



Basic Judaism

Milton Steinberg

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Rabbi Steinberg identifies seven strands that weave together to make up Judaism: God, morality, rite and custom, law, sacred literature, institutions, and the people. A classic work directed to both the Jewish and the non-Jewish reader.

Basic Judaism Details

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From Reader Review Basic Judaism for online ebook

Daveed Waithaka says

As a fellow person of Judaism I found this book to be very informative and insightful. It covers basics of what Judaism stands for and the different aspects from different types of Judaism from Orthodox, to reform, conservative, and reconstructionist. From this book my mind as a reform jew has changed drastically and philosophically has made me more of an open minded person, not that I wasn't before but in the way that as a jew it has been enlightened to study and find more about the people and culture that has been practiced for centuries.

Eric says

I had to keep reminding myself when this book was published -- 1947. And that it was written by a rabbi. I wanted to read it to get some more perspectives on Judaism, as my wife is Jewish. Despite it being a short book, it was a slog. It's pretty academic, and very much from a believer's perspective, so there were times where I found it pretty arrogant. There were a few interesting tidbits that I came away with. Like that some locusts are kosher (and I really have to wonder now which ones). And that until the recent past, in many places, Jews took care of their own legal issues, separate from the court systems of the country they were in. But I could've probably learned those tidbits elsewhere with a less painful slog.

Madeleine Lesieutre says

This is really helpful for someone who knows very little about Judaism. Steinberg breaks the book up into helpful sections, and it's not a big commitment; it's a fairly short read. Some of the most interesting things to me were the latitude of beliefs within Judaism, the lack of effort to convert others, the thoughts on Jesus, and the thoughts on whether it is good to come up with reasons for a specific rule (as opposed to just answering "God said so"). For instance, Steinberg gives the example of food restrictions. Jews are not supposed to eat certain meats, and for meats that they can eat, it has to "be slaughtered in a prescribed manner and by a qualified person licensed to that purpose." While some traditionalists argue that God ordained all of this and therefore it needs no further explanation, the author says that plenty of Jews are willing to speculate why. Steinberg suggests that the abstinence from certain meat has a hygienic purpose and a humanitarian purpose. This book does a bit to explain the existence of God, and a lot to argue the benefits of the beliefs and rituals. In terms of the latitude of beliefs within Judaism, some religious Jews don't observe the dietary rules at all. Meanwhile, someone with "no theology at all may abstain from forbidden foods out of respect for the historic practices of his people."

I would go on, but I don't just want to write down all of the cool facts in my review; that's what reading the book is for!

Camilla says

I'm torn about this book. On the one hand, it did its job excellently--it's the first book I've found that managed to comprehensively but briefly explain the many (often opposing) facets of Judaism. On the other hand, the author managed to turn a very interesting subject into a snooze fest. I'm normally not bothered by dry, more academic writing, but this seemed a bit too dry for an introductory book. I'd recommend it for the information, but there are probably more fun ways to get the info.

Joan says

As a human, it compelled me. As a woman, it left me feeling isolated.

J.T.K. Gibbs says

A book to read and reread. The style is a bit stilted, but well worth reading! The explanations are succinct and reflect the variety of Jewish expression.

Craig Barner says

I read "Basic Judaism" as I traveled through Israel, contributing to the enjoyment of my sojourn. As I walked the shores of the Dead Sea and the streets of Jerusalem's Old City, I found myself meditating on the generations of Jews who lived and propagated a faith and tradition steeped in ancient teachings and who had experiences that no other people has shared.

I thoroughly enjoyed "Basic Judaism." Rabbi Steinberg's presentation of Judaism is lucid and detailed, but never tedious. He crystalizes the core beliefs and practices of Jews in terms of observance, reason, salvation and other issues. I have read the Tanakh, which is also known as the Old Testament, and other books on Jewish faith and experience. From them I had a decent perception of what Judaism represents and teaches. "Basic Judaism" contributed significantly to my understanding. The book has a primer quality, but it is much more than a dry primer. Steinberg is analytical in his presentation but also thorough and loving.

