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THE SAGE IN ISRAEL  
AND  
THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

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THE EARLY RABBINIC SAGE

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From when the dust of the destruction of the Second Temple settled in the late first century c.e. until the early third century, a historically critical period of over one hundred years during which the rabbinic sage movement took root and underwent significant growth and development, there is not a single clearly datable rabbinic source, nor much in the way of extrarabbinic sources relating to those sages.<sup>1</sup> From the early third century on there is a steady succession of rabbinic documents, which constitute the main sources of information about Judaism and Jewish history of that period. Those texts take the form of biblical commentaries (*midrash*) and translations (*targum*), topically arranged collections of rabbinic rules (*mishnah*), and discursive expositions of those rules (*talmud*). Each of these collections incorporates traditions and the literary crystallizations of traditions that predate the time and circumstances of their formation into redacted texts. Many of these incorporated traditions and texts are likely to derive from times anterior to the appearance of the earliest rabbinic documents in the third century. But the process of textual redaction has left such a deep mark on these incorporated traditions and texts that their extraction (not to mention distillation and synthesis) for purposes of historical representation of a time much earlier than their redaction is fraught with difficulties.<sup>2</sup>

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A substantially expanded version of this essay will appear as chapter 3 of my forthcoming book *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre Deuteronomy* (Albany: State University of New York).

1. I speak here principally of literary sources, but for the period of the late first and second centuries c.e. we are also largely at a loss for archeological sources relevant to the rabbinic sage and his institutions.

2. On the general problem of the use of highly rhetoricized rabbinic narrative forms for purposes of historical and biographical reconstruction, especially with regard to the figure of the sage, see Henry Fischel, "Story and History: Observations on Greco-Roman Rhetoric and Pharisaism," *American Oriental Society, Middle West Branch, Semi-Centennial Volume* (ed. Denis Sinor; Bloomington: Indiana University, 1969) 59-88. For a

I begin with these general comments on rabbinic literature since it is at the heart of that vast and complex literature that we find the figure and class of the rabbinic sage (*hākām*).<sup>3</sup> In order to construct a picture of that class of sages, it is to that literature—with all its difficulties for historical reconstruction—that one must turn. I say “construct” since the information about the rabbinic sage is not found gathered in any one part of rabbinic literature. Distributed throughout are anecdotal stories about individual sages in their dealings with one another, and occasionally with nonsages, both Jewish and non-Jewish; legal and nonlegal teachings attributed to individually named sages, groups of sages, or the collectivity of sages; statements prescribing attitudes and conduct appropriate to the sage; and discussion of the institutions within which the sages worked or upon which they sought to exert their influence. Several important studies have culled rabbinic literature for these sorts of information out of which to fashion a synthetic, narrative portrayal of the rabbinic sage and his society, in some cases typologically or chronologically differentiated.<sup>4</sup> But in such work of distillation, another,

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discrete case study, see Robert Goldenberg, “The Deposition of Rabban Gamaliel II: An Examination of the Sources,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 23 (1972) 167–90. On the impossibility of using rabbinic sources to write biographies of individual sages, see William Scott Green, “What’s in a Name?—The Problematic of Rabbinic ‘Biography,’” *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice* (ed. W. S. Green; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 1:77–96; idem, “Storytelling and Holy Men: The Case of Ancient Judaism,” *Take Judaism for Example: Studies toward the Comparison of Religions* (ed. Jacob Neusner; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983) 29–43; Jacob Neusner, “The Present State of Rabbinic Biography,” *Hommage à Georges Vajda: Études d’histoire et de pensées juives* (ed. Gérard Nahon and Charles Touati; Louvain: Peeters, 1980) 85–91 (with references to Neusner’s earlier writings on this question). This set of problems is not unique to the study of ancient Judaism, as can be seen from M. I. Finley, *Ancient History: Evidence and Models* (New York: Viking, 1986), esp. chap. 2, “The Ancient Historian and His Sources.”

3. Although several terms are employed in rabbinic literature for the sage, *hākām* is the most frequent and inclusive of them, denoting members of the rabbinic class. On the use of the word “class” for the rabbinic sages, see Lee I. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class in Palestine during the Talmudic Period* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak ben Zvi Institute, 1985) 2 [Hebrew]. The terms *rab* (‘master’) and *rabbī* (literally, ‘my master’) are used mainly in direct address, as titles preceding a particular sage’s name, or when the master-disciple relationship is specifically being referred to. In inscriptions it is difficult to discern when the term *rabbī* (and its cognates) is a conferred title denoting a member of the rabbinic class and when the term is simply honorific, denoting someone deserving of respect. See Hershel Shanks, “Is the Title ‘Rabbi’ Anachronistic in the Gospels?” *JQR* 53 (1962–63) 337–45; idem, “Origins of the Title ‘Rabbi,’” *JQR* 59 (1968–69) 152–57; E. Lohse, “*ῥαββί, ῥαββουví*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:961–65; Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Epigraphical Rabbis,” *JQR* 72 (1981) 1–17.

