H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jonathan Ray. *The Jew in Medieval Iberia.* Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012. xxiv + 441 pp. $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-936235-35-3.

Reviewed by Norman Roth (University of Wisconsin, Madison)
Published on H-Judaic (January, 2013)
Commissioned by Jason Kalman

Essays on Various Aspects of Jews in Medieval Spain

There has been a spate of edited articles or essays of late, often apparently aimed at the "general readership" with little or no background in the subject. That is also the case with this work, in which almost all of the contributions are short surveys summarizing information already well known and widely available to all but the neophyte.

In spite of the title, this work deals not with "medieval Iberia" (which includes Portugal) but only Castile and Aragón, with some references to Catalonia, and while the subtitle indicates the period 1100-1500, in fact the only mention of Muslim Spain is a brief review of the career of Hasdai Ibn Shaprut and an even briefer mention of Samuel Ibn Naghrillah (the correct spelling, neither "Naghrila" nor "Nagrela") in the first chapter by Jonathan Decter, "Before Caliphs and Kings: Jewish Courtiers in Medieval Iberia." Even less attention is paid to Christian Spain, focusing almost exclusively on Isaac Abravanel (at least the spelling here is correct, unlike "Abarbanel" later in the volume). The volume includes a welcome contribution from Jane Gerber, veteran scholar in English of Jewish history in medieval Spain, a discussion of the inscriptions in the so-called El Transito Synagogue in Toledo (now renamed the National Sefardic Museum) and the light these shed on the career of Samuel ha-Levy, patron of that synagogue and treasurer of Pedro I of Castile. Mariano Gómez Aranda, one of only two Spanish scholars (despite a remarkably large cohort now working in related topics) who contributed to this work, provides an excellent survey of "The Jew as Scientist and Philosopher." In discussing Jewish contributions to the scientific works of Alfonso X, it is unfortunate that the present reviewer's study was overlooked.[1] Also, nothing is said about the extensive contributions of Jewish scientists in Aragón-Catalonia. It is also incorrect that "it has been demonstrated that Abraham Zacut was not the author [of the *Almanach perpetuum*] but Joseph Vizinus" (p. 93, n. 84). José Chabas and Bernard Goldstein, cited there, say nothing of the sort. Joseph Vecinho (correct spelling) translated the work from Castilian to Latin and also wrote a Hebrew commentary on the work.

Vivian Mann's "The Unknown Jewish Artists of Medieval Iberia," is important less for so-called unknown Jewish artists than for new information on the portrayal of Jews by non-Jewish artists. One must also object that there is far more information available on Jewish artisans and craftsmen (which perhaps ought not to have been mentioned here at all) than suggested. There are problems with the so-called Jewish silversmith Juden ben Bazla, alleged to have made an "extraordinary work in silver" for the caliph Alhakem (*sic*; better identified as al-Hakam II, p. 168). In fact, the photograph does not appear in the work cited, nor is it "silver" but rather a small box of carved wood, now in the treasury of the cathedral of Gerona. No Jew, especially in Muslim Spain, was named "Juden." The misreading is based on a book written in 1879, where the author, in fact, understood the name as "Hudzen ben Bozla," and identified him as a Muslim. The correct identification was made later: Jaudar, a eunuch and favorite of the caliph, and it was made not for al-Hakam but his son Hisham.[2] Ram Ben-Shalom provides, in the course of a general survey of the well-known rabbi "philosopher" (perhaps better described as an anti-philosophical writer) Hasdai Crescas, a brief but important new source, a letter from the community of Montalban in reply to his request for funds to aid the Jewish community of Barcelona. It is unfortunately hidden in his lengthy rehearsal of much well-known information.

The same is true of Eric Lawee's survey of "Sephardic [*sic*] Intellectuals: Challenges and Creativity (1391-1492)." His effort to prove that great "creativity" persisted until 1492 fails to convince. Among the errors is the peculiar idea that Profiat Duran (Isaac b. Moses ha-Levy) lived, "it appears," to the end of his life as a baptized Jew

(p. 364), when it is known that he did nothing of the sort and in fact penned important anti-Christian polemics following his return to Judaism. His major work, scarcely mentioned, was in fact the almost unique example of intellectual "creativity" of the period and needed substantial discussion. Isaac "Abarbanel" (why not "Abravanel" as elsewhere in the volume?) has been thoroughly studied by authors unmentioned by Lawee who concluded that he wrote little or nothing while he was still in Spain, certainly not his commentaries on the Bible. While it is undeniable that secular learning and writing was virtually nonexistent among Jews in the fifteenth century, the author ignores several important rabbis who were responsible for the revival of Talmudic learning: Isaac de León, Shem Tov Ibn al-Franji and his son Moses, Samuel Valanci (not Valenci, a converso), and others. Hartley Lachter, a new figure on the crowded landscape of writers on "Kabbalah" (why must we still use antiquated transliteration?), discusses "Jews as Masters of Secrets in Late-Thirteen Century Castile"–that is, a few famous qabalists such as Joseph Ibn Chicatillah (the correct spelling) and Moses de Leon; with respect to the former, it should be pointed out that the commentary on Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* is only questionably attributed to him.

