



Ross Shepard Kraemer

The Mediterranean Diaspora in Late Antiquity: What Christianity Cost the Jews

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Steven Fine
Yeshiva University

Ross Shepard Kraemer's important volume, *The Mediterranean Diaspora in Late Antiquity: What Christianity Cost the Jews*, opens with a reflection on our own time. She writes with passion of her experience of writing this volume while thinking about medieval anti-Semitism, Nazism, Islamic fundamentalism, and the most recent Jewish experience in America and elsewhere. Kraemer writes:

In 2017, as I finished years of revising, polishing, and annotating, the American political landscape, if not the larger world, shifted tectonically. Incidents of anti-Jewish rhetoric and sometimes actual violence accelerated in the wake of an American electoral result that emboldened anti-Jewish voices and actors banished to the margins of American public discourse, particularly after the Holocaust. A few days before I printed out a version of the manuscript to send to my editor, white supremacists marched in Charlottesville Virginia, chanting vile racist and anti-Jewish slogans that explicitly invoked Nazi Germany. The American president could not bring himself to utter an unequivocal, unqualified denunciation of their actions and views, falling back instead on a false equivalence of the violence of the racists with the protests against racism. In the additional year and a half that it took for this book to go to press, anti-Jewish incidents and rhetoric have intensified, perhaps most horrifically in a mass shooting the day before my seventieth birthday, at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, a congregation where a colleague of mine studied to become a Bar-mitzvah. All are chilling evidence that the legacy of the centuries I consider here

remains with us and requires of us constant vigilance. Careful historical work may not be sufficient to protect us from repeating our painful past, but its absence makes that even more likely. (xii)

This is not the first time that “careful historical work” may not be enough to protect actual living Jews. In 1934 an Anglican Minister, James Parkes, published *The Conflict of Church and Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism* (<https://archive.org/details/conflictthechu012717mbp>). This volume, too, was not a disinterested study of the ways that theologians have irenically debated their theological differences. Parkes’s work appeared at a moment when the world was going very wrong. Stalin, Hitler, and a host of rightist and leftist anti-Semites were on the march. This is how Parkes began his monumental study:

The publication of a study of the causes of antisemitism needs neither justification nor explanation at the present time. But a word may be said of the material offered in the present work. The progress of events from the mediaeval ghetto to modern Europe is fairly well known. That the roots of the present situation lie in the mediaeval past is generally agreed. The present work tries to go a stage further, and to answer the question: why was there a mediaeval ghetto? In 1096 there were wild popular out-breaks against the Jews in all the cities of northern and central Europe. What made this possible? The answer could only be found by a study of the earlier period, a period incidentally which is little known by either Jewish or Christian scholars of the subject. It was necessary to begin with the Jews in the Roman world, and to trace their passage through the Roman pagan and Roman Christian civilisations into the beginning of the Middle Ages if the significance of this sudden popular fury was to be discovered. (vii)

Parkes concludes his volume where he began, writing that

scholars may know to-day of the beauty and profundity of the Jewish conception of life. They may know that “some Jews” were responsible for the death of Jesus. But the Christian public as a whole, the great and overwhelming majority of the hundreds of millions of nominal Christians in the world, still believe that “the Jews” killed Jesus, that they are a people rejected by their God, that all the beauty of their Bible belongs to the Christian Church and not to those by whom it was written; and if on this ground, so carefully prepared, modern antisemites have reared a structure of racial and economic propaganda, the final responsibility still rests with those who prepared the soil, created the deformation of the people, and so made these ineptitudes credible. (476)

Between the preface and the conclusion of this volume, Parkes makes no mention of “the present time.” No discussion of Nazism or Soviet anti-Semitism or of Henry Ford or Father Coghlan in the United States is to be found. There is no explanation why he resorted to a Jewish publisher

otherwise known for its Talmud translations to get his book out. Rather, Parkes lays out the contours of anti-Semitism century by century through the period we call late antiquity and until recently, with negative judgement, the Dark Ages or early medieval period. The story he tells is harrowing, especially when read against the events of his day (known to all of his readers, unstated by the author) and the tragedies he well understood might be in the offing.

Parkes himself was not the first to engage these sources with goals far beyond antiquarianism. Heinrich Graetz, for example, surveyed them in his grand history of the Jews. In no small part, this influential metahistory, which appeared beginning in 1853, was meant to further Jewish emancipation in Europe after 1848, then the great migration of Jews from the Russian Empire and its virulent anti-Semitism. Wagner's music graced the most elegant Western concert halls, unbaptized Jews could still not assume academic positions in "enlightened" Europe, and Jewish studies was unwelcome (at least when carried out by Jews) in those same universities.

Graetz's history was branded as "lachrymose" by a Galician Jew from a well-off bourgeois family, a Vienna-trained rabbi and historian and a transplant to America named Salo Baron.¹ Over time, *lachrymose* became almost a dirty word for the Baronist and their fellow travelers. It represented the Jewish past of persecutions, not the promised progressive future of enlightened Europe and America. Baron, Cecil Roth in England, and others sought a new usable history where pain is put in its place and the positive in Jewish history stressed. Theirs was an inwardly focused history, built mainly upon Jewish sources that supported a positive modern Jewish self-image and then elided the anti-Jewishness of Christian texts about Jews.

The 1930s came as quite a start. Jews (including Baron and Roth) could no longer elide lachrymosity, as these academic historians would have hoped. Anti-Semitism was at their doors and spreading across Europe and even America to harrowing effect. Parkes's work grappled with this reality directly and with valor. It was a beacon in a world that averred its collective eyes.

After the War, the "antilachrymose" approach to Jewish history had a resurgence, particularly in the United States, as Jews and Judaism slowly found acceptance in the American polity. In fact, it hardened into dogma, as the grandchildren of the great turn-of-the-century Jewish migration from Eastern Europe became thoroughly Americanized and wanted their own positive history. Even the Holocaust was often sidelined as beyond Jewish history, in the search for a happy American usable history.

This antilachrymose orthodoxy was reinforced by the academic culture that Jews so desperately hoped to penetrate. An excellent example is art historian Kurt Weitzmann's monumental

1. See <https://tinyurl.com/RBL202012a>. For a general survey and bibliography, see Yitzchak Schwartz, "An Anti-anti-lachrymose Approach to Jewish History?," 22 February 2017, The Blog of the Journal of the History of Ideas, <https://tinyurl.com/RBL202012b>.

exhibition, “The Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Centuries,” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1973, where Judaism was given equal status with Christianity and paganism as “The Jewish Realm.”² The message that everyone got along in a happy late antiquity was purveyed vigorously and prescriptively. The synagogues at Sardis and Dura Europos were the “poster children.”

Parkes and Graetz were read by graduate students like me for their comprehensive exams, but American Jewish scholarship had little interest in such issues. As late as 1996 my own exhibition, *Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the Synagogue in the Ancient World*, ignored the phenomena so well documented by Parkes—not even a word. It did not even occur to me to include this lachrymose part of the story, and it did not occur to reviewers that it was missing.³

After 9/11, with the close of our post-Soviet parousia, I returned to Parkes, his predecessor Jean Juster (1912), and Marcel Simon’s more complex *Verus Israel: Etude sur les relations entre Chretiens et Juifs dans l’Empire romain (135–425)*, begun before the War, published in 1948, translated only in 1986.⁴ Israeli Amnon Linder’s *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* appeared in 1987 (in general, a “golden moment” for studies of ancient Judaism, synagogues in particular).⁵ At first without knowing it, I accumulated a significant body of archaeological evidence that reflects a rather lachrymose story of synagogue and communal destruction. My findings appeared in 2012 as “The Menorah and the Cross: Historiographical Reflections on a Recent Discovery from Laodicea on the Lycus.”⁶ I was pleased to find that David Engel of NYU had told a similar story in his 2010 *Historians of the Jews and the Holocaust*, this time focused on Baron, his students, and the Holocaust—and that there was a common thread. Neither Engel nor I were formed intellectually within the regnant Baronist school with its Americanist antilachrymosity but by the far more sober, Israeli-German-American-Californian Amos Funkenstein.

