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Elisheva Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe. (Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World)*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004. xvi + 275 pp. Illustrations, notes, glossary, bibliography, and index. \$39.50 U.S (cl). ISBN 0-691-09166-8.

Review by Robert Chazan, New York University.

The social history of the Middle Ages and the social history of medieval Jews have lagged considerably until recently. The problem was, in part, limited prior interest in the issues of social history. Broad societal and scholarly concern with social history and, in particular, augmented interest in the history of women and then more broadly of gender have served to remove this impediment. There is now deep desire in both scholarly and popular circles to enhance our knowledge of the ways in which medieval men and women in general, and medieval Jews in particular, lived their quotidian lives.

This new-found desire still encounters formidable obstacles, however. History can only be written on the basis of preserved data, and the preserved data for the social history of the Middle Ages are generally rather slim. This is especially true for the Jews of that period. There is, to be sure, one major exception to this generalization. The treasure trove of quotidian materials found in the Cairo Genizah has allowed for reconstruction of many aspects of Jewish daily life along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and S. D. Goitein's multi-volume *A Mediterranean Society* provides a remarkably detailed portrait of major aspects of everyday Jewish life, including the experience of the Jewish women of this Mediterranean society. [1] For the rest of the medieval Jewish world, no such repository of data has survived, and thus researchers with interests in social history must utilize an assortment of literary sources not especially well suited to answering the questions that social historians pose. Not surprisingly, the volume under review--Elisheva Baumgarten's *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe*--has been greeted with enthusiasm and acclaim, which seems more than justified to this reviewer. As we shall see, Baumgarten uses considerable ingenuity to surmount the source problems and thus to illuminate important aspects of the family life of the Jews of northern Europe--the Jews who designated themselves (and have been designated by posterity as well) as Ashkenazic. As we shall also see, Baumgarten in fact does far more: her findings on Jewish family life enable her to make important observations on the place of these Jews in the large societal ambience in which they found themselves.

Despite the sub-title *Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe*, an analysis that would do justice to the diversity of medieval European Jewry is not possible, and Baumgarten has not made such an effort. The Jewish communities of medieval Europe were far too different from one another to permit an overarching analysis of Jewish family life that could engage the sources for all these differing communities and that would encompass their variegated experiences. Thus, Baumgarten has wisely decided to limit her analysis to the young but vigorous Jewish communities that, beginning in the tenth century, began to emerge first in the central areas of northern France and Germany and then spread relatively briefly to England in the west and more permanently to Hungary and Poland in the east. This set of Jewish communities, designated Ashkenazic, became increasingly important in the overall configuration of late-medieval Jewish life and during the modern period came to constitute the demographic backbone of worldwide Jewry. Clarifying Jewish family life in this set of Jewish communities is thus an important scholarly objective.

Baumgarten provides a clear and useful indication of the sources available for her analysis: the Jewish sources “include halakhic responsa (questions and answers addressed to prominent rabbinic authorities), exempla such as those in *Sefer Hasidim*, ritual books, comprehensive books of commandments (*sifrei mizvot*), biblical and talmudic commentary as well as commentary on liturgical poetry (*piyyutim*), medical tractates, polemical compositions, chronicles, lists of the dead, and gravestones” (p. 17). Because Baumgarten has important observations to make on the embeddedness of the medieval Ashkenazic Jews in their majority environment, she adds some observations on useful Christian sources: “In addition to sources originating in the Jewish communities, canon law, municipal records, medical texts, commentaries on the Bible (Old Testament and New Testament) and legenda provide knowledge about the Jewish communities, their Christian surroundings, and the contacts between Jews and Christians.”

With regard to the Jewish sources noted by Baumgarten, their limitations are notable. As she herself indicates, “[t]he majority of these sources were not written with the intention of discussing family life; rather they address a variety of concerns both legal and theological, and the details of family life emerge from the narrative” (p. 17). Baumgarten’s indication of the legal and theological objectives of the Jewish materials is important. Teasing out social history from each of these categories of sources is no simple matter. In addition, these sources, which Baumgarten uses for reconstructing first and foremost an account of mothers and children, were written exclusively by adult males, a problem noted explicitly by Baumgarten herself. Finally, these sources do not include anything like the first-hand and unselfconscious materials deposited in the Cairo Genizah and exploited so successfully by Goitein. Interestingly, Baumgarten begins her book with a quotation from Abelard’s first letter to Heloise. While these remarkable letters can hardly be labeled first-hand and unselfconscious, they too have no parallel in the medieval Jewish corpus available to Baumgarten for her analysis.

