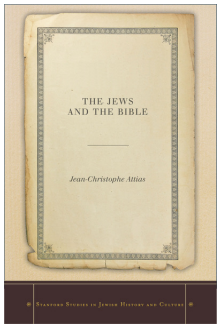
The Jews and the Bible, by Jean-Christophe Attias



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The translation of Jean-Christophe Attias's work *The Jews and the Bible* unlocks to English-speaking readers a broad-in-scope, fluid, and full coverage of the history of how Jews have historically related to the Bible. As the chair of "Medieval Jewish Thought" at the École pratique des hautes études, Attias's area of study is Jewish Traditions. *The Jews and the Bible* covers everything from the elusiveness of the relationship between Bible and Jews to how the Bible is perceived in the modern era by Jews. Many of his conclusions are challenging to the reader and require reflection in order to fully engage with and digest his history because he operates within a Jewish framework that calls for actions.

Attias establishes the elusiveness of what "Bible" actually means from the outset of chapter 1. Such elusiveness is present in the "varying harmonics of the words denoting the scriptural corpus in rabbinical language" (4), Christian traditions, and other sources from antiquity. With regard to the dynamics between Jews and the Bible, he notes that before the official Jewish canon was established, the text became "the key element of the dialogue between God and His people" (21), indicating that actual practice can and should do without a text. Even the establishment of "official" bibles, like the Masoretic text, could not put an end to the various interpretative traditions and understandings of "Bible." Attias, thus, roots his work in the ambiguous identity of "Bible" and a basic understanding of the Jewish relationship to it.

Chapter 2 examines Judaism's use of the Bible as an Object. In his analysis, traditional Jewish "Bible objects," like the Tefillin, Mezuzah, and Sefer Torah, contain portions of the biblical text which are paradoxically not of scriptural origin but are dependent upon scripture to maintain their Objectness. This paradoxically allows the hearer to participate in worship of the Word, the revered Object, and focus on rabbinic material, benedictions, and mishnaic prayers and express the importance of the Objectness of the Bible. Reasonably he concludes that the people provide life to the book, not the book to the people. His presentation is importantly focused on how Jews give life to the book based on how people use the book as an Object. With this Objectness in mind, he proceeds to engage in the relationship between Jewish identity and the Bible.

After identifying Jewish identity as the condition of collectiveness of Jews as descendants of Abraham and Moses, and part of the continuity of Jewish history, he explores in chapter 3 the collective identity and results of "Biblical Judaism." Attias argues that "Biblical Judaism" and early Christian appropriations of Judaism and the Bible misunderstood the relationship by ignoring the value of Oral Tradition, or true tradition. This caused Jewish teachers to focus on three primary principles in rabbinic Judaism: Oral Law, which grounds Jewish identity; Written Law, which should be read in light of Oral Law; and the oneness of the Oral and Written Law, emphasizing the Oral Law as the locus of identity rather than the Bible. Even the Karaites, Attias argues, were not considered heretical for "Bibliocentrism," but for denying true tradition and adding false tradition. Jewish identity is therefore dependent upon living tradition.

Moving towards the personal relationship between the Bible and Jews, Attias focuses chapter 4 on the relevance of the Bible for individual Jews. For Attias, the Bible is dangerous for children because it may result in bad interpretations and not necessary for women whose focus should be on the household. Within a scholarly context it is important to Jews because it is common property for differing faiths, "imposing an exceptional duty on scholars to engage with it" (102), to draw out the supersaturated meaning of the Bible, which may only be done within a Jewish community. For the scholar, the "Spirit" of the "Flesh" that is the Bible should be found in Oral Tradition, meaning Jews assert their role over the Bible by simply commenting on it. Overall, the commentaries, which contain Scripture, are the primary focus for Judaism. It wasn't until the moderns (neo-Karaites)

that Scripture attained a position by which the spirit of rabbinic Judaism, the Oral Traditions and commentary, was not of the utmost importance.

