



The Jewish Bible: A Material History

David Stern

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The Jewish Bible is a fascinating look at a work whose materiality is shown to be inseparable from its meaning.

David Stern's *The Jewish Bible: A Material History* is a carefully plotted, awe-awakening journey through the evolution and adaptation of the Jewish Bible within a variety of cultures and settings. This enrapturing work is extensively footnoted and amply enlivened by photographic support.

Stern traces the progression of the Hebrew Bible from oral tradition to its inscription on scrolls, and on to the Jewish leadership's reluctant acceptance of codices, at first thought to be too Christian a vehicle for the Jewish text. He explores the reasons behind the substantial size of the Torah in synagogue settings—"the rabbis effectively turned a 'book,' a text to be read, into a cult object to be revered"—and notes how the reverence given to it resulted in a near magical aura, with some medieval communities said to treat their scrolls as though they possessed "amuletic powers."

Information about the unique features of the Masoretic text (a text "key to the Jewish Bible's history, or better yet, the key to its Jewishness"), and about the necessarily interpretive work of vocalization and translation, proves to be an exciting introduction to the Bible's evolution, while some of Stern's terminological presentations (here, midrash is "the rabbinic name for Bible study") are both curious and illuminating.

The influence of surrounding cultures is shown: via general presentation on the page, or the way that the space around the text was handled, and even through the size of a particular codex. The advent of the printing press is shown to have opened up the Jewish Bible to non-Jewish readers in a freshly seamless way, resulting in new challenges with such new access.

Such research provides a good road map for identifying the origins and influences of surviving manuscripts, and bibliophiles will find much here that fascinates. Photographs of Torah scrolls, adornments, and bits of text from copies like the Aleppo Codex are a fascinating accompaniment, and they help to bring Stern's text into relief. *The Jewish Bible* is a fascinating look at a work whose materiality is shown to be inseparable from its meaning.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (Religion 2017)

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