# Introduction

The First Crusade was an intense and explosive outburst of religious exhilaration that culminated in a remarkable military achievement. Pope Urban II, in his call to the crusade at Clermont in late 1095, touched a nerve in western Christendom, unleashing forces that far exceeded his anticipations and proved impossible to control. Motivations both noble and base impelled armies of crusaders to journey to the East. Despite formidable obstacles, many of these military forces succeeded in reaching the Holy Land; in mid-1099 they breached the walls of Jerusalem and in a paroxysm of frenzy conquered the Holy City.

This extraordinary religious and military venture has long fascinated historians. To the Christian chroniclers of the late eleventh and early twelfth century, it represented the saga of religious dedication and zeal rewarded by God's miraculous interventions on behalf of his loyal servants. The remarkable success of this audacious effort, capped by the conquest of Jerusalem during the summer months of 1099, reinforced this religious and romantic view of the great military campaign as a divinely supported undertaking on the part of an army of devoted Christian warriors. To be sure, the Christian foothold established in the Near East crumbled quickly, and subsequent crusading efforts never duplicated the brilliant achievements of the 1090s. As setbacks mounted, the historical sources began to reflect doubt and disillusionment where there had been simple admiration on the part of the earlier crusade historians. Modern skepticism has taken the revisionism fur-

ther. The result is a set of crusade accounts that present an increasingly unsavory picture of the enterprise, emphasizing the cupidity that sent many crusaders into the Levant in quest of temporal gains and pointing to the fanatic cruelties that sprang from the initial religious exhilaration. Another line of investigation has focused on the attempts of the papacy to regain control of the movement it had launched, to define the movement more clearly, and to administer it more effectively. In the twentieth century, historians have sought to understand the wellsprings of this dynamic movement. Deeply aware of the innovative aspects of crusading behavior and ideology, these contemporary historians have sought to identify key elements in crusading theory and practice, to discover their origins in eleventh-century European life, and to discern their impact upon the rapidly developing civilization of twelfth-century western Christendom. The result of all this is a mosaic of diverse views of the First Crusade; there have been pious, perjorative, institutional, social, and spiritual perspectives and explanations.

A dramatic by-product of the religious fervor associated with the First Crusade was a series of devastating attacks on Jewish communities in northern Europe. Certain crusading bands interpreted the papal initiative as a call to overcome *all* infidelity and chose to begin their mission with an assault on the infidels immediately at hand, the Jews. These attacks were both cruel and thorough, resulting in the total destruction of a number of important Jewish settlements. The response of the besieged Jews reflects a level of religious fervor as intense as that of the attacking crusaders. In a variety of ways these Jews remained firm in their faith and militantly fought off the challenge of Christianity, in most instances at the cost of their lives. Crusader persecution of the Jews and consequent Jewish martyrdom have long been known to historians of the crusades and to historians of the Jews alike. The Christian chroniclers of the late eleventh and early twelfth century showed little interest in the anti-Jewish violence of 1096; their modern counterparts have dealt

with it more extensively, generally using these assaults to highlight some of the negative aspects of the crusading venture.[1] To Jewish historians the events of 1096 have held far greater meaning. Following the catastrophe, observers preserved recollections of these incidents. These recollections were eventually fused into two unusual and innovative Hebrew chronicles, both devoted to celebrating the martyrdom of the Jews under assault. The pious attitudes of the twelfth-century Jewish chroniclers have by and large been adopted by their nineteenth- and twentieth-century successors, although modern Jewish experience has led to some critical perspectives on medieval Jewish martyrdom. Jewish sources and commentators through the years have generally concurred in interpreting the events of 1096 as an instance of remarkable Jewish heroism and as a disastrous turning point in the course of medieval Jewish history.[2]

This study began with my conviction that the anti-Jewish violence associated with the First Crusade deserves and requires full analysis. No one has isolated the phenomenon and made it the focus of detailed scrutiny before now. The first step in such an analysis would be a careful examination of the available sources, followed by an evaluation of their reliability. It quickly becomes apparent that the key to a study of Jewish fate in 1096 lay in the two original Hebrew chronicles. Extended examination of these unusual and innovative sources indicates that they are in fact relatively reliable. They were composed fairly close in time to the events depicted, are based on first-hand testimony, are committed to a portrayal of a variety of patterns of Christian and Jewish behavior, and are written in a plain and unadorned style. On examination, these unusual Hebrew chronicles reveal, besides their reliability, a striking stylistic parallel with the corresponding Christian accounts of the First Crusade. This concurrence shows that northern European Jews at these early stages formed a community that shared the spiritual environment of the Christian world in which it was embedded.

