

The King's Jews: Money, Massacre and Exodus in Medieval England

Review Number:

1077

Publish date:

Sunday, 1 May, 2011

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ISBN:

9781847251862

Date of Publication:

2010

Price:

£30.00

Pages:

256pp.

Publisher:

Continuum

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

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There was a time, not so long ago, when the history of the Jewish communities of 12th- and 13th-century England was a neglected subject in English historical studies. No longer. Starting with the seminal work of Barrie Dobson and Paul Hyams during the 1970s, the importance of medieval Jewish history to a proper understanding of medieval English history has been affirmed, embraced, and demonstrated by a generation of English medievalists that includes such luminaries as Paul Brand, David Carpenter, Barrie Dobson, John Maddicott, and Nicholas Vincent. By and large, this work has been published in specialized articles and scholarly books that are not likely to be read by a wide popular audience – although David Carpenter's splendid survey for the Penguin History of England, *The Struggle for Mastery* (1), is an obvious exception to this claim. In all this work, however, the focus has been overwhelmingly on the significance of royal policies toward Jews for what we might regard as the 'larger history' of the medieval English state. For a synthetic account that foregrounds the historical experience of English Jews themselves, readers have for long had to rely on the first five chapters of Cecil Roth's *A History of the Jews in England*, first published in 1941 and last revised in the early 1960s.(2)

In 2006, Richard Huscroft provided a fine, highly readable summary of this new work on Jews and the English state in a short book he entitled *Expulsion: England's Jewish Solution*.(3) Robin Mundill now enters these same lists, aiming to attract a similar audience of general readers and students but with a topical rather than narrative focus, with *The King's Jews: Money, Massacre and Exodus in Medieval England*. Dr. Mundill is well-known to specialists working on the history of the medieval Anglo-Jewish community for his 1998 book, *England's Jewish Solution: Experiment and Expulsion, 1262-1290* (4), and for a series of article-

length studies he has written since 1990 on the changing roles Jews played in the credit markets of 13th-century England. In *The King's Jews*, however, he aims to broaden his remit. Ever since he participated in the making of 'All the King's Jews,' a BBC *Timewatch* documentary broadcast in 1990 to mark the 700th anniversary of the expulsion of the Jews from England, Mundill 'had always aimed to write a book which would take readers back into the world of the small colony of Jews who came to England between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries' (p. ix). The opportunity to fulfill this ambition came when Michael Greenwood of Continuum Books commissioned the volume we now have before us. With a degree of self-discipline that I can only envy, Mundill completed the book during a Lenten term of sabbatical leave in 2009 from Glenalmond College, where he is a full-time teacher and administrator.

Mundill's great strength is his unrivalled knowledge of the financial records the royal government kept of credit transactions between Christians and Jews. These records, most unpublished and likely to remain so, are the foundation on which his book rests, and they shape the book's contents and structure. Mundill's account is strongest when dealing with subjects on which these archival sources shed the most light. There are useful and frequently colourful discussions of the mechanics of Jewish lending and their consequences. Readers who have wondered about tallies, chirographs, bonds, quitclaims, starrs, gages, and fee debts will find clear and authoritative explanations of these matters in chapter two, 'Jews and the economy'. In chapter three, 'A community within a state', Mundill gives a fine description of the organization of the English Jewish community as it appeared to the royal government, starting with the Exchequer of the Jews and the Archpresbyter, and then working his way down through the chirographers, the sheriffs and the undersheriffs, to the local Jewish communal officials who looked after the synagogues and buried the dead. On 'Saints and martyrs,' however, the subject of chapter four, the financial records are uninformative; instead Mundill is thrown back upon Joshua Trachtenberg's outdated book, *The Devil and the Jews* (5), which leads him to assume that evidence Trachtenberg drew, rather haphazardly, from an uncritical assemblage of late medieval, mostly German sources can be used to illuminate the attitudes of 13th-century English Christians toward such matters as *mezzuzot* and *Kabbalah* (p. 71). Chapter five, 'Christians and Jews,' returns us to the 13th-century financial markets, where Mundill notes persuasively the extent to which Jewish lending ultimately redounded to the profit of Christian courtiers and financiers. Chapter six, 'Church and synagogue,' is the least successful chapter, for reasons I discuss below. Finally, in chapter seven, "Dissolution and diaspora," Mundill turns to the expulsion of the entire Jewish population from England in 1290, which he sees as a long-contemplated plan, perhaps originating as early as 1275, motivated by a long list of causative factors, including 'religious animosity, antipathy and angst ... complicated by religious and social perceptions as well as political interests, and of course the bitterness and determination of Archbishop John Pecham that the Jews should be continually punished for the death of Christ' (p. 159).

