast to other surveys of the medieval Ashkenazic experience, such as Kenneth Stow's recent *Alienated Minority* (Cambridge, MA, 1992) or Israel Abrahams' nineteenth-century classic, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, both of which are organized thematically.

Indeed, one of the virtues of Glick's book is that he includes a fair amount of the general historical background to this era of Jewish history. Many of the readers of this book -- whether outside of the academy or undergraduates in survey courses -- may be unfamiliar with medieval European history. Glick's contextualizing of Jewish society and of Jewish-Christian relations against the larger background of medieval political, social and cultural history makes his book an accessible introduction to this period.

Unfortunately, Glick's organizational scheme entails a tradeoff. The dispersal of Glick's analytic/interpretative interludes makes it more difficult for him to offer an overall interpretation of this history--or at least more difficult for the reader to piece together such an interpretation. This is all the more disappointing because Glick, in his preface to the work, does hint at an overall thesis; unfortunately, this thesis is not fully developed over the course of the book. Glick suggests that the history of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry can be best understood by focusing on the distinctiveness of the Jew in medieval society: "Far from being just one of many groups in a 'multicultural' society, Jews were the one group who stood wholly and obviously outside the mainstream: they were not *an* other people; they were *the* other people....In such a world, where being Christian and being a member of society were one and the same thing, there could be no place for Jews other than as provisionally tolerated outsiders" (p. x). And, indeed, Glick consistently returns to the notion of Jewish distinctiveness as an explanatory factor. Over the course of his narrative, he builds a case that Christians in Europe saw the Jews as different from themselves, and that this difference was

perceived negatively. For example, Glick explains, moneylending became a crucial activity in the shift to a commercial economy. Because Jews were gradually squeezed out of other professions, Jews turned toward moneylending and Christian rulers welcomed them, recognizing the importance of moneylending to commerce. Even though Christians often did engage in moneylending, because Jews were "legally" permitted to charge interest on loans to Christians, moneylending became associated with Jewishness. Now anti-Judaism could result from intertwined religious and secular motives.

Likewise, Glick sees the increasing reliance of Jews on central authorities as another example of their standing outside society. Even when charters were issued for their protection, these charters further emphasize Jewish distinctiveness. Glick is correct that Jews were seen in medieval society as having a group and not an individual identity. It should be noted, however, that this kind of group identity is common in a corporate society. Jewish reliance on kings was little different, at least in theory, than the reliance of serfs on their feudal lords. Jews certainly were "different" in that they were non-Christians in a largely Christian society--but each group in medieval society was ultimately distinctive in some way. Glick's view that Jews were the *most* distinctive of groups may be correct, but his argument would be strengthened by taking greater notice of the corporate nature of all of medieval society.

The difficulty is most apparent in Glick's discussion of the provision of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) requiring distinctive clothing for Jews and Muslims. Glick concludes that this legislation was most likely directed at Jews in Spain and Provence. He writes, "Assimilation had probably proceeded less smoothly in northern France and Germany, however, than in Spain and southern France, and it may be that the edict was directed mainly at the latter. The Jews of northern France and Germany, the most conservative in Eu-

rope, were probably already distinguishable by beards, earlocks, and clothing. The Jews of Paris may have been required to wear a distinctive badge for a time, but there is no definite evidence for a badge requirement in northern France until considerably later" (p.188). In other words, Glick reasons that the Jews of Ashkenaz must have been distinguishable because they were only later required to wear distinguishing clothing. This assumption, however, raises a question--did the Jews of Ashkenaz at some point become less different-looking than their neighbors, thereby provoking a backlash from Christian authorities which consisted of greater enforcement of this regulation from Fourth Lateran? Indeed, a few pages later, Glick cites a 1233 letter from Gregory IX to the bishops in Germany complaining that Jews in Germany wear "clothing like that everyone else" (Glick's phrase, p.196). Glick seems to be implying that prior to 1215 the Jews of Ashkenaz were distinguishable from the general population, but that sometime between 1215 and 1233 they became less so. What is needed here is a more nuanced probing of the sources and the issues. Should Gregory's complaints be taken at face value? What is the relationship between proscriptive laws and social reality? Does prohibition of a certain activity in a piece of legislation constitute sufficient evidence that such activity is on-going in society? Glick might also have posed a more fundamental question -- what did the medieval Europeans who produced these sources mean when they talked of a group being distinguishable or not?