Kraemer’s volume builds on this transformation. She writes with great personal reflectiveness throughout:

Fine argues that much recent historiography has downplayed Christian anti-Jewish violence and destruction. When I began this project, I probably would have not have

2. See <https://tinyurl.com/RBL202012c>.

3. See <https://tinyurl.com/RBL202012d>.

4. Jean Juster, *Les droits politiques des Juifs dans L’empire romain* (Paris: Geuthner, 1912); Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel: Etude sur les relations entre Chretiens et Juifs dans l’Empire romain (135–425)* (Paris: de Boccard, 1964); idem, *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire, AD 135–425* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). This is, of course a short list. See Albert I. Baumgarten, “Marcel Simon’s *Verus Israel* as a Contribution to Jewish History,” *HTR* 92 (1999): 465–78, <https://tinyurl.com/RBL202012e>.

5. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987. On that moment, see my “Rabbi Aqiva in 3D: Artifact, Text and the Recent History of Judaism in Late Antiquity” (forthcoming).

6. An updated version is at <https://tinyurl.com/RBL202012f>.

concluded, but I find myself more sympathetic now to this reading. While, as I will argue throughout the book, many accounts of such violence are not necessarily reliable in their specifics, the cumulative evidence is distressing, and difficult to disregard.... The late antique Christian narrative of Jewish decline and “Judaism” as moribund may have more about Christian self-positioning than about the realities of Jewish lives.

Nevertheless, it seems naïve to argue that hostile Christian rhetoric, even if fashioned primarily for internal consumption, had no impact on the lives of Jews, any more than we would argue now that racist rhetoric has no effect on the lives of people of color or that misogynistic and sexist rhetoric has little or no impact on the lives of women. Christian accounts of attacks on Jews and the persecution of Jews are by no means reliable historical evidence, but neither are they total fantasy. As the interests and practices of the governments and the orthodox church increasingly aligned, the negative consequences for Jews intensified. Forced to choose a century in late antiquity in which to have lived as a Jew in the Mediterranean diaspora, I would choose neither the fifth nor the sixth. (39–40)

In *The Mediterranean Diaspora in Late Antiquity: What Christianity Cost the Jews*, Kraemer reclaims this lachrymose history, tracing it across late antiquity. In ten rich chapters our author unpacks late antique Christian sources with acumen and insightfulness. In chapter 1, “The Absence of Evidence as the Evidence of Absence,” is an extended historiographic essay, where Kraemer explains her rather minimalist reading of sources. She is definitely a “splitter” and not a “lumper,” terms used delightfully by Paula Fredriksen in the Kraemer Festschrift.⁷ Fredriksen describes herself as a “lumper,” that is, a confirmed contextualizer. Being a “lumper” myself, I found myself sometimes parting ways with Kraemer’s minimal reading of possible historical contexts—an approach popular among the remnants of the Columbia legacy in the American academy. Not filling spaces is also a form of filling, after all. Kraemer’s choice to remove rabbinic literature—and Palestine in general—from the equation is unfortunate; I will return to the decision to ignore rabbinic sources in a forthcoming essay. Kraemer’s “micro-histories” are incisive and her reads generally reasonable. Her claim “absence of evidence as the evidence of absence” is just right. When the last Jewish family left or converted to Christianity, the result was indeed silence.

