

Maristella Botticini, Zvi Eckstein

The Chosen Few

How Education Shaped Jewish History, 70-1492

by [Cristiana Facchini](#)

The Return of the Grand Narrative

In 1899, Henry Dagan published a short collection of interviews under the title *Enquête sur l'antisemitisme*.¹ All the most prominent French and Italian intellectuals of socialist beliefs were asked a few questions about the rise and spread of anti-Semitism. Amongst the many different answers given for it, a particular one emerged.

Most likely owing to a common socialist culture, the intellectuals that took part in this project explained that the rise of new forms of anti-Semitism could be better understood through the economic prism, therefore presenting anti-Semitism as a response to the economic struggle intensified by capitalism, and ultimately as a form of resentment that spread amongst impoverished middle classes. The chief editor of the *Journal des économistes* established a parallel that was almost a myth. He claimed that anti-Semitism and hatred against the Jews were to be compared to the expulsion of the Huguenots from France in seventeenth century, as economic and religious persecution usually ran parallel. The religious persecutions of the Huguenots could be explained as economic persecution that applied perfectly to Jews of the nineteenth century. According to this explanation, Catholic religious intolerance caused the expulsion of the most dynamic factions of society, and thus provoked the decline of Catholic nations. Surprisingly enough, this explanation was grounded in seventeenth century Jewish thought, an argument that was originally elaborated by Simone Luzzatto, a learned and sophisticated Venetian rabbi, in an attempted plea for tolerance of the Jews according to the doctrine of *raison d'état*.² The decline of Catholic countries was later to be explained as the result of the expulsion of Jews and the rise of new mercantile nations that preached religious tolerance, namely, those of Protestant leaning. How these arguments developed since the early modern period cannot be explored here. Nevertheless, they provide an

ideal framework for the understanding of recent trends in historiography of the Jews and Judaism.

Religion and economy have been at the core of scholarly debate and public discussion since the inception of modernity as such. The groundbreaking work of Max Weber and his underlining critique of Marxist interpretation of religion and economy played – and in some ways continue to play – a key role in addressing research in the field of religion and economic modernization. Weber also assigned a significant role to Judaism, although his work contributed to fueling an enormous debate and some resentful reactions, especially from Jewish intellectuals.³ Ever since, historians have been debating the relationship between religion and economy, with each historiographical tradition opposing, criticizing, supporting or correcting Weber's hypothesis.⁴

Scholarly research on the economic behavior of religious minorities, and more precisely of merchant communities, has attracted a lot of attention. Works such as Yuri Slezkine and Francesca Trivellato, to mention just a few, analyzed the role of religious and ethnic minorities and the services they provided for their host communities from different angles.⁵ Historiography on port-cities has suggested that religious minorities – and Jews especially – offered highly specialized services, which added to shaping a certain path to modernity.⁶

While the above-mentioned works dealt with early modern and modern Jewish history, certainly providing a 'grand narrative,' works that embrace the long sweep of Jewish history, or even the whole notion of Judaism, are much rarer in the context of postmodern narratives. In this sense, the book of Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein is a novelty in the recent historiographical setting, and therefore calls for a short commentary.

The Chosen Few is a book that encompasses the history of the Jews from the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) to the expulsion from Spain in 1492. Attempts to write a comprehensive history of Judaism are very rare: there are a few excellent exceptions, with the most outstanding examples being sociologist Shmuel N. Eisenstadt's *Jewish Civilization* and *Judaism* by Catholic theologian Hans Kung. Both perspectives are culturally charged, the first one being from a Jewish standpoint, and the second from a Christian stance. Nevertheless, both are interesting as they

convey modes of understanding Judaism in its extraordinary long history and in holistic terms: as a complex religious system, and subsequently, as a civilization that coped with many challenges of various natures.

