

外文书库

A SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF THE JEWS

By SALO WITTMAYER BARON

Second Edition, Revised and Enlarged

Late Middle Ages and Era of European Expansion
1200-1650

VOLUME XVII

BYZANTINES, MAMELUKES, AND MAGHRIBIANS



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BYZANTINES, MAMELUKES,
AND MAGHRIBIANS

BYZANTINE WORLD IN DECLINE

LEAVING THE territories of Poland and Lithuania, we must now turn back to the East-European areas under the sway of the Byzantine civilization. Despite its large number of Greek-Orthodox and Uniate subjects, the dual Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was essentially part of the Western group of nations. It shared the major developments of medieval western and central Europe under the spiritual control of the Papacy and, after a brief Humanist experience, it played an eminent role in the Reformation and Counter Reformation. In the Jewish question, too, the Commonwealth followed the patterns developed in the Holy Roman Empire and its dependencies to such an extent that, as we recall, the basic royal charters for the Jewries of both Poland and Lithuania originated as almost verbatim replicas of documents granting similar privileges to the Jews of Austria, Bohemia, and Hungary. These enactments themselves had had their roots in the legal evolution initiated by the rulers of the Carolingian Empire. East of the Polish-Lithuanian border, however, the old institutions developed in the Eastern Roman Empire since the time of Constantine the Great continued to prevail. We resume here the analysis of the socioreligious evolution of Jewish life after the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204. Despite this great crisis and the constant turmoil of the ever shifting power structure in the Balkans, Asia Minor, the East-Mediterranean islands, and the vast expanses of the growing Muscovite Empire, the Byzantine civilization revealed, in many ways, a remarkable continuity from the developments of the preceding centuries discussed in our earlier volumes.

Byzantium as such never recovered, to be sure, from the shock of 1204. Politically and economically it was but a shadow of its former self. Even after its gradual recuperation in the course of

the thirteenth century and the recapture of Constantinople in 1261, it remained a fragmented country, of which a relatively small area continued under the control of the Greek emperors. The very title of "emperor and autocrat of the Romans" was now often assumed by other princes, including the Greek rulers of Epirus and the Serbian king Stephen Dushan. In what follows we shall have to deal mainly with three different groups of sovereignties—Greek, Latin, and Slavic—which shared the destinies of the Byzantine world until its partial reunification under Ottoman rule in the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Though politically and socio-economically greatly divided and frequently in armed combat with one another, the large majority of its inhabitants remained faithful to the Greek-Orthodox Church, headed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The spiritual underpinnings of the Byzantine civilization remained intact even after several Slavic nations achieved autonomous status under their so-called autocephalous metropolitanates and, ultimately, patriarchates in Bulgaria, Serbia, and Kiev-Moscow.

Understandably, the greatest degree of continuity existed in the areas under Greek rule. Beginning with the Empire of Nicaea in Asia Minor and, after the reconquest of Thessalonica in 1246 and Constantinople in 1261, having fairly defined (though still often fluctuating) borders in Europe and Asia, the Empire was controlled during the last two centuries of its existence by a single dynasty established by Michael VIII Palaeologus (1259–82). Its regime could pursue a relatively consistent policy, as did to some extent those of the "empire" and later despotate of Epirus in the west and the Empire of Trebizond on the Asian shore of the Black Sea. Much less uniform, however, were the areas under Western control. The Crusaders experienced great difficulty in holding on to their 1204 gains. As one example, Baldwin II, the last Latin "emperor" of Constantinople before its return to Greek rule, was in such financial straits that, in order to secure a loan from Venetian merchants, he had to pledge his only son and heir, Philip, as security.¹

Some parts of the mainland now developed Western forms of life and almost resembled cities and villages in Italy, Spain, or France. This was particularly true of the Peloponnesus and some coastal areas on the Adriatic Sea. Of a different nature was the

penetration of many important islands, including Rhodes, by the Western Order of the Hospitallers, or of St. John of Jerusalem, which later ruled over Malta. Equally important were the numerous islands (such as Crete, Euboea, and Corfu), as well as quite a few harbors both close to Constantinople and elsewhere, which had come under the enduring control of the Venetian Republic, the real initiator of the Latin conquest. But Venice soon found a powerful rival in the continually expanding Genoese empire. Stimulated by a treaty it concluded with Michael VIII in 1261, the Republic of Genoa established a number of colonies in the Aegean and Black Seas; it even exercised effective control over Galata, the harbor at the very doorstep of the Byzantine capital. However, all of these Latin powers pursued different policies in their diverse possessions, policies which often varied from one island to another in accordance with both deep-rooted local customs and temporary exigencies.

