PREFACE

Religions invariably seek to make true statements about the nature of reality, the nature of a god or gods, and humanity's place in this universe. Consequently, religions must address the epistemological problem of how we gain knowledge of those aspects of the world that we cannot readily experience or understand with certainty. Most often, one thinks of the transcendent realms as those most central to religious discourse. But much of our rather mundane terrestrial experience is as unknown—and, perhaps, as unknowable—as what is usually termed transcendent. The future, for instance, is very much a mystery, and in its own curious way, the past is an equally vast uncertainty. Indeed, within a given religious or political community, there can be much competition over which conceptualization of history best serves a people's sense of purpose. But that conflict over history is only possible by virtue of ambiguities confronted at every turn in the historiographic endeavor. As such, religions must address, in some manner, the problem of our world's ambiguities.

It does not matter whether we are discussing cosmic questions or pondering a decision that needs our immediate attention; the fact remains that we are constantly in a state of knowing less about ourselves and the variables relevant to our lives than we might daily acknowledge. The suppression of our ignorance surely constitutes a complex coping mechanism, which, when disabled, has crippling effects on one's psychological health. Equally problematic can be the overinsistence upon certainty in the face of so much obscurity. One's ability to handle ambiguity is undoubtedly dependent upon both psychology and culture. Individuals differ in the extent to which they suffer uncertainty. And while no western religion actually celebrates the unknowability of the universe and the nihilism that might go along with it, we should recognize that the subjects of some cultures are more sensitive than others to the limits of human knowledge.

Though not overtly the central focus, the question of how religions and scholars of religion treat the problem of ambiguity underlies this study. One may view the development of religious systems as deeply rooted in the question of how indeterminacy is resolved. Only against this backdrop can the role and purpose of metaphor be appropriately framed.

The core of this book was completed during the academic year of 1995-96, while I was enjoying a year-long leave generously provided by Wellesley College. Circumstances that I now understand to be rather typical of publishing sagas postponed its appearance for some four years. During the summer of 1998 I incorporated some additional bibliographic references, but this was done only in a casual, unsystematic manner. Except for improvements made during the editing process, the core of the book did not undergo changes after the initial writing period. I am appreciative of the financial support made available by the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion through the Werner and Lisl Weinberg Publications Fund and the faculty research grants that made possible the copyediting and indexing of the manuscript in its final stages of preparation.

Professor Barbara Geller of Wellesley College read very early drafts of parts of the manuscript. Professor Ray Jackendoff was also gracious enough to consider the first complete draft. The critiques offered by both of these individuals helped me rethink many crucial questions of methodology and presentation. As a result of their readings, I rewrote most of the chapters from the bottom up. I am also grateful to Professor Ellen Schauber, who served as a publisher's review reader and who chose to share with me directly her reactions and suggestions, as well as her enthusiasm for this interdisciplinary project.

During the spring of 1996, by chance, I entered into discussions with Professor Jacob Neusner, who had just begun working on a book he would later publish as *The Theological Grammar of the Oral Torah.* In that expansive, three-volume work, Neusner employed the terminology of generative linguistics to describe the structure of rabbinic thinking at its most rudimentary conceptual level. Through e-mail, we discussed the best uses of linguistic terminology to frame the ideological structure of rabbinic literature. As it turned out, Neusner's use of linguistic labels for the generative ideas within rabbinic literature proved to function as a sustained metaphor for the relationship between language and theology more generally. In this domain, his insights deserve not only attention, but adaptation for other areas of study. It was during these discussions that I first sent Professor Neusner sections from the newly emerging draft of *Biblical Ambiguities.* I wish to express my deeply felt appreciation for his sustained interest in this work and for his continued support and

enthusiasm for this project, from its early stages through to publication.

The introduction to this book was reworked many times, but the most recent rendering benefited from the thoughtful reflections of Professor Susan Einbinder as well as from Professor Jerome Eckstein's insightful reading of the entire manuscript. To both I am deeply grateful. Jerome Eckstein has repeatedly explored the question of certainty, indeterminacy, and human psychology in his own philosophical quest (1981, 1991). Along the way I have been assisted by his discoveries, many of which he has shared with me in writing and in discussions over the past twenty-four years.

It is my great pleasure to express much thankfulness to Mr. Chris Rohmann, who brought innumerable improvements to this manuscript through his expert skills as an editor. He is a sophisticated reader whose ideas and questions often pushed me to articulate my thoughts more cogently.

I have undoubtedly been unable to adequately combine the collective wisdom of my teachers and readers in this work. Of course, I alone am responsible for its final form—errors and all.

Much of this book was written when my two boys were in their early stages of language acquisition. I learned more from them than they could ever imagine. Witnessing the emergence of speech is not only a joy, it is a privilege we should never take for granted. By listening to Joshua and Elisha as they learn to navigate the nuances of language and its relationship to the world about them, much of what is studied in linguistics as theory became, for me, deeply rooted in reality.

My bride, Marjorie, now knows more about ambiguity with certainty than she might ever have dreamed possible. Her support, her encouragement, and her love are ever-sustained blessings.

D.H.A.
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