

TORAH and CHRIST

A Comparison Of
Rabbinic Jewish and Early Christian
Interpretation of the Bible

"And Moses diligently inquired. . ."
(Lev.10.16)

"Seek and you will find. . ."
(Matt.7.7)

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Bernice Meyer Saltzman
Department of Religion
Trinity College
Hartford, Connecticut

Studies in biblical literature and history rarely conclude that rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity were equally authentic developments of biblical religion. My thesis is that rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity were parallel movements from and equal claimants to the traditions of ancient Israel; but each gave the ancient traditions a distinctive new focus in response to two separate epoch-making events of the first century. One epoch-making event was the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Early Christians claimed that this event, the advent of the Christ, was the fulfillment and perfection of God's creative and redemptive acts as they had been unfolded in the historical process, and had inaugurated a New Covenant between God and man. The other epoch-making event was the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 c.e. In response to this calamity the rabbinites claimed that the study of Torah, the observance of commandments and deeds of lovingkindness were equivalent to sacrifice and brought atonement to Israel.

Neither movement erupted suddenly in the first century. Both grew out of diverse groups that germinated several centuries earlier with the onset of Persian-Greek domination in the Near East. Both movements effectively established links of continuity with the ancient traditions embodied in the Old Testament. They did this through the activity of biblical interpretation.

My essay will demonstrate that the interpretive activity itself was not new but ancient; that the New Testament writers and the rabbinites, in their primary activity as interpreters of Scripture, employed similar techniques; but the results of the interpretive

activity of each were distinctively different and authentically derived from the Old Testament.

A frequent assumption is that biblical interpretation had its inception in the late, post-exilic books of the Old Testament and in the extra-canonical books written between 200 b.c.e. and 200 c.e. The most often-cited example is Chronicles which is described as a reinterpretation of Samuel and Kings in order to construct a model history of ancient Israel. Another is Deuteronomy which takes the form of a repetition, with modifications and different emphases, of many sections of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs is an example from the intertestamental period. This work recasts Genesis 49 (Jacob's blessings to his sons) and Deuteronomy 33 (Moses' blessings to the tribes of Israel) into a framework for ethical and religious teachings. It also draws on the imagery of the Pentateuch in projecting a vision of a new era.¹

Interpretation of the Bible within the Bible is older than the post-exilic period. For example, Genesis 12.10-20 tells that Abraham took Sarah to Egypt under the guise of his sister. Pharaoh took her into his harem and Abraham acquired great possessions. God sent a plague on Pharaoh and Pharaoh sent them both away. Genesis 20 tells virtually the same story in a different setting, but the flaws in Abraham's character are completely erased. The second story has cast the Patriarch in a more favorable light. This is one function of interpretation.² Consider also the interpretation of dreams and oracles which existed in antiquity.

The case-law character of the codes in Exodus must have required an accompanying oral interpretation to make them applicable to different situations.³

What inspires - or provokes - interpretation? Most of all it is an attitude shaped by two opposing injunctions regarding the sacred text:

You shall not add anything to what I command you or take anything away from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon you. (Deut.4.2, 13.1)

At the same time both king and subjects were commanded to read, study, recite, teach, "meditate upon it day and night." (Deut.6.7, 11.18-19, 17.18-19; Ps.1.1-2; Josh.1.8)

This attitude was not peculiar to the Bible but prominent in the Ancient Near East. For example, the laws of Lipit-Ishtar and of Hammurabi (second millenium b.c.e.) lay down a curse on those who would alter their statutes.⁴ Yet the various "recensions" of the Gilgamesh Epic and Enuma Elish represent concerns of different historical periods.

The idea of an unchangeable, authoritative word, in fact evokes change. Ancient words, precisely because they are authoritative and sanctified, are drawn upon and reinterpreted to give legitimacy to a new order and relevance to contemporary events. The activity of interpretation is the life-force of the sacred text because it renews its message from age to age.