The third major area emerging from the old Byzantine Empire was inhabited by the now wholly independent Slavic peoples, notably in Bulgaria and Serbia. Each of these countries in turn found its boundaries expanding or shrinking as a result of the constantly changing power constellations and almost unceasing warfare. They sometimes acted in alliance with the remnants of the Greek Empire, the neighboring Walachians and Hungarians, or with each other, and sometimes as enemies in combat. To the north the Byzantine Church's influence extended to the semi-romanized areas of Walachia and Moldavia and also had an increasing impact on the quickly expanding Muscovite Empire. It was ultimately Moscow upon which the mantle of Byzantine leadership descended. The Muscovite Grand Duke Ivan III, married to Zoe-Sophia (a niece of the last Byzantine emperor, Constantine XI Palaeologus [1449-53]), assumed the formal title of "tsar," a variant of Caesar, and thereby laid the foundation for the ever more assertive doctrine of "Moscow, the third Rome."²

The destinies of the Jews in these three widely divergent groups of states differed greatly. During the Late Middle Ages, however, in the aggregate they constituted but a small minority of the Jewish people, and their impact on the cultural and religious life of world Jewry was relatively slight. They left behind few records of

their socioeconomic life, with many basic aspects remaining obscure and controversial, before the new era which began for most of them after the successive Ottoman conquests. Thenceforth they shared the destinies of their coreligionists in the vast Ottoman Empire extending from Algiers, Cairo, and Baghdad to Budapest, Jassy, and the Crimea.

GREEK REVIVAL

After the Crusaders' conquest of Constantinople, the emergent small Greek states were further fragmented internally by the progress of feudalism. The feudal system of *pronoia*, which had been spreading in the Byzantine Empire even before 1204, now increasingly resembled the Western fief. Yet these states, and especially the resurgent Byzantine Empire, formed the nucleus for the reassertion of Greek civilization. Of course, the disturbances preceding the Crusaders' invasion and the catastrophic breakdown in 1203-1204 inflicted irreparable damage on Byzantine society. If under the regime of Manuel I Comnenus (1143-80) the Empire had retained some of its former glory, it quickly went downhill under Isaac II (1185-95) and Alexius IV (1195-1203). Its disorganization progressed so rapidly that its major backbone, the imperial bureaucracy, became more and more a purely mercenary force acting for the benefit of its own members rather than of society at large. According to the distinguished chronicler Nicetas Choniates, Isaac himself was selling offices "like vegetables on the market." The presence of some 60,000 Latins in the capital—many of them, like the Venetians, enjoying special privileges which helped them exploit the local economy rather than contribute to it—should also have been for keen observers an ominous portent of unavoidable ruin. Although generally living on fairly amicable terms with their Venetian and other Latin neighbors, the Jews of Constantinople readily became special objects of murder and pillage during the three-day conquest of the city (April 13-15, 1204) by the newly arriving Western legions, animated by both greed and a fanatical zeal to destroy infidels and heretics.³

Jews also probably suffered more than other citizens from the growing disarray during the preceding quarter century. No longer

would travelers like Benjamin b. Jonah of Tudela and Petaḥiah b. Jacob of Ratisbon be impressed by the beauty, populousness, and wealth of both the capital and the provinces. We recall Petaḥiah's assertion that the Empire embraced "so many Jewish congregations that the Land of Israel could not contain them, were they settled therein." (This statement is reminiscent of the equally exaggerated account about Basil I's persecution of 873-74 which, according to Yehudah b. David, affected some 1,000 Jewish communities, of which only five were saved.) Even an outsider, like Elisha bar Shinaya, writing in the second quarter of the eleventh century, strongly emphasized the presence of a large Jewish population in the Empire. Yet within the great imperial population the Jews formed but a tiny minority even during the relatively flourishing time of Manuel I. Benjamin, who offers us the most comprehensive, if at times ambivalent, data on Jewish life in the area—for which he gathered the available evidence with a moderately critical eye—did not cover the entire territory. He also was often quite ambiguous as to whether the figures he cited were derived from autopsy, such as through observation of the number of worshipers at synagogue services, or from what he heard from local communal leaders. Nor are we certain when his figures refer to families, to adult males, or to all individuals. Hence modern scholars have cited them in partial support of their diverse estimates of the total Byzantine Jewish population of his time, estimates which range from 12,000 or 15,000 to 85,000 or 100,000 persons, representing 0.1-0.7 percent of the Empire's approximately 15,000,000 inhabitants. Moreover, during the four decades after Benjamin's visit in the mid-1160s and particularly during the fall of Constantinople in 1204, the Jewish ratio must have declined sharply because of the mass slaughter by the conquering hosts and the flight of countless refugees to neighboring lands. The Jewish community of the capital, for example, which may have numbered as many as 20,000 souls (if we accept Benjamin's figure of 2,000 Rabbanites and 500 Karaites as representing families settled in the main Jewish quarter in suburban Pera and add about 50 percent more for Jewish residents of other quarters), after 1204 became both small and inarticulate. In the first half of the thirteenth century many visitors actually commented on the relative

paucity of residents seen on the city's streets. Certainly, Constantinople, which once may have accommodated as many as 1,000,000 persons and still may have numbered 400,000 to 500,000 inhabitants in the latter part of the twelfth century, was reduced now to a small fraction of that number. The Jewish decline doubtless was proportionately even greater.⁴

Initial steps to reconstruct the Empire were taken by the largest remnant of Greek rule, the Empire of Nicaea. Though for a time deprived of the main center in Constantinople, the Greek emperors of Nicaea Theodore I Lascaris (1204–1222) and John III Vatatzes (1222–54) took over most of the Byzantine possessions in Asia Minor and defended them not only against the Latin conquerors but also against their Seljuk neighbors in Anatolia. A part of Anatolia separated itself, however, and under the high-sounding name of the Empire of Trebizond continued an independent existence until it was conquered by the Turks in 1461, eight years after the fall of Constantinople. At the same time Nicaea also became the seat of the Greek-Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate, which retained the title of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and still claimed spiritual supremacy over the entire Greek-Orthodox world. Held first by the scholarly Michael Autoreianus, the office quickly overshadowed the Roman Catholic patriarchate established in Constantinople by the Latin conquerors and occupied by such alien priests as the Venetian Tomaso Morosini (1204–1211).

Carefully husbanding the resources of its Anatolian possessions, the new dynasty of Palaeologi gradually recaptured much of the former imperial territory on the European mainland. Its founder, Michael VIII, himself entered Constantinople in 1261 and transferred the seat of the Empire back to the ancient metropolis. The second largest city of the former Empire, Thessalonica (now Salonica), reconquered by a Nicaean army in 1246, served as a base for expansion into the other major segment of Greek rule, the despotate of Epirus. Finally the despotate was conquered by the Nicaeans in 1340. This expansion proved short lived. By 1348 the Serbian ruler Stephen III Dushan, who styled himself "emperor [*basileus*] and autocrat of Serbs and Romans," took over most of Epirus and Thessaly. But Serbia soon found an overpowering enemy in the Ottoman Turks, who crossed into Europe and

defeated first Bulgaria in the Battle of Maritza in 1371 and then the Serbian army in the historic Battle of Kosovo Polye in 1389. Thenceforth Bulgaria became an integral part, and Serbia first a vassal state and later a province, of the rapidly expanding Ottoman Empire with its temporary capital in Adrianople. It was only the diversion of Ottoman energies to the defense of the Asian territories against the new, overwhelming power of the Mongolian hosts led by Timur (Tamerlane), who routed the Ottoman forces in the decisive battle of Ankara in 1402, that saved Constantinople from immediate capture by the Turks. It allowed Greek rule to continue there for half a century, while another small fragment of a Greek regime persisted for a while in the northern Morea.⁵

In all these areas under Greek domination, Jewish communities lived a shadowy existence. The old saying that a people is most happy when it has no history does not apply to the Jewries of the surviving parts of the Greek Empire. Occasional glimpses into the position of the Jews in the Nicaean Empire, recorded in a few early Greek and Jewish sources (often ambiguous and confused in their dates), reveal an increasingly antagonistic attitude of the regime toward its Jewish subjects. According to Jacob b. Elijah of Valencia (or Venice), when Theodore I Dukas Angelos reconquered Thessalonica in 1222-23, he confiscated much of their property in the city and generally refused to protect them against acts of injustice. More serious was another outburst of Byzantine intolerance aimed at suppressing the Jewish faith, such as had repeatedly occurred in previous centuries, although it seems to have had no more lasting effects than the earlier enactments. We learn that in 1253, toward the end of his reign, John III Vatatzes, though sometimes styled "the Merciful," was carried away by nationalist zeal. Although he and his contemporaries derived much comfort from comparing their own "temporary" exile to that of the ancient Israelites in Babylonia, he proclaimed a general outlawry of Judaism in his possessions. True, our information about the Jews in Nicaea and other Anatolian cities of the period is almost nil. But since the Crusaders had not occupied the Asian provinces of the Empire, they could not stage bloodbaths against heretics and infidels as they had in Constantinople. Hence the earlier presence of Jews—attested for Nicaea itself by the casual remark of a tenth-century

