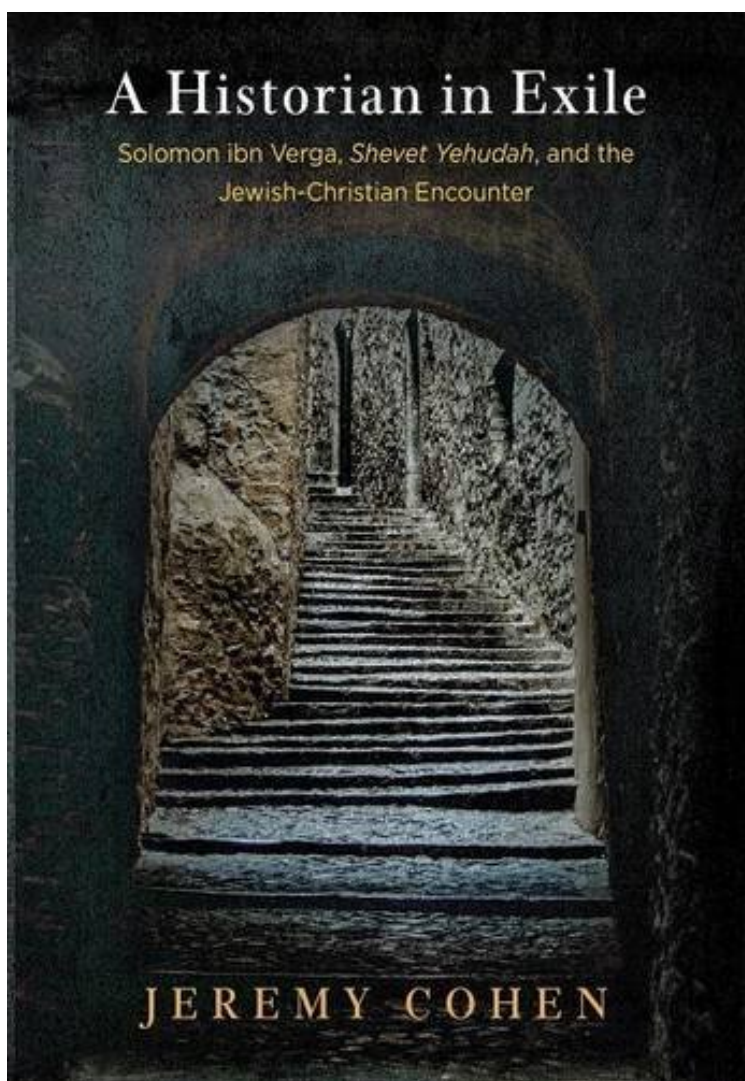


(Online library) A Historian in Exile: Solomon ibn Verga, "Shevet Yehudah," and the Jewish-Christian Encounter (Jewish Culture and Contexts)

A Historian in Exile: Solomon ibn Verga, "Shevet Yehudah," and the Jewish-Christian Encounter (Jewish Culture and Contexts)

Jeremy Cohen

ePub | *DOC | audiobook | ebooks | Download PDF



DOWNLOAD



+

READ ONLINE

#2231001 in Books Cohen Jeremy 2016-10-10Original language:English 9.20 x .80 x 6.30l, .0 #File Name: 0812248589256 pagesA Historian in Exile Solomon Ibn Verga Shevet Yehudah and the Jewish Christian Encounter | File size: 48.Mb

Jeremy Cohen : A Historian in Exile: Solomon ibn Verga, "Shevet Yehudah," and the Jewish-Christian Encounter (Jewish Culture and Contexts) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Historian in Exile: Solomon ibn Verga, "Shevet Yehudah," and the Jewish-Christian

Encounter (Jewish Culture and Contexts):

Solomon ibn Verga was one of the victims of the decrees expelling the Jews from Spain and Portugal in the 1490s, and his *Shevet Yehudah* (The Scepter of Judah, ca. 1520) numbered among the most popular Hebrew books of the sixteenth century. Its title page lured readers and buyers with a promise to relate "the terrible events and calamities that afflicted the Jews while in the lands of non-Jewish peoples": blood libels, disputations, conspiracies, evil decrees, expulsions, and more. The book itself preserves collective memories, illuminates a critical and transitional phase in Jewish history, and advances a new vision of European society and government. It reflects a world of renaissance, reformation, and global exploration but also one fraught with crisis for Christian majority and Jewish minority alike. Among the multitudes of Iberian Jewish conversos who had received Christian baptism by the end of the fifteenth century, ibn Verga experienced the destruction of Spanish-Portuguese Jewry just as the Catholic Church began to lose exclusive control over the structures of Western religious life; and he joined other Europeans in reevaluating boundaries and affiliations that shaped their identities. In *A Historian in Exile*, Jeremy Cohen shows how *Shevet Yehudah* bridges the divide between the medieval and early modern periods, reflecting a contemporary consciousness that a new order had begun to replace the old. Ibn Verga's text engages this receding past in conversation, Cohen contends; it uses historical narrative to challenge regnant assumptions, to offer new solutions to age-old problems, to call Jews to task for bringing much of the hostility toward them upon themselves, and to chart a viable direction for a people seeking a place to call home in a radically transformed world.

