*Review Essay*[*]

# Judaic Texts and Their History?

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In a recent review of Martin Goodman's *A History of Judaism* and Simon Schama's *The Story of the Jews,* Adam Kirsch notes that their histories reflect the times in which they were written as well as the ones they describe.[1] Close to a century ago, the German-Jewish author Lion Feuchtwanger explained how historical novels (of which he wrote many that were commercially and critically successful) *invariably* reveal more about the author's own era than the distant past. With narrative history, the creative tension between present and past remains intact to a greater degree. Thus, for historians, Kirsch's comment qualifies as a commonplace on first glance. However, when one pursues this point a bit further—and, to his credit Kirsch does—he concludes that the portrayal of Jews and Judaism by Goodman and Schama reflects their post-World War II British upbringing, and an overall early twenty-first-century liberal Western embrace of variety and tolerance, forces that seem politically imperiled at the moment. Given this, Kirsch concludes that these two top-notch scholars have authored books that may soon seem dated. Let us hope so, just as cancer treatments in 2068 will date those of 2018. Science or scholarship—in German the word *Wissenschaft* covers both—evolves by its very nature. To say that the founders of the field *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (modern

[*] Martin Goodman, *A History of Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 656 pp., $39.95 hb., ISBN 9780691181271. Page references appear in parentheses within the text.

[1] Adam Kirsch, "Tales of the Tribe," *The New Yorker* (26 March 2018) 73–77. Schama's *The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words 1000 BC – 1492 AD* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014) is the second of a projected three volumes. Both Goodman and Schama reflect a Whiggishness—Goodman about Judaism's ability to regenerate religious meaning; Schama, about the Jews' ability to persevere and create varied meanings. Yet the simultaneous appearance of these volumes may strike the reader as inherently un-whiggish, a summing up of a phenomenon (Jews and Judaism) whose current direction is uncertain.

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critical Jewish studies), Isaac Marcus Jost or Heinrich Graetz, or even their second generation successors such as Shimon Dubnov, Gershom Scholem, or Salo Baron, missed or misconstrued part of the Jewish past, in no way impugns the significance of their projects. Scientists and humanists alike stand on the shoulders of others.

Martin Goodman, a Distinguished Professor of Jewish Studies at Oxford University and President of the Oxford Center for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, acknowledges, "My attempt to present an objective history of Judaism may strike some readers as naïve" (xxvii). I would replace "naïve" with the old-fashioned word "admirable." Goodman does not stake out an essentialist position that claims to encompass the entire phenomenon called Judaism, nor does he present a latter-day version of the "unapologetically linear histories of earlier generations" (xxiv). Goodman keenly observes counter-traditions, reversions, or outright ironies such as the radically innovative nature of ultra-orthodoxy sailing under the banner of tradition. Despite the historian's inclination to "complicate," a word which has become a professional shibboleth, Goodman tells a clear story of a religion that, he confides, has changed since the ancient world and has always evidenced pluriformity, but retains enough coherence to be described as Judaism. Were one looking for an antithetical approach, one might cite Jacob Neusner's nominalist view that not even rabbinic Judaism can be treated as a coherent whole, but only as a discrete set of documents. Whether "religion" offers the right category by which Judaism should be considered, an issued raised in recent years by volumes as different as Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion* and John J. Collins, *The Invention of Judaism*, does not come into consideration.[2]

Readers will immediately notice that Goodman begins with Josephus—specifically, the latter's *Antiquities* and *Against Apion*. The reason for this starting point is evident: whereas much in the Bible may be historically questionable, nobody doubts that this first century CE Jerusalem-born Jew turned Roman historian re-told the Bible, explained the revolt against Rome, and defended his religion with vigor. In fact, Josephus receives a significant rehabilitation at Goodman's hands. Although one could make a case for the Davidic Court Historian or the Deuteronomistic Historian, for Goodman it is Josephus who qualifies as the first Jewish historian. Not only that, Josephus appears to be the first Jewish historian to articulate a "lachrymose conception" of that history. This phrase, popularized by Salo Baron to counter the relentlessly negative presentation of Jewish-Gentile relations by his nineteenth-century predecessors, has stuck. Leopold Zunz's *Synagogue Poetry in the Middle Ages* forwarded a claim that lands between boast and lament: "If there are ranks in suffering, Israel takes precedence of all the nations—if the duration of sorrows and patience with which they ennoble, the Jews are among the aristocracy of every land—if a literature is called rich in the possession of a few classic tragedies, what