A reverential and imaginative approach to the ancient words was characteristic of the rabbinites and the New Testament writers. One way to appreciate their attitude is to examine

the workings of midrash. In its broadest definition it means the interpretation of Scripture. The Hebrew root of the work, darash, "דרש" means "seek, search, investigate or inquire." The Greek equivalent is exegesis, meaning "enquiry."⁵

Midrash is expressed in a variety of literary forms: verse by verse commentary; visions supposedly from biblical figures, which are extensions of Scripture; expansion and retelling of biblical narratives; legal commentary applying Mosaic law to the contemporary situation; anthologizing by collecting related texts and linking them with notes and comments; imitation, by producing works modelled on accepted scriptural books; sermons, inspired by a scriptural verse. Several forms appear in translations of Scripture from Hebrew to other languages. The Hebrew word, targum and its Greek equivalent hermeneia means both translation and interpretation.⁶

The religious seeker, committed to the sanctity and authority of the sacred text, is confronted with complex problems. They are of two categories: the first arises from phenomena in the biblical text itself, such as a word whose exact meaning is uncertain; a passage which seems to contradict other passages and so demands harmonization; a passage which lacks sufficient details; or a passage whose apparent or literal meaning is unacceptable to the interpreter.⁷ The Gen. 12.10-20 account of Abraham, cited above, raised several questions because it lacked details and slurred the Patriarch: What was the nature of the plague? Was Sarah's virtue impaired? Did Abraham actually lie?

The embellishments in Genesis 20 resolved these questions.

Another category of problems arises from the demands of life itself. The present reality in history contradicts or falls short of the ideal promised in the sacred writings. Psalm 89.20-38 constitutes a midrash on Nathan's oracle in 2Sam.7.4-17 wherein the psalmist's concern is the glaring contrast between the divine promise of perpetuity to the Davidic dynasty and the actual situation of his day. That situation was the invasion of Judah from the north in 735 b.c.e. when an attempt was made to depose Ahaz and replace him with a non-Davidic king. (2kg.16.5ff)⁸ Further: beliefs and practices may come under attack from those who have opposing viewpoints and interests which conflict. The doctrinal disputes between Pharisees, Sadducees and the Qumran sects, and later between Jews and Christians, reflect this interpretative task.⁹

Out of these dilemmas, experienced by interpreters of all ages, come two types of midrash, halakic and haggadic, which are particularly associated with rabbinic Judaism. Halakah (from halak, "to go, walk, follow," hence "the way") is regulative, legal material. Something can become halakah, a rule, in any of four ways: by longstanding custom; by decree of a recognized and respected teacher; when it is supported by an accepted proof from Scripture; and by majority vote.¹⁰ Haggadah, (from higgid (nagad) "to make apparent, tell, expound") means "what Scripture tells" in addition to its obvious meaning. Usually it describes a non-halakic interpretation. Haggadah often stays close to the

text, but also may be independent of it, spinning off parables, proverbs, legends, miracle stories, historical anecdotes, biographic details of rabbis, anything which might encourage or teach the seeker after God.¹¹ It should be noted that while a halakah may be derived by way of midrash, it cannot be derived from a haggadah. It can, however, be "supported" by haggadah as part of the effort to secure acceptance of the regulation.

A kind of midrash particularly utilized by the writers of the New Testament is typology. It may be defined as the search for historical connections between certain events, persons or things in the Old Testament and similar events, persons or things in the life of Christ and the Church.¹² Especially important is the establishment of the relationship of prophecy in the Old Testament to fulfillment in the New Testament. The prophetic writings themselves suggested typology as a method of interpreting the present reality. The New Testament writers carefully studied the nature and pattern of God's creative and redemptive activity in the history of ancient Israel and in the prophecies which confidently spoke about the constancy and expected repetition of these acts.¹³ The great events in Israel's past acquired significance because of what had been accomplished in Christ.

