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Review:

***The Medieval Postcolonial Jew, In and Out of Time*, Miriam Ara Krummel**

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## REVIEWS

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*The Medieval Postcolonial Jew, In and Out of Time*, Miriamne Ara Krummel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022), ISBN 978-0-472-13237-9, pp. xv, 267, \$85.

Time, surely, troubles everyone. For busy academics, there is too little of it, with many demands encroaching on a scarce and vanishing quantum of time in our lives. For those of us embarked today on establishing a critical version of early global studies, time, when we look across the globe, is so asynchronous and multifarious that how to name disparate temporalities and chronologies is a vexing conundrum, yielding unsatisfying outcomes.

But for everyone troubled by time, and also those who never give time a moment's thought, Miriamne Ara Krummel's latest book, *The Postcolonial Jew, In and Out of Time*, is an important milestone that calls serious attention to one of the more troubling aspects of time: the fact that the calendrical time dominant today, as well as during the long European Middle Ages, is Christian time.

While scholars in the West have largely learnt, in discussing periodization, to abjure references to chronological history as BC/AD (Before Christ/Anno Domini) in favour of BCE/CE (Before the Common Era/Common Era), Krummel makes sure we understand that any reflexive comfort we might feel in referring to BCE/CE instead of BC/AD is still a complicitous act.

After all, whose "Common Era" is it, when the pivotal moment in time, at the midpoint of our standard chronology, is "infused with hidden sacred markers" – namely, "the inescapable centrality of the Christ-event" (pp. 234, 232)? Calculating time as periods before and after a midpoint identified by the life of Christ hardly offers a way of counting time that is authentically common to all – and certainly not common to Jewish or Muslim calendars.

While Krummel is not the first scholar to point to the absurdity of an "allegedly 'common-era' time" posited on Christianity's sacral event that hides in full view in our supposedly secular modernity and postmodernity, her book takes a reader through key moments in Latin Christendom's cultural and historical past that function to consolidate temporality into

a singular, Christian time, paying particular attention to machinations in medieval England.

The book begins by pointing to “a story of temporal reterritorialization that occurred over a period of almost a thousand years” when Christianity, appearing in a heterogenous temporal landscape sprinkled with many timescapes – for example, Coptic, Seleucid, Polytheist, Egyptian, and Jewish – proceeded to establish itself as the standard temporality while also obscuring and repurposing its temporal indebtedness to “Other” calendars (p. 2). Christianity’s colonization of time is thus the prime impetus driving the book, as Krummel tells a multipart story of “normative Christian time’s bid for temporal dominance as it works to erase its inescapable dependence on earlier and older non-Christian (and particularly) Jewish formulations of time” (p. 6).

Beginning with Constantine’s conversion and the Council of Nicaea, Christian-dominant time repeatedly ensures that “the Jew is frozen in the role of an outmoded holdover from another temporal world” (p. 23). Christian events such as Easter come to replace Jewish events such as Passover in Europe/the Latin West, and dead boys who are transformed into Christian “martyrs”, for example Hugh of Lincoln, erase the lives of Jewish historical subjects such as Belaset of Lincoln, whose wedding celebration occasioned the gathering of England’s Jews who were subsequently accused of the ritual murder of Hugh.

Through an introduction, five chapters, and an epilogue, the book tracks key texts that “evinced ideological battles” over competing temporalities (p. 28). Chapter 1, “Just in Time: Sacrificial Gifts, Rotting Corpses, and *Annus Domini*”, and Chapter 2, “An (Un)Common Era: Passionate Narratives, Temporal Clashes – Jewish and Christian”, crucially consider German Jewish chronicles of the Crusades, and in particular the incidents of *Kiddush ha-Shem* (sanctification of the divine name) narrated in the Mainz Anonymous and Solomon bar Simson’s chronicles, juxtaposing such affirmations of Jewish temporality against anti-Judaic tales of boy-murder, such as Thomas of Monmouth’s *The Life and Passion of William of Norwich* in England and continental anti-Judaic Marian stories like “The Jew of Bourges”.

Chapter 3, “Taking Jews Out and Putting Them Back In: Christian Chronometry, the York Massacre, and a Cycle of Mystery Plays”, ruminates critically on the massacre of Jews at York, especially as gleefully recounted by the Christian English chroniclers William of Newburgh and Roger of

Howden, and on the medieval York passion plays that kept alive memories of putative Jewish perfidy and the York slaughter.

