June 1992

Book Review/ A History of the Jews

Barry Fast
Academic Book Center

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fast, Barry (1992) "Book Review/ A History of the Jews," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 14.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1228>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Book Reviews

Reviews of Books That Belong in Every Library
Column Editor: **Barry Fast** (Academic Book Center)

A History of the Jews

Paul Johnson

Harper Collins 1987 \$11.95 paperback

The British historian, Paul Johnson, has no limits. Whether he is exploring our century in *Modern Times* or the private lives of the most influential historical figures in the *Intellectuals*, the sheer breadth of his knowledge and freshness of his analysis is staggering. Johnson deals with big subjects in a way that can only be called courageous. His research is meticulous, but he goes beyond merely recounting. He forces us to think, to experience with him the passionate flow of ideas and events that have shaped our heritage.

A History of the Jews is important because it encompasses our historical experience, whether we are Jew, Christian,

Muslim or a member of no organized religion. For Jews, this book is the real story, more compelling than Max Dumond's *The Jews, God and History*. For non-Jews, this understanding of Jewish history serves as a counterpoint to all Western experience, because the Jews, as actors or victims, participated in virtually all of it. So non-Jews will see their own history as if through a mirror, an imperfect one, reflecting and refracting the light of their traditions, tragedies and triumphs.

How did this small tribe of nomads, wandering in the desert 4000 years ago, invent Hollywood in the 1920's? What is the line that led from Moses to Maimonides to Einstein? When did the Holocaust

begin, and why did a most civilized nation systematically destroy European Jews and their culture? Johnson explains all this, and more.

The Jews were different. From their very beginning they were "obsessed with history." Unlike their neighbors, they recorded all that happened to them and then imbued their experience with a kind of holiness. They called themselves The People of the Book because the book, their own history, was god-like. This had a profound effect on them. Elevating the recording and analysis of their own history to a sacred level caused them to revere the men and women who acted in their history, as well as those who taught it and

FOR EAST OR WEST EUROPEAN BOOKS AND SERIALS YOU NEED ONLY ONE SUPPLIER

Collets provide a supply service for European books that is second to none.

Naturally we supply **British and West European** publications but we also have a specialist department taking care of books and serials from **Central and Eastern Europe**. In fact no other European bookseller and subscription agent offers a more comprehensive service.

Our fully automated system allows us to ensure that you receive a fast, efficient and competitive service that is tailored to the requirements of our library customers.

For more detailed information on how we can help you, please contact our Sales Manager, Keith Edwards.

Collets

**Denington Estate, Wellingborough
Northants NN8 2QT, UK**

**Tel: +44 933 224351 Fax: +44 933 276402
Telex: 317320 Collet G**

Celebrating 150 Years:

Springer for Science

Throughout the medical and scientific world, Springer-Verlag has an established reputation as a publisher of outstanding books and journals.

Since 1842 Springer-Verlag has had its finger on the pulse of the international market. In addition to offices in Berlin and Heidelberg, Springer-Verlag has branches in New York, Vienna, London, Paris, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Barcelona and Budapest. Over 10,000 titles are now in print, with an additional 1,300 new titles released yearly.

Springer-Verlag books and journals are available through your wholesaler or subscription agent. For further information about Springer-Verlag call toll-free: **1-800-SPRINGER**.

Springer-Verlag

Reference Number L295

New York • Berlin • Heidelberg • Vienna • London • Paris • Tokyo • Hong Kong • Barcelona • Budapest

explained it. Only briefly did they succumb to the lure of monarchy as a ruling force, and that flirtation with royalty was disastrous. For most of their early history, the Jews were ruled by judges, prophets and rabbis they chose themselves. They developed a rudimentary democracy when the rest of the world was organized under inherited aristocracies. Among themselves they valued most the people who rose from the lowest levels of their society to become the chief rabbis or judges. They perfected social mobility and the "self-made man," and this remains an integral part of Jewish culture, firmly based in their Biblical history.

The Greeks invented anti-Semitism, but the early Christians raised it to an art form. In the beginning the Christians despised the Jews because of their unwillingness to convert. Later, as the Jews developed skills in diplomacy, business and science, they became the objects of envy. Kings used their business skills to create capital in their countries, and then confiscated their property to pay for wars. Paul Johnson describes the long litany of the use and abuse of the Jews from the fall of the Roman Empire to the twentieth century. It is a tale that follows the Jews

all over the world in their search for peace and security.

Despite, or perhaps because of almost constant assault, their culture remained intact. During the late middle ages and Renaissance tens of thousands sought safety through conversion; many of these remained crypto-Jews (in Spain, Marranos), resuming their religion whenever the pressure on them eased. Finally, by the 1700s, most European Jews were driven into the Pale of Settlement, a swath of land stretching from Romania across Russia to Poland. It was here, over a period of three hundred years, that the various governments regulated virtually all aspects of Jewish life, prohibiting them from owning land and confining them to a few business or trade activities. The Nazi's final solution, seen in the context of this European experience, seems almost inevitable.

While the organized Christian church as a whole persecuted the Jews continually, it was in America, with its bedrock of Protestant Christianity, that the Jews found lasting peace and security. American anti-Semitism was small time and amateurish compared to the European version.

In North Africa and the Mideast the Jews and Moslems enjoyed a particularly benign relationship until the founding of Israel. And Israel in itself is a dreamy kind of question mark in the context of Jewish history. Judaism evolved to survive in an alien and hostile world. The return to the land of their beginnings was at once a kind of historical culmination and, at the same time, can be seen as an anachronism. The Jews have been taught by their own experience to distrust government, and in fact many of them have been political iconoclasts and radicals. In the light of their history, the state of Israel seems paradoxical. Is it, like the brief period of the Kings, just a disastrous blip in time? Is it doomed to self destruct, just as the kingdom of Israel did after the reigns of Saul, David and Solomon? Paul Johnson does not even suggest this, but his scholarship leads one to ask the question.

This is the great value of *A History of the Jews*. It is more than a history of a particular people. It encompasses all our ideals and evils; it is full of searching questions about the nature of God and the limits of humankind. ☛