

Jacob Neusner, *The Way of Torah, An Introduction to Judaism*, 4th ed. (Belmont, C.A.: Wadsworth, 1988) pp. xxv + 194 n.p.

Anyone who has taught university-level courses in Judaism is likely to have confronted the problem of how *not* to turn the course into a “history of Jewish religious literature.” It is no easy task to present a meaningful synchronic description of the religion called “Judaism” that would do justice to a way of life that has been evolving in innumerable ways from Patriarchal times to its modern American and Israeli forms. Many have been daunted by the perception that any such description would inevitably turn out to be so vague and generic as to be meaningless, or so inaccurate as to be devoid of scholarly value.

In the present volume, which was composed as a beginner’s introduction, Neusner has taken a middle course, of focusing upon the long period in Jewish history that extends from the Second Commonwealth until the beginning of the modern European Enlightenment and Emancipation, a period during which most Jews shared a relatively uniform set of beliefs, values and behavioral patterns. As he describes the basic values of this “classical” Judaism, N. is able to introduce a variety of subsidiary and particular “Judaisms,” such as medieval rationalism and Kabbalah, but their roles are always secondary to the fundamental structures of classical Rabbinic Judaism.

Though such a presentation of Judaism is by no means unique, N.’s book does have some distinctive features. Most important, perhaps, is his decision to order his description of Judaism around the Jewish liturgy. On the surface, this is a very promising approach, since the words of the traditional prayers, accompanying Jews of all sorts throughout the various cycles of day, calendar and life, are far more likely to depict a generic “Judaism” than the legalistic and theological tomes that furnish the basis of standard histories of Judaism. N.’s actual implementation of the project, however, is less than satisfactory. It soon becomes evident that what he is placing at the basis of his study is not the historically evolved liturgy as adapted over the ages by various Jewish communities, but the particular Ashkenazic *Siddur* in use in most American synagogues. In light of the strong conservatism of traditional Jewish liturgies, the relatively minor local variations would not normally cause serious problems. However, N. at times goes beyond the bounds of reasonable flexibility, as when he chooses to base his discussion of Jewish views of history on the *Had Gadya* (“One Only Kid”) song, a medieval rhyme included in standard Ashkenazic Passover *Haggadot* from the late middle ages. The song is of doubtful religious intention, and may have been composed as mere children’s doggerel. N., without any allusion to the limited provenance of the text, offers his interpretation of it as an allegory of the divine plan for history, as if this interpretation were an unchallenged fact. Such confusion of the borderlines between accepted fact and opinion occur too frequently for an introductory textbook.

The above flaw is symptomatic of the book's major shortcoming: an introduction to Judaism would begin with a presentation of fundamental information that can serve as the basis for discussion and analysis. N. has by-passed this necessary stage and leapt directly into the discussion of facts which have never been presented. This lacuna is not compensated by either the five-page "Table of Dates" inserted at the book's beginning, or by the companion volume of primary readings.

It is not entirely obvious why N. elected this particular manner for presenting his subject. The book strongly suggests that it grew out of N.'s interplay with students in classroom situations. Consequently, an inordinate amount of energy seems to be directed to the provocative debunking of the simplifications of Judaism that students may have brought to class from their religious schools. In the present context, where the actual reader cannot be presumed to have prior opinions, the approach does not succeed, as has been confirmed by the experience of at least one colleague who did assign an earlier version of the book for an undergraduate course. The result, as it turned out, was a pedagogic disaster.

These shortcomings might be turned to advantage if the book were used to supplement a more conventional introduction to Judaism. N.'s thought-provoking evaluations are likely to inspire productive classroom discussion among the students, as well as between the teacher and N., with whom he/she will find much occasion for disagreement.

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E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity, 1989) pp. x + 375. \$18.95 (U.S.) pb.

This book is intended to be a comprehensive guide for those who plan to study the Synoptic Gospels from a historical-critical perspective. Its attractive design and low cost certainly enhance its appeal as a textbook, especially given the present lack of alternatives. The book has five parts: the first (pp. 3-47) deals with introductory matters (authors, dates, genre, and purposes); the second (pp. 51-119) and third (pp. 123-97) explore the source-critical and form-critical issues; the fourth (pp. 201-98), looking more closely at each Gospel as a whole, discusses redaction criticism, structuralism, and rhetorical criticism before positing genres for Matthew, Mark and Luke; and the fifth (pp. 301-34) summarizes Gospel-based life of Jesus research. The



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