Chapter 5 explores the triumph of the Bible in the West and Judaism, and its impact on Jews. The rise of critical biblical scholarship resulted in the dismemberment of the unity of the Bible and its appropriation as a book of theologized politics. These tendencies prompted Jewish responses which contradicted and splintered Judaism, including four major approaches. Of these four options, *Bible as literature* became "the pillar of a modern Jewish identity" (136). Secularization, argues Attias, began with Moses Mendelssohn who, although not advocating assimilation, advocated for the culture of the Other in Jewish studies, moving the Bible from the sacred to common. Thus, the sharing of the Jewish Bible as non-Jewish dissolved tradition. Secularization then provided fuel for Zionism as the locus of Jewish identity began to be constructed around the Bible, something taken furthest by David Ben-Gurion. As the ideology progressed, the Bible as a pillar to Jewish-Israeli identity waned and became a book that separated, rather than united. It was shaken even more with scholarly claims that the Bible was a book of non-site and not viable as a pillar of Jewish identity.

The epilogue concludes the book by challenging the reader's sensibilities regarding the Bible and Freud's interpretations thereof: "If the Bible is really the Father's Book we [Jews] say it is, and if that Father is dead, what or whom is the Bible now the Book of" (156)? The Bible is therefore nothing without Oral Tradition, tradition which prevents the Bible's excess violence and "seductiveness of force." So, for Attias, living tradition alone may save the Bible, or perhaps not. From a historical vantage point, Attias's arguments are rooted in Jewish traditions and history. He convincingly illustrates the complex dynamics between Jews and the Bible, taking into consideration concurrent sociopolitical contexts and theological currents in Christian tradition. In drawing out the history of the relationship, Attias provides reasonable grounds on which to increase understandings of Jewish traditions and improve the state of multi-faith dialogue, especially with Christians. Although some statements should be tempered due to his higher view of Judaism, he suggests a provocative point regarding Christian traditions: Christians "in a way substituted Jesus and the teachings of the Church for the Oral Torah" (107). Though the statement is problematic because it assumes superiority of Jewish traditions, it does emphasize that Christianity does indeed have an "Oral Torah" of sorts, one that is only found in Church traditions. Recogni-

tion of this in multi-faith dialogue could potentially improve the quality of the dialogue through recognition of shared commonalities, namely dependence upon tradition.

Yet this also presents a significant flaw with his work. Attias is justified in focusing on Jewish traditions, yet *how* he approaches traditions assumes Judaism is greater than Christianity. Rather than being an unbiased (as much as possible), historical analysis of the development of the relationship between Jews and the Bible, *The Jews and the Bible* is rooted in assumptions of the validity and truth about Jewish interpretation and traditions. To write, as Attias does, that Christians replaced the Oral Torah is to assume that the Oral Torah, as a whole, has ancient roots. While some elements of the Oral Torah are surely present in the turn of the first millennium, many elements were absent and are merely assumed to be present in antiquity. If he wishes to most effectively and critically discuss the historical, relational dynamics between Jews and the Bible, Attias should have explored the historicity and viability of one of his primary resources for history and Jewish tradition.

With regard to his style, Attias is difficult to follow. While he does not stray from his primary topic (the relationship between Jews and the Bible), the structure of the chapters, and sections therein, are often unnecessarily extended. Attias's style does not provide the opportunity for points to actually layer and build upon each other. In contrast to academic literature and histories whose arguments may be traced like a complicated set of connected staircases, his work is like a mountain which, although beautiful, mighty, and strong, is not easy to climb with its many sudden changes in terrain.

Even with a trajectory oriented towards Judaism, he creatively and, to a certain extent, clearly demonstrates the complexities of the historical relationship between Jews and the Bible. His broad coverage of history, thorough analysis of Jewish traditions with regard to sociopolitical contexts, and ability to contextualize the role of the Bible for modern Jews are major strengths of his work, elements which the style detracts from expressing more clearly. Even so, *The Jews and the Bible*, while not necessarily a historical analysis that will significantly change the grounds of Jewish studies and multi-faith dialogue, is a valuable contribution to those fields and does offer unique insights about the complex dynamics, polemic activities, and religious-political issues surrounding the relationship between the Jews and the Bible.

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