

Contemporary Jews and The Tanakh

1. The Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries led virtually all religious groups to take a new look at their Scriptures. Formerly, Jews were expected to read the Tanakh (Old Testament) in light of their oral tradition as set out in the Talmud, Mishnah, and Midrash. But “enlightened” Jews began to raise questions about that approach. “Reformed” Jews determined to go back and take another look at Scripture and base their teachings more directly on the Scriptures themselves.
2. In the 20th century, two major events impacted Judaism throughout the world. The first was the Holocaust; and, the second, the founding of the nation of Israel.
3. Almost every new movement or new approach to an old subject has some positive and some negative implications. The Enlightenment—with its greater emphasis on individual freedoms—led to a sort of emancipation for many Jews in many parts of the world. No longer were they totally dominated by Christians within their societies. But that did not eliminate anti-Semitism. Organized, church-based anti-Semitism was on the decline but individual anti-Semitism became even worse in some cases. But a new threat arose. For many Jews, emphasis on individual choices and individual rights led to more interaction with the larger society and the risk of assimilation and a loss of Jewish distinctiveness.
4. That resulted in three new developments in Judaism.

A) Beginning in the 19th century, in Germany, where a large concentration of Jews were living, the reform movement called for a rejection of traditional Talmudic interpretations of Scripture and the traditional Talmudic “way of life.” That led to a new emphasis on interpreting the prophets and understanding prophecies about the coming Messiah in terms of social improvement. This movement had a great appeal to the new, growing, freer society in North America. However, after some time, Jews in the reformed movement again began to embrace some of the traditional Jewish practices.

“Reformed” Judaism tended to be characterized by the following five points: 1) Like the Enlightenment, it put an emphasis on the individual. 2) It called for the use of historical methods in analyzing the ancient texts, thus following the *historical-critical methods* of critical scholars. 3) It suggested that somehow, modern means should be accomplished using Jewish principles. 4) As far as possible, it sought to embrace modern culture. For example, it sought to accomplish gender equality in worship. And, 5) It saw the movements for social betterment as a sort of fulfillment of biblical prophecies. In a recent census, approximately 35% of Jews in North America claimed the reform movement as their form of Judaism.

Reconstruction among reformed Jews took an interesting twist. As it observed Adolf Hitler and others seeking to destroy Judaism, it embraced ancient Jewish practices not so much as being required by the Bible or God, but rather, as a means of identifying themselves as Jews.

B) Some Jews insisted on maintaining a very strict, orthodox, Talmudic form of worship and reading the Hebrew Bible. All of the traditional approaches to reading Scripture were maintained. A special, extremely conservative group among Orthodox Jews called themselves Hasidic.

C) Conservative Jews have tried to bridge the gap between reformed Jews and Orthodox Jews with a more moderate, middle position. They reject the extreme measures practiced by

some Orthodox Jewish communities for a more culturally acceptable group of practices in the settings in which they lived, but they still maintained the loyalty to the Talmudic framework and some of its practices.