The limitations of source materials are responsible for the contours of Baumgarten’s analysis. The book is divided into five chapters: “Birth”; “Circumcision and Baptism”; “Additional Birth Rituals”; “Maternal Nursing and Wet Nurses: Feeding and Caring for Infants”; “Parents and Children: Competing Values.” What is immediately apparent is that eighty percent of the chapters (and in fact more than eighty percent of the pages in the book) are devoted to the more biologically grounded issues related to birth and infancy. The closing discussion of child-rearing occupies a minimum of space in the volume. This seems to me clearly related to the sources at Baumgarten’s disposal. Her Jewish sources have much to say, for instance, on infertility and fertility, to which she devotes very interesting discussions; there are a number of major birth-related rituals that draw the attention of Jewish legal thinkers and allow Baumgarten to discuss these rituals at considerable length. By contrast, the kinds of issues that constitute child-rearing are much less legally grounded, produced far less in the way of legal discussion, and necessarily limit Baumgarten’s treatment in this area. It seems important to note that Baumgarten has been scrupulous in her use of the available sources, eschewing the temptation to move beyond what her sources permit, and that she has exercised maximal ingenuity in extracting reasonable conclusions from the limited source material at her disposal. This combination of scrupulousness and ingenuity are part of the reason for the strongly positive reaction her study has elicited.

Another factor in this strongly positive reaction has been Baumgarten’s extension of her analysis of mothers and children in medieval Ashkenazic Jewry toward consideration of the place of these Jews in the larger environment in which they found themselves. The issue is of critical significance for an understanding of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry. It is widely acknowledged that the medieval Ashkenazic Jews were considerably more distanced from their surroundings than were their confrères in the Islamic world. The explanations for this greater distance lie in historic longevity, with the Jews in the Islamic world constituting a far older community, and in linguistic dynamics, with the Jews in the Islamic world sharing Arabic with their neighbors as both a spoken language and a written language as well. Indeed, the Ashkenazic Jews of northern Europe were more distanced from their surroundings than were the Jews of southern Europe. In both these sets of Jewries, the Jews utilized the language of their

environment for everyday discourse while making Hebrew the language of the written word, in parallel fashion to the majority use of the vernacular for oral communication and Latin for writing. Despite parallel language circumstances, the Jews of southern Europe and northern Europe differed markedly in their closeness to the Christian majority, largely it would seem as a result of longevity. The older Jewish communities of the south—the Italian peninsula, southern France, and the Iberian peninsula—were much more deeply embedded in their environment than were the Jews of the north. These comparative observations, pitting the Ashkenazic Jews against the Jews of the Islamic world and southern Europe, have often led to the sense of highly isolated Jewish life in northern Europe, with the Jews living among themselves—except for economic relationships with their Christian neighbors—and culturally and religiously sustained by their Jewish heritage only. This sense of a highly isolated Ashkenazic Jewry has been challenged of late by a number of studies, and Baumgarten addresses this issue directly and convincingly.

Baumgarten suggests reasonably that her analysis of Jewish family life offers a valuable perspective for treating the embeddedness of the Ashkenazic Jews in their cultural milieu. Precisely the quotidian aspects of her topic serve to make the parallels between majority Christian and minority Jewish practices and beliefs obvious, despite the necessary efforts on both sides to highlight for polemical purposes the differences between the two communities. In her discussion of these issues in the introduction, Baumgarten notes the language element we have already discerned, viz. the Jewish utilization of the majority vernacular. She goes on to adduce further factors that made the Jews part of the northern European culture of the times. The first of these factors was simply the engagement in both communities with the same irreducible elements of human existence. Baumgarten's eloquent formulation bears citation: "Clearly, on the most basic level, the everyday needs of a Jewish family were similar to those of their Christian neighbors. The Jews needed to support themselves financially as did their neighbors, and they too married, gave birth, and died. In the context of family life, giving birth, and raising children, we can assume that Jews and Christians who lived in similar material surroundings and environments shared many of the same concerns" (p. 7). This reality is often obscured by the focus on religious issues and identity; Baumgarten claims that the focus on the everyday aspects of family life offers a different and invaluable perspective. To this emphasis on shared circumstances, Baumgarten—following the lead of Jacob Katz—emphasizes the everyday contact between members of the two communities, contact especially discernible between the women of the two communities.[2]

What Baumgarten suggests in the introduction to her study as the reality of medieval Ashkenazic Jewish life—namely embeddedness within the larger cultural context—is illustrated carefully throughout the study. As noted, Baumgarten identifies useful non-Jewish sources at the outset and uses these non-Jewish sources to make an ongoing and—to this reviewer at least—convincing case for significant parallels in family life between the Christian majority and the Jewish minority of medieval northern Europe. Attentive readers will have noted earlier that the second chapter in the book is entitled *Circumcision and Baptism*, suggesting a major instance of the tendency toward comparative study that is characteristic of the book in its entirety.

Those interested in medieval European family life, in medieval Jewish social history, and in the fundamental relationships between medieval northern Europe's Christian majority and Jewish minority will all be well served by *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe*.

NOTES

[1] S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Genizah*, 6 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967-93).

[2] Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

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