David B. Ruderman. *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History.*
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. xiv + 326 pp. + 5 b/w pls. index. append. map. bibl. $35. ISBN: 978–0–691–14464–1.

In this volume, David Ruderman seeks to offer "a comprehensive, transregional portrait of Jewish culture and society in early modern Europe" (8–9). He notes the difficulties that have inhibited scholars from attempting such a synthesis. First among them is the challenge of meeting the standard set by Jonathan Israel with his masterful work, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism* (first edition, 1985; third edition 1998). Yet the need for such a work is obvious. Jonathan Israel, who is not a scholar of Jewish history, cannot offer a finely-articulated analysis of the internal cultural patterns of early modern European Jewry, an analysis that requires an intimate knowledge of the universe of Jewish lore and learning. Ruderman brings that knowledge to the task.

Yet Ruderman emphasizes the tentative and preliminary nature of his effort. He views as a crucial aspect of early modern Jewish history the "intense communication and exposure" (12) of early modern Jews to differing Jewish traditions. He proposes five overarching themes: an acceleration in the mobility of Jews throughout the Jewish diaspora, a decline in rabbinic authority and a rise in the power of lay leadership, a sharp increase in the availability to Jews of different sorts of knowledge, a proliferation of religious views that deviated from rabbinic norms, and an erosion of boundaries between Christians and Jews. While Ruderman seeks to be geographically inclusive, he admits to a "Eurocentric perspective" (19) that is a result both of the state of scholarship and of his own training. He does not, though, ignore the major Jewish communities of the Ottoman empire, which played a key role in Hebrew

printing, the dissemination of kabbalistic and messianic ideas, and Mediterranean trade.

The book has the feel more of an impressionistic sketch than of a fully executed portrait. A series of biographical illustrations of Jewish mobility in chapter one serves to suggest how migrations may have generated new points of view, though the author does not offer clear evidence of such an impact. Chapter two deals with communal organization, an excruciatingly difficult topic about which to generalize. Ruderman circumvents the difficulties to some extent by treating converso, German, and Ottoman communities separately. What characterizes all regions, he argues, is the growth in the power of lay elites in these communities, at the expense of the rabbinic elite. The third chapter, on the information revolution among early modern Jews, brings together disparate developments — Hebrew printing, increasing use of European languages, Christian Hebraism, Jewish entry into medical schools — that had social as well as cultural repercussions for European Jewry. The radical challenge to rabbinic Judaism of the Sabbatean movement (and its offshoots) forms the core of chapter four, while chapter five portrays the "remarkably fluid, protean, and unstable" boundaries between Jew and Christian, a phenomenon that does indeed seem a striking hallmark of this period (187).

In his appendix, titled "Historiographical Reflections," Ruderman abandons the suggestive, cautious quality of the body of this volume. Having earlier discussed the difficulty of surmounting Jonathan Israel's work, the author here presents a critique of that work. He notes that Israel's book was well-received because it "removed the Jewish experience from its relative isolation and obscurity as a subject for mere Jewish historians by integrating it fully into European history in general" (209). He argues, from a standpoint that is familiar to scholars of Jewish history, that Jonathan Israel, in his treatment of Jewish culture, examined primarily those elements reflecting trends that were also apparent in European society. For Israel, Ruderman maintains, Spinoza's thought was the crowning achievement of early modern European Jewry. Yet this period was one of remarkable creativity for Jews of Eastern Europe and Italy, who knew nothing of Spinoza. By focusing not on intellectual achievements that gripped contemporary Jews, but on those that were important to gentile society, Israel's work is, Ruderman argues, "ultimately misleading and distorting" (213).

This criticism of Israel's book is one with which most scholars of early modern Jewish history would concur. Ruderman seeks to propose an alternative view, one that synthesizes the work of specialists in early modern Jewish history and thought, including his own. This volume, however, is too sketchy to serve as a corrective. It is also a book that privileges elites in Jewish society — particularly the intellectual elite — in a way that demands its own corrective. But it is a bold, deeply informed, and welcome contribution, and one hopes that Ruderman and others will continue to explore the problem of how to make early modern Jewish culture accessible to Europeanists, as well as to others who lack a specialized knowledge of Jewish culture.

MIRIAM BODIAN
University of Texas at Austin