

A Note to the Christian Reader

The prophet Isaiah counsels: “Look to the rock whence you were hewn . . .” (Isa. 51:1). For Christians this could be understood to mean that the path to one’s self-understanding as a Christian runs through an inquiry into Judaism and an encounter with its canonical texts and key ideas. This book hopefully can serve as a gateway to such an inquiry and a facilitator of such an encounter.

Most Christians know that Jews read from their Scripture during their services. The New Testament furnishes among the most important documentations of this ancient practice: “For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (Acts 15:21). This is not a trivial observation, for the entire Christian lectionary tradition of including weekly readings and lessons (lections) in the church service stems from the Jewish practice of reading a portion of the Torah each week over the year.

This book will help you understand this practice and, in doing so, will help you better understand and appreciate your own tradition. While my agenda here is to outline for Jews a method of how they can approach and read the weekly Torah portions, the method itself may have relevance for you in your own reading. Taken as a whole, this book will illuminate for you the nature of the Jewish transaction with the Pentateuch and give you some idea of the hermeneutics that this transaction involves. Old Testament texts that are familiar to you may, in the following pages, come to look somewhat different.

Reading the Bible and about the Bible is always a challenge. It is a challenge when we do this within the comfortable confines of the assumptions we hold about God, man, and the world, and even more so when we look at Scripture outside these parameters and see how it is read from under a different interpretive horizon. I applaud your willingness to accept this challenge.

As I invite you into the pages that follow, I cannot improve upon what Martin Buber said to a group of German Protestant missionaries in Stuttgart in 1930:

What have you and we in common? If we take the question literally, a book and an expectation. To you the book is a forecourt; to us it is the sanctuary. But in this place we can dwell together; and together listen to the voice that speaks here. That means we can work together to evoke the buried speech of that voice; together we can redeem the imprisoned living word.¹