

REVIEW OF “THE CHOSEN FEW: HOW EDUCATION SHAPED
JEWISH HISTORY, 70–1492”
(Princeton Economic History of the Western World)

AUTHORS: MARISTELLA BOTTICINI AND ZVI ECKSTEIN

Arthur Abramov and Benjamin Bental (University of Haifa)

The distance of time is a psychological shield which allows us to use history in order to ask bothersome questions about ourselves, hoping to obtain some answers and prevent repetition of past mistakes. This is the inevitable source of subjectivity in any historical research: History “as such” is an illusion likely to disguise intellectual dishonesty.

Some of the bothersome questions facing Jewish (and Israeli) readers in particular concern the issues of “Who is a Jew” and “What does Judaism mean to us”. The book written by Botticini and Eckstein focuses on the development of Pharisee Judaism (which is the antecedent of current Judaism) and explains when and how the urban Jew developed.

The book gives a crystal-clear answer, following the Weberian tradition which argues that a change in religious norms may have far-reaching consequences. The clarity and sharpness of the book is one of its main advantages. It makes the argument accessible to non-professional readers, and also helps professionals simplify complex issues. It is not always the case that the success of a scientific book attests to its quality, but in this case both achievements go hand in hand.

The question of when and how the urban Jew developed, or the transition of Jews from agriculture to urban professions, is not new. The literature has provided two central answers. The first, associated with the prominent historian Cecil Roth, claims that the transition is due to restrictions prohibiting Jews from holding agricultural land. This answer is *rightfully* rejected by the authors, as it is not supported by historical facts. The transition of Jews from agriculture to urban professions occurred in the Muslim world despite the fact that no land ownership restrictions were imposed on them. The second answer is ascribed to Simon Kuznets. According to that view minorities have an easier time preserving their identity within the compounds of cities. The authors use the example of communities such as the Druze to contradict this thesis. This counter-evidence may be a bit problematic, though. First, Kuznets’ position may be interpreted as saying that minorities with *specific* religious characteristics may find it easier to survive in cities. These characteristics may go beyond the study of religious texts such as the Torah. They may also include dietary laws and the need to form a “minyan” (i.e. – a group of ten adult males) for proper praying. Second, the case of the Druze may be a bit special. Druze belief emerged as a heresy out of Islam, and its adherents were massacred in central cities such as Alexandria and Aleppo. Therefore the Druze could survive only in distant rural areas thereby giving up any attempt to proselytize.

Botticini and Eckstein view the year 64 as the turning point of Jewish history. This is the point at which the High Priest Joshua Ben-Gamla issued an ordinance requiring Jews to

send their six- or seven-year-old sons to learn Torah in schools. This ordinance had political motivation, strengthening the Pharisee faction in its struggle against the Sadducees. This struggle, which seems to have started already in the second century BCE, was decisively ended a few years after the ordinance was issued with the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70. The loss of the Temple meant the end of the offerings, which were replaced by studying the Torah. Thus, the Rabbi vanquished the Priest, thereby democratizing religious knowledge: While one has to be born into the priesthood, becoming a rabbi is open to anyone. The Talmud put it this way: “A knowledgeable “mamzer” (a child born out of wedlock to a married woman, who was not allowed into the Jewish community) is preferred to a boorish high priest.”

Has the ordinance been implemented? There are plenty of 3rd–5th century synagogues and Talmudic passages attesting to the fact that synagogues were used to teach the Torah. Thus it seems that the ordinance had been at least partially implemented.

As Torah studies gained in importance, we find increasing Talmudic demonization of the boorish ignoramuses (“amei ha-aretz”, literally the people of the land). Second and third century statements by sages are full of hatred towards such persons. A particular quote that does not lack in black humor is ascribed to Rabbi El’azar: “‘It is permitted to stab an ‘am ha-aretz’ [even] on the Day of Atonement which falls on the Sabbath (this being the holiest of all possible combinations).’ Said his disciples to him, ‘Master, why don’t you say to slaughter him [ritually]?’ He replied: ‘This [ritual slaughter] requires a benediction, whereas that [stabbing] does not require a benediction.’”

Clearly, Ben-Gamla’s ordinance was costly. One needs to appoint teachers and provide books. There is also the alternative cost of child labor, specifically during the agricultural high seasons of sowing and reaping. This cost is especially high for the poor and those with limited learning capabilities. Botticini and Eckstein conclude that since Torah studies contribute nothing to agricultural skills, the “new” post-Ben-Gamla Judaism could not survive in an agricultural society living at subsistence in a Malthusian environment. The demographic data seem to support this view: Between 100 and 650 CE about 1–1.5 million Jews had converted to Christianity. These were probably mostly people characterized as “am ha-aretz” who suffered from a double disadvantage—as Jews and as ignoramuses within Judaism. A second massive wave of conversion happened after the Mongolian conquest of (modern-day) Iran and Iraq in 1256–60. About 75% of the 400,000 Jews who survived the conquest (about half of the pre-conquest Jewish population) became Muslims.

