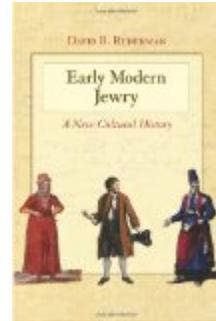


David B. Ruderman. *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. ix + 326 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-14464-1.

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Cultural History of the Jews in the Early Modern Period

David B. Ruderman's latest book *Early Modern Jewry*, the fruit of a long career of teaching and study, is a stimulating reconstruction of early modern Jewish culture, *A New Cultural History* as the subtitle states. Until quite recently, historians of both European and Jewish history have neglected the early modern period—roughly the three centuries between the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 and the *Haskalah*, the Jewish enlightenment—as a transitional time somewhere between traditional and modern, not worthy of study for its own merit. The amorphous early modern era was either seen as a mere continuation of the Middle Ages or a long foreplay to modernity. Although in the last decades several areas of the early modern Jewish experience have attracted growing attention within the scholarly community, there has hardly been an effort to understand the period as a whole. A notable exception is Jonathan Israel's *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550–1750*, first published in 1985. Israel, for the first time, defines the early modern period as a distinct epoch in European Jewish history, distinguishable from both medieval and modern times. Israel's pioneering reconstruction of early modern Jewish history is mainly a socioeconomic and political account. Ruderman seeks to augment the complex picture of early modern Jewish life by surveying its cultural components.

Ruderman understands the rich Jewish cultural life in the early modern period on a transnational level. He links together Jewish culture in Italy and the Netherlands as well as central and eastern Europe with that in the

Ottoman Empire by unearthing its “connected histories” and pointing out its larger general patterns. To characterize the cultural formation of early modern Jewry as a whole, broadly defined as “ideas and intellectual achievement in their social and political contexts,” Ruderman suggests five salient features, each of which is discussed in a separate chapter (p. 11). The first of these five primary interrelated characteristics of early modern Jewish culture the author suggests is “mobility.” He demonstrates that because Jews were on the move, due to forced mass migrations and economic hardship and the voluntary wanderings of individuals in their quest to improve their economic and social standing, they increasingly came into contact with their brothers and sisters from different cultural backgrounds, and also with non-Jews. What followed was “rapid cultural change and reactionary conservatism” (p. 14). To bolster the proposed relationship between mobility and cultural production, Ruderman cites an impressive list of prominent Jewish intellectuals who moved from place to place—among them historiographers, messianic activists, physicians, Sabbatean emissaries, and itinerant rabbis, from the exiled Sephardi Isaac Abravanel to the Eastern European maskil Solomon Maimon.

Ruderman considers “communal cohesion” the second foundation of the early modern Jewish experience. In an age of consolidation of communal and intercommunal structures of Jewish self-government, which peaked with the Council of the Four Lands in Poland-Lithuania, he convincingly argues for a growing decline of the rab-

binate that gradually lost its authority over the community to the rising power of the lay oligarchies who came to control it. The chapter also discusses important questions regarding the changing interference of absolutist state building and its mercantilist policies with Jewish autonomy and the extent of its influence on the communal structures. Next, he examines the “knowledge explosion,” which primarily followed the invention of printing. It was also encouraged by other related factors, however, such as the growing interest in Jewish books by Christian Hebraists, the broadening of Jewish learning to include secular subjects, and the entrance of Jews into the universities (medical schools in particular). As a consequence of the abovementioned changes in Jewish cultural life, the early modern period (most conspicuously the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) witnessed a “crisis of rabbinic authority,” Ruderman’s fourth topic of discussion. Community ordinances curtailed rabbis’ rights as a legal entity and their independence was subjugated to the body of lay leaders. The messianic movement, which centered on the apostate Messiah Shabbetai Zvi, especially signified the crumbling of the traditional authority of the rabbis. Although the rabbinic establishment reacted with fury against the Sabbatean heresies, Sabbateans crossed traditional religious boundaries between Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Ruderman labels this fifth phenomenon “mingled identities.” In the same category also fall the emergence of a large group of conversos on the Iberian Peninsula finally reentering the Jewish communities in Amsterdam, Hamburg, and London; (voluntary) Jewish converts to Christianity; and the new caste of Christian Hebraists making use of Judaism for their own ends. All of these religious and cultural border crossers influenced and ultimately changed the definition of Jewish and Christian identity in early modern Europe.

Early Modern Jewry structures the vast material pertaining to early modern Jewish culture, ideas, and society in both Europe and the Ottoman Empire with great erudition and clarity. For practical reasons, the Jewish experiences in England, France, North Africa, and the Middle East beyond the Land of Israel are not adequately integrated. By tracing the great lines and presenting a com-

prehensive narrative of early modern Jewish cultural history, the book makes it easily accessible for the reader. Its foremost merit, however, lies in reconstructing a distinct epoch in Jewish history tied together by five essential common features. Ruderman is of course aware of the inherent danger in generalizing and simplifying. He rightly stresses chronological and regional differences with regard to each of the five factors and seeks to integrate local and regional diversity in his argument, avoiding forcefully reconciling seeming paradoxes. Building on his masterful knowledge of specific subcultures and regions and their specific conditions and characteristics in different times, the author nevertheless succeeds in detecting common features in the heterogeneous Jewish culture. Ruderman provides us with a larger picture of the whole into which to place the particular in order to better understand the similarities, singularities, and connections of Jewish history. However, the author emphasizes that his pioneering theses should to some extent be considered tentative in light of the present state of research. For example, despite the “virtual impossibility” of proving a precise causal connection between the mobility of intellectuals and cultural creativity, Ruderman makes a “strong circumstantial case” in chapter 1 (p. 42).

The concluding chapter is especially valuable. It offers some final thoughts about the modern era in light of the early modern. Ruderman detects a unifying theme in his five factors: the blurring of Jewish identity. New options for Jewish self-definition and its representation in the non-Jewish world provide a background for understanding the modern Jewish experience, making the alleged break from a traditional past toward modern Jewish identities in fact less radical. Its thought-provoking discussion of the early modern period in Jewish history, the notes and bibliography providing additional information, and the extensive appendix discussing various historiographical interpretations of early modernity make this book indispensable for both students and teachers of early modern and modern Jewish history alike, as well as for those more generally interested in Jewish history. Ruderman’s study will decisively shape future discussions about early modern Jewish history and the beginnings of modernity.

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