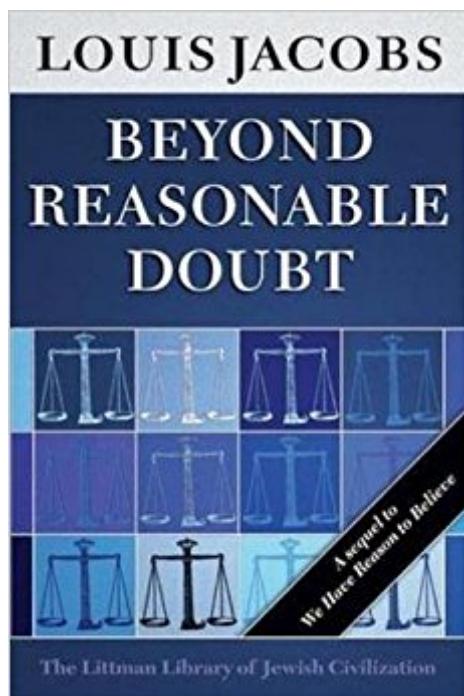


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Beyond Reasonable Doubt (Littman Library Of Jewish Civilization)



Synopsis

More than forty years have passed since Louis Jacobs first put forward the argument that traditionally observant Jews have no reason to take issue with the results obtained by the historical critics in their investigation into the Bible and the other classical sources of Judaism. As a result of his views, which were first published in the still-controversial text *We Have Reason to Believe*, the Anglo-Jewish Orthodox hierarchy banned Jacobs from serving as an Orthodox rabbi. In this new book, Louis Jacobs examines afresh all the issues involved. He does so objectively but with passion, meeting the objections put forward by critics from the various trends within the Jewish world, both Orthodox and Reform. In a recent poll conducted by the (London) Jewish Chronicle, Louis Jacobs was chosen as the 'Greatest British Jew.'

Book Information

Series: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization

Hardcover: 278 pages

Publisher: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in association with Liverpool University Press; 1 edition (March 1, 1999)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1874774587

ISBN-13: 978-1874774587

Product Dimensions: 0.2 x 6.8 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces

Average Customer Review: 2.5 out of 5 stars 5 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #998,797 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #130 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Judaism > Movements > Orthodox #441 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Judaism > Theology #1260 in Books > History > World > Religious > Judaism

Customer Reviews

"Novel, fresh, and creative as well as cogently argued. It is an original contribution to the study of Maimonides in particular and of medieval Jewish thought in general. Shows how philosophy informs the entire Mishneh torah from beginning to end in an exquisite structure that is Aristotelian in number and Plotinian in order. Gillis does not just present purely theoretical theses but applies them in order to resolve some of the problems that have engaged both scholars and the rabbinic world in making sense of various anomalies, inconsistencies, and contradictions in the Maimonidean corpus." -- James A. Diamond "A few brave souls have dared to bridge the divide between Halacha

and philosophy by trying to unravel the connections between the Code and the Guide. In this book, David Gillis does not only rise to this challenge. He aims for the top, offering an approach to the Mishneh Torah that is meant to reveal its deepest secrets and illuminate its conundrums. ...Gillis suggests that Maimonides' magnum opus should be seen as a work of art, whose very structure conveys its deepest meaning." - AJL Reviews, Vol. V, No. 3, (September/October 2015)

Louis Jacobs, founding rabbi of the New London Synagogue, was a renowned scholar with an international reputation as a lecturer. He was the author of *The Jewish Religion: A Companion* (1995) and of many other distinguished books, several of them published by the Littman Library, including *A Tree of Life* (second edition 2000), *Hasidic Prayer* (paperback 1993), and *Theology in the Responsa* (paperback 2005), as well as an edition and translation of Zevi Hirsch Eichenstein's *Turn Aside from Evil and Do Good* (1995). He died in 2006.

