

## FOREWORD

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For generations Jews regarded the Bible as a book with no history—all its stories were faithful to exactly what transpired, and its messages were those divinely wrapped up in an endlessly intricate tapestry. The brilliant commentary of the classical Rabbis was devoted to unfolding the mysteries and beauties of the text on its own terms.

Many things combined to complicate this picture. The advances of science gave us a deeper understanding of the natural world. New techniques of historical research and literary analysis were developed, casting the Bible's structure in a different light. Scriptural repetitions and contradictions, the different levels of the Hebrew (for Hebrew, like any language, developed over time), and parallels to other stories circulating in the Ancient Near East in biblical times gave us a more advanced understanding of the formation of our central sacred text.

One's reaction to these developments ranges from outrage to keen curiosity. Because if the Bible is (at least in part) a product of historical influences, how much can we learn by studying its history? Why does the book of Deuteronomy use such different rhetoric than the book of Genesis? Why are so many of the early stories in the Bible never mentioned again? How did the societies existing around the time of the ancient Israelites view themselves? And perhaps most intriguing, did God speak in one commanding moment alone, or can God also speak through the unfolding story of our people and our world?

Conservative Judaism might be called the Judaism that believes God's voice can be heard through human history. Conservative Judaism is dialogic Judaism: it understands the relationship between God and Israel as analogous to a friendship that has both a powerful history and a promise of development. The use of the word friendship does not imply equality, but rather the continuing, flourishing nature of the covenant. The dynamism of Judaism is the dynamism of the yet unspoken—all the things that are still to grow in the inexhaustibly

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rich soil of the past. We are a people balanced between history and prophecy, past and future. Both the ancient sage and the modern seeker have something indispensable to contribute to the dialogue between Israel and God.

We have never been just the Bible's readers; we have also and always been its interpreters. The answers to most questions Jews ask will not only be found in the pages of the Bible; they are also in the elaborations by the classical Rabbis, the medieval sages, and modern scholars. That is why the word "Torah" refers both to the Five Books of Moses and to the entirety of Jewish learning. The Bible has always been understood as the first word spoken—the indispensable "Word"—but never the last word. Building on the achievements of our ancestors we are able to shift the prism of the Bible's beauty to reflect ever new light. The essays in this study guide provide us with some ways to see the Bible anew.

One cannot really understand the Bible just by reading its words once. For all true reading is rereading. Each story yields its depths only upon renewed acquaintance, and each reader will discover how constant meditation on the messages of the Torah enables her or him to come to new understandings and often to find a kinship with the commentators of the past.

Each verse is a reservoir. Don't skim, not unless you intend to go back and read over and over in depth. A man once came to the rabbi and boasted that he had been through the Talmud three times. "My question," responded the rabbi, "is how much of the Talmud has been through you?"

As you read through the essays in this guide, remember that we are searching in our reading of the Bible for our history, to situate our own souls in this world, and to seek God. How does our reading change once we know the Near Eastern background of the text, the way Jewish law has developed from a given verse, or what modern theologians have to teach us? The essays herein will help deepen our study of the text by keeping these questions in our minds.

No matter how imprecise the details may be, the Bible is the family diary of our nation. It is as if, as a Jewish thinker once remarked, you

were walking through your great-grandmother's house and found her journal under a creaky floorboard. This is our story—your story.

Our story in the Torah is deliberately incomplete. Although these five books point toward entering the land of Israel, when Deuteronomy ends, we are still in the wilderness. This may be the Torah's way of teaching us that we live in an unredeemed world, a wilderness, and we need community, tradition, a road map, and a guide. The road map is the Torah; the guide is God.

The essays that follow are products of the care, scholarship, and love characteristic of the Conservative movement's approach to Torah. For we believe that through the ancient cadences we can hear the voice that our ancestors knew at Sinai. We understand that some messages will change their emphasis with the ages, and some will remain constant. Israel brought the Torah to the world. The scholars in this guide will help bring it anew to each of us and to those who will follow.