In the economic sphere, only two articles appear. In the first, Yom Tov Assis offers some new information on "The Jews of Barcelona in Maritime Trade with the East," on which there is nonetheless much more to be said; this is followed by a very brief and unsatisfactory survey by Gregory Milton of "Jews and Finance in Medieval Iberia." Of importance is his correct statement that Jewish moneylending has been greatly overestimated and was surpassed by Christian moneylending. In fact, this has already long been known, and one misses references to the important studies by Miguel A. Ladero Quesado (relevant also for other aspects of Jewish economic activity in Castile), and for that matter relevant articles in the *Encyclopedia Medieval Jewish Civilization* (2003).

An interesting contribution which takes us beyond the normal chronological limitations of Sefarad (the expulsion of 1492) is Esperanza Alfonso's "From Al-Andalus to North Africa: The Lineage and Scholarly Genealogy of a Jewish Family," that is, the famous Abraham Gavison and his family (about whom surprisingly little has been written).The family originated in Seville, but of course it is Abraham himself who is important, as the author of a work which sometimes sheds light on people and events of late medieval Spain.

Other contributions summarize already known information and with significant omissions. Maud Kozodoy surveys "The [Jewish] Physicians in Medieval Iberia" (actually, Spain); but far more is left out than is included and major figures are not even mentioned (in spite of the extensive bibliography). Renée Levine Melammed writes the inevitable article on "The Jewish Woman in Medieval Iberia" (again, Spain only). Not only is there nothing new, once again much is missing ("Are there records of women's poetry?" we are asked on p. 259), and finally mention is made of Qasmuna, a Jewish poetess of the Muslim era who wrote in Arabic, about whom there is considerable bibliography, in addition to other female poets.[3] Given the amount of writing in recent years on the activity of Jewish women in medieval Spain, this article is rather disappointing. The extremely important role of Jewish women in promoting learning is hardly noted.

One regrets the absence of many scholars, particularly from Spain, who could have enriched this collection. The time has long since passed when writers who deal with medieval Spain can afford to ignore Spanish scholarship. Not only the venerable journal *Sefarad* but now even more the multilingual *Iberia Judaica* provides complete updates and reviews of all significant scholarship on all aspects of medieval Iberian Jewish civilization.

Notes

[1]. Norman Roth, "Jewish Collaborators in Alfonso's Scientific Work," in *Emperor of Culture: Alfonso X the Learned of Castile and His Thirteenth-Century Renaissance,* ed. Robert I. Burns (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 59-71, 223-20; available online: http://libro.uca.edu/alfonso10/emperor.htm.

[2]. Leonard Williams, *The Arts and Crafts of Older Spain* (London, Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1907), 1: 46-47, with photograph.

[3]. See important information in "Poetry in Other Languages" in *Medieval Jewish Civilization*, ed. Norman Roth (New York: Routledge, 2003), 518, col. b; Teresa Garulo, ed., *Diwan de las poetisas de al-Andalus* (Madrid: Hiperión,1986), 121-23, translation of Qasmuna's poems. There were other Jewish women who wrote Hebrew poems, including allegedly the daughter of Judah ha-Levy. See generally Carlos del Valle Rodríguez, "Poetisas hebreas de al-Andalus," *Iberia Judaica* 1 (2009): 199-208. On Mercina of Girona, not mentioned by Melammed, see Abraham M. Habermann, *'Iyunim be-shirah u-vepiyut shel yemey ha-beinayim* [Studies in Sacred and Secular Poetry in the Middle Ages] (Jerusalem: Reuben Mas, 1972), 265-267; and a translation in Shirley Kaufman, Galit Hasan-Rokem, and Tamar Hess, eds., *The Defiant Muse: Hebrew Feminist Poems from Antiquity to the Present: A Bilingual Anthology* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 1999), 64-65.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Norman Roth. Review of Ray, Jonathan, *The Jew in Medieval Iberia*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36090

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.