

## THE ORAL TORAH AND HERMENEUTICS

### (Why Jews Read the Tanakh Differently)

#### Introduction: "God has spoken"

Before we can begin to deal with the issue of the Oral Torah — the vast literature that has significantly shaped the world view and religious perspectives of virtually all forms of rabbinic Judaism—we must take the full measure of one factor that brought this literature into being. It is the terrible incompleteness of the Tanakh (or Old Testament).

Pick up the Tanakh. Review its contents. It begins with the God of creation who both speaks and acts, calling the heavens and the earth into being, and creating the human race in his likeness and image. Then follows the deliberate revolt of Adam and Eve, and the beginnings of God's judgments and his grace. And we soon find ourselves pursuing the unfolding of his redemptive purpose through the Patriarchs that "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:3).

But as we draw near to the end of the Tanakh after reviewing its long years of troubled history and prophetic witness, the tone is quite different. Questions begin to multiply, and there is no certainty that they will be answered in the closing pages. The history of Israel has become inconclusive. Will its people ever come to the place where they please God? Will they attain their God-ordained place of centrality among the nations? Will the glorious portrayal of Israel's future Golden Age ever be realized (Isa 60-61)? Actually, the great period of Israel's history recedes deeper and deeper into the past. The power of sin seems more pervasive than ever, and we wonder whether it will ever be removed. Will there be no Messiah to destroy its power and establish his righteous rule over the nations? Then we reach the message of Malachi, the last prophet, and find him addressing a stubborn people, few of whom fear the Lord. Only a small remnant of believing people gather together to reflect on his name (3:16). Finally, the prophet reminds the reader that God will send "Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes." If people do not respond to his ministry of renewal, "God will come and smite the earth with a curse" (4:5,6).

Only Christians can read the Tanakh from beginning to end and avoid the despair of wondering whether the redemptive purpose of God for Israel and the nations will ever be realized. This is because they know what the New Testament says of the coming of Jesus Christ and his gathering to himself all the loose ends with which the Tanakh abruptly ends. He spoke of Israel and the nations, sin and Satan's reign, the consummation of human history, personal salvation and

eternal life. All of these issues are wonderfully dealt with in the New Testament. Jesus the Messiah of Israel and Savior of the world is the Omega as well as the Alpha of all God's purposes for his creation. And he alone will be exalted in the Last Day.

Christians are deeply persuaded that the whole of the Tanakh (the Law, the Prophets and the Writings) was wonderfully fulfilled in the person and salvific achievement of Jesus Christ during his First Advent. He also took the Hebrew Scriptures at face value and showed that no complex hermeneutic was needed to understand their meaning. Because he accomplished all this so perfectly, Christians have little doubt but that he will bring to consummation the eternal purpose of God at his Second Coming.

But what of the Jewish people who have chosen to say No to Jesus Christ? They know the Tanakh speaks of Israel's unique and ongoing relationship with God. Not a few are acquainted with those passages in the Tanakh that reiterate again and again God's everlasting covenant with their people. They willingly confess that the Tanakh contains the revelation of God's will to Israel through Moses and the prophets. In fact, they will affirm the possibility of knowing and doing God's will today. It is their deep conviction that "God now speaks in the Torah today, as always he has spoken in the past" (Neusner 1989:77). The troublesome questions that come to Christians when they reach the end of the Tanakh, and which cause them to rejoice that these questions are wonderfully answered in the New Testament, do not come to Jews when they reach Malachi, the last of the prophets. They are not troubled by its incompleteness. Why is this so? The answer is not hard to find. Rabbinic Judaism has provided them with an entirely different way of reading the Scriptures.

This paper has been written to explore the complex tangle in the religious life of the Jewish people that caused their leaders to change the way they should read and interpret the Hebrew Scriptures. That a radical change has taken place in their hermeneutic is easily established. We have only to turn to any of the Gospels to realize that there was a time when their leaders read the Tanakh just the way Christians do today.

A case in point: turn to Matthew 2:1-7. Wise men from the east came to Jerusalem asking: "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" Herod the king was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. He assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and asked them where the Messiah was to be born. Without hesitation they replied, "In Bethlehem of Judea," then quoted Micah 5:2 to confirm their reply (Matt 2:1-6). We cannot but note that they accepted the plain meaning of Scripture. In other words, they approached the Scripture the same way we do today. Their hermeneutic was our hermeneutic.

But today the Jewish people read the Tanakh the way they do because of the Oral Law. It is their hermeneutical key. It confirms to them the wisdom of their leaders in rejecting Jesus Christ and in regarding the New Testament as utterly irrelevant.

To the Jewish people the Tanakh represents a closed canon, a finished Scripture, that is dated and pointed in what it says. Their scholars might even agree with Christians and say, "On the surface you are right about what the Tanakh said when it was inscripturated long years ago. But the Oral Torah which 'our rabbi Moses' also gave us, is an eternally open canon that constantly provides us with relevant, up-to-date insight into the message of Tanakh for today. Hence, we are convinced that the Word of God can be truly heard, but only through disciplined reflection on the Oral Torah. We have a dual Torah — 'closed and open' — and by this we know the will of God."<sup>1</sup>

### The Oral Torah — "Rabbinic Judaism's Biblical Hermeneutic"

The integrity of rabbinic Judaism stands or falls on "the claim of the unity and cogency of the one whole Torah, oral and written, of Sinai" (Neusner 1986:ix). According to this claim, a dual Torah exists. The definitive text states that —

Moses committed this Oral Law to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets committed it to the men of the Great Synagogue.<sup>2</sup> They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Law (Aboth 1:1 — Danby 1991:446)<sup>3</sup>

At first this oral tradition was largely in the form of instruction concerning worship to help the exiles in Babylon come to terms religiously with the absence of the Temple and its priestly cult. This early formulation of what came to be known as "classical Judaism" began to coalesce during the period following the end of the Babylonian captivity (539 B.C.E.) particularly after the rebuilding of the

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<sup>1</sup>This is the substance of Jacob Neusner's discussion of "Revelation and Canon" in his volume, Foundations of Judaism (1989:77-88).

<sup>2</sup>The Great Synagogue — A body of 120 elders, including many prophets who came up from exile with Ezra.

<sup>3</sup>In the Pentateuch we do not find any reference to the existence of an Oral Torah. What we do find is Moses being commanded to write down all that God had revealed to him on Mount Sinai (Ex 34:27). There are several references in Deuteronomy to the law existing in written form (28:58; 29:20,21; 30:10; etc.) but nothing is said about an Oral Torah. Furthermore, in the book of Joshua we find six references to the written law, but none to any law being transmitted orally.

Temple in Jerusalem (completed in 515 B.C.E.). It made possible the restoration of Israel's ancient institutions and leadership. Prophecy then revived for a period through Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. Later, when it became apparent to the sages of Israel that prophecy had come to an end, they initiated the process of making many new rules and restrictions to guarantee the better observance of the Law. Their concern was heightened when they realized that diasporal Jews particularly needed to be restrained from violating the written Torah (Danby 1991:446 — fn 2,5). Simeon the Just (c. 280 B.C.E.) was the prime mover in this process, and the beginnings of the Oral Torah resulted. It initially represented

a collection of this and that; sayings and stories good for rabbis' sermons; some wise apothegms; and a lot of erudite nonsense to be learned by scholars as an exercise not of intellect, but merely of academic ritual (Neusner 1986:xiii).

Four hundred years later when it had been codified and reduced to writing the Mishnah had become —

a systematic law code covering the ways in which the important aspects of Jewish life might be sanctified in accord with God's will, with special attention to economic, social, family, civil, and cultic life (Neusner 1989:108).

We can readily appreciate the appeal of having a written Torah that is accessible to the people and to an oral Torah privately known by the sages, but made public when they judged a corrective to be needed to what was regarded as the "static" written Torah. To ascribe both as having come from "our rabbi Moses" granted them a sanctity that was hard to resist. To have an oral tradition accompanying the written Law provided Judaism with the attractive certainty of her sages always being able to come forward at crucial moments in Jewish history to adapt the written Law to the new situations. The claim is continually made that all present commentary and all that will be taught in the future has already been communicated to Moses on Mount Sinai. Judaism is more than the religion of the Tanakh, since this Oral Torah is also regarded as authoritative. This means that God and his people will always be caught up in a dynamism that is ever changing, according to Israel's internal development and to Israel's ongoing presence and interaction with the nations. Rabbinic Judaism can now claim that it is progressive in its unfolding, and that Israel's sages and rabbis will invariably and inerrantly apprehend and proclaim to the people the will of God — always relevant and always up-to-date.

Before we begin our investigation into the factors that caused the Jewish sages to become involved in the lengthy process of developing "the Sacred Books of Judaism" — moving from an oral

tradition to the Mishnah and then to supplementary materials and commentaries and finally to two sizeable Talmuds — we must call attention to a fundamental presupposition that underlies all rabbinic understanding of Scripture. The rabbis contend that the word "torah" has various meanings. These range from an equivalent for "revelation," or the Pentateuch, or the whole of Tanakh ("the Tripartite Torah"), or the act of "doing Torah" (i.e., studying, learning and teaching Torah), or the word may even be used to embrace a well-defined world view and way of life — something that Israel's sages regard as a living and dynamic expression of the will of God for Israel at any particular moment in her history. The rabbis contend for both an authenticating "written" Torah and a growing "oral" Torah. Both are needed. Taken together they allegedly provide individual Jews and the leaders of the nation of Israel with a correct understanding of the meaning of Scripture in vital and holy relation to the context in which they find themselves.

This dual Torah has so shaped Judaism that the Jewish people read their Hebrew Scriptures in a distinctive fashion quite different from the way in which Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians read these same Scriptures. This follows because the rabbis taught that the primary objective of the Oral Torah is to "make a fence around the Law" (Aboth 1:1). This "fence" of post-biblical Jewish religious literature over the centuries has come to possess a validity and sanctity equal to that of the written law.

### Judaism — An Historical Overview

Judaism is the term used to embrace the cultural, social and religious beliefs/practices of the Jewish people. It has known much change during its long history. When the prophetic voice became silent following Malachi, increasing diversity characterized Judaism in the land and throughout the diaspora. No one religious party was dominant. No new revelation came from God until the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus, the Messiah.

The advent of Jesus brought great challenge to the Jewish people. He drew to himself men and women, largely from the common people: the sort that constituted the believing Remnant in Israel. This movement attained considerable size and vigor following his resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. His movement could be defined as Messianic Judaism, for its followers were "zealous for the law" (Acts 21:20) and faithful in their participation in Temple worship. As "observant Jews" they were regarded as essentially loyal to their people and concerned for its destiny.

However, following the first Jewish revolt (66-73 C.E.) and the destruction of the Temple, only the Pharisees became dominant with

their distinct form of rabbinic Judaism. Up until this time Messianic Jews did not think of themselves as the vanguard of a new religion, separate from their cultural roots and the biblical faith that had shaped the Hebrews from the Patriarchs onward. To them the "New Covenant" was so intimately related to the Sinaitic Covenant that they saw themselves as in the midstream of the ongoing purpose of God. After all, their great Jewish prophet Jeremiah has predicted Yahweh's New Covenant with Israel and Judah (31:31ff). Furthermore, Jesus had deliberately initiated this New Covenant while at the same time affirming that he had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matt 5:17-20).

However, all this thought of Jesus' followers being a distinct Messianic Judaism within Jewry came to an end with the efforts of the Jewish hierarchy to excommunicate all followers of Jesus from the synagogues and publicly identify them as no longer Jews.

At the same time and particularly after the second Jewish revolt (132-135 C.E.) the sages and rabbis sought to reconceptualize Judaism in such a way that the Jewish nation would survive and that its people would be insulated against further incursion by the Messianic witness.

During this period — 200 to 600 C.E. — the Oral Torah eventuated in the Mishnaic/Talmudic literature. This became the world view and constitution of Orthodox Judaism and dominated the Jewish community worldwide with only one serious challenge until the 18th century Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

The Enlightenment with its exaltation of reason and humanism proved the undoing of Orthodoxy. Diversity slowly returned and various contending Judaisms emerged, all attributable to Judaism's prior acceptance of a flawed approach to religious authority. The situation today is not only of diversity but of disintegration. Agnosticism and even atheistic secularism are quite common.

We will now review in detail the period from the time of Christ to the 7th century C.E.

### The First Century — A Political and Religious Overview

During the period covered by the New Testament the political status of Judea oscillated between the alternatives of Herodian rule and Roman procuratorial administrations. Just before the turn of the first century Herod the Great ruled Judea. He was a faithful servant of Rome and proved an able monarch. When he died in 6 C.E., the

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<sup>4</sup>A Jewish sect known as the Karaites emerged in Babylon (c. 767 C.E.) opposing the Oral Law and calling themselves "The Followers of the Scriptures." The sect spread widely throughout Jewry. Overall, their numbers have greatly diminished, but communities still exist in the Middle East, Turkey, Russia, the Baltic countries and the West.

Romans sought to keep Herod's sons in power, but this soon proved unworkable. The Jews then sought Rome's assistance, pledging that though they were regarded as ungovernable. They wanted to prove that they "knew how to obey equitable rulers."

From 6 to 41 C.E. six successive Roman procurators administered Judean affairs. Then followed Herod Agrippa I, who pleased the Jews because of his piety and scrupulous observance of the law. His sudden death in 44 C.E. brought the return of procuratorial rule and as a result growing Jewish unrest. Even the wisest Roman administrators failed to understand, much less respect, the religious scruples of the Jewish people. However, the majority by their harshness and insensitivity precipitated a succession of Jewish revolts, which in the end proved disastrous to the Jews and brought to an end the structured components of biblical Judaism.

Several Messianic pretenders appeared in succession, but they and their followers were destroyed by Roman power (e.g., Luke 13:1; Acts 21:38; Josephus: Antiquities XX). These Messianic movements invariably attracted the most fanatical and homicidal of the Zealots, but Roman reprisals were so savage that increasingly all Jewry became a potential revolutionary force pledged to rise up when their leaders felt that the decisive moment had arrived to count on God's decisive intervention on behalf of their land, Jerusalem, and the Temple.

a. John the Baptist: "The Kingdom is at Hand"

Josephus has more to say about John the Baptist than he does about Jesus. Furthermore, what he says is fairly clear. He portrays John as a devout Jew seeking the spiritual renewal of the Jewish people.

