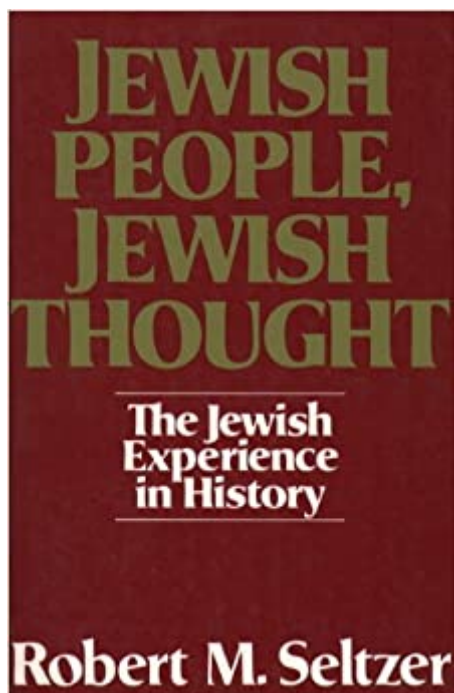


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Jewish People, Jewish Thought : The Jewish Experience In History



Synopsis

For courses in Jewish Thought and Culture and Introduction to Jewish Americans. This classic survey of the main features of the Jewish historical landscape exposes students to the rich scholarly literature on Jewish history, theology, philosophy, mysticism, and social thought that has been produced in the last century and a half. It shows Judaism as a creative response to ultimate issues of human concern by members of a group that has faced a unique concatenation of political, economic, and geographical circumstances. “Standing both within and without the mainstream of Western culture, Judaism offers remarkable insights into the genesis and elaboration of powerful religious ideas and into the determined survival of a small, vulnerable people repeatedly forced to confront and adjust to conditions beyond its immediate control.”

Book Information

Paperback: 896 pages

Publisher: Pearson; 1 edition (1980)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0024089400

ISBN-13: 978-0024089403

Product Dimensions: 5.9 x 2 x 8.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.7 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars 6 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #98,701 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #25 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Religious Studies > Judaism #70 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Judaism > History #81 in Books > History > World > Religious > Judaism

Customer Reviews

A native of St. Louis, Missouri, Robert M. Seltzer is an associate professor of history at Hunter College of the City University of New York, where he teaches Jewish history and is coordinator of the interdisciplinary program in Jewish studies. He taught previously in the department of Religious Thought at the University of Pennsylvania. He holds degrees from Washington University, Yale University, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, and Columbia University, and has studied at Harvard University and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He has published scholarly papers on the rise of Jewish nationalism, on the eminent Russian Jewish historian Simon Dubnow, and on the history of the Jews in Eastern Europe.

Like every distinctive heritage, Judaism must be understood as a creative response to ultimate issues of human concern by members of a group that has faced a unique concatenation of political, economic, and geographical circumstances. And the Jewish historical experience is more unusual than most. Standing both within and without the mainstream of Western culture, Judaism offers remarkable insights into the genesis and elaboration of powerful religious ideas and into the determined survival of a small, vulnerable people repeatedly forced to confront and adjust to conditions beyond its immediate control. In this work, I have attempted to survey the Jewish historical landscape and orient the reader to its main features, opening up for him access to the rich scholarly literature on Jewish history, theology, philosophy, mysticism, and social thought that has been produced in the last century and a half. The subject of every section of every chapter involves the lifework of several researchers. Within the limits of the space available to me I have tried to provide a reasonably detailed introduction to a complex, ramified, and intellectually challenging field of humanistic learning. The structure and contents of this book have been affected by the following considerations. First, I felt that it was necessary to include enough general historic4-background that the reader could glimpse the larger context in which each new phase of Judaism emerged out of previous phases. The separateness of Judaism has always been relative rather than absolute. The overall political and social milieu and the spiritual climate have shaped, sometimes subtly and sometimes conspicuously, the Jewish condition. Jewry has responded selectively and according to its own criteria of meaning and value to events affecting non-Jews as well; Judaism, at the same time, has exerted a reciprocal influence, direct or indirect, on the general course of historical development. It is always necessary to adjust the usual rubrics of history, such as ancient, medieval, and modern, to the particular contours of Jewish identity to define the changing subjective borders between Jew and non-Jew. Thus, it was a crucial transition when Judaism passed from being the only monotheistic civilization in a polytheistic world to being the monotheism of a minority living in lands where the state religions of the Christian or Muslim majority were spiritual descendants of Judaism; and it was another crucial transition when the secularization of European society set in motion a variety of contradictory redefinitions of the status and core of modern Jewish identity. Second, I have tried to avoid falsifying the nature of Jewish history through oversimplification. The social profile and institutional structure of Jewry have been modified to such an extent in the course of centuries that no single definition of the Jews in a few words is possible, except that they are the continuation of previous Jewish generations. Emerging from a collectivity of seminomadic clans and tribes, the Jews during some periods were mainly peasants and fighters; in later periods they have been predominately urban artisans and merchants, sometimes widely

