

Judaism: History, Belief and Practice

D. Cohn-Sherbok, 2003 London,
Routledge £19.99 (pbk), 590 pp.
ISBN 0-415-23661-4

Judaism: History, Belief and Practice is presented as an ‘all-encompassing textbook’ with its 90 chapters covering episodes of history, and overviews of belief and practice. The text has a strong pedagogical structure designed to assist learning. The design can be seen as sequential in firstly *introducing* texts and commentaries, which students are able to access through the development of *skills*. The next level *explains* how to interpret history, which is *supported* by materials, including discussion questions, key readings, a glossary and an index. The final level provides *illustrations and links* to a free companion website.

Reviewers draw attention to excellent characteristics of the publication. Melissa Raphael states: ‘Its magnificent sweep not only encompasses a wealth of Jewish experience, thought and achievement, but also invites the reader to engage in Judaism’s great debates.’ Oliver Leaman predicts: ‘Few students will fail to be stimulated by this book and it should rapidly become one of the standard introductory texts in the teaching of Judaism.’

There is no doubt that the text provides good value for money and provides an excellent one-volume introduction to Judaism. Each chapter stands alone as a succinct presentation on the set topic of history, belief or practice.

The first part on history could stand alone as an extensive book in its own right, with 54 chapters in its 340 pages. Short chapters cover the five thousand years related to the Jewish people and the communities they interacted with. Coverage is succinct and provides an accurate overview of the period under consideration. But a quick calculation would enable you to see that the chapters are short—between five and eight pages, including maps, illustrations and sources. Thus, although coverage is extensive, breadth mitigates against depth. From my experiences teaching A level students, they would need to look further than the material provided for most topics of study. This need is recognized in the suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter, but I doubt that college libraries or even some university libraries would house the vast range of texts suggested.

The preface explains the structure of the text and *Tips for Students* cover just about every point you would need to include in an introductory lecture. Each chapter provides a suitable introduction to a topic, supplemented by maps and illustrations (there are 75 maps and 94 illustrations). The inclusion of primary sources at the end of each chapter is invaluable and there are useful suggestions for discussion questions, which enable students to relate the primary sources to points raised in the chapter.

However, some of the materials in chapters have only tenuous links with the content of the chapter, and opportunities for cross-referencing within the text could have been built in. For example, the chapter on Jews in the Roman Empire contains as source material Rabbi Ishmael’s Rules of Exegesis which is not linked to the chapter, but the rules are discussed in a later chapter, and would seemingly have been better placed in the sources for that chapter. In this case the index ensures that all related materials can be accessed. However, unless the tutor spends time getting to know the text and making extensive use of the index it is likely that materials which could be useful for a session will be overlooked.

The introductory section on sources is useful, but in using a text with students I would have preferred a standard form for bibliographical details providing full details (place of publication and publisher) as we stress the importance of accuracy to new students. Similar issues arise about

consistency in dating, as some maps use AD whilst the accompanying text uses CE, without any explanation.

There is no doubt that Professor Rabbi Cohn-Sherbok is an authority on Jewish history, belief and practice. The content is sound, clearly expressed and suitable for introducing students to Judaism. Some of the internal debates within the tradition are presented to show the diversity in thought and practice. However, as a progressive Jewish feminist I have major concerns about the failure to represent progressive Judaism and Jewish feminist thought.

I was not able to find any details about the impact of feminist theology upon Jewish belief and practice, and no feminist theologians were included in the index. There is a picture of Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild but no mention of the expanded role for women within progressive Judaism.

Developments in non-Orthodox Judaism are largely set out in relation to the nine-teenth-century reform movement in Germany and the USA, with updates to reflect developments in the USA, particularly in relation to Conservative Judaism. It is surprising that an author based in Wales made no reference to the situation in the UK. There was no mention of Liberal Judaism or the wider use of 'progressive' to encompass specific organizational structures such as are found in the UK for the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain and the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues. Indeed the key thinkers and founders of the Liberal movement in the UK, Mattuck, Montefiore and Montagu, do not even get a mention.

The presentation of the conflict in Israel effectively ends in 1987, as although events are listed up to 2001 there is no discussion of events after 1987 and no mention of the contemporary situation. This is an area where non-specialists would be most in need of expert guidance, for help in how to interpret the significance of events and to build an understanding of what is happening.

There is no doubt that this is an excellent introductory text for undergraduate and A level students. The chapters provide useful bite-size chunks of information with suitable resources to explore key concepts. The companion website offers the possibility of updating and addressing gaps: <<http://www.routledge.com/textbooks/0415236614>>.

I would recommend a visit to the site to see sample materials and assess whether the text has enough detail for your needs. Although I have reservations about the book, because of the superficial coverage of many topics, I have no reservations in making it the set text for my undergraduate introduction to Judaism. It provides a suitable introduction to every topic I am likely to cover in the syllabus, apart from the omissions set out above, and contains primary sources that can be used as a stimulus for discussion in seminars.

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