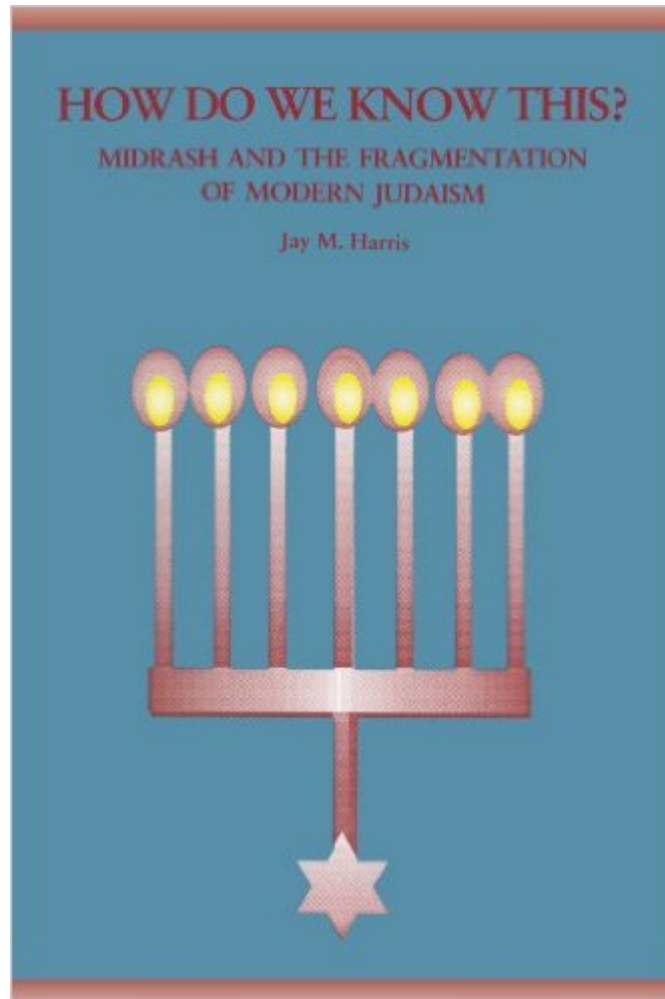


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How Do We Know This?: Midrash And The Fragmentation Of Modern Judaism (Suny Series In Judaica)



Synopsis

This book is a study of rabbinic legal interpretation (midrash) in Judaism's rabbinic, medieval, and modern periods. It shows how the rise of Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism in the modern period is tied to distinct attitudes toward the classical Jewish heritage, and specifically, toward rabbinic midrash halakah. What has gone unnoticed until now is the extent to which the fragmentation of modern Judaism is related to the interpretative foundations of classical Judaism. As this book demonstrates, spokespersons for any form of Judaism that engaged modernity on any level had to explain the basis for their rejection or continued acceptance of the authority of rabbinically developed law. Inevitably and invariably, this need led them to address anew what were long-standing questions regarding the ancient interpretations of biblical law. Were they compelling? Were they reasonable? Were they still relevant? Each form of Judaism fashioned its own response to these challenges, and each argued forcefully against the responses of the other denominations. Jay M. Harris describes the fragmentation of modern Judaism in terms of each's relationship to classical Judaism's system of interpretation in part two of this book. "This is a seminal, suggestive, and comprehensive study of a vital aspect of Jewish religious thought. It is enormously significant and cuts across a wide cross-section of fields of study." Marc Hirshman, University of Haifa "Harris follows in the good step of some recent scholars who display a healthy skepticism toward ancient sources. Few of them have applied this hermeneutic method to the texts. Harris is a pioneer in this regard." David Weiss Halivni, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This work is a overwhelming survey of the understanding of rabbinic hermeneutics from the Talmudic period until the 19th century. Harris deals with all the material in stride, and does not fall into the trap of seeing one author as nothing but a "precursor" or "influence" over the other. Even more so, he managed to take a topic which seems esoteric and technical but actually, as he shows, became one of the major bones of contention in the confrontation of traditional Judaism with modern historical thinking. It would be worthwhile for the author to add an appendix bringing the debate up to date and emphasizing the theological and legal ramifications of the debates on rabbinic hermeneutic (such as the recent work of Moshe Halbertal). But don't wait for that. Read it now!!

This book is an excellent introduction to halachic midrash and is especially valuable in understanding how 19th century Jewish scholars dealt with rabbinic exegesis. By focusing on typical examples of reform and orthodox scholarship, Harris illuminates the entire period without bogging the body of the book in detail. I would highly recommend it to all scholars in Jewish studies and to the casual reader who would like to know more about the relationship of the Biblical text to the Jewish tradition.

While Judaism is a religion based largely on the Hebrew Bible, it is clear that much of Jewish law is extra-biblical. Many scholars, such as Jacob Neusner, have investigated the origins of such laws. Professor Harris' book traces the history of how Jewish intellectuals have dealt with the critical question: how do we know where Jewish Law came from? Starting in the Talmudic era, and moving through the medieval and modern periods, *How Do We Know This* offers a brilliant historical perspective on the fragmentation of modern Judaism. Highly recommended for readers undaunted by scholarly material and rabbinic concepts.

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