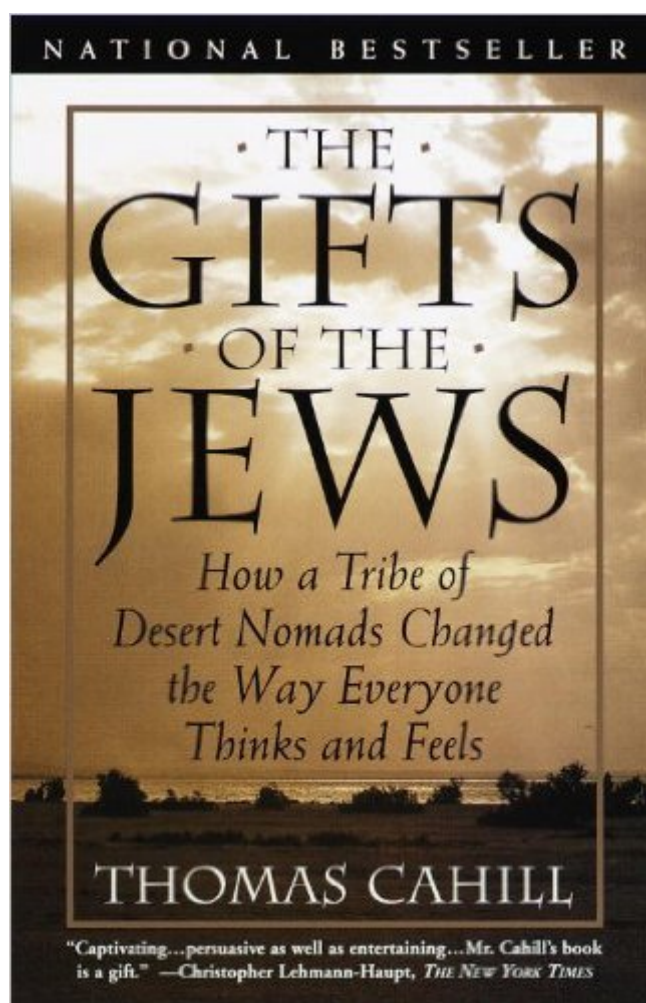


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The Gifts Of The Jews: How A Tribe Of Desert Nomads Changed The Way Everyone Thinks And Feels (Hinges Of History)



Synopsis

The author of the runaway bestseller *How the Irish Saved Civilization* has done it again. In *The Gifts of the Jews* Thomas Cahill takes us on another enchanting journey into history, once again recreating a time when the actions of a small band of people had repercussions that are still felt today. *The Gifts of the Jews* reveals the critical change that made western civilization possible. Within the matrix of ancient religions and philosophies, life was seen as part of an endless cycle of birth and death; time was like a wheel, spinning ceaselessly. Yet somehow, the ancient Jews began to see time differently. For them, time had a beginning and an end; it was a narrative, whose triumphant conclusion would come in the future. From this insight came a new conception of men and women as individuals with unique destinies--a conception that would inform the Declaration of Independence--and our hopeful belief in progress and the sense that tomorrow can be better than today. As Thomas Cahill narrates this momentous shift, he also explains the real significance of such Biblical figures as Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the Pharaoh, Joshua, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Full of compelling stories, insights and humor, *The Gifts of the Jews* is an irresistible exploration of history as fascinating and fun as *How the Irish Saved Civilization*.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Normally, I only include books on this page that I recommended highly and unequivocally. In the case of *The Gifts of the Jews*, I do recommend it, but with a bit of equivocating. There's no sense rehashing all the critiquing that has already been done on this short and fascinating volume -- it is