Throughout the book, Glick considers not only Christian perceptions of Jews, but also Jewish self-perception and the shaping of Jewish culture. Here, too, his theme is distinctiveness. He argues, for example, that the values and social structure of Jewish society were largely at odds with that of feudalism. Whereas feudalism was hierarchical and based on the controlled use of violence, "Jewish society can be envisioned as a radially organized network of essentially autonomous but inti-

imately connected urban communities, by necessity egalitarian in social philosophy, that accorded highest social status only to men who combined religious learning and piety with commercial talent and political wisdom" (p. 65; cf. pp. 68-69). There is no doubt that Jews in Europe crafted a different social system and culture than that of either feudal lords or peasants. Moreover, Jews certainly stood in a different relation to the feudal lords than did other townspeople. Nevertheless, as Glick himself shows, Jews did not stand apart from feudal society entirely. Rather, they constituted one of many orders within that society. And, again, Glick offers his reader enough contradictory examples to suggest the problems with *assuming* Jewish difference. For example, Glick argues that violence "was for Jews anathema, the very antithesis of the kind of environment required for survival" (p.69). Yet, Glick also notes an incident in Le Mans in 992 in which Jews were required, by the local count, to fight a convert who had accused them of attempting to kill that count. Glick, following Robert Chazan, assumes that the Jews survived by bribing the count (and not by fighting). But Glick also notes the obvious: "that Jews were still being accorded the right of free men to fight with weapons." Again, Glick misses an opportunity to engage in a more nuanced discussion of what it means to be against violence and yet live in a violent society. The question of violence is an important one, since, as Elliott Horowitz has demonstrated, it is one that is often bound up with apologetics and with the self-perceptions of later Jewish historians.[1] While Glick criticizes Bernhard Blumenkranz for being apologetic in trying to show "that Jews in early medieval Europe were much like everyone else in most respects other than religion" (p. 280 n.12), Glick's work sometimes takes on a different apologetic tone in which Jews were different than (read: better than) others in their society.

It is somewhat disappointing that Glick does not push his analysis of Jewish difference to a deeper level and consider a more-nuanced ap-

proach, which his evidence seems to require. Although Jews may have been "the" other in medieval Europe—having a kind of meta-distinctiveness, perhaps—Glick's examples suggest a complicated pattern of acculturation, such as that discussed in Ivan Marcus's recent anthropologically-informed *Rituals of Childhood: Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe* (New Haven, 1996). Other work in Hebrew, by Israel Yuval and Elhanan Reiner, also delineate various ways in which Ashkenazic culture adapted to the general society around it.[2]

In addition to the theme of distinctiveness that he raises in the preface, Glick also hints at another interesting area for analysis. He explains that one reason for considering medieval Ashkenazic Jewry is that most Jews in contemporary America and Europe derive from this group: "I suggest that Jews in the Western world exhibit a 'cultural psychology,' a patterned set of behavioral dispositions and values, reflecting the historical experience and adaptive strategies of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry. To put it simply, contemporary Jews still think and behave in ways that derive partly from the experience of their medieval ancestors" (p. xii). For many of the behaviors and tendencies that he then lists (such as "above-average interest in radical political movements"), it is difficult to see the connection to the medieval experience. Certainly, "a vague sense of unease, feelings of not being quite at home, and acute sensitivity to hostility or aggression directed individually or categorically toward Jews" (pp. xii-xiii) seems to be as easily traceable to modern anti-semitism and the Holocaust as to medieval persecution. Nonetheless, the notion of "cultural psychology" is an intriguing one, and I would have liked to see Glick develop this argument in the course of the book. Although he hopes "that the history to follow will provide some support for the argument," he does not return to this potentially fruitful theme in any detail.

It is not uncommon for historians to complain that the scholarship of social scientists is too theoretical and overly-concerned with methodology. Ironically, in this case, this historian reader wishes for a bit more theoretical and methodological reflection from his anthropologist author. Despite these criticisms, Glick has given us a readable survey of the medieval Ashkenazic experience. Although specialists may find the book to be of limited value, general readers and scholars in other areas should discover *Abraham's Heirs* to be an accessible introduction to the field.

Notes

[1]. "Wild Men or Mild Men," lecture at the History of Emotions Conference, Institute of Advanced Studies, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, June 3, 1998. See also his "The Rite to be Reckless: On the Perpetuation and Interpretation of Purim Violence," *Poetics Today* 15,1 (Spring 1994): 9-54.

[2]. For a description of Marcus's approach as well as citations to the work of Yuval and Reiner, see Israel Ta-Shma's review of Marcus in the *Jewish Quarterly Review* 87 (1996): 233-239.

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