This rich volume originated in a research group that was hosted in 2012 to 2013 by the University of Pennsylvania’s Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies on the theme “Institutionalization, Innovation, and Conflict in 13th-Century Judaism: A Comparative View.” The results of that rather amorphous-sounding project are consolidated here into a collection of studies that, in addition to their value as examinations of specific historical phenomena, represent a coherent argument for an approach to the study of this fascinating era in European intellectual history.

While the concept of “the long thirteenth century” (beginning somewhat earlier and ending later than its precise mathematical dates) is one that was formulated for other historical contexts (notably, as far as I am aware, for English economic history), it is eminently suitable for the study of medieval Judaism. The designated time frame presents us with a dazzling constellation of religious, social, literary, and political expressions of Jewish life and thought as they achieved prominence in assorted localities and in relationship to various adjacent Muslim and Christian societies. Formulations of Judaism that had taken shape during previous centuries—such as Maimonides’s synthesis of Aristotelian rationalism, the esoteric hermeneutic of Kabbalah, the Ashkenazic Pietistic ethos, literal scriptural exegesis or the dialectical Talmud analysis of the Tosafot—were now establishing themselves as authentic but competing options for Jewish religious self-definition. The professed policies of the rival religions toward one another were not necessarily consistent with the actual dealings between members of the respective communities or even among their leaders, and these were all subject to dynamic changes. As the editors argue articulately in the introductory chapter, their use of the “entanglement” metaphor in the volume’s title was a very carefully considered choice that underscores the complexity of the patterns that need to be discerned and the methodological diversity that must be applied in order to obtain an accurate understanding of the developments being described.

The chapters in this volume are arranged according to three primary modes of “entangled” interrelationships: between intellectual communities, between secular and religious authorities, and the process of translation or transmission between cultural units. Each of the chapters must be assessed on its own merits, a task that would exceed the space allowed for this review, even if the reviewer could actually claim competence in all the scholarly disciplines that are requisite for a responsible assessment. Indeed, the principal theme that underlies all these studies is the crucial necessity of approaching the facts from diverse perspectives. Of course, scholarship has long since ceased to perceive the evolution of Jewish religious institutions and ideas either as uniform processes
or in isolation from their surrounding cultures (a well-considered issue that is illustrated in M. Z. Cohen's discussion about the relationship of the Jewish “Pardes” framework to the Christian “four senses” of scriptural interpretation); and—at least since Beryl Smalley’s work on the influence of Jewish biblical interpretation on the School of St. Victor—it has been acknowledged that “influences” did not flow invariably from the dominant majority culture to a passive Jewish minority. What we find significantly in several examples from the present collection, however, is how many additional factors must be taken into account before it will be possible to complete the historical picture. The contributions by J. Galinsky, L. Yarbrough, R. Winer, and Y. Schwartz ascribe important features of religious thought, practice, and literary genres to developments in professions, institutions, or marketing in the general societies (though, to be sure, none of the authors is suggesting any crude reduction of religious values to socio-economic forces). In some instances, it would appear that the facts cannot all be subsumed under broad historical patterns, but rather allowances must be made for the impact of individual personalities.

Thus, in R. Reiner’s essay about the correspondence concerning questions of biblical exegesis between Rabbi Jacob Tam and the Count of Champagne (probably Henri I “the Liberal”), neither the choice of interlocutors nor the content of the interpretations seem to fit our expectations of what a Talmudist or a Christian prince should be saying in this context. This suggests that we should seek out a more personal reason that emerged from the specific relationship between the count and his Jewish vassal. A comparable puzzle underlies Y. Schwartz’s study of the acerbic rivalry between Zerahyah ben Isaac of Rome and Hillel of Verona, two otherwise like-minded scholars who became embroiled in a vitriolic *ad hominem* controversy over the interpretation of Maimonides’s thought. In P. Capelli’s attempt to capture the motives of Nicolas Donin, the Jewish convert to Christianity who was instrumental in initiating the trial and burning of the Talmud in Paris in 1240, he suggests that Donin himself may have been sincere in his alienation from rabbinic Judaism or the Jewish community (contrary to the tendency in Jewish historiography to ascribe expedient or self-serving motives to apostates), though his personal situation fit conveniently into the agendas of the parties in the church-state struggle of the time.¹

Some of the chapters demonstrate how useful it is to look not only at the contents of the texts and documents but also at physical objects—as in S. J. Pearce’s examination of a manuscript of the Life of Alexander, or K. Ihnat and K. Mesler’s article about the crafting of wax figurines and their associations with alleged Jewish sorcery.

Over the last few decades of scholarship, especially in the social sciences, researchers have often been encouraged to commit themselves to a quasi-religious adherence to particular theoretical schools. Interdisciplinary practices have too often been promoted in the guise of generalization that is not anchored to deep familiarity with texts in their original languages and settings. The present collection serves as an effective counterweight to those tendencies. All the participating authors are experts in their texts and in their respective areas of social or religious history. What they have done here is to expand the frontiers of the more conventional, self-contained interpretations of the evidence toward a sensitivity to relevant developments in other contemporary Jewish communities, ideological movements, or foreign religions. The final product succeeds in arguing a persuasive case for its central thesis of multidirectional and nuanced entanglements among those groups.

The historical range of this book might be too narrow—and the individual studies too diverse²—for it to be adopted as a textbook in any likely academic courses.³ Its value will lie largely in having provided a venue for the participants to direct their considerable skills

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and expertise toward testing the project’s central thesis. The outcome is indeed an impressive and instructive achievement.

REFERENCES

1. The case lends itself to an intriguing comparison with a recent study of how, in a later century, the erstwhile Rabbi Solomon Halevi of Burgos, after becoming Bishop Pablo de Santa Maria, continued to defend the Sephardic exegetical tradition against Nicolas de Lyra’s reliance on Rashi; see Yosi Yisraeli, “A Christianized Sephardic Critique of Rashi’s Peshāt in Pablo de Santa María’s Additiones Ad Postillam Nicolai de Lyra,” in Medieval Exegesis and Religious Difference: Commentary, Conflict, and Community in the Premodern Mediterranean, ed. Ryan Szpiech (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 128–41.

2. Notwithstanding the Introduction’s excellent endeavor in summarizing how each of the chapters relates to the project’s main concerns, there is no significant overlap in the topics of the various contributions that would allow for specific comparisons between them.

3. This would be more probable in the case of some similar collections that deal with more narrowly defined scholarly areas, such as scriptural exegesis; e.g., the Szpiech collection cited earlier, or Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry Walfish, and Joseph Ward Goering, eds., With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).