
Jewish Concepts of Scripture

A Comparative Introduction

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Chapter 3

Concepts of Scripture in Rabbinic Judaism

Oral Torah and Written Torah

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Introduction

If at the center of Judaism is “the book,” meaning the Hebrew/Jewish Bible (TaNaKh),¹ at the core of the Jewish Bible is the Torah, the Five Books of Moses (Pentateuch/Ḥumash), traditionally thought to have been revealed by God via Moses to the Israelites standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai. However, from the perspective of the ancient rabbis (ca. 70–500 CE, in the Land of Israel and in Babylonia), who came to define, even more than did the Hebrew Bible, the practice and meaning of Judaism in all of its subsequent varieties, Judaism is less based on the written biblical record of revelation than by an accompanying oral human elaboration, with the latter constituting as much “words of Torah” as the former. The former is referred to as “Torah that is in writing” (*torah she-bikhtav*), while the latter is known as “Torah that is by the mouth” (*torah she-be’al peh*), or, alternatively, as denoted by their modes of performance, that which is read from a written text (*miqra*/Scripture) and that which is recited or repeated without recourse to a written text (*mishnah*). The former consists of a fixed, closed text, the latter of fluid oral transmission and expansion. The former is the record of divinely revealed laws, the sacred history of ancient Israel, and the utterances of divinely inspired prophets and teachers of wisdom. The latter is the multitude of collections of rabbinic rules and legal debates, stories, and interpretations of Scripture, whose origins are traced ultimately back to Moses at Sinai. At the very least, the Written Torah (traditionally understood to encompass Torah, Prophets, and Writings), though the center of ritual attention in its own right in the synagogue liturgy, cannot be

apprehended except in tandem with and as interpreted by its accompanying Oral Torah.

Eventually (when exactly is itself a matter of scholarly debate), the Oral Torah of the ancient rabbis (like that of their successors) was committed to writing, presumably so as to be more surely preserved, first as scrolls and eventually as books. However, even when recorded in writing, it remained ever expanding and fluid (compared to the Written Torah) and retained qualities of oral expression, for example, in its constant dialogue and debate, often unresolved, between rabbis of differing opinions across the generations.

The “books” of the Oral Torah began as being of two types: (1) *Midrash* (literally, “seeking” [of meaning], or explication): commentaries on books of the Hebrew Bible or their liturgical cycles of reading, whether their contents be mainly law (*halakhah*; literally, “the way to go”) or narrative (*aggadah*; literally, “narration”), in some cases more exegetical and in others more homiletical; and (2) *Mishnah*: topically grouped lists of rabbinic laws (*halakhot*), with only minimal reference to their biblical sources, in some cases practically applicable (e.g., specific kinds of work prohibited on the Sabbath), in some cases theoretical (e.g., procedures for offering sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple, which had been destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE). Today we have one such authoritative collection, the Mishnah of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch (ca. 200 CE), but with remnants of mishnaic rules that did not make it into this collection, preserved in other sources. In turn, the Mishnah demanded its own commentary, largely due to its concise, elliptical style (possibly designed so as to facilitate its being memorized), which resulted in the Talmud (literally, “study”), comprising both the Mishnah and its expansive elucidation, the Gemarah (from a verb meaning “to complete” or “learn”). There are two such talmuds (*talmudim*), one produced by the rabbinic sages of the Land of Israel (the Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud, the *Yerushalmi*) and the other, more expansive and authoritative, produced by the rabbinic sages of Babylonia (the Babylonian Talmud, the *Bavli*). The subsequent development of the Oral Torah, through medieval and modern times, follows the same basic divisions: biblical commentaries, collections (or codes) of laws, and commentaries on those laws or supercommentaries on preceding commentaries on either Scripture or collections of laws, without end.

Returning to the “two Torahs,” how they are related to each other—in origin, status, authority, contents, forms, mode of study, and transmission—cannot be stated in simple or absolute terms, given the variety of

expressions within rabbinic literature (that is, Oral Torah) as it evolved in anonymously edited anthologies over the centuries. Although strictly differentiated from each other in mode of transmission and performance, they deeply intersect with each other. Nor is it clear what the relation might have been between what became the rabbinic Oral Torah and the plethora of prerabbinic extra- (or para-) scriptural laws, narratives, and forms of scriptural interpretation now known (most recently, thanks to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls) but excluded from the Hebrew biblical canon.