4. See in particular the following writings of Ephraim E. Urbach: “Class-Status and Leadership in the World of the Palestinian Sages,” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 2 (1968) 38–74; “Talmudic Sage: Character and Authority,”

equally important type of information about the rabbinic sage is often ignored: the discursive practices of those texts, which in and of themselves give, I shall argue, the best expression to who the rabbinic sages were or sought to become (the two often being difficult to differentiate).

### THE “CHAIN OF TRADITION”

The problem with representational portrayals of the rabbinic sage from the evidence of rabbinic literature is not only that they reduce that literature to its discursively denuded contents, but that they assume those contents to be themselves representational, not only of the time when the texts in which they are found were redacted but of the earlier times for which they provide fragmentary accounts. Such portrayals fail to take seriously enough the nature of that literature (and the same may be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of ancient literature more generally) as a medium dedicated *both* to transmission and to transformation: its texts not only transmit received traditions from an earlier time, but simultaneously transform—for purposes of their own place and program in time—what they seek to transmit.

Let me illustrate this point, and at the same time move further into the topic of this essay, with a well-known rabbinic text from *The Sayings of the Fathers*:

Moses received Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets transmitted it to the men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be thorough in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah. Simeon the Just [ca. 200 B.C.E.] was among the last of the Great Assembly. He used to say. . . . Antigonus of Soko received [Torah] from Simeon the Just. He used to say. . . . (*m. Abot* 1:1–3)<sup>5</sup>

This “chain of tradition” continues with five pairs of teachers, each of whom adds one or more teachings to what he has received before transmitting the newly transformed Torah to the next link in the chain.

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*Jewish Society through the Ages* (ed. H. H. Ben-Sasson and S. Ettinger; New York: Schocken, 1969) 116–47; *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1979), esp. 1:564–648. For more critical approaches, which are therefore more limited in focus, see, for the Babylonian sages, Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* (5 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1965–70), 4:279–402; idem, *School, Court, Public Administration: Judaism and Its Institutions in Talmudic Babylonia* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987); and for the Palestinian sages, Levine, *The Rabbinic Class in Palestine during the Talmudic Period*.

5. For English translations of the *Sayings of the Fathers*, see Charles Taylor, *Sayings of the Jewish Fathers* (2d ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1897; repr. New York: Ktav, 1969), or Joseph Hertz, *Sayings of the Fathers* (New York: Behrman, 1945).

The last pair is that of Hillel and Shammai (ca. 30 B.C.E.–10 C.E.), who in turn (despite some kinks in the chain) transmit what they have received and taught to Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai (*Sayings* 2:9), who together with his five students establishes the first specifically rabbinic center for learning at Yavneh (Jamnia).<sup>6</sup>

In this “genealogical” chain, each link (explicitly beginning with the men of the Great Assembly, but implicitly for their predecessors) transforms as it transmits Torah. That which is added at each successive link in the chain is no less Torah than that which precedes it as it takes its place within the cumulative tradition, which is said to originate in the divine revelation at Sinai.<sup>7</sup> Presumably, each teacher (or generation of teachers) taught more than is here explicitly credited to him and thus transformed what he received more complexly than is here schematically expressed. Furthermore, there is no way of verifying whether the named teachers actually said what is credited to them, the attributions themselves being a product of the tradition’s complex history of transmission and transformation.

#### THE PROTO-RABBINIC SAGES—AN UNCERTAIN LINK

The transformative quality of the opening chapter of *The Sayings of the Fathers* is as much historiographic as it is literary. In historiographic terms the chain set forth in the *Sayings* is most significant for what it omits: the priesthood. Like other rabbinic texts it presumes that proto-rabbinic sages had primary responsibility for the transmission and teaching, not to mention judicial implementation, of Torah texts and traditions during the Second Temple period. Modern scholars have similarly presumed that some time in the third century B.C.E., with the increasing canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures and the hellenization of the priesthood, a new class of *nonpriestly* scribes arose to challenge the authority of the priests as guardians and interpreters of Israel’s Scriptures and traditions, even though that authority is repeatedly vested, overall, in the descendants of Levi by Scripture itself. These scholars argue that the priesthood, having become increasingly self-serving, lost touch with the needs and sentiments of the common people, who turned instead for teaching and guidance to the lay scribes and their antipriestly “democratizing” program of extending Torah

6. Much has been written on this passage. See in particular Elias Bickerman, “La chaîne de la tradition Pharissienne,” *RB* 59 (1951) 44–54; Moshe D. Herr, “Continuum in the Chain of Torah Transmission,” *Zion* 44 (1979) 43–56 [Hebrew].

