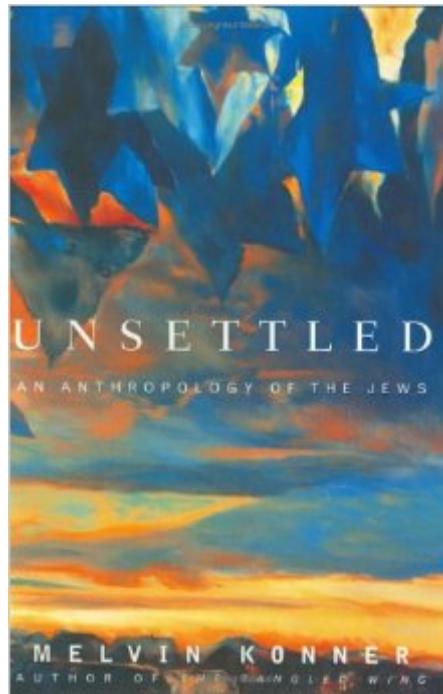


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Unsettled: An Anthropology Of The Jews



Synopsis

In this intellectually rich and passionately written history, anthropologist Melvin Konner takes the whole sweep of Western civilization as his canvas and onto it places the Jewish people and faith. Drawing on archaeological findings, census data, religious texts, diaries, poetry, oral histories, and more, Konner shows how the Jews shaped the world around them and how this largely hostile but at times accepting world shaped Jewish practice, culture, and success. We see how the facts of oppression and ongoing diaspora led to the rise of Jewish literacy, education, trade, and influence that continue to make their mark today. Konner takes the reader from the pastoral tribes of the Bronze Age to enslavement in the Roman Empire, from the converses fleeing the Spanish Inquisition to eighteenth-century European villages, from the darkness of the Holocaust to the creation of Israel and the flourishing of Jews in America. The result is a unique and comprehensive portrait of the major events, people, traditions, and turning points of the Jewish people and faith. Filled with vivid images and fresh historical interpretations, *Unsettled promises* to take its place next to Paul Johnson's *History of the Jews* and Thomas Cahill's *The Gifts of the Jews*.

Book Information

Hardcover: 528 pages

Publisher: Viking Adult; First Edition edition (September 29, 2003)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0670032441

ISBN-13: 978-0670032440

Product Dimensions: 6.5 x 1.6 x 9.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.9 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (19 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,093,369 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #940 inÂ Books > Religion & Spirituality > Judaism > History #1314 inÂ Books > History > World > Religious > Judaism #3770 inÂ Books > History > World > Jewish

Customer Reviews

This book could be more accurately described as a collection of essays by a scholar with specific interests in selected topics of Jewish history. The most notable omission is the lack of discussion of Jewish experience outside the Middle East except for Spain, North Africa, Ethiopia, China, and Cochin. There is nothing about the great migration of Jews into the tolerant Polish Commonwealth, so there is nothing about the role of Jews in Eastern Europe until Zionism and anti-Semitism spring

up in the nineteenth century. He describes the destruction of the Jewish communities in Poland, but how did they get there and what was their anthropology? I bought the book to find out, but there was nothing. Also, his footnotes and bibliography make no reference to sources that place this vital topic in a wider historical context, as a general history of Eastern Europe or even of Jews in the Habsburg Monarchy, for example, or Russia. What is the culture that gave us Freud, Marx, and Mahler? Nothing on that. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a refuge for Jews from Western Europe. Nothing on that. This is definitely not a book for the general reader.

This is not a straight dry history book. It is an anthropological account of a people who have survived despite all odds. The author delves into the intellectual, sociological and economical reasons as he goes around the globe to tell the story. There have been better histories told about the Jews of Eastern Europe but not necessarily from this perspective. However, the accounts of Jews in Ethiopia, China, Uzbekistan, to name a few are eye opening. The Bible calls the Israelites a stiff-necked people. Perhaps, without realizing it, the author explains that in essence, this is the reason for Jewish survival through the ages. No matter the tyrant, king, oppression, opportunity, the Jewish people kept to the principles of their faith. This is a good read.

Some of the other five-star reviews, in particular Gerard J. Delaunay and J. Davis, give, in my opinion, a good summary of this excellent work by Konner. I read the same author's "The Tangled Wing" and was interested to see how he would handle such a huge subject as Jewish history/anthropology. (Konner's interests are very wide ranging; he wrote, in addition to "The Tangled Wing," an early, perhaps the first, book on the now famous Paleo diet and a book on the history of childhood, among others.) Though of course the book is not comprehensive or exhaustive (how could a one-volume work on the 3,000-year history of any subject be?), it does provide a nice overview of Jewish history, tying in culture, religion, and even anthropology (as one would expect). And even though I thought the two-star reviews added some valid criticisms, they weren't enough for me personally to detract from the great merits of the book. It made Jewish history interesting enough for me, a non-Jew, to want to read more, which I'm sure the author would find gratifying. And, as usual for this author, the writing is excellent, as other reviewers have pointed out.

As an avid reader of history, I purchased this book expecting a historical survey of Jewish history from an anthropologist's point of view. It is not really a history at all, but a collection of anecdotes and interesting observations. That would be fine, if they were held together with a coherent theme. Or

held together at all. The author does not even seem able to put together a cohesive chapter. He jumps all over the place and it makes a difficult, at times painful read. It really needs an editor, and if it had one, they should be fired for poor work. The author also makes factual mistakes. One that jumps out is a claim that only Jewish culture used the lunar calendar. This is false. China used the lunar calendar throughout its long history, right into the 20th century. I also found the survey of ancient Jewish history to be weak: no context at all is provided about the area or its people and the author's conclusions are arrived at with little supporting evidence or even argument. For example much is made of a single inscription in a stone from 1200 BC. Overall the book is more of a personal journey by the author into his cultural roots, than it is a systematic or well thought-out study. If you want the later, don't buy this book.

The 3,000 year old history of the Jews has been the subject of many one volume works, and some many volume masterpieces. It is impossible to be "comprehensive" so the author has to select certain episodes to construct a winning narrative. Melvin Konner succeeds because he is such a talented writer. This book has the flavor of a James Michener novel as opposed to a dry scholarly tome. Take a look at just two examples of his writing: "The roots of the Jews are lost in the deep, blood-soaked mud of ancient empire." And speaking about Jacob wrestling with the angel, Konner writes: "But of course it is not just Jacob who limps away hurt, with a new name. It is all his descendants, destined, he has been told, to be as numerous as the stars. ISRAEL: a whole nation of God-wrestlers, striving and undaunted, hurt but not subdued." True there are many areas of Jewish history that are passed over. Rather than include everything, Konner searches for nodal points that changed the Jewish outlook. I especially liked the chapter entitled: "Women of Valor; How Jewish Women broke the Patriarchal Bonds." If the reader wants a handle on what makes the Jewish people so important in world history, this is the book to read.

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