

## TRANSLATION

### NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF THE JEWS IN THE LATIN KINGDOM OF JERUSALEM

by JOSHUA PRAWER\*

Among the numerous correspondence that has been salvaged from the remnants of the Geniza and made public, there appear every so often bits of information that enable us to reconstruct the daily life of communities and individuals whose very existence had been unknown until recently. One such correspondence is a very touching letter written by a Jew from Ashkelon who had sunk into debt in order to ransom his sister. She had been taken into captivity by the Franks, and brought to Nablus. Part of the ransom money had been paid, and she had been released. The woman had traveled to Egypt in the hope of collecting enough money to pay off the debt. The time for payment had arrived, meanwhile, and her Frankish captor showed up in Ashkelon. Not enough money could be raised, however, and so the Ashkeloni Jew offered to pledge his son as security, but the local community declined to cooperate.

The letter originates from Crusader Palestine between 1154-1187 and comes within the framework of Moslem or West European but generally not Byzantine culture. S.D. Goitein who published this letter, and who is the topmost authority on Jewish life amid Moslem culture, argues that the idea of pledging a person as security was exceptional in the Moslem world, and more common in Byzantine culture.<sup>1</sup> How, then, did the idea find its way to Palestine?

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1. S.D. Goitein, "Redeeming a prisoner in Nablus and pledging a child in Ashkelon in Crusader times (1153-1187)," *Tarbiz*, Vol. 31 (1962), pp. 287-290 (in Hebrew).

A collection of juridical writings known as “The Assizes of the Court of Burgesses” throws light on this issue. Written by a burges (that is to say a Frank who was not a member of the nobility) between 1229-1244 in Acre, it is a compilation of Crusader law and legal procedures, paralleling writings of the period of the Renaissance in Roman law scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

One of the chapters enumerates circumstances in which parents are allowed to disinherit their children, and another, the conditions under which children may disinherit their parents (assuming the children die first and leave no offspring).<sup>3</sup> The seventh ‘reason’ for a father’s disinheriting his children is, “if the father or mother is in Moslem imprisonment because of debt or property claims, wants to imprison the child as a security pledge against his or her presence until ransom money can be obtained, and the child refuses to take his or her place.”

This law proves that not only was the pledging of a child practiced in Crusader countries, but even that the child’s refusal was grounds for disinheritance. The law is ascribed to the Crusader King Baldwin II (1118-1130), but there are grounds for believing it was promulgated by his son Baldwin III (1142-1163).

Even though this law opposed the traditional German law which the Crusaders brought from northern France, it still was probably not revolutionary. Rather, it is likely that the practice had already been introduced by the Frankish burgeses. This class brought with it the traditions of southern France, especially Provence — where remnants of Roman law survived.<sup>4</sup> In fact, in a Provençal manual of Roman law, known as “Lo Codi” (Arles, c. 1144)<sup>5</sup> the eighth reason for disinheritance appears, identical to the Crusader law cited above. The Roman law evolved from the famous “Novella” of Emperor Justinian of February 1st in the year 542.<sup>6</sup> S.D. Goitein, therefore, was correct in emphasizing the Roman-Byzantine origin of the practice. The Roman-Byzantine influence reached Palestine indirectly, by way of southern France, and was adopted by the Crusaders. It is nearly certain that the practice was then also adopted by the Jews in the region.

#### WHAT HAPPENED TO THE JEWISH IMMIGRANTS TO JERUSALEM OF 1211?

Among the various migrations to Palestine during the Crusader period, special place should be singled out for the sizeable immigration movements from both the north-

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3. *Livre des Assises des Bourgeois*, ed. H. Kausler, cap. 234-235.

2. Joshua Praver, “Etude preliminaire sur les sources et la composition du Livre des assises des Bourgeois,” *Rev. hist. de droit français et étranger (RHDF)*, 32 (1954), pp. 198-227; 358-382.

4. Joshua Praver, “Etude sur le droit des Assises de Jerusalem: Droit de confiscation et droit d’exheredation,” *RHDF* (1961), pp. 520-550.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

6. *Novella* 115.

ern and the southern areas of France between the years 1209-1211.<sup>7</sup> A concise summary of the events can be found in the annex to Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Verga's chronicles (*Shebet Yehuda*), which were first printed around 1554: "In the year 1211, the Lord stirred the rabbis of France and England into going to Jerusalem, and there were more than three hundred of them, and the king paid them great honor, and they erected synagogues and study centers there. Also our great priest and rabbi Yehonatan went there, and a miracle occurred – they prayed for rain and their prayers were answered – and the Name of the Lord was sanctified by them."<sup>8</sup>