7. Note the following often cited saying: “Even that which an advanced disciple will some day teach before his master was already said to Moses at Sinai” (*y. Pe’u* 2:6 [17a]).

teaching into everyday life. These lay scribes, it is claimed, were the precursors of the Pharisees and in turn of the rabbinic sages.<sup>8</sup>

As attractive as this picture may be from a postpriestly perspective, it is hardly supported by the extant evidence from the Second Temple (that is, prerabbinic) period. First, there is little evidence for the existence of a broad class or movement of nonpriestly (and certainly not antipriestly) scribes and sages in this period.<sup>9</sup> Second, the extant sources, right up to and shortly following the destruction of the temple, continue to associate the overall authority to preserve, interpret, teach, and legally apply sacred Scriptures with the priesthood, even as that authority shifted between different priestly families and strata and even as that priesthood was split by sectarian schisms. Those groups that rejected the Jerusalem temple and its officiating priesthood as being illegitimate or defiled did not question in principle Israel’s priestly “constitution,” but rather created alternative priestly structures and ideologies in the hope that one day the Jerusalem temple and priesthood would be transformed along the lines of their alternative priestly programs.<sup>10</sup> Rather than a *split* between priests and scribes, the Second Temple sources show evidence of inner-priestly *shifts* of Torah and legal authority to specialized priestly subgroups, particularly scribes and

8. Some influential works that evidence this view are Viktor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1959) 124–25; Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)* (rev. ed.; ed. Geza Vermes et al.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 2:322–23; George Foote Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (3 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1930), 1:308–9; Elias Bickerman, *From Ezra to the Last of the Maccabees: Foundations of Postbiblical Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1962) 67–71; Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 1:78–83. More recently, see Isaiah Gafni, “The Historical Background,” *The Literature of the Sages, First Part: Oral Tora, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, External Tractates* (ed. Shmuel Safrai; Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 2/3a; Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 4; and Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Library of Early Christianity; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 101–3, 160, 172–73, 218. See my study “Of Priests, Scribes, and Sages in Second Temple Times” (forthcoming, *JBL*) for a more extensive marshalling and analysis of the evidence for the following challenge to that conventional view.

9. I use the terms “priestly” and “priesthood” to refer to members of families that trace their ancestry back to Aaron (including the Levites), whether or not they served as temple functionaries. For a useful survey of the different priestly social strata in Second Temple times, see Menahem Stern, “Aspects of Jewish Society: The Priesthood and Other Classes,” *The Jewish People in the First Century* (ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern; Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 1/2; Assen/ Amsterdam: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 561–630.

10. This finds its clearest expression in the Dead Sea Scrolls, but also in the Enochic corpus, both of which are discussed in my “Of Priests, Scribes, and Sages.”

Levites (the latter being, in a sense, quasi-priests), with the two often overlapping.<sup>11</sup> However, it is important to stress that despite such shifts and schisms, the extant sources concur that the prophetic authority to interpret and the juridical authority to implement scriptural laws remained principally with the priesthood, however it may have been conceived and distributed at different times and by different groups.<sup>12</sup> There were, however, important exceptions to this pattern, especially at the end of the Second Temple period: the quasi-priestly Pharisees (who are by all accounts the closest antecedents to the rabbinic sage) and individual nonpriestly charismatic teachers (*sophistai*) and their disciple circles. Unfortunately, it is impossible to gauge the extent and impact of either of these developments. It is important, however, not to make of such exceptions the rule.<sup>13</sup>

In light of the preponderance of evidence for the continued paramountcy of the priesthood in matters of Torah preservation, transmission, and adjudication throughout the Second Temple period, how are we to understand the absolute omission of the priesthood from the rabbinic chain of tradition text cited above? One might conclude that while the opening chapter of *The Sayings of the Fathers* is not a correct representation of that period of the history of Torah transmission, it is symptomatic of the situation in a time when sages and not priests filled such roles in Israelite society. This text may then be thought of as the creation of such sages who wished retroactively to transform the past from the vantage of an *already* transformed present.<sup>14</sup> But, lacking

11. Note in particular the transference of teaching and administrative roles from the priests to the Levites, and in particular to the Overseer (*mēbaqqēr*) at Qumran; see IQSa 1:22–25; CD 13:2–7, 14:3–18; see my “Of Priests, Scribes, and Sages” for discussion and further evidence. For the New Testament “scribes” as members of the Levite class, see Daniel R. Schwartz, “Scribes and Pharisees, Hypocrites: Who Were the Scribes?” *Zion* 50 (1985) 121–32 [Hebrew]; and my “Of Priests, Scribes, and Sages” for further discussion.

