

BOOK REVIEW

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***The Norton Anthology of World Religions: Judaism.* David Biale (ed.). Series edited by Jack Miles. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015. Pp. xxxviii + 722. ISBN 978-0-393-91258-6.**

Reviewed by: Catherine Hezser, SOAS, University of London

This compendium with texts from all periods of Jewish history is part of the six volume Norton Anthology of World Religions. As such, it is meant to provide a broad and representative overview of Jewish textual production from the Bible and Talmud to modern Hebrew poetry. It seems to be primarily meant for students of introductory courses to Judaism. Instructors need to make choices and direct students to the texts that fit their teaching outlines. The general reader, whether a practitioner or outsider, may easily feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of material offered. Several questions arise: Does the structure of the volume focus on the most important aspects of Jewish religious culture? Are the texts presented here the ones that are most important and representative? How useful for teaching purposes is the choice of texts (and images) offered here, together with their brief introductions and appendices (glossary and selected bibliography) at the end of the volume? Obviously, one needs to take into account that any selection would, to some extent, represent the perspective and preferences of the editor, even if he tries to be as unbiased as possible to make his collection reflect Judaism as a whole. The editor of this volume is Professor of Jewish History at the University of California, and his particular expertise is in modern European Jewish cultural history. His pluralistic American Jewish perspective probably reflects the background of most of the intended readers of this volume.

The volume is arranged chronologically, from First Temple literature to the Shoah, Zionism, and secular Judaism in the Twentieth Century. Obviously, with such a long span of history and so many sub-categories, only a few texts can be presented under each rubric. Nevertheless, as far as antiquity is concerned, one wonders why so much space is given to biblical texts (readily available in the various Bible editions) and the Dead Sea Scrolls in

comparison with Jewish Hellenistic literature (only one text from Philo and one from Josephus are included). The arrangement of rabbinic material is rather odd: “Law and Legend” are distinguished from “The Oral Torah”, although they are part of it; the chronologically later Babylonian Talmud is given precedence over the Jerusalem Talmud, amoraic Midrashim and even tannaitic documents (Tosefta). Texts of early Jewish mysticism appear under “Synagogue and Liturgy” rather than under the separate rubric “Mysticism” that begins with the Zohar. A relatively large amount of space is given to medieval Jewish texts, especially to Sephardic philosophy and poetry and Ashkenasic Hasidism, much less to legal Responsa and commentaries. The few entries under “Women’s Spirituality/Voices” and “Feminist Thinkers” do not seem to properly reflect women’s contribution to modern Judaism (e.g., feminist interpretations of traditional texts; women’s fight for admission to the rabbinate). While modern Jewish philosophy is well represented, one looks in vain for literary voices that reflect the ambiguities of immigration and assimilation (e.g., Anzia Yezierska and Mary Antin). The sixteen colour images, printed together in the centre of the volume, are not arranged chronologically and constitute a rather haphazard collection.

As far as the volume’s usefulness for teaching purposes is concerned, it is unlikely that someone would use the entire volume as a textbook for a course. A pick-and-choose method by which particular texts are chosen and supplemented by others is more likely. One may argue that more limited collections which focus on particular time periods, such as L.H. Schiffman’s *Texts and Traditions* (1998) for antiquity and P. Mendes-Flohr/Reinhartz’ *The Jew in the Modern World* (1980), are preferable.