



Solomon ibn Verga, "Shevet Yehudah," and the Jewish-Christian Encounter



Book review

Sarah Ifft Decker* | 01.10.2018

Jeremy Cohen:

A Historian in Exile: Solomon ibn Verga, "Shevet Yehudah," and the Jewish-Christian Encounter

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.
256 pp. \$65.00 (cloth) \$30.00 (cloth).

In *A Historian in Exile: Solomon ibn Verga, Shevet Yehuda, and the Jewish-Christian Encounter*, Jeremy Cohen explores the Jewish experience in medieval Christian Europe from the perspective of a converso historian on the cusp between the Middle Ages and early modernity. Solomon ibn Verga, purported author of *Shevet Yehuda*, chose expulsion from Spain over conversion in 1492, only to be forcibly baptized in Portugal. In order to resume living as a Jew, he fled the Iberian Peninsula, probably for the Low Countries. His son Joseph ibn Verga, who edited and published his father's work, left Christendom entirely, relocating to the Ottoman Empire.

In his in-depth analysis of the stories presented in *Shevet Yehuda*, Cohen asks how a Jewish historian, living at a moment of crisis and transformation, understood the medieval Jewish-Christian encounter. What lessons did this recent past hold for the transition to modernity, as Jews sought to find their place in a changing Christian Europe? Cohen's approach differs substantially from that of earlier scholarship on *Shevet Yehuda*, which has tended to either over-historicize the work, treating its narratives as accurate accounts of historical events, or under-historicize it, emphasizing its literary and didactic functions without placing them in their appropriate historical context.

The greatest strength of Cohen's book lies in his effective treatment of the surprising ways Ibn Verga portrays medieval Christians, medieval Jews, and the fraught relationship between the two. *Shevet Yehuda* criticizes Christian anti-Jewish polemicists, but hardly descends into anti-Christian polemic. In fact, Ibn Verga challenged the basis for polemic, arguing that each person naturally prefers his or her ancestral religion, and cannot be convinced otherwise. Moreover, although he condemns the fanatical, uneducated Christian masses, he offers many positive portrayals of Christians. Christian rulers—including popes—appear as "righteous, beneficent, rational, and fair" (p. 5). Ibn Verga voiced

his own perspective through conversations between the imagined Christian scholar Thomas and an equally imaginary Christian King Alfonso, who lacks an obvious connection to any of the real Alfonsos who ruled medieval Castile and Aragon. Other medieval Jewish authors also emphasized the beneficent evenhandedness of Christian monarchs. Nachmanides, for example, presented Jaime I of Aragon as a fair arbiter in his account of the Disputation of Barcelona. But Ibn Verga went a step further by employing elite Christians as the mouthpiece for his own views. Medieval Jews, in contrast, were singled out for perhaps the greatest censure. Although the blood libel might be absurd, and religious disputations useless, such things occur because Jews inspire Christian hatred by lending money at interest, and then flaunting their ill-gotten wealth. Ibn Verga also mocked Jewish leaders as incapable of internal civil discourse and overly stringent in their interpretations of Jewish law.

Cohen organizes his work thematically, addressing various topics in Ibn Verga's discussion of the Jewish-Christian encounter. The first chapter considers the accounts of religious debates and disputations with no clear link to real historical events. In chapter 2, Cohen discusses the single historical disputation described in *Shevet Yehuda*—the fifteenth-century Disputation of Tortosa—and analyzes how Ibn Verga presented historical reality through the lens of his own interests, opinions, and didactic goals. The following two chapters explore Ibn Verga's treatment of themes prevalent in medieval anti-Judaism: Christian attacks on the Talmud and the blood libel. In both chapters, Cohen emphasizes how Ibn Verga worked both to debunk Christian anti-Jewish superstitions and to criticize elite Jews for inspiring Christian hatred with their behavior. Chapters 5 and 6 consider how Ibn Verga treated two different Jewish responses to crisis in medieval Christendom: martyrdom and conversion. Cohen argues that Ibn Verga represented the perspective of a convert to Christianity by focusing on the experiences of the living—not the dead—and refraining from criticizing Jews who succumbed to forced conversion rather than accepting martyrdom. Ibn Verga idealized Jewish martyrs, yet never presented them as practical models to be followed. The final chapter, framed as an analysis of the discussion between King Alfonso and the Christian scholar Thomas, contextualizes Ibn Verga and speculates about some of the possible literary and philosophical influences on *Shevet Yehuda*.

Although Cohen provides an intriguing and overall convincing analysis of *Shevet Yehuda*, he does not entirely deliver on the promise of using this seemingly idiosyncratic text to reveal broader trends in late medieval and early modern Jewish thought. More attention to the readership, reception, and manuscript history of *Shevet Yehuda* might have helped to explain why this text proved so attractive to sixteenth-century Jews and what they thought of the ideas contained within it. Cohen claims that the book illustrates the rise of an early modern "new order" (p. 3), which he links to Ibn Verga's Enlightenment-esque call for tolerance and religious relativism. Yet in reality the early modern new order remained one marked by religious intolerance, as seen in the ghettoization of Jews in Italian cities as well as the religious wars afflicting a newly fractured Christendom. Ibn Verga, a forced convert and a member of a persecuted minority, had good reason to call for tolerance and describe conversionary pressures as pointless. But contemporary Christian rulers, who rarely demonstrated the magnanimity that characterized Ibn Verga's King Alfonso, were far from ready to heed such calls. Ibn Verga's appeal to pluralism might seem modern, but it was hardly distinctively early modern.

Despite this critique, Cohen's book remains an invaluable resource for scholars interested in the Jewish response to the Spanish expulsion, as well as late medieval Jewish-Christian encounters more broadly. Cohen effectively relates Ibn Verga to better-known figures such as Don Isaac Abravanel, as well as individuals such as Profiat Duran and Isaac Nathan, who have more recently received scholarly attention.^[1] Those interested in *Shevet Yehuda* in particular will benefit not only from Cohen's analysis, but also from his extensive tables, which systematically present the different themes and stories included in the text. Above all, Cohen has successfully demonstrated that *Shevet Yehuda* deserves further study, as we explore how Jews in the late medieval and early modern world grappled with increasing restrictions on where and how they could live in Christian Europe.

Footnotes

[1] Maud Kozodoy, *The Secret Faith of Maestre Honoratus: Profayt Duran and Jewish Identity in Late Medieval Iberia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Ram Ben-Shalom, "A Minority Looks at the Mendicants: Isaac Nathan the Jew and Thomas Connecte the Carmelite," *The Journal of Medieval History* 30 (2004): 213-43.

Editorial remarks

***Sarah Ifft Decker** is a social and economic historian of medieval Europe, with a particular focus on the Western Mediterranean. She is especially interested in medieval Iberia, which was home to thriving Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities. She was awarded a doctorate for a thesis on "Gender, Religious Difference, and the Notarial Economy in Medieval Catalonia, 1250-1350." Currently she is Visiting Lecturer at Indiana University, Bloomington.

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