12. This is not to deny the existence or importance of a lay elite (that is, not specifically priestly) in Second Temple Jewish society, but to argue that its functions are generally not evidenced to be those of Torah teaching and interpretation. At the *local* level a hereditary lay elite is likely to have sat on regional and village courts and councils. Instruction of children, when not conducted by their parents, may have been entrusted, especially by the rich, to professional (lay?) tutors. However, there is little evidence, as is often presumed (see sources cited above, n. 8) that the synagogues were a lay alternative to the temple or that *institutions* of lay education were in place before the destruction of the temple. For further details see my “Of Priests, Scribes, and Sages.”

13. Another exception might have been the early followers of Jesus, but we know too little about them to say much (having to depend again on later, retroactively transformative sources).

14. This is the implicit argument of M. D. Herr (“Continuum in the Chain of Torah Transmission”), who understands the shift of Torah teaching from priests to sages to have taken place in early Hellenistic times (third century B.C.E.), and the tradition about the chain of tradition to have come into being some time in the last century B.C.E. or the first century C.E.

external evidence to the contrary, one could just as easily argue that this text at the opening of the *Sayings* was created at a time when the priesthood still filled, or claimed for themselves, such roles, and that the creators of this text, *critical* of that present situation, sought, perhaps in part through the very force of their *discourse*, to transform it.<sup>15</sup> And finally, but not necessarily independent of the preceding possibilities, one might consider this text, and the wider body of rabbinic texts for which it stands, to be transformative in still another way: disciples of sages, through their engaged study and hence interpretation of this text, might be *empowered* to view the very activity of *their* study as part of an unbroken, living chain of Torah and tradition extending back to and deriving from Sinai, with themselves as its latest links.<sup>16</sup>

This is by no means to suggest that the above-cited text or rabbinic literature more generally should be dismissed as pseudepigraphic fabrication. Rather it is to caution that the *representational* employment of such a text, not only for periods anterior to the time of its redaction but for that time as well, needs to be conditioned by considerations of the dialectical intertwining of transmission and transformation that is so central to the self-understanding of the rabbinic sages who claimed the status of Torah for their own rhetorical texts of teaching.

#### EXTENT OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE PERIOD OF THE TANNAIM (CA. 70–212 C.E.)

This brings me to the line that divides the extant sources for the history of the sage, pre- and post-70 (roughly speaking). For the period between about 70 C.E. and the early third century there are virtually no nonrabbinic sources against which to measure the historical reliability of rabbinic accounts of the lives and teachings of the sages of that time (the tannaim). By contrast, for the period before 70 there is a varied

15. It is often assumed that with the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. the priesthood's social status and influence suddenly terminated, leaving the Pharisaic sages without serious competition for the roles of religious and political leadership. Several kinds of evidence suggest rather that priestly status and influence continued to be factors in Jewish communal life long after 70 C.E. and that the priesthood's longstanding and scripturally rooted claims to be the authentic guardians, interpreters, and adjudicators of Israel's Scriptures and laws were not so easily set aside. For details, see my *From Tradition to Commentary*, chap. 3, n. 20.

16. The terminology of symptomatic, critical, and transformative, and the conception of their dialogical interplay, is adapted from Dominick LaCapra, *History, Politics, and the Novel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1987). For a fuller discussion of the interrelation of historical and literary criticisms in the study of rabbinic literature, see my *From Tradition to Commentary*, chap. 1, as well as my two-part review essay, “Interpreting Midrash 1: Midrash and the History of Judaism,” *Prooftexts* 7 (1987) 179–94; “Interpreting Midrash 2: Midrash and Its Literary Contexts,” *Prooftexts* 7 (1987) 284–300 (with errata in *Prooftexts* 8 [1988] 159–60).

abundance of materials with which to test the Rabbis' claims to be the successors to an uninterrupted chain of nonpriestly sages extending back well into Second Temple times (and ultimately to Sinai), and from which to fashion (albeit not easily or completely) an alternative picture of the antecedents to the rabbinic sage.<sup>17</sup>