. . . the (earlier) destruction of Herod's army seemed to be divine vengeance, and certainly a just vengeance, for his treatment of John, surnamed the Baptist. For Herod had put him to death, though he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God.

Josephus feels at this point that he should make a comment on the meaning of John's baptism — a perspective more in line with what the Pharisees were saying in his day than what the Scriptures reveal.

They must not use baptism to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body, implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behaviour.

Josephus then gets back on track. He gives us insight into the climate of those days. The fear of sedition was dominant in the minds of all local rulers, and they were ruthless in their efforts to suppress all popular uprisings.

When others too joined the crowds about John, because they were aroused to the highest degree by his sermons, Herod became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on mankind might lead to some form of sedition, for it looked as if they would be guided by John in everything that they did. Herod decided therefore that it would be much better to strike first and be rid of him before his work led to an uprising, than to wait for an upheaval, get involved in a difficult situation and see his mistake. Though John, because of Herod's suspicions, was brought in chains to Machaerus, the stronghold that we have previously mentioned, and there put to death, yet the verdict of the Jews was that the destruction visited upon Herod's army was a vindication of John, since God saw fit to inflict such a blow on Herod (Antiquities, Book XVIII, Chap. V:2, pp. 540, 541).

According to the Gospels, John was not primarily what Josephus claimed him to be — a revivalist. The witness of all four Gospels is unambiguously clear. John saw himself solely as committed to proclaiming that One greater than himself was coming, who would baptize in the Holy Spirit and inaugurate the new Messianic Age (Mark 1:1-8). His call to repentance was ancillary to this. But why did Josephus mention John in such detail and yet totally omit the theme of John's ministry? Later I found that this pattern of treating with silence what one personally rejects occurs rather frequently in Jewish religious literature.

The type of ministry John exercised served to heighten the mood of expectation that was common throughout Jewry at that time. "There went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem" (Mark 1:5) and many of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt 3:7). No wonder Josephus felt compelled to speak of John's having been widely known in his day.

#### b. Jesus and the Pharisees - The Issue of Tradition

We must keep in mind that the first element of the Oral Torah — the Mishnah — was only codified, written down and made the constitution of the Jewish people until almost 200 years after Christ. Even so, we know that there was a growing body of oral tradition, largely the result of the deliberations and teachings of the Pharisees, that existed in our Lord's day. Hence, it is natural for us to wonder



whether it was these same traditions that provoked Jesus' controversies with them.

The Pharisees or "separatists" were a relatively small lay movement<sup>5</sup> that stressed belief in the "traditions from the fathers" the ancient Hebrews allegedly received alongside of and in addition to the written Scriptures of Moses. Prior to Christ they contended with the scribes that to follow the oral wisdom of the sages was essential to carrying out the injunctions of the written Torah. For them it constituted an authoritative "fence around the law" (Aboth 1:1). Other groups within Jewry such as the Essenes, Herodians and Sadducees rejected the Pharisees' claim that this oral tradition was authoritative.

On one memorable occasion Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The Scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat" [as authoritative teachers of the Law] "so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do" (Matt 23:1-3a). From this we naturally infer that he endorsed the teaching of the Pharisees and desired that his followers sit at their feet and learn from them the Law of God.

But we also know that the Gospels frequently refer in a negative fashion to the growing "tradition of the elders" as constituting the focal point of Jesus' opposition to the Pharisees. He charged them with "making void the word of God" through their deliberate transgression of the Law in order to uphold the supplementary laws of the sages (Matt 15:3,6; Mark 7:1-13).

What shall we then say to this apparent contradiction? Not for a moment would our Lord have commended all the "fences" (the rules and regulations) with which the Pharisees encumbered the great mandates of the Law enunciated by Moses at Sinai. Actually, these fences obscured the Law itself and crowded out the prior attention that the people were under obligation to give to it. Out of respect for the Pharisees, more attention was given to what they commanded ("the fences") than to what the Scriptures specifically required. This could not but develop a frame of mind that tended to tolerate biblical illiteracy and lead to preoccupation with what the Pharisees stressed as crucial — the Oral Law. And this in turn made them more open to the new hermeneutic this other body of literature would eventually provide.

Over the years the Pharisees became increasingly hostile to any possibility of relaxing their fences. This not only made obedience to God an intolerable burden, but the actual law of Moses was increasingly

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<sup>5</sup>There were about 6,000 Pharisees at the time of Herod the Great (Josephus *Antiquities* XVII, Chap. 2:4, p. 505). We should also note that Josephus also said: "... the Pharisees have the multitude on their side" (Book XIII, Chap. X:6).

obscured in the process. It was the abuses resulting from this which Jesus exposed and condemned (Matt 23:13-24). We must not evaluate Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees solely in terms of their ethical failure. A far larger issue was involved. This becomes apparent when we ponder the implications of his charge that they "shut the kingdom of heaven against men . . . and would not allow those who would enter to go in" (vs 13). This followed because they themselves had not entered God's kingdom. The severe language that Jesus used must be evaluated in terms of the standard of judgment upon which it was based. His judgment was uniquely that of the Son of God. What the Jewish people saw in the Pharisees was in sharpest contrast to what God saw.

In Jesus' controversies with the Pharisees we meet what Karl Barth defined as "religious man vis a vis the Son of God." The issue was not primarily their moral failure. We should not reduce the issue to bad Pharisees vs good Pharisees (like Nicodemus). Before God all people and their values stand under judgment. Hence, there are only two groups: those whose relationship to God is defined in terms of their independence of him or in terms of their surrender to him. The danger of the Pharisee is the danger of every religious person. Whenever religion is self-defined and made an end in itself, it becomes a means of security or a "position" assumed before God. Then Pharisaism is re-enacted. We dare not forget that when Saul the Pharisee surrendered himself fully to Jesus Christ — and this included surrendering his religious existence, his theology and his self-proclaimed "blameless" achievement of "righteousness under the law" (Phil 3:6) — only then did he begin to see himself as the chief of sinners" in desperate need of the righteousness that only God could provide. From that encounter onward Paul became a disciple of Jesus Christ.

### The Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth

Inasmuch as we are concerned with identifying the factors that over a period of 800 years transformed an alleged Oral Torah into "The Sacred Books of Judaism," I must presume on your grace by breaking the historical sequence at this point. I do not feel that I should include any discussion of the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish community. He was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). As to Israel's responsibility, I rest on the Apostolic witness (Acts 2:36; 3:17; 4:10-12). In their eyes he was a blasphemer and claimed a status that belonged to God alone. The crucifixion has driven a deep and troubling question into the heart of the Jewish people. Tragically it has made them most reluctant to read the Gospels and reflect on all that Jesus said and did, and on all that he represents.

## The Disciples' Witness — A Bothersome Irritant Until 70 C.E.

Any careful reading of the Gospels will convince one that those who opposed the ministry and teachings of Jesus were not the common people but the religious leaders. It was the Scribes and Pharisees along with the Temple hierarchy that sought his destruction. Whereas the common people were manipulated to call for his death at the time of his trial, this unfortunate outbreak was hardly an expression of long-standing hostility toward him (Matt 26:3-5; 27:15-26; Mark 3:6-15; etc.).

