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*Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History*  
**Robert M. Seltzer**

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**SELTZER, ROBERT M.** *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1980. 874 pp. \$19.95.

Reviewed by Dennis Rasmussen, associate professor of philosophy at Brigham Young University.

As its title, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History*, suggests, Robert Seltzer's book treats not only the events of Jewish history but also the development of Jewish thought. Seltzer has produced a substantial, rewarding, and demanding book. But the reader must come to it prepared for intellectual effort. This is a book to be studied and not merely read.

The dual emphasis in the book on Jewish events and thought is a successful attempt on Seltzer's part to provide an introductory survey which is "at the same time an account of a people and a religion" (p. xi). A people, a religion, a culture, a language, a scripture, a law, a set of ceremonies, a pattern of conduct—one could multiply such terms and still not exhaust the tradition of Judaism. Seltzer offers a rich and rewarding discussion of these and other topics as well. Instead of trying to isolate his subject and its concerns, Seltzer shows how Judaism developed by interaction with its environment. He emphasizes the "reciprocal influence" (p. x) between Jewish and non-Jewish elements in history. Religion, philosophy, politics, economics, geography, military strategy—all of these played a role in shaping and directing the course of Jewish history. The breadth of Seltzer's book is impressive and important. Because it traces the development of one of the two fundamental sources of Western civilization (the other, of course, being the Greek heritage), this book will give any reader a perspective on Western history as a whole.

The book is organized into four parts, beginning in the ancient Near East with the origin of the people who came to be called Israel and ending with the Jewish experience in the twentieth century. But more than half the book deals with the post-Rabbinic Period of Jewish history. (The Rabbinic Period, roughly 200 B.C. to A.D. 500, is second only to the biblical in its effect upon the structure of Judaism.)



The fourth part, which includes the period running from 1770 to the present, is the longest. In it, the panorama of the Jewish encounter with modernity is presented. Spinoza, Mendelssohn, Krochmal, Hirsch, Graetz, Zunz, Cohen, Rosenzweig, Buber—all of these and many others pass before the reader, each with his unique contribution to Jewish thought. One might say that Seltzer has tried to discuss too many individuals. On the other hand, by choosing to root his account, both of people and thought, in the lives of individual Jews, he emphasizes something vital—the experience of individual human beings. Historical experience is always, finally, that individual experience.

The book's sixteen chapters alternate between people and thought. For example, chapter 7 treats "Medieval Jewry to 1500." Chapter 8 covers "Medieval Jewish Theology and Philosophy." Jewish thought is the dominant topic, however, being the subject of ten chapters. Given the immensely productive character of Jewish intellectual history, such a division of material is about right. Following his basic division into people and thought, Seltzer usually discusses the same period twice, each time from a different point of view. As a result, the reader comes to appreciate more fully the differences and similarities between a people's history and its ideology.

Seltzer has also made space for valuable illustrations and examples. In his discussion of the Talmud, for instance, he presents excerpts, followed by interpretive discussions to help the reader understand the character of rabbinic thinking. An entire chapter is devoted to Jewish mysticism and kabbalah. Also, Philo and Maimonides, the two greatest Jewish philosophers, are given ample treatment. In addition to its other qualities, the book contains a wealth of detail and an ample index which make it a helpful reference work as well as a history text. The notes at the end of each chapter, combined with the thirty-four pages of "Suggestions for Further Reading," provide sources for a beginner wishing to explore a particular topic at greater length. Furthermore, maps, charts, and photographs have been carefully selected to help guide the reader through a complicated historical landscape. A minor slip occurs on page 758; a photograph of an impressive set of carved walnut doors on a synagogue ark is printed upside down.

Seltzer's point of view is that of the modern historian. He describes his subject as "a complex, ramified, and intellectually challenging field of humanistic learning" (p. ix). In other words, Seltzer attempts to provide an objective, critical account of Jewish history. In considering the ancient sources of that history, Seltzer



displays the methodological principles which have come to be the basis of modern scholarship. He states, "The classic works of rabbinic Judaism offer a wealth of information on Jewish life and ideas, but their historical recollections are anecdotal, semi-legendary, and homiletic; only the most sophisticated text and form criticism will elicit from them the raw material for modern historical synthesis" (p. 244). Ancient texts are not to be taken simply at face value. Where there are significant differences in scholarly interpretation, Seltzer presents the alternatives, either in the text or in the notes. Most readers will probably find Seltzer's multifaceted approach especially rewarding in his discussion of the biblical period. His comparisons of Hebrew ideas with those of Canaanite and other Near Eastern origins are illuminating. While noting the debt of the biblical writers to their surrounding cultures, he is careful to point out that the Bible is more than a book of borrowings. "The civil and criminal law of the biblical codes . . . draws extensively on the ancient Near Eastern collections. . . . However, borrowings are reshaped according to the distinctive features of Israelite religion. Thus a fundamental concern of biblical law is the sanctity of the person" (p. 69).

The least engaging aspect of the volume is probably the style. The reader must persevere through more than a few sentences like the following: "As a result, Jews who plunged into the study of Hellenistic wisdom and learning and who mastered its models of reasoned argumentation and effective rhetoric as well as its doctrines of logic and ethics, of the ideal state and the ultimate nature of reality—or even Jews who merely absorbed some of its more popular features indirectly—found themselves confronted by intellectual resources and challenges of a quite different character than the ancient Near Eastern mythology in reaction to which Judaism had first developed" (p. 200).

This is a textbook, and, as such, it has a common weakness of textbooks: its accounts of systems of thought often tend to be unclear to those not already familiar with them. For instance, a reader who has not studied the philosophy of Immanuel Kant will find little light in the two-page summary of it offered in preparation for an account of Hermann Cohen's neo-Kantian thought (pp. 729–30).

But the book is complete, the scholarship careful, and the tone objective. Although it can be read with great profit by anyone interested in the history of Judaism, its primary purpose, no doubt, is to serve as a text for college and university courses on Jewish history. It should perform that task well. But it will not, I think, be very much

read outside of that setting. For most readers of history expect, and have a right to expect, a graceful, literate account which can be read with enjoyment. Seltzer's book cannot meet such a standard. It is a work of scholarship, but not of literature.