truly a quite thought-provoking attempt at some historical paradigm shifting. My question is whether such shifting is warranted in light of the evidence Cahill brings to bear on his thesis. Like most bible-based historical analyses, Gifts suffers from assumptive leaps often grounded on precious little substance. For example, to claim that our very concept of time evolved from one of cyclical and unbreakable repetition with no end and no beginning to our current "processive" notions of past and future because of the Jews begs more questions than Cahill tackles. Among them are how the Egyptians managed to spend decades building monuments that were intended to last forever if they were convinced it would all be for naught when the next cycle began anew. For that matter, how did the Sumerians ever get around to building cities? The author also provides mountains of detail regarding the emotional states of biblical figures whose words and behaviors were described in the barest of minimalist proportions, attributing broad and profound meanings to mere handfuls of words. To his credit, Cahill chose for his basis an unconventional translation that hews much closer to the meaning of the original language, and in fact his presentation of that novel interpretation is the best part of this book, but some of those interpretations strain credulity to such an extent that his underlying thesis is too often undermined. As an example, jumping directly from the Burning Bush to the conclusion that "God...can burn in us without consuming" is poetic and clever but did this actually occur to the early Israelites? Overall, there is far too much speculation upon which to hang a serious thesis, and it put me in mind of the classic skit in which one syllable uttered by a diplomat becomes three paragraphs from the translator. However, the book is so full of wonderful nuggets that it is still a delight to read, at least once you get past the overlong and overly-discursive discussion of the Sumerian "Epic of Gilgamesh," and that's why I am recommending it. Cahill's reading of the Abraham and Isaac story is tremendously moving, as is the story of the exodus from Egypt, particularly as concerns the ongoing frustrations of Moses. One of the most soul-stirring sections is the one dealing with the "minor" prophet Amos, who openly scorns the "elegant piety" of the people of Israel and exhorts them to put away the symbolic sacrifices and instead "let justice flow like water."

After reading all the negative reviews of this book, I couldn't help but state my piece. Sure, Cahill does try to justify the actions recorded in a literary tradition that he obviously respects a great deal. That makes his telling of the history of the Jewish people and the Hebrew bible INTERESTING. He does not write in a purely objective way and, as far as I am concerned, that is fine. History, despite what some may argue, is always written from someone's viewpoint- it is never totally objective. As for the book itself, I thoroughly enjoyed reading Cahill's writing. It was one of the most enjoyable

histories I have read in a while. Furthermore, it is accepted scholarly fact that the Jewish people did invent (or were among the first to use) the linear model of time and among (if not the first) to have a universe in which there was one God. Cahill was also very careful to emphasize that these cultural changes were not instantaneous, but took place over many hundreds of years. So what if Cahill excuses Abraham's use of Sara to get what he wanted. Cahill is looking at history and when looking at history you have to look in the context of the culture at the time the particular history was recorded. In the ancient world, women didn't count for all that much and the original readers of the story of Abraham (and the listeners to the oral tradition before that) would not have exactly been outraged on Sara's account. Overall, though a bit slanted in its interpretations, this book is so full of great storytelling that I would consider it to be well worth a reader's time. (Although I do agree that perhaps the pagan fertility ceremony thing was a bit much.) END

I opened Thomas Cahill's *The Gift of the Jews* and immediately fell into a virtual journey throughout the history of the Jewish faith. Beginning with the origins of Biblical style from ancient civilizations, Cahill establishes the premise of the Bible itself and takes us on a tour of the triumphs and burdens of the Israelites. In explaining and interpreting each major action with commendable knowledge and depth, he builds towards the final, dazzling effect of proving the gifts of the Jews as characteristics we utilize daily but take for granted, including our perception of time, the emphasis on individual actions, and the reliance on God not just because we are told to but because we are His. In retrospect, Cahill did a remarkable job instilling a sense of enthusiasm about the Bible in his readers as he drove home specific points important to him. I found his explanation of the Jewish gift of time to be particularly well written and moving, emphasizing that "in this moment-and only in this moment-I am in control. This is the moment of choice..." (146). Cahill provides us with the inspiration to take control of what we are doing, to take a look at the bigger picture (the history of burdened people), and to thank our Jewish ancestors for handing down the "gifts" that have shaped who we are today.

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