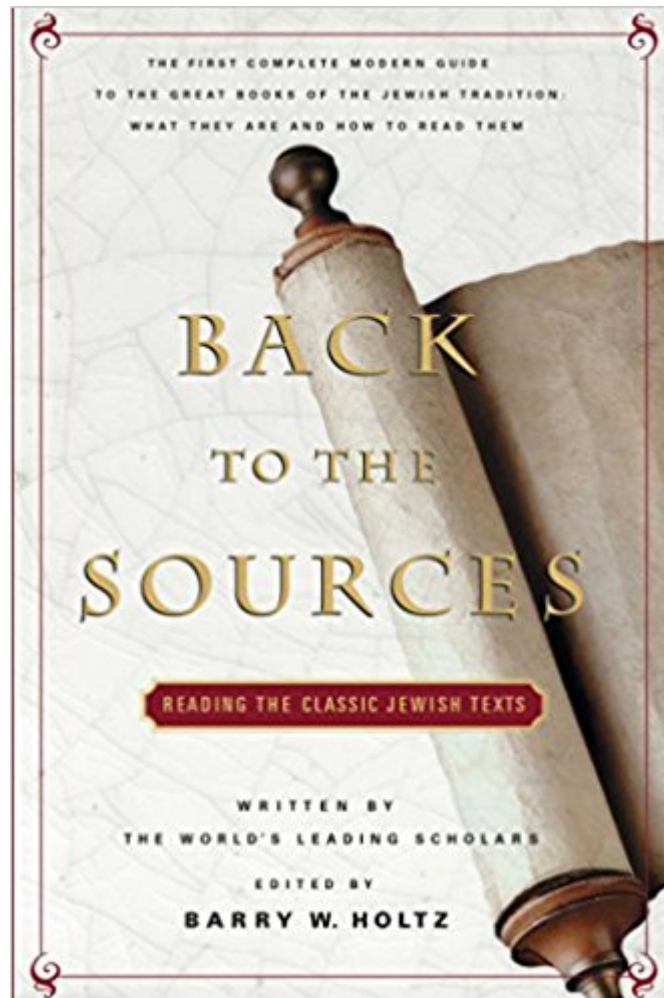




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# **Back To The Sources: Reading The Classic Jewish Texts**



## Synopsis

Essays analyze the major traditional texts of Judaism from literary, historical, philosophical, and religious points of view.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

With chapters written by leading scholars specifically for this volume, 'Back to the Sources' is the first comprehensive guide to this literary legacy: the Bible, the Talmud, the midrashic literature, the commentaries, the legal codes, the mystical texts of the Kabbalah and of Hasidism, the philosophical works and the prayerbook.

If you are interested in a basic understanding of Jewish texts, from Torah to Talmud, and everything in between, this is a perfect book for you. Each chapter contains a different text, and is presented in a clear, manageable style. Soon after reading this book, I took a course in Zohar with a VERY poor teacher; the only thing that saved some of the students in the class from utter confusion was a Xeroxed copy of the chapter on Kabbalah from this book. Each chapter is self-contained, so it is not necessary to read the book all the way through. It can be used as a reference that you can return to again and again. This strength is also its greatest weakness, however; there is no sense that these texts interact with one another. Each seems to be examined in a vacuum, exclusive of every other text. Also, the section on Talmud actually made me more afraid of studying Talmud than I had previously been. It painted it as a dizzying and impossibly dense text, although the information I gleaned from that chapter was nonetheless useful. (Please don't let that chapter scare you away

from studying Talmud yourself!) I recommend this book to anyone who has a basic understanding of Judaism and would like to begin the process of studying in depth.

This work presents chapters on all areas of Jewish and rabbinic literature, by ten experts in Jewish rabbinic works. They are not just knowledgeable, but they are also good writers. It presents a readable explanation and overview of all the basic Jewish texts, including the Torah, the Tanakh (Bible), the Mishna and both Talmuds. That's right, there are two Talmuds: The Bavli, from Babylon, and the Yerushalmi, from Israel. This book also covers Jewish philosophical writings, Kabbalah [Jewish mysticism], Hasidic writings and the Siddur [prayerbook].

Back To The Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts is an excellent introduction to foundational Jewish texts. For a basic book, it contains a great deal of information, scope, and range. It moves from the Torah down to the Hasidic movement, involving multiple readings from religious, historical, psychological and sociological perspectives. But overall, this book examines the place of Jewish texts in Jewish religious life. It explains a fundamental strength of Judaism: the ability of its practitioners to constantly recast the interpretation of Judaism, and what it means to be a Jew.

After more than 20 years, Holtz's book stands as the best guide to classical Jewish Texts written for the layman. Each chapter offers a succinct description of an area of Jewish texts, e.g. Biblical, Talmudic, et.al. At the end of each chapter there is a bibliography of published books useful to gaining access to the topic of the chapter.

Back to the Sources is a collection of essays by eminent scholars in their field on the major texts of the Jewish religious tradition. The topics covered include, Bible, Talmud (includes Mishnah and medieval law codes), midrash, medieval biblical commentaries, medieval philosophy, kabbalah (sans pop stars), hasidic tales, and the siddur (the prayerbook). The essay on the Bible covers the literary aspects of modern scholarship. The Talmud and midrash essays help the reader understand the classical rabbinic mindset that give rise to those literatures - that is, every word and every letter means something, and therefore the parallelism (which to a modern literary theorist is an aspect of style) of the biblical text, becomes a phenomenon to be explained. The essay on medieval biblical commentaries is an excellent survey of all the major figures and amounts to an introduction to the Mikra'ot Gedolot (the biblical text printed with a collection of commentaries on the same page to facilitate study). The essay on medieval philosophy traces the development of Jewish philosophical

works and presents the main figures. The essay on kabbalah is the weakest of the collection. It presents only a very superficial account of the major figures, the "official" (Gershom Scholem) story of its evolution, and a very limited introduction to the system of sfirot. It mentions not at all the four worlds, a major failing. The essay on Hasidic tales is excellent. Each essay has a "Where to go from here?" section that points the reader towards translations of the primary sources and other books and articles. The sources cited date primarily to the 1980s and earlier, and that particular section is in need of an update. There are also some glaring omissions in the references. For example, in biblical poetry, James Kugel's *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* is the gold standard, and not referenced. Nor when discussing Biblical narrative is Julius Wellhausen's *Prolegomena to the Study of Israel*, which is the foundation text for the Documentary Hypothesis.

I headed into this book with very low expectations. I expected it to be exceedingly boring. I was very surprised. It was quite interesting. Having sat through countless Friday night Kabbalah services, I thought that there was nothing you could tell me about it that I didn't already know. I learned that there was a lot I didn't know! I now cannot wait to go to ne

Great source book, came carefully packaged- thank you!

This is an excellent sourcebook for anyone who wants to study Torah ... whether they are Jewish or not. For someone who is converting to Judaism (my case), it has amazing essays on Jewish religious texts. You could be an agnostic history of religion student and still gain knowledge from this book. I highly recommend it.

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