People of other faiths would benefit by reading "Basic Judaism" because there are several superb discussions on topics common to all religions. For instance, "Basic Judaism" has an excellent discussion on prayer and whether it is efficacious.

Steinberg criticizes Christianity, but there is nothing wrong with that. Christians should encourage well-intentioned criticism as a way to strengthen dialogue with Jews and to develop their own religious observance. Some of Steinberg's criticisms of Jesus, however, struck me as superficial. For instance, Steinberg knocks Jesus for His occasional ill temper, such as His cursing of the fig tree in the gospels of Mark and Matthew. Every holy man shows personality traits, including "negative" ones. This criticism by

Steinberg struck me as "criticism for the sake of criticism."

An interesting element to "Basic Judaism" is that the often contrasting outlooks of traditionalists and modernists within Judaism are given. This provides a fascinating look at disagreements and is an intellectual treat. Indeed, "Basic Judaism" as a whole is an intellectual treat.

Joe says

Excellent, excellent introduction to Judaism. Explores and explains many aspects of Judaism from a variety of different perspectives. I especially like how the writing itself is so reflective of some of the ideologies of the religion; it's not always cut and dry, but neither are the principles being reflected. Some things are clearly written in proverbial stone, but everything else is left up to you to think about, decide, and experience for yourself. Timeless.

Rikka Filkins bos says

I am a Jew by choice. While I read (and continue to read) many books on both the Jewish tradition and on the faith itself, this is probably the "one" that made clear to me that Judaism was to be my life's journey. I've lent my copy out several times, mostly to non-Jewish friends, and they seem to find it helpful in grasping what Judaism is. Highly recommended.

Denise Junker says

I really liked the summary points of specific beliefs and entities. The theological discussions could at times be tedious but that is what theological writing tends to do. The writing needs to explain something not all will understand. He does use a specific theological language so if a person does not have such a background it could be difficult to read. "Non-Jews" refers to others who at least believe in God or know theological language.

Even with this being an older book (1947), it still is completely useful today. I have other books to read on Judaism that I hope to compare and contrast with this one.

Kelly says

A neighbor lent this to me after I mentioned my reading project on world religions, and I decided to take a look even though I'd originally intended to read mostly scriptures and foundational writings.

This book is interesting, but definitely wouldn't be considered "basic" by today's standards, as it's pretty heavy on philosophy; I appreciated this, but I'm sure not everybody would. Jewish theology and history are obviously not my forte, but based on my prior knowledge it seems to be a pretty thorough summary of Jewish beliefs and (to a somewhat lesser extent) practices. However, modern (in the 1940s, that is) interpretations get much less space than traditional ones. The book also spends a surprising amount of space

talking about Judaism's relationship to other religions (unsurprisingly, Christianity in particular), which was especially interesting. Steinberg writes well--and occasionally movingly--about his faith, but I think the book is a bit too dry to be widely appealing. And while it doesn't address the question of theism in a way I suspect skeptics or atheists would find satisfying (though, really, if you read a book like this as an atheist, you sort of have to know what you're getting into), such readers might still appreciate some of the factual / historical knowledge.

Overall, this was interesting and informative, and I'm glad I read it, but I'd recommend something more recent / less philosophical for casual readers.

Brock says

Excellent introduction to Jewish cultural and religious thought for non-Jews and even for secular Jews. Is often used as a textbook in a conversion to Judaism program but is an excellent book outside of that context.

Stefano says

A great overview of Jewish thinking and tradition. This is not a "1001 questions and answers" type book, so don't expect a lot of specific information about practice, tradition, etc. This is really a big-picture book and does a great job of communicating the gist of Judaism, which like any faith, cannot be covered by just one volume.

Zack says

Really a fantastic book though not what I expected. I don't know why but I expected something more technical but this was so spiritual and immersive. I'd recommend this to anyone wanting a good window into Jewish spirituality and practice.

Elliot Cooper says

Excellent overview of Judaism as a religion and the differences and similarities between the traditionalist and modernist POVs. I loved the way Rabbi Steinberg's voice was so clearly imprinted in his writing style. Learned some new things and reinforced much existing knowledge.