5. In the middle of all of that, there developed a new form of Zionism. Moses Hess (1812-1875) began to speak of a Jewish homeland and helped to bring about the first Jewish colony reestablished in Palestine in 1869. Somewhat in response to a new wave of anti-Semitism in the 1870s, in 1896 Theodore Hertzl (1860 to 1904)—filling the role of the “new Moses”—sought to reduce or eliminate anti-Semitism by establishing a new Jewish state in Palestine.
6. We need to understand that all of these so-called solutions or approaches to Judaism in modern times are “Diaspora solutions.” They assume that Jews will be living in societies dominated by non-Jews. Another interesting twist on developing Judaism came as a result of their understanding of Messianic prophecy. Rejecting the so-called “false Messiah” in the 1st century—Jesus—and accepting the failures of the “failed Messiah” in the middle of the 2nd century—bar Kockba—and being embarrassed by the so-called “apostate Messiah”—Shabbetai Zvi—and the great commotion caused in Europe in the 17th century, Jews turned away from the idea that the Messiah would be an individual. Rather, they chose to interpret Messianic prophecies as referring to themselves as a group of people.
7. The greatest challenge to modern Judaism in the 20th century was, of course, the Holocaust. To Jews who had been claiming for centuries to be God’s chosen people, it was a severe threat. For centuries, Jew have believed that they were targeted in many ways with persecution and discrimination. But to have 6 million Jews destroyed—many of them children who certainly had not done anything to deserve what happened to them—shook Judaism to its foundations. What was the value of biblical promises in light of the Holocaust? Had God totally rejected His Jewish people?
8. An initial response on the part of many Jews to the Holocaust was pure shock! They were not sure what to say about their Judaism or their God.
9. In time, the appearance of books describing the experiences of certain Jews such as Anne Frank during those horrific times gave a sort of human face to the whole issue. Some authors such as Richard Rubinstein in his book, *After Auschwitz*, suggested that the Holocaust required a whole new approach to Scripture. Former understandings of God as presented in Scripture could no longer be relied upon.
10. But as decades have passed, two new interpretations of the Holocaust have emerged: 1) The one essential aspect of Judaism is to perpetuate the Jewish people. Whatever else happens, the children of the next generation must be preserved. 2) As time goes by, Jewish authors will find ways to interpret even the worst possible events as being part of the overall plan of God for their people. After all, didn’t they survive through the Egyptian slavery? Weren’t they able to return from Babylonian captivity? They survived the destruction of their temple and their nation in the 1st century A.D. Surely, the Holocaust is yet another step in that whole process.
11. The rise of the state of Israel beginning in 1948 has raised new questions and brought up new issues in Judaism. Instead of Zionism being a worldwide movement uniting the world under Judaism, Israel became a state among other states. And within Israel there are three very different groups of people. 1) “Reformed” Jews who are thoroughly secular. They want Israel to be a free society like America or like Western Europe. 2) There are the Hasidic, hyper-

orthodox Jews in Israel who do not even think there should be a nation of Israel until the Messiah comes. 3) There are a larger group of conservative Jews who have very strong, right-wing leanings who feel that the entire nation should be governed by Talmudic law. Furthermore, just to confuse issues more, instead of being a solution to anti-Semitism, the state of Israel has become a *source* of anti-Semitism, particularly in the Middle East.

12. Emil Fackenheim, a Holocaust survivor and a student of Hegel, has written a book suggesting a radical new approach in Judaism. That book is *The Jewish Bible After the Holocaust*. Fackenheim wrote that the Holocaust was not just another terrible event in the history of Jews; but, in fact, it was a breaking point, a sort of death, followed by a resurrection to a whole new approach for Judaism. So the state of Israel represents the resurrection from the dead—and, of course, the beginning of the Messianic Age. The Messianic Age is “here and now” not something future in heaven! In that context, the Bible is not read as a history of God’s working with His people but rather simply the history of a people.
13. He even went so far as to suggest that the book of Esther is the “heart of the Bible.” There are two reasons for that understanding: 1) The book of Esther never mentions the name of God. And, 2) It shows how Jews themselves rescued and assisted other Jews in a worldly setting. Not many Jews take Fackenheim very seriously.
14. More traditional Jewish scholars have embraced the *historical-critical method*. Some of them have been foremost in analyzing, reading, and interpreting such archaeological finds as the Dead Sea Scrolls. In that context, it is particularly interesting to notice Jacob Milgrom’s 2-volume, 3000-page commentary on the book of Leviticus which is included in the *Anchor Bible* series.
15. Other Jewish-Hebrew scholars have taken the approach that we need to understand Hebrew and Hebrew literature more for its literary dimensions, analyzing its prose and poetry. That has led to a particular resurgence of the study of Hebrew itself. As a result, there was an impetus for producing, first in 1917 and then a revision in 1985, the Jewish Bible in English, called the *Tanakh*.
16. Jewish scholars have led out in that new emphasis—not so much on the historical aspects of Scripture or even its relationship to archaeology but how do we interpret the meanings of the Bible. In many respects, those scholarly efforts by Hebrew and Jewish scholars have led to a more meaningful dialogue between Jewish-Hebrew scholars and Christian scholars in the overall understanding and interpretation of Old Testament Scriptures.

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