

A  
HISTORY OF  
THE  
JEWS

ABRAM LEON SACHAR

complete history of thirty centuries of Judaism, in which due emphasis  
given to the economic, social, and environmental factors as well as to  
purely religious and philosophical development. With four maps.

FIFTH EDITION • REVISED AND ENLARGED

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A HISTORY  
OF  
THE JEWS

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by  
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*President of Brandeis University*

FIFTH EDITION, REVISED AND ENLARGED



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*To*  
*MY*  
*PARENTS*

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## PREFACE TO THE FIFTH EDITION

NEARLY thirty-five years have passed since this volume was published. Now, some nineteen printings and four editions later, I have found it necessary once again to effect major revisions in the text, primarily in its last chapters. The events of the past few decades have been cataclysmic beyond human imagination. For the chronicler of Jewish history, the changes of our own generation have surely been more profound than those that occurred during any other period in the annals of the Jewish people since the fall of the Second Commonwealth in A.D. 70.

Which of us even twenty-five years ago would have conceived that a Europe steeped in the traditions of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, of classical liberalism and public, secular education, was capable of methodically destroying its entire Jewish community? In one terrifying convulsion, world Jewry was deprived of a third of its population; the entire demographic structure of Jewish life was thereafter altered more traumatically and irretrievably than at any time in its long and tragic history.

Conversely, only a generation ago the dream of a Jewish National Home in Palestine was still equated with an autonomous enclave within the British imperial system, a kind of sheltered agricultural experiment station, dependent for protection upon a garrison of some one hundred thousand British troops. Today that garrison is gone. An Israeli army has taken its place. The Star of David waves from flagpoles where once the Union Jack fluttered. Two and a quarter million inhabitants, an ingathering of Jews from the far corners of the

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earth, are the proud citizens of a resurgent sovereign nation. Foreign ambassadors present their credentials to a Jewish president. Israeli delegates in the United Nations vote on issues affecting the fate and fortune of other nations, a dramatic change from the time, only yesterday, when the destiny of the Jews was almost totally dependent upon the good will, or lack of it, of the non-Jewish world.

These two revolutions in recent Jewish history—the destruction of Jewry's European hinterland, and the rebirth of its independent homeland—the one a tragedy of unimaginable proportions, the other an event pregnant with incalculable opportunities for creativity and enrichment, would surely of themselves require a basic revision in any volume dealing with Jewish life. But there is another factor, as well, which suggests the need for continual reassessment. Jewish historiography has grown enormously in the past thirty-five years. Thousands of articles, many hundreds of books, nearly a score of learned journals, have appeared to provide a new depth and dimension to our understanding of the Jewish scene. I cannot claim to have incorporated even a fraction of this extensive bibliography in my revision. But I believe that enough new material has been included in the section on the modern period to provide a significantly better focus and perspective.

My basic approach, however, to the writing of a history of the Jews, has not altered since those days—they seem so long ago—when I first embarked on this project as a junior member of the history department at the University of Illinois. It seemed to me then, as it does now, that the task of interpreting more than three thousand years of Jewish history was far too presumptuous for one man to take upon himself. Such an undertaking ought properly to be organized as a kind of Cambridge Jewish History, the collective effort of many historians, each providing chapters or sections in the area of his specialty. Yet such a joint enterprise did not appear to be in the offing in the late 1920's, nor unaccount-

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ably, has it in the decades that have followed. Thus, it seemed to me a vacuum continued to exist in the field of Jewish historiography. The volumes that addressed themselves to the totality of the Jewish experience were, and still are, primarily religious or social in their interpretation. The impact of secular forces upon the Jews has been largely ignored.

My aim, therefore, in undertaking a one-volume survey of Jewish history was, at least temporarily, to bridge this gap: to set down, first of all, in as lucid a fashion as possible, the salient events, ideas, and influences that have shaped the destiny of the Jews and their role on the world scene; and, secondly (because I was trained as a European historian, and was deeply influenced by the schools of Robinson and Beard), to pay what I considered proper attention to economic, political, and diplomatic factors, as well as to the purely social and religious. In the subsequent editions of the book, I have continued, as far as possible, to stress this diversified interaction between Jewish and non-Jewish life. For this approach has more validity than ever before.

In the preface to the first edition I expressed my indebtedness to many helpful friends. It was possible then to list by name those who had generously shared with me their specialized information and experience. Through subsequent revisions my obligation to others has grown manifold, especially during my trips to Europe, Israel, Asia, and Latin America. Accordingly, it is no longer possible to express my appreciation to these countless benefactors—many of whom unhappily are no longer with us—within the limits of a few paragraphs, or even a few pages. Only to my wife, the companion of my public as well as my private life, and the partner of its sacrifices no less than its creative satisfactions, must my thanks once again be extended for her sustaining patience and devotion.