What are my findings from the careful study of these valuable records? For the anthropologically oriented, the events of 1096 would seem intrinsically interesting as instances of unusual group behavior—both the radical violence of the Christians and the equally radical martyrdom chosen in response by the Jews. In depicting these fascinating behaviors, I have often quoted the language of the sources because I felt that paraphrasing would diminish the powerful impact of the medieval portrayal. While attempting to convey some of the intrinsic power of the medieval accounts, I have also tried to remain aloof of their seductive appeal. These sources—especially the extensive Jewish records—seek to leave an impression of overall Christian bestiality and Jewish heroism. In fact, however, they provide sufficient detail to indicate that the reality was more complex and nuanced. For one thing, not all Christians were united in hostility to the Jews; even the Christian burghers of the Rhineland cities, usually excoriated by the Jewish chroniclers as aligned monolithically with the popular crusading bands, are nonetheless depicted as displaying a wide variety of behaviors, ranging from full collaboration with the attacking crusaders to vigorous efforts to protect their Jewish neighbors. Nor should the Jews who were affected by the events of 1096 be depicted simplistically as having responded uniformly to adversity. They reacted to their persecution in a number of ways. Even those who opted for martyrdom did so in ways that followed a variety of patterns. In the depiction of violence on the part of Christians toward Jews, and the response of their victims, the *diversity* of behavior will be emphasized. In addition, unlike the medieval chroniclers, I have chosen to do more than depict. I have attempted also to explain the development of these behaviors, finding the sources of the violence in some of the essential motives of the crusade and in some of its organizational shortcomings, while discerning the roots of Jewish martyrdom in both the Jewish tradition and in the vibrant spirituality of late eleventh-century northern Europe.

The events of 1096 are striking and significant for more

than their intrinsic fascination. They tell us much about general facets of the First Crusade and its aftermath—the exhilaration and frenzy of the masses, the loss of control by the papacy, and the resolute efforts on the part of the Church to regain and maintain effective leadership during the ensuing crusading ventures. To be sure, these aspects of the First Crusade and its aftermath are well documented elsewhere and have been carefully analyzed by modern historians. Nonetheless, the perspective afforded by examining the anti-Jewish assaults is important for a general understanding of aspects of the crusading experience.

More significant still is the light shed on the early development of Ashkenazic (i.e., northern European) Jewry by the events of 1096. This fledgling Jewish community began to emerge as a cohesive force in Jewish life during the eleventh century; it survived through the centuries and held a place of leadership on the modern Jewish scene. Given the importance of this community and the paucity of evidence related to the early stages in its development, the data provided by the incidents of 1096 are of great import.

Scholars interested in early Ashkenazic Jewry have tended to see this vibrant young community as socially and spiritually isolated from its immediate environment. General medievalists usually neglect this Jewish community when investigating major social and spiritual trends of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Specialists in Jewish history have by and large remained insouciant of general tendencies of this creative epoch. Careful study of the events of 1096, however, has convinced me that early Ashkenazic Jewry was far better integrated into its environment than is generally assumed.

This integration can first be seen with regard to social interaction. Despite the largely negative view of Christians expressed in the post-1096 Hebrew records, it is clear that many Jews during the crisis period itself saw their Christian neighbors—both those in positions of power and the common burghers as well—as genuinely well disposed. There is no other way to explain the widely noted tendency

of Jews to seek refuge with their Christian neighbors. No amount of after-the-fact disillusionment can gainsay the expectation on the part of the Jews of 1096 that they could count on the support and protection of segments of the Christian populace.

A second—and more striking—reflection of the integration of the Jews into their milieu is the pattern of Jewish martyrdom at this time. Granted that pre-1096 Jewish experience afforded some precedents, the martyrdom of 1096 took startling new forms. As this study proceeded, I came to feel that both the extreme behavior of the attacking crusaders and that of the besieged Jews must be seen within the context of the eleventh-century propensity for new and innovative interpretations of prior traditions. This after all was the hallmark of the eleventh century in Europe, characterizing a creative upsurge felt throughout western Christendom. The new-style papacy and its demands constitute a major example of this tendency toward innovation, disguised always as reassertion of the old and true. Crusading itself constituted a radical departure in Christian practice, although both the calls to crusade and the chronicles of the period were couched in terminology that obscures its novelty. In much the same way, a segment of those committed to the crusade—and a small segment at that—created its own pathbreaking and destructive exegesis on prior Christian doctrine concerning the place of the Jews in Christendom and its own radical interpretation of the notion of the crusade. Out of these novel interpretations emerged the devastating assaults on Rhineland Jewry. Likewise the Jews under attack constructed their own innovative and extreme interpretation of earlier Jewish teachings on how to respond to religious persecution, leading them to a radical manner of manifesting their rejection of the crusader call to conversion. In the process, these Jews significantly enriched the historic Jewish legacy of *kiddush ha-Shem* (martyrdom), thereby enshrining themselves in the annals of Jewish heroism.

