

Under Muslim Rule

THE JEWS OF ARAB LANDS: A HISTORY AND SOURCE BOOK. By NORMAN A. STILLMAN. *Jewish Publication Society*. 473 pp. \$14.95.

Reviewed by DANIEL PIPES

THE history of Jews in Muslim countries conjures up two contrary images in the Western mind: on the one hand, the glorious achievements of medieval Spain in poetry, philosophy, and science; on the other hand, the degradation of recent times—flight from Yemen, public hangings in Iraq, possible persecution in Khomeini's Iran. Beyond these two extremes, the story of the Jews under Islam remains obscure. The standard histories of the Jews tend to slight all but the most exceptional events outside Europe, and anyway they display little understanding of the Islamic environment, in which Jews have lived for 1,350 years. Whereas historians are careful to explain developments in 11th- and 12th-century European Jewish life against the background of the Crusades, or the massive changes in the 19th-century intellectual world of Jews against the background of the European Enlightenment, Jewish life in Muslim countries too often has seemed an arbitrary sequence of events affected by random, inexplicable forces.

Norman A. Stillman has made a signal contribution by drawing in this book a general portrait of Jewish life among Muslims with clarity, intelligence, and a wide perspective. He treats his topic in two ways: the first quarter of *The Jews of Arab Lands* is a historical outline incorporating the latest research, including Stillman's own. The rest of the book is devoted to a large and fascinating collection of documents and literary texts translated mostly from Arabic and Hebrew, but also from Aramaic, Persian, Turkish, and several European languages. The excellent translations and helpful footnotes

DANIEL PIPES, a new contributor, teaches history at the University of Chicago and is at work on a study of the Islamic revival.

give the English-speaking reader a genuine sense of the varieties of Jewish experience under Islam. (The word "Arab" in the book's title is seriously misleading, however, since before the 20th century, "Arabic speakers from Iraq to Morocco" had virtually no sense of a common identity. Stillman deals with the Jews of Muslim lands in

the Middle East and Mediterranean area, regardless of language.)

The historical section follows a scheme of periodization which derives closely from that established by Stillman's teacher, S. D. Goitein. (It is a sad reflection on the state of scholarship about non-Western areas that this outline was originally created to understand the

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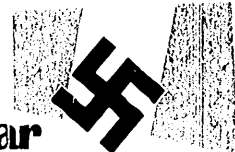


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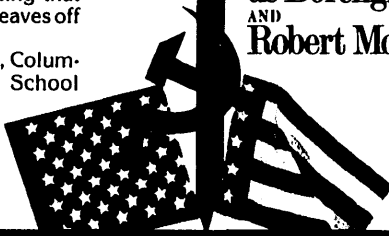
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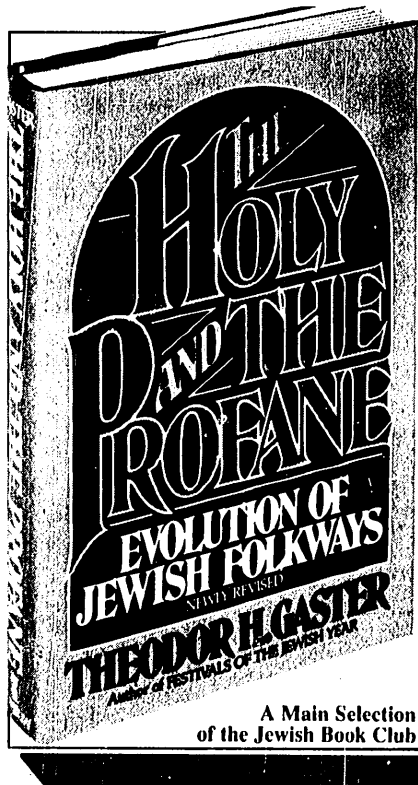
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past of the Jews.) The outline begins with the brief but crucial period of Muhammad's prophecy (610-32), when the Qur'an and Muhammad's actions set fundamental Muslim attitudes toward Jews and other non-Muslims. A dual heritage emerged, accepting Judaism but antagonistic toward Jews. Unlike Christianity, which was always troubled by the continued existence of Judaism, Islam did not have to convert the Jews but granted them specific rights as members of a monotheistic, scriptural religion. But it also despised them for insisting on believing in a defective version of God's message. Jews were not to be befriended or trusted; rather, they were to be humiliated as a reminder of the inferiority of their religion. In subsequent centuries, Muslims could justify benevolent or harsh treatment of Jews by emphasizing one or the other of these elements.

In the second period, 632 to around 900, Jews from Iran to Spain fell under Muslim control; they developed new cultural forms characterized by an increasingly frequent use of the Arabic idiom (Sa'adya Gaon's translation of the Bible in the early 10th century had nearly the impact of the Septuagint in 3rd-century B.C.E. Alexandria or Moses Mendelssohn's 18th-century German translation), and lived in conformity with the requirements of their Muslim overlords. Most significantly, "during this time large numbers of Jews in the Islamic East . . . gradually changed over from the agrarian way of life . . . to a more cosmopolitan one"; they moved to the cities and henceforth derived most of their income from trade and industry. Jews played a major part in the "bourgeois revolution" of the 8th and 9th centuries, leaving the manual trades for commerce, banking, manufacturing, and the professions.

THE "best years," 900-1200, coincided with the centuries of greatest Muslim wealth and cultural accomplishment. Iraqi leadership in Jewish (as in Muslim) affairs ended during this period, to be replaced by the secure, rich community of Egypt and the cultural brilliance of



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North Africa and Spain. Spain produced some of the most illustrious figures of Jewish culture: the poets Solomon ibn Gabirol (d. 1070) and Judah ha-Levi (d. 1141), and the religious philosopher Moses Maimonides (d. 1204) are perhaps the best-known. Two factors help explain the vitality of Jewish culture in Spain and elsewhere during these centuries. First, Muslim wealth and creativity were then at their height and probably preeminent in all Eurasia, certainly surpassing the level of Christian Europe. Second, Jews living among Muslims participated in the mainstream culture. They hardly ever experienced the social and cultural isolation more commonly endured by their brethren living in Christian countries.

