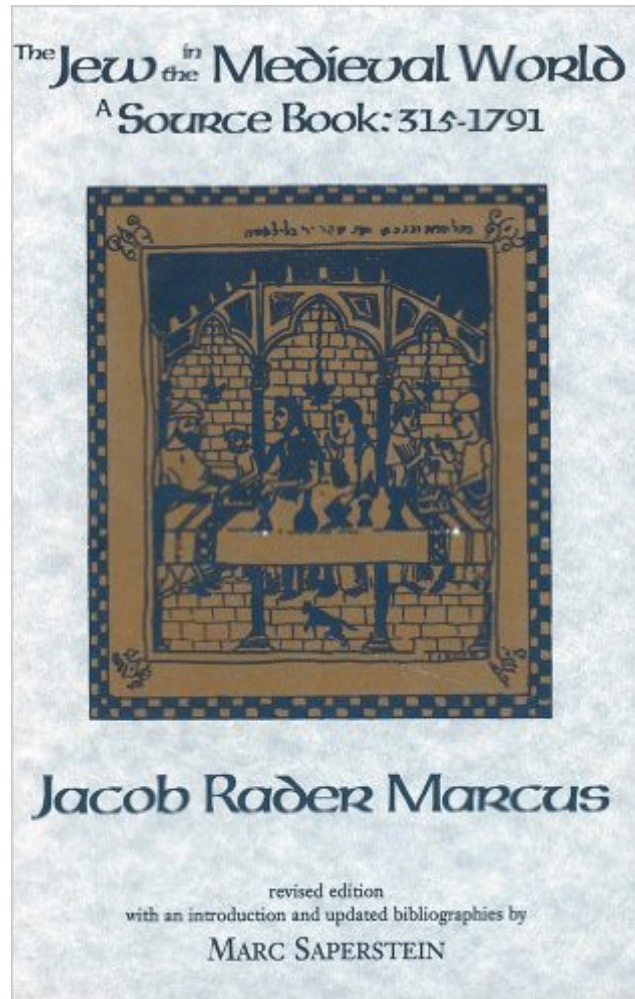


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The Jew In The Medieval World: A Sourcebook, 315-1791



Synopsis

To gain an accurate view of medieval Judaism, one must look through the eyes of Jews and their contemporaries. First published in 1938, Jacob Rader Marcus's classic source book on medieval Judaism provides the documents and historical narratives which let the actors and witnesses of events speak for themselves. The medieval epoch in Jewish history begins around the year 315, when the emperor Constantine began enacting disabling laws against the Jews, rendering them second-class citizens. In the centuries following, Jews enjoyed (or suffered under) legislation, either chosen or forced by the state, which differed from the laws for the Christian and Muslim masses. Most states saw the Jews as simply a tolerated group, even when given favorable privileges. The masses often disliked them. Medieval Jewish history presents a picture wherein large patches are characterized by political and social disabilities. Marcus closes the medieval Jewish age (for Western Jewry) in 1791 with the proclamation of political and civil emancipation in France. The 137 sources included in the anthology include historical narratives, codes, legal opinions, martyrologies, memoirs, polemics, epitaphs, advertisements, folk-tales, ethical and pedagogical writings, book prefaces and colophons, commentaries, and communal statutes. These documents are organized in three sections: The first treats the relation of the State to the Jew and reflects the civil and political status of the Jew in the medieval setting. The second deals with the profound influence exerted by the Catholic and Protestant churches on Jewish life and well-being. The final section presents a study of the Jew "at home," with four sub-divisions which treat the life of the medieval Jew in its various aspects. Marcus presents the texts themselves, introductions, and lucid notes. Marc Saperstein offers a new introduction and updated bibliography.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This amazing book has 96 primary sources - excerpts from books and essays by and about pre-emancipation Jews, discussing topics as varied as Christian and Muslim oppression of Jews, Jewish religious law, Jewish false messiahs, and Jewish education. Some of the more interesting things I learned: *That Christian oppression of Jews began almost as soon as Christians took over the Roman Empire. Just a few years after Constantine (Rome's first Christian emperor) took power, he issued relatively mild decrees against Jews converting or intermarrying Christians. A Jew who converted and circumcised a non-Jewish slave could be subject to capital punishment. A century later, Theodosius actually prohibited Jews from erecting new synagogues. On the other hand, as late as the 1750s Frederick II of Prussia prohibited Jews from establishing private synagogues, and sought to regulate exactly which prayers Jews could engage in. *Just as Jews sought to distance themselves from Christians, Christians did the same. A 300 Spanish church council prohibited Christians from eating with Jews. And in 325, the Council of Nicaea changed the date of Easter to ensure that Easter's dating was not dependent on the dating of the Jewish Passover. (Some early Christian communities, by contrast, celebrated Easter on the first night of Passover). *The sheer diversity of Jewish customs over the centuries. Some Jews today think that the most distinctively dressed groups (such as the Hasidim) are the most "traditional" or "authentic" Jews. But a 1748 essay describing Shearith Israel (a still-prospering New York synagogue) writes that "Both men and women were dressed entirely in the English fashion; the former had all of them their hats on.

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