

Book Review – Essential Judaism, A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals

Robinson, George. *Essential Judaism: a Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs and Rituals*. 1st ed. New York City: Atria Books, 2001.

Christianity is an outgrowth of the ancient Hebrew religion, and modern Judaism is also a descendant of that belief system, centered around the Law of Moses, the Torah. Sharing so much Scripture, Christians and Jews should act like blood brothers, but we generally do not. The past 2,000 years describes much hatred and bloodshed between Christians and Jews; the Jews intermittently persecuting the Christians for the first 40 years, during the infancy of the Faith, and the Christians intermittently persecuting the Jews for the next 1900.

Mutual ignorance has been one persistent cause of this persecution. George Robinson's *Essential Judaism, A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* is intended to help readers, whether Christians, Muslims, secularists, other religionists, or even Jews, understand the basic beliefs and rituals of the Jewish religion and the Jewish people. Robinson was raised a Jew, drifted away from the Jewish faith, and then returned. Bewildered at first about the rituals and other aspects of modern Rabbinic Reformed Judaism, he determined to write this book. Judging from the profusion of laudatory reviews on the book cover and on the internet, Robinson's work is well regarded.

The first chapter covers two fundamental facets of modern Rabbinic Judaism: prayer and ritual. Prayer, along with the study of the Torah, Talmud, and other key documents, is the fundamental religious activity of Jews. Rituals are performed at home and in the synagogue. Rabbis lead the activities within synagogues, but unlike Catholic priests, they do not serve as confessors and do not mediate, not even serving as "lesser mediators," between God and man. The greatest asset of the rabbi is often his, or sometimes her, knowledge of Jewish rituals. Robinson describes the rituals of the daily services, the Sabbath services, and the festival services. He concludes the chapter with an overview of modern denominational Judaism – Orthodox, Reformed, Conservative, and Reconstructionist.

The author's next two chapters cover the Jewish year, from Passover to Purim, and the Jewish life from birth to death. Judaism puts heavy emphasis on the family, and this focus is revealed by the multitude of home rituals for every stage of life. Birth brings joy to the household, the friends and their relatives. Observant Jews generally oppose abortion, but they do not believe that life begins until the baby's head has emerged from the birth canal. Brit Milah, the rite of circumcision, includes family, songs, the reading of the Torah, a special dinner (chickpeas), and recited blessings.¹ The Bar Mitzvah ceremony marks the transition of the Jewish boy to a Jewish man. Increasingly, girls have ceremonies that correspond to the Brit Milah (without the surgery), and they have the Bat Mitzvah. Mitzvah means "the commandment", so boys become "sons of the commandment" at age 13 and girls become "daughters of the commandment" at age 12 (or 13 if Reformed). Marriage is a huge milestone in Jewish life and includes meals, merriment, Torah readings, songs, and the reading of the Ketubah (marriage contract). The ceremony includes two parts, the betrothal and the nuptials. Death and burial complete the life cycle and also involve extensive ritual and times of mourning. Jews are supposed to remember their deceased loved ones throughout life.

Essential Judaism, A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals describes the 613 laws of Judaism and how they play out in daily life. From justice to sexuality to dietary laws, the author explains why these restrictions exist, why they should be followed, and how to follow them. One thing that I found confusing was Robinson's use of the word *Bible* when referring to the *Hebrew Bible*; what Christians would call (and he strongly objects to) the *Old Testament*. For example, most of the time that Robinson says *Bible* he is referring to the *Tanakh*, the Law, Writings, and Prophets. Then he says "the verse and chapter breakdowns derive from the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the

¹ George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: a Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs and Rituals*, 1st ed. (New York City: Atria Books, 2001), 148.

Bible.”² The Vulgate is the Latin translation of the Old and New Testaments, the Christian Bible, not just the Tanakh. Robinson’s overview of the Tanakh is interesting, but he gets the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel out of order; it happened after he met and married Rachel, not before.

The coverage of the Talmud and other Rabbinical writings is useful. These works began as reactions to the Babylonian captivity and the later destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans. The Talmud includes the Mishnah, an analysis of Biblical law, and the Gemara, rabbinic commentaries on the Mishnah and other writings. Jewish mysticism, including the ancient, the Kabbalah, and the Hasidic, compares with Sufi Muslim and Christian mysticism. Jewish philosophers such as Philo, Maimonides, Spinoza, and Buber wrote about the intellectual more than the experiential, side of the Jewish faith.

Robinson’s last chapter refers back to some early historical events that shaped modern Judaism. He spends most of his ink on the Hasidim-Mitnagdim conflict, the Enlightenment/Emancipation, the Holocaust, and the State of Israel. The author concludes by noting some recent developments in Judaism, especially the increasing role played by women.

One of the author’s points regarding anti-Semitism is excellent. Medieval disdain for Jews was related to their religion and culture; things that they could change. Modern disdain for Jews is related to their race and their heritage, things that they cannot change. A medieval brigand could hold his sword to the throat of a Jew and say convert to Christianity or die. A modern Schutzstaffel (SS) guard at Auschwitz gave Jews no such choice. The rise of secular Jews, Jews by blood but not by religion, brought about by the Enlightenment, is at least part of the cause.

Overall, *Essential Judaism, A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* is a good and useful book. It provides perspective on the Old Testament that would be interesting to pastors and professors. It helps modern Christians understand their Jewish neighbors better, and may even help reconcile with each other. This one will maintain a place on my shelves.

Questions

1. Ritual has an important place in the worship and lives of Jews. How much ritual is important, and how can we make ritual a more important part of our worship and lives?
2. The history of Christians and Jews has been turbulent. How can evangelical Christians contribute to healing with our Jewish friends, without neglecting the imperatives of the gospel?
3. How should modern Christians balance the needs of Israeli Jews and of Palestinian Christians in their support of Israel?

² Robinson, 259.