Jesus' early ministry in Galilee drew the crowds, and he became a popular figure on the religious landscape. His mighty works ranging from deliverance from demonization to feeding the crowds could not but commend him to many. Furthermore, his preaching and teaching, especially his use of parables familiar to *am ha-'aretz* (the common people of the land) added to his attractiveness. But the more people drew near to him, the more they began to realize that in his messages were many "hard sayings." Hence, he was both popular and unpopular at the same time. Many of his words caused offence largely because of their prophetic dimensions, and not a few drew back from committing themselves to his lordship (e.g., Luke 9:57-62; 14:25-27,33; John 6:41,52,60,66). It is rather significant that even in Galilee and following his triumphant and entirely unexpected resurrection, among the few hundred that heard him deliver the Great Commission, "some doubted" (Matt 28:17). It is also significant that only 120 disciples gathered in Jerusalem to await the coming of the Holy Spirit, even though it was in that city that there was not only his empty tomb but those who had seen him risen from the dead (Acts 1:15).

Though Jesus had told his disciples to "beware of men; for they will deliver you up to councils and flog you in their synagogues" (Matt 10:17), we have little evidence in the Gospels to indicate that this took place before the Messianic movement was formally launched following Pentecost. It needs to be stated, however, that as our Lord's earthly ministry drew to an end, the religious leaders, particularly the Pharisees, were increasingly regarding Jesus' followers with suspicion. Incidents surrounding their popular acclamation of Jesus as the Son of David when he entered Jerusalem (Matt 21:8-11,14-18; Luke 19:39; etc.) were doubtless the sort that aggravated their hostility.

Even prior to his crucifixion some of them publicly threatened with excommunication any who publicly confessed that he was the Messiah (John 9:22). On one occasion they actually carried out this threat and expelled from the synagogue a man whom Jesus had healed of congenital blindness. This man then boldly and understandably proclaimed that because Jesus had come from God, he was able to work such miracles (vs 33). Actually, such incidents were doubtless

rare. As long as only his so-called "ignorant and unlearned" people made up this witnessing community, it tended to be little more than a bothersome irritant to the Pharisees. They were more preoccupied along with other members of the religious establishment to reach for bigger game: Jesus himself.

### Messianic Witness — A Growing Problem to Rabbis

One gathers that during the period prior to the destruction of the Temple while Judaism was still highly diverse with no one party in a dominant position, each party apparently handled the Scripture in the same straightforward manner. Its language was taken at face value, and no radically diverse interpretations shaped the basic differences between them. The great warnings of Deuteronomy (4:2; 12:32) were taken seriously. Words were neither added to nor taken away from the commandments of the Law. Great care was exercised to avoid the divine rebuke for presuming to alter the Word of the living God. Only among the Pharisees do we find evidence of their efforts to "fence the Law" with additions designed to make its obedience more certain.

All this changed with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and the sudden emergence of a vigorous Messianic community in Jerusalem. We can well believe that this phenomenon brought heightened anxiety to the religious establishment. Their problem was that it exalted as "Lord and Christ" the One whom they thought they had destroyed — with help from the Romans.

Upon investigating the Messianic community more closely these leaders found themselves confronted with an additional problem that was central to its dynamic growth. These Messianic believers were effective in their witness to Jesus Christ because of a newly acquired ability to show that the Tanakh spoke again and again of the coming of the Messiah: his Davidic roots, his birth in Bethlehem, his unique qualifications as the Servant of Yahweh, his redemptive death and triumphant resurrection. C. H. Dodd contends that lists of "testimonia" (Messianic passages in the Tanakh) had been drafted and were used by all the New Testament writers (M. Barth 1954:343). This naturally followed from Jesus' post-resurrection teaching on these themes (Luke 24:25-27,44-49).

The rabbis' problem was that in the first century there was general agreement among the Jewish people that the Tanakh should be read in a straightforward manner. Its language was not obscure. All agreed that it was literally inspired by God and that it meant what it said. On this basis the use of the "testimonia" in evangelistic witnessing proved most effective and resulted in increasing numbers of Jews coming to faith in Jesus as their Lord and Messiah (e.g., Acts 17:1-4).

Anyone who has read Risto Santala's recent book: The Messiah in the Old Testament in the Light of Rabbinical Writings will appreciate the dilemma the rabbis faced. He very pointedly demonstrates that "the older the tradition of interpretation, the greater the relative weight assigned to the source as an original exponent of the Messianic concept" (1992:21). Santala also notes that with the formation of the Talmud, its scholars "consciously avoided speaking about the Christian faith and certain Messianic prophecies, which were considered sensitive issues" (1992:29). And Robert Gordis, a prominent Jewish scholar, in Poets, Prophets and Sages candidly admits that although "the masses of the people" whether Jewish or Christian retained "liberal inspiration as the regnant view of Scripture," this conception "began undergoing reinterpretation by Talmudists, theologians and philosophers" (1971:4). These Jewish scholars propounded the thesis that since the Tanakh is the Word of God, "every apparently unimportant word and insignificant incident must have a deeper meaning. In order that the true intent of the Bible be revealed, "the text is therefore in need of reinterpretation."

New methods of interpretation were devised that "sought to reveal the hidden meaning of the text by finding important implications in the repetition of words and phrases, and by drawing deductions from each particle and copula, often from each syllable. The imposing development of the Talmud rests upon this method of textual interpretation (1971:4).

Obviously, this new hermeneutic gradually, but effectively evaporated the specific implications of the Messianic testimonia.

But we are getting ahead of our story. During the history of the Apostolic Church recorded in Acts, Jewish leaders were at a loss as to how to nullify the biblical witness of the Messianics. They could not explain away the substance of the gospel, so became openly hostile to their leaders, even to the point of using violence against them. It was only the counsel of a prominent Pharisee named Gamaliel that prevented their slaughter (Acts 5:33-42). This provided a period of relative freedom from attack and made possible their steady increase in number (Acts 6:1).

It was only much later when Jesus' followers "multiplied greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith" (vs 7) that things got out of hand. A new violent attack was mounted, particularly by Hellenist Jews. The focus of their hostility was on Stephen, a believer "full of grace and power" who "did great wonders and signs among the people" (vs 8). They charged him with blasphemy "against Moses and God" (vs11) and against "the Temple and the Law" (vs 13) and then brought him before the Sanhedrin for examination and trial. This precipitated his courageous witness to

God (7:1-53), and they responded by casting him out of the city and stoning him (vs 54-60).

Up until Stephen's death both the leaders and members of the new Messianic community frequented the Temple and in other ways demonstrated that they were "observant" Jews, living in peace and enjoying the good will of their Jewish neighbors. But all this came to an end during that last decade before the first Jewish revolt.