At issue, it should be stressed, is not the existence of an “oral tradition” (or “unwritten law”), common to all literate cultures, but the attribution of *revealed* status and authority to the specifically rabbinic Oral Torah. The classical rabbis used their interpretive methods to deduce this Oral Torah, both in its parts and as a whole, from the Written Torah, thus claiming that the Oral Torah was contained within the Written. But they do not understand Oral Torah’s status and authority to be secondarily derived from the Written Torah. Rather, as traditions revealed at Sinai, Oral Torah in their eyes has legal authority in its own right. While several prerabbinic (Second Temple period) bodies of literature adduce dual aspects of revelation—for example, literal and allegorical, exoteric (available to all) and esoteric (revealed only to a few and concealed from the rest)—none of them differentiates between the two in terms of their modes of transmission or performance as “written” and “oral,” mutually distinguishable thereby from each other. The closest possible antecedent is found in an ambiguous comment by the first-century CE Jewish historian Josephus with respect to the Second Temple group known as the Pharisees (thought to be the closest antecedent to the rabbis), that they

had passed on to the people certain regulations handed down by former generations and not recorded in the Law of Moses, for which reason they are rejected by the Sadducean group, who hold that only those regulations should be considered valid which were written down (in Scripture), and that those which had been handed down by former generations need not be observed.²

All we can surmise for certain is that the Pharisees attributed (divine) authority to ancestral laws not written in the Torah, but not necessarily that they preserved or transmitted these laws orally, and even less that they claimed an ultimate Sinaitic origin for them.

How are we to understand, therefore, both historically and functionally,

the rabbinic emphasis on the orality of rabbinic discourse, in contrast to the writtenness of Scripture? We shall examine noteworthy passages from classical rabbinic literature (Oral Torah) that thematize (and in some cases problematize) the nature of that Torah, especially in relation to its written sibling, as well as to the social, pedagogical context of their dual recitals. Contrary to my usual practice of working through such sources from earliest to latest in chronological sequence, so as to discern historical development, I shall begin with later, more conceptually developed traditions and work my way back to the earliest textual expressions. Given the limits of space, my aim is to highlight some salient aspects of the rabbinic concept of Written and Oral Torahs, and thereby rabbinic conceptions of Scripture and revelation.

A Late Story of Rabbinic Origins

Although it is impossible to determine with any certainty whether the “myth” of the Oral Torah goes back to prerabbinic (Pharisaic) times, the following story (which in its extant form dates to a late period in the rabbinic era) from the *Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* is a good indication of how foundational that idea was to become.³

What was the impatience of Shammai the Elder? They said: A story [is told] about a certain man who stood before Shammai, saying to him, “My master, how many Torahs do you [plural] have?”⁴ [Shammai] said to him, “Two, one written and one oral.” [The man] said to him, “With respect to the written one I believe you, but with respect to the oral one I do not believe you.” [Shammai] rebuked him and angrily removed him.

He came before Hillel, saying to him, “My master, how many Torahs were given?” [Hillel] said to him, “Two, one written and one oral.” [The man] said to him, “With respect to the written one I believe you, but with respect to the oral one I do not believe you.” [Hillel] said to him, “My son, have a seat.”

He wrote out for him the alphabet. [Pointing to the first letter,] he said to him, “What is this?” [The man] said to him, “It is an *aleph*.” [Hillel] said to him, “This is not an *aleph* but a *bet*.” [Pointing to the second letter,] he said to him, “What is this?” [The man] said, “It is a *bet*.” “This is not a *bet*,” said [Hillel], “but a *gimmel*.” [Hillel] said to him, “How do you know that this is an *aleph*, and this is a *bet*, and this is a *gimmel*? Only because our earliest ancestors have passed it on to us that this is an *aleph*, and this is

a *bet*, and this is a *gimmel*. Just as you have accepted [received] this [the alphabet] on faith, so too accept the other [the two Torahs] on faith.⁵

Although the ostensible purpose of the story in its present setting is to contrast the impatience of Shammai with the patience of Hillel, two proto-rabbinic teachers of early-first-century CE Jerusalem, for our purposes the story is remarkable in several other respects. First, it presumes that whatever their differences in patience or teaching style, Hillel and Shammai, the last of the Second Temple proto-rabbinic teachers and, implicitly, the ones whose differences of opinion set the initial agenda for rabbinic study, are indistinguishable from each other as to their “curriculum” of Written and Oral Torahs. Second, the prospective student (or convert) presumably reflects a widespread Jewish acceptance of the Written Torah as being divinely revealed/authoritative, but not the Oral one. Thus, from the perspective of our story, the “doctrine” (if we may call it that) of the Written and Oral Torahs at once defined rabbinic Judaism already at its origins, notwithstanding its many internal disagreements, and differentiated it from much (if not all) of nonrabbinic Judaism of its time.

Most significant, it seems to me, is the argument that Hillel employs to gain the confidence of the prospective student, according to which belief in two Torahs is as fundamental to rabbinic teaching as are the most elementary building blocks of language (and hence all learning) itself. What Hillel, according to this story, does *not* do (which we will see in other rabbinic passages later, beginning in the earliest strata of rabbinic literature) is try to convince the man of this idea through the exegetical reading of biblical verses, that is, to prove the existence (or status) of the Oral Torah from prooftexts drawn from the Written Torah, whose authority is already accepted by the man, as indicated by his ready acceptance of the Written Torah.

Rather, Hillel argues by way of an epistemological analogy, entirely free of scriptural proof: All systems of knowledge and communication rest on foundational postulates that cannot be proven but must be accepted (“on faith”) in order for the system’s foundations to be constructed. Thus, without a collective, societal understanding of the identity of the letters or the sounds they represent, reading (e.g., of written scriptures) cannot occur. After all, what is the Written Torah if not, at the most basic level, an assembly of letters to be read? Similarly, rabbinic learning cannot progress without a shared acceptance of the existence (and shared status) of two Torahs, Written and Oral. Just as the one (the alphabet) must be accepted as

received, so too the other (two Torahs). Of course, one need not accept this postulate, but without doing so, it would be impossible to learn from Hillel and Shammai or their rabbinic successors. Implicit in this comparison (although not admitted by the story) is the arbitrariness of a culture's assignment of names (that is, sounds and meanings) to the letters, which arbitrariness Hillel displays to the consternation of the prospective student, wherein lies the rhetorical force of his argument: Why presume the one (alphabet) as being self-evident and not the other (two Torahs)?

However, the story is even more subtly profound, in that Hillel's analogical argument itself instantiates its very point. While the man is prepared to accept the Written Torah but not the Oral Torah, his apprehension of the written word (or letter) is itself deeply dependent on his acceptance of received (oral) tradition/transmission. Whether Hillel's argument would convince anyone not already committed to the rabbinic conception of revelation and study of a dual Torah, it would bolster the attachment of rabbinic sages and disciples to the revelatory and authoritative status of Oral Torah as being as pedagogically "natural" as the acceptance of *aleph* as *aleph* and *bet* as *bet*.

The Linked but Differentiated Performances of Written and Oral Torahs

The rabbinic claim to be in possession of two revealed Torahs, Written and Oral, was not just of epistemological (how do we know this?) or ontological (what is the nature of each?) significance but of performative importance for how the two bodies of tradition were recited and studied, that is, ritually enacted, in relation to each other. In this regard, the following passage from the Palestinian ("Jerusalem") Talmud is particularly interesting for its concern with the practice of rendering the Hebrew text of Scripture into the Aramaic translations known as *targum*, since *targum* resides along the liminal borderline between written Scripture and oral teaching, partaking of each (although the rabbis defined *targum* as part of the latter):

[A] R. Samuel bar R. Isaac [ca. 280 CE] once entered a synagogue. A man was standing and translating [the lection] while leaning against a pillar. He said to him: "You are forbidden to do so [translate while leaning]! Just as it [the Torah] was given in reverence and fear, so too must we relate to it in reverence and fear."

[B] R. Ḥaggai [ca. 350 CE] said: R. Samuel bar R. Isaac once entered a synagogue. He saw the sexton (*hazzan*) standing and translating without having appointed someone else under him [to translate].⁶ He said to him: "You are forbidden to do so! Just as it was given by way of a middleman, so too we must relate to it by way of a middleman."

