

BOOKS

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Through Christian Eyes

A History of the Jews

by Paul Johnson

Harper & Row, 1987. 644 pp., \$25

Reviewed by Jonathan D. Sarna

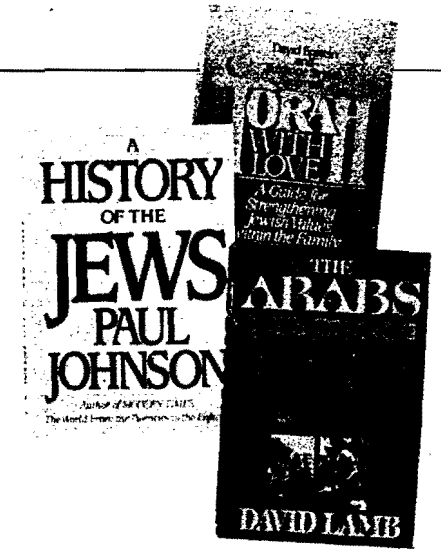
King Frederick the Great of Prussia, we are told, once asked his ministers if they could offer him "one single, irrefutable proof of God." "Yes, Your Majesty," Jean-Baptiste du Boyer, the Marquis d'Argens is said to have replied, "the Jews." The story may well be apocryphal, but it certainly reveals much about the way that many eighteenth-century Christians viewed Jewish history. Schooled by the exiled French Protestant historian Jacques Basnage, who in 1706 issued volume one of his widely read and soon translated *Histoire des Juifs*, Christians learned that Jews were a people "Despised, hated, persecuted by all Nations—still distinguished in their Laws, Customs and Religion, remaining a standing Evidence of Divine Vengeance upon Unbelief, and an indelible Monument of the Truth of Christianity." Popular Christian surveys of Jewish history in the nineteenth century, one by Hannah Adams in America and another by H. H. Milman in England, reiterated the same bleak message.

To read Paul Johnson's new history of the Jews is to see how much has changed. Himself a believing Roman Catholic and author of a popular history of Christianity, Johnson warns in this volume against "seeking providential patterns" in the annals of the Jews. His narrative elevates Jews from passive victims to prime movers, and expands Jewish history well beyond its traditional Christian confines. Gone are pious references to divine wrath, fulfilled Christian prophecies, and centuries of deserved persecution; instead, he offers us a history that any Jew can read with pride. "No people has ever insisted more firmly than the Jews," he writes, "that

history has a purpose and humanity a destiny." He sees Jews as "exemplars and epitomizers of the human condition." "The role of the Jews," he concludes, is to "focus and dramatize these common experiences of mankind, and to turn their particular fate into a universal moral."

Johnson divides his history into seven parts, beginning with "Israelites" and ending with "Zion." His narrative reads well, rests on solid research, and is remarkably error-free. Still, there are problems. "Holocaust," in part six, receives as much attention as "Judaism" in part two, and fully a third of his narrative covers only the last century—to my mind an unbalanced division. Recent literature on Jews in Arab lands seems to have passed Johnson by, and even his treatment of American Jewry is weak and overgeneralized. Many other sections cry out for greater amplification and deeper penetration—inevitable, perhaps, in a volume seeking to cover 3,500 years of Jewish life and creativity in fewer than 600 pages.

What I find most disturbing, however, are the facile cultural continuities that Johnson purports to uncover beneath the shifting sands of Jewish history. He speaks of Jews as being "historically minded," "subversive of the existing order," "natural capitalist entrepreneurs" (a role, one might add, not usually conducive to subversion), and willing "to exist in distant areas without the need for acculturation." All of these statements are true, historically speaking, for certain times and places. But one might equally well characterize Jews, using other historical evidence, in precisely opposite terms. Over the years, they have not infrequently failed to heed the lessons of history, supported reactionary governments, stood among capitalism's loudest and strongest opponents, and proved sadly unwilling to preserve



their identity, preferring to assimilate.

If there is a lesson in Jewish history, it may be, paradoxically, that Jews regularly defy those who seek to lock them into predetermined historical laws and patterns. Time and again, they have broken free, created new paradigms, and proved their analysts—Jews and Gentiles alike—wide of the mark. To some this Houdini-like quality may demonstrate that Jewish history is indeed "irrefutable proof of God," a conclusion reached at the end of his *History of the Jews* by no less an authority than Cecil Roth. Johnson, in his epilogue, however, advances a more radical view, one which of all his interpretations seems to me the most worth pondering. "Jews," he writes, "believed they were a special people with such unanimity and passion, and over so long a span, that they became one. They did indeed have a role because they wrote it themselves." "Therein, perhaps," he suggests, "lies the key to their story."

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