

Abraham D. Lavender**BOOK REVIEWED**

Jonathan Ray. *The Sephardic Frontier: The Reconquista and the Jewish Community in Medieval Iberia*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006.) xiv + 198 pp., hardback, \$35.00.

The *Sephardic Frontier: The Reconquista and the Jewish Community in Medieval Iberia* introduces new research to the field of Sephardic studies, and, in several major areas, challenges the traditional view of Sephardic history during the Reconquista period. Ray agrees with the current view that the re-conquest is central to the study of medieval Spain, and also believes that the century following the 1212 victory of the Christians over the Almohad Muslims started the permanent shift of power that made the thirteenth century the "important turning point in the development of the most essential values and attitudes of medieval Spanish society" (p. 2). He also accepts the concept of the frontier society as the theoretical model for studying the nature and diversity of European, and particularly Iberian, civilizations. But, he criticizes previous frontier studies for concentrating on the interactions and exchanges that made the frontiers distinct while neglecting to examine the impact of these frontiers on the development of their own social and ethnic groups. He also criticizes the lack of studying "how these processes affected the third great religious group of medieval Iberia, the Jew" (p. 2). One of his goals is to fill these gaps by studying "the early development of Jewish settlements and communities in the various peninsular kingdoms during the transition from Muslim to Christian rule" (p. 3). He also objects to the majority of studies for analyzing only one specific area or city, hence limiting comparisons. Hence, he uses the larger area of Andalusia, Murcia, Valencia, and the Balearic islands as his frontier areas to study.

The Sephardic Frontier uses a large amount of unpublished material in royal, ecclesiastical, and municipal archives, as well as rabbinic literature, to suggest a new view of this time period. Ray, studying Jewish and non-Jewish life in the frontier of al-Andalus following the expulsion of the Muslims, argues that the significant depletion of population caused by the expulsion of most Muslims from al-Andalus, and the subsequent successful efforts to repopulate this area with Christians as well as with Jews from other sections of Iberia and areas outside Iberia, resulted in Jewish life that was different from that in other parts of Iberia. This challenges the traditional historical view which has taught that already developed Jewish communities, mostly from other areas of Iberia, were reestablished in al-Andalus as Jewish settlers moved in to repopulate this depleted area.

Ray concludes from his research that these al-Andalus Jewish communities were not only new communities, but that they had a degree of openness, mobility, and interaction with Christians and Muslims that was not found in other areas of Iberia. The competing crusader kings of Iberia, in need of pioneer settlers to repopulate and fight over the eventual control of al-Andalus, encouraged economic and political activity by both Christians and Jews. Although conditions would change over time, at first the goals of the competing kingdoms were more important than religious prejudices. In this open atmosphere, there was extensive interaction between Christians and Jews, with both being part of the same pioneer resettling effort. A significant factor was that the settlers moved to the area not as organized Jewish communities, but mostly as individuals. In the beginning of resettlement there was "an absence of long-standing public institutions and political structures...[which] aided both the crown and individual settlers in pursuing their own agendas" (p. 3).

Ray then presents impressive details to support his revised history, in seven chapters: (1) The Migration of Jewish Settlers to the Frontier, (2) Jewish Landownership, (3) Money-lending and Beyond: The Jews in the Economic Life of the Frontier, (4) Royal Authority and the Legal Status of Iberian Jewry, (5) Jewish Communal Organization and Authority, (6) Communal Tensions and the Question of Jewish Autonomy, and (7)

Maintenance of Social Boundaries on the Iberian Frontier. Space limits discussion of the many interesting details in each chapter, but let's look at a few examples. In chapter 2, Ray disagrees with Salo Baron's position that Jews resisted paying ecclesiastical tithes because they viewed the tithes as going to an "alien faith." Instead, Ray writes that "Furthermore, Iberian Jewry did not see the Church in purely theological terms" as representing an alien faith, "displayed an enduring willingness to do business with the Church..." and resisted paying the tithes largely because of a desire to avoid taxation whenever possible. He notes that "the Iberian Church encountered similar resistance during this period from many Christians..." (p. 52). In chapter 3, Ray notes that Iberian Jews were active in money-lending, but also documents that "One of the distinguishing characteristics of Iberian Jewry that sets its members apart from their co-religionists in northern Europe was the degree to which the former were able to maintain a high level of economic diversity throughout the Middle Ages" (p. 70). In chapter 5, Ray describes the custom among some Jews to establish prayer houses in private homes, and concludes that "The use of private or family synagogues posed a potential threat to public houses of worship, especially in smaller communities..." He posits, however, that it is unlikely that this practice resulted from ancient legal restrictions, but more likely resulted from convenience "as well as the ability to assert greater control over the limits of one's social group or religious community" (p. 100).

In the second part of the book (chapters 4-7), Ray shows the gradual constriction of Jewish life in southern Iberia, and how, by the end of the thirteenth century, royal restrictions had begun and Jewish communities were developing which were similar to those in the North and interior of Iberia. But, he also shows "the degree to which the independent spirit of the Jewish settler was able to endure in spite of the eventual 'closing' of this Hispano-Jewish frontier" (p. 8). He recognizes and documents the gradual movement toward forcing Jews to live in a *juderia*, the regulation of clothing, and the restriction of sexual relations between Jews and Christians. But, he also shows that "while leaders of the Jewish communities generally supported efforts to strengthen social boundaries, individual Jews continued to resist any policies that would restrict their social and economic movement within the larger society" (p. 175). Ray concludes that both

Iberian kings and Jewish leaders tried to limit Jewish settlements for two similar reasons, to increase revenues to each group and to limit social interaction with non-Jews. But, even as these two groups received additional support from both municipal and ecclesiastical groups who also had their own financial and religious reasons for restrictions, Ray concludes that "there persisted within these juderias the active pursuit of the sort of dynamic and unfettered society that had come to symbolize the frontier for over fifty years" (p. 179).

Ray disagrees with scholars of Iberian Jewry who tend to emphasize a "pre-Inquisition" perspective, classifying events into a "Golden Age" or "Evidence of Decline," and notes that the pioneering work of Yitzhak Baer is till the most influential source of this perspective. Ray believes that it is important for the historian to see the history of Iberian Jews on their own terms, from their own time perspective, and "not to read their history as a prelude to expulsion..." (p. 6). After all, Ray notes, the Jews did not know that they were in pre-exile.

Ray views his work as a new model that challenges the traditional view concerning the characteristics of the Jewish community as a permanent and inevitable feature of medieval Iberian Jewish life. He emphasizes Jewish individuals and factions rather than "the general outlook of Jewish or Christian society" in an attempt to "reveal the complex texture of Sephardic identity and the volatile nature of their communities" (p. 8). He states that his objective was to "abandon the well-known yet facile dichotomies of Golden Age and decline, persecution and tolerance, in favor of a more nuanced portrait..." (p. 9). Although the book is highly textured with many details, over three hundred footnotes, and nearly three hundred bibliographical sources, it is well organized, well written, and highly readable. Any book that challenges so many settled perspectives probably will receive some criticisms, but in *The Sephardic Frontier* Ray has presented an impressive amount of evidence to support his objectives. He has made a major contribution to the study of Sephardic Jewry.