During the "best years," Jews and Muslims could create a cultural symbiosis: a degree of toleration and shared concerns meant that they addressed similar issues from divergent viewpoints (in a manner resembling much of the intellectual life in the West today). Jews wrote in Arabic (except for poetry, which was almost always in Hebrew), considered the same moral, philosophic, and scientific questions as their Muslim counterparts, and lived under a legal system comparable to the Muslim one. Some persecution of Jews did occur during the period 900-1200, but "a relatively open society [existed] in which more often than not Muslims and non-Muslims could participate, if not on an entirely equal footing, at least with near equality in those spheres of activity that were not specifically religious, particularly in the marketplace, in certain scientific and intellectual circles, and, to an extent, in the civil service." Islam is the only monotheistic religion that has allowed Jews to participate so fully in its culture. By contrast, in the European Enlightenment many centuries later, Christianity had to be removed as the central element of culture before Jews could join in a common discourse.

STILLMAN terms the fourth period, 1200-1850, "the long twilight" during which Jewish social standing and culture fell. As Crusaders,

Christian Spaniards, and Mongols challenged the Muslims militarily, "the secular and humanistic tendencies of Hellenism, which until this period had been predominant cultural forces in Islamic society, began to wane [while] the Islamic religious element in its most rigid form began to wax ever stronger." The unfortunate implication here,

that it was Hellenism and not Islam that accounted for the earlier Muslim creativity and tolerance, recalls certain 19th-century efforts to ascribe everything good in Muslim culture to the Greeks. A more convincing explanation takes into account economic decay, a greater emphasis on legal prescriptions, the spread of mysticism, and cultural

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is that more than any other book I know on this literature, it helps us to see the terrible events that formed it. Although her book is essentially a literary history, and displays the kind of quiet judgment that literary history requires, Mrs. Ezrahi makes us see the Holocaust itself as inevitably more real, urgent, terrible, than the writing that came out of it. That is as it should be. In the history of Jewish literature generally, the creation comes before the word and transcends it. . . . To be a Jew is to know that words strive after the reality but can never adequately capture the human situation."

—From the Foreword by **Alfred Kazin**

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introversion. Stillman correctly points out that the Jews shared the fate of the Muslims around them, who also endured a "long twilight."

Unpleasant sumptuary laws regulating personal and social habits, which rarely had been applied to non-Muslims in earlier times, were now increasingly enforced. As Christian communities died out in several Muslim countries (all of North Africa, the Yemen), the Jews became more exposed to harassment; ghettos appeared in early 15th-century Morocco, heightening the Jewish sense of "isolation and marginality." Fervent religiosity, including kabbalism and messianism, and recourse to alcohol increasingly characterized Jewish populations suffering this internal exile. While the Ottoman empire brought good government and tolerance to much of the Middle East in the 16th century, its power declined rapidly, its policies degenerated, and the Jews returned to their earlier misery.

STILLMAN, who justifiably concentrates on the pre-modern age, about which the least is known by the general reader, touches only lightly on the 19th century and even less on the 20th. European imperial influence grew enormously after 1800; it eventually brought economic and educational benefits to the Jews and vastly improved their social status by forcing Muslims to discard the Islamic laws which assigned inferior positions to Jews and Christians. But this was a short-term gain, for the "conspicuous overachievement" of Jews in the 19th century led to their undoing in the 20th, when Muslims took back control of their countries. Not only did they deeply resent the widespread Jewish identification with Europe, but modern political anti-Semitic notions, which came to them by way of Arabic-speaking Christians, transformed their attitudes to Judaism. Today many Muslims, including leaders in Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Iran, have absorbed the notion of a world Jewish conspiracy, and treat Israel and their own Jewish subjects accordingly.

By changing the old order, Euro-

peans had hoped incidentally to improve the Jews' position in Muslim lands, but in the end they undermined it. Protected to some degree by religious precepts, Jews had fared better under Islamic law than they did in the newly independent Muslim states of the 20th century. The side-effects of European power—including such disparate and mutually contradictory phenomena as new legal systems, political anti-Semitism, the Alliance Israélite Universelle, and Zionism—worked to create less bearable circumstances, forcing the Jews to leave. One hopes that in a future volume Stillman will take up this modern history with the same intelligence and care he has devoted to earlier times.

Open Admissions Revised

ACADEMIC TURMOIL: THE REALITY AND PROMISE OF OPEN EDUCATION. By THEODORE L. GROSS. Anchor Press/Doubleday. 250 pp. \$10.95.

Reviewed by PETER SHAW

IN 1978 Theodore L. Gross, then a dean at the City College of New York, published an article in *Saturday Review* that raised a storm of protest over its criticisms of his campus's Open Admissions program. *Academic Turmoil* tells the story of how the article brought forth student and faculty attacks on Gross as a turncoat and racist, how those who agreed with him kept silent out of fear, and how in the end the college's president, with whom he had maintained a close working relationship, fired him.

Ostensibly this is a story of probity and lonely courage. "It is always safer to remain silent," Gross moralizes about others. But there is little in *Academic Turmoil* to offend anyone—certainly nothing that could threaten Gross's dismissal by the president of Pennsylvania State University, where he is now the provost. On the contrary, without explicitly admitting it, his book takes back much of what he wrote

PETER SHAW is writing a book on the decline of critical standards.