scattered in small villages and towns, sometimes concentrated in a few geographical regions or in the major cities of the world. There have been centuries when Jewish identity was primarily an unquestioned matter of descent, and ages when proselytes have been enthusiastically sought or when positive Jewish loyalty involved a strong element of personal choice. Discrimination, hatred, and violence against Jews have marked certain epochs, alternating with times of relative security when there were some tangible, as well as psychological, advantages of belonging to the Jewish minority. For over 1,500 years Jewry was rooted in its original homeland (surely the return of a large proportion of modern Jews to that homeland is one of the most striking chapters in the history of any people), yet there is hardly any part of the world that has not seen one or more waves of Jewish settlement. Owing to the adaptability of Judaism, centrifugal tendencies of diaspora produced regional varieties of Jewish custom and culture; only to have other, centripetal, forces bring these separate Jewish ethnicities together into crucibles where new forms of Jewishness emerged. And in the course of history the Jewish people has had various, quite different political and intellectual elites: monarchs and ethnarchs, priests and sages, scholars and elected communal officials. The survival of the Jewish group has been the triumph of continuity over periodic sometimes drastic, change.

Third, I have tried to indicate that the intellectual history of the Jewish people exhibits a complexity similar to that of its social history. The character of Jewish thought; whether it was innovative or conservative, whether it took a collective or individualistic form of expression; has been a function of the nature of Jewish society at the time, of the presence or absence of internal sectarian or political controversy, and of the roles that Jewish writers, sages, and intellectuals projected for themselves with respect to the people and God. Jewish intellectual history embraces periods of conscious encounter with the most sophisticated general modes of philosophical and scientific thought and eras of relative intellectual isolation when Jewish legal, theological, and mystical preoccupations do not correspond in any obvious way to those of adjacent cultures. In certain centuries some Jewish intellectuals have enthusiastically adapted rationalism to the defense of their faith, whereas their contemporaries or successors rejected rationalism as undermining religion and threatening the integrity of the Jewish tradition. I have tried to describe most of the principal modes of thought that have been called Jewish by Jews, so that the reader can gain an overall and representative conception of the subtraditions of Judaism and their outstanding individual exemplars. But there is a unity with the diversity of Jewish thought. The Jewish intellectual heritage is not merely a sequence of writings produced by Jews, but a consideration of issues arising out of the biblical world view, augmented and reshaped by later concerns and partaking in a self-transforming unity of themes, symbols, and

beliefs. The convictions that there is only one God who created the universe and who guides history, that He commands justice and mercy, and that Israel is His people provide the starting points and focus of Jewish religious thought throughout most of history and affect secular Jewishness in the modern world as well. Above all, it has been the aim of this book to address itself to one of the greatest puzzles facing the modern student: that Jewish history is at the same time an account of a people and a religion; a very unusual people and a religion exactly like no other, both of which have to be understood according to their own dynamics and their own categories. The overarching unity of the societal and the ideational poles of Jewish historical experience seems to me to require that each be treated in some detail. Neither a history of the Jewish people that mentions only in passing the greatest Jewish thinkers nor a history of Jewish thought that is forced to omit much of the Jewish historical continuum, conveys the rich uniqueness of Jewish identity. A grasp of the interrelationship of these two levels of the common denominator "Jewish" should accompany the reader's exploration of particular phases and elements of Jewish history. It is crucial in an introductory survey to exhibit the interplay between the body and the mind of Judaism, because, in the long run, the social shaped the ideational and the ideational shaped the social in surprising ways. A brief explanation of some specific choices I have made in the process of writing this book: For practical and historical reasons, I decided to present the Bible according to its traditional format, not according to the preliminary oral or literary phases that were absorbed into the final text. Familiarity with the Bible can not be taken for granted in a beginning study of Judaism, and a description of the contents of the principal biblical books; with historical explanations and flashbacks in passing; seemed useful. Moreover, it was the Bible as a whole, not its earlier components, that became the groundwork for the development of Judaism in subsequent periods. Second, I have tried to convey, when dealing with certain formative periods of Judaism such as the rise of monotheism and the religious ferment of the first century BCE and the first century CE, the awareness that limited and uncertain data make every reconstruction conjectural and a subject of considerable scholarly dispute. Third, I regret that limitation of space prevented more extended treatment of certain topics, but I wanted to concentrate on those intellectual movements, such as philosophy and mysticism, which, in the long run, represent the most self-conscious speculation on the truth of Judaism, and it was imperative that they be presented with adequate scope. Finally, a word on why I devoted so much attention to modern Jewish secular thought. I believe that Jewish secularism has features that differentiate it from secularism in general and make it a reexamination, from a new perspective, of the meaning of Jewish existence. Secular Zionism has been, of course, one of the most vital movements of modern Jewish renewal and its

