



Reorienting the East: Jewish Travelers to the Medieval Muslim World (Jewish Culture and Contexts)

By Martin Jacobs

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Reorienting the East explores the Islamic world as it was encountered, envisioned, and elaborated by Jewish travelers from the Middle Ages to the early modern period. The first comprehensive investigation of Jewish travel writing from this era, this study engages with questions raised by postcolonial studies and contributes to the debate over the nature and history of Orientalism as defined by Edward Said.

Examining two dozen Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic travel accounts from the mid-twelfth to the early sixteenth centuries, Martin Jacobs asks whether Jewish travelers shared Western perceptions of the Islamic world with their Christian counterparts. Most Jews who detailed their journeys during this period hailed from Christian lands and many sailed to the Eastern Mediterranean aboard Christian-owned vessels. Yet Jacobs finds that their descriptions of the Near East subvert or reorient a decidedly Christian vision of the region. The accounts from the crusader era, in particular, are often critical of the Christian church and present glowing portraits of Muslim-Jewish relations. By contrast, some of the later travelers discussed in the book express condescending attitudes toward Islam, Muslims, and Near Eastern Jews. Placing shifting perspectives on the Muslim world in their historical, social, and literary contexts, Jacobs interprets these texts as mirrors of changing Jewish self-perceptions. As he argues, the travel accounts echo the various ways in which premodern Jews negotiated their mingled identities, which were neither exclusively Western nor entirely Eastern.

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Review

"Impressive and unique. . . . A timely discussion of Jewish identity and reflections on self and 'other' in the premodern Islamic world. Jacobs clearly and cogently demonstrates the complexities of Jewish identity in the Mediterranean and the Islamic world."—Josef Meri, Centre of Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge

"An original, comprehensive, and clear account of medieval and early modern Jewish travel writing. Martin Jacobs discusses all known relevant Jewish writings from the period, giving the textual history of each and often comparing them to contemporary Christian and Muslim texts. Any reader of this book will come away not only with a clear picture of Jewish travel writing but also with a good introduction to the main concerns of contemporary scholarship on medieval and early modern travel writing more generally."—Iain Macleod Higgins, University of Victoria

About the Author

Martin Jacobs is Associate Professor of Rabbinic Studies in the Department of Jewish, Islamic, and Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at Washington University in St. Louis.

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