Chapter 4, “A Time of Many Layers: Feasting on the Temporalities of *The Siege of Jerusalem*”, treats an infamous Middle English alliterative romance, with its disturbing depictions of horrific maternal Jewish cannibalism, while Chapter 5, “Repressing a Perpetually Resurfacing Temporality: Four Authorial Orphans and the Fifteenth-Century ‘The Legend of the Litel Clergeon and the Jews’”, discusses four late-medieval, nearly early-modern versions of the story of the boy chorister putatively slaughtered by Jews, the most famous version of which is told by Geoffrey Chaucer, the so-called “Father of English Literature” in his *Prioress’s Tale*.

All these chapters taken together show how history and culture in Latin Christendom – especially in England – collude to ensure the supersession of Jewish chronology by Christian chronology, but also argue with considerable dexterity for the ways in which medieval Jews have fought back to reassert the primacy and centrality of Jewish time, Jewish faith, and Jewish historiography. The book’s main examples of resistance are from Germany, not England, but they stitch together lineaments of possibilities for future scholarship on England’s Jews, and are important in many ways.

The Mainz Anonymous, chronicling the pogroms that tore through the Rhineland at the beginning of the Popular Crusade/First Crusade of 1096, depicts some of the hardest to read instances of *Kiddush ha-Shem*, as the Jews of Mainz refuse forcible conversion at the hands of Jerusalem-bound, armed Christian pilgrims by sacrificing their own lives, and the lives of their loved ones, through ritual suicide: “Thus, the Jewish calendar prevails despite the final throes of death, and crusading time figures as impotent, in failing to forcibly convert and personally slaughter Jews who have claimed their own time of death. . . . The Rhineland Jews translate agency into acts of *Kiddush ha-Shem* that mark their choice to embrace eternal Jewish life in ultimate resistance to the temporal monolith of Latin Christendom” (p. 40). When I first began teaching the literatures and cultures of the Crusades in 1994, the Mainz Anonymous was the most difficult of all the Jewish chronicles of the Crusades for students – as difficult, in some ways, as Holocaust narratives.

The poignancy of “Jews who are sacrificing their physical forms to keep their Jewish souls intact” (p. 41) builds in the Mainz Anonymous through the depiction of one sacrifice after another: from lovers who die intertwined, to whole families who lie in the arms of their beloved

parents, to the unbearable pathos of a child named Aaron who runs away from his mother and hides because he does not want to die, and does not understand why he must. Hardly anyone could read the boy's cry, "Mother, Mother, do not slaughter me!" without emotion.

But in Krummel's skilled hands, we cannot fail to see medieval Jewish ritual suicide, like the mass suicide at Masada, for what it is: agency of the last resort, when your body is the final thing over which you have control as an agent, and the ultimate way to perform resistance to oppression in highly asymmetric warfare. From Tibetan Buddhist monks who set themselves alight to protest against China's occupation of Tibet, to the Tunisian fruit-seller who set himself aflame to oppose an impossible economic and governmental system, human beings have asserted agency by giving up their bodies. Krummel's medieval example provides a framework for learning to read resistance in unexpected and unfamiliar ways.

For those who study medieval England's Jews, a continuing problem is the silence of the archives, so that as Suzanne Bartlet points out, "Ultimately, the voices we hear of Jews in medieval England are filtered through non-Jewish, and sometimes overtly hostile, sources" (*Licoricia of Winchester: Marriage, Motherhood and Murder in the Medieval Anglo-Jewish Community*, edited by Patricia Skinner, Vallentine Mitchell, 2015, p. 10).

Reading Jewish resistance in England's records of fines, jailings, punishments, and executions is a minimal, somewhat unsatisfying process. Reading Krummel's latest book, however, suggests that it is perhaps time to attempt what Saidiya Hartman calls "critical fabulation", a way to "imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done" ("Venus in Two Acts", *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 [2008]: 12) – acts of resistance otherwise hard to see, hear, and acknowledge, given the gaping voids of archival records.

After all, as Krummel urges, "we have to complete sentences where parts are missing" (p. 229). Just as "Jewish time unrelentingly interrupted Christian calendars" (p. 229), perhaps the Jewish voices that are unrelentingly suppressed in England's ecclesiastical and state records can also be recovered through critical-creative acts that can function as interruptions in the history of medieval England, the first racial state in the West (as I argue in *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, Cambridge University Press, 2018, chapter 2). With the massacre at York, Krummel herself attempts a version of this practice of voicing the unvoiced: "Because there are no extant accounts written by English Jews,

those [continental] Jewish chroniclers and I are ‘reading into life’ the medieval English Jews who perished at Clifford’s Tower” (p. 103).

Krummel concludes Chapter 5 by praising Joseph Kimhi (c. 1105–c. 1170), who “bravely voices his resistance to the dominant temporality as a way of keeping Jewish time vivacious” (p. 229). So, we might say, does Krummel herself, who keeps Jewish time and its acts of resistance vivaciously alive throughout her magnificent book.

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