CHAPTER ONE

THE NORTHERN FRENCH SCHOOL OF BIBLICAL EXEGESIS: THE STATUS QUAESTIONIS IN MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

1. Jewish Life in Eleventh and Twelfth-Century Northern France (Tsarfat)

The social and cultural environment plays a prominent role in a person’s attitude towards life, science, and culture. We will begin, therefore, by looking at the living conditions of the Jews in Northern France in the eleventh and twelfth century.¹

Our generation is accustomed to construe the history of the Jews in Western Europe as an unbroken chain of painful and depressing persecutions, starting with the First Crusade in 1096, and ending with the destruction of European Jewry between 1933 and 1945. We often regard Jewish history as mainly a history of victims surrounded by a hostile environment. To us, in particular the medieval period represents first and foremost the ‘Dark Ages,’² in which the Jews had to defend their faith against Christian attacks that increasingly evolved from theological and merely speculative debate into open and brutal violence against Jewish life and culture. This viewpoint is grounded inter alia in the fact that we have only sparse external information and archeological evidence on the living conditions of the Jews,³ but have


to rely on their own reports in Hebrew chronicles, biographical notes, letters, responsa, or other written sources from that time period. However, these sources, whether they consist of open or hidden polemics, are not always helpful when it comes to determining the social and cultural environment. We must beware of not reading the Hebrew sources from only one perspective. Ivan Marcus is certainly right in warning us that we “should suspend a predisposition to view medieval Jewish history first and foremost as the story of growing insecurity from the twelfth century on, and instead compare Jewish culture and the revival that scholars mapped out for Christian culture.”

This study is, thus, a further attempt to emphasize that the Jews in the High Middle Ages, in particular in eleventh and twelfth-century Northern France never lacked their own Jewish response to cultural and social challenges. Although they often stood on the ruins of previous catastrophes and calamities, they were not only victims in other people’s history but empowering deciders of their own fate, culturally, literally, and religiously directed towards a Jewish future even in the Diaspora.

With regard to the Jews in Northern France, Robert Chazan emphasized that “French treatment of the Jews…was similarly innovative and precedent-setting.” Jewish settlements, in particular in Champagne and Normandy, developed at the latest in Carolingian times. In the eleventh century, we find in the region of Champagne forty-three Jewish settlements with communities consisting of approximately one hundred individuals, making up a total number of 4300–4500 Jews. The Jews enjoyed good relationships with their neighbors. Jews and their families attached themselves to the nobles, who guaranteed them security and encouraged Jewish settlement for financial reasons. They gained privileges like permission to carry on trade or commerce, and

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5 Chazan, Jews of Medieval Western Christendom, 130.

6 Taitz, The Jews, 63.