Martin Jacobs


Reorienting the East: Jewish Travelers to the Medieval Muslim World is an exceptionally good study addressed to advanced researchers, but it is also suitable for master’s-level students and beyond. The topic is politically timely and charming, too, and even though the author describes himself as a cultural historian (p. 13), the study contributes substantially to Jewish and Islamic studies as well as to religious studies.

The “Jewish travelers” to whom the subtitle refers were Jewish pilgrims and merchants who came from Christian-ruled European countries and wrote to Jewish audiences back home about their pilgrimages and trade journeys to the Levant. In some cases, these writings were continuously edited and redistributed within local communities, indicating that they were tailored to the interests of their target audiences.

In this circumstance lies the political timeliness that the topic has for this reader, who reads the book through glasses colored by hardened political frontlines between modern Jews and Muslims which result from the unsolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its transnational repercussions. Among the many disturbing recent developments are the rise of Islamophobic movements in the West, such as the various “Stop Islamization of country x” groups, which increasingly pledge allegiance to Israel due to its purported existential struggle against Islam. In Islamophobic discourse, Islam is inherently anti-Jewish, and Israeli nationalists are happy to chime in. By contrast, Jacobs’ scholarly narrative leaves our fact-denying clamorous politicians further and further behind until nothing remains of them but a faint dint of noise at the horizon. New information fills the reader’s senses and makes reading the book an absorbing experience.

Yet Jacobs’ scholarship is by no means apolitical. His research questions place his study squarely within the postcolonial literature paradigm (pp. 2–3):

[M]ost premodern Jews who left accounts of their peregrinations hailed from Christian-ruled lands, and many travelled to the Levant aboard Christian-owned vessels. Moreover, the emergence of Jewish travel literature is tied to the Crusades, when the increase in maritime traffic between western Europe and the eastern Mediterranean included Jewish pilgrims and merchants. If European Jews traveled to the same regions as Christians, did they describe them through the same lenses and for the same reasons? Did these Jewish authors share certain “Western”
perceptions of the Islamic world with their Christian counterparts? Or did looking at the Near East through a medieval Jewish prism fracture the myth of home and abroad in unexpected ways? For instance, did the existence of Jewish communities throughout the then-known world allow Jewish travelers to see sameness within the otherness of foreign lands? Where did they locate exile (Hebrew: galut) and domicile, where were the center and the periphery of their universe: in Europe, or in Palestine, the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people? How did they use travel writing to negotiate an identity between East and West, their countries of origin and what they considered the Land of Israel (eres yisra'el)? To what extent were European Jewish perspectives on the Middle East predicated on the fact that Occidental Christians viewed their Jewish neighbors as aliens (and later as Orientals)?

In general terms, Jacobs finds that Jewish travel writing “frequently challenged a Western-cum-Christian notion of the Middle East and the world at large” (p. 17). As we shall see, he uses this result to probe the late Edward Said’s (d. 2003) thesis, that the European Orientalist “othering” of the Middle East and its Muslim population reflected a specific modern discourse dependent on colonization.

Jacobs’ carefully crafted study consists of ten chapters distributed over three sections. The first section is entitled “Travels and Travel Narratives.” Chapter 1 deals with the primary sources, over two dozen Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic texts, complete with biographical information about each author. This data is complemented by an excellent chronological table which is placed after the book’s conclusion. The sources fall into two periods: the Crusades (1100–1300 CE) and the early modern period of commerce between Italy (Venice) and the Mamluk Sultanate (1400–1500 CE). Quite frequently, Jacobs accompanies these sources with Arabic Muslim writers. Chapter 2 describes the often overlapping motivations for the travels: pilgrimage and trade. Chapter 3 charts the physical conditions of the travels, which could be quite hazardous indeed: boats capsizing, highway robbers, harsh climates, illness, and ruthless customs officers — all mixed in with good doses of adventures and marvels.

The second section, “Territory and Place,” also contains three chapters. Chapter 4 is about Palestine and its sanctuaries, first under Crusader and then under Mamluk rule. Chapter 5 describes “mingling” between Jews, Muslims, and Christians at sacred sites mainly in Palestine but also in Iraq and even Iran. Chapter 6 is about the grand Islamic metropolises: Baghdad (the seat of the Abbasid Caliphate as well as the Babylonian Jewish Exilarch and the Nestorian Katholico), Damascus, and Alexandria.