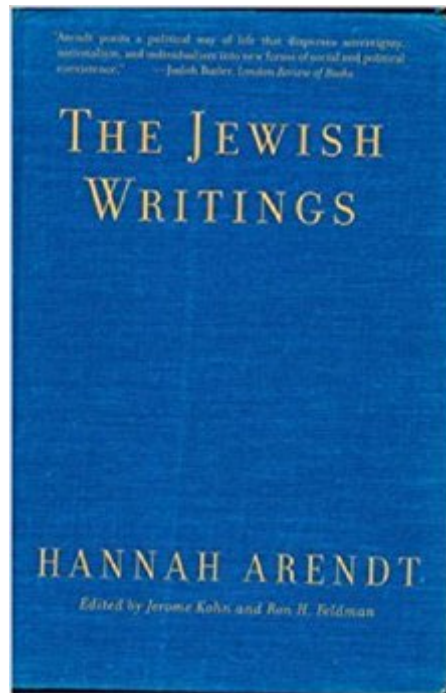




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The Jewish Writings



Synopsis

Although Hannah Arendt is not primarily known as a Jewish thinker, she probably wrote more about Jewish issues than any other topic. As a young adult in Germany, she wrote about German Jewish history. After moving to France in 1933, she helped Jewish youth immigrate to Palestine. During her years in Paris, her principle concern was the transformation of antinomianism from prejudice to policy, which would culminate in the Nazi "final solution." After France fell, Arendt escaped from an internment camp and made her way to America. There she wrote articles calling for a Jewish army to fight the Nazis. After the war, she supported the creation of a Jewish homeland in a binational (Arab-Jewish) state of Israel. Arendt's original conception of political freedom cannot be fully grasped apart from her experience as a Jew. In 1961 she attended Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem. Her report, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, provoked an immense controversy, which culminated in her virtual excommunication from the worldwide Jewish community. Today that controversy is the subject of serious re-evaluation, especially among younger people in the United States, Europe, and Israel. The publication of *The Jewish Writings*—much of which has never appeared before—traces Arendt's life and thought as a Jew. It will put an end to any doubts about the centrality, from beginning to end, of Arendt's Jewish experience.

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Customer Reviews

"Arendt posits a political way of life that disperses sovereignty, nationalism, and individualism into new forms of social and political coexistence."—Judith Butler, *London Review of Books*
"Arendt's experience as a Jew was sometimes that of an eyewitness and

sometimes that of an actor and sufferer of events, all of which run the risk of partiality; but it was also always that of a judge, which means that she looked at those events and, insofar as she was in them, at herself from the outside. Her Jewish writings from more than thirty years are less exemplifications of Arendt's political ideas at work than the experiential ground from which those ideas grew and developed. It is in this sense that her experience as a Jew is literally the foundation of her thought: it supports her thinking even when she is not thinking about Jews or Jewish questions.

— From the preface by Jerome Kohn

Hannah Arendt was born in Hanover, Germany, in 1906, fled to Paris in 1933, and came to the United States after the outbreak of World War II. She was the editorial director of Schocken Books from 1946 to 1948, and taught at Berkeley, Cornell, Princeton, the University of Chicago, and The New School for Social Research. Arendt died in 1975.

Her writing is most of the time very difficult to unravel, and I could not read most of this highly abstract text. However, I carefully read the last chapters, about the State of Israel, and was astounded by the accuracy of her analysis and vision.

As a writer affiliated with the bi-nationalists the critique of nationalism is appropriately directed against the Nation-State concept although it recedes from a rejection of nationalism per se. National-identity however is to be differentiated from nationalism as a statist ideology. The Hans Kohn model of exclusive and inclusive nationalism falters on this point.

Hannah Arendt is known today primarily as the political thinker who provided a fundamental understanding of 'Totalitarianism'. Her work explores the meaning of the human condition. And her thought often involves a profound exploration of the etymology of basic concepts of thought and experience. In this comprehensive collection of her writings on Jewish - related subjects we come to better understand how her experience as a Jew played a formative role in her thinking. In his illuminating introduction Jerome Kohn tells of how Arendt as a schoolchild when taunted by Anti-Semitic remarks by other pupils, did not flinch and run, but rather followed her mother's instruction, stood proudly and answered back. This 'fighting spirit' no doubt also played a central role in her urging during the Second World War the creation of an independent Jewish fighting force which would give shape and meaning to Jewish political identity. Kohn sees Arendt as having gone through a number of stages in her relation to her Jewish identity. In the first phase in which she wrote 'Rahel

Varnhagen' she was very much concerned with the effect of the Enlightenment on Jewish identity. In a second phase when Anti- Semitism began to threaten the very existence of German Jewry she was forced to confront the rejection of herself as German national. When the war clouds thundered and the threat to European Jewry became more palpable she escaped to France. There she entered the world of action, the world central to the political meaning of her thought. She worked for Youth Aliyah helping young people make their way to the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine. In one of the most moving documents in the work she urges a young person, distressed at the thought that his parents will not be able to go with him, to think not only of his own future but of that of the larger Jewish community. After her internment at Gurs and her escape she made her way to the United States. Here was ushered in her most active period of Jewish writing. Writing for the German-Jewish 'Aufbau' she urged the creation of a Jewish military force. She saw in the inability of the Jews to defend themselves, not only a physical danger but a threat to their communal integrity. After the war when she began to become more widely known as a political thinker. (The 'Origins of Totalitarianism' her breakthrough book was published in 1951.) she wrote less about Jewish issues. However when Eichmann was captured she requested from the 'New Yorker' to be its correspondent at the trial. The result was her most controversial work 'Eichmann in Jerusalem' in which she spoke of the 'banality of evil' and in also indicting the Jewish communal leadership caused a sharp break between herself and much of the Jewish world. My own personal take on this story is that this was Arendt's 'worst moment' and her moment of failure. Despite Kohn's defense of her, and despite the fact that a number of Israeli scholars have risen to her defense any close and clear-minded reader of this book can see that she displayed in it a somewhat aloof, arrogant and cold tone towards the victims. No less than Gershom Scholem who had once been a friend and defender disassociated himself from her because of this coldness. Clearly Arendt's relationship to her Jewishness is a central and complex theme in her story. This present work gives the evidential base upon which to judge her words if not all her deeds. It is an important work which will enable scholars and thinkers to further probe her life and thought. I myself prefer to think of her primarily as the woman of action who in the hour of the Jewish people's greatest need did work to rescue young people and send them to what would become the state of Israel.

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