

Preface and Acknowledgments

This book was originally written in Swedish with a general Swedish audience in mind, and to a large extent it has evolved around questions about Jewish tradition posed to me over the years by students and the public at large. These questions typically revolve around the ability of Jewish tradition to change and adapt while at the same time preserving a commitment to the Bible and its traditional interpretations. The combination of a seemingly free and at times even creative interpretation and reinterpretation of the Bible together with an insistence on the importance of and adherence to tradition within Judaism appears puzzling to many people whose background is in Protestant Christian tradition. How is it possible, for instance, to interpret away certain explicit biblical commandments but still insist on having separate dishes for meat and dairy products and to refrain from driving, writing, and knitting on the Sabbath—commandments and prohibitions that are *not* stated in the Bible?

This book addresses the ostensible paradox between commitment to the Bible and tradition on the one hand and the freedom in adapting them to present realities on the other. In order to comprehend this paradox, one needs to understand the underlying theology of revelation that, according to Jewish tradition, allows humans to be God's partners in interpreting his word. This idea of an ongoing dialectical process between divine revelation and human interpretation is the key, I believe, to understanding the character and development of Jewish tradition.

The aim of the original book was to provide an accessible introduction to these issues for readers with little access to scholarly literature in English. While such introductions are more easily available to readers of English, it is my hope that the unique combination of the various areas covered in this book will lead to new insights. The treatment of the strategies that the

rabbis of the rabbinic period developed in order to adapt Jewish tradition to new circumstances and the underlying views of revelation that allowed them to do it (chapter 1), together with the ways that the various denominations of contemporary Judaism address legislation of new issues and reconsider laws and customs that conflict with modern moral sensibilities, highlight the imprint that classical rabbinic Judaism has left on its modern forms. By placing the early Jesus movement within a Jewish hermeneutic tradition emphasizing its Jewish character (chapter 4), I hope to demonstrate the ways in which knowledge of Second Temple Judaism and Jewish hermeneutics may contribute to our understanding of the beginnings of Christianity. Chapters 2 and 3 present the major works that make up rabbinic literature and focus on the ways that the rabbis of the rabbinic period understood and interpreted the Bible and tradition. This part can be used as an introduction to rabbinic literature. A glossary of key terms is provided at the end of the book.

Citations of biblical texts are taken from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh: The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), although I have freely modified them when needed in order to make the rabbinic interpretations comprehensible. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of ancient sources are based on the English translations that appear in the bibliography, though at times I have modified them upon consultation with the original sources. Citations of stories from the Babylonian Talmud are taken from *Rabbinic Stories*, J. Rubenstein (New York: Paulist, 2002), and in the cases where the texts are not cited there, my translations are based on those that appear in *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935–1952). The transliteration of Hebrew is phonetic: פ=q, כ=kh, צ=ts, ה=h. When rendering common Hebrew terms I have not differentiated נ from ב, א from א, or ו from ו. נ and ב are indicated only in transliterations of Hebrew words that are not common terms.

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