Waltham, Massachusetts

August 1, 1964




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**PART ONE**

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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

#### I. THE PROCESSION OF PEOPLES

WE usually begin the story of Western civilization in the little bow-shaped strip of territory known as the Fertile Crescent, skirting the vast Arabian desert. It is, on the whole, a grudging soil, nourished by few life-giving rivers, uninviting, surrounded by sheet rock and burning sand. Yet it has offered an irresistible temptation to countless peoples. Its history has been an unceasing struggle between the northern mountain folk and the southern desert nomads for possession of its few and scattered fertile districts. Today the great wastes and uninspiring ruins, scorched by the blasting summer sun and whipped by the dreary winter rain, cause the tourist to wonder how this, of all areas, could be the nursery of Western civilization. His guide-book, however, marshals the relentless facts. Here tradition has placed the garden of Eden. Here were built the splendid empires of the Sumerians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Hittites, the Chaldeans, and the other ancient peoples who stormed and fretted for brief periods and then were gone for ever. Here, moreover, were enacted the spirit-moving scenes which made Palestine the holy shrine of three powerful religions.

The little Crescent world, however, was long in preparing itself for the actors who were to make it immortal. The Semitic races were comparative late-comers on the scene. For tens of thousands of years other forgotten races had lived there, slowly working through successive stages which have marked the progress of every historical people. Men fought with animals and with each other for possession of rude and vile-smelling cave homes. They discovered new metals which helped them to control nature and conquer their enemies. They learned to draw sustenance from the soil and to dress themselves with skins crudely sewed together with bone needles. They developed institutions with which to regulate their simple society. Undoubtedly they relied upon primitive practices, forms of magic rather than of religion, to bend the spirits to their bidding, pouring water over cliffs to induce the rain to fall, sacrificing animals, or even human beings, to propitiate the unseen supernatural powers which they dreaded. The light of history is not yet powerful enough to illuminate those long, dark periods, so that we know little about them, except that civilization moved along lazily, unconcernedly, as if unable or unwilling, in the climate of the area, to bestir itself.



The light is still very dim when it begins to play on the fourth millennium B.C., but certain forms are now vaguely to be distinguished. On the fertile soil between the Tigris and the Euphrates, the choicest spot of the ancient world, lived a sturdy race, the Sumerians, already advanced to a high degree of culture. They were a non-Semitic people, part of the great white race, capable and energetic. They probably invented cuneiform writing, cumbersome indeed and inadequate, but a vast improvement over the pictographic writing which preceded it. They were far enough advanced to fashion utensils of copper, though they had not yet learned to manufacture the sturdier bronze. They could cut gems with a fair degree of artistry; some of their personal seals, cut in stone, were unequalled by those of any ancient Oriental people.

Most of them lived in towns, in little groups of houses, built usually of the baked clay which was plentiful in the valley. They brought water into these towns and into their fields by a system of artificially constructed canals. Agriculture was, of course, a long and arduous process, but it was less primitive among them than among any people of their little world. They understood the simple movements of the stars. Already, so early, they had developed a faith and a system of religious practices regulated by a priesthood, the first known priesthood, indeed, in all history. We have remains of imposing tower-temples, later imitated by the Babylonians, and destined to become the ancestors of our church steeples.

While the Sumerians built their cities and their temples and wrote boastful memoirs into their baked tablets, other non-Semitic races were established in Palestine and Syria, less gifted, but settled, progressive, and quick to lend themselves to the influences which came from the Euphrates and the Nile.<sup>1</sup> In between, wherever life was possible, wherever good soil or water beckoned, there were tiny communities — men struggling with nature and with each other for food and wealth; women bearing heavy burdens and ministering to their lords and masters; children, sallow and drawn from drinking bad water, playing near tents and huts; sheep and cattle grazing on meagre grass-land. Endless tribes, sprung from obscurest corners of nowhere, living out simple, forgotten existences.

Into this area came the historic Semites, probably from the desert which lay on its outskirts. The desert has been a most potent force in the development of the life and thought of the ancient world. From its depths nomads have been pouring out, clan by clan, since the dawn of history, hunting for food and for better soil, drawn to the Fertile Crescent as by an irresistible magnet. Sometimes it has been a leisurely emergence, a few families or tribes at a time,

<sup>1</sup> Recent excavations of ancient sites in Palestine reveal the presence, among the earliest inhabitants, of a race of New Stone men who dwelt in caves and grottoes and burnt their dead in crude crematoriums, and who may have been the Horim of the Biblical narrative. How long they lived on in Palestine cannot be ascertained.