The idea for this book has been long in gestation; but the book nonetheless shows signs of haste. None of the resulting mistakes is fatal, of course; but their cumulative effect does undermine confidence. Chapter six, 'Church and synagogue' is particularly badly served. On pp. 141–2, two versions of the same sentence follow each other *seriatim*; and every single endnote from 40 to 96 is misnumbered. The note that should have been endnote 40 was apparently omitted altogether; and so thereafter, note 41 in the text corresponds with endnote 40; note 42 in the text corresponds with endnote 41; and so on to the end of the chapter. Some sentences don't make good sense (p. 143, for example: 'Some communities had as much disregard for apostates as they had hatred for an informer'.) There are also inconsistencies between this chapter and others in the volume that treat the same subjects. On p. 133, for example, Mundill declares that the Jewish badge 'had been officially enforced in England since 1218', whereas in chapter seven he declares, correctly, that the badge was not 'officially enforced by the state' until 1253 (p. 151). In neither place, however, does he cite Nicholas Vincent's definitive article on the imposition of the badge.(6) In chapter four (pp. 90–2), he discusses the infamous coin-clipping charges of 1278–9, as a result of which some 300 Jews (ten to 15 per cent of the entire Jewish population) were hanged; but he does so without taking into account Paul Brand's important reconstruction of these events, to which Mundill alludes in chapter six (p. 137 n. 59, *recte* n. 60). There is also a degree of casualness in the way Mundill represents the views of the authors whose work he cites in his notes. On p. 135, for example, Mundill cites Joe Hillaby's 2009 article demolishing the claim that there was ever a 'House of Converts' at Bristol, while asserting in the text that there was indeed such a house

(pp. 8, 135). He also seems to believe that there was a 'House of Converts' in Oxford (pp. 134, 135), another misunderstanding corrected by Hillaby in the same article, but again not noticed by Mundill.

More often, however, authors with views different from Mundill's own are simply not cited at all. This is, of course, an author's prerogative; and it is understandable that in an account written for a popular audience, an author would not wish to weigh down his narrative with the petty disagreements of professional historians. Readers should nonetheless be aware that this is not a book on which they can rely for an up-to-date summary of current historiography. Quite the contrary: the number of citations to and quotations from outdated authors is surprisingly high, and occasionally (as on p. 99, where Mundill quotes the Rev. L. B. Larkin, a 19th-century clergyman and local antiquary) these quotations lend a jarring tone to a book whose author is a paragon of tolerance and good will.

Usually, this odd reliance on outdated authorities is simply puzzling. But sometimes it leads to errors of a more significant kind. Mundill's account of Bishop Robert Grosseteste's attitudes toward Jews (pp. 14, 129–30) is based almost entirely on L. M. Friedman's 1934 study, *Robert Grosseteste and the Jews*.⁽⁷⁾ In the circumstances of 1934, it is perhaps understandable why an author might wish to portray a saintly 13th-century bishop's attitudes toward Jews in the most favorable light possible: fascist anti-Semitism certainly needed no encouragement. 80 years later, however, it is harder to understand how Mundill can read Grosseteste's vituperative letter to the Countess of Winchester, urging her either to expel outright a refugee Jewish community that had recently settled in her half of Leicester, or else to confiscate all the Jews' property and force them to work at menial occupations in servitude to Christians, and conclude from it that 'Grosseteste had a firm but enlightened attitude towards the Jews' (p. 130) or that Grosseteste's letter 'display[ed] his knowledge of the Jewish people' (p. 129), unless this latter remark was meant ironically. It is equally difficult to understand how Grosseteste's successful efforts to claim jurisdiction over 45 Oxford students, who had been arrested by the sheriff and imprisoned in the royal gaol for robbery and assault upon the Jews of Oxford, showed how Grosseteste 'clearly tried to keep a balance between the two religions' (p. 130). Soon after the students were handed over to him, Grosseteste freed them all without charge, 'the evidence being held insufficient to convict them of felony', in the graceful words of Cecil Roth.⁽⁸⁾

Far from being 'benign and enlightened' with respect to Jews (p. 130), Grosseteste was an extremist whose anti-Jewish animus was equaled among 13th-century English bishops only by John Pecham, the Franciscan archbishop of Canterbury under Edward I. Grosseteste was certainly not the only churchmen who took the view that all lending at interest was immoral and that the 'perpetual servitude' ostensibly imposed upon Jews as punishment for the death of Jesus should be interpreted in the most literal manner possible. But Grosseteste's views on these subjects were far more severe than was contemporary canon law, which permitted Jews to lend at moderate rates of interest and opposed the expulsion of Jewish populations from Christian territory, stressing instead that Jews had a protected, albeit subordinate, place within Christian society as the people of the 'Old Law.'