[2] Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); John J. Collins, *The Invention of Judaism: Torah and Jewish Identity from Deuteronomy to Paul* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

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shall we say to a National Tragedy lasting for fifteen hundred years, in which the poets and actors were also the heroes?"[3] But Josephus appears to have anticipated Zunz's lachrymosity by nearly two millennia: "Looking over the whole sweep of history, I would say that the sufferings of the Jews have been greater than of any other nation" (25). Josephus stars in the first section of Goodman's book and makes cameo appearances throughout until the very last page (534). Goodman remains silent on the unsavory incident, which Josephus himself relates with an astonishing lack of embarrassment in *The Jewish Wars, 3:8*, by which this *yeled ṭov shel yerušalayim* (well-bred Jewish boy) became a Roman historian in the first place—and the bane of twentieth century Zionist historians. The Siege of Jotapata in the Galilee—a Roman success but a Jewish disaster—does not even appear in the index.

Goodman skillfully organizes his work both chronologically and topically. "The approach of this book," he writes, "is therefore a marriage between the unapologetically linear histories of earlier generations and the 'polythetic' descriptions favored by contemporary scholars concerned to keep an open mind about the claims of all traditions" (xxiv). So one may find a discussion of the tenth-century Egyptian-Babylonian Saadyah Gaon after eleventh-century Northern French Rashi (327, 318), if the sub-chapter topics warrant it. Similarly helpful, each of the five major divisions provide overlap and contain socio-political orientations that most readers will need and all should welcome (e.g., "Deserts Tribes & Empires," "Jews in a Graeco-Roman World," "From Pagan Roman to Islam and Medieval Christendom," "The European Renaissance and the New World," "From the Enlightenment to the State of Israel"). The last couple of these chapter titles may seem Eurocentric, but display relative balance, with modern Mizrachi experience getting slighted less than usual. The last synoptic chapter, "From the Enlightenment to the State of Israel," bears an indisputably Zionist teleological title; by contrast, the third edition of Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz's standard *The Jew in the Modern World* moved sections around to avoid this impression.[4] Nevertheless, the actual contents of Goodman's overview in this section constitute a ball pitched down the middle of the plate. Goodman's writing is always clear, sometimes elegant, and he does not refrain from offering speculation as to why certain phenomena happened and others did not:

> Why has Greek [Hellenistic] Judaism petered out and Karaism survived up to now? One reason may be the roots of the Karaite movement in principled opposition to the rabbinic mainstream, which has often left them in uncomfortable isolation but has provided them with a distinctive identity. Greek Jews, by contrast, inherited a worldview compatible with that of the rabbis,

[3] Leopold Zunz's *Synagogue Poetry in the Middle Ages [Die synagogale Poesie des Mittelalters]* (Berlin, Julius Springer, 1855). I use the translation of George Eliot, who took these lines as an epigraph to chapter 42 of her proto-Zionist novel *Daniel Deronda* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1876).

[4] Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (3rd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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> and in time their distinctiveness merged into that of rabbis trained in more vigorous traditions elsewhere in the Jewish world. (310)

It may be worth noting in passing that Lawrence Schiffman's *From Text to Tradition*, like *The Jew in the Modern World*, also a standard undergraduate text, offers a nearly antithetical explanation for the decline of Hellenistic Jewry, one that highlights the disjunction of Greek and rabbinic values.[5]

Predictably, Second Temple Judaism under Roman rule, Professor Goodman's own specialty, receives much emphasis, roughly pages 90–310, and constitutes a highlight of the volume. But Goodman's mastery of other periods of Jewish history seems no less impressive. His citations of primary texts appear every few pages, if not more frequently. The selections are invariably well-chosen, sufficiently long to get the flavor and context of the cited author, but highly illuminating of the phenomena or era he seeks to describe. Goodman has an extraordinary gift for locating primary texts that convey a great deal yet do not require too much explanation for the uninitiated. One could read only these citations and come away with a pretty good sense of the range of Jewish religious thought. To give just one example, and there are dozens in this tome, consider Rabbi Abraham ben David's critique of Maimonides' law code *Mishneh Torah*, produced in full below. Please note that "Geonim" is the only specialized word in this paragraph and readers will have been introduced to it on the preceding pages:

> He intended to improve but he did not improve, for he forsook the way of all authors who preceded him. They always adduced proof for their statements and cited the proper authority for each statement; this was very useful, for sometimes the judge would be inclined to forbid or permit something and his proof was based on some other authority. Had he known that there was a greater authority who interpreted the law differently he might have retracted. Now, therefore, I do not know why I should reverse my tradition or my views because of the compendium of this author. If the one who differs with me is greater than I – fine; and if I am greater than he, why should I annul my opinion in deference to his? Moreover, there are matters concerning which the Geonim disagree and this author has selected the opinion of one and incorporated it in his compendium. Why should I rely upon his choice when it is not acceptable to me and I do not know whether the contending authority is competent to differ or not? It can only be that "an overbearing spirit is in him." (326)

Any book of this scope will make decisions within a given period with which experts may quibble. To take modern religious reforms as an example, Goodman begins the chapter titled "Reform" with a discussion of Moses Mendelssohn, despite the direction of historiography in recent years, which has emphasized not only Mendelssohn's halakhic observance, but also his Hebrew opus, previously underestimated. Comparing Mendelssohn with Spinoza's earlier work on the

[5] Lawrence Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV 1991).

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Hebrew Bible, Goodman writes that the former "thus moderniz[ed] Bible study in a fashion less revolutionary than Spinoza's critique." To my mind, Goodman skirts two elements: One, Mendelssohn's severe criticism of contemporary critical Bible scholarship places him at the opposite end of the spectrum from Spinoza, rather than presenting a milder version of the same. With respect to historical critical Bible scholarship, though not aesthetics, Mendelssohn is arguably more reactionary than reformist. Two, Mendelssohn's Bible translation is revolutionary because it encouraged a recalibration of Jewish learning toward the Bible and consequently away from rabbinic literature, although Mendelssohn himself had mastered both, making his commentary quite challenging. Mendelssohn's Bible "was much read" (458), but often with translation and commentary detached, often re-packaged in a conservative direction for Eastern European readers, while re-packaged in Latin characters with no Hebrew commentary for German readers, and so on.

Similarly debatable is Goodman's choice of Samuel Holdheim rather than Abraham Geiger as the model of "Reform Judaism." Holdheim makes the point of reform more clearly, as Holdheim was the more radical of the two on most issues (e.g., the historical value of different eras, overall worth of early rabbinic traditions, possibility of rabbis performing and validating intermarriage), but certainly less representative than Geiger of the direction of German Reform at large. Judged by scholarly legacy, theological balance, or even historical conception, Geiger commands center stage. Geiger's *Judaism and Its History* constitutes an early predecessor of Goodman's approach— hence the title of this review essay. In any event, Geiger's influence surely surpasses Holdheim's, even were one to consider the impact of David Einhorn, Holdheim's disciple and son-in-law, on American classical Reform Judaism.[6] In Germany, for a variety of reasons, moderate Reform prevailed and Liberal congregations in Great Britain were few and far between.

Once again, at the risk of entering into the realm of the picayune, while Goodman cites an irenic statement from Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz regarding denominational differences among Jews, a major theme for Goodman, Hertz's very influential Pentateuch commentary must be considered highly polemical against the Higher Critics, as well as apologetic with regard to the superiority of biblical Jewish values over against those of the ancient Near East. One may argue, as Harvey Meirovich did in *A Vindication of Judaism: The Polemics of the Hertz Pentateuch* (Jewish Theological Seminary, 1998), that this bristly pride accounts for the relatively long time span in which Hertz's commentary sufficed for Anglo-American Jews. To discuss Solomon Schechter at length (491–93), but barely to mention the two "Louis"—Louis Ginzberg (1873–1953) and Louis Finkelstein (1895–1991)—does not do justice to the emergence of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) as a pinnacle of American Jewish intellectual life in the early mid-twentieth century. Arguably, the proliferation and job placements of JTS-trained rabbis accounts for much of that erstwhile dominance. So too, the faculty hires made at

[6] Abraham Geiger, *Das Judentum und seine Geschichte* (Breslau, W. Jacobsohn, 1910).

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JTS in those years may account for JTS's excellence even more than any one or set of individuals like Schechter and the two Louis. That the Cambridge University professor Schechter, the British Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz, and Rabbi Louis Jacobs, a UK-educated theologian and teacher at Jews' College, all receive considerable attention displays an excusable homeland pride in English Jewry on Goodman's part. (In fairness, two of the many JTS stars also receive sympathetic treatment.)