#### The First Jewish Revolt — From 66-73 C.E.

During the major part of the first century (6-66 C.E.) intense Messianic and eschatological expectation dominated Palestine. The word was abroad that the Jewish people had to keep themselves in constant readiness for the final battle in which God would defeat the demonic forces then dominating history. Social unrest became so acute that small groups of the faithful began to form in every major district in Palestine to promote separate and often competing forms of popular Messianic expectation. They focused prayer on "the shooting up of the Branch of David and the raising up of his horn" (Cohen 1987:88-131). The conviction also grew that only the Messiah could defeat the godless foreign nations, liberate the Jewish people, and establish God's reign of justice and righteousness in the earth. Scholars are agreed that there is little reason to question Josephus' straightforward claim that "what incited the Jews to war more than anything else was an ambiguous oracle, found in their sacred writings, to the effect that at that time someone from their country would rule the whole world" (Wars, Book V:3).

The Roman conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple (70 C.E.) was a cataclysmic event of first magnitude. More than one million Jews lost their lives in the struggle they had precipitated. This tragedy was surpassed only by the Nazi Holocaust in our day. In fact it is rather significant that some Jewish scholars use the same term "Holocaust" to describe the destruction throughout Palestine and particularly in Jerusalem in the '66-'70 Jewish War (Fenn 1980; Cornfeld 1982; etc.). One has only to read Wars of the Jews by Josephus to be confirmed in this thesis. The rebellion began when Jewish dissidents pulled down the Roman eagle over the Temple and occupied Jerusalem (Book II, Chap. XVII:1-5, pp. 693-696). Three years later when the war reached the height of its fury, Titus built a wall around the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:43) and symbolically called for the genocidal destruction of all Jews. This resolution found strange endorsement by the Jewish Zealots within the city who began slaughtering the wealthy and nobility who had initially been spared the suffering that came to those with the least social or economic status. And since God and all that the Temple symbolized had not come to their assistance, the Zealots melted down its treasures for weapons and thereby held in contempt the authority

images that had earlier given shape to their religious, social and political life. But in the end this only aggravated the totality of the Jewish defeat.

What is significant to us are the ways in which those who had been caught up in this disaster sought to explain it to their separate constituencies. Titus told the Jewish people, as reported by Josephus:

You without bestowing a thought on our strength or your own weakness have through inconsiderate fury and madness lost your people, your city and your Temple. You were incited against the Romans by Roman humanity . . . we allowed you to occupy this land, and set over you kings of your own blood; then we maintained the laws of your forefathers, and permitted you . . . to live as you willed (Wars, Book VI, Chap. VI:2).

Messianic Jew were very forthright in stating that the continued resistance of the Jewish people to the claims of Christ brought God's patience to an end. Eusebius summarized their position as follows:

Those who believed in Christ migrated from Jerusalem, so when holy men had altogether deserted the royal capital of the Jews . . . the judgment of God might at last overtake them for all their crimes against Christ and his apostles, . . . Such was the reward of the iniquity of the Jews and of their impiety against the Christ of God (Ecclesiastical History, Book III, Ch 5, pp. 85-87).

Jewish Apocalypics sought to explain the disaster in terms of their understanding of history. In effect they said:

Yes, we sinned and God had to judge us. Our problem was that we lacked numbers and strength, but even so our people showed themselves capable of great courage and we learned valuable lessons. After only a short interval the struggle will be rejoined. We will then witness the participation of God with us in our struggle. We will then be released from our anguish. Our slogan is: "Thrice blest is the man who lives until that time."

The writings of II Ezra (particularly chapters 3-14) speak of the soon coming of the day of judgment when the Messiah will destroy Roman power, and the rule of God will govern society. "A new age is dawning," the apocalypists affirmed, "but let us pray for forgiveness and find hope in the coming transformation of the age and the promise of a new day, when man's heart will be as able, as his mind even then was willing, to do the will of God" (Neusner 1984:92). This sequence of thought was patterned after what was thought to be God's

way with Israel: first chastening, then restoration through His favor and on to final victory through his intervention.

But the rabbis reacted differently. They were impressed by the fact that only the Pharisees with their unique commitment to the dual Torah really survived the disaster. In their efforts to mitigate the implications of the painful reality of God's evident judgment of Jerusalem and the Temple, they turned to a Pharisee, Johanan ben Zakkai for help. In response he gave them an unexpected perspective on the Torah that turned their gloom into joy. His was an amazing combination of rationalization and reconceptualization of the disaster. In short, he said that the Jewish defeat should be primarily perceived not as evidence of God's displeasure with his people, but rather as God giving to Jewry a new message: "God is served not through cult and sacrifice — that is, by Sadducees and priests — but through service to one's fellow man and the sacrifice of one's own selfish inclinations" (Neusner 1974:69). Of course, Johanan mentioned the sins of his people and lamented the loss of the Sanhedrin — the High Priest's Court — now that the Temple was no more. Furthermore, he was troubled by the impossibility of any further pilgrim festivals in Jerusalem. But all these were overshadowed by his conviction that the Jewish people and their ancient tradition could still flourish.

The story is told of an occasion when Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was coming out of Jerusalem, followed by Rabbi Joseph. Both beheld the Temple in ruins. "Woe to us," Rabbi Joseph cried, "that this place, the place where the iniquities of Israel were atoned for, is laid waste." "My son," Rabban Johanan said to him, "be not grieved. We have another atonement as effective as this. And what is it? It is acts of lovingkindness, as it is said, 'for I desire mercy, not sacrifice' (Hos 6:6)."<sup>6</sup>

From 70 C.E. onward and for the following decade Johanan devoted himself to the reorientation of Torah around this new frame of reference. Through his teaching and preaching he diverted the people from all preoccupation with the implications of the Temple's ruins to a growing awareness of an entirely new way of interpreting Israel's history: the simple observation that with the destruction of the Temple and the end of the cult, God saw to it that

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<sup>6</sup>We would question this extraction of a verse from the context in which Hosea uttered it. It would be a deliberate misreading of the prophet to assume that God was now repudiating *en toto* the sacrificial system revealed and instituted at Sinai. Quite the contrary. What was rejected was their abuse of the Temple cult. Their ignorance of the God who had initiated the covenant caused them to break it and transgress his law (4:6 and 8:1). Actually, the Sinaitic covenant condemns all religious externalism not supported by sincerity and humility of heart before God.



the realm of the sacred had finally overspread the world. Man must now see in himself, in his selfish motives to be immolated, the noblest sacrifice of all. . . . Just as willingly as men would contribute bricks and mortar for the building of a sanctuary, so willingly ought they to contribute love, renunciation, self-sacrifice, for the building of a sacred community. If one wants to do something for God in a time when the Temple is no more, the offering must be the gift of selfless compassion. The holy altar must be the streets and marketplaces of the world (Neusner 1974:75).

### Ostracizing Messianic Jews from Jewry

In the decade that followed the Jewish War the rabbis became increasingly concerned over the growing number of Jews who were impressed with the explanation given by Messianic Jews for the loss of the Temple: the nation's persistent rejection of Jesus as the Christ in the 40 years since His resurrection (Matt 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6). Furthermore, the rabbis resented the fact that these followers of Jesus had left Jerusalem prior to the final catastrophe, in obedience to what he had told them long before the outbreak of the war (Luke 21:20-24).