At the heart of midrash, in all its variety, lies the conviction that:

The Scriptures are not only a record of the past but a prophecy, a foreshadowing and a foretelling, of what will come to pass. . . Text and personal

experience are . . . reciprocally enlightening: even as the immediate event helps make the age-old text intelligible, so in turn the text reveals the fundamental significance of the recent event or experience.¹⁴

I have described the varieties and functions of biblical interpretation; let me now examine its application. The rabbinites applied comparatively few, but strict rules to the interpretation of Scripture for the purpose of halakah because the early sages, who came from the ranks of the pious laity could not claim authority by reason of hereditary status. Therefore, whenever they promulgated a regulation different from the accepted norm, they were compelled to defend their position with a solid scriptural argument. (Later in the academies of Babylonia they would, through midrash, attribute to the early masters lineal descent from David.) Rabbinic rules of exegesis constitute four categories: (1) interpretation based on methods of logic such as inference, deduction, analogy, and the like; (2) interpretation derived from the context of words, phrases, verses, or passages and from certain peculiarities of composition and style; (3) interpretation derived from irregularities or oddities of grammar and syntax; and (4) interpretation based on the conviction that every word, even every syllable and letter, of Scripture had a significance beyond its plain meaning.¹⁵

To outline and illustrate each hermeneutic rule is not feasible. I will give one example that demonstrates both analogy and inference from minor to major, called in Hebrew,

gal vehomer (literally "light and heavy"). Hillel the Elder (ca.30 b.c.e.-10 c.e.) was asked whether the Passover sacrifice was offered on the Sabbath when the festival fell on that day. His answer was returned in several parts:

It is said concerning the continual (daily) offering: In its season (Num.28.2), and it is said with reference to the Passover: In its season (Num.9.2). Just as the continual offering. . . overrides the Sabbath, so the Passover. . . overrides the Sabbath.

Furthermore, gal vehomer: Although the continual offering, which does not produce the liability of cutting off (from the community), overrides the Sabbath, (how much more so) the Passover, which does produce the liability of cutting off, should override the Sabbath.¹⁶

Here, exegesis concerns a halakah. The same method appears in haggadic midrash: Rabbi Jose bar Hanina (ca.250 c.e.) sought to know why in the first of the Ten Commandments, God says "I am the Lord your God" using the singular "your" instead of the plural. His answer was that by using the singular pronoun God was addressing individually each man, woman and child in Israel, and did so in order to suit His words to each person's capacity to understand them. After citing various scriptural verses to show that God provided manna in the wilderness according to each person's capacity in tasting, he concluded:

If each and every person was enabled to taste the manna according to his particular capacity, how much more and more was each and every person enabled, according to his capacity, to hear the Divine Word.¹⁷

The same exegetical technique surfaces in the New Testament, often to establish regulations for the Christian life. Matthew 12

records a controversy over proper conduct on the Sabbath.

Jesus was asked "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath" (v.10)?

He answered:

What man of you, if he has one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath (vv.11-12).

Jesus found a scriptural analogy for his disciples' conduct of plucking grains to eat on the Sabbath in the incident in 1Sam. 21.1-6 when David and his followers, against the sacred regulations, ate holy bread from the Sanctuary (vv.3-4). Paul gave direction to the churches to collect funds for the "poor among the saints at Jerusalem" (1Cor.16.1-4). He derived a guiding principle for the givers and collectors of funds from the manna-in-the-wilderness story:

I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. As it is written, "He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack" (Ex.16.18). (2Cor.8.13-15)

This is what people must do. Through the gal vehomer technique Paul conveyed his understanding of what God has done:

God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. (Resurrection) (Rom.5.8-10)

Additional examples would illustrate that rabbinites and New Testament writers used similar techniques to interpret the

Old Testament. Both groups approached the Bible with deep reverence for its sanctity and authority and drew upon the same motifs to reach their different conclusions.

Bible students are aware of the diversity of documents that comprise the Old Testament. The preservation of literature which reflects a wide difference of opinion attests to a history of conflicts and compromises. We look, therefore, for unity in the Bible, not in the details, but in the great pattern which dominates all the books: God's activity as Creator, King, Father, Judge and Redeemer, and Israel's response as God's servant, first-born son and treasured possession. The major themes in this pattern are Creation, disobedience, punishment and restoration, the Exodus, the Covenant of Sinai, the conquest of Canaan, the Davidic monarchy, veneration for the Temple and Jerusalem, Exile and Redemption. The rabbinites and the New Testament writers never lose touch with these themes. We cannot trace the development of all of them in the post-biblical period. The following discussion illustrates that Christ was the focus in New Testament interpretation and Torah the focus in rabbinic interpretation.

Recalling the mighty acts of God occurs often in the Old Testament. In Deut. 26.5-10 the Israelite settler in Canaan, offering the first-fruits of his harvest at the sanctuary is directed to recite:

A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number;

and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Joshua Chapter 24 makes a similar recital but adds details about the patriarchs and emphasizes God's deliverance from enemies encountered in the wilderness and during the conquest of Canaan. Psalm 78 greatly amplifies the story of the Exodus, wilderness and conquest and carries the recital to the establishment of the Davidic dynasty on Mount Zion. The psalmist particularly stresses Israel's continual sin of distrust of God and God's punishments and merciful forgiveness. Again, Psalm 105 declaims events from Abraham to the settlement of Canaan. Its climactic statement affirms God's gift of the land to Israel "that they might keep His laws and observe His teachings." Psalm 106 confesses sin and prays for help in the context of the Exodus and apostasy in the wilderness. Particular mention is made of Moses in his role of Israel's advocate before God (vv.23,32-33). Psalms 135 and 136 rehearse God's great deeds on behalf of Israel. The dominant themes of the Exodus and God's sustaining care in the wilderness are joined with His acts of creation and His power over nature.

The prophets show the purpose of these recitals with clarity. Their sharp perception of the pattern of God's acts in the past

allowed them to expect with confidence that the pattern would repeat itself in the future. No finer example exists than in Deutero-Isaiah Chapter 51:

Listen to Me, you who pursue justice*
You who seek the Lord;
Look to the rock you were hewn from
To the quarry you were dug from.
Look back to Abraham your father... (vv.1-2)

Awake, awake, clothe yourself with splendor,
O arm of the Lord!
Awake as in days of old,
As in former ages!
It was You that hacked Rahab in pieces,
That pierced the Dragon. (Creation)
It was You that dried up the Sea,
The waters of the great deep;
That made the abysses of the Sea
A road the redeemed might walk. (Exodus)
So let the ransomed of the Lord return,
And come with shouting to Zion,
Crowned with joy everlasting. (vv.9-11) (Redemption
from Exile)

As the prophet instructed, Paul indeed looked back to Abraham for his interpretation of the significance of the Christ event.

In a complex midrash

Paul established Abraham as the model for the Christian believer and God's covenant with Abraham as the one that was fulfilled in Christ. Because he believed God's promise to provide an heir, Abraham was reckoned as righteous (Gen.15.6). This happened before his circumcision when Abraham was "ungodly" (Rom.4.5,10). - That God justified the ungodly who trusted in Him was supported by David who blessed Abraham thus: "Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin" (Ps.32.1). Paul applied a verbal analogy to prove that David's blessing

*or "vindication" or "salvation" or "righteousness"; tzedek (צדק) in Hebrew.

referred to Abraham (Rom.4.7-10), for Psalm 32.1 has the same word for "reckon" as Gen.15.6.* Circumcision recognized Abraham's righteousness (v.11). Its purpose was to make him the father of the Gentiles as well as of the Jews. Just as Abraham was reckoned as righteous because of his faith in the promise of offspring, so shall Christians be reckoned as righteous who believe in Him that raised Jesus from the dead, the same God of Abraham (vv.23-25).

The Covenant was not of the law, acknowledged by circumcision, but of faith in the promise of offspring. A grammatical "oddity" stimulated Paul's imagination; the Hebrew word, and the Greek of the Septuagint translation, is "seed" in Gen. 12.7, "I will give this land to your offspring." When the Bible speaks of "offspring" it often uses "seed" in the singular construction as a collective noun.**

The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying "In you shall all the nations be blessed" (Gen.12.3). (Gal.3.8) . . . Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say "offsprings" referring to many; but referring to one, "and to your offspring" which is Christ. This is what I mean: The law which came four hundred and thirty years afterwards, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance is by law, it is no longer by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise. (Gal.3.16-18)

What then was the purpose of the law? To bring realization of sin. It was

our custodian until Christ came, that we might

*Hebrew root מִשְׁחַו (חָשַׁב)

**Hebrew zarah (זָרָה); Greek, spermati. Source for the Greek: Walter Lawn.

be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. . .if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (vv.24-26,29)

The law delivered to Moses at Sinai was limited and cancellable. The true covenant was made with Abraham through promise and faith.

