



Judaism in Christian Eyes: Ethnographic Descriptions of Jews and Judaism in Early Modern Europe

Yaacov Deutsch

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This book examines Christian ethnographic writing about the Jews in early modern Europe, offering a systematic historical analysis of this literary genre and arguing its importance for understanding both the period in general and Jewish-Christian relations in particular. The book focuses on nearly 80 texts from Western Europe (mostly Germany) that describe the customs and ceremonies of contemporary Jews, containing both descriptions and illustrations of their subjects.

Deutsch is one of the first scholars to study these unique writings in detail. Examining books in which Christian authors describe Jewish life, he provides new interpretations of Christian perceptions of Jews, Christian Hebraism, and the attention paid by Hebraists to contemporary Jews and Judaism. These works also present new perspectives on the study of religion, developments in the field of anthropology and ethnography, and on internal Christian debates that arose from the portrayal of Jewish life. Despite the lack of attention by modern scholars, some of these books were extremely popular in their time and represent one of the important ways by which perceptions of Jews were disseminated during the period.

The key claim of this study is that, although almost all of the descriptions of Jewish customs and ceremonies are accurate, their authors chose to concentrate mainly on details that portray Jewish ceremonies as anti-Christian, superstitious, and ridiculous and to show the deviation of Judaism from Biblical law. Deutsch argues that such descriptions are better defined as "polemical ethnographies". Nevertheless, he claims that despite their polemical tendency these texts represent a shift from writing about Judaism as a religion to writing about Jews, and from a mode of writing based on stereotypes to one that is based on direct contact and observation.

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