Book Review


What sets Jainism: A Guide for the Perplexed apart from other books on Jainism is that it explores fundamental aspects of Jainism through the narratives of the Jain community. The advantage of this approach is, as Arvind Sharma writes in his blurb on the back of the book, that it ‘teaches Jainism the way it is learnt by those who follow it—through stories’. The stories discussed in the book form part of the cultural memory of Jainism. As functional memory they are the resources that the Jain community can draw upon for maintaining, re-establishing and developing their identity as a community across time and space. In 1992, Paul Dundas had in The Jains criticised the fact that so far Western scholarship has not in a serious manner ‘retrieved Jainism for the Jain community or mediated the tradition to it’ (p. 9). Jainism: A Guide for the Perplexed is a very laudable step in this direction. It should be of interest not only for students and academics but also for Jains themselves who, maybe from a diaspora perspective, want to know more about the context of the stories they might have known since early childhood.

The title of the book, Jainism: A Guide for the Perplexed, suggests that the volume is an introductory book about Jainism for those who find it difficult to understand what Jainism is all about. However, in Chapter 1 the author herself remarks that the book does not aim to introduce Jainism in all its breadth and detail but that it is ‘designed to complement the books that already do this’ (p. 2). After reading the book I agree with this. As a first book on Jainism I would recommend Paul Dundas’ classic The Jains (1992) or for a shorter introduction, maybe as part of an undergraduate survey course on Indian religions, Robert Zydenbos’s Jainism Today and its Future (2006). For those who are interested in the more philosophical elements of Jainism, Jeffrey Long’s Jainism: An Introduction (2009) is also a good read. Jainism: A Guide for the Perplexed would then be a good recommendation as a second book, especially for readers who are interested in the narratives of the Indian traditions.

In the first chapter, the book addresses the context of the Jain narratives. The author places Jainism into the scheme of the ‘three paths’ (path of works, path of knowledge, path of devotion) that is sometimes used to conceptualise the historical development of Hinduism. Fohr writes: ‘Both Jainism and Buddhism were founded after “the path of works” was already well established (but still changing), and while “the path of knowledge” was developing’ (p. 4). It is interesting to see Jainism discussed in the more general context of Indian culture but some remarks in the section could easily give the impression that Jainism was an offshoot of a more or less unified Hindu tradition. As the origins of Jainism are not easily traceable, it would have been very useful to have some references in the section that clarify the current state of scholarly debate.
Chapter 2 explores the question of why Jainism, unlike Buddhism, has survived in India until the present day. The argument is that Jainism did survive mainly because Jain renouncers had to stay itinerant and poor, and it ‘is difficult to destroy a religion in which the pillars of that religion (i.e. renouncers) have no fixed abode’ (p. 19). The issues of laxity and lay support are illustrated with a story from Hemacandra’s *The Lives of the Jain Elders*.

The third chapter discusses Jain ethics through the story of Mahavira, the last refounder of Jainism. This story is one of the foundational myths of the tradition, and also a role model for the life of every Jain today. The Jain story of the heroic wife Damayanti is discussed as an exemplar for nuns and laywomen. The Hindu version of Damayanti’s story is one of the standard texts that Sanskrit students translate, and the chapter could be used as a supplementary reading in such a course. Drawing on different sections of the aforementioned texts, the fifth chapter provides examples of how Jain narratives can guide laymen in their lives. The last section contains the fascinating story of Bahubali and his brother Bharata which forms the basis of the Mahamastakabhisheka, the most famous Jain ritual that is held every twelve years at Shravanabelagola in Karnataka.

One minor point concerns the choice of the cover image. It is not at all clear to me what lemon peel has to do with Jainism. As the cover image is the only picture included in the book, this is a missed chance to give the reader some form of visual impression of the Jain tradition. The book contains an index and a glossary which explains the most important terms. The bibliography shows that Fohr has a good knowledge of the relevant literature in Jain studies.

Melanie Barbato  
LMU Munich  
Cluj Center for Indian Studies