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Paul Johnson's America

by [Hadley Arkes](#)

On A History of the American People by Paul Johnson

Henry James describes, in one of his short stories, a writer of unabated success, and remarks that “it was not given her not to please.” In the case of the English historian Paul Johnson, it is not given him to write dull or opaque sentences, even on some rather abstruse and complicated subjects that do not figure to command a popular audience. For many good, imperishable reasons, we are not apt to see a musical version of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. And yet, one has the sense that, if Paul Johnson tried his hand at a work expounding Kant, he would somehow make a bestseller of it. He is not himself a biblical scholar, and yet he wrote a *History of the Jews* that could be read, with profit and satisfaction, by people who were well-tutored in the arcana of Jewish theology. One friend, learned in these matters, was quite astonished at the range of writings that Johnson managed to cover—and to explain ...

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