It is as though one enters a historiographic tunnel shortly after the destruction of the Second Temple, and does not emerge until the early third century. "Before" and "after" pictures can be put together (however blurry and partial), but there is much less certainty of how much of the transformation in Jewish learned circles that occurred within that tunnel occurred near its beginning (at Yavneh after the destruction of the temple), around its middle (in the Galilee following the failed Bar Kochba revolt), or not until its end a century and a half later (with the ascendancy of R. Judah as Patriarch). It should not be surprising if the earliest texts of rabbinic transmission and transformation, appearing in the third century, project some of the most significant transformational aspects of rabbinic Judaism back onto its "foundational" figures and their times: R. Akiba, R. Joḥanan b. Zakkai, Hillel, and their presumed antecedents.<sup>18</sup>

In what follows I shall examine a selection of rabbinic texts that deal, either explicitly or implicitly, with the rabbinic sage. They are all drawn from the third-century *Sifre* commentary to the Book of Deuteronomy, the earliest commentary to that book, created shortly after the emergence of the rabbinic sage from, what might historiographically be termed, the tannaitic tunnel. This collection is of particular interest since it is the Book of Deuteronomy that is the most didactic of the books of the Pentateuch—in its rhetorical style, its narrative framework, and its frequent admonitions to Israel to teach and learn God's words. But it is also the most explicit of the books of the Pentateuch in

17. This I have done in my aforementioned forthcoming study "Of Priests, Scribes, and Sages." I do not mean to suggest that Second Temple Jewish sources are without their transformative effects and that they can be taken as straight historical representations. Each one, depending on its rhetorical genre, intellectual and political purpose, and social setting, displays a different intermixture of symptomatic, critical, and transformative aspects. However, the very *variety* of these texts' genres, purposes, and perspectives permits, by juxtaposing and testing their different views against one another, construction of at least a rough picture of who the Second Temple antecedents to the rabbinic sage are likely or unlikely to have been.

18. Depictions of what occurred at Yavneh per se, as desirable as these may be, remain, therefore, highly speculative. For two recent examples, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, "The Significance of Yavneh: Pharisees, Rabbis, and the End of Sectarianism," *HUCA* 55 (1984) 27–53; and Jacob Neusner, "The Formation of Rabbinic Judaism: Yavneh (Jamnia) from A.D. 70 to 100," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Principat*, vol. 19: *Religion* (ed. W. Haase; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979), 2:3–42.

stressing the role of the priests, here being the descendants of Levi, as the authoritative teachers of God's revelation and as the judicial authorities for the implementation of Israel's covenantal laws (see Deut 17:8–13, 18; 19:7; 21:5; 24:8; 27:9–10; 31:9–11, 25–26; 33:10). The Book of Deuteronomy, thus, presents the early rabbinic exegetes and the redactors of the *Sifre* with numerous opportunities to assert the importance of study of Torah as a central religious obligation, while challenging them to express their claims to be the paramount authorities in matters of Scripture and Jewish law in exegetical engagement with a biblical text that associates that authority with the hereditary priesthood. This is a challenge to advance the rabbinic work of collective self-definition in relation to a scriptural text that, perhaps like social reality, offered some resistance to that work.

My examination of the following texts, therefore, will not seek simply to extract information about the rabbinic sage (as if those texts were linguistically autonomous of the sages who both produced and studied them). Rather, it will seek to engage critically the discursively transformative practices of those texts as the best guides to who the rabbinic sages were and were working to become—successors to the priests, prophets, and elders of earlier times—through the medium of their own self-defining engagement in the work of textual study.

## TWO TYPES OF SAGE AND A DUAL IDENTIFICATION

The scriptural context of Deut 1:13 is Moses' decision to distribute leadership responsibility, especially in judicial matters, to a select group of *lay* tribal leaders (the "elders" elsewhere).<sup>19</sup> According to the lemma, these are to be selected according to three qualities:

Select from each of your tribes persons who are wise [*hākāmīm*], and discerning [*nēbônīm*], and experienced [*yedu'īm*], and I will appoint them as your heads.

The discussion of this verse in *Sifre Deuteronomy*, between Arios<sup>20</sup> and R. Jose, revolves around the difference between two of these, the

19. Cf. Exod 18:13–26, where Moses shares his authority with a lay leadership at Jethro's recommendation, and Num 11:16–25, where he does so at God's command. The larger context of the *Sifre's* commentary to this biblical passage is treated in my *From Tradition to Commentary*, chap. 3.

