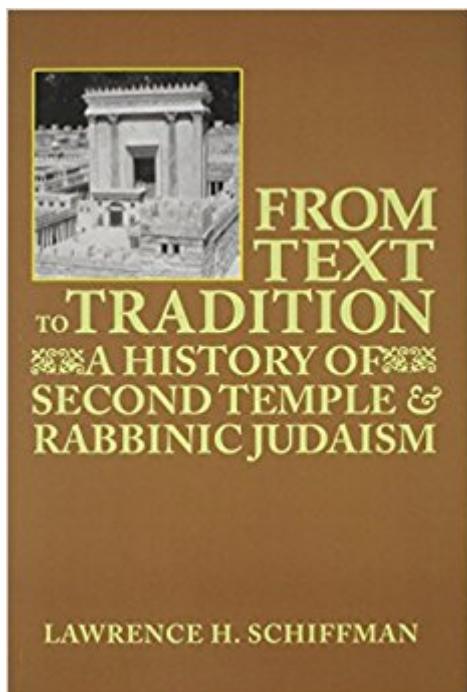


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From Text To Tradition: A History Of Second Temple And Rabbinic Judaism



Synopsis

From Text to Tradition examines the history of Judaism as it developed from the religion on the biblical Israel to the Judaism of the talmudic rabbis. Each step in this process is discussed from the historical, literary and religious points of view and the context of the political history of the Jews. Among the topics covered in this connection are the biblical heritage which underlies all later Judaism, the importance of the Persian period for laying the groundwork for post biblical Judaism, the confrontation of Judaism with Hellenism, apocrypha, pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea Scrolls, Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes, the Jewish-Christian schism, the impact of the Jewish revolts against Rome and the destruction of the Temple, the rise of Rabbinic Judaism, and the development of the Mishnah, Talmud and Jewish Law. One of the book's major theses is that the various approaches to Judaism shared sufficient common ground as to be classified as one, albeit variegated, religious tradition. Diverging trends may be - and are - traced during this period, as is the question of the role of interpretation, the impact of external influences, and the process by which the competing approaches were eventually supplanted by the rabbinic tradition, which became the basis for medieval and modern Judaism. In this way, Judaism is shown to have traveled the long road from the textual heritage of the Hebrew Bible to the oral tradition of the rabbis.

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Customer Reviews

This is a concise, beautifully organized historical overview of Second Temple Judaism which demonstrates how the religion of the Talmudic rabbis developed from the religion of biblical Israel. Schiffman (Judaic studies, NYU) takes a conservative approach in his main thesis by arguing that

Rabbinic Judaism was not a radical break with the religion of ancient Israel, but rather a logical development of that faith. A concomitant view is that while this period brought forth several different approaches to the Jewish religion, they all basically reflected one, as opposed to several, Judaisms. This study is an excellent history of a complex period which may be appreciated by general readers as well as scholars interested in this area of Judaica.- Robert A. Silver, Shaker Heights P.L., OhioCopyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Schiffman is the pre-eminent Orthodox historian of ancient Israel. That said I find some parts tiresome where the standard line about moral judgment is handed down. The "Rabbis", duly respected by me, are made to sound like machines to history - repeating the value judgements that we are all taught to make in cheder (religious elementary) when my instincts tell me the case is more difficult to pronounce. Hellenism is not explained well. The period of the redaction of Talmud is glanced over. I did enjoy the first part of the book leading up to the dispersion after the Second Temple. That piece satisfies something in me wanting to know more about the complexity of Judaism early on when Sadducee and Pharisee lived side by side

very comprehensive review of a transformative period in Judaism.

Answers lots of questions

This is a good comprehensive review of Judaism in the second temple period. The writing is exceptionally clear. For instance, several times the author defines a term that might not be familiar to the lay reader, such as "sapiential" (p.124) or "Diadochi" (p. 63). More commonly, authors expect the reader to know these terms or look them up in a dictionary. Schiffman slips in the definition seamlessly, and I really appreciate this. I also liked the author's frequent lists, such as the tractates of Talmud, the generations of Tannaim and Amoraim, and many others. Most of the content of the book was familiar to me; but one new angle was Schiffman's discussion of the decline of the Hellenistic Judaism that dominated the Mediterranean coasts for several hundred years, and was replaced by Christianity and rabbinic Judaism after the first century C.E. The book documents the historical transition "from text to tradition;" but it does not provide much analysis of this transition. He briefly suggests in the Epilogue that "When the amoraic commentary in the form of the Talmuds became available, this material became the new scripture of Judaism ... Scripture had been

displaced by Talmud." And, "the displacement of biblical tradition as the central authority in Judaism was a process long in the making. ...the ever-expanding, developing nature of the oral law attracted the best minds, leaving the written Torah to serve as a subject of elementary instruction, midrashic exegesis, and technical grammatical study by a select few." The success of the Talmudic enterprise in gaining the confidence and financial support of the people both in Israel and in Babylon to support these schools of reason and elaboration with a thin veneer of Torah continues to mystify me.

Although no single book exists that covers everything one would want to know about the second temple period in the development of Judaism and also immediately following the destruction of the temple, this is a really good book related to that subject. My Rabbinics teacher really likes it as one of the textbooks for the class (for its historical treatment of that era). We use it in conjunction to studying the Talmud. This allows you to understand some of the trends, traditions and historic events that led to the development of Rabbinic Judaism that we all love today.

I read this book, not primarily because I was interested in finding out how the Jewish Rabbinic tradition developed, but to learn what I could about how the Christian scholarly/church tradition is developing. As I watch Christian theology and church tradition fall into a tradition that is rooted not so much in Scripture as in history, I was hoping to learn how and why the Jewish tradition developed as it did, and see if there were any similarities to how our own tradition is developing. The book was insightful in many ways, and I learned a lot about the development of the Jewish Rabbinic tradition, but I am not sure that there are many hard and fast similarities between it and the developing Christian tradition. The book points out that the Jewish tradition was solidified in large part due to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 and the attempts by Jewish scholars to make sense of how to apply the Torah to life in the absence of a Temple, and as the Jewish people faced persecution at the hands of various governments and emperors over the next 400 years. There is no clear equivalent to a single Temple in Christianity, and so the circumstances which led to the development of the tradition are not likely to happen within Christianity. I suppose there are some similarities to what happened to Christian theology when Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in 410 AD. There might also be some similarities in modern times with the movement away from the institutional church with its buildings and clergy. It will be interesting to see how Christian theology and practice develops in response.

For those who have wondered how the Jewish religion transformed the practice of animal sacrifice

depicted in the Bible to the one we know today, this book is for you. Professor Schiffman writes a careful, thoughtful history of Jewish religious thought from the time of return from Babylon (about 560 B.C.E.) to the closing of the Talmud (about 200 C.E.). Focusing on the Greek and Roman periods, the reader is treated to the historical facts that account normative rabbinic Judaism. This is not a flashy read, but it is always engaging. Highly recommended.

This text can only be completely understood when used in conjunction with Schiffmans other book, Texts and Traditions : A Source Reader for the Study of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism. He is a scholar on the dead sea scrolls so that portion is particularly well covered, and maintains objectivity throughout, distancing himself from the history and religion, yet thoroughly covering both and their relaiton to one another.

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