Paul's sermon in the synagogue at Antioch (Acts 13) begins with a review of God's acts on Israel's behalf. He is as concise as the formula in Deut. 26.5-10, and like Psalm 78, retraces the history to the establishment of David as the ideal king. In the psalm the raising up of David is the climax; In Paul's sermon it is a stage on the way to the real climax. "Of this man's posterity God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised" (v.23). "When the enemies of Jesus fulfilled "all that had been written" about him by putting him to death, God acted to raise him from the dead, and fulfilled to the children what He promised to the fathers (vv.26-33). Thus the good news:

Through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses (vv.38-39).

Stephen's speech in Acts 7 also begins with Abraham. Stephen especially emphasizes two moments in Moses' career as judge and deliverer; first, that his fellow Israelites did not understand "that God was giving them deliverance by his hand" (v.25). Evidence of this was their question "who made you a ruler and judge over us" (Ex.2.14)? (v.27) and the making of the golden calf (Ex.32) (v.39). Second, it was Moses who said "God will raise up for you a prophet

from your brethren as he raised me up" (Deut.18.5) (v.37), Stephen continues:

This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living oracles to give us. (v.38)

Stephen recalls the transformation of "the tent of witness" in the wilderness into the Temple built by Solomon, which must be rejected for "the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands" (v.48). He concludes by connecting the wilderness generation's distrust and disobedience of Moses with the generation who "killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered" (v.52). As Stephen was being stoned he gazed heavenward and declared: "Behold I see the heavens opened and (Jesus) the Son of man standing at the right hand of God" (v.56). The historical connection between the rejection of Moses and the rejection of Christ is background for the affirmation that Christ is the prophet predicted by Moses, that Christ was with Moses at Sinai and is with God now in His glory.

Details from the lives of biblical personalities and from particular events are incorporated into the life of Jesus. Matthew records the flight of the holy family into Egypt to escape the search of Herod for the child. "This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'out of Egypt have I called my son' (Hos.11.1)" (2.13-15). The Transfiguration depicts Jesus, accompanied by three disciples, going up a high mountain to pray. As he prayed his appearance altered, (as when Moses spoke with God-Ex.34.29) and his clothing became

dazzling white. Then the disciples observed Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. (Elijah, like Moses, had an encounter with God on Mount Horeb/Sinai where he fasted forty days and forty nights-1Kg.19.8). Then a voice from a cloud announced, "This is my beloved Son."¹⁸(God to Moses: "Tell Pharaoh, 'Israel is my first-born son'"-Ex.4.22). The Temptation of Jesus in the wilderness¹⁹ parallels Moses' experience on Sinai and Israel's forty years of testing in the wilderness. Like David, his ancestor, Jesus is born in Bethlehem. Moses and David were both shepherds before the call to leadership. Echoing the Old Testament's frequent characterization of the relationship between king and subjects, Jesus often refers to himself and the people in terms of a shepherd and his flock.

As reinterpreted by the New Testament, the significance of the Passover which remembers the Exodus event is "the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood" (Rom.3.24-25). "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers. . . with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1Peter 1.19). "For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed" (1Cor.5.7).

God's acts as Creator recur in the rebirth which Christians experience when they are baptized into Christ:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the

glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom.6.3-4)

"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2Cor.5.17). "Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (Gal.6.15). Repeating language from the creation story in Genesis, Paul writes:

. . . Christ. . . is the likeness of God. . .
For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness" who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2Cor.4.4,6)

God's mighty works recorded in the Old Testament reach their climax in Christ, but the redemptive work which Christ accomplished in his death and resurrection affects the continuing history of Christians.

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The rabbinites believed that the voice of the prophets, spokesmen of the divine will, became silent in Ezra's time; however, the discovery of God's thought and will was still possible through study of Torah. When one immerses oneself in the text of Torah and penetrates the surface of what is written, the seeker perceives anew the word spoken on Sinai. "Turn it (Torah) and turn it over again for everything is in it."²⁰ The Talmud's best known and most studied tractate is Pirke Abot, "Sayings of the Fathers." It begins:

Moses received the Torah on Sinai and handed it down to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly.²¹

By this unbreakable "chain of tradition" Torah becomes the possession

of the post-biblical Jew.