On the other hand, the ordinance also had a positive effect. Jews who studied gained a comparative advantage in professions for which education provides a high return. However, in the Roman Empire, Jews had few opportunities to realize this advantage. Jews moved to cities and realized their advantage only with the emergence of Islam and the creation of the Islamic empire.

Is it reasonable to assume that income derived from trade is positively related to the merchant’s education and that of his sons? The authors use documents from the 10th–13th centuries found in the Cairo Geniza (containing a collection of about 300,000 Jewish medieval documents) to show that Jewish schools taught arithmetic and Arabic, besides religious studies. This body of knowledge helped Jews form a commercial network based on Jewish law.

The final edifice of Botticini and Eckstein's thesis is the voluntary migration of Jews both within the Islamic empire and outside to Western European countries in order to become merchants, artisans and money lenders. It seems to us that this edifice requires some additional empirical evidence.

The above is a brief summary of the book's main thesis. There are many conclusions one may draw, out of which we focus on three.

- 1) The Ben-Gamla ordinance turned Judaism into a closed club at the cost of mass conversions which came at a crucial point in history. Until the destruction of the Second Temple there were three important Jewish centers: the largest was in the Land of Israel (Palestine) with about 2.5 million people. In Mesopotamia and Egypt there were Jewish communities of about one million each. The "rebellion of the exile" (better known as the Kitos War) of 115–117 destroyed the Egyptian community, reducing the number of Jews there to about 100,000. The two uprisings that took place in the Land of Israel (66–73 and 132–135) reduced the population there to 700,000. Most of those eventually converted. Prior to the appearance of Islam only Mesopotamia remained, not only as the largest Jewish center in terms of numbers, but also in terms of its leading intellectual role. However, this community too suffered from losses to Christianity. Therefore, according to the thesis presented by Botticini and Eckstein, Judaism was bound to disappear. **It was urbanization brought about by Islam that saved it.**
- 2) Jews were not expelled from the Land of Israel. Most stayed and converted to Christianity. In the 6th century the Jewish population in the Land of Israel numbered only about 200,000 people.
- 3) The origin of at least part of European Jewry is Mesopotamia. Jews voluntarily migrated to Europe, only to find out in due course that it was more difficult to blend into these societies than they first thought.

Finally, a small comment is in order. The Weberian answer given by the book, namely that it was a change in a religious norm that brought about such far-reaching consequences, is not unambiguous. It is not clear whether the Ben-Gamla ordinance formed a new reality, or, as is often the case, was just legitimizing an existing norm. In other words, it is possible that it was the struggle between Pharisees and Sadducees that created the change with respect to the layperson's acquisition of religious knowledge, and that the ordinance gave official legitimization to the Pharisee practice. As mentioned above, the struggle between the factions started in the 2nd century BCE and was decisively won by the Pharisees with the destruction of the Temple. The Pharisees' main weapon in the struggle was religious proficiency, specifically of oral traditions which were not recognized by the Sadducees. As a matter of fact, the Ben-Gamla ordinance had been preceded close to two centuries earlier by an almost identical ordinance issued by another prominent Pharisee, Shimon Ben-Shetach (who, according to some sources, was the president of the Sanhedrin). At about the same time, the Pharisees developed a rational methodology of religious studies heavily influenced by Greek thinking. Specifically, the "seven (logical inference) methods" of the sage Hillel the Elder (1st century BCE) facilitated religious studies and enhanced the standing of the learned rabbis. If so, one can pre-date the birth of the "new Jew" by almost two hundred years.

Why is the new dating important? Accepting our suggestion may help explain the existence of multiple Jewish communities all over the Roman Empire. At around the year 65 (when the Ben-Gamla ordinance was issued) there were between 500,000 and 1 million Jews living in the Roman Empire (not including Egypt). About 300,000–600,000 lived in Asia Minor, the Balkans and Western Europe, mostly in cities. Where did these Jews come from? They were hardly all converts. What drove them to voluntarily go into exile even before the destruction of the Temple? The answer may be that of Botticini and Eckstein, namely that they sought to realize their educational advantage, something they could do only in cities.

We end with the disturbing questions raised above. According to Botticini and Eckstein the survival of Judaism over the past two millennia was due to the educational advantage of the Jews. Now that this advantage has largely disappeared, what should we predict about Judaism's chances for survival over the next two millennia?