

The Bible As It Was

By James L. Kugel

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This is a guide to the Hebrew Bible unlike any other. Leading us chapter by chapter through its most important stories--from the Creation and the Tree of Knowledge through the Exodus from Egypt and the journey to the Promised Land--James Kugel shows how a group of anonymous, ancient interpreters radically transformed the Bible and made it into the book that has come down to us today.

Was the snake in the Garden of Eden the devil, or the Garden itself "paradise"? Did Abraham discover monotheism, and was his son Isaac a willing martyr? Not until the ancient interpreters set to work. Poring over every little detail in the Bible's stories, prophecies, and laws, they let their own theological and imaginative inclinations radically transform the Bible's very nature. Their sometimes surprising interpretations soon became the generally accepted meaning. These interpretations, and not the mere words of the text, *became* the Bible in the time of Jesus and Paul or the rabbis of the Talmud.

Drawing on such sources as the Dead Sea Scrolls, ancient Jewish apocrypha, Hellenistic writings, long-lost retellings of Bible stories, and prayers and sermons of the early church and synagogue, Kugel reconstructs the theory and methods of interpretation at the time when the Bible was becoming the bedrock of Judaism and Christianity. Here, for the first time, we can witness all the major transformations of the text and recreate the development of the Bible "As It Was" at the start of the Common era--the Bible as we know it.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
James Kugel's *The Bible As It Was* is an eye-opening study of early scriptural interpretation. Kugel focuses on readings of the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) from 100-300 A.D., particularly the Jewish tradition of *midrash*--a practice of filling in the narrative gaps where biblical stories are ambiguous or unclear. Kugel's interest in midrash is more than academic, however. He wants readers to consider the ways these early readings of the Bible affect today's popular understandings of scriptural texts (such as the sacrifice of Isaac or the creation in Genesis); and he provides a convincing description of the richness and complexity that informs what seem to many like simple, commonsense readings of scripture.

From Library Journal
Kugel (Hebrew literature, Harvard Univ. and Bar Ilan Univ., Israel) attempts to reconstruct the Bible as it was understood in the closing centuries B.C.E. and at the very start of the common era. His work is designed to serve as the popular complement to a more scholarly book, soon to be published by Harvard University Press. Here, Kugel aims to show how traditional interpretive motifs regarding the Bible were formed, came to be idealized, and were even regarded as indistinguishable from the biblical text itself, whether by Jews or early Christians. Half of this work is given to elucidating major interpretive motifs drawn from Genesis, the remainder, to major interpretive traditions drawn from Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Kugel has marshaled a great many ancient sources. This important work for intelligent readers should be acquired by all general readership libraries and especially by those intended for theological and sociological research.?Robert H. O'Connell, Denver
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From Kirkus Reviews
An extraordinary, pathbreaking scholarly achievement: an annotated anthology of interpretations of ancient (mostly 100 b.c.300 a.d.) interpretations of the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) culled from hundreds of sources. ``Interpretation'' here often refers to the homiletical expansion of a biblical narrative--known in the Jewish tradition as midrash--particularly to fill in narrative gaps and vague allusions, or to resolve morally problematic passages. Kugel, a professor of Hebrew literature and the Bible at Harvard and Israel's Bar-Ilan University, notes in a penetrating opening essay that his focus is on ``exegetical motifs.'' He notes basic principles that underlie ancient biblical interpretation, including a view of the Scriptures as ``omnisignificant,'' that is, containing meaning in even the smallest details. Jewish and Christian exegetes also expanded the prosaic to lend greater resonance to seemingly minor matters. For example, Rabbi Simeon Bar Yochai interpreted Deuteronomy 27:17, ``Cursed be he who displaces his neighbor's boundary-mark,'' and Proverbs 22:28, ``Do not displace that boundary mark of old set by your father,'' by adding, ``If you see a custom of your forefathers observed, do not reject it.'' Thus, a law whose literal focus was on property was homiletically expanded to emphasize the ``boundary'' of religious tradition. Kugel's great achievement is to demonstrate again and again, with hundreds of fascinating examples, how the integrity of the text was both respected and reinterpreted by authors as varied as those of the apocrypha, the earliest midrashim, and the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as the early Church fathers. His own interpretive comments are consistently clear and engaging. This volume, which will be savored by both Jewish and Christian lovers of Scripture, richly illustrates Kugel's point that what we know as ``the Bible'' is really a series of texts filtered through the imaginative perceptions of its ancient exegetes. (24 illustrations, not seen) (History Book Club main selection) -- *Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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