

Early Modern Jewry – A New Cultural History by David B. Ruderman.  
Princeton University Press 2010.

Early Modern Jewry is one of those priceless books of history that leave you both informed and uplifted at the end of reading it. Professor Ruderman of the University of Pennsylvania has created an exemplar of good history – analytical, detailed and open-minded – that opens a window on a period of Jewish history that all too often loses out to the Haskalah at one end of it and the medieval period at the other.

The book is divided into six sections: Jews on the Move, Communal Cohesion, Knowledge Explosion, Crisis of Rabbinic Authority, Mingled Identities, Toward Modernity: Some Final Thoughts. There is also an appendix entitled Historiographical Reflections.

There is so much of interest in this relatively short book that it is hard to be selective; but of the greatest interest to me was Ruderman's description of the combined impact of enhanced Jewish mobility and the printing of books, both of which had a profound effect on the Jewish communities of Western and Eastern Europe, as well as the Mediterranean basin. He also chronicles the decline in rabbinic authority as the Jewish merchant classes asserted their dominance in communal affairs, the impact of the messianic upheavals associated with Shabbetai Zevi and others, and the role played by converts both out of and into Judaism, sometimes many times in one individual's lifetime.

Of great interest also is Ruderman's engagement with terminology, particularly the designation 'early modernity', about whose usage his theories are most persuasive; he engages dynamically with the work of other historians, and though he sometimes disagrees with the views of others he does so with an inherent respect that is often rare in academia.

This is an immensely approachable book, and certainly one of the best works on Jewish history that I have read for years.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh