

New, revised edition of Rabbi Eckstein's bestselling classic
WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT JEWS AND JUDAISM



HOW FIRM A FOUNDATION

A Gift of Jewish Wisdom for Christians and Jews

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CHAPTER 1

FOUNDATIONS OF JEWISH BELIEF

Torah

To speak of the Jew and his faith is to focus on the quintessential dimension of that faith, Torah. It is the Torah that brings solace, inner strength, and spiritual fulfillment to the Jew during times of joy, security, and prosperity, as well as during periods of wandering, suffering, and adversity. It is the Torah that guides the Jew's path, shapes his character, and links him with ultimacy. The Torah is the lens through which the Jew perceives life and reality; it is that which unites him indissolubly with his fellow Jew. The Torah is the very lifeblood of the Jewish people.

The term *Torah* has a variety of connotations. Etymologically, it means "teachings," not "law," as it is so often mistranslated. In its broadest sense, Torah means "correct" or "properly Jewish," as in "leading a Torah way of life." More narrowly, it refers to all Jewish religious writings, including the Hebrew Scriptures, Talmud, *responsa* literature, rabbinic commentaries, and others. The term is most generally used, however, in reference to the Bible or written scriptures that Jews refer to as the *Tanakh* and Christians refer to as the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. In its narrowest sense, the term *Torah* refers to the five books of Moses, or *Pentateuch*.

The traditional view of the Torah in its narrowest sense is that it is the embodiment of God's word par excellence; the *sine qua non* of our knowledge of God and of the divine will for man. Although given to the people of Israel at a particular juncture in history, it is, nevertheless, eternally valid and authoritative. Everything there is to know about life, claim the rabbis, can be derived from the Torah. "Turn it around and inside out and everything is in it." As the psalmist declared, "the law [Torah] of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul" (Ps. 19:7). Without the Torah man has precious little knowledge of God and the divine intent, nor of the means by which he might link up with them.

The Torah is divine in the sense that every word and letter—even the designs or "crowns" on top of the letters as they appear written in the parchment scrolls—are believed to have been revealed by God. The rabbis regarded the concept of *torah mishamayim*, or "torah from heaven" (i.e., its divinity), as one of the most central of all Jewish affirmations. (The term *the rabbis* is used throughout this book in reference to the collective body of rabbis through the centuries, but particularly those in the Talmudic Period. See below.) They tell a *midrash* (a homiletic story) of how Moses sought reassurance from God that all his efforts in bringing the children of Israel out of Egypt and giving them the Torah would not be in vain and that the Torah would continue to be studied and practiced long after him.

God, according to the midrash, took Moses in a time machine centuries ahead to the second century C.E. (Jews often do not use the acronyms "B.C." and "A.D.," which implicitly define time in terms of the birth and death of Jesus. Rather, they refer to these periods of time as "B.C.E.," or "Before the Common Era," and "C.E.," or "Common Era.") There Moses sat in the talmudic academy of the great sage and Torah scholar Rabbi Akiva, who was deriving laws exegetically from the crowns on top of the Torah letters. The *Talmud*, or oral tradition, states that Moses was so confused by Rabbi Akiva's intricate discourse that he could not even recognize that the rabbi was commenting on the same Torah he had brought down from Sinai! Moses was shocked and filled with grief. Finally, a student asked Rabbi Akiva how he derived a particular law from the Torah text. He responded, "It is a law to Moses from Sinai" that was passed down (orally) through the generations. At that concludes the talmudic story, Moses became reassured that God's Torah, the very same one revealed to him at Sinai, would remain forever with the people of Israel and would, in fact, be studied intensively and applied to daily life long after he died (B. T., Men. 29b).

The Torah is written on parchment and tied together in a scroll. It is the holiest ritual object in Judaism in that it contains both the name and message of God. The Torah is to be treated with utmost reverence and respect, not lightly or frivolously. It may not be desecrated or defiled. Indeed, there are numerous laws pertaining to the sanctity with which we are to treat the Torah. Scrolls that are old or torn, for example, may not be discarded but must be buried in the earth like human beings. If a Torah scroll accidentally falls, a fast day is decreed for all those who saw it drop. (Charity may be given in lieu of the fast.) If a printed Torah text drops, we kiss it as a sign of our respect. The meticulous care involved in writing a Torah scroll, letter by letter (writing a scroll takes,

on the average, one full year), is another reflection of its sacredness in the eyes of Jews.

How did God reveal His word through the Torah? Did He "dictate" it verbatim to Moses on Sinai? Was Moses "inspired" to write it down? Was it all written by man and then sanctioned retroactively by God? These and many other explanations are proffered as to how God actually communicated His will to man. In whatever way traditionalists understand the mechanics of the Sinai theophany, however, they all regard the Torah as we have it today as the primary source of our knowledge of God's word to man, and indeed, of God Himself. It is, in the words of the Jewish liturgy, "given to the children of Israel from the mouth of God through the hand of Moses."

God is not a physical being mortal man can ever come to fully know, nor can we expect to completely comprehend His immutable ways. Even Moses, the greatest of all prophets who talked with God "face to face" (Exod. 33:11), was allowed to "see" only God's "back" (Exod. 33:20, 23). (These, as well as other instances in which the Torah describes God's physical attributes, were considered by the rabbis to be anthropomorphisms, written in that manner since "the Torah speaks in language man can understand.") But if the Torah is, in a very real sense, God's word, we can come as close as humanly possible to "knowing" God Himself by studying its content. The term "to know" in biblical Hebrew—*ladaat*—is often used in the Greek sense connoting not only cognitive and speculative knowledge, but unification and attachment as well, as in the verse, "Now Adam *knew* Eve his wife" (Gen. 4:1, emphasis added). This principle guided Maimonides (1135-1204), whose opening words in his magnum opus, *Mishneh Torah*, are, "The foundation of foundations and pillar of wisdom is to *know* that there is a God. . ." It is the Torah that enables us to truly know God and to unite with Him as much as humanly possible.

By immersing ourselves in the sacred act of Torah study, we can come to better understand both the content and source of that divine word. For this reason Jewish education, and particularly Talmud Torah, or "study of the Torah," is one of the most important mitzvot, "religious duties," in all of Judaism. The Talmud states that good deeds such as honoring parents, acting kindly toward strangers, visiting the sick, attending the dead, devotion in prayer, and bringing peace among people are all important, but that "the study of Torah excels them all." (See B. T., Shab. 127a.) Its supreme importance lies in the fact that, in the words of the rabbis, "an ignorant person cannot be pious." Daily, the Jew links his love for God with his love for God's Torah. He prays, "With an eternal love East thou loved thy people, the house of Israel; Torah, commandments, good deeds, and laws hast thou imparted to us. Therefore, O LORD our God, when we lie down and when we rise up, we will ponder thy laws and rejoice in the words of thy Torah and commandments. For they are our lives and the length of our days and upon them will we meditate day and night" (from the Jewish prayer book). The study of the Torah is the Jew's loftiest spiritual pursuit.

In Judaism, the intellectual and the spiritual are inseparable; the heart *and* the mind must be applied in the service of God. Even Jewish prayer and devotion are interlocked with Torah study. For this reason, a portion of the Bible is read publicly in synagogue each Shabbat (Sabbath) so that over the course of a year the entire five books of the Torah will have been completed and everyone who attended prayer services will have heard and studied it. (This emphasis on Torah study may also have contributed to the fact that Jews historically have been a highly literate people.)

Traditional Judaism affirms that the Torah is not only God's revealed word to man, but it also has been passed on to us from generation to generation without error. This doctrine of inerrancy underlies the traditional Jewish hermeneutic which derives laws and theological concepts from each word (and, at times, from each letter) in the Torah. The validity of this exegetical method rests upon the belief that every word in the Torah as we have it today is divine, without error, and consequently, imparted to man for an express purpose. (The possibility of error is, indeed, reduced since Torah scribes must be pious individuals who work slowly and meticulously in the arduous task of transcribing each letter of the Torah onto the scroll parchment. If a scribe makes even the slightest mistake in writing the name of God, for example, he must undergo ritual acts of purification.) Seen from this perspective, the Torah cannot be redundant, can have no missing words, nor can it contain mistakes since God would not repeat or contradict Himself without reason.

Biblical critics, of course, might disagree. It remains left to man to interpret such textual "irregularities" through the use of the oral tradition (see below). Thus, for example, the threefold repetition of the phrase "you shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk" (Exod. 23:19, 34:26; Deut. 14:21) was explained by the rabbis as a threefold prohibition against cooking meat and milk together, eating them together, or deriving any benefit from such a mixture.

The Torah constitutes the primary component of the Jewish "written tradition," which also includes the *Neviim* (prophets) and *Ketuvim* (writings comprising the Scrolls of Esther, Psalms, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Ruth, Lamentations, and Proverbs, as well as the Books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles). This written tradition, more widely known by its acronym, *Tanakh* (*T* for *Torah*, *N* for *Neviim*, *K* for *Ketuvim*), came to a close roughly after 586 B.C.E., with the destruction of the first temple and end of the prophetic period (Ezra and Nehemiah are considered the last prophets). It was not canonized, however, until after the first century C.E. Christians generally refer to the *Tanakh*, or written tradition, as the Old Testament, although many, in deference to Jewish sensitivities, have come to use the term *Hebrew Bible* since *Old Testament* implies the existence of a *New Testament*, something that Jews deny.

The Jewish hermeneutical treatment of the Torah is fundamentally different from that of the rest of the *Tanakh* (Bible). For while all other holy writ in the *Tanakh* (i.e., the prophets and writings) are sacred and divine, none carries the same authoritative force as the Torah, wherein every word is regarded as divine and inerrant and, consequently, is to be interpreted by man. In the case of the rest of Scripture, only the concepts are sacred and divine. Laws cannot be derived exegetically from every word or letter.

While the Jewish view of the inerrancy of the Torah suggests that its every word is from God, portions, such as the Genesis account of the Garden of Eden, can legitimately be interpreted allegorically rather than literally. In contrast, a conservative Christian view of inerrancy might not suggest that each and every word and letter of the Torah is to be interpreted exegetically (much like the Jewish view of the rest of Scripture), although it would be inclined to claim that they are to be understood literally. In Judaism, the Torah, which is inerrant, is interpreted through the eyes of the rabbis and oral tradition (see below), which at times treat certain portions allegorically, though always as the embodiment of the word of God.

Biblical authority, which serves as the foundation for traditional Jewish authority as a whole, is premised on the belief that the Torah was “revealed”—however one understands that term—by God. The Sinai theophany was a unique moment in human history: “For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of. Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live?” (Deut. 4:32-33). The Torah is the repository of divine truth and is, therefore, binding and authoritative upon humanity: “Keep them and do them {i.e., the statutes of the Torah}; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’” (Deut. 4:6).

Unlike most other faiths that are founded upon the revelatory experiences of an individual, Judaism was born out of a divine revelation to a collective people. For while the Torah was written by Moses, the Sinai theophany was experienced by the entire Jewish people (see Exod. 20:19). There is a midrash that suggests that the whole world, including all the animals and birds, heard God speaking the Ten Commandments, and another claiming that the souls of all Jews not yet born at the time were also present then at Sinai (see Deut. 5:3 upon which this idea is based).

The very concluding phrase in the Torah, “in the sight of all Israel” (Deut. 34:12), points to the centrality of this concept within Judaism. By addressing the people of Israel collectively and directly, God sought to teach them that Moses was His trusted servant and that all that He would speak and write in God’s name would equally be his word (see Exod. 19:9). In other words, Moses’ position of authority as transcriber of the word of God was vindicated by God’s having revealed Himself to the community of Israel and publicly endorsing Moses as such. According to the midrash, Moses’ stature became so great and his voice so authoritative, God feared that the Jews might come to regard him as divine. For this reason, states the midrash, God told Moses to “go down” the mountain (Exod. 19:21) so that the people would see that he was really human. Only then did God begin speaking the first of the Ten Commandments, declaring, “I am the LORD your God” (Exod. 20:2). Moreover, lest Moses become deified posthumously by Israel and his gravesite turned into a venerated place of worship, God did not disclose its location “to this day” (Deut. 34:6). For while man can be godly, only God is God.

While revelation presumes a revealing God, it also presumes a receiver, man. Indeed, in many respects, the question of how we hear and interpret God's word is of far greater importance than that of how God revealed it. For although man may acknowledge the Torah as the repository of divinely revealed wisdom and truth, he can also distort and abuse that word. Man has the power to mold the Torah into either a holy Bible or an instrument for idolatry.

The partnership of God and man as revealer-receiver is exemplified by two verses in the Torah's account of revelation, "And the LORD came down upon Mount Sinai" (Exod. 19:20) and "And Moses went up to God" (Exod. 19:3). It is at the point of encounter between God and man when, in Martin Buber's terminology, the "I" meets the eternal "Thou" that genuine revelation takes place. God makes Himself immanent by moving "down the mountain" and meeting man halfway. In Christian terms, this is His act of grace. On the other hand, man, His copartner, elevates himself and spiritually goes "up the mountain" to greet the LORD. The midrash states that if man initiates even a slight movement toward God and creates an opening in his heart the size of a needle, God will respond magnanimously by enlarging it so that even chariots could pass through.

While affirming man's need for divine grace, the rabbis insisted that the initiative for this turning and reconciliation must come from man who is eminently capable of uplifting himself and initiating such a return. Man must open up his heart to God, repent of his sins, and observe the laws of the Torah (see the section on the High Holy Days in Chapter 4). The Hasidic expression "Where is God? Wherever we let him in" is a reflection of the Jewish conviction that man possesses the ability to initiate a movement toward God who, through His love and grace, responds a thousand fold. For Judaism maintains that man is a dignified being, created with free will and an innately pure soul (see Chapter 2).

In contrast, the predominant Christian view is that man is shackled by his sinfulness and incapable of self-regeneration. It is God, through an act of love and grace, who initiates the movement toward man. While Judaism and Christianity indeed differ on this matter, their differences are often grossly exaggerated and very much misunderstood. Certainly, Judaism professes that it is not man's works, observance of the law, or merit alone that bring him closer to God, but God's love and act of grace in response to his initiative, despite man's unworthiness, as well.

Daily, the Jew recites in his morning prayers, "Not out of our righteousness do we appeal to you, hut because we rely on your mercy. What are we? What value are our lives? Our righteousness?" And while Christianity, indeed, emphasizes God's initiative of grace in spite of man's sinfulness, it, too, regards man's deeds and works as essential. "Not every one who says to me, 'LORD, LORD,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).

Clearly, while traditional Jews and conservative Christians may share much in common on the fundamental question of the divinity and inerrancy of Scripture (at least, the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible portion of it), differences abound regarding how we exegetically interpret- that divine message and relate it to our life of faith. The differences become especially pronounced when we consider the question of the oral tradition.