

Trinity College

Trinity College Digital Repository

Faculty Scholarship

2011

Was there a "Golden Age" of Christian-Jewish Relations?

Jonathan Ray
Georgetown University

Jonathan Elukin
Trinity College, Jonathan.Elukin@trincoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/facpub>

 Part of the [History Commons](#)

Trinity College
HARTFORD CONNECTICUT

INTRODUCTION TO CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Jonathan Ray, Georgetown University
and Jonathan Elukin, Trinity College

“Was there a ‘Golden Age’ of Christian-Jewish Relations?”
Conference at Boston College, April 2010

The papers collected here were written in response to a specific question: Was there a golden age of Jewish-Christian relations?¹ The contributors each offered a different period of history (and location) as a possible golden age. All of the contributors, however, were careful to recognize the deeply problematic nature both of the question and of their individual responses in their papers or the discussions that followed. The term “golden age,” of course, evokes nostalgia for a lost world of great accomplishments in literature, art, economics, or politics. Most nations have cultivated the memory of some kind of golden age. The idea itself was first articulated in Hesiod’s works, and then picked up by Virgil and Ovid.² Before turning to the specific discussions of the golden ages offered in the papers, we should reflect for a moment on the implications of using the idea of a golden age in any historiographical analysis. Hesiod’s outline of successive ages following a golden time was only one of several ancient ways of imagining the division of time and history. Historians in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, in general, were rather flexible about periodization, with some favoring a kind of cyclical quality to the flow of history. The conception of a golden age, however, had a long life before it in western culture as a compelling shorthand for an unrecoverable, glorious past. It has survived despite Jewish and Christian historical thinking that was linear and forward-looking.

The structure of time in the Hebrew Bible itself did not incorporate the idea of a golden age. Time in the Bible was largely linear in following the movement of the Children of Israel through time.³ True, the human experience began in Eden, but the moments of paradise were fleeting and the memory of Eden was always tainted with man’s exile. The voice or voices of the Hebrew Bible seemed to push Eden to the margins as they articulated a sense of time moving first to the exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt and then to the establishment of the Temple, exile, and the hope of a messianic redemption. For the Israelites and later the larger communities of Jews who identified with them, the golden age, if they even thought of such an image, was in the future, not the past.

¹ The “Was there a ‘Golden Age’ of Christian-Jewish Relations?” conference was hosted by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College in April 2010.

² Harry Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (Indiana University Press, 1969). Lawrence Besserman, “The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New,” in Lawrence Besserman, ed., *The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives* (Garland, 1996), 3-28. John Collins, “Cosmology: Time and History,” in Sarah Iles Johnston, ed., *Religions of the ancient world: a guide* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 66.

³ Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “Jewish Memory between Exile and History,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 97, 4 (Fall 2007): 530-543. Cf pp. 535-6 on the seeming absence of the idea of progress in rabbinic ideology of history as well as interesting comments on the Jewish internalization of Christian historical values when they embraced secular historical approaches.

That indifference to a classical sense of a golden age as imagined by Hesiod persisted in the more complicated historical thinking of Christianity. The New Testament, followed by Eusebius and Augustine, constructed a past that was largely divided between the time before the incarnation and the time that followed it. Christians were waiting for the end of time and salvation. Even if there were past ages that had achieved great things, those times paled in comparison to the truth of salvation. The fundamentals of Christian periodization remained relatively stable through the Middle Ages. Even the complicated tri-partite scheme of historical time created by the medieval mystic Joachim of Fiore was still focused on the age of grace that would come before salvation. It was not a religious culture of nostalgia—except in the negative sense that many Christians looked back in reverence to the sufferings of the early Christian martyrs.

In the post-biblical Jewish historical tradition, we look in vain for advocates of the idea of a golden age. The interest in what we might consider history in the post-Second Temple period was extremely narrow in any case, as Yerushalmi has noted.⁴ The apocalyptic sentiments of most Jewish sectarian groups of the first century pretty much ensured that a golden age would not be satisfying or meaningful. These groups, including the early Christians, were focused on the imminent end of society and the beginning of a messianic age. Josephus, who was perhaps closest to the classical historical tradition, did not try to contrast the tragedies of the Jews under the Romans with an idyllic past. Perhaps the priestly class, from which Josephus came, looked back with longing to the days of the Temple, but such longing was not coherent enough (or given the disruption of the destruction of the Temple) able to shape a historical narrative around it. The rabbis were interested in certain aspects of history—the rituals of the Temple, for example, or if they understood it as history, the accounts of the Torah. But in their eyes, Scripture was more a coded text that revealed truths about contemporary rituals and values rather than a systematic account of the “national” past. Later medieval texts that grappled with historical events in ways that seemed analogous to Christian historical accounts did not wander into fantasies of a golden past even as they recorded past events.⁵

Just as the idea of a golden age flourished in the historiography of 17th-century Dutch history or early modern Spanish literature, so, too, did Jewish historians find their own golden age. The scholars of the 19th-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* were infatuated with the cultural glories of Iberian Jewish life under Islam.⁶ That period, and to some extent, the *convivencia* that seemed to survive under Christian Spain as well, became the touchstone of a golden age for modern Jewish historians.⁷ It certainly has never been really challenged by subsequent Jewish historians, or rather, no other period has been consistently designated a golden age.

