

Radical Judaism – Rethinking God and Tradition by Arthur Green.
Yale University Press 2011.

Arthur Green has, during a long and illustrious academic and rabbinic career, established himself as one of the foremost Jewish theologians of the last fifty years. His books, whether for scholarly or lay audiences, are beautifully written and much of what he writes is challenging, thought provoking and memorable.

In Radical Judaism, Green throws down the gauntlet to those within Judaism who are perplexed or frightened by modern biblical scholarship or scientific theories about the origins of life on earth and envisions not only a path back to active engagement with our ancestral faith but also, even more challengingly, with God.

Radical Judaism is divided into four parts, with copious notes and an excellent bibliography: Y-H-W-H: God and Being, Evolution Continues: A Jewish History of “God”, Torah: Word out of Silence, Israel: Being Human, Being Jewish, mirroring the structure of his 2006 Franz Rosenzweig lectures at Yale out of which the book was developed.

Green remains inspired by the theology of his mentor A J Heschel, who felt that radicalism had to have roots to be successful. For Heschel those roots were the writings of the Hasidic Masters, for Green it is undoubtedly Jewish Mysticism and the Kabbalah. The first chapter tackles evolution and its challenge to Biblical creationism, and also ways in which the deity may be framed and understood in a post-modern world. The second chapter considers the way ideas of God have metamorphosed throughout Jewish history and the key influences on this development. The third chapter ponders Torah in its various meanings, ways of engaging with the concept of mitzvah, and also understanding the Sinaitic covenant in fresh and relevant ways. The fourth and final chapter reflects on Israel in all its various meanings, applications, and ways of creating a vibrant, meaningful and relevant Diasporist Judaism.

Art Green is inspiring and challenging in equal measure in Radical Judaism, and his radicalism remains at one and the same time grounded and fresh. There are many highlights in this book, but for me the outstanding one is his consideration of reclaiming the vocalisation of the Tetragrammaton rather than using its Adonai synonym, which in his casting of it becomes not just an achievable aim that is eminently justifiable but also a means of re-discovering beauty in a liturgy with which many have become jaded.

Radical Judaism is a superb piece of work, and deserves to be studied by rabbis and laity alike as part of the necessary process of keeping Judaism alive and relevant in a secularised world.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh