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Book Review: Life in medieval times

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One difficulty I have with many historical novels is that their characters often behave as if they had a contemporary sensibility. For example, female protagonists act as if they've attended feminist consciousness-raising sections, denouncing the sexism that was the standard of past ages. While some women in the past did rebel against religious and societal restrictions, others accepted their culture's mores and customs, even if they did chafe at their restraints. What makes "The Fruit of Her Hands: The Story of Shira of Ashkenaz" by Michelle Cameron (Pocket Books) a pleasure to read is that the author not only creates realistic historical characters, but also does an excellent job portraying the difficulties of being Jewish in 13th century Europe.

The basic plot outline of "The Fruit of Her Hands" is simple, yet it belies what Cameron accomplishes. It tells the fictional life story of Shira of Ashkenaz from childhood through old age, focusing first on her relationship with her father, who runs a small yeshiva in France, and then on her marriage to real-life Meir ben Baruch of Rothenberg, who was one of the most celebrated talmudists of his time. (His *responsa* – responses to legal questions – were sought by many communities throughout Europe.) A strong-headed young girl who loves learning, Shira is forced by community opinion to focus on more traditional womanly tasks, such as cooking, washing clothes and scrubbing floors; however, she still manages find a small amount of time to continue her studies with her father. After her marriage, though, her life is filled with running their household and raising their children, something she does not rebel against, although she does relish time spent with other educated women.

The relationship between Shira and Meir is the heart of the story. Although deeply in love, they still argue over how to run a household, the fate of their children and the future of Europe. What makes these characters believable is that they remain true to their time: Meir can be insufferable when assuming that women should defer to their husbands, particularly when it comes to matters of learning and scholarship, if not also in deciding whom their children should wed. While Shira rails against his decisions at times, she also knows when to defer to his choices in order not to be labeled a rebellious wife.

What makes "The Fruit of Her Hands" stand out, though, is its portrayal of the increased persecution of Jews during the 13th century. Cameron shows how the Christian church came to a new understanding of Judaism, for the first time realizing that Jews followed the legal rulings of the Talmud, rather than just those of the Bible. Disputations between priests and rabbis led to the burning of the Talmud in Paris and attacks against Jewish communities across Europe. The author use Shira to convey how both sides felt about these issues. Although Shira knows that the rhetoric used to inflame the Christian crowds is filled with falsehoods, she understands how their emotions might get the better of them. Since some of those calling for persecution are Jewish apostates, she realizes that even learned Gentiles might believe the lies being spread about Jewish practices are true. After all, the apostates are well-versed in the Talmud and Jewish customs.

At one point, fearing for the lives of her children, Shira even wonders "why would anyone remain Jewish" in the face of these persecutions. With reasoning that might be too modern for her time, but which must have resonated with some living during that period, she ponders her situation: "It is an accident of birth that I am Jewish and not Christian, I thought. Had I been born to it, I probably would have made a fine Christian. I would have enjoyed going to the enormous churches that I passed in the city and praying in their vaulted hall, the sun, pouring in, colored by the stained glass. I would cross myself and pray for the Virgin Mother to intercede for me when I wanted a favor." Yet, Shira's imagination can only take her so far: Unable to picture life without her beloved Meir and the Jewish memories she shares with her children, she realizes that "even if it meant death, I could not be other than I am."

"The Fruit of Her Hands" would make a great selection for book clubs and discussion groups. The prose is easy to read and the plot complex and interesting enough to keep the pages turning. This is Cameron's first novel and I look forward to future works.

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