The rabbis reasoned: We must prevent further erosion of Jews from the rabbinic faith, and show them that it did not fail Israel in her great hour of need. We must get rid of this "messianic" sect and insulate our people against its blandishments. But how can we do this without recourse to violence? We have had enough of violence. In fact, it was our Jewish violence that precipitated the war and brought horrible retribution on our people. We must find a non-violent way to get rid of this growing sect.

The idea then suggested itself that they take the ancient and popular prayer of the synagogue, the Amida with its eighteen benedictions and enlarge it to include a malediction against all followers of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> This would help plant in the minds of synagogue worshipers that a follower of Jesus was nothing less than an apostate Jew who in abandoning the tenets of Rabbinic Judaism was separating from all sense of identity with the Jewish people.

During the time of Rabban Gamaliel II (90-110 C.E.) Samuel the Little composed the following execration in the form of a prayer:

For the apostates may there be no hope, and may the  
Minim (the Nazrim) and the heretics suddenly perish  
(Jocz 1949:51-57).

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<sup>7</sup>The Amida was recited three times daily (in silence and standing) and then read aloud by the Reader.

Years later, after this so-called "twelfth benediction" (Birkat ha-Minim) had proved effective in bringing about the self-exclusion of Messianics from the synagogue, this "benediction" was radically revised and "softened." But initially it represented nothing less than the formal decision of official Judaism to cut all ties between the followers of Jesus and other schismatics from the Jewish people. No longer were Messianic Jews welcome. They were apostates. They had forfeited the right to the essential Jewishness they had received from God and their parents. The decision was irrevocable. Jesus is not for Jews!

We can easily imagine how this decision impacted on the devout Messianic Jew when his turn came in the local synagogue to lead in the recital of the Amida. Obviously, he could not call down such a curse upon either himself or other believers in Jesus. His only recourse was to withdraw from synagogue life and worship.<sup>8</sup>

### The Second Jewish Revolt — From 132-135 C.E.

One would have thought that the tragic Jewish War of 66-70 C.E. would have forever ended armed resistance to Rome. Actually, from 70 C.E. onward Palestine continued to be tormented by several small Jewish-Roman clashes. These eventuated in a second major Jewish outbreak: the rebellion associated with Simon bar Koseba (132-135 C.E.). This war gained rabbinic endorsement through a proclamation by R. Akiba<sup>9</sup> that Simon was the Messiah. Initially his followers were very successful, although no support was gained from the large communities of Messianic Jews in Palestine for whom Jesus alone was Messiah. In the end the Emperor Hadrian crushed the revolt, proscribed the Jewish religion, and drove the Jews out of the country. This made Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, more aware than ever of the need to distinguish their religion from rabbinic Judaism. Years later, with the death of Hadrian, Jews were again granted religious freedom, but Gentile Christians could not escape the growing hostility of the State. In fact, more than 200 years of Roman persecution would be their lot until the Edict of Toleration granted by the Emperor Constantine in 313 C.E. Since Christians were without longstanding established customs and did not belong to any single race or nation, they were neither protected legally nor did the emperor feel any

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<sup>8</sup>Through a discovery by Solomon Schechter in the Geniza of Old Cairo, manuscript substantiation has been established to sustain the contention of Justin Martyr, Epiphanius and Jerome that this prayer was especially designed against the followers of Jesus despite the cover-up by some scholars today.

<sup>9</sup>Rabbi Akiba (c. 50-135 C.E.) was the most respected rabbinic scholar of his day (Wilson 1989:81). Simon bar Koseba was mockingly called Bar Kokhba, "Son of the Stars," by the Romans (Trepp 1982:30). Akiba saw in Numbers 24:17 scriptural warrant for identifying him as the Messiah.

obligation to defend them against social contempt and individual hostility. Their refusal to share in the idolatrous rites associated with the imperial cult made them suspect as hostile to the state (Latourette 1953:84). In contrast, the religion of the Jews represented an ancient phenomenon attached to a specific people, hence they were regarded with far more deference.

#### The Sages Confront Further Crises: 200 to 600 C.E.

We must now take the measure of the succession of major crises that overtook the Jewish people throughout the lengthy period from the Bar Kokhba Revolt to 600 C.E. when the Mishnaic/Talmudic literature was finally completed. James Neusner among Jewish scholars is almost unique in the ways in which he grants the enormous impact of this troubled period on the creativity of the sages producing this literature. I am much indebted to him for his objectivity in candidly recognizing the utter reasonableness of the direction biblical Christianity took in its movement to the Gentile world along lines deeply imbedded in the Tanakh. I am also grateful for the insights he has given me in understanding the various ways in which "outside events" impacted the deliberations of the sages.

When the Oral Law was finally codified and reduced to writing c. 200 C.E., we need to recall that prior to the first Jewish revolt Roman authorities had granted R. Johanan ben Zakkai permission to set up a yeshivah for rabbinic study at Jamnia in western Palestine (on the coast south of Jaffa). In time the Sanhedrin (the High Court) was established there. Jamnia or Yavneh was destroyed in 135 C.E. toward the end of the second Jewish revolt and never reoccupied.

We also need to be reminded that the Jewish people had long been exempt (ever since the time of Julius Caesar) from a variety of civil and military duties, particularly all those duties involving contact with idolatry. Their religion was "licit" because they represented a longstanding subject-nation people. At first, because all Messianic believers were Jews, these same concessions were extended to them because the Messianic movement in its early decades appeared to the Romans as just another Jewish sect.

But long before the first Jewish revolt, Christians were singled out by the Romans (e.g., Nero) for persecution. Over the years they were exposed to successive waves of imperial hostility. They became the scapegoats for much of the social ill-will in society.

It was inevitable that the Jewish community looked with favor on the persecution of Christians, whether they were Jews or Gentiles. During the latter half of the second century Judah Hanasi began the task of codifying, editing and then preparing the Mishnah for

publication. Already, because of the disasters arising from the two Jewish revolts against Rome, he was doubtless saying to himself,

We Jews are few in number. We have no business filling our minds with apocalyptic images of victories gained over our pagan enemies. And what a blunder that Rabbi Akiba called Bar Kokhba the Messiah. We Jews need to be done with all who call themselves Messiah or let themselves be called Messiah. We've truly been successful cutting down on the number of Jews following the Messiah Jesus through making his so-called disciples incriminate themselves in our synagogues and virtually excommunicate themselves from our people. But their movement surely keeps growing among the Gentiles! What is it that makes them willing to embrace so costly a faith?

One wonders if the Mishnah would have ever captured the imagination and allegiance of all Jewry, had it not been for Judah the Patriarch (c. 180-230 C.E.). The Romans had recognized him as the head of the Jewish community in the land of Israel and made him responsible for maintaining its law and order. What should he do? In the absence of any alternative he decided to sponsor Mishnah as the law code of his administration. In no time at all it became Israel's constitution. Many bylaws were then added. Inevitably, as Neusner relates:

The clerks of Judah's government, who served also as judges in the petty claims courts governing the Jewish sector of the Land's mixed population, took over the Mishnah. They studied its laws, applied those that were relevant to their immediate task, and over a period of two hundred years developed a rather substantial corpus of Mishnaic exegesis. That corpus organized around specific clauses or paragraphs of the vast Mishnah, reaches us as the Talmud of the Land of Israel, brought to closure in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. The second Talmud, produced in Babylonia by the exilarch's clerks (counterparts of the patriarch's bureaucrats), reached closure probably a century and a half later (1989:40).