For obvious reasons, Anglo-American readers will anticipate Goodman's treatment of Jesus and early Christianity with special interest. Goodman emphasizes Jesus' complete belonging to Judaism and notes that the most telling difference of Jesus is that he sprouted a following rather immediately after his crucifixion. Jesus kept kosher, said nothing to induce a charge of blasphemy, and was betrayed by Caiaphas and the leading Sadducees, not the Pharisees. Did Jesus consider himself the Messiah? Goodman remains agnostic on this point. The nasty and protracted schism between what became rabbinic Judaism and Christianity gets handled rather gently, maybe too gently, given the vituperative nature of the *adversus judaeos* tradition. Goodman appropriately adopts the prevailing sibling rather than parental metaphor for these emerging religious systems, both heirs of the Hebrew Bible. Goodman ends this discussion on a note that seems a very traditional reading of the big split, one that has come under assault in recent years for two major reasons. First, Paul's agenda seems less clear than it did a few decades ago. Second, political factors provided the decisive incentive for Jesus' followers to distance themselves from the majority of Jews after each unsuccessful revolt against Roman rule. Here is Goodman's verdict:

> But for most Christians the break with Judaism had begun in the time of Paul [described by Goodman as a "highly unusual Jew"], with the growth of a gentile Church which saw itself as the true Israel in contrast to the Jews of the old covenant. Ultimately, the cause of the split lay less in any perceived incompatibility of Christian theology within the variegated religious landscape of contemporary Judaism than in the self-definition of Christians, for whom the urgings of Paul to see their faith in Christ as novel and all-encompassing were reinforced by the tendency of the wider Roman world to treat Christianity as the religion of gentiles who had forsaken their ancestral gods rather than a branch of Judaism. (198)

The most significant limitations in Goodman's work proceed from his desire to treat Judaism and not all of Jewish history. This ought to be acknowledged as a reasonable and defensible stricture, and the dissatisfying alternatives are telling. Salo Baron's *Social and Religious History* runs eighteen volumes, and although Professor Goodman considers it "very readable," mere mortals do not.[7] In any event, Baron's innovations in statistics, demography, migration patterns, and linguistic variations shed far more light on the social than the religious half promised by Baron's title. Moreover, the mastery of the myriad host cultures needed to advance Jewish history

[7] Salo Baron, *Social and Religious History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

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makes it unlikely that any one person could replicate, much less improve upon, what Baron accomplished. Thus, perhaps, the shift from one author to three in the most popular single-volume textbook for undergraduates—John Efron, Steven Weitzman, and Matthias Lehmann's *The Jews: A History*.[8] While Robert Seltzer's *Jewish People, Jewish Thought* dominated the field for a couple of decades, it has been displaced by Efron and colleagues, who have produced a truly excellent work that aspires to be, and is, an excellent introduction for undergraduates.[9] *The Jews: A History* incorporates primary documents, material culture discussions and visual aids far more effectively than Seltzer's learned work. Contrariwise, *Cultures of the Jews*, a multi-authored, three-volume work superbly edited by David Biale, provides a truly wide-ranging view of Jewish life with long overdue attention finally paid to secular and cultural expressions of world Jewry.[10] Goodman's "Further Reading" notes that Schama's projected three-volume work, which also adopts a cultural view, will not displace Biale's, a judgment with which I concur.[11]

All said, I do not think anyone could gainsay the claim that Goodman's volume surpasses any other one-volume treatment of Judaism. The individuals providing endorsements on the back cover comprise a scholarly *Who's Who*. The American Jewish historian Jonathan Sarna states it crisply and correctly: "Henceforward, all students of Judaism should begin here." As noted, some would question whether one ought to present Judaism as a single coherent tale, or the related question of the particular merit of having a one-volume history of Judaism in the first place. Ironically, what Goodman persuades most of all, in this reviewer's opinion, is that one can answer these questions affirmatively. To state it differently: one may still be a historian of Judaism responsibly, even if not a historian of all Jewish experience in the Baronian model. To state it a third way: this volume is a masterpiece.

Goodman sticks to religion—or more precisely, religious texts. However necessary, one can see that Goodman's self-imposed limits lead to anemic discussions of some increasingly popular historiographical realms, such as material and folk culture. The color plates in *A History of Judaism* are beautiful and well explained, but rarely woven into the book's narrative. Goodman barely discusses Jewish folk magic or superstition. Cursing, amulet writing, and oddly local customs played a larger role in folk Judaism than that of Moses Isserles' glosses on the *Shulchan Arukh*, well-described by Goodman. Tellingly, his discussion of the always bizarre custom of chicken-swinging (*kapparot)* comes in the context

[8] John Efron, Steven Weitzman, and Matthias Lehmann, *The Jews: A History* (2nd ed.; New York: Routledge, 2014).