Ancient Judaism underwent a form of seismic modification that, as Botticini and Eckstein describe, redefined the religious structure of Judaism. The most typical example is the disappearance of the sacrificial system that was organized around the temple of Jerusalem following its destruction in 70 CE. The political collapse of ancient Judaism is the starting point of the *Chosen Few*, which aims at understanding the epochal changes of rabbinical Judaism, and more precisely, the kind of culture Judaism prompted after what might aptly be called the great "trauma" of the collapse of its ancient and central structure. *The Chosen Few* deals with the relationship between religious rules and literacy, and accordingly, it attempts to investigate the transformation that Judaism underwent through a relatively long formative period. More precisely, the authors are interested in reassessing some tenets of Jewish history, from late antiquity to the early Renaissance, as they claim in their book.

The Chosen Few is divided into ten chapters, each one dealing with a specific topic: the first one introduces the general theme of the book, and particularly deals with the issue of demography; the second aims at assessing whether or not the Jews were a persecuted minority; the third chapter progresses through a chronological path and deals with the introduction of new rules related to religious literacy as a feature of ancient Judaism; chapter four is mainly theoretical, whereas chapter five delves into the consequences of literacy from 200-650. The sixth chapter follows up on and analyzes the transformation of Jews from farmers into merchants (750-1150); the seventh deals with migration and the eighth with the key issue of segregation and money-lending (1000-1500); the ninth introduces a lesser-known topic, which is the impact of the Mongol conquest, and finally, the last chapter summarizes the results and offers new insight into future research.

The table of contents clearly reflects major trends in historiography of the latest decades, although both authors address one of the main issues that have been on the agenda of historians and social scientist since the nineteenth century, when historiography on Jews and Judaism developed into a more or less professional discipline. How and why did Jews turn to certain specific professions, namely money-

lending, medicine, trade, and a few other specialized urban occupations? The debate over Jews, Judaism and economy is an important part of Western thought, not to mention the very problematic essay composed by Marx on the "Jewish Question", which fired, along with other writings on religion, the scholarly and public debate on religion and its role in society. These questions reflected a different problem as well, which was related to the process of political emancipation of the Jews in European society. The issue over role of the Jews in the past was twofold, and reflected changes in the process of Jewish integration throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. On one hand, supporters of Jewish emancipation suggested that the Jewish economic structure and specialization should also be changed, and that Jews must be permitted to practice professions that they were previously barred from, due to religious hatred. Political emancipation and reforms, like the ones implemented in the Hapsburg Empire, contributed to a great extent in shifting the professional position of the Jews. These achievements and their relatively successful integration into the fabric of modern society incited resentment and new forms of anti-Semitism.

Historians and Jewish historiography in particular underlined how Jews were pushed by legal restrictions and impediments into despised and risky professions, namely to the performance of what was considered "polluted activities." This was especially true in Christian societies where, though often with a certain ambivalence, some economic activities were forbidden for specific social groups. Authors of *The Chosen Few* challenge a set of these historical explanations, and expressly claim that they are retroactive historiographical answers that may not be applicable to the history of the Jews in late antiquity and the medieval period. Let us briefly follow the authors on their journey.

The first assumption is that Jews in the ancient world (200b BCE – 200 CE) who lived in *Eretz Israel* were mainly occupied in agricultural activities. In a time span of a few centuries however, Jews of the Diaspora had dramatically changed their economic and professional position. How had that come into being? The change is particularly indebted to the introduction of a rule that proved to be central, according to Botticini and Eckstein's account. It is precisely the rule attributed to Yehoshua ben Gamla, a priest mentioned in the early rabbinic texts, according to which a compulsory obligation to teach Torah to children was enforced as a communal regulation. In

comparative terms, this norm was introduced in the background of a religious world that was modeled after the rules of ancient religions, which focused on sacrificial offerings and temple activities, initiation and magic, fasting and prayers.⁷ Despite their different beliefs and ritual structure, Roman and Greek religions, alongside Zoroastrianism, mysteries religions, Orphic and Dionysian cults, and Mithraism never implemented a law that imposed significant textual knowledge of a written sacred tradition. For historians of religion this is an important innovation indeed, even though the imminent spread of Christianity and Islam would introduce a great number of additional transformations to the religious world of late antiquity.⁸ We will not discuss the issue extensively; suffice it to note that literacy was not one of the primary interests of other religious groups, which preserved, transmitted and elaborated religious memory in different ways and through other means.