writer that "Hebrews dwelt there for the sake of its trade and its other advantages"—doubtless continued into the thirteenth century. We may only deplore Benjamin of Tudela's decision not to visit Asia Minor. This restraint has deprived us of an eye-witness account of life in its Jewish communities. Presumably, Vatatzes' intolerant decree was not implemented, since he died the following year and was succeeded in 1258 by Michael VIII who, from the outset, took a much more liberal stance toward religious diversity. We note that the fourteenth-century Karaite scholar Aaron b. Elijah was called "of Nicomedia," a designation probably derived from his birthplace or former residence.⁶

Being limited to but a few references in later chronicles, we can only surmise the reasons for John Vatatzes' anti-Jewish attitude and Michael's more liberal one. From the beginning John had to appeal to the national and patriotic sentiments of the Greek population in order to resist the power of the Western knights. As in many other periods of Jewish history, a rising wave of nationalism engulfed Jewish communities in the ruler's quest for ethnoreligious uniformity of his subjects. Michael, on the other hand, especially after transferring his residence to Constantinople with its cosmopolitan population (including many Latins), took a much broader view. He realized that the greatly depleted old capital required a rapid increase in its population. Therefore he not only allowed the Jews to continue professing their inherited religion but also is said to have called together an assembly of Jewish leaders from all parts of his country and publicly announced to them his disapproval of Vatatzes' decree.⁷

Michael's immediate successors, Andronicus II (1282-1328) and Andronicus III (1328-41), continued his tolerant policies toward their multinational subjects. In fact, when Andronicus II's armies occupied parts of Epirus, the emperor confirmed in 1319 a municipal charter that had been granted to Iannina when his army commander, Syrgiannes Palaeologus Philanthropenus, conquered the city. This charter included such generally patriotic and liberal provisions as that the city would never be handed over to the Franks, that its citizens would enjoy freedom of trade throughout the Empire without the payment of commercial taxes, and that they would be free to elect their own judges. It also provided that

the Jews of Iannina should enjoy freedom and not be molested. The entire tenor of that chrysobull, or formal decree, intimates that Jews were to enjoy a measure of equality with their non-Jewish neighbors. This insistence is the more noteworthy as it implied a desire to attract Jews to this locality which, a century and a half earlier, apparently had not merited a visit from Benjamin of Tudela. He stopped for a while in Arta or Leucas, but not in Iannina.⁸

Of course, the surviving Greek states basically continued to adhere to both the ecclesiastical ideology concerning the treatment of Jews, and the laws governing their legal status, as they had developed in the area since the early days of the Eastern Roman Empire. Notwithstanding occasional persecutions of Jews and even Vatatzes' attempt at outright suppression of Judaism, the Jewish inhabitants, when tolerated, lived along established legal and political patterns. Curiously, the Byzantines never adopted the Western doctrine of Jews as "serfs of the imperial Chamber." Nor did they look for such diverse ideological justifications as were advanced by the popes, the Holy Roman emperors, and the Western kings; these ideological divisions were largely obviated by the absence of a strict separation between state and Church in Byzantium. We only hear some echoes of Jewish subjection to Christian domination, as already formulated by certain Church Fathers and reflected in a few imperial enactments. For example, in the privilege granted in 1049 to the monastery of Nea Moné, on Chios, Constantine IX Monomachus wrote:

God the great King, having rejected the Old Israel and chosen the new, preferred the latter to the former and named it the people of His own possession, the 'pleasant portion,' and His own lot. For this very reason He placed the Jewish race in subjection to the Christian and appointed the faithful and right-thinking people to rule over the faithless and ungrateful one.

Yet the emperors did not seem to derive therefrom the Western lesson that they were to collect a special Jewish tax. It appears that even the *aurum coronarium*, which in the fifth century had replaced the *fiscus judaicus* of ancient Rome, did not become a permanent institution that continued in all Byzantine regions. Whatever special taxes were occasionally recorded, like that imposed on