I find one of the reviews on this site curious; it makes the bizarre claim that modern day academics have abandoned the findings of higher biblical criticism: i.e. the fact that we now know that the current text of the Torah was redacted together from several earlier sources. The fact is that this is not a matter of debate in any academic circles, religious or non-religious. No uneducated and bible-thumping fundamentalists can claim otherwise. On this subject, it is best to read "Who Wrote the Bible" by Richard Elliot Friedman. The strength of Louis Jacob's theology is that he moves beyond the "Do it because I told you God said so" approach so popular among the Orthodox. Orthodox Jews claim that the text of the Torah is a direct quote from God, and thus we are obligated to follow its rules. Non-religious Jews use the findings of modern critical Bible study to show that since our understanding of how the Bible was edited is now known to be flawed, then it can't possibly be inspired in any way; therefore, humanity is free from trying to follow the word of God in this way (or in any way). In between these paths lies a view promoted by Rabbi Jacobs, and by Masorti and Conservative Judaism in general. He notes that *how* God inspired man is one question; whether or not God does so is another. If God does exist, and does inspire mankind in some way, then the Torah may well contain man's understanding of God's will, as Judaism has always claimed. Unfortunately, no brief review can do justice to the subtle and convincing arguments that Rabbi Jacobs makes for his views: non-fundamentalist, observant, authentic Judaism. You will have to read it for yourself - and you'll be the better for it. Also, I strongly suggest obtaining "Halakha for Our Time" by Rabbi David Golinkin, published by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, and "The Dynamics of Judaism", by Rabbi Robert Gordis.

In defense of Jacobs' much-maligned works, I believe that this book makes a valiant effort to describe a mode of Judaism that harmonizes historical-critical research and belief. Although the author himself admits that gray areas do exist in his non-traditional "liberal supernaturalism", it is certainly a step toward a definition of belief for today's Jews. The book is written in a very personal tone, one that some readers may find distracting; I found it to add an interesting autobiographical flavor, one that reflects Jacobs' journey from yeshiva student to Masorti proponent. Incidentally, he makes no claim that the so-called "High criticism" represented by Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis has been utterly rejected, only that it has been subject to scholarly revision and modification in recent years.

Each of which would have been better had they been separate books. The first book criticizes the traditional Jewish belief in the Torah as divine revelation, and proposes "Liberal Supernaturalism" as an alternative (i.e. accepting man-made halacha even if it rests on a man-made Torah rather than a purely Divine Torah). Contrary to what one reviewer wrote, Jacobs does not limit his justification for this view to Psalms; he goes over a few inconsistencies in the Pentateuch itself. Nevertheless, the broader point stands: Jacobs devotes one chapter to an issue that really is worth a full book or something close to it. Jacobs then justifies halacha on the ground that it connects us with the Jewish tradition and with holiness generally- a point of view likely to persuade more-or-less observant Jews, but less likely to persuade the apathetic. The second book is an excellent little guide to the factions within Judaism (leaving aside Conservative Judaism, which the author's "Liberal Supernaturalism" chapter implicitly argues for). Jacobs seems to maintain an OK balance between criticism of and respect for both Reform and for various tendencies within Orthodoxy (including Hasidism, mysticism, Modern Orthodoxy, and other more traditional variants of Orthodoxy).

Louis Jacobs is trying his best to defend the obviously untenable position of having-the-cake-and-eating-it-too, by offering another book to explain the Jewish Conservative movements "Liberal Supernaturalist" view. He wants to explain how one can deny the historical truth of Judaism's core beliefs, the Revelation at Mount Sinai, and the divine source of the Oral Code - while at the same time stay committed to the observance of Halacha. The core of Jacobs' argument is that Biblical Criticism is a scientific fact. But when faced with the fact that modern scientists totally reject the premise of High Criticism - he reverts to the indefensible stance that current critics do not accept the divine source of the Torah. The current rejection of the "popular" Criticism is enough to

give the believer a reason to stand by his beliefs. It is also quite boring to read the history of English Jewry and the personal adventures of Jacobs the person. Still, it is a good read.

This book should really be entitled 'Beyond Reasonable Scholarship.' Dr Jacobs bases his argument on the false claim that Jewish tradition only countenances a single author for Psalms i.e. King David. Then he goes on to infer that as this is untrue (how could David write about future events?) the belief in the divine authorship of the five books of Moses must also be untrue. This is blatant nonsense as Dr Jacobs must know. There are several Talmudic references to Psalms as a composite work and many later commentators such as David Kimkhi and the Malbim also explain how Psalms was the work of over 10 authors, edited in his generation by David and that later editions added Psalms written in the Babylonian exile. Therefore the supposed authorship of Psalms has not a jot to do with the authorship of the Pentateuch. This a bad book full of bad scholarship. It is also an insult to any academic or traditionally learned Jew who is aware of the sources.

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