By the time the rabbinites established this claim for the "genealogy" of Torah, the term "Torah" meant much more than the Five Books of Moses. It included a specific body of beliefs and practices, which over the centuries had been grafted onto or derived from the Written Law. A collection of this Oral Law was published around 200 c.e. as the Mishnah. Further: the products of the study of Written and Oral Torah were also meant by the word. Such literature as the Talmud, Midrashim, translations of Scripture, the Prayerbook, and letters of the rabbis contain the distillation of this study. Torah could especially be found in the actions of a sage or any righteous man. In rabbinic usage "Torah" can mean the Whole Torah or any particular teaching.

A concrete formulation of Torah's totality is a midrash on Exodus 24.12:

"And YHWH said to Moses, 'Come up to Me to the Mount and there I will give you the tables of stone, the law and the commandment which I have written that you may teach them.'" Tables of stone means the Ten Commandments, the Law means the Pentateuch, the commandment means Mishnah, which I have written means the Prophets and the Writings, that you may teach them means Gemara (commentary or interpretation). The verse shows that all these things were given by God to Moses on Sinai. (B.Berachot 5a)²²

To counter the "theological exaggeration"²³ implied in this ruling, another midrash said:

Could Moses have learned the whole Torah? Of the Torah it is said, "Its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea" (Job 11.9); could then Moses have learned it in forty days? No, it was only the principles thereof which God taught Moses. (Exod.Rabba 41,6)²⁴

The rabbinites established the correspondence between their role as teachers and lawgivers and Moses, who had acted with divine sanction. If Torah was to be kept alive, it must be expounded and interpreted afresh in every generation. They found scriptural support for their activity in Deut.17.9ff:

It is stated "You shall come to the priests the Levites, and to the judge that shall be in those days." Could it possibly enter your mind that a person would go to a judge who was not in his days? The meaning is, you are to go to a contemporary authority. (B.Rosh Hashonah 25b)²⁵

The hearer of this midrash knew that the passage in Deuteronomy went on to rule that all the instructions and decisions given by the priests and judges were to be carried out, not only by previous generations, but also by his:

"On this day Israel came to mount Sinai" (Ex.19.1). Why "on this day?" Because when you learn Torah let not its commands seem old to you, but regard them as though the Torah were given this day. Hence it says "on this day" and not "on that day." (Tanhuma B. Yitro 38b)²⁶

The prophets' perception that national disaster was the inescapable consequence of sin was not lost on the rabbis when they interpreted the significance of the destruction of the Temple:

When you see whole villages of people plucked up and removed from their place in the Land of Israel, know that ~~this fate befell them because they failed to provide fees for teachers of Scripture and teachers of Mishnah. And the proof? The verse "Why is the land ruined and laid waste like a wilderness?"-words which are followed directly by "The Lord said, 'Because they have forsaken My Torah'"~~(Jer.9.11-12). (Pesikta de-Rab Kahana)²⁷

Hosea charged that Israel had "broken My covenant and transgressed My Torah" (8.1). Since, therefore, "Israel has cast off the good,

the enemy shall pursue him" (8.3). A typical midrashic technique finds support of one prophet in the words of another and draws the rabbinic conclusion:

By "good" Torah is meant, as in the verse "I give you good teaching; forsake not My Torah" (Prov.4.2). Why do calamities. . . come upon Israel? "Because they have rejected the Torah of the Lord of hosts and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel" (Isa.5.24). The verse's beginning refers to the Written Torah; and the verse's conclusion refers to the Oral Torah. (Pesikta K.)²⁸

Another midrash tells that God showed Abraham Torah, Temple offerings, Gehenna (the abode of the wicked after death) and "the yoke of the kingdoms." God told Abraham:

As long as your children busy themselves with Torah and with offerings, they will be saved from Gehenna and from the yoke of the kingdoms. Since it is ordained, however, that the Temple will be destroyed and offerings will cease, how would you have your children chastised - in Gehenna or by the kingdoms?

