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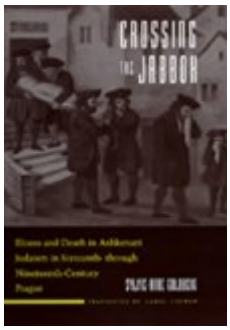

Sylvie-Anne Goldberg. *Crossing the Jabbok: Illness and Death in Ashkenazi Judaism in Sixteenth- through Nineteenth-Century Prague.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996. xvii + 303 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-08149-9.

Reviewed by Steven Fine

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The social and religious history of death is a growth area in modern scholarship. Scholars of western cultural history have found interest in this subject, an interest that paralleled, was influenced by and influenced contemporary debate on the social construction of death. In the United States interest in death as a phenomenon began to develop during the later 1960's. Generally associated with the work of psychologist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, new attentiveness to death has resulted in attitudes toward dying that are much different than those that existed before her time. The single most important historical study of changing western attitudes toward death is Philippe Arlés' *L'homme devant la mort* (Paris, 1977). This work, produced by one of the major practitioners of the French Annales school, was translated as *The Hour of Our Death* (New York, 1981). Arlés' work was not carried out for academic reasons exclusively. Like Kubler-Ross, Arlés' was dissatisfied with the sanitized attitude toward death that he felt characterized the 1960's and 1970's. He probed literary and archaeological sources for alternative approaches. Arlés assumed a global approach to the history of death, tracing its development from the Greco-Roman period through the present. The book, in fact, deals with very specific issues of death, usually as they pertain to France or to western Catholicism. As has often been the case with studies emanating from the *Annales* school, Arlés is almost silent on the subject of Jews and Jewish notions of death.

The lack of Jewish representation has been partially remedied by Sylvie-Anne Goldberg. In *Les deux rives du Yabbok: la maladie et la mort dans judaïsme ashkénase: Prague XVIe-XIXe siecle* (Paris, 1989) Goldberg followed on Arlés' interest in death, writing a history of Jewish attitudes toward death and dying that spans from Biblical times to the Emancipation, focusing upon the Jewish burial society of early modern Prague. The English-speaking world is most fortunate that this work recently papered in translation as *Crossing the Jabbok: Illness and Death in Ashkenazi Judaism in Sixteenth- through Nineteenth Century Prague* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996), ably translated by Carol Cosman. This important work breaks new ground in its study of religious and social culture of the medieval through early

modern Judaism. A strength of the work is its detailed analysis of the Ashkenazi literature, particularly of the burial societies, during the medieval and early modern periods. Goldberg explores how the practices of this community continued or differed from those that preceded it and developed from it. Of particular importance to this discussion is the 17th century *sefer minhagim* known as *Ma'avar Yaabok*, thus the title of Goldberg's monograph, *Crossing the Jabbok*. Goldberg sets sickness, death and dying at the core of the concerns of medieval and early modern Western Ashkenazi communities, placing the *Hevra Kaddisha* at the center of these communities. Though one could question elements of Goldberg's thesis and her treatment of specific texts, her analysis of the medieval and early modern documents (including visual testimony) is generally quite competent and insightful.

While medieval and early modern Ashkenaz come into sharp focus in this work, the periods that came before and after were left somewhat fuzzy by our author. Goldberg continued Arlés' penchant for broad chronological presentation in this monograph. Unfortunately, this approach served her no better than it did Arlés. For example, the Chasidic conception is dealt with in one paragraph (pp. 204-205). In regard to the Greco-Roman period, my own primary area of scholarship, our author treats questions that are still open as givens (as, for example, in her discussion of ossuary burial, pp. 15-21) and treats Rabbinic sources as a single body of literature rather than as the geographically and chronologically variegated assemblage that it is. I am unconvinced by Goldberg's suggestion that the Jewish cemetery as an institution began ca. 1000-1100 C.E., particularly in light of Jewish burial practices during late antiquity (e.g. Beth She'arim, the Roman catacombs), and other archaeological and literary sources. The history of death and dying in Judaism is simply too vast a topic for one monograph.

That said, Goldberg has written a superb and utterly engaging history of sickness, death and burial in Ashkenaz. This important study belongs in every university library.

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