Compulsory Jewish education, the goal of which was primarily religious and not universal, contributed to redefining the borders of Judaism when the “religious market” was fluid and very diverse. In chapter four, the authors apply some known theories based on choice analysis and economic behavior. Moreover, they highlight how a religious system is defined according to its appeal and capability to attract or sustain its members. Religion is one of the many commodities that are available on a relative free market, and it is likely to attract or reject on the basis of its appeal. Men and women will choose according to their expectations and needs. “Religious affiliation typically requires some costly signal of belonging to a club or network,”⁹ and rabbinic Judaism required literacy and education. According to this norm, Jewish farmers had to send their children to school where the teaching of the Torah was enforced. In other words, it meant they had to invest time and resources in religious literacy, rather than having the help of their children in working the land. Any farming society would be well-acquainted with this problem.

On the basis of this assumption, the authors elaborate a model, which aims to explain the demographic crisis of Judaism between the first and seventh century, and the pattern of conversion. According to the model, the high cost of the norm was likely to drive away Jewish families that were unwilling to receive such low benefits or that were not wealthy enough to support such a request. The idealized Galilean village of around 200 CE, as it is envisioned by the authors, depicts several situations that are likely to provide an explanation for patterns of conversion in late antiquity.

The religious farmer, whether wealthy or less so, would perform the norm because the benefits of belonging to the group were higher than the cost of literacy. Yet both the wealthy and the less affluent farmer might also choose to not obey the norm for a number of reasons, and thus would have to accept the social stigma that came with the label of *am ha-aretz*.¹⁰ Ultimately, they might decide to convert and join a different religious group, especially one of the many Christian sects that proliferated in the late antiquity period, and that were quite familiar, particularly those still following certain Jewish rules (as the Ebionites did). Rich and poor were likely to pay the cost of compulsory religious literacy and belong to the group; or, they might avoid the cost and live on the margin of the religious group, ultimately deciding to convert to another religion.

This theory is fascinating and offers new insight into what can be termed self-segregation rules, focusing, in this case for example, on literacy more than the laws of purity. It also provides an explanatory theory for conversion that is applicable to societies that are relatively open and pluralistic in their religious organization. Examples of microhistory, which are not provided for this period, might shed light on the opportunities, constraint and options made available to a small or larger group of Jews. Their choices would be determined by a number of factors that would influence their actions and practice.

The implementation of the rule of religious education spread during the Talmudic period (200-650) when the society of farmers became literate. Talmudic literature, Gaonic *responsa* and archeological evidence from synagogues indicate a strong emphasis on universal education.

The implementation of rule over education coincides with the demographic decline detected by scholars. Although figures vary, there is a scholarly consensus on the dramatic drop of the Jewish population between the fall of the temple and the end of the Talmudic period. The causes of this decline were usually attributed to the impact of wars, famine, plague and changes in fertility rates. However, Botticini and Eckstein claim that these explanations are not supported by evidence, and the only explanation for the demographic demise of the Jewish population is conversion. As the theory suggests, conversion of Jews to Christianity escalated as a result of religious rules that enforced increased literacy in the framework of a farming society.

In the following centuries major changes took place in the religion and culture of the Jews, and the structure of the Jewish Diaspora was reconfigured. What were the consequences of this process? From chapter six onward, the theory defined in the previous chapters is used to explain the main, though inadvertent, changes in the social structure of Judaism. The world of literate farmers was destined to develop into a world of urban professionals composed of merchants, doctors, craftsmen, and artisans. As a part of the old Diaspora vanished in highly Hellenized areas, a new Diaspora rose in those regions that underwent a religious revolution around the seventh century CE. The majority of Jews now lived in Mesopotamia and Persia, where they slowly abandoned agriculture and moved to villages in order to practice new professions. This transformation reached its apex after the establishment of the Abbasid Empire.¹¹ “This occupational transition took about 150 years: by 900 the overwhelming majority of the Jews in Mesopotamia and Persia were engaged in a wide variety of crafts, trade, moneylending and medicine.”¹²

