

The Word and the world

Gavin Jacobson revisits some of the landmarks of a 4,000-year journey in two very different but complementary histories of Judaism and Jewishness

- 1 **W**riting to Martin Buber, the existentialist philosopher, in May 1917, the Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig set out his most passionate views on what he called "the Jewish question". Seized by an irrepressible wanderlust, Zweig had spent the previous 10 years travelling throughout Europe, revelling in his being "homeless in the highest sense of the word", where all places felt like home.
- 2 Zweig's tribute to being a citizen of the world, liberated from the parochial confines of state borders was his own small act of defiance against the rise of fascism and the decay of liberal power in 20th-century Europe. It was a vision of the good life informed by his close reading of Jewish history and a keen awareness of Judaism as a worldly religion, one shaped by its cross-border interactions with other philosophies, cultures and faiths. As Martin Goodman writes in *A History of Judaism*, "Jewish people had been widely scattered for millennia, so that their religious ideas have often reflected, by either adoption or rejection, the wider non-Jewish world within which Jews have found themselves living."
- 3 Goodman charts the development of Judaism from its inception as "a distinctive form of religious life" in the first century AD, up to the 21st century. He is mostly interested in the relationship of Jews to the wider Graeco-Roman world, and it is within the period between antiquity and the end of the Middle Ages (around 2000BC-AD1500) that his account of the Jewish faith largely unfolds. He draws extensively on the writings of Flavius Josephus (AD37-AD100), a Jerusalem priest and historian who provided the earliest surviving theology of Judaism, to show how Jewish religion emerged among the polytheists of the ancient world. Yet Judaism's outward uniformity of practice and beliefs, Goodman shows, belied an extraordinary religious and liturgical 27.
- 4 That Judaism was freighted with internal disputes, such as over the interpretation and application of the Torah or the form of rites and rituals, is hardly surprising – doctrinal and ceremonial variation is a feature of all religions and philosophical traditions. But Goodman's main contention is that religiously motivated violence between Jews was uncommon. He does not suggest that the history of Judaism was free of internal disorder. Still, in his reading, nothing within Judaism was quite like the Christian wars of religion in Europe in the early modern period. Historically, Judaism has proved both malleable and resilient, capable of accommodating diverse interpretative traditions, moral codes and religious practices.

- 5 By charting the fortunes of Judaism over three millennia, Goodman is able to show how Judaism constantly absorbed and adapted new ideas, so that the religion was forever renewing itself. His discussion about the impact of Enlightenment philosophy on Judaism, for example, especially how Jewish philosophers such as Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) questioned the virtues of received truth, is just as assured as the treatment he gives on Hellenistic philosophers such as Philo of Alexandria (around 10BC-AD40), whose allegorical interpretations of the Torah were intended to synchronise Platonic thought with the law of Moses.
- 6 *A History of Judaism* is a definitive study. Goodman's singular learning is admirable, and the way he has synthesised an astonishing array of source material should be applauded. 29 the relentless vitality of Simon Schama's *The Story of the Jews*, Goodman's narrative can be ponderous and wearing. This is partly because Schama's book is about Jews whereas Goodman's focus is on theology. Goodman recognises that "Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people," and the book contains a vast gallery of theologians, prophets, intellectuals, historians and high priests. But too often they merely serve as receptacles into which Goodman injects various doctrines in order to advance his argument. The different political and cultural settings in which Judaism developed can be lost under the weight of biblical exegesis and scriptural exposition.
- 7 A far livelier, more approachable but no less illuminating work is Rebecca Abrams' *The Jewish Journey: 4000 Years in 22 Objects from the Ashmolean Museum*. Through 22 treasures housed in one of the oldest public galleries in the world, Abrams recounts the journeys of Jewish people from Ancient Mesopotamia to modern Europe. From a dazzling aquamarine perfume flask from the second millennium BC unearthed in Jericho, to a ceramic bowl found in Iraq; from amulets in France to wedding rings in Italy; and from Mark Gertler's painting "Gilbert Cannan and his Mill" (1916) to a camel figurine from the Chinese Tang dynasty, Abrams brilliantly chronicles the material dimension of Jewish life, and what she calls "a singular culture with myriad variations".
- 8 But Abrams' book is more than a history of the Jewish experience, and of how Jews have lived day-to-day over millennia both within and between continents. Combining flawless storytelling with intelligent curation (the book is also gorgeously illustrated), *The Jewish Journey* is a celebration of Jewish life in all of its worldly immensity, and reads like a tribute to the 32 ideals of Stefan Zweig, who wrote that "the purpose of Jewry is to show through the centuries that communion is possible even without soil, merely as the consequence of blood and spirit, merely by means of the Word and the faith."

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