20. Arios is presumably a nonrabbi, if not a non-Jew; see *t. B. Meš.* 3:11 (see the edition by Moses Samuel Zuckerman, *Tosefa, 'al pi kitve yad Erfurt uVina* [Trier, 1881–82]; repr. as *Tosephta, Based on the Erfurt and Vienna Codices* [Jerusalem: Bamberger and Wahrmann, 1937]) 376. Moshe D. Herr, ("The Historical Significance of the Dialogues between Jewish Sages and Roman Dignitaries," *Studies in Aggadah and*

*ḥākām* and the *nābôn*, now representing not simply two intellectual qualities but two types of intellectuals:

[A] With regard to this Arios asked R. Jose [ca. 150 C.E.]: "Who is a wise person [*ḥākām*]?" He replied to him: "Whoever maintains [*mēqayyēm*] his learning." [Arius asked:] "But is this not a discerning person [*nābôn*]?" He replied to him: "[Persons who are] discerning' has already been mentioned."

[B] What is the difference between a wise person and a discerning person? A wise person resembles a rich money changer. When someone brings him [money] to examine he examines it, and when no one brings him [money] to examine he takes out his own and examines it. A discerning person resembles a poor money changer. When someone brings him [money] to examine he examines it, and when no one brings him [money] to examine he sits waiting anxiously.<sup>21</sup>

The midrashic passage as a whole (if not R. Jose) clearly favors the *ḥākām* over the *nābôn*. R. Jose defines the *ḥākām* as one who, unlike the *nābôn*, not only learns Torah, that is, acquires a knowledge of it, but maintains it through constant review. What follows (paragraph B), the metaphorical comparison of these two types of learned men, may either be seen as R. Jose's further response or as an editorial juxtaposition to the preceding dialogue, the latter being my preference.

The contrast between *ḥākām* and *nābôn* as two different types of scholars is now illustrated through comparison with rich and poor money changers, the preference for the *ḥākām* now becoming manifest, even though the precise difference between the two requires interpretation on the part of the student of the text. Like the rich and poor money changers, the *ḥākām* and the *nābôn* provide a service to those who

*Folk-Literature* (ed. Joseph Heinemann and Dov Noy; Scripta Hierosolymitana 22; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1971) 149, considers Arios to have been a convert, but the evidence is too slim to allow any such identification.

21. *Sifre Deut.* §13 (Finkelstein 22.1-5). The critical edition is S. H. Horowitz, *Sifre ad Deuteronomium* (ed. Louis Finkelstein; Corpus Tannaiticum 3:3:2; Berlin: Jüdischer Kulturbund in Deutschland, 1939; repr. as *Sifre on Deuteronomy* [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1969]); references to *Sifre Deuteronomy* below will include § plus the section (*pisqa*<sup>2</sup>) number, followed by the page and line numbers from Finkelstein's edition. In this and subsequent passages, the translation is my own, based on a critical evaluation of the textual witnesses, but usually following ms Vatican (and ms London where ms Vatican is not extant). Sometimes, therefore, the text that I provide differs from that of Finkelstein, who is more eclectic in reconstructing the text of the *Sifre*, and from the translations of Reuven Hammer (*Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy* [New Haven: Yale University, 1986]) and Jacob Neusner (*Sifre to Deuteronomy: An Analytical Translation* [2 vols.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987]), who follow Finkelstein's text. For justifications of my text critical choices and for explanations of my translation choices, see my notes to the same passages in *From Tradition to Commentary*, chap. 3.

come seeking their expertise, most likely in legal matters. But the difference between the two is that the former preoccupies himself with the examination and evaluation of his wealth of acquired rules and traditions whether or not his services are sought. In other words, he spends his time absorbed in study *for its own sake*, and not, like the *nābôn* (poor money changer), only when his expertise is sought for a practical application.

There is in this twofold interpretation of the *ḥākām* a tension (evidenced elsewhere in the *Sifre*, as we shall see): the sage is someone who serves the public, yet who is, ideally at least, constantly engaged in Torah study for its own sake. But there is another, even more important social thrust to this seemingly simple passage with its privileging of the *ḥākām*. While several qualities are mentioned in Scripture as criteria for the selection of men to share leadership with Moses,<sup>22</sup> that which is singled out for favored treatment is the one by which the Rabbis call themselves, as if to suggest that they view themselves as the successors to the anonymous lay leaders (*zēqēnīm*) who shared the burden and honor of leadership with Moses.

