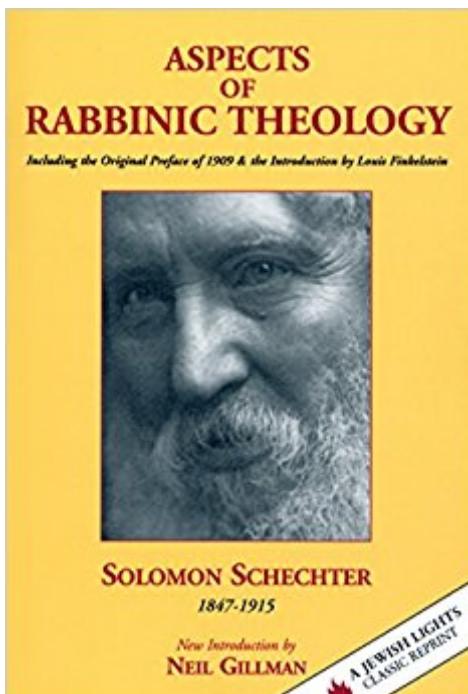


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Aspects Of Rabbinic Theology: With A New Introduction By Neil Gillman, Including The Original Preface Of 1909 & The Introduction By Louis Finkelstein



Synopsis

The classic statement of the ideas which form the religious consciousness of the Jewish people at large, by one of the great minds of Jewish scholarship of our century. His creative scholarship, compelling English style, and warm personality have given this book lasting influence on Jew and non-Jew alike. Includes the original preface of 1909 and the introduction by Louis Finkelstein.

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Customer Reviews

An accessible classic statement of fundamental Jewish ideas by one of the great Jewish scholars of this century. Includes the original preface from the 1909 edition and Louis Finkelstein's introduction to the 1961 edition. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc.

"Schechter is one of the great minds of Jewish scholarship of our century, and his succinct syntheses of rabbinic teachings are still valuable almost 100 years after they were written. For students who need a handle on the complexity of rabbinic thought, these essays are learned and yet very accessible." -- Professor Steven Fraade, Professor of Religious Studies, Yale University "Solomon Schechter's Aspects of Rabbinic Theology is a classic. A pioneer work with enduring value has been reissued with a masterful introduction by Professor Neil Gillman. This work still speaks to every generation of students of the Jewish tradition." -- Dr. Alfred Gottschalk, President, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Schechter labored to mediate the

dynamic otherness of Judaism to Christian America in unalloyed, clear and graceful prose." -- Professor Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America This is the only book on the theology of Judaism written 100 years ago that anyone can read today with profit." -- Jacob Neusner, Distinguished Research Professor of Religious Studies, University of South Florida

Rabbinic theory and literature can be very difficult to understand but this a good basic book to read and easy to understand.

Excellent re-issue of a classic work.

The two introductions to this volume, the new one by Neil Gillman and the older one by Louis Finkelstein, explain a lot about the book's author and its origins. However, this review goes over the ground a little more succinctly, and from a somewhat different angle -- and not everyone will want to struggle with the 'Look Inside' feature to figure what Gillman, at least, has to say. When this book, "Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology," was published in 1909, informed opinion was largely skeptical of the whole idea of an early Jewish Theology, as distinguished from the Religious Philosophies articulated in the Middle Ages by Saadia Gaon, Yehudah Ha-Levi, Maimonides, and their successors. (And by informed opinion, I mean the traditionally trained Jewish scholars who were sufficiently modern in their view of the world to worry about such questions.) Certainly there were no obvious theological expositions or programmatic presentations of dogma by the Rabbis cited in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, the immense repositories of generations of debate over just about every imaginable aspect of Jewish life. Indeed, there were even warnings about too much speculation (Such as "What is above, and what is below? What was before, and what will be after?" Mishnah, Hagiga II, 1) -- admittedly promptly followed in the Babylonian Talmud by examples of such esoteric knowledge (B.T. Hag. 11b-14a), and to whom it might be taught. Solomon Schechter (1847-1915), an outstanding scholar as well as an influential early leader of American Judaism's Conservative Movement (see Wikipedia for a short biography and cross-references), didn't agree with the conventional wisdom of his fellow-Talmudists. In his eyes, the early rabbinic sages had consensus views of God, the nature of Man and the World, and other topics considered theological in western thought, assumptions to which their disputes, questions, answers, and parables constantly refer. What they did not have was a tradition of expounding such things dogmatically and systematically, after the manner of the Church Fathers and later Christian theologians, or of later Jewish thinkers exposed to both Christian and Muslim dogmas. The difficult

part of recognizing this shared view, according to Schechter, was to dig it out of the texts, and expound it in a coherent manner, and to do so without resorting to typically medieval devices, such as allegorical readings. It should be observed that the Babylonian Talmud alone runs to about 5500 large pages; and that the literature to be surveyed also included early Midrash (anthologies of originally oral commentary set out in Biblical order), a smaller but still substantial corpus. Schechter had begun lecturing and writing on these topics in the early 1890s, so he was not taking all of his readers by surprise. Its influence is evident in George Foot Moore's "Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian era, the Age of the Tannaim," written in the 1920s; still an excellent introduction by a non-Jewish scholar, albeit dated in several respects. The book continues to be considered a classic presentation of its argument, and remains influential in expositions of early Jewish thought. However, Schechter's entire approach remains an issue. There is no suggestion that his Talmudic knowledge was anything except excellent, his citations accurate. One problem that remains is the doubt that any of the Sages would have recognized their own thoughts as organized and set forth by Schechter in neat, but alien, categories. The other enduring problem is that Schechter, simply by organizing his material in this manner, gives a misleading impression of the very unsystematic way it was transmitted, and the way students would (or would not) absorb its points of view. About the only cure for the latter problem is to actually read a little Talmud -- presumably in translation, since Rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic are not part of most potential readers' mental equipment.

Fortunately, there are now more-or-less complete English versions out there; in fact, the entire Soncino translation of the Babylonian Talmud (Soncino being the publisher) is available for consultation on-line, with pdf files available for downloading. Many of the same texts are available in inexpensive Kindle editions, and can be read in that format. An alternative is the Penguin Classic "The Talmud: A Selection," translated and edited by (Rabbi) Norman Solomon (2009), published a century after Schechter's book. It includes an excellent introduction, a copious modern bibliography, and illuminating headnotes and footnotes to the selections. It draws from the Mishnah, a second-century CE Hebrew codification of Jewish law, or rather, legal rulings, and from the Gemara, the Aramaic commentary -- the latter exclusively from the better-known Babylonian Talmud (Bavli), not the less-studied Yerushalmi (Jerusalem, or Palestinian, Talmud). Rabbi Solomon uses typography and lay-out to indicate the development of lines of argument (and digressions) and supplies Biblical contexts, including notes on how this or that citation strains the Hebrew text, or departs from the original context in the interest of atomistic literalism. Be warned: although it contains only samples of the sixty-three tractates of the Mishnah, not all of which have Talmudic commentary (Gemara), it still runs to almost 900 pages itself.

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