diagnosis of the Jewish predicament cannot be ignored. No one can describe Judaism, especially its recent trends, without assumptions and a position of his own, but I hope that mine are sufficiently inclusive and catholic not to distort unfairly any of the movements I have portrayed. It is my conviction, however, that the future of Judaism as a coherent world view, and therefore as an identity with continued personal relevance, involves philosophical and theological exploration of the kind indicated in the last chapter. I would like to record my gratitude to those who have helped me during the years when this book was in preparation. The original plan for a history of Jewish thought was conceived by me and Rabbi Jack Bemporad, now of Dallas, Texas; I am grateful to him for memorable conversations and for materials on the Bible, Hellenistic Judaism, and Jewish philosophy. Although in the course of time the book took on a different character and all responsibility for the present version is mine, without the stimulation of his friendship and learning I would hardly have set out. I have had the benefit also of insightful comments and suggestions by Professors Matitiah Tsevat, Joseph L. Blau, Martin A. Cohen, Eugene B. Borowitz, Rabbi Edward Schechter, Dr. Irving Levitas, and Philip Winograd, all of whom read part or all of the manuscript. I am indebted to several of my colleagues in the History Department of Hunter College: Professors Nancy G. Siraisi and Naomi W. Cohen for criticizing sections that fell into their purview, and my chairman, Professor Naomi C. Miller, for her constant encouragement and wise advice. A fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1973-74 gave me the leisure to do research on various topics, and I was also fortunate to receive a grant from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture in 1972. At Macmillan, Charles E. Smith, Ron Harris, and above all, my editor, Kenneth J. Scott, have been exceedingly patient and helpful, despite the many delays I forced on them. The friendship and assistance of Rosalie Bachana were invaluable. Major typing and other responsibilities were handled by my sister, Frances Mendlow, and by Brenda Parnes and Nanci Kramer. Art research was done by Lucy Rosenfeld, who adroitly helped me choose pictures illustrative of each period of Jewish history and of its general environment. Only I should be blamed for mistakes of fact and interpretation and for errors of emphasis and omission. I cannot begin to recount the role of my wife in making possible the completion of this endeavor. R. M. S.

Great perspective.

An excellent, enjoyable, and informative book.

Extraordinarily researched history complete with photographs of antiquities as old as 5000 years. A

masterful work that is very readable.

I was assigned 'Jewish People, Jewish Thought' as preliminary reading for a university course in Jewish Studies. A hefty tome some 770 pages long (excluding extensive notes), it represents one historian's attempt to document the story of the Jews in its entirety, from ancient figures to political dilemmas of the present day, with sections detailing all major events and currents of philosophical and theological thought that have played their part in Jewish life. In terms of its basic mission, Seltzer's book is very successful. It is an excellent resource, densely-packed with facts and explanations. The 'Jewish Thought' of the title is covered, thinker by thinker, in paragraph sketches that provide biographical information, concise explanations and links to predecessors and broad movements as context. A good grounding in the emergence of the other Abrahamic religions is also provided, helping to give a clear picture of how Christianity and Islam have interacted with Judaism as they have developed in time. Seltzer's coverage of the Tanakh is particularly strong, with concise and eloquent summaries of the books and their contents. In terms of reading experience, however, I must admit that I found it hard going. While Seltzer's style is fairly accessible and resists condescension, it is nonetheless rather dry, especially when dealing with 19th Century Jewish thought. Even with a lively interest in the book's subject matter, I struggled to maintain my focus as I read through from cover to cover. In light of my experience, I'd suggest maybe using it primarily for reference purposes, though its layout is not particularly conducive to dipping in and out. Although this is ultimately a textbook, its style and presentation are decidedly old-fashioned. Each lengthy chapter is designed to be read straight through, without distractions often found in contemporary textbooks, such as 'fact boxes' or teaching aids. Events are overwhelmingly presented in chronological order, running from ancient times to the present, a few centuries per chapter, though as the book progresses, separate sections are increasingly devoted to 'history' and 'thought'. The reader is also buoyed along by a generous smattering of illustrations reproduced in the same black and white as the text. While these are clearly intended to complement the text, they do not directly illustrate it, and their presence breaks up the dizzying onslaught of information nicely, humanising philosophers by showing their faces. As a book published at the end of the seventies, 'Jewish People, Jewish Thought' is in some ways beginning to show its age. The section on recent developments in history and thought could do with a little updating, and would benefit particularly from discussions of issues like the role of women in Judaism and current debates over conversion and Jewish status between different religious streams. Having said that, given the historical scope of Seltzer's work, it is able to retain most of its direct relevance today, and, if you can get hold of a

copy (some of the second-hand prices are eyewateringly high) it makes a very useful overview for the student or ambitious lay reader.

In this excellent, readable and scholarly book we find the most comprehensive review of Jewish civilization, Jewish history and Jewish thinking. This unique book combines the study of Jewish history with profound analysis of Jewish thought. A must book for every student of Jewish history as well as for those seeking to learn more about the Jewish people through its history.

This is an amazing treatise for those who need to understand biblical context or the some of the beliefs undergirding the Israel-Palestine conflict. There is not another book like it. Seltzer does an amazing job of telling this story in a clear and concise way.

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