

Judaism when Christianity Began – A Survey of Belief and Practice
by Jacob Neusner.

Professor Jacob Neusner was one of the scholarly phenomena of the second half of the twentieth century, producing a steady stream of publications of a high standard, some of which were outstanding. He has started the twenty first century in a style which indicates that he has no intention of resting on his laurels!

Judaism when Christianity Began is a superb study of the core doctrines of Judaism, as well as the practices which sprang from them. Neusner reviews key areas such as Revelation, the Image of God, Exile and Return, the Chain of Tradition and Sacred Space, as well as concepts like Sacrifice, Repentance and Atonement, Death and Afterlife, and Ritual Purity and Uncleaness.

Each chapter is subdivided into sections by means of which Neusner not only develops the subject but broadens the scope of his analysis. For example, the chapter on The Community of Israel, of inestimable interest to any Christian – and possibly some Jews too - seeking to understand the many nuances of the name, covers What is an "Israel" in a Judaic Religious System?, "Israel" in the Mishnah, "Israel" in the Talmud of the Land of Israel, The metaphor of the Family: Israel's Children, and The importance of "Israel" in Rabbinic Judaism.

In the chapter on Death and Resurrection, Neusner not only clarifies Jewish teaching on this complex subject but demonstrates where and how Judaism and Christianity differ. There is also a fascinating mini-subsection at the end on The Messiah.

Where appropriate Neusner introduces and explains rabbinic texts which either illustrate the subject under consideration or underpins the point that he is making. These texts are well set out and easy to understand.

Neusner's final chapter The Representation of the Faith considers the origins of synagogue iconography and its justification within the context of a religion that ostensibly forbids the representation of images. This chapter's last section, Conclusion: From Scripture to Judaism serves as a summary of the whole book, and the author brilliantly explains the vital importance of the twin pillars of classical Judaism, the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Literature, in a way that this reviewer has rarely seen bettered.

Judaism when Christianity Began is a perfect introductory text for those entering the world of interfaith dialogue, Christians interested in the faith from which their religion developed, and Jews eager for clear explanations of the main teachings of their faith.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh