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Review:

The Palgrave Dictionary of Medieval Anglo-Jewish History, Joe Hillaby and Caroline Hillaby

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The Palgrave Dictionary of Medieval Anglo-Jewish History, Joe Hillaby and Caroline Hillaby (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), ISBN 978-0-230-27816-5, pp. xix + 447, £88.

This landmark publication sets the history of the Jewish communities of medieval England on a new and far more secure scholarly footing than ever before. To call this remarkable book a dictionary attests to the authors' humility. They, more than anyone, know the extent to which their work rests on the labours of previous scholars, and they are generous in giving credit where credit is due. As a result, among much else, the book is an unparalleled guide to the best and most reliable sources and authorities on the many subjects it covers. Even so, to call the book a dictionary does not do justice to the magnitude of what Joe and Caroline Hillaby have accomplished. What they have actually given us is a single volume, alphabetically arranged, that summarizes, synthesizes, and extends what six generations of scholars have learned about the people, places, and events that comprised the Anglo-Jewish world between the late eleventh century, when Jews first moved from Rouen to London, and 1290, when the entire Jewish population of England was expelled from the kingdom by King Edward I and his parliament. Although capacious in the range of subjects it covers and in its bibliographic scope, the book is much more than a compendium of existing knowledge. It also contains a great deal of new information and many new ideas, the products of Joe Hillaby's own research over a long and productive scholarly career.

Among the many strengths of this book are its balanced judgments and gentle corrections of previous scholars' work. Now that this book exists, there should be no excuse for scholars to repeat hoary old historical chestnuts (such as the 16,000 Jews expelled in 1290) that have for long been discredited, but that continue to find their way into recent work by non-specialists. Equally notable is the attention the authors pay to the intellectual and religious life of the Anglo-Jewish medieval communities. Among many other revelations, Maimonides now appears a far more influential figure in England than we had previously realized; Rabbi Josce of London is now more firmly established as the London host of the famous Spanish polymath, Abraham ibn Ezra; and scholars such as Jacob ben Judah of London, Peytevin, Joseph, and Master Benedict of Lincoln at last receive their due. As a result, it is no longer possible to regard the Jews

of medieval England as living in an intellectual backwater. And because Joe Hillaby has an unrivalled knowledge of the family connections that bound the English Jewish community together, we can also see much more clearly than ever before how the scholars, merchants, and financiers of the English Jewish community were connected to one another, and how the patterns of Jewish settlement in England changed over time.

There are scores of other important and interesting observations in this book, but two large and more general points stand out. One is that there were even more seigneurial Jewish communities in England (that is, communities controlled not by the king but by earls, barons, bishops, or abbots) than any of us had realized before. The other is that a fundamental change in the nature of power within the English Jewish community occurred during the long reign of Henry III (1216–72). From the 1230s on, but especially after 1265, it became essential for the great Jewish magnates of England to have a patron at the king's court in order to preserve their power and influence within the Jewish community itself. Those without such a patron, such as the great Aaron of York, lost their fortunes, while men of much lesser stature (such as Abraham of Berkhamsted or Aaron son of Vives of London) flourished under the protection of one or another member of the royal family. In any future narrative history of the English Jewish community, this development will have to be a primary theme.

In a book of this scope, it is inevitable that there will be some unevenness in its discussions, and that a few errors will slip through the editing process. But there are remarkably few such errors here. I found only a half-dozen copy-editing errors, none of which is likely to cause any confusion. There are some mistakes of the sort that every scholar makes; but once again, these are few. Edward of Germany (p. 188) is in fact Edmund (more commonly known as Edmund of Almain), the son and eventual heir of Earl Richard of Cornwall; Edmund “Crouchback”, the brother of Edward I, was Earl, rather than Duke, of Lancaster (erroneously on pp. 191, 231, but correct on p. 199). Godwin Sturt, the father of the child saint, William of Norwich, appears as Gordon Sturt (p. 282); while English knowledge of the Jews of Narbonne predated John of Coutances (p. 324: the Jews of Narbonne were known to William of Malmesbury). All these are small points indeed.

Some claims (four in particular) to which the Hillabys give credence I do not find convincing. All are matters on which serious historians can differ, and none impugn the high scholarly standards the Hillabys have brought to their work. I mention them here only because their appearance

in so careful a work as this one may lend them more credibility than I believe they deserve. First, there is no historical evidence of which I am aware for an 1192 ritual murder charge in Winchester apart from a clearly fictional and satirical account included in the chronicle of Richard of Devizes. Second, it is important to observe that on matters pertaining to Jews, Matthew Paris is an unreliable narrator. For example, I find it impossible to believe Matthew's claim, accepted by the Hillabys (p. 51), that Abraham of Berkhamsted placed an image of the Virgin Mary in his privy, upon which he defecated. Even Richard of Cornwall could not have secured Abraham's exoneration from such crudely blasphemous conduct, had it indeed occurred. Similarly, I do not believe that the 1244 allegations of ritual murder that Paris claims were raised at St Paul's in London served as the pretext for the 60,000 mark tallage imposed upon the Jews in that year (pp. 227, 326, 363). Nowhere in any royal record is such a connection asserted. As I have argued elsewhere, both these stories tell us much more about Matthew's own obsessions with Jews as blasphemers and murderers than they do about any actual events. I am also doubtful that the surname "Judeus" or "le Giu" can be reliably presumed to indicate that the individual was a convert from Judaism to Christianity (p. 412). This surname is too common, too rural, and too long-lived (it appears in eyre rolls and other local records throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) for it to prove conversion or descent from a convert to Christianity from Judaism.

This book does not offer a detailed narrative history of the two-hundred-year history of the Jews in medieval England. That book remains to be written. Rather, what the Hillabys have provided us with, for the first time, is an up-to-date work of reference on which scholars and general readers can rely to write such a narrative, and a secure foundation that will allow other scholars to incorporate Jews and Jewish history into the history of medieval England. As such, it is a book that all those interested in Jewish history and in medieval English history will treasure and want to own.

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