

Book Review – A Short History of the Jewish People

A Short History of the Jewish People, from Legendary Times to Modern Statehood, is a well-regarded and accessible history of a religiously significant people by an acclaimed author. From the Exodus to the Holocaust, the Jews have occupied major roles in Western history, and their triumphs and travails have been encyclopedically documented. Raymond P. Scheindlin, a rabbi and professor of Medieval Hebrew Literature at The Jewish Theological Seminary, has provided a clear and concise text, perfect for an initial overview of the subject.

The author begins with the advent of the Hebrew monarchy around 1200 BC. Since its inception, Israel has been a tiny country on the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, and as such has been vulnerable to larger and more powerful neighbors. Initially, the Egyptians to the southwest and the Assyrians/Babylonians to the east battled for hegemony in Israel. In the 3rd century BC, the Greeks and Persians became the contenders, followed by the Romans/Byzantines and the Arabs/Persians. Even today major powers such as the United States, Russia, China, the Muslim world, and the Jews fight over this tiny piece of real estate. It is hard to think of any ground on the planet that has heard more hatred, and soaked up more blood. Considering the long history of anti-Semitism throughout the world, culminating in the Holocaust, it is hard to think of any people on the planet that has suffered more, as a percentage of its population, over the millennia.

Scheindlin's discussion of Biblical events is more secular than religious, even from a Jewish perspective, but he provides interesting counterpoints to those used to reading ancient Hebrew history with theological eyes. Christians seem to think that Jewish history ended around 400 BC, the time of Malachi, resumed with Jesus and His apostles, and ended for good when Titus smashed the Jewish rebellion in 70 AD. The author mentions these events but then highlights how the Jews adapted to these changes, developing rabbinic Judaism and mechanisms to thrive as a people in the diaspora.

Muhammad destroyed the Jews of Medina (Banu Qainuqa, Banu al-Nadir, and Banu Qurayza), but Jews on the whole did fairly well under later Muslim rule. Scheindlin notes that Christians fared worse because they were the largest minority, the doctrine of the Trinity was suspect to Muslim eyes, Christian icons violated Muslim views on idolatry, and armies from Christian nations were implacable foes of Islam. The Jews, with their small numbers, strict monotheism, iconoclastic tendencies, and lack of a nation or an army, did not pose such a threat.¹

While schools throughout America lambast the Church endlessly for persecuting European Jews in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, scholars such as Scheindlin are impressively balanced on the topic. He notes that Jews were persecuted, often harshly, but local lords and Church authorities tried to stop the carnage, only failing from lack of resources, not want of will. Blood libel, the accusations that Jews killed Christians to use their blood in secret ceremonies, was condemned by Pope Innocent IV. During the Black Death, Pope Clement IV tried to quash rumors that Jews caused the outbreak.² Even the notorious Spanish Inquisition was directed against Christians, many newly converted Jews, not Jews per se. Mob hysteria, not official policy, was commonly the culprit. Many Christian lords and priests behaved despicably towards the Jews, expelling them, seizing their property, and even massacring them. But many did everything they could to promote justice, for the Jews and for everyone else.

The author's discussion of how the Inquisition in Spain drove talented Jews into the Ottoman Empire, thereby strengthening that nation, was fascinating, as well as reminiscent of Hitler's persecutions driving talented Jews such as Albert Einstein to the United States. In the long run, sin harms the sinner more it does the one sinned against, and persecutors harm themselves more than those they are persecuting. The commonalties of Jews, including their heritage, their common Hebrew tongue, their dispersion, their loyalty, and their acquired skills, made them perfect agents of government.

¹ Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People – From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood*, Oxford University Press, 1998, 74-75.

² Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People – From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood*, Oxford University Press, 1998, 108-109.

Scheidlin makes some Gibbons-type mistakes in his history, suggesting that the Jews lot was better because “skepticism, deism, and other Enlightenment philosophies broke the monopoly of Christianity over the intellectual life of the West.”³ In truth, had Europeans thought, spoken, and acted as taught in the New Testament, the lives of Jews, and everyone else, would have been far better. Authentic Christianity provided the basis for the finest thoughts of the Enlightenment.

Pushed by persecution and pulled by opportunity, large numbers of Jews in the 18th and 19th centuries migrated from Western to Eastern Europe. This blessing turned into a curse when the Holocaust began. Large numbers of Jews in that period went to Canada, Argentina, and especially the United States. There they enjoyed more freedom and security than ever before. The author’s description of the Zionist movement and the early days of the State of Israel was good, and his final evaluation was better; “both Israel and the Diaspora face challenges, but there has never been a better time to be part of Jewish history.”⁴

Questions

1. What mistakes do religious readers of the history of Israel from ancient to modern times make that secular readers avoid?
2. What mistakes do secular readers of the history of Israel from ancient to modern times make that religious readers avoid?
3. Given the beliefs and technology of the time, what could Church and secular leaders have done to eliminate or at least minimize anti-Semitism in the populace?

³ Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People – From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood*, Oxford University Press, 1998, 164.

⁴ Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People – From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood*, Oxford University Press, 1998, 263