Canon law is not Mundill's strength. Nor is his handling of the narrative evidence entirely secure. Mundill retells the story of the 'Jew of Tewkesbury' (p. 69) as if it were fact, without mentioning that this tale, of a Jew who falls into a latrine but whose reverence for the Sabbath leads to his death, was an exemplary story told in Christian sermons all over northern Europe between the 12th century and the 14th. It is interesting, and worthy of remark, that this story not only found an English audience, but was also retold in an English context, with recognizable historical actors, including Earl Richard de Clare of Gloucester, being assigned prominent roles in it. But there is absolutely no reason to think that any such event occurred, either in England or elsewhere.⁽⁹⁾ In a similarly literal vein, Mundill reads Richard of Devizes' satirical account of a ritual crucifixion allegation at Winchester as evidence that an actual allegation of ritual crucifixion was lodged there in 1192. He also takes seriously William of Malmesbury's report of King William Rufus's declaration that he would convert to Judaism if Jews won a religious debate with Christians; Mundill concludes that since Rufus did not convert, the Christians must have won the debate (p. 125). Here as elsewhere, Mundill treats 12th-century accounts of Jewish-Christian disputations as being records of actual debates that took place between real Jews and real Christians with conversionist purposes, rather than seeing these tracts as Christian literary and theological productions, written for Christian audiences and reflecting

little or no knowledge of contemporary Judaism.

It is not easy to organize a book that aspires to cover the 200-year history of an entire medieval Jewish community. Huscroft organized his book chronologically, with a single topical chapter, squarely in the middle, on 'Jewish life and lending.' As a result, his book has a strong narrative thrust, but offers relatively little fine-grained description or analysis of Jewish life. Mundill's book, by contrast, is organized topically by chapters, and then chronologically within each chapter. This too is an effective strategy, but one that comes with some costs. Description outweighs argument; there is much about how things worked, but less about why the Jewish community in England developed as it did, or about the peculiarities of its history in comparison with other Jewish communities elsewhere in medieval Europe. The book's topical arrangement also makes it harder to explain the interconnectedness of events: the ways in which, for example, developments in Jewish lending during the 1240s and 1250s (discussed in chapter five), combined with the crushing weight of royal taxation during these same decades (discussed in chapter seven), led to the proliferation of anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic myths (discussed in chapter four), and ultimately produced a crisis within the Jewish community that resulted in conversions on a hitherto-unprecedented scale (discussed in chapter six). Nor is there always a clear sense of change over time, of how much the early 12th-century Jewish community differed from the community under Henry II and Richard I, or of how different Jewish life was in 1250 from what it was in 1150. As Mundill portrays it, Jewish life in medieval England was shaped largely by factors and influences external to the Jewish community itself and that did not change very much between 1100 and 1290.

Fundamentally, therefore, this isn't so much a book about the Jews of medieval England as it is a book about how Christians and Jews interacted in their business dealings, and the effect those interactions had upon their relationships with one another. Mundill's goal, to 'take readers back into the world of the small colony of Jews who came to England between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries', is an admirable one, well-deserving of an important book. To fulfill that goal, however, we will need a history that takes us into the hearts, the homes and the lives of this small but extraordinarily well-documented Jewish population. That is a history that remains to be written; but until it is written, we will need to continue to rely on the ageing works of Cecil Roth.

Notes

1. David Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery: Britain 1066-1284* (London, 2004).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Cecil Roth, *A History of the Jews in England* (3rd edition, Oxford, 1964).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Richard Huscroft, *Expulsion, England's Jewish Solution: Edward I and the Jews* (Stroud, 2006).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Robin Mundill, *England's Jewish Solution: Experiment and Expulsion, 1262-1290* (Cambridge, 1998).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews* (New Haven, CT, 1943).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Nicholas Vincent, 'Two papal letters on the wearing of the Jewish badge, 1221 and 1239', *Jewish Historical Studies*, 34 (1994-6).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. L. M. Friedman, *Robert Grosseteste and the Jews* (Cambridge, MA, 1934).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Cecil Roth, *The Jews of Medieval Oxford* (Oxford, 1945-6), p. 127.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Anthony Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms, 1350-1500* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 23-53. Mundill cites Bale's book, but does not note its implications for his treatment of this story.[Back to \(9\)](#)

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