[9] Robert Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

[10] David Biale (ed.), *Cultures of the Jews: A New History* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002).

[11] Brilliant as Simon Schama is, his first two volumes do not evidence the decades-long immersion in secondary sources so evident in Goodman's history, nor does Schama offer new scholarly directions as does Biale's *Cultures of the Jews*. As above, this reflects my assessment of the maturation of the field of Jewish studies, not a criticism of Schama's readable work.

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of the Hungarian Reformer (Neolog) Aron Chorin condemning this practice in the footsteps of Joseph Karo, author of the *Shulchan Arukh* (464). But what did the chicken-swingers think they were accomplishing? Understandably, social and economic history find little room in this volume, but even the staples of "Introduction to Judaism" classes, such as lifecycle events and holidays (251–55), get relatively short shrift. Goodman certainly understands this material perfectly well, as his superb discussion of the proliferation and variation of the Mourner's Kaddish (383–84) demonstrates, but this also remains a discrete case, separated by whole chapters from circumcision or marriage practices.

The most lamentable consequence of Goodman's top to bottom approach is that the role of women in the story of Judaism gets largely sidelined until around page 517. In his discussion of the yeshivot of Eastern Europe, Goodman makes no room for the Bais Yaakov phenomenon. This, presumably, is not a consequence of sexism, but of elitism. Sarah Schenirer did not write much, while Israel Salanter and—even more so—the Hasidic masters did. The Yiddish language *Ṣe'nah U-R'enah* and *Teḥinnos* books receive a couple of pages (376–77), but as singularly important windows into women's spirituality, they deserved more space. Moving backwards historically to Goodman's own era, why so little discussion of the tractates that fixed the role of women in rabbinic discourse? Or the inscriptional evidence of an earlier, Hellenistic-style religiosity, where women did serve, as Bernadette Brooten argued years ago, as synagogue presidents?

One desirable response to dealing with the patriarchal nature of rabbinic Judaism comes from forcing a bottom-up approach, or a conscious gender-study approach with a focus on constructing Jewish masculinity. Since Goodman begins a history of Judaism with Josephus' re-telling of the Bible, why not deploy the lengthy and accessible rabbinic discussion of Hannah in *Babylonian Talmud* (Ber. 31a-b), where Hannah is construed by the rabbis as the positive paradigm for recitation of a statutory prayer (the Amidah) from which Hannah herself would be exempt? The Talmud here reimagines the putative eleventh-century BCE woman portrayed in I Samuel 1–2 as a fifth-century CE Babylonian rabbi—or at least someone who reasons like one, complete with prooftexts from a biblical corpus that certainly did not exist in her day. Or why not a few pages on the extraordinary transformation of the biblical Rachel through the ages from barren woman to mother of the nation, a process begun by the prophet Jeremiah in the sixth century BCE, advanced in *Lamentations Rabbah,* validated in Rashi's comment to Gen 48:7, and ultimately ritualized in the Kabbalistic *tiqqun ḥaṣot*? The few rabbinic examples that Goodman adduces to discuss the religious life of women (163, 166, 169) get subsumed in his larger narratives of Sages, Nazirites, and Ḥaverim. Goodman's examples seem less than edifying for exploring rabbinic conceptions of female spirituality.

One final question begs asking: What readership does Goodman envisage for this work? Goodman's mastery of the material suffices to reach and teach other specialists in Jewish history. Casting the net more broadly, this author's graceful

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style may reach fellow academics in the fields of history and religious studies. Goodman's *A History of Judaism* will be pitched perfectly to scholars and students in theological and religious studies without expertise in Judaism, and even experts in Judaism will benefit greatly from it. The editors at Princeton University Press have no doubt judged how much resonance this book will have for a general audience. I fear neglect from the readers most in need of this book: Jew-*ish* readers who fear the plunge into the depths of Judaic learning; Ultra-Orthodox readers who have no interest in discovering the variegated and developmental nature of Torah and the latitude evident in the historical record. Hopefully, many others—Jews and non-Jews, students of religion of all sorts—will open these pages. Those interested in the forms, personalities, and thinkers of Judaism, those wondering why this ancient tradition did not die out or lose its vitality, should turn with confidence to Goodman's magisterial work.

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