The immigration mentioned in the laconic reference, an immigration massive in terms of this and other generations, can be confirmed by other sources. But rather than speak of a large-scale immigration movement, these other sources recount the groups of Jews, with their leaders, that immigrated to Palestine during this period. There were two large waves – the first in 1209 or 1210, and the second, evidently, in 1211 (as recorded in *Shebet Yehuda*) in the season for sailing between southern Europe and the Holy Land, i.e. between the spring and the fall of that year. It seems that some of the 1211 immigrants sailed straight to the Holy Land, while others went by way of Egypt.<sup>9</sup>

Rabbi Yehuda Alharizi gives a description of these same immigrants in Jerusalem some five years later, around 1216-1218: "Coming from France to dwell in Jerusalem, their righteousness is of the highest order."<sup>10</sup> Alharizi's recordings lack historical consistency, and are strongly biased by his own erratic flights of spirit. His intense sorrow at finding Rachel's Tomb in Christian hands turns to ecstasy when the Jewish community in Jerusalem is renewed after the conquest of Saladin.

Despite the righteousness of the immigrants and the spirit of renewal, the Jerusalem community displayed the same characteristics which typified the numerous Jewish communities in which various ethnic groups, each zealous in the preservation of its own unique traditions and identity, clashed. Such encounters often resulted in rancor and jealousy, and certain other recordings of Alharizi's testify to this, albeit in terms that are undoubtedly exaggerated:

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7. See Joshua Praver, "Lovers of Zion in the Middle Ages – Immigrations to Eretz Israel in the Crusader period," (in Hebrew), *19th Conference of the Society for the Study of Eretz Israel and its Antiquities – Western Galilee and the Coast*. 1962, pp. 129-136.

8. Shlomo Ibn Verga, *Shebet Yehuda*, Shochat ed. Jerusalem, 1947, p. 147. This selection is from a supplement to Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Verga's work, written by his son Rabbi Yosef Ibn Verga.

9. See Joshua Praver. "The Jews in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem" (in Hebrew), *Zion*, Vol. 11 (1946), p. 18; E.E. Urbach, "Writers of the Tosephot," (in Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1955, p. 230; Joshua Praver, *The Crusaders: Profile of a Colonial Society*, (in Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1976, p. 294ff.

10. Tahkemoni, Section 46, A. Yaari ed., *Journeys in Eretz Israel*, (in Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1946, pp. 68-69.

“For we are fearful of the amount of evil in the deeds being done in the city. And fearful of the cruelty and sinfulness in the heart of the city. And the fire of hatred and faction which burns in its midst. And the divided hearts of its dwellers. Because all strive to be masters, and are thoroughly wicked. Every man wishes his neighbour ill. The father loathes his firstborn son, and the son his father.”<sup>11</sup>

The cause of the strife was, undoubtedly, the presence of three distinct communities in the city: the community which had lived in Ashkelon from the time of Arab rule until 1191,<sup>12</sup> when their city was destroyed and they moved to Jerusalem; the Jews of Magreb, who settled in the city after 1198-1199; and the immigrants from Europe, who arrived between 1209-1211.

Strife or no strife, Jerusalem, according to Alharizi, was brimming with Jewish life. All three ethnic groups lived in complete security, and had strong and solid economic bases. At one point, Alharizi even goes so far as to say, “Sweet tranquility shall shine upon us, just so long as we never have to move.” However, letters written by Rabbi Yehiel ben Rabbi Yitzhak ha-Sarfati, present a sharply contrasting picture.<sup>13</sup> The date of the letters cannot be determined with certainty, but it is likely that Rabbi Yehiel was one of the French immigrants who passed through Egypt, decided to settle there, and was invited to Jerusalem at some later date. While these letters confirm that strife and faction were prevalent, their dominant theme is the dwindling and gradual disappearance of Jerusalem’s Jewish communities. One telling face is that a single ritual bath, in the home of this same Rabbi Yehiel, was sufficient for *all* the Jews. The community was supported by alms collected in Egypt. Rabbi Yehiel wrote that if he were to leave off instruction, the populace would remain “without Torah, and without a priest or teacher.”

Information from other documents testifies to the fact that the Jewish population of Jerusalem was decreasing. We find mention of the French immigrants and their children living in Acre, and being buried at the feet of Mount Carmel (the customary burial grounds for Acre’s Jews, since the city itself was considered to lie outside of Palestine’s boundaries). There is no doubt that it was easier to strike roots in Acre than in Jerusalem since the former was the Crusaders’ primary port city and sources of income were plentiful. But the dwindling of the Jerusalem community proceeded at a rate too great to be explained by financial difficulties alone. The question that remains, then, is what caused the drastic turnabout in the fate of the prospering Jewish communities depicted by Alharizi?

The answer lies in the history of Jerusalem as a whole during the Crusader Wars. With Saladin’s conquest of the city, churches were reconverted into mosques and

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11. *Ibid.*, sections 28, 50.