We should take the full measure of this development. The Mishnah was transformed into a document that served in courts and government bureaus. It became the original document, after Scripture, in the canon of formative rabbinic Judaism. Its mode of thought and method of discourse would largely characterize the tone of Judaism's "Sacred Books" even though its system would be radically altered by subsequent sages, because of the new set of crises shortly to confront the Jewish people. Four of these followed in quick succession.

a. The Conversion of Constantine (312 C.E.)

While in the process of gaining control of the Roman Empire (achieved in 323 C.E.), Constantine won the battle of Milvian Bridge against a formidable competitor. He attributed this victory to a vision received in prayer of "a cross of light bearing the inscription 'Conquer by this.'" This event marked the beginnings of his active Christian life (Latourette 1953:92). The next year he promulgated an Edict of Toleration at Milan granting religious freedom to all his subjects. A decade later Christianity became the empire's "most favored religion."

Constantine permitted the Jews to retain their privileges although their proselyting was forbidden and they could no longer punish any Jews who became Christians. Converts were protected, intermarriage between Jews and Christians was forbidden, and Jews were not permitted to have slaves who were of Christian origin. What really mattered to Jews was that they were reduced to second-class citizenship. What particularly heightened their fears was this arm-in-arm linkage between the Church and the State. The future looked ominous.

b. Julian's Failure to Rebuild the Temple (c. 361 C.E.)

He is known as "Julian the Apostate." As a youth he professed to follow Christ. But upon his elevation to emperor he proclaimed his loyalty to the gods of pagan Rome and proceeded to demonstrate this by inviting Jews to rebuild the Temple. His object was to discredit the One who had said that not one stone of the Temple would be left upon another (Matt 24:2; etc.). Work was started but brought to an abrupt end by an earthquake coupled with burning gases. We can well imagine the sharp alternation in feelings that overtook the Jewish community at that time. First, intense elation over the prospect of the rebuilding of the Temple. Surely this would precipitate Messiah's return to consummate the restoration of the Temple and deliver it from its pagan overlords. Then, sharp reversal. The Christians affirmed that the timely earthquake demonstrated that God endorsed Jesus' Messiahship. Many Jews believed, so much so that in the next half century "Palestine gained a Christian majority" (Neusner 1989:97-99). Did the Talmudic sages take note of all this?

c. Depaganization of the Roman Empire

It was inevitable that in time there would be a depaganization of the Roman Empire. No longer were its non-Christian priests and temples subsidized by the state. Indeed, many temples were taken over by Christians and made serviceable to the Kingdom of God. Many pagan idols and other religious symbols were torn down. Temples that couldn't be transformed were destroyed. The state increasingly linked

arms with the church — as the Jews had feared — and together they both began to swagger through history. The natural question many Jews could not but ask concerned the evident movement of God in history. Were not the Christians right after all?

It was natural for the sages to discuss all this and wonder what they should do in response. The Christians had too much confirming evidence on their side: their way of reading of the Tanakh along with their views of God acting in history; the advent of the Messiah and the enlargement of the Messianic movement to include all the nations; and finally the drifting of Israel into total irrelevance as a result. They asked: "What must be done to enable Israel to survive and to rise above the seas of despair threatening to overwhelm her?" They reached for their Mishnah and the growing corpus of Talmudic literature and said to themselves: "Something new is needed, and the answer must be right here!"

#### d. The Christian Dominance of Palestine

The 4th and 5th centuries were very difficult for the Jewish leaders. All that they put heart and hand to seemed to end in futility. Their Messiahs proved false. God seemed to thwart all efforts to rebuild the Temple. And despite their best efforts to discourage Jews from believing in Jesus, each generation saw numbers come to faith. Nowhere was their frustration greater than in Palestine. Earlier, Constantine and his mother had purchased many sites connected with Israel's sacred history that later gained prominence through association with the life and ministry of Jesus. We can well believe the sages drafting the Talmudic literature were appalled at this transformation of "their land" into "The Holy Land." The map of the Land of Israel was being gradually rewritten with the multiplication of churches, shrines and resident communities of one sort and another.

Not only were Gentile Christians migrating to Palestine and multiplying Christian towns and villages. Jews were coming to faith in sizeable numbers. And increasingly, where they were already less than half of the total population, the Jewish people were increasingly beginning to feel they were Palestine's second-class citizens.

This sense of second-class citizenship had already begun to permeate the consciousness of Jews living in other areas around the Mediterranean basin. Although primarily due to the depaganization of the empire, it was heightened by the beginnings of assaults against their synagogues by lawless segments in Rome's polyglot society. Jewish scholars attribute this to the beginnings of chronic Jewish insecurity in Europe (Neusner 1989:100).

## The New Hermeneutic Takes Shape

Out of all these crises came the demand for a new rabbinic hermeneutic that would confirm to the Jewish people that their leaders had not misled them. We must realize that those Jews who had believed in Jesus kept telling them that they continually misunderstood the meaning of the Tanakh. Their charge was that because the rabbis had not been willing to read it in the light of Jesus' fulfillment of its promises, they had lost contact with the living God.

The rabbis were desperate. They had to review the Mishnah and reinterpret it with a supporting literature that would become in turn a "suitably powerful, yet appropriately proud" new hermeneutic. But it must accomplish two essentials. We turn to Neusner for an authoritative statement regarding the manner in which the new hermeneutic would deal with these essentials.

First, it would supply a complete account of what Scripture had meant, and always must mean, as Israel read it.  
Second, it would do so in such a way as not to dignify the position of the other side with the grace of an explicit reply at all (Neusner 1989:102).

The sages' task was clear. Scripture had to be "thoroughly rabbinized as earlier it had been christianized." This put them on the offensive, for the charges all along had been that "they not only could not read and understand the ancient revelation of God to Moses at Mount Sinai but that the rabbis "had changed and falsified that revelation" (1989:102).

Obviously, the task facing the sages was formidable. They had to ignore all the dark realities of their history from the crisis over Jesus of Nazareth onward and deep into the 4th century. They had to show that in reality Moses and David in their alleged rabbinical roles were quite like themselves. They claimed that when one reread the Scriptures as these men in their rabbinic roles did, one would find that the traditions contained in Mishnah neither opposed nor replaced their understanding of Scripture. Furthermore, it was widely heralded that when Jews followed the rabbinic way of reflecting on the meaning of history and the Messianic hope, the result would be a diminishing interest in what was happening "outside" (i.e., the triumphs of Christianity). This would also generate rather total indifference to what Jesus was reported to have said and done. In other words, the sages had to use the weaponry of a minority people, denying the strength of the strong, exaggerating their recourse to reason and see themselves pressing the strong to accommodate to their indifference to Christians.

All this sounds complicated, and it is! If you are eager to master the details, be forewarned! I can recommend at least ten books on the Oral Torah but cannot promise that everything will finally fall into place. One has only to trace out their use of a minor passage of Scripture to become aware of this complexity. Jacob Neusner asks us to reflect on 1 Chronicles 11:17 and David's longing for someone to give him a drink from the well in Bethlehem. The rabbinic interpretation is that this meant David "required a teaching of law." Then, why did three of his men break through the camp of the Philistines for him (vs 18)? The rabbinic comment: "Because the Law is not decisively laid down by fewer than three" (1989:106). This rabbinization of Scripture is certainly a new hermeneutic! Imagine the time needed to master this way of reading and interpreting the Scriptures! No wonder a Talmudic education might demand at least eight years of concentrated study (five days per week on the Talmud and half of the sixth day on the weekly Bible passage — mostly from the Pentateuch — to be read on the Sabbath). The following statements are not without significance.

Our Rabbis taught that to be engaged in the study of the Bible is neither good, nor bad, but to be engaged in the study of the Mishnah is a good habit and it brings reward while there is nothing better than the study of Gemarrah (Baba Mezia 33a). It is a more serious matter to contradict the words of the scribes than the words of the Law of Moses (Sanhedrin 11:3; Hebamoth 89b-90a).

Consider the following observations of one of the outstanding Jewish scholars of rabbinic literature. Jacob Neusner regards the emergence of this literature as marking "the beginning of a new and stunningly original epoch in the formation of Judaism." Indeed, he becomes so expansive about this that he endorses its superiority to the Hebrew Bible:

So from the Mishnah back to the revelation of God to Moses at Sinai, in the view of the Mishnah, there lies a vast desert. But from the Mishnah forward stretches a fertile plain (1989:28).

When Neusner discusses the rabbinization achieved in the Talmud, he is not reluctant to detail the problems involved. It was quite apparent to the Jewish people that the Mishnah in itself rarely cited any verse of Scripture to support its perspectives. Indeed, at times it reflected complete indifference to Scripture, and did not even seek to imitate the style of Moses' writings in the Pentateuch. Furthermore, they found no internal support for the thesis that the Mishnah claimed scriptural authority for itself. They only could conclude that it must have scriptural authority because of their high regard for its authors — the sages who were allegedly in direct,



unbroken linkage with Moses. Besides this, the occasional use of a scriptural proof-text was made to endorse this rather tenuous approach to an authority equal to Scripture. Neusner comments:

Only some of Scripture was found to be relevant. . . . The framers and philosophers of the tradition . . . came to Scripture when they had reason to . . . . They brought to Scripture a program of questions and inquiries framed essentially among themselves . . . . They selected with care and precision what they wanted in Scripture, ignoring what they did not want . . . They took up laws, not prophecies, descriptions of how things are supposed to be, not accounts of what is going to happen (1989:91,92).

As this rabbinic literature grew in size (the commentaries on the Mishnah, etc.), the Jewish people were comforted by its detailing of a coherent world view and comprehensive way of living that brought order and significance to a people, despite the upheavals of the world outside. It also had a message that could not but appeal to a people captured by a sense of their "chosenness." Indeed, its overarching presupposition is that

Man is at the center of creation, the head of all creatures upon earth, corresponding to God in heaven, in whose image man is made. . . . (It seeks) to impute power to man to inaugurate and initiate those corresponding processes, sanctification and uncleanness which play so critical a role in the Mishna's account of reality . . . . Man, through will and deed, is master of this world, the measure of all things. . . . When Mishnah thinks of man, it means the Israelite, who is the subject and actor of its system, this statement is clear . . . . This man is Israel, who can what he wills. . . . He makes the world work. If he wills it, nothing is impossible. . . . He initiates the processes that force things to find their rightful place on one side or other of the frontier, the definitive category, holiness (1986:24-26).

It was through elevating this ideology of the autonomous Israelite — a very dangerous concept! — that an apologetic evolved in defense of Rabbinic Judaism. Its strength was that it denied Christians any dialogue with Jews on "Christian" terms. This faith once caught enabled the Jewish people to withstand all and remain firm "beyond all argument from revelation, let alone historical confirmation" (1989:107). From now on to its completion the Talmud would focus on the sort of exegesis that would clarify and demonstrate in rational terms the sort of proofs that are incontrovertible. From the fifth century onward, this became the settled stance of Jewish leaders in their confrontations with outsiders, particularly with Christians.

## Conclusion

I've encountered no Messianic Jew who contends that the Oral Law is fully supportive of the Tanakh, or that its study really helps one grasp the great heart themes constituting God's redemptive purpose for Israel, the spiritual blessing of the nations, and her final elevation in the unfolding of apocalyptic history. Among evangelicals only Marvin Wilson comes close. In my judgment one of the great flaws in his book Our Father Abraham is his claim that "the essence of the religious teaching of Judaism has remained remarkably constant, firmly rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures" (1989:32). Some 300 pages later he states that

in the split between Judaism and Christianity, the divorce is not permanent. In the New Testament Paul stresses that the coexistence of both faiths is in keeping with God's mysterious plan (p. 328).

These two statements rock me. I find nothing in the 300 pages separating these two incredible statements that even hints at the desperate efforts of the rabbis to create a post-Christian Judaism that would not only be largely antithetical to the ancient faith of Israel but also would be in total opposition to the faith of first century Jewish Christianity. When Jacob Jocz compared rabbinic Judaism's dual Torah to New Testament Christianity, he stated the difference in the following fashion:

What the Jew owes to the Torah, the Christian owes to Jesus Christ. But the difference lies not merely between loyalty to a person and loyalty to a code. Underneath the Cross, man stands in the position of crisis, asking for grace; under the Scrolls of the Law, man stands in a position of self-assertiveness, giving his best. Thus the difference between Judaism and Christianity lies in the difference of attitude (Jocz 1949:290).

In summary, Rabbinic Judaism no longer distinguishes between "torah" as divine revelation (the Books of Moses) and "the canon of Torah," the literature of the Oral Torah. Both are regarded as authoritative for the Jewish people. Torah now represents the growing deposit of "truth" equally spoken by Scripture, the Mishnah and the sages. And when a rabbi speaks today, he is the current representative and embodiment of this Torah--God's will and purpose for the world today.

I conclude with two quotations that flow from what has just been stated. The first is by Jacob Neusner. It clearly points out the inevitable end-point of rabbinic thought and serves as a reminder of

what happens when people add to or take away from the revealed Word of God.

In the rabbi, the Word of God was made flesh, And out of the union of man and Torah, producing the rabbi as Torah incarnate, was born Judaism, the faith of Torah: the ever-present revelation and always open canon (1989:121).

The second quotation is taken from the writings of Ben Zion Bokser. It first came to my attention in Avner Boskey's extended article: "The Messianic Use of Rabbinic Literature" that was published in Mishkan in 1988. At that time I had read very little in the field of rabbinic literature. In the years since I have sought to enter this complex field. As a result I am deeply convinced that Boskey is absolutely right in his endorsement of Bokser's judgment. It follows.

The Oral Torah is by its very being a denial that the Hebrew Bible moved naturally and inevitably toward one fulfillment, that of Christianity. It exemplifies another path of development — the Jewish path. The presence of another path . . . constitutes a challenge to Christianity (p. 8). . . . The offense of the Talmud to Christianity stems . . . from its refusal to acknowledge the claims of Christianity and from its positive contributions to the strengthening of Judaism as a distinctive faith (1967:144,145).bv

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