Reviews


'The contributors include both Jewish and Gentile scholars from many countries, and this History will *thus* [my italics] help to deliver the study of Jewish history and Christian origins from geographical and religious limitations, and contribute to a deeper understanding and a broader tolerance.' So proclaims the fly-leaf of this volume. A similar well-meaning liberal lack of logic permeates the whole conception of this new Cambridge History and as a result the best efforts of some excellent writers have been frittered away on a project inadequately controlled by the editors. An amalgam of contributions by scholars of diverse origins who have not been made to confront the contradictions between their own accounts and those of their collaborators has produced not balance and objectivity but fuzziness and repetition. Indeed, the unconscious assumptions in the basic programme of this History, which is to cover in four volumes the period 587 B.C.E. to 250 C.E., shows the impossibility of achieving balance by disdaining editorial intervention; Jewish scholars will react with dismay at the suggestion implicit in this chronological range that Judaism was a phenomenon which ended in antiquity before even the compilation of the Talmuds; the corollary, that the study of Judaism is primarily interesting as the background to Christianity, is at least debatable. The ecumenical and international approach so proudly boasted in the preface hardly affects the contents of this volume in which the contributions of Israeli scholars are anyway included only in fields not concerned with religion.

The non-religious part of the book is in fact about two-thirds of it. This is really a history of the Jews rather than Judaism. The Introduction to all four volumes, which takes up the first sixty-nine pages of this one, consists in three chapters on geography, numismatics, and calendars and chronology. There is nothing even in the preface to justify the inclusion of these general subjects and not others. Nonetheless, the discussions are interesting in their own right—in particular, Bickerman has some important insights on attitudes to chronology (cf. p. 69). Rappaport, who writes about the coins, laments not unreasonably his inability because of the slow production of the book to take into account much material that has come to light over the past ten years (p. 57). Conclusions in his field are particularly vulnerable to changes arising from new discoveries, but nearly all the contributions to the volume have suffered to some extent from having been written in the early 1970s with little chance for revision, and most chapters have disclaimers to that effect.

After this haphazard Introduction, the bulk of this volume deals with the Persian period. There are three useful chapters, two by Ephraim Stern and one jointly by Naveh and Greenfield, on the history, archaeology and language of Jews in Palestine under Persian rule. Stern's chapter on the archaeology was completed in 1973; only a footnote refers the reader to the much fuller and more up-to-date presentation of the same material in the excellent English edition of his *The Material Culture of the Land of the Bible* (Warminster, 1982).

Only with Chapter 7, Ackroyd's discussion of the Jewish community in Judah, does the book begin (though still only in passing) to deal with Jewish religion; this chapter,
with the following ones on prophecy and psalms (Wanke), wisdom literature (Gese) and 'Jewish religious life' (Smith), form the core of the volume. Sadly, the core is soft, for the simple reason that almost nothing can be said with confidence about Judaism in this period. Of this the contributors are well aware. Morton Smith urges almost at the end of fifty-nine pages that 'we must try to learn to be ignorant' (p. 276). Of the contributors here, however, only Ackroyd seems to have been prepared to accept this advice, providing a careful, sceptical and only occasionally confusing discussion of the limitations of the sources and a possible reconstruction of communal history. He frequently stresses where his assertions are necessarily hypothetical. Wanke and Gese give solid accounts of the majority views of scholars about the texts they discuss, providing only occasional warnings about the fundamental unreliability of the dating criteria for this material. But least abashed by his own warning is Smith, who tackles his general survey with gusto and élan. Beginning with the 'reported events of the period' (ignoring Ackroyd's demonstration that they are not as clearly reported as might be wished), Smith infers the (i.e., a possible) social structure of Jerusalem and then tries to understand the different elements of the literary tradition as the expressions of different groups within Jerusalem society (assuming, perhaps without justification, that they must reflect groups of some kind; cf. p. 244 for an enunciation but not a defence of this procedure). The result is a coherent and often entertaining account with many brilliant insights. It is much the most stimulating part of the book to read. But much of the reconstruction is, through the nature of the evidence, little more than inspired guesswork, a fact that frequent references for further information to his own book Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament, which is not available in this country, should not be allowed to disguise. I am not sure that a text book, as this History is presumably intended to become, is a suitable place to present strikingly independent views without either full documentation and arguments (which space did not, presumably, permit) or at least an indication of how the ideas presented deviate from those more generally held. The rest of the book is an odd mixture. The decision to make clear the general historical background to Jewish history in the Persian period was a good one, but whether it was necessary to devote so much of the space on this period—over a sixth—to discussing Persian, Babylonian and Egyptian history without reference to Jews is more dubious, particularly when some of the conclusions laboriously reached in these general sections are not only available in other easily accessible works but are either repeated or (worse) contradicted within this volume when a different contributor moves on to the Jewish evidence (e.g. pp. 311–13). Nor is the brief for these latter contributions clear. Shaked (Chapter 12) makes general remarks about possible Iranian influence on Jewish religious ideas right down to the early centuries C.E.; though suitably cautious about the difficulties in spotting such influence, he is less careful in his selection of texts as representative of 'Second Temple Judaism', citing, for instance, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs without discussion of the problems in deciding their date and provenance. Bickermann confines his brief discussion of the Jews in Babylon to the Persian period, and Porten, in an excellent survey primarily of the Elephantine material, sticks to the same chronological limits. In this latter case the oddity lies in the inclusion of five whole pages on the scribal craft (393–8); as elsewhere in the book, editors and contributors seem to have forgotten what they were trying to say to their readers, and why.