The midrashist suggests, and supports with scriptural texts, that Abraham chose the yoke of the kingdoms and that God agreed with the choice. (Pesikta K.)²⁹

Other midrashim also utilize the "yoke" metaphor: acceptance of "the yoke of the commandments" was the condition upon which God redeemed Israel from Egypt.³⁰ "Had Israel gazed deep into the words of the Torah when it was given them, no nation or kingdom could ever rule over them. What did Torah say to them? Accept upon yourselves the yoke of the kingdom of heaven."³¹
How do we know that Torah is a "yoke of freedom?"

"The tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven (harut) upon the tables" (Ex.32.16). Read not harut (חרוּת) but herut (הֵרֵוּת) freedom, for no man is free but he who occupies himself in the study of Torah. (Abot 6.2)³²

The rabbinites also examined the reason suffering fell upon the righteous. One answer was:

The potter does not test cracked vessels, for, he need only knock upon them once and they break; but if he test sound vessels, he can knock upon them many times without their breaking. Similarly the Holy One, blessed be He, does not try the wicked but the righteous; as it is said, "The Lord tries the righteous" (Ps.11.5), and it is written, "God tested Abraham" (Gen.22.1). Parable of a householder who had two cows, one strong and the other weak. Upon which of them does he place the yoke? Surely upon the strong. In the same manner God tests the righteous. (Gen.Rabba 32,3)³³

In the prophetic voices the rabbinites heard the recurrent theme of Israel's infidelity and God's consequential chastisement. But God's fidelity was unshakeable. The Torah was compared to a marriage contract given by a king to a noblewoman. It pledged substantial treasures into her keeping. Then the king went to a far country for many years and the woman was mocked by her companions for waiting the king's return. To comfort herself, she read her contract and found the strength to wait. So too Israel finds comfort in its time of punishment and hope for forgiveness and future redemption when it will declare to God:

. . . but for the Scroll which You did write for us, the nations of the world would long since have got us to give You up. Of the Torah it is written "This I recall to mind; therefore I have hope" (Lam.3.21). And David said likewise: "Were not Your Torah my delight, I would have perished in my affliction" (Ps.119.92). (Pesikta K.)³⁴

Furthermore, as the father disciplines a beloved child, God never abandons or totally rejects Israel. His chastisements always are motivated by love:

Should a man see sufferings come upon him, let him scrutinize his actions; as it is said "Let us search and examine our ways, and turn back to the Lord" (Lam.3.40) If he has scrutinized his actions without discovering the

cause, let him attribute them to neglect of Torah; as it is said, "Happy is the man whom You chasten, O Lord, the man You instruct in Your Torah" (Ps.94,12). If he attributed them to neglect of Torah without finding any justification, it is certain that his chastenings are chastenings of love; as it is said, "For whom the Lord loves, He corrects" (Prov.3.12). (B.Berachot 5a)³⁵

Before the destruction of the Temple a high priest had taught:

On three things does the age stand: On the Torah, on the Temple service, and on acts of lovingkindness. (Abot.1.2)³⁶

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, a witness to the destruction, comforted a disciple grieving over the ruins:

Be not grieved. We have another atonement which is just as effective as this. . . It is deeds of loving-kindness, as it is said, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Hos.6.6). (Abot R.Nathan)³⁷

Two generations after the destruction, Judea revolted a second time against Rome. The rebellion, led by Bar Kokhba (132-135 c.e.) and supported by some members of the rabbinite movement, ended in a Roman victory. Thereafter the pacifist element of the movement mediated rabbinic teachings concerning personal and communal relations:

The world rests upon three things: on justice, on truth, on peace. Yet, those three are one and the same thing. For if there is justice, there is truth and there is peace. And these three are expressed in one and the same verse: "Execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates"-(Zech.8.16).³⁸

Torah as an agent for right conduct joins man to his fellows; as an agent of repentance it links man to God. In the Old Testament, light is often associated with righteous conduct, with the promise of redemption, with God's presence and with His teaching. One rabbi, mindful of this, said:

