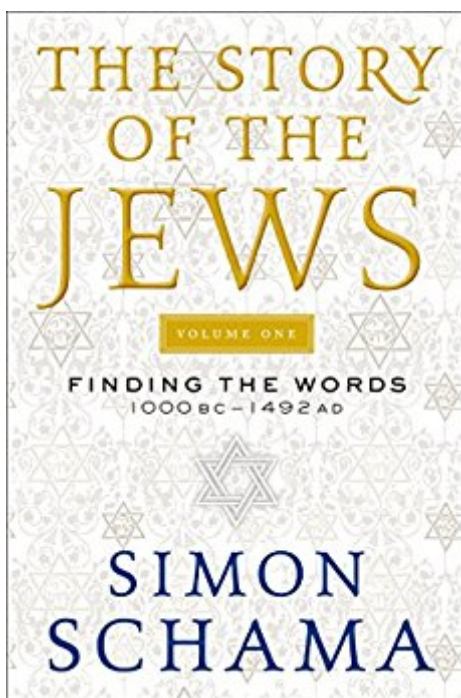


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The Story Of The Jews: Finding The Words 1000 BC-1492 AD



Synopsis

In this magnificently illustrated cultural history—the tie-in to the pbs and bbc series *The Story of the Jews*—Simon Schama details the story of the Jewish people, tracing their experience across three millennia, from their beginnings as an ancient tribal people to the opening of the new world in 1492. It is a story like no other: an epic of endurance in the face of destruction, of creativity in the face of oppression, joy amidst grief, the affirmation of life despite the steepest of odds. It spans the millennia and the continents—from India to Andalusia and from the bazaars of Cairo to the streets of Oxford. It takes you to unimagined places: to a Jewish kingdom in the mountains of southern Arabia; a Syrian synagogue glowing with radiant wall paintings; the palm groves of the Jewish dead in the Roman catacombs. And its voices ring loud and clear, from the severities and ecstasies of the Bible writers to the love poems of wine bibbers in a garden in Muslim Spain. In *The Story of the Jews*, the Talmud burns in the streets of Paris, massed gibbets hang over the streets of medieval London, a Majorcan illuminator redraws the world; candles are lit, chants are sung, mules are packed, ships loaded with gems and spices founder at sea. And a great story unfolds. Not—as often imagined—of a culture apart, but of a Jewish world immersed in and imprinted by the peoples among whom they have dwelled, from the Egyptians to the Greeks, from the Arabs to the Christians. Which makes the story of the Jews everyone's story, too.

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Customer Reviews

One can easily be forgiven for assuming that there's no "new" way to present Jewish history, but Simon Schama has done it in this book. The focus of "The Story of the Jews" is the Torah and Talmud and how the Jewish people developed their consciousness, observances and traditions in light of those works. Ranging from Persia to England, Schama describes how Jewish communities mingled the demands of religion with the demands of the various social and political environments they lived in. The writing is superb: flowing and touched with humor as well as with emotion. It is a book to read again and again.

This book is really well written and very easy to follow. It just wasn't what I thought it would be; it's more of a history of Jewish-ness - like, what does it mean to be Jewish at different places and times in antiquity - sometimes told out of sequence, than it is a history of "the Jews" as a social, political and geographic tale. As someone who is not Jewish I felt like I was missing a lot of references and meaning in the discourse about what it means to practice Judaism. Not a criticism of the book or of Schama at all, it just wasn't 100% for me and that's okay.

This book is an expansion of part of Prof Schama's superb TV documentary 'The Story of the Jews' which covered Jewish history from early to modern times. The volume takes us from settling the hill fort that became Jerusalem up until the massive persecution and eventual expulsion of the Jews in late mediaval Spain. I do hope a second volume is in preparation. Be prepared to have some cherished biblical tales questioned. For example despite much searching by Israeli and other archaeologists no traces have been found of any mass migration of the Israelites from Egypt. It is hinted that the so called Exodus was actually a marauding mob of Semitic tribesmen who were defeated and forced out of the country. Much later, under Greek domination Judaen soldiers and their families were imported to the Egyptian city of Elephantine on the Nile near Abu Simbal to guard the border against invasion. Detailed records of that settlement have been discovered, many on potsherds and the settlers even built another Temple although this was frowned upon by the Jerusalem Establishment. The ebook also contains a comprehensive supplement of photographs illustrating key parts of the text. All in all a long, detailed, and fascinating read.

All the books that enrich the history of the Jews deserve to be well received. In this sense, Simon Schama's book is very good for offering a chronology of landmark events in Jewish History. Schama dresses himself as an archaeologist and analyzes traces since 1000 BC. to 1492 AD. I am conscious that there are points in common with my book "Dutch Connection - The Jewish Saga From Spain To America", also available at www..com. It is good for the Jewish History as a whole. First of all, this first volume of Schama's work ends where I begin mine. But let us return to our historian. In precise narrative, he traverses meadows and deserts in this walk of about five thousand years. Schama works the history properly, but with detachment from the human truth accumulated by the Jews throughout the centuries. In certain passages he puts in check the divine value of sacred words. One of his favorite phrases is "If the Bible was right, as the Orthodox rabbis say (...)." However, the writer admits the importance of Deuteronomy in the formation of Jewish culture. In presenting the book, Simon makes it clear that he considers himself as "the" Jewish historian, not "a" Jewish historian. He says he was the only one to be chosen to continue Cecil Roth's work, but decided to build his own castle. "The Story of the Jews - Finding the Words 1000 BC-1492 AD" is his first monument in this way.

"The Story of the Jews" is filled with the history of the Jew's journey in this world. Their contributions; but most of all the difficulty of other religions relating to them. The Jews had to be tough, smart, and had a tenacity to survive amongst all odds. It makes the reader appreciate their history even to this day. The author has led me to appreciate and understand them even more because of the research that was done of their history. Religions can be good as well as evil to one another.

A very pragmatic point of view on the "talmudic history" of the Jews as juxtaposed with empirical, archeological data presented from the regional and contextual history of the Jews in those areas. Quite comparable to similar studies of "Biblical Christianity" and empirical, contextual Christian history in enlightened, modern interpretation of ancient belief systems. I found it very good reading.

As do all good historians, the author has brought to life the a 2500 year history of the Jewish people. I have read many such treatises in this subject and I think this one fired my imagination more than most that I can recall. One does not have to be Jewish to read it, and if you're not you probably should read this text.

As a book, this falls woefully short of other Schama's other projects, such as the wonderful *Power of Art*. A televised documentary -- which was the first from for this work -- is fundamentally "of the moment," with immersive visuals to absorb the viewer. Turning that experience into language is in this instance largely a failure, yielding an avalanche of verbal stuff that is hard to follow, often boring, and ineffective. "Big" ideas are at best tentatively suggested; at the other extreme, most of the concrete details (say, descriptions of objects) are not engaging. I expected to encounter a marvelous history of a people with a compelling religion and culture, but, instead, came away with thinking that most of what had been conveyed was truly ordinary, often trivial. If there is grandeur or triumph in Jewish history, it does not exist in this flabby, unfocused, tedious rendition of "stuff the Jews did." Surprisingly disappointing, this book reads like an uninspired group project dignified by a famous writer's name.

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