Reviews


Not so long ago it was so difficult to find any good textbooks or sourcebooks for help in teaching Jewish Studies that the International Center for the University Teaching of Jewish Civilisation set up projects to fill the gap. Now the position is radically altered and the teacher has a bewildering variety from which to choose. This plethora is all to the good, not least because it avoids the danger that any one standard work will so dominate the market that it sets the academic agenda for future generations. In any case, despite their surface similarity these teaching tools have rather different aims.

By far the most general introductory volume considered here is the grand survey of all Jewish history from Genesis to 'Where are we?' provided in 34 units by Steven Bayme. This is essentially potted history illustrated by brief but well selected extracts from a huge variety of sources. Like all potted history it simplifies many issues to the point sometimes of caricature, and the works cited in the bibliographies for further reading sometimes seem rather strange choices, but it fulfils well its professed role as a lively introduction to the main issues and constitutes a huge advance on the deathly narrative in the text books used in undergraduate courses thirty years ago.

Rather more ambitious is the massive sourcebook by Larry Schiffman, which covers only (!) the history and literature of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple period and late antiquity. Designed as a companion to his textbook, From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism (1991), this volume guides the reader through a huge quantity of selected texts. The texts are almost all the obvious ones most often cited in contemporary scholarship, so this is not a book from which novel insights are likely to emerge, but as a way of bringing the standard primary sources to the attention of students it is superb.

The purpose of Margaret Williams's 'Diaspora Sourcebook' is different again. This is an austere collection with introductions to each text so concise that they presuppose a fair degree of knowledge in the reader. The passages are presented not as illustrations of any particular thesis but, in essence, to make students think. There is no attempt to disguise the complexities involved in getting behind the literary and epigraphic material to what life was really like for diaspora Jews, and readers are given excellent guidance both about continuing debates and about the bibliography which will enlighten them further. In this respect, Williams' book far surpasses the obvious rival collection by Feldman and Reinhold, Jewish Life and Thought among Greeks and Romans (1996), reviewed in JJS 49 (1998), pp. 145–47. Above all, Williams's sourcebook excels in its judicious choice of unexpected texts culled from inscriptions, papyri and Christian writings, as well as more obvious sources such as Josephus and Philo. This is a collection from which everyone engaged in this field can learn.
Finally, the two volumes by Beard, North and Price touch only occasionally on Judaism in the Roman world but provide a model of the best of such surveys in any field. Volume 1 is a strikingly original history of Roman religion in which the joint authors make a brave attempt to get behind the form of rituals to their meaning for worshippers, a task rendered particularly difficult by the tendency of pagans to talk and write less about their religions than Jews or Christians did about theirs. Volume 2, the Sourcebook, is a companion volume which illustrates the themes discussed in the first volume but also brings out the complexities of interpretation involved in each case. A most valuable resource for teachers, then, but more than that: like Margaret Williams’s sourcebook, Beard, North and Price volume 2 makes accessible an extraordinary amount of unfamiliar and unexpected material which will now, it can confidently be predicted, enter into the common currency of undergraduate essays.

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Anyone familiar with McKane’s monumental two-volume commentary on Jeremiah in the International Critical Commentary series will feel at home with his new work on Micah. It has all the same strengths and weaknesses.

McKane’s major contribution is once again his detailed analysis and discussion of the ancient versions and the medieval Jewish commentators. From this, he moves on in each section to debate with some of his most significant predecessors, allowing for cautious emendation where the sometimes obscure Hebrew text of Micah permits of no other satisfactory alternative, and concluding with a fresh translation which enables the reader to see at a glance which of the many possibilities he prefers. Mixed in with this are exegetical remarks, extensive on some particular issues, but lacking altogether on others. In terms of standard critical issues, he adopts and defends lightly a position not far from that of Wolff (who in turn developed the pioneering research of Stade), so that there is little that will startle informed readers in this regard.

On the downside, McKane is one of the most frustrating commentators to consult: it is all there, but not laid out in the most helpful manner. Since he works paragraph by paragraph, the same issues may be discussed three or more times over. First there will generally be an attempt to explain the Masoretic Text with the help and in the light of traditional versions and commentaries (a sound starting point, of course, from the point of view of method), then a run through of each paragraph in the company of a variety of commentators, sometimes one at a time, and then further observations. If preferences are expressed, they occur in the course of one or another of these discussions, so that it may be necessary to read many pages in order to collect and benefit from all the material relevant to even a single point.

Then again, his selection of secondary literature is eclectic to the point of being idiosyncratic. He cannot, for instance, have been unaware of the detailed commentary by L. C. Allen, which also includes much careful textual discussion, and while that of J. L. Mays is mentioned in the bibliography, it does not appear to be referred to even once in the body of the work. Some major monographs (e.g. by Renaud, Stansell, Hagstrom and Shaw) are also passed over, not to mention many articles. This does not, of course, detract significantly from those parts of the commentary which work directly from the primary sources, but it means that other aspects of the analysis are incomplete. It would have been interesting to know, for instance, how he responds to the alternative analysis of the structure of the book proposed by Mays and Hagstrom,