Sacha Stern and Charles Burnett, eds.


*Time, Astronomy, and Calendars in the Jewish Tradition* investigates the “traditional association, in a specifically Jewish, ancient and medieval context” between the calculation of time (and calendars) and the science of astronomy (xiii). It is the third book in Brill’s five-volume *Time, Astronomy, and Calendars: Texts and Studies* series—a series that covers a broad geological and temporal swath, spanning from Antiquity to the Early Modern period, from Western Europe to the Near East and beyond, with the ambitious aim of uncovering and exploring the complex interplay of cultures, religions, and languages that contributed to the historic, and current, understanding of time, timekeeping, chronology, astronomy, and calendar development. The other volumes in this series are *Dating the Passion*, by C. Philipp E. Nothaft; *A Survey of European Astronomical Tables in the Late Middle Ages*, by José Chabás and Bernard R. Goldstein; *Medieval Latin Christian Texts on the Jewish Calendar*, by Nothaft; and *Essays on Medieval Computational Astronomy*, by Chabás and Goldstein.

This volume stands out among its companion texts in that it is an edited work. Featuring twelve article-like chapters contributed by thirteen specialists from a wide range of international institutions, it focuses almost exclusively on (as the title indicates) a distinctively Jewish perspective of astronomy, cosmology, and the history of the Jewish calendar. The wealth of information presented in these collected chapters could be taken as an advantage or a weakness, depending on the reader’s needs. The topics covered are quite specialized, and the writing is not geared toward a general audience. The text is often heavy, with footnotes providing context and translations for blocks of untranslated text, and the book includes no comprehensive glossary or index to help the reader navigate the complex subject matter. But to students of Jewish history and culture and to academics whose familiarity with the history of time and calendars may derive primarily from a Western Christian or other non-Jewish cultural vantage point, an international, interdisciplinary collection like this, which brings together new translations and evaluations of Jewish, Islamic, and Christian source materials, would be quite valuable. The chapters are highly detailed, well referenced, and fittingly illustrated, which makes perusing this volume all the more stimulating.

The book’s diverse material and edited structure is a result of its origins. This volume grew from a conference that celebrated and expanded on the results of a major University College London research project, “Medieval Monographs on the Jewish Calendar,” the chief objective of which was “to produce new editions, with translation and commentary, of the 12th-century calendar.
monographs of Abraham b. Hiyya, Jacob b. Samson, and Abraham ibn Ezra.” The conference extended the project’s scope “to astronomy and calendars in the whole of ancient and medieval Jewish tradition,” and ultimately resulted in this volume of collected articles that, together, aim to disseminate “new, ongoing research in the related fields of Jewish astronomy and calendars” to a worldwide audience. The stated purpose of this volume, according to its editors, Sacha Stern and Charles Burnett, is to “convey a sense of the continuous, developing tradition of Jewish astronomy and calendars through Antiquity and the Middle Ages, in its broader context of interaction with Hellenistic, Christian, and Islamic science and culture,” thereby demonstrating “the broad relevance of astronomy and calendars to many aspects of Jewish, and more generally ancient and medieval, culture and social history” (xxi).

For the most part, this book lives up to its objective. The various, and very different, chapters range in topic from evaluations of religious texts, scientific instruments, and astronomical tables to hygiene and dietary calendars, but they work together as a unit, piecing together the development and transmission of Jewish calendrical knowledge and associated practices and traditions by emphasizing original research and fresh interpretations of sources both well-known and recently discovered.

The first chapter, by Dr. Jonathan Ben-Dov, an expert on ancient Jewish time reckoning, astronomy, prophesy, and biblical historiography, establishes the tone and scholarly style of the rest of the volume with an analysis of 1 Enoch: specifically, 1 Enoch 72–82—what the author terms the Astronomical Book, or “AB”—which is apparently the earliest “Jewish work that engages with astronomy” and which can be considered “scientific.” (2). This chapter makes use of recently discovered Aramaic fragments of the text published in the 1990s and subsequent related scholarship to focus on how Roman Egypt received and reacted to the work and its “astronomical teaching” in its Greek translation.

Other chapter topics include François de Blois’s investigation of Islamic and Christian sources on the Jewish Calendar from the ninth to eleventh centuries; Marina Rustow and Sacha Stern’s “The Jewish Calendar Controversy of 921–22: Reconstructing the Manuscripts and their Transmission History”; Dr. Ilana Wartenberg’s “The Hebrew Calendrical Bookshelf of the Early Twelfth Century: The Cases of Abraham bar Hiyya and Jacob bar Samson”; and C. Philipp E. Nothaft’s concluding piece, “Me pudet audire Iudeum talia scire: A Late Medieval Latin School Text on the Jewish Calendar.” This last chapter investigates late medieval Christian treatises on the Jewish calendar and the perceivable tension between the medieval authors’ “theological hostility towards Judaism” and their “grudging admiration” for “the unsettling finesse of the Jewish lunisolar calendar”—something that Nothaft described as “a source

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