12. Joshua Praver, “Ashkelon and the Ashkelon Strip in Crusader Policy,” (in Hebrew), *Eretz Israel*, Vol. 4 (1957), pp. 243-244.

13. J. Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs*, vol. I (1920), pp. 240-241; vol. II (1922), p. 304; *Idem*, *Hebrew Union College Annual (HUCA)*, vol. 3 (1926), pp. 299-300, and in the new edition of his book, pp. 473-474.

centers of Islamic scholarship. The sultan also oversaw repair work on the city's fortifications.<sup>14</sup> As Moslem power in the Middle East reached its zenith, danger of a Crusader invasion seemed non-existent. Such a danger began to materialize, however, when in 1191 Richard the Lionhearted completed a triumphant sweep along the coast, and stood on the verge of attacking Jerusalem. Saladin responded by bolstering the supply lines to the city, and strengthening the city's fortifications.<sup>15</sup> Richard the Lionhearted drew near the city several times in 1191 and 1192, but never dared attack Jerusalem itself. It was during this period when the Moslems were ardently determined to defend the city that the Jews of Ashkelon moved to Jerusalem – the fortifications of their own city having been destroyed by the order of the sultan. Moslem rule met with no serious challenge until the crusade of Andrew, King of Hungary, threatened Damascus in 1217, but by this time the three immigration movements to Jerusalem had already been completed.

Another threat came the following year. The first Crusader fleet, under the command of Jean de Brienne, blockaded the Egyptian port of Damietta, and thereby tipped the balance of power in the area in favour of the Christians. Al-Malik al-Mu'azzam, who the year before had been sent to Jerusalem to fortify the city, now devised a new strategy. He began a systematic campaign to destroy the fortifications of Palestine's cities. After capturing and razing Crusader Caesarea, he demolished, one after the other, the fortifications in Moslem hands: at Mount Tabor, Tibnin, Banias, Safed, Belvoir – and Jerusalem.

The order to destroy the walls of Jerusalem was given in 1219, and supervision of the project was assigned to al-Malik al-Mu'azzam's brother, al-Malik al-'Azīz Uthmān. One Moslem chronicler described the reaction of the population:

"The fear that fell upon this city resembles that of Judgment Day. Men, women, children and the elderly all sought refuge in the Mosque of Omar and the al-Aksa Mosque, as they pulled out their hair and ripped their clothing. The mosque's *mihrāb* became filled with hair. Convinced that the Franks were about to arrive, these unfortunates fled in panic and left all their possessions behind them. They crowded onto the roads, fleeing to Egypt, Karak (in Trans-Jordan) or Damascus. Girls tore pieces from their garments so as to swathe their wounded feet. Never has such a disaster struck the Moslem world. Many of the refugees died of hunger and thirst. Everything they left behind in Jerusalem became booty."<sup>16</sup>

Yet this did not mark the end of the city's plight. When the Mongols began to threaten Damascus, al-Malik al-Mu'azzam, before leaving to defend the besieged Syrian city, ordered the renewed destruction of Jerusalem. The order was executed between January 8th and February 6th, 1220.<sup>17</sup>

14. Joshua Prawer, *The History of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem*, I. Jerusalem, 1963, p. 558; sources are listed here.

15. Beha el-Din in: *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades, Historiens Orientaux*, vol. III, pp. 310, 351; Abu Shama, *ibid.*, vol. V, pp. 50-51; Ibn Alathir, *ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 52, 55.

16. *Ibid.*, Abu Shama, pp. 173-175.

17. *Ibid.*, Ibn Alathir, *ibid.* II, p. 119.

In the wake of the two destructive periods, the city grew desolate. According to one source, only the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Dome of the Rock, and the Citadel (David's Tower) were, for diplomatic reasons, left standing. The splendid marble pillars of other buildings were carried off to Damascus. Jerusalem, which had been so diligently and industriously fortified, now lay unprotected. It seemed certain that the city would come under Crusader domination – if not by conquest then by peace treaty (negotiations were under way, and only the extreme demands of one Crusader faction for Trans-Jordan to be given up as well, prevented the Crusaders from taking control of all of Western Palestine). Only the Eastern Christians, who had no reason to fear a Crusader conquest (which, ironically, failed to materialize because of setbacks to the Crusaders elsewhere) remained behind in the city.

Herein, therefore, lies the solution to the puzzle of what caused the dissolution of the vibrant Jewish community described by Alharizi. The Jews, along with the Moslems, fled from imminent danger. Some fled with the Moslems to Damascus and Egypt, while others went to Crusader Acre, and joined the thriving Jewish community there. Jerusalem was the only city where the Crusaders forbade Jewish settlement. This edict against Jewish habitation was reissued when, in 1229 the city did pass into Crusader hands, and only years later, when the city returned to Moslem domination, did the Jews make another serious attempt at establishing a community there.