Master of the Universe, we made a lamp for you in the days of Moses (the desert tent) and it went out; ten lamps (the Temple) in the days of Solomon, and they went out. From now on we will wait for your light alone: "In Thy light do we see light" (Ps.36.10).³⁹

* * * * *

Only the rabbinic and early Christian interpreters of the Old Testament, out of all the claimants in that turbulent era, survived as the transmitters of ancient Israel's religion. Why? In response to events which produced discontinuity, each successfully established a continuity between past events and present existence. The Christian appropriates the sacred facts of history through participation in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The Jew appropriates the sacred facts of history by knowing and doing Torah. To both, the nexus of faith rested in Creation, Redemption and Revelation. The traditions transmitted by each express certainty that God acts in the world. And each labored mightily to shed light upon God's word.

Notes

- ¹N.N. Glatzer, The Judaic Tradition, (Boston, 1969) pp.66-67.
- ²Samuel Sandmel, "The Haggada Within Scripture" in Two Living Traditions, (Detroit, 1972) pp.316-334.
- ³Morton Smith, Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament, (New York, 1971) p.12.
- ⁴Nahum Sarna, "Psalm 89: A Study of Inner Biblical Exegesis" in Biblical and Other Studies, A. Altmann, ed. (Cambridge, 1963) p.33.
- ⁵Saul Lieberman, Hellenism in Jewish Palestine (New York, 1962) p.47
- ⁶Lieberman, Hellenism, p.47.
- ⁷Geza Vermes, "Bible and Midrash: Early Old Testament Exegesis" in Post-Biblical Jewish Studies, (Leiden, 1975) p.62.
- ⁸Sarna, "Psalm 89," p.39ff.
- ⁹Vermes, "Bible and Midrash," pp.82-85.
- ¹⁰H. L. Strack, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, (New York, 1959) pp.6-7.
- ¹¹John Bowker, The Targums and Rabbinic Literature, (Cambridge, 1969) p.16.
- ¹²G.W.H. Lampe and K.J. Woolcombe, Essays on Typology (Naperville, Ill., 1957) pp.39,40.
- ¹³Lampe and Woolcombe, Typology, p.46.
- ¹⁴Judah Goldin in Introduction to The Last Trial by S. Spiegel, (New York, 1969) p.xvi.
- ¹⁵William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein, trans., Pesikta de-Rab Kahana, (Philadelphia, 1975) Intro. p.xl.
- ¹⁶Jacob Neusner, From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharasaic Judaism (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1973) pp.23-24.
- ¹⁷Braude & Kapstein, Pesikta, Piska 12.25 p.249.

Notes (continued)

¹⁸Matt.17.1-8; Mark 9.2-8; Luke 9.28-36.

¹⁹Mark 4.1ff; Luke 4.1ff.

²⁰Hyman Goldin, trans., Pirke Abot (New York, 1962) p.90.

²¹Goldin, Abot, pp.2-12.

²²Quoted by Bowker, Targums, p.7,n.1.

²³Term used by A. J. Heschel, God in Search of Man (New York, 1955,1966) p.302.

²⁴Quoted by Heschel, God in Search of Man, p.302.

²⁵Abraham Cohen, Everyman's Talmud (New York, 1975) p.148.

²⁶C.F. Montefiore and H. Loewe, The Rabbinic Anthology (New York, 1963) p.137.

²⁷Braude and Kapstein, Pesikta, Piska 15.5, p.278.

²⁸Braude and Kapstein, Pesikta, Piska 15.5, p.280.

²⁹Braude and Kapstein, Pesikta, Piska 5.2,p.92.

³⁰Rabbinic Anthology, (Sifra 57b) p.117.

³¹Glatzer, Judaic Tradition, p.224.

³²Goldin, Abot, p.94.

³³Everyman's Talmud, p.119.

³⁴Braude and Kapstein, Pesikta, Piska 19.4, p.327.

³⁵Everyman's Talmud, p.119.

³⁶Goldin, Abot, p.4.

³⁷Goldin, Abot, p.4,n.14.

³⁸Glatzer, Judaic Tradition, p.234.

³⁹Glatzer, Judaic Tradition, p.237.

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