Each of the papers collected here makes that challenge in different ways. Eliya Ribak, for example, suggests that relations between Jews and Christians in 4th through 7th-century Byzantine

⁴ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Schocken 1989). An interesting point to pursue is how Yerushalmi might account for the fact that the trauma of the destruction of the Temple did not produce a historical sensibility when the expulsion from Spain purportedly did. For a response to Yerushalmi on this last point, see Robert Bonfil, “Jewish Attitudes Toward History and Historical Writing in Pre-Modern Times,” *Jewish History* 11 (Spring 1997): 7-40.

⁵ Among these texts I include *sefer yossipon*, chronicle of Ahimaaz, and the various Crusade chronicles.

⁶ Ismar Schorsch, “The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 34 (1989): 47-66.

⁷ So too does the idea of *convivencia* which carries something of the same charge: See reflections on the idea of *convivencia* in Jonathan Ray, “Beyond Tolerance and Persecution: Reassessing Our Approach to Medieval *Convivencia*” *Jewish Social Studies* 11 (winter 2005): 1-18. Alex Novikoff, “Between Tolerance and Intolerance in Medieval Spain: An Historiographic Enigma” *Medieval Encounters* 11 (2005): 7-36. Maya Soifer, Beyond *convivencia*: critical reflections on the historiography of interfaith relations in Christian Spain,” *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 1 (2009): 19-35.

Palestine were remarkably free of violence or animosity. The two communities shared a common material culture to the extent that without explicit epigraphic markers, it was virtually impossible to distinguish Jewish or Christian sites from each other. Such common material culture, Ribak argues, suggests the absence of real friction between the two traditions. In a later period, Margaret Jennings tries to identify Christian valorization and acceptance of Jewish religious influences in the art of a medieval French cathedral. She sees this as a marker of a golden age of tolerant relations between the two communities and traditions. Jonathan Ray offers a nuanced discussion of the age of *convivencia* in Christian Spain that raises the question of who benefited from the putative golden age and what were the costs to individual Jews or the Jewish community. Magda Teter's essay reminds us that there may be paradoxes to any purported golden age when it comes to Jews. Kings who embody the early modern Polish golden age, may be more severe on Jews making it difficult to transfer these historical periods whole scale into Jewish periodization.

Miriam Bodian offers, perhaps, the fullest discussion of a golden age—that of the experience of religious tolerance and acceptance in 17th-century Amsterdam when Jews came to be largely accepted as just another category of non-believer who had to be tolerated rather than a specific kind of outsider subject to particular disabilities. Finally, Yaakov Arieli identifies the continuing interfaith dialogue of the 20th and 21st-century as one strand of a modern golden age when certain Christian denominations and Jewish interlocutors broke through traditional boundaries to establish some kind of real, albeit limited, dialogue of mutual acceptance.

It should go without saying that the idea of a golden age is not a precise or very meaningful historical label. Thus, trying to assess whether any historical period was such a time for Jewish-Christian relations is fraught with problems. Even the terminology of periodization is problematic. Are we using Jewish or Christian/secular schema to focus on a particular time? For example, are we talking about the entire period of the Middle Ages—however that is defined either in Christian, secular, or Jewish terms?⁸ In general, are we talking about one region, kingdom, or territory? And, of course, what is particularly golden about such a putative golden age? Do we judge an age golden by the level of Jewish culture, the degree of acculturation of Jewish communities, the absence of violence between Jews and Christians, the lifting of legal restraints on the Jewish community, or demonstrated friendships and communal interaction? Do we need a specific combination of these elements to reach a golden level? Does it have to be golden for an entire society or just a golden age for Jews? (Or for all Jews?)⁹ What this collection of papers suggests, however, is that there is still a historiographical impulse to identify and define a golden age of Jewish-Christian relations. That in itself is interesting and worthy of reflection. Why are we still trying to understand the past in this way? Moreover, bringing all these disparate periods together suggests that no single golden age stood apart from the rest or was without potential problems of definition. Jonathan Ray has pointed out those problems in his discussion of *convivencia*. Miriam Bodian has recognized that the tolerance experienced by the Jewish community in Holland came at the cost of the community policing and punishing its own members. Jewish historians may still be searching for a golden age, or may feel that their readers still desire a

⁸ Patricia Skinner, "Confronting the 'Medieval,' in *Medieval History: The Jewish Example*," *Past & Present* 181 (2003): 219-247. There is a massive literature on periodization in Jewish history writing, but it primarily centers around the question of when does modernity begin. I am working on an essay that examines the question of earlier periodizations.

⁹ The papers presented here raise some of these concerns. In Ribak's paper, for example, the common material culture of Jews and Christians may have reflected the weakening of a distinctive Jewish identity in the wake of the destruction of the Temple and the late rise of rabbinic Judaism as argued by Seth Schwartz. In Jennings' paper, as well, we are not sure that the artists behind the cathedral's sculptures and images suggested Jewish interpretations on an intellectual level apart from any larger and more critical social attitudes.

golden age. Ultimately, seeing all these periods juxtaposed against each other in this collection may help shake us out of this Manichean worldview of a Jewish past caught between times of persecution and a golden age or ages of tolerance. We may begin to see each age as a spectrum that contained both these qualities.