

In Ishmael's House – A History of Jews in Muslim Lands by Martin Gilbert.
Yale University Press 2010.

This is the latest work by Britain's most eminent Jewish historian, and follows a pattern set so capably by previous works. For Gilbert history is not a dry subject but rather a commingling of events and human experience, a living organism with a direct relevance and meaning for those living long after the events themselves occurred.

In Ishmael's House is the rich telling of the relationship between Muslims and the Jews living in Muslim lands: Gilbert divides his book into 22 chapters, covering the vast sweep of history from before the advent of the prophet Mohammed up to the present day. Due to the enormous period under consideration, Gilbert is of necessity succinct, and the first 126 pages cover the years between the 6th and the 20th centuries, while the remaining pages of a book of just over 400 pages deals with the 20th and early 21st centuries.

Martin Gilbert's attention to detail is meticulous, and the book benefits from clear and informative maps – Gilbert's early trademark in his first forays into Jewish history – and a good glossary of terms.

This is a fascinating story, beautifully told, and written by Gilbert with a lofty purpose, as he makes clear in the penultimate paragraph of the book:

From the time of Mohammed until today, Jews have often found greater opportunities, respect and recognition under Islam than under Christianity. They have also been subjected to the worst excesses of hostility, hatred and persecution. It is my hope that this book will encourage a better understanding of the past, and help to make possible a future that emulates only the best aspects of the past. [p.354]

This is a laudable aim with which no sane person could disagree, but I for one will not be holding my breath, or confidently expecting its realization.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh