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Neusner, Jacob, William Scott Green, and Alan J. Avery-Peck, eds.

The Encyclopedia of Judaism: Volume 5, Supplement 2

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According to the book jacket, “*The Encyclopedia of Judaism* provides a full and reliable account of Judaism, beginning in ancient Israelite times and extending to our own.” It defines Judaism broadly, encompassing religion, history, literature, beliefs, practices, and more. Here twenty-one entries, varying in length from six to sixteen pages, provide surveys of astrology and astronomy in ancient Judaism; biographies (real and imagined) on talmudic sages and commentators; midrashic and medieval exegesis and movements; and articles on a variety of topics, such as Pseudo-Philo, medieval Judeo-Arabic literature, homosexuality in Judaism, and Zionism in Moroccan Judaism. Each entry is detailed and focused, and a number contain extensive notes and a brief bibliography. Fifteen illustrations and a cumulative index (general and textual) to volumes 1–5 are provided.

Main editor Jacob Neusner contributed eight chapters, which reflect his prodigious synthesis of text and context, crammed with insights and augmented with analytical acumen. He rejects inductive midrash study, which informs what the text contains but not why the text is what it is, what is meant by the text, and what we can learn from the text as is. The account is least systematic and confident in understanding the rabbinic worldview; in its stead, he pursues a deductive midrash approach. That is to say, the rabbis chose a repertoire of scriptural verses distinctive of its self-understanding and self-

realization for the dignity and continuity of Israel against the realia of the Roman catastrophe and the triumph of a diverse group of believers, early Christianity.

The strength of Neusner's writing is its empiricism. In his view, three things interact for the proper study of midrash: (1) the principles of exegesis; (2) the goals of exegesis; and (3) the process of collecting and arranging exegesis into compilations. Thus in his articles on "Genesis in Judaism" and "Leviticus in Judaism," he argues that the redactors of *Genesis Rabbah* (ca. 350–400 C.E.) and *Sifra* (ca. 300 C.E.) inherited biblical exegesis and framed it in the encounter with triumphant Christianity of the fourth and fifth century in the former and united the Mishnah and Scripture in the latter. His selected *parshiyot* on world and Israel (*Genesis Rabbah*) and holy life (*Sifra*) illuminate how the sages confronted pressing challenges of their age and foreordained salvific history to their descendants if the latter like the former lived within the merits of the founders, sanctified by everyday acts of holiness and hope, characterized by observance, obedience, and optimism.

Neusner's other entries include exegetical studies on the midrashic compilations *Mekhilta Attributed to R. Ishmael*, *Sifre to Numbers*, and *Sifre to Deuteronomy*; categories of discourse and thought found in rabbinic documents; dialectics between Torah and culture; and "Biography in Rabbinic Judaism," where his form-critical history of religion methodology sees not valid biographical data in named individuals but paradigmatic episodes reflecting the permanency of the Dual Torah in learning, virtue, and death.

The other contributors expound on aspects of Judaism as a religious civilization then and now. Meir Bar Ilan establishes that the role of astrology played a greater role in Jewish antiquity than the old Jewish texts acknowledge, and he also surveys rabbinic texts and interpretation reflecting the complexity of the Jewish calendar. Frederick J. Murphy analyzes the makeup and intent of Pseudo-Philo or *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, a post-70 C.E. Latin translation of a substantive midrashic work written by an unidentified Jew that chronicles biblical history from Adam to Saul.

Miguel Pérez Fernández investigates similarities and differences, apologetics and polemics, in the oral traditions of the Gospels and Mishnah under five headings: realia, linguistics, haggadah, halakot, and theology. The question whether the Second Testament is anti-Judaistic is lessened in his focus on texts matched from Tanak, Mishnah, and Christian scripture. Nonetheless, there was, is, and will be a theological chasm between Judaism, people of the faith of Jesus, and Christianity, people of the faith in Jesus. Indeed, the writer acknowledges this: the Torah is the creating word and Jesus is the creating word; Torah is the word of life and Jesus is life.

The Samaritans, who call themselves *Shamerim* or *Shomerim al ha-'emet* (“keepers of truth”) and who are called *Kutim* in rabbinic literature, believe that they are the true guardians of the Torah of Moses and the true descendants of the people of the biblical kingdom of Israel. Factually, they are the remnant of the ancient kingdom of Israel as Jews are the descendants of the ancient kingdom of Judah. In the fourth and fifth centuries C.E., the Israelite Samaritans numbered about 1.2 million people dwelling in many cities and villages in the Land of Israel, from southern Syria to northern Egypt. Alas, war, persecution, religious decrees, forced conversions to Islam and Christianity, low birth rate, and the like have dwindled their number to a bare 146 persons in 1917. The descent to extinction reversed in the 1930s, and their numbers continue to grow, slowly but surely, to this day. Alan D. Crown explicates their history, religion, literature, biblical commentaries, halakic directives, polemical texts, contemporary situation, and differences from normative rabbinic Judaism. His cogent essay is supported by ninety-six footnotes and numerous bibliographic citations therein.

Robert A. Harris evaluates the revolutionary biblical interpretation among the rabbinic masters of northern France between the middle of the eleventh century and the end of the twelfth century (namely, Rashi, Rabbi Joseph Qara, Rashbam, Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency, Rabbi Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor, and Rabbi Jacob Tam) and compared to the Christian scholarship of Hugh of St. Victor, Andrew, and Herbert of Boshan.

With intimate knowledge of the commentaries, responsa, and liturgical poetry of Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040–1105), Mayer Gruber explains how and why this medieval French Jewish exegete became known as the *Parshandatha* (“interpreter of the Torah par excellence”). Rashi’s genius is demonstrated not only in a variety of philosophical, linguistic, and grammatical techniques to explain intricacies of a text and previous commentaries but in his aphorisms and ethical teachings, which are interwoven in his exegesis to enhance the moral character of the reader, based on the love of God, his commandments, and his people. The engaging essay with its voluminous footnotes presents effectively Rashi’s comments on the world in which he lived: mores, beliefs, practices, and domestic religion.

“Conversos” (Spanish for “converted”) designates Sephardic Jews who accepted baptism, whether voluntarily or under duress (hence, Hebrew, *anusim* / “forced ones”) to escape Christian persecution in Spain, Portugal, and their colonies from 1391 and beyond. Kevin S. Larsen recounts significant events and major shakers and brokers in this persecution-laden period of medieval Jewry. The Zionist movement is one of contemporary Jewry’s most successful responses to the Jewish predicament: the Jewish people as victim of world history. Understanding Zionism in terms of “the Land,” religion, and nationality and emancipating Zion by movers and movements from Eastern

Europe are common fare in campus courses on Zionism, but less taught, let alone known, is the contribution of Sephardic ideologues to the fulfillment of the Zionist dream. Henry Toledano's overview of the deep attachment of Moroccan Jews to *Eretz Israel* serves to rectify this lacuna. Meira Polliack details the rich oeuvre of Judeo-Arabic literature, now considered an independent genre within Jewish and Arabic studies.

Norman Lamm explores the subject of homosexuality in Judaism. He reviews classical Jewish sources against contemporary attitudes (repressive, practical, permissive, psychological) and maintains that traditional Judaism does not nor could not support homosexual practice as advocated by defenders of the new permissiveness and morality in the name of "alternative lifestyle," a position at variance with non-Orthodox streams of contemporary Judaism. He sees homosexuality as a perplexing, painful moral challenge to Jewish law and attempts a halakic solution that abrogates social harassment and demonstrates compassion and sympathy but defends the Maimonidean position that empathy to the disadvantaged minority cannot replace regulated law that covers the majority of the people. No doubt thousands of gay Jews and their allies would view this halakic norm as an affront to their principled and lifelong commitment to love of God and Torah and same-sex intimacy and companionship.

In "Sermons in Modern Judaism," Marc Saperstein concentrates on preaching in Britain and United States by representatives of the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform movements from the middle of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first, with emphasis on style and content. The fully noted essay reflects a mirror of internal and external concerns affecting Anglo and American Jewry from 1763 to today. Finally, Israel Zvi Gilat surveys the *mitzvah* of honor of parents (obligation, limitation, restriction) from scant biblical notation to the decision of Israeli rabbinical authorities.

In summary, this is a fine reference work on a mosaic of topics informed by competent scholarship and spouting a wellspring of Jewish knowledge and attitudes. Structurally, however, a grass-roots readership (a stated audience) can be better served with more user-friendly language, focused general and source indices, and contributors' identities.