The rise of Islam and the establishment of a world-wide, highly urbanized and dynamic empire offered the ideal setting for the benefits enhanced by literacy. The authors claim that, in the changing context of the Muslim caliphate, religious literacy had “spillover effects,” meaning that skills acquired by learning to read and write might improve the ability to count, write contracts and letters, and therefore bolster practices of law-enforcement. The improvement in technology, science and art that accompanied the development of a sophisticated empire contributed to the dissemination of literacy at large, and these main changes in society contributed to reinforcing literacy among Jews. Using ample evidence from the Cairo Geniza and specifically Shelomo Goitein’s research, the authors highlight that literacy was spread among Jewish communities of the Muslim world, where, one should add, seventy percent of Jewry lived.

Following Avner Greif, the authors stress how rabbinic Judaism, with Talmudic and *responsa* literature, were able to build a system of legal protection which operated as a contract-enforcement mechanism, even in the absence of a state. In this sense, a common language and high literacy contributed to transforming Jewish settlements and their professional landscape radically, prompting a change that, according to Botticini and Eckstein, would continue in the following centuries.

The following chapters are devoted to describing the formation of a voluntary Diaspora, and focus on the rise of Western European Jewry. How did Jews arrive to the Christian countries of Western Europe?

Chapter seven and eight address the question of how the Diaspora came into being, and how Jews willingly moved from different areas – mainly to cities – in search of better social conditions and professional options. The arrival of Jews into the diverse and parceled Christian kingdoms of the Middle Ages suggests that Jews were invited, in small groups, to offer their highly specialized services. A parallel development in the cultural and religious milieu took place in the same period, with the emergence of the great rabbinic centers of France and Ashkenaz that contributed to normalizing support for these new settlements. By the year 1000, charters show that Jews could own land, and were involved in the fields of craft, trade and medicine in general, with highly specialized urban professions. However, money-lending was not a distinctively Jewish occupation. How did Jews become involved in money-lending?

The answer follows the path of argumentation which was set forth earlier. The authors explore different historical explanations, according to which Jews were pushed into money-lending: one suggests that they were thrust into it because of the exclusive membership of Christian guilds (Roth); another one emphasizes persecutions and portable capital as driving forces that produced this professional specialization, and the last explanation is given by Haym Soloveitchik, which regards the laws on buying and selling wine in medieval Europe. Because wine was a profitable commodity, Jewish involvement with this business needed to be formally and legally sanctioned from within the Jewish community. According to Soloveitchik, laws regulating wine trade and consumption were gradually softened by eminent rabbis – particularly Rashi – and the strict rules that forbade Jews to drink, buy and sell wine produced by Gentiles was slowly lifted.

Botticini and Eckstein offer some historical examples of a Jewish preference for money-lending. Both English and French cases illustrate how Jews became preeminent in money-lending and how later, between the thirteenth and the fourteenth century, they were slowly replaced by Christians, especially Lombards and Florentines. Jews were expelled from England in 1290, more than a century after the appearance of ritual murder libels. In France, after reaching a key role in money-

lending, Jews were expelled at the end of fourteenth century, and the same pattern is traceable throughout German lands and elsewhere, with the exception of the Italian states and the Iberian Peninsula.

“We show that the entry and then specialization of the Jews in lending money at interest can be explained by their comparative advantage in the four assets that were and still are the pillars of the financial intermediation: capital, networking, literacy and numeracy, and contract enforcement institutions.”¹³ This is the leitmotif that supports the whole narrative, which is a grand narrative on Judaism: literacy and economic performances. An inadvertent revolution was launched by rabbis in the midst of a great trauma, and with the collapse of the ancient *politeia*, and through compulsory religious education of male children, a great transformation that would subsequently be well-suited for the social and economic integration in developed empires and economies was triggered. The theory is certainly intriguing and attractive, and at times very convincing. “Lachrymose history” is not part of this story, which instead highlights the positive and creative effort of Judaism in Muslim and Christian lands. Moreover, a number of historical certainties are challenged and a different explanation is offered, on the basis of microanalysis or detailed accounts of historical material. A wide and impressive amount of secondary literature is described and thoroughly discussed, along with a number of primary sources.

