

EMPIRE AND JEWISH STUDIES

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The *Perspectives* editorial board invited five scholars to comment upon what we consider to be an important development in Jewish studies: writing Jewish history through the lens of empire, a transnational form of political and economic power involving relationships that are as much about culture as they are about structure. In particular, the study of this form of power underlines the importance of analyzing and problematizing the relationship between the dominant and the dominated. The lachrymose fantasy of Jewish history—victimization—is addressed anew in a literature that interrogates the illusion of an absolute binary between power and powerlessness. Indeed, how Jews have exercised power within the context of empire is of central concern. Our contributors follow a historiographic path from Late Antiquity to the present. The questions that they pursue are, however, broadly relevant and even provocative for the social sciences, literature, and cultural studies as well.

Several of the essays address the presence—or absence—of Jews within the discussion of empire. The problem is not geographic alone. Much work in Jewish studies is largely indifferent to economic and political analysis, preferring instead to emphasize religious and cultural developments. At the same time, anxieties about calling attention to

Jewish involvement in capitalist and colonialist projects may well inhibit research into topics that can easily feed anti-Semitic fantasies of Jews' global reach. For others still, Jews simply disappear into a generalized European identity, failing to note both chronological and cultural parallels between Jews and, for example, Indians, as objects of imperial domination.

Agency is another key issue explored by these contributors as they engage with postcolonial theories. They note the extent to which empires dominate their subjects neither by brute power alone, nor by cultural indifference. The project of empire is mutually constitutive; cultural boundaries are not what they appear to be. Our colleagues emphasize the porous nature of the relationships between the Christian imperial powers and the Jews, either within its geographic center or at a distance from it. Mimicry and contestation both emerge within regimes of empire, thereby raising the vexing problem of where to draw lines between “them” and “us.”

Several of these essays engage the problem of how to understand Jews as actors within empires. If empire was the “dynamic engine” of Late Antiquity, then how have Jews as Jews participated in the various periods of empire? How is the Jewish presence in the modern nation-state, including Israel, understood best? How has local

variation as a central component of empires helped to explain developments in Jewish cultures?

For all of the scholars who have contributed to this issue of *Perspectives*, empire is a “project” made by its subjects within specific cultural domains. That such projects have, to a greater or lesser degree, depended upon the participation and even complicity of those subjects is not to deny that power asymmetries are real. It is, however, to suggest that power is not a matter of politics alone. Symbols, language, and clothing, among other examples, function within a discursive realm that simultaneously reflects and contests domination. Taken as a whole, these essays make clear that Jewish studies scholars draw increasingly on contemporary theories not only to illuminate our subject, but to rethink this scholarship in light of it.

AJS 37th Annual Conference

December 18-20, 2005
Washington Hilton and Towers
Washington, DC

Deadline for meal reservations, pre-conference reduced registration fee, and hotel reservations:
November 15, 2005.

See page 37 for further details.