By contrast, the terms *ḥākām* and *nābôn*, frequently connected to each other in Scripture (e.g., Gen 41:31, 39; Deut 4:6; 1 Kgs 3:12) are also differentiated from one another in the *Damascus Document* (CD) of the Dead Sea sectaries, where the *nābôn* and not the *ḥākām* is privileged. There it is said that God raised up the elect community, comprising "from Aaron men of discernment [*nēbônīm*], and from Israel men of wisdom [*ḥākāmīm*], and made them hear [His voice]" (CD 6:2-3). Whereas discernment is associated with the priests of the community, who were considered the prophetic conduit through which God made his will and the proper interpretations of prophecies known to the community as a whole, the community's *laity* are characterized by the attribute of wisdom.<sup>23</sup>

This is not to suggest that this *Sifre* passage be read as an anti-sectarian polemic.<sup>24</sup> Rather, against a background in which some associated the authoritative teaching and adjudication of covenantal law

22. In Exod 18:21 four different criteria, being moral rather than intellectual, are suggested by Jethro. According to *Sifre Deut.* §15 (Finkelstein 24.7-8), Moses could only find men with three of the seven qualities suggested to him by Jethro.

23. For *ḥākām* as a term for the sect's laity overall, see IQSa 1:28, 2:16; CD 6:3; IQH 1:35. In the Dead Sea Scrolls in general, forms of the root *byn* are much more frequent (by about four times) than those of the root *ḥkm*, whereas in *Sifre Deuteronomy* these proportions are reversed. In the Dead Sea Scrolls the verb *hēbīm* is commonly used to denote the prophetic enlightenment of the community by its priestly leaders and by God. For details see my *From Tradition to Commentary*, chap. 3, n. 140.

24. Held by Chaim Rabin, *The Zadokite Documents* (2d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1958) 21 (note to CD 6:2).

with an inspired priesthood, the *Sifre* text wishes to downplay the *nābôn* in favor of the *hākām*, whose genealogy extends back to Moses through the anonymous lay elders, and whose pedagogic and juridical authority is predicated upon his incessant engagement with a wealth of divine texts and traditions for their own sakes. The *hākām*, unlike the *nābôn*, according to this formulation, is not simply a privileged *source* of sacred wisdom, but its very *embodiment* through his *life* of Torah study.

The identification of the rabbinic sages with the elders (*zēqēnīm*) on the one hand, and of the elders with the prophets on the other, is common in rabbinic texts.<sup>25</sup> This dual identification is important since it is the biblical lay elders who both accompany Moses to Mt. Sinai (Exod 24:1, 9) and are assigned leadership and judiciary functions by him. The Rabbis, viewing themselves as the contemporary elders, understand themselves as the inheritors of the authority of the scriptural lay elders—as their descendants in the chain of tradition.

#### THE SAGES AS LINKS IN A VERTICAL CHAIN

If the rabbinic sages view themselves as the latest link in the horizontal chain of tradition, they also view themselves as an essential link in the vertical chain that connects Israel to God:

“[If, then, you heed (*šāmōʿa tišmēʿū*) my commandments] that I command you today” [Deut 11:13]: From whence can you derive that if a person learns [*šāmaʿ*] a teaching from one of little learning [*qāṭān*] within Israel, he should consider it as if he had learned it from a sage [*hākām*]? From the words, “That I command *you* [plural] today.” And is not one who learns from a [single] sage like one who learns from [the collectivity of] sages, as it is said, “The words of sages are like goads” [Eccl 12:11]<sup>26</sup> Just as a goad guides the cow along its furrows so as to bring life to its masters, similarly the words of Torah guide a person’s thoughts toward knowledge of God. And is not one who learns from [the collectivity of] sages like one who learns from the Sanhedrin, as it is said, “Masters of assemblies [*ʿāsūppôt*]”? For “assemblies” must refer to the Sanhedrin, as it is said, “Assemble [*ʿespā*] for me seventy men of the elders of Israel” [Num 11:16]. And is not one who learns from the Sanhedrin like one who learns from Moses, as it is said, “They were given by one shepherd” [Eccl 12:11]? And furthermore it says, “They remembered the ancient days, the

25. For other rabbinic texts, including several in *Sifre Deuteronomy*, that identify elders with sages and associate elders with prophets, see my *From Tradition to Commentary*, chap. 3, nn. 27–31, 47.

26. The transition from the single sage to the collectivity of sages may derive exegetically from the fact that the two verses preceding Eccl 12:11 speak of the teachings of Qoheleth, the single *hākām*.

days of Moses [. . . the shepherd of his flock]” [Isa 63:11]. And is not one who learns from Moses like one who learns from the Mighty One, as it is said, “They were given by one shepherd”<sup>27</sup> [And furthermore it says,] “Give ear, O shepherd of Israel [. . . You who are enthroned on the cherubim]” [Ps 80:2]. And furthermore it says, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one” [Deut 6:4]. (*Sifre Deut.* §41; Finkelstein 86.4–12)

There are, broadly speaking, two parts to this section of commentary. The first interprets the lemma, Deut 11:13, by focusing on the plural direct object “you” (*ʿetkem*), stressing that it is to *all* of Israel that Torah is commanded and hence revealed. Therefore, even the non-learned may have something to teach and may be regarded *as if* a sage, or as a potential sage.<sup>28</sup> The second part interprets atomistically the words of Eccl 12:11 so as to link the teaching of the individual sage with that of the collectivity of sages, and in turn with the authority of the Sanhedrin,<sup>29</sup> which is identified with the biblical elders, and then with Moses the single lawgiver, and finally with the one God.

The editorial combination of these two exegeses, the second being found in other early rabbinic sources independently of any interpretation of Deut 11:13,<sup>30</sup> results in a vertical chain, or hierarchy, that begins with a single, one might say average, Israelite and ends with a single God. The distance between these two single figures is filled, or mediated, by the collectivity of sages, who while not being genealogically distinct from the people, trace their intellectual ancestry back through the seventy elders of the Sanhedrin (the elders) to Moses. By stressing on the one hand that *all* of Israel are teachers of Torah, all having been equally addressed by God, yet on the other that it is the sages in particular who have inherited the role of the elders (Sanhedrin) to mediate between Israel and God, the text expresses two views of the sage that cannot but be in some tension with each other: the sages are of the people, yet distinct from (and implicitly superior to) them.

27. The single “shepherd” of Eccl 12:11 is interpreted twice, once signifying Moses and once God.

28. Cf. *m. ʿAbot* 4:1: “Ben Zoma says: Who is wise [*hākām*]? One who learns from every person.” For other expressions of an egalitarian Torah ethic, see below, n. 32.

29. It is unclear whether Sanhedrin here refers to an authoritative, national institution in rabbinic times or to the Sanhedrin of Second Temple times. For the view that such a body no longer existed in Palestine by the third century C.E., see Levine, *The Rabbinic Class in Palestine during the Talmudic Period*, 47–52.

30. It is at the point at which these two exegeses are joined that the transition from single sage to collectivity of sages is exegetically the weakest; see above, n. 26. The earliest parallel, in *t. Soṭa* 7:9–12 (and *b. Hag.* 3a–b with slight variations), contains the explication of Eccl 12:11 without that of Deut 11:13 and sets it in an entirely different narrative frame. There the emphasis is not on the sages as a link between Israel and God but on the idea that, despite the multivocality of contradictory rabbinic teachings and rulings, they all derive from a single lawgiver and God.

What is striking in this text is the way in which this view gradually and dynamically unfolds through the dialogical dissection, interpretation, and unexpected interrelation of six scriptural verses. It would be a mistake, it seems to me, to collapse the middle of this text so as to reduce its message to the simple statement, "Even if you learn it from a lesser teacher, it is as if it comes from God."<sup>31</sup> For the intermediary position and function of the sages find their expression in the unfolding exegetical discourse by which the text's middle transports its student from the single simple Israelite with which it begins to the single supreme God with which it ends.

### "ALL ARE EQUAL WITH REGARD TO TORAH"

The tension between egalitarian and elitist Torah ethics is even more forcefully expressed in the following piece of commentary:

[A] Another interpretation of "If, then, you carefully keep [all this commandment]" [Deut 11:22]: Perhaps you might say, "[Leave it to] those who are elders, those who are leaders [*gēdōlīm*], those who are prophets." Therefore Scripture teaches, "If, then, *you* [plural] carefully keep." This teaches that all are equal with regard to Torah. Similarly it says: "Moses commanded us Torah as an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob" [Deut 33:4]. It does not say "priests, Levites, and Israelites," but "congregation of Jacob." And similarly it says: "You stand this day, *all of you* [before the Lord your God]" [Deut 29:9].

[B] Had it not been for those who arose and preserved Torah in Israel, would not the Torah have been forgotten? Had it not been for Shaphan in his time, Ezra in his time, and R. Akiba in his time, would not the Torah have been forgotten in Israel? For it says, "A teaching [*dābār*] in its time, how good it is!" [Prov 15:23]. The teaching of one such as this is equal to all the rest together. (*Sifre Deut.* §48; Finkelstein 112.7-13)

By attending to the plural form of address in the lemma, the commentary stresses that *all* of Israel, and not a select class of leaders, are enjoined to attend to the Torah. Other verses are adduced to the same effect. Two types of special status are specifically rejected: acquired (elders, leaders, and prophets) and inherited (priests, Levites, and Israelites). Although the sages regard themselves as a distinct and elite class within Israelite society, they draw their disciples from Israelite society as a whole, regardless of genealogical pedigree or social