The long bibliographies will be useful and to this extent the Cambridge History will become a useful reference book. For the rest, the editors show in their preface that they are aware of the confusion and 'hesitancy' of their contributors. They affirm that
'a “definitive” History of Judaism (or of any other phenomenon) is an impossibility'. They are doubtless right. But a clearer and more coherent account of Judaism in the Persian period would be feasible and is desirable.

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Section One of the Compendia, entitled The Jewish People in the First Century, dealt with historical geography, political history, social, cultural and religious life and institutions, and was published in two volumes (1974 and 1976, reviewed by Tessa Rajak in JJS 26 (1975), pp. 183–5 and 30 (1979), pp. 95–7). Section Two will consist of three volumes: I, Miqra; II, Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period (the volume considered here); and III, The Literature of the Sages. Volumes I and III are still to appear.

Some indication of the various problems incurred during the present volume’s lengthy period of gestation is given in a foreword by the Secretary of the Compendia Foundation, J. van Goudoever; there is therefore all the more reason to congratulate the final editor, and all others concerned, on the appearance of a volume which is notably more coherent than were its two predecessors.

'The Second Temple Period' is a term of convenience, for as Stone explains in his introduction, the volume ‘comprises Jewish literature that was written after the Bible and is not rabbinic literature'. The time scale covered is in fact c. third century B.C.E. to mid-second century C.E. The volume consists of the following: Introduction (M. Stone), Historical background (I. Gafni), Stories of Biblical and early post-Biblical times (G. W. E. Nickelsburg), The Bible rewritten and expanded (Nickelsburg), Historiography (H. W. Attridge), Josephus and his works (Attridge), Philo of Alexandria (P. Borgen), Wisdom literature (M. Gilbert), Testaments (J. J. Collins), The Sibylline Oracles (Collins), Apocalyptic literature (M. E. Stone), Jewish sources in Gnostic literature (B. A. Pearson), Qumran sectarian literature (D. Dimant), Psalms Hymns and Prayers (D. Flusser), Epistolary literature (P. S. S. Alexander).

In a volume devoted to literature, the first chapter, on the historical background, though a good overview in itself, seems oddly out of place. On the other hand the inclusion of the chapter on Jewish sources in Gnostic literature is much to be welcomed, especially in view of the fact that the study of the Nag Hammadi texts has now grown up into a discipline of its own. The mere enumeration of the chapter headings at once highlights some of the problems of classification which face any editor of such a volume. Basically the chapters are organised by 'literary types', but difficulties arise since many works incorporate several different literary types; there is thus inevitably an element of overlap in the case of those texts which receive special attention in the final two chapters. Usually the necessary cross-referencing has been provided, but on occasion this has been overlooked; thus at p. 557, on the links between Psalms of Solomon 11 and Baruch 4:36–5:9, a reference to the discussion on p. 145 would have been helpful. Once or twice the duplication of treatment has