



Universiteit
Leiden

The Netherlands

Review of Zinger, O. (2023) Living with the law: gender and community among the Jews of medieval Egypt

Peled, I.

Citation

Peled, I. (2024). Review of Zinger, O. (2023) Living with the law: gender and community among the Jews of medieval Egypt. *Journal Of Church And State*. doi:10.1093/jcs/csae016

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3753327>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Book Review

Living with the Law: Gender and Community Among the Jews of Medieval Egypt. By Oded Zinger.
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023. 255pp. \$59.95.

The volume under review offers a study of the realm of marital disputes among the Jews who lived in Islamic Egypt during the first quarter of the second millennium (ca. 1000–1250 CE). As such, it offers insights into the intersection between gender and law among this Jewish community, especially focusing on women's daily coping with their legal status as an inferior gender class within a society that was characteristically male-dominant. The textual corpus utilized for the research comprises a plethora of documents found in the Cairo Genizah.

At the core of this book, one may argue, lies the matter of legal practice: the comparison between the instruction of official law and the performance of actual practice in everyday life. The texts studied in this book belong to the second group, but they can only be understood against the background of the legal instruction of Jewish official law.

The clear and illuminating introduction opens with an interesting narrative fashion, presenting a specific case in point. It moves on to explain the research questions and aims, giving a brief overview of what is meant by "Jewish law" in the book, the sources of information utilized, previous research and state of the field, and an overview of the contents of the book.

Following the introduction, the book consists of four chapters, each dealing with a different aspect of the study: "The Legal Arena: A Social Interpretation," "Gender and Status in Geniza Courts," "Compromising Women: Gender and Property in Divorce and Marriage Life," and "The Ties That Bind: Kinship Support and Communal Participation." Chapter 1 lays the foundations of the book by investigating and interpreting the realm of Jewish law in medieval Egypt. Chapter 2 is dedicated to gender and social status, studying the participation of Jewish women in litigation in Jewish courts. Chapter 3 focuses on monetary rights in marriage life and divorce as reflected in documents of the public arena (the court) and the private one (the domestic sphere). Chapter 4 explores women's tactics and networks of support when engaging with legal institutions. The book concludes with a thoughtful section that nicely and comprehensively summarizes its contents.

A few general comments on the book are due. The book's text is relatively short (155 pages long), but in comparison, the endnotes take up a disproportional length of almost sixty pages. The "Notes on the Text" are somewhat puzzling, as the author mentions transliteration and transcription, while no text appears in transliteration throughout the book, and the primary sources are only given in English translation and not in transcription. This brings me to comment on the problematic presentation of the primary sources throughout the book. The sources are only translated into English (besides four black-and-white photos). While obviously not questioning the author's philological competence and translation accuracy, it might still be assumed that many readers would wish to assess the original texts themselves rather than blindly rely on the author's translations. The alternative—expecting the readers to locate the pertinent texts on the Friedberg Genizah Project website and bounce back-and-forth between the book and the website—would mar a smooth reading of the book. The customary way of displaying philologically based research is to present the primary sources in their original language, followed by the

author's translation. This seems all the more significant since the author states explicitly that, on certain occasions, his translations deviated from the literal meaning of the original texts (p. xii).

One item this reviewer misses in the book is a list of figures, even if the book only has four of them. Also, it seems somewhat awkward to find the acknowledgments section at the end of the book rather than in its beginning. The textual index is very useful, but the general index that follows could have been improved. It would have been better to subdivide it to allow the reader an easier orientation (proper/place names, professions, general/technical terms, etc.). This mixture of terms makes the index less effective than it could have been. For the nonspecialists, it would have also been nice to explain key terms in different languages: Hebrew, Arabic (as well as Judeo-Arabic), and Aramaic. The opening section of the book, "Jewish Marriage 101: In Lieu of a Glossary," is an insufficient substitute for this (pp. vii–ix).

Oded Zinger's *Living with the Law* brings to life fascinating aspects of the daily life of a thriving Jewish community who lived in medieval Egypt. The picture that emerges from the book shows how Jewish women were forced to resort to varying tactics and rely on different social networks, mostly male-dominant, in order to gain support for their legal handling of economic affairs. This obviously resulted from their legally inferior status compared to men. We should always be reminded that such gender-imbalanced social reality still prevails in many parts of the world, even today.

Ilan Peled

Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

<https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csae016>