"A fresh reading and compelling interpretation of *Shevet Yehudah* that is unprecedented in its profoundness and intellectual depth." Martin Jacobs, Washington University in St. Louis

A Historian in Exile is that rare thing, a book by a great historian about a great historian. Solomon ibn Verga is today an obscure figure, but in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this Spanish exile's work *The Scepter of Judah* was the historical meditation par excellence upon the Jewish condition in the Diaspora. Jeremy Cohen restores to us the history and its author, both of whom seem to have as much to say to us today as they have to so many generations in the past.

David Nirenberg, University of Chicago

"This fine book is a fascinating and learned study of the *Shevet Yehudah*, Solomon ibn Verga's rethinking of the history of the Jews in the wake of the great forced conversions and the massive expulsions from Spain and Portugal in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and of the continuing Christian hostility towards Jews. This is the one book that both Hebraists and non-Hebraists will need to have at hand when reading ibn Verga's work."

Edward Peters, University of Pennsylvania

About the Author

Jeremy Cohen is Abraham and Edita Spiegel Foundation Professor of European Jewish History at Tel Aviv University. Among his earlier books are *Sanctifying the Name of God: Jewish Martyrs and Jewish Memories of the First Crusade*, also available from the University of Pennsylvania Press, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism*, and *Christ-Killers: Jews and the Passion, from the Bible to the Big Screen*.

Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

Preface

I heard from elders who had left Spain that in a certain ship the plague broke out and the captain cast them ashore in an uninhabited place. There most of them died of hunger, while some braced themselves to walk on foot until they should find a settlement. Now one Jew among them tried to walk together with his wife and two sons, but the wife, who was not accustomed to walking, fainted and died. The man began to carry the children, until both he and his two sons also fainted out of hunger. When he awoke from his faint he found his two sons dead, and in his great distress he got up on his feet and cried: "Lord of the Universe! Although you are doing much to make me abandon my religion, know for certain that, despite the heavenly hosts, a Jew I am, and a Jew will I remain, and nothing that you have brought or will yet bring upon me will help you!" He gathered some earth and some grass, covered the boys, and went to seek an inhabited place. (p. 122)

This brief but powerful tale, appearing toward the end of Solomon ibn Verga's book *Shevet Yehudah*, encapsulates the life experience, the world, and the agenda of its author. Although modern scholars differ as to whether Solomon himself included this vignette in his anthology of stories or his son Joseph added it before publishing his father's work posthumously, it ultimately matters little. These few lines convey much of the spirit and message of the Ibn Vergas' popular book, both literally and metaphorically. Significantly, the narrator does not record the incident as factual on his own authority, but he relates what he has heard from the elders in the wake of their expulsion from Spain. The story lacks historical particulars. Rather, it captures the collective suffering and desperation of Iberian Jews at the end of the Middle Ages: homeless, forlorn, overwhelmed with one misery after another and deprived of security, possessions, and hope, the depth of their desolation defies comparison. Yet, despite everything, the Jew of our story does not surrender to his despair. In Job-like fashion, he celebrates his Jewish identity, looking forward to a better and more viable future, even as the relentless tribulation of his past and present weighs directly on his body and soul.

I have shared much of the last decade with Solomon ibn Verga and his stories. While we know few details about his life and absolutely nothing about his death, I have little doubt that he identified with the suffering hero of this tale. Deprived of nearly everything that mattered, he clung to his faith, a faith that found expression in the

collective memories of his people's past, and he used those memories to chart a course for healing wounds and remaining afloat. His courage and his impetuosity and willingness to voice sharp criticism of his fellow Jews and his God alike undoubtedly contributed to the success of Shevet Yehudah among generations of readers who followed him. Three hundred years ago, the leading Ashkenazic rabbi Jacob Emden forbade reading Shevet Yehudah on the Sabbath because its stories were too sad, but he then declared emphatically: "But during the week . . . it is an obligation [mitzvah] binding on every Jew to be fully conversant with this wonderful book, in order to remember God's kindness toward us in every generation; for we have not ceased to exist in the face of all the evil decrees that boggle the mind." Solomon ibn Verga, his son Joseph, and their afflicted hero might have measured the extent of God's kindness to his people somewhat differently. But their message rings loud in Emden's triumphant assertion: "We have not ceased to exist in the face of all the evil decrees that boggle the mind." My own interests in interreligious polemics, blood libels, and historical writing in the Middle Ages all induced me to study Ibn Verga and his captivating book, even if they date from a period later than that on which most of my previous work has focused. Yet fascination adequately compensated for any sense of displacement that accompanied this medievalist in his foray into the sixteenth century. The blend of resilience, elusiveness, and unswerving commitment that characterizes the author of Shevet Yehudah nourished my own determination to pursue this research, and the study presented here is the result.