Chapter 2, “‘Five Hundred and Forty Souls Were Added to the Church’: The Letter of Severus of Minorca on the Conversion of the Jews, Early Fifth Century?,” provides a thick description of the Letter of Severus, the longest patristic narrative related to the conversion of Jews, using this text as a homepage for much of her later discussion. As she does in later chapters, Kraemer then contextualizes this story in terms of other texts preserved by the church, including Roman law and

7. Paula Fredriksen, “‘If It Looks Like a Duck, and It Quacks like a Duck...’: On Not Giving Up the Godfearers,” in *A Most Reliable Witness: Essays in Honor of Ross Shepard Kraemer*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Nathaniel DesRosiers, Shira L. Lander, Jacqueline Z. Pastis, and Daniel Ullucci (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2015), 25–54.

patristic literature, reporting on archaeological discoveries through secondary literature in later chapters where applicable. What differentiates Kraemer's book from her predecessors is her contextualization of the phenomena discussed within the full Imperial and Christian history of this period. She discusses not only the treatment of Jews (and Samaritans) but of heretics and "pagans," who often fared far worse (if only because they were extinguished). Kraemer's work fully and respectfully engages the work of her predecessors and peers, especially when disagreeing. Chapter 3, "'You Shall Have Freedom from Care . . . During my Reign.' Letter 51, The Emperor Julian to the Collectivity of the Jews, (perhaps spurious) (dated) March 1, 363: From Constantine to the Death of Julian, 312–363," begins a kind of chronological narrative, organized by Imperial legislation. Under each succeeding emperor, the pressure on Jews increased. The chapter headings, each drawn from a law of subsequent eras, tell the story of increasing clerical and legal pressure. They are best read in sequence: (4) "The Sect of the Jews Is Prohibited by No Law," "Their Synagogues Shall Remain in their Accustomed Peace" (393 AD); (5) "Their Synagogues Shall Remain in their Accustomed Peace" (397 AD); (6) "No Synagogue Shall Be Constructed from Now on" (423 AD); (7) "We Deny to the Jews and to the *Pagani*, the Right to Practice Legal Advocacy and to Serve in the State Service" (this chapter is subtitled "Theodosios II in His Majority, 423–450"); (8) "We Do Not Grant That Their Synagogues Shall Stand, but Want Them to be Converted in Form to Churches" (this chapter is subtitled "In the Aftermath of Theodosios II in the East, 450–604"). Chapter 9 is headed by an excerpt from a letter by Gregory the Great, to Victor, bishop of Palermo, dated June 598: "In What Has Been Allowed to Them [the Jews] Should Not Sustain Any Prejudice." This chapter breaks with the structure of the previous ones, providing an integrated case study of how Jews were treated in Byzantine and Vandal northern Italy. It is called "In the Aftermath of Theodosios II in the West, 450–60."

Chapter 10 turns from Christian Rome to Jews themselves. It begins with citation of a Hebrew-language Jewish tombstone from Venosa in southern Italy. It reads, "Here rests Faustina, aged fourteen years, five months.... Two apostoli and two rebbites sang lamentations." This chapter discusses how Jews responded to the Christian imperial onslaught. It is really the first chapter where Jews appear as active agents rather than as people who are acted upon. Kraemer calls this chapter "The Price of (Christian) Orthodoxy." She provides eight short and incisive essays, each meant to elucidate the price and responses of Jews in the late Roman Empire: "They Converted," "They Emigrated," "They Resisted," "They Entertained Messianic Possibilities," "They Adapted," "Women's Religious Offices as Adaptive Strategy?," "They Retrenched," and "Rabbinization."

Ross Kraemer's *The Mediterranean Diaspora in Late Antiquity: What Christianity Cost the Jews* is an important and timely contribution to the scholarly library. This is a fine example of activist scholarship, its subtitle expressing explicitly its purpose in a way that Parkes could not have permitted himself—and with Oxford University Press, no less. We can only hope that Kraemer's warning will be far less prescient than Parkes's was.