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HISTORICAL  
REAPPRAISAL

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Yonatan Adler



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## The Origins of Judaism

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# The Origins of Judaism

An Archaeological-Historical Reappraisal

YONATAN ADLER



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*Dedicated with love to Netanel, Emuna,  
Avital, Techiya, Elyada, and Aviya*

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# Preface

The biblical tradition provides a sweeping narrative, spanning the course of a millennium, about the reception of the Torah among the people of Israel. The account begins when the God of Israel first gives his set of laws to Moses at Mt. Sinai and continues until the time when Ezra and Nehemiah bring about a restoration of this Torah in Persian-era Jerusalem. This is a chronicle of discontinuities, characterized by long periods when the Torah was entirely neglected, but punctuated by intermittent episodes of rediscovery and restoration at the hands of virtuous leaders. Already before Moses descends from the mountain, the people transgress by setting up a golden calf. Subsequent prophets through the centuries repeatedly scold Israel for its various iniquities, and time after time the nation is punished for its sins. This dim narrative of disobedience is punctuated now and again when a righteous leader returns the people to observance of the Torah's laws. Jehoshaphat, for example, sends teachers throughout the land to teach Torah to the people (2 Chr 17:7–9). Hezekiah restores observance of the Passover, as it had not been celebrated “since the days of Solomon son of David, king of Israel” (2 Chr 30:26). Josiah similarly restores observance of the Passover, as it had not been offered “since the days of the judges who judged Israel nor in all the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah” (2 Kgs 23:22; see also 2 Chr 35:18). On the authority of a Persian king, Ezra arrives in Jerusalem and publicly expounds from a long-forgotten Torah, restoring observance of Sukkot rites that had been neglected “from the days of Jeshua son of Nun to that day” (Neh 8:17). And finally, Nehemiah discovers the populace of Persian-era Jerusalem negligent of the Sabbath and immediately sets about to restore proper observance of the day (Neh 13:15–22).

This biblical tradition is certainly not “history” in the modern sense of the word. “History,” from the ancient Greek “*historía*,” refers to the open-ended, methodical investigation into questions that people in the present choose to pose about the past. That the biblical tradition was never “history” becomes abundantly evident when we consider the fact that the tradition provides no citations, includes no footnotes, and affords no bibliographic lists of sources. Rather than a methodical inquiry into the past, the biblical tradition about Israel’s reception of the Torah is very much a *living declaration in the present*, a call to action in the here and now. It proclaims that the Torah is divine, and as such its commandments are sacred and to be kept assiduously. It warns against complacency, as the Torah is liable to be ignored and even forgotten if sufficient care is not taken to maintain its continual observance. It comforts that even if transgression occurs, full repentance through restoration of Torah observance is always possible. Its message is acutely relevant to the lives of those who inherited the tradition, and it adjures those who have thus received it to pass it onward as a legacy to subsequent generations.

As a call to action in the present, the biblical tradition about how the Torah came to be observed by Israel is undeniably *true* in the deepest, most fundamental sense of the word. It is this tradition that has fostered not only the survival but also the astonishing development and flourishing of Jewish communities throughout the many centuries of frequently recurring persecutions and hardships. To paraphrase the Hebrew thinker Ahad Ha’am (1856–1927), more than the Jewish people have kept the Torah, the Torah has kept the Jewish people. Undoubtedly, the biblical tradition about the early reception of the Torah has served as the bedrock of Jewish identity, and hence existence, through the generations.

Despite its crucial place in forging the Jewish past and present, the biblical tradition about the origins of the Torah and how it came to be observed is decidedly *not* the point of departure of the book that is before you. The biblical account has been studied in the past from countless angles, both traditional and critical, and doubtless will continue to be a subject of intense interest well into the future. As crucial as the biblical tradition has been as a call to action throughout the millennia, it will not be subject to investigation within the framework of the present study.

Instead of the biblical tradition about Israel’s reception of the Torah, this book takes as its starting point the lived experiences of the Jewish peo-

ple as they have actually *practiced* their Judaism over the centuries through the observance of the laws of the Torah in their everyday lives. It is this *practical* Judaism, rather than the biblical tradition *about* it, that stands at the center of the present book. The aim of this study is to apply systematic historical and archaeological methods to seek the earliest evidence for the emergence of precisely this practical Judaism within the routine lives of ordinary people in antiquity.

The title of this book announces that it will conduct a “reappraisal” of Judaism’s origins. What is to be reappraised here is not the biblical tradition, however, which as I have just explained will not be subject to investigation. Rather, my aim is to reevaluate a certain scholarly hypothesis, dating back to the nineteenth century but still current today, that locates the emergence of Judaism in the so-called postexilic period.

*The Origins of Judaism* is actually a play on the title of a volume published by Eduard Meyer in 1896, *Die Entstehung des Judentums: Eine historische Untersuchung* (The origin of Judaism: A historical investigation). Meyer’s work represents the culmination of a century of Protestant biblical scholarship which posited that the Babylonian exile marked a complete rupture in the history of Israel, dividing between a preexilic “ancient Israel” and a postexilic “Judaism.” The postulate was that the Pentateuch was promulgated as the law of the Jews among the returnees to Judea from Babylonia during the Persian period, and that with this an entirely new creation called “Judaism” was born. The evidence adduced for this idea derived primarily from literary-critical analyses of the biblical texts themselves, and therefore scholars’ attention focused more on *intellectual* history—the history of ideas communicated by biblical authors—rather than on *social* history surrounding the actual behaviors and practices of the general populace of Judea.

Since the late nineteenth century, we have experienced an explosion of archaeological and epigraphic discoveries that have consequentially led to the exponential expansion of our knowledge about the practical observance of Torah among ordinary Judeans in antiquity. This new body of material evidence allows us today to turn our attention to social history, and specifically to the question of when rank-and-file Judeans first began to observe the rules and regulations of the Torah on a wide-scale basis. The present study seeks to do just that; it aims to mine this treasure trove of new data, and concurrently to reexamine the long-available historical resources in order to assess the origins of what we might call “Judaism.”

## A Note on Translations and Transliterations

Translations of ancient texts mostly follow standard editions, but I have emended these in some cases as I deemed necessary. For the Hebrew Bible, Apocrypha, and the New Testament, I have usually followed the New Revised Standard Version. For Jewish Pseudepigrapha, I have usually followed *OTP*. For Philo, I have generally followed Colson and Whitaker, *Philo*. For Josephus, I have mostly followed Thackeray, Marcus, and Feldman, *Josephus*. For other Greek and Latin sources, unless otherwise indicated, I have followed M. Stern, *GLAJJ*. All other translations of ancient and modern texts are my own, unless otherwise noted.

Transliterations from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac mostly follow the Society of Biblical Literature’s “academic style” as described in B. J. Collins et al., *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 56–58, 63. Exceptions are the fricative *bēt*, which I transliterate as “v,” the fricative *kāp*, which I transliterate as “kh,” and the fricative *pē*, which I transliterate as “f.” Transliterations from Greek follow the online transliteration software at [https://www.lexilogos.com/keyboard/greek\\_conversion.htm](https://www.lexilogos.com/keyboard/greek_conversion.htm). Names of people, places, and written works are provided according to their standard spellings in English, without diacritical marks.