For too long, those studying medieval Ashkenazic Jewry have tended to see this vibrant young community

as spiritually isolated from its immediate environment. My study of Rhineland Jewry in 1096 convinced me that both the anti-Jewish assaults and the remarkable Jewish responses must be seen against the backdrop of intense late eleventh-century spirituality, in both its positive and negative aspects. Treating this young Jewry in isolation from its ambiance can yield only unresolved questions and outright distortions; studying early Ashkenazic Jewry in its temporal context affords a much richer understanding of its remarkable efflorescence. The late eleventh century in Europe was a period of unusual creativity and innovation; new ideas, always masked as restatements of the old and valued, abounded. The events to be presented here—both the aggressions of the popular crusaders and the zealous reactions of the beleaguered Jews—can, at their core, be comprehended only against the backdrop of this volatile spirituality.

A third index of the degree of integration of late eleventh-century Ashkenazic Jewry into its environment is the special style of history writing that emerged in the wake of the disaster. Once again, Jewish tradition provided historiographic precedents, yet a new style of history writing was forged out of the intense Jewish response to the events of 1096. This new style shows striking similarities to the historiographic tendencies in late eleventh- and early twelfth-century northern Europe, suggesting once more that the Jews of this area were influenced far more by the general patterns of spiritual and intellectual creativity than heretofore recognized. The examination of this limited set of events and reactions thus opens the way for a better appreciation of key characteristics of early Ashkenazic Jewry, and should be of interest both to general medievalists and to specialists in the history of the Jews.

Besides demonstrating that the events of 1096 illustrate important features of crusading history and of the history of early Ashkenazic Jewry, this study also raises the question of the place of 1096 within the overall development of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry. The results negate a widely

held assumption: It has been a commonplace of modern historiography that 1096 serves as a decisive and disastrous watershed in medieval Jewish history. This extended investigation of the events of 1096 concludes that the tangible impact of crusader violence on European Jewry was quite limited. While the violence was aimed at and resulted in the destruction of three of its leading communities, the bulk of early Ashkenazic Jewry emerged from the crisis unscathed and in fact its rapid development continued with little impediment. This conclusion led inexorably to further questioning of the broadly accepted thesis that 1096 served as a disastrous turning point and eventually to its rejection. The thirteenth-century decline of western Ashkenazic Jewry must be associated with other, and less dramatic, developments on the European scene.

While I have come to reject the notion of 1096 as marking a sharp turn in medieval Jewish history, I do believe that the events of that year serve to introduce us to new developments that were to prove central to twelfth- and thirteenth-century Ashkenazic Jewish experience. Some of these developments were decidedly negative. The perception of the Jew as enemy of Christendom, which lay at the heart of the popular anti-Jewish violence in 1096, intensified during the twelfth century, culminating in the series of destructive slanders that were to plague European Jewry down through the ages. There are positive indicators in the events of 1096 as well. In particular the responses of the beleaguered Rhineland Jews serve as a harbinger of the intense and creative spirit that distinguishes Ashkenazic Jewry of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Much of the creativity expressed by the Tosafists and German Pietists is foreshadowed in the Rhineland Jews' remarkable readiness for martyrdom in 1096, and in the evocative symbols that aroused and sustained this attitude.

This study concludes by examining the events of 1096 from the broad perspective of Jewish history in its entirety. This wide focus suggests that these events introduced into the history of the Jews a new-style persecution and a new-

style response to persecution. This new-style persecution, repudiated though it was by the ecclesiastical authorities, constitutes a disturbing precedent for later medieval and modern projects to eradicate the Jews. The radical behavior of the Jewish martyrs of 1096 was likewise precedent-setting. To be sure, later Jewish tradition tended to efface some of the radical quality of this behavior, in effect domesticating it into a confirmation of older styles of Jewish martyrdom. My analysis, however, emphasizes the unique and innovative aspects of the Jewish martyrdom of 1096.

In many respects then, the events of 1096 merit our consideration and study: They are intrinsically interesting and significant; they point beyond themselves to important aspects of eleventh-century Christian and Jewish life and to striking new developments on the twelfth- and thirteenth-century scene; and they highlight important new elements—both negative and positive—in the long and complex history of the Jews. When I began this study, I had no clear idea where the analysis of the events of 1096 would lead. As it has concluded, I am convinced that, as so often happens, the close scrutiny of a limited set of events has provided broader and more revealing perspectives on medieval western Christendom and its Jews than one could have guessed at the start.