Ultimately, as I have already said, the book is both a historical account of Judaism, and a history of the Jews covering a relatively long historical period and which offers a fairly new interpretation through the lens of economic history. Such an undertaking indicates a certain interest in the return of grand narratives, after a period of postmodern historical practices that made a narrative of any kind impossible.

Nevertheless, as with every grand narrative that aims at providing one unique explanation for historical facts, this one provokes a number of questions and possible critical responses. I will mention only three problems that may be of some relevance.

1. First of all, one must recall that the Diaspora did not begin after the fall of Jerusalem, but rather, was a conspicuous and relevant component of ancient Judaism. Jews lived in metropolises, like Rome and Alexandria, and were likely engaged in urban activities. Historiography on Christianity has stressed that Christianity spread first and foremost in the great urban centers of the Roman

Empire, although the movement of Jesus was mainly throughout villages. The fascinating theory of conversion offered by the authors is therefore interesting, but needs to be supported by more evidence.

2. Considering the wide scope of the book and the claim to a universal and general explanatory theory of Judaism, some comparison with other similar groups was needed. In which way did Judaism in the Muslim empire differ from Christian minorities, which in turn were endowed with similar trades? How then are Armenians, Greek Orthodox, or various sectarian religious groups to be evaluated when they competed with Jews and performed similar roles?

3. Theory and history are somehow disconnected in this book. The theory the authors offer is applied to very different historical, social and religious contexts. One wonders if the organization of economy in the Muslim empire and the one in Medieval Christian Europe does not bear multiple and dissimilar features, resulting in a perpetually different relationship with Judaism, when not directly influencing it.

Anachronism is generally inevitable, but my impression is that it strikes as too strong an element in this narrative. Is it possible to assume, with the help of economic theory and modeling, that a peasant in the ancient world would behave exactly as a contemporary peasant in a third world country? The long journey back in time requires, among other things, identification with a world that might have been radically different. Moreover, this long journey is often an intricate path into a labyrinth, which the historian is impelled to explore in its multiple directions.

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[1] *Enquête sur l'antisemitisme*, ed. Henry Dagan, (Paris: Stock 1899).

[2] See Simone Luzzatto, *Scritti politici e filosofici di un ebreo scettico nella Venezia del Seicento*, a cura di Giuseppe Veltri (Milan: Bompiani, 2013); Jonathan Karp, *The Politics of Jewish Commerce. Economic Thought and Emancipation in Europe, 1638-1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[3] Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism* (New York: Free Press, 1952).

[4] I refer, for example, to Catholic scholars who have tried to show how Catholicism fueled economic modernity, following Weber's path but attempting to amend it. Trevor Roper offered a different interpretation of Weber's theory, claiming that modernity and capitalism were initiated by merchant communities who practiced a form of "erasmianism." Sombart opposed his interpretation of capitalism as a byproduct of Judaism, although with an anti-Semitic twist.

[5] Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton - Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004); Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[6] For a more complex view on minorities and port-cities see: Tullia Catalan, "The Ambivalence of a Port-City. The Jews of Trieste from the 19th to the 20th Century," *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* 2/2011: 69-98.

[7] These ritual settings relating to different religious systems appeared in the ancient world (chap. 3).

[8] For a brief introduction to these themes: Guy G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009).

[9] Botticini, Eckstein, *The Chosen Few*, pos. 2334.

[10] There is a lot of literature on *ammei ha-aretz*, "people of the land." Botticini and Eckstein affirm that they are those people/Jews unwilling to perform the norm of learning the Torah.

[11] Botticini, Eckstein, *The Chosen Few*, Chapter 5.

[12] Chapter 5, pos. 3326.

[13] Chapter 8, pos. 6131.

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