[C] R. Judah [bar R. Simeon] bar Pazzi [ca. 300 CE] entered and provided a biblical proof-text: "I [Moses] stood between God and you [Israel] at that time to declare to you the word of the Lord" (Deut. 5:5).

[D] R. Ḥaggai said: R. Samuel bar R. Isaac once entered a synagogue where he saw a teacher drawing the targum out of a [Hebrew] scroll.⁷ He said to him: "You are forbidden to do so! Teachings which were said [revealed] orally [must be presented] orally and teachings which were said [revealed] in writing [must be presented] in writing."⁸

We have here accounts of three instances in which the same rabbinic sage upon entering a synagogue objects to the manner of the public translation of Scripture. These stories presume rabbinic rules for the synagogue reading of Scripture and its interlinear accompaniment by targum translation, according to which the two are to be separate and distinct, the former read from a written scroll and the latter recited orally (whether extemporaneously or from memory), with the former performed by a person of higher status than that of the latter.

The first incident (A) stresses that the practice of translation, as a crucial part of the Torah's public reception, is to be conducted in a manner consistent with the awe-inspiring manner of the Torah's original revelation, for which Moses and the Israelites stood in rapt attention. Whereas the translator might view his translation as an ancillary service to the central ritual of the Torah reading, R. Samuel conceives of the translation as constituting a part of both the medium and the message of that mythic reenactment. The second incident (B–C), while building on the analogy between synagogue lection and original revelation, conversely stresses the need to *differentiate* between Torah reading/reader and translation/translator. Just as the Torah was revealed by God but *mediated* to the people by Moses (C), so too the weekly reenactment of that event is performed by a reader through the mediation of the translator, the two needing to remain distinct from each other. The reception of written Scripture is orally mediated in the synagogue as it was at Sinai (there was *sola scriptura*, "Scripture alone," at neither).⁹ If the second incident stresses the need to have two

different people play the roles of reader/revealer and translator/transmitter, the third incident (in paragraph D) stresses the difference between the ways in which the two recite their “lines,” the first from a fixed written text, the second according to a rule-governed but fluid oral tradition. Notwithstanding this distinction, this incident stresses, as did the first and second (with C), that *both* types of revelatory communication (written and oral) originated at Mt. Sinai and are reenacted as revelation in the synagogue ritual.

As this section of the Palestinian Talmud continues, it has much more to say about the relation between Written and Oral Torahs, once again employing words of the former to argue for the status of the latter:

[E] R. Ḥaggai (ca. 350 CE) in the name of R. Samuel bar Nahman (ca. 300 CE): Some teachings were said [revealed] orally and some teachings were said [revealed] in writing. We do not know which of them is more beloved, except from that which is written, “For in accordance with (*‘al pi*: “by the mouth of”) these things I make a covenant with you and with Israel” (Exod. 34:27), which is to say that those that are transmitted orally [literally, “by the mouth”] are more beloved.

[F] R. Yoḥanan (ca. 250) and R. Judah b. R. Simeon (ca. 350). One said: If you keep what is oral and what is written, I [God] will make a covenant with you, but if not, I will not make a covenant with you. The other said: If you keep what is oral and what is written, you will receive reward, but if not, you will not receive reward.

[G] [With respect to Deut. 9:10, in which Moses says, “The Lord gave me the two tablets of stone, written by the finger of God, and on them were (something) like all the words which the Lord spoke to you on the mountain from the midst of the fire on the day of assembly”], R. Joshua b. Levi (ca. 225 CE) said: “On them,” *and* on them”; “words,” *the* words”; “all,” *like* all”: [this expansive language includes] written teaching [*miqra*’], oral teaching [*mishnah*], dialectical argument [*talmud*], and narrative [*aggadah*].¹⁰ And even that which an experienced disciple will one day teach before his master was already said to Moses at Sinai.

[H] This is related to what is written, “Sometimes there is a phenomenon of which one might say, ‘Look, this one is new!’,” to which his fellow responds to him, “It occurred long ago, in ages that went by before us.” (Koh. 1:10)

Were we to think of Oral Torah as being derivative from Written Torah, or of less direct revelatory authority, we might suppose that the answer to R. Ḥaggai’s implied question (E) would be that the Written Torah is the more beloved of the two. Playing on the phrase *‘al pi* with respect to revelation and covenant in Exod. 34:27, the midrash avers that it is the Oral Torah that is the more beloved (by God? by Israel? presumably by both). Although the Written Torah, as a physical object, has greater iconic significance (e.g., in the way it is produced, handled, and read in synagogue), Jewish (especially halakhic) life is much more based on the Oral Law than on the Written Law. Even though the laws of the Written Torah are considered to have stronger divine backing, it is precisely the weaker authority and grounding of the laws of the Oral Torah that require their being paid greater attention and being accorded greater protection from violation. Furthermore, because the Pentateuch formed a part of the Christian (and Jewish-Christian) scriptures at this time, the rabbis regarded the Oral Torah as defining Jewish identity more distinctly. This rendered the Oral Torah more beloved as the *exclusive* possession of Jewish people.

We find this idea most clearly expressed in the following late midrash. After stating that the synagogue Torah reader cannot read from memory but must be looking at the Torah scroll, it adds that the person reciting the targum cannot look at a text, whether the targum or the Torah scroll (R. Judah b. Pazzi derives both rules from Exod. 34:27). The midrash continues:

R. Judah b. R. Shalom (ca. 375) said: Moses requested [of God] that the oral teaching [*mishnah*] be written. The Holy One, blessed be he, foresaw that in the future the nations would translate the Torah and read from it in Greek and say, “They are not Israel.” The Holy One, blessed be he, said to him, “O Moses! In the future the nations will say, ‘We are Israel; we are the children of the Lord.’ And Israel will say, ‘We are the children of the Lord.’ Now, the scales would appear to be balanced [between the two claims].” The Holy One, blessed be he, would say to the nations, “What are you saying that you are my children? I only recognize as my son one in whose hand are my ‘mysteries.’” They would say to him, “And what are your ‘mysteries?’” He would say to them, “the oral teaching [*mishnah*].” . . . Said the Holy One, blessed be he, to Moses, “What are you requesting, that the oral teaching be written? What then would be the difference between Israel and the nations?” Thus, it says, “Were I to write for him [Israel] the fullness of my teaching [*torah*]; if so, “they (Israel) would have been considered as strangers” (Hos. 8:12).¹¹

Returning to the Palestinian Talmud, the statements attributed to R. Yoḥanan and R. Judah b. R. Simeon (F) would seem, in contrast to what precedes them, to stress the *equal* importance of the Oral and Written Torahs (although note the order), whether for establishing the covenant or receiving its rewards. The difference between the two sages is whether observance of the commandments is a precondition for establishing the covenant or the condition for receiving its rewards. Implicitly, one might ask whether Israel's failure to preserve the Oral and Written Torahs would risk nullifying the covenant (and Israel's special relationship with God) or simply deny them the rewards *within* the covenantal relationship. This question was, in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple and the continuing dispersion and subjugation to foreign rule, not merely an academic one.

Next (G) R. Joshua b. Levi provides scriptural proof for the claim that all branches of Torah teaching, both written (*miqra'*) and oral (*mishnah*), and all forms of the latter, were revealed to Moses at Sinai. This is a claim not just for the comprehensive scope and diversity of *past*, received revelation but for its continuation in the *present* and well into the *future*, all of which were anticipated and authorized at Sinai. Implicit in this interpretation is not just the variety of *forms* of rabbinic oral teaching but the variegation of its *contents*. We might not yet know what a future disciple will someday expound before his master, or that it will not differ from what will be taught by another disciple, but we are assured that whatever it will be, it was already contained within "all the words" communicated by God to Moses (and by Moses to the Israelites). The expansive language of the fixed verse of Written Torah suggests that teachings of the inexhaustibly fluid Oral Torah are ever expanding, in both form and content. Lest this claim be thought to be overly daring, an anonymous voice, itself anticipated by the words of the biblical book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), concludes, what appears to be new and novel was there from the revelatory beginning (i.e., do not take credit for intellectual innovation).¹²

Written and Oral Torahs in Pedagogical Tandem

Several rabbinic passages suggest ways in which Written and Oral Torahs were not only experienced in tandem as part of the synagogue service on Sabbaths and festivals but also in the central ritual of study. According to Deut. 17:19, the Israelite king is obligated to keep by his side a "copy of this Teaching [*mishneh torah*]," followed by a sequence of verbs: "It shall be

with him, and he shall read [from the root *qr'*] *it all the days* of his life, in order that he may learn [root *lmd*] to fear [*yr'*] the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this Teaching [*torah*], and to perform [*'sh*] these laws." The midrashic commentary of *Sifre Deuteronomy* (itself part of the Oral Torah) interprets the verse as follows: "This teaches that the sight [*r'h*] [of it] leads to reading [*miqra'*, from the root *qr'*], reading leads to translation [*targum*], translation leads to oral teaching [*mishnah*], oral teaching leads to dialectical study [*talmud*, from the root *lmd*], dialectical study leads to performance [*'sh*], and performance leads to fear of God [*yr'*]."¹³ The scriptural verb *yil-mad* (learn/study) is unpacked so as to comprise three branches and consecutive stages of the rabbinic study curriculum—*targum*, *mishnah*, and *talmud*—which are interposed between the king's reading of the Torah and his fear of God, with his practice of the commandments being inserted from the end of the verse as the immediate consequence of his study. From the rabbinic perspective, mere reading of the Written Torah alone is insufficient to bring the king to proper practice and fear of God. It is by dynamically engaging words of Torah, both Written and Oral—through rabbinic-style study—that the king joins the people in submission to God, thereby rendering himself worthy of the people's submission to him.¹⁴

The commentary's envisioning of the king's practice of Torah "reading" as leading to dialectical study is modeled after the rabbinic curriculum of study of Written and Oral Torahs, precisely the kind of engaged, dialectical study in which the rabbinic student of the *Sifre's* text would be presently engaged. Note, in particular, the transitional role of scriptural translation (into Jewish Aramaic, itself a hybrid language) as a bridge between the reading of written Scripture and the interpretive dialectics of oral study. This probably reflects the sequence of rabbinic study.

For another look at the rabbinic curriculum of combined study of Written (*miqra'*) and Oral (*mishnah*) Torah, we will look at *Sifre Deuteronomy's* commentary on Deut. 32:2, in which Moses employs the metaphor of rain to describe how he wishes his "discourse" to fall upon and penetrate the Israelites:

"May my discourse come down as rain" (Deut. 32:2): Just as rain falls on trees and infuses each type with its distinctive flavor—the grapevine with its flavor, the olive tree with its flavor, the fig tree with its flavor—so too words of Torah are all one, but they comprise written teaching [*miqra'*] and oral teaching [*mishnah*]: [the latter including] exegesis [*midrash*], laws [*halakhot*], and narratives [*aggadot*]. . . .

Another interpretation: Just as with rain, you cannot see [anticipate] it until it arrives, as it says, “And after a while the sky grew black with clouds and there was wind and a heavy downpour” (1 Kings 18:45),¹⁵ so too with respect to a disciple of the sages, you do not know what he is until he teaches [*yishneh*] oral teaching [*mishnah*]: exegesis [*midrash*], laws [*halakhot*] and narratives [*aggadot*]; or until he is appointed provider [*parnas*] over the community.¹⁶

Of particular significance is the way, once again, in which Moses’s teaching is understood to contain already the diverse forms of rabbinic Oral Torah, which despite their distinctive “tastes” “are all one,” that is, derive from a single divine source and revelatory event. However, of even greater interest is the metaphoric slippage whereby the rain, having at first signified the diverse forms of rabbinic *teaching*, comes to signify the rabbinic *teacher* (disciple of the sages) of these very same forms of oral learning. His active engagement with and production of rabbinic words of Torah, rather than passive reading of the Written Torah, accomplished to no small measure by memorization, ensures that the sage not only exemplifies the Oral Torah but embodies it, in all its branches, as he learns it and teaches it.

In many areas of rabbinic thought and practice (as in the priestly stratum of the Hebrew Bible), division and differentiation (*havdalah*) of seeming opposites (e.g., light and dark, holy and profane) is a necessary precondition to their intersection and ultimate integration. Similarly, the following passage from the *Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* exemplifies the performative differentiation between Oral and Written Torahs, as among the subdivisions of the latter (e.g., between law and narrative, *halakhah* and *aggadah*), and their ultimate integration in the idealized master of all the curricular divisions:

“Provide yourself with a [single] teacher” (*m. ’Abot* 1:6): How so? This teaches that one should provide himself with a regular teacher and study with him written teaching [*miqra’*] and oral teaching [*mishnah*]—exegesis [*midrash*], laws [*halakhot*], and narratives [*aggadot*]. Then the meaning which the teacher neglected to tell him in the study of *miqra’* he will eventually tell him in the study of *mishnah*; the meaning which he neglected to tell him in the study of *mishnah* he will eventually tell him in the study of *midrash*; the meaning which he neglected to tell him in the study of *midrash* he will eventually tell him in the study of *halakhot*; the meaning which he neglected to tell him in the study of *halakhot* he will eventually

tell him in the study of *aggadah*. Thus, that man remains in one place and is filled with good and blessing. R. Me’ir used to say: He who studies Torah with a single teacher, to what may he be likened? To one who had a single field, part of which he sowed with wheat and part with barley, and planted part with olives and part with oak trees. Now that man is full of good and blessing. But one who studies with two or three teachers is like a man who has many fields: one he sows with wheat and one he sows with barley, and plants one with olives and one with oak trees. Now this man is scattered among many pieces of land, without good or blessing.¹⁷

Just as the diversity of forms of rabbinic oral teaching, in hermeneutical tandem with written Scripture, are said to derive ultimately from a single God, the same diversity is integrated, ideally at least, within the teaching of a single rabbinic sage. However, we must assume that this emphasis on unity gives indirect expression to its very opposite: the tendency, known to all scholars, to master one subject well, and for the student who seeks a comprehensive education to study from a wide range of such specialized teachers, moving from one to the next. Such specialization, and its attendant competition, among the rabbinic masters of the Oral Torah is well evidenced in rabbinic literature.

Conclusion

The rabbinic conception of a revelatory and pedagogical curriculum of written Scripture and oral teaching is without antecedent or parallel in the ancient world. While the idea of a twofold Torah, differentiated as Written and Oral, was not without its opponents and detractors, it became a fundamental part of rabbinic theology and self-understanding. The rabbis viewed themselves as the receivers, transmitters, and masters of an ever growing and diversifying corpus of interpretations, laws, and narratives. They understood this corpus to constitute a chain of tradition originating as divine revelation through Moses to the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the dialogical pairing of a *fixed* scriptural text with a *fluid* oral complement enabled rabbinic society, and eventually broader Jewish society, to survive the many vicissitudes of history by striking a delicate balance between cultural permanence and plasticity. Even today, the idea that the foundational, divinely revealed scriptures of a religion cannot be understood or applied aside from the accompanying

tradition of their continual and variegated human interpretation remains a radical one—especially because the human interpretation in Oral Torah is as determinative in practice as the revealed scripture is. This “humanizing” of scriptural transmission and interpretation would appear to run counter to an emphasis on the primacy of Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) in other scriptural religions, as in some streams of Judaism.

The rabbinic “movement” (if we can call it that) began as one of many marginal Jewish groups at a time of great social, political, and religious upheaval in the early centuries CE. This is the context in which the rabbinic teachings that we have examined took form and need to be understood. One of the great mysteries of ancient and late-antique Jewish history is the ability of this relatively small and marginal group of scholars to eventually, sometime in the mid- to late first millennium, redefine the very nature of Judaism as both practice and belief around the central obligation and ritual of textual study. While an important part of any explanation thereto must be sought at the *outer* plane of historical transformation and cultural realignment (whether identified with Greco-Roman paganism, Christianity, or Islam), a major aspect of the transformation of Judaism and Jewish society must be understood as having occurred at the *inner* plane of Jewish history, as shaped by the rhetorical power of rabbinic discourse in its exegetical (*midrash*), legal (*halakhah*), and narrative (*aggadah*) modes of expression, whether directed to the people as a whole or mastered by a scholastic elite (or the two in tandem). The discursive world that these distinctive forms of *torah* constructed and inhabited, and from which vantage the surrounding world was increasingly viewed and understood, is a phenomenon yet to be adequately apprehended and appreciated. Central to the lasting and renewing vitality of the rabbinic “conception of Scripture” is its pedagogical pairing of the closed and open, fixed and fluid, the timeless and the timely, of the Written and the Oral (even long after the latter was consigned to writing), by which Jewish society and culture were to understand themselves along the continuum of reenacted revelation and awaited redemption.

NOTES

1. *TaNaKh* stands for the three components, in sequence, of the canonical Hebrew Bible: *Torah* (Pentateuch), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), *Ketuvim* (Writings).
2. *Jewish Antiquities* 13.297 (trans. Ralph Marcus; LCL 7:376–77).

3. For the two earliest rabbinic statements that “Two Torahs were given to Israel (at Mt. Sinai): one written and one oral,” see *Sifre Deut.* 351 (ed. Louis Finkelstein, 408), commenting on Deut. 33:10, where the order of “written” and “oral” is reversed; and *Sifra Behuqqotay pereq* 8:12 (ed. Isaac Weiss, 112c).

4. In a parallel version in *b. Shabbat* 31a, the man is a non-Jew, a prospective convert.

5. *Abot deRabbi Natan* A15 (ed. Solomon Schechter, 61; trans. Judah Goldin, 80). Cf. *Abot deRabbi Natan* B29 (ed. Solomon Schechter, 61–62; trans. Anthony Saldarini, 174–75).

6. The sexton usually assigns the Torah lection to someone else. See *t. Meg.* 3(4):21. Presumably, on the present occasion, the sexton was acting both as reader and as translator, thereby failing to differentiate performatively between written Scripture and its oral translation.

7. The reference here is either to a text of targum, which had been inserted within the Hebrew text or scroll of the Torah, or to the rendering (“drawing” here intended not in a physical sense) of the targum from the written Hebrew text, with the translator looking at the Hebrew text for guidance, thereby giving the impression that the targum itself is written in that text.

8. *P. Megillah* 4:1, 74d (ed. Academy of the Hebrew Language, 768).

9. Nor was there *sola scriptura* in Ezra’s mediated public reading of the Torah according to Neh. 8:8.

10. The word *miqra’* denotes that which is read (literally, “called out”) from a written text, whereas *mishnah* denotes that which is recited from memory, or through repetition. The former appears first in this sense of “reading” in Neh. 8:8, with respect to Ezra’s public reading of the Torah. The two nouns are used in the present sense of written and oral teaching for the first time in tannaitic rabbinic literature.

11. *Pesiqta Rabbati* 5 (ed. Meir Friedmann, 14b; trans. William Braude, 93; ed. Rivka Ulmer, 51–52).

12. See especially *Kohelet Rabbah* 1:29(9): “Similarly, if you have heard Torah from the mouth of a scholar, let it be in your estimation as if your ears had heard it from Mount Sinai. That is what the prophet rebukes the people for when he tells them, ‘Draw near to me and hear this: From the beginning, I did speak in secret; from the time anything existed, I was there’ (Isa. 48:16 NJPS). They said to him, ‘[If you were present at the revelation] why have you not told us [this teaching before]?’ He replied to them, ‘Because chambers [for the reception of prophecy] had not been created within me, but now that they have been created within me, “And now the Lord God has sent me, endowed with his spirit” (ibid.)’”

13. *Sifre Deut.* 161 (ed. Louis Finkelstein, 212). My translation follows Finkelstein’s edition, with the exception that “sight” renders *hammar’eh* found in the better witnesses.

14. Note that our text begins with *mar’eh* (“sight, vision,” from the root *r’h*)

and ends with *yir'ah* ("fear, awe," from the root *yr'*), creating an *inclusio* based on a word play.

15. The prophet Elijah sends his servant seven times to look for signs of rain until on the seventh try he spots a small cloud in the distance. The rain storm then comes suddenly.

16. *Sifre Deut.* 306 (ed. Finkelstein, 339). I translate the text according to MS London.

17. *'Abot deRabbi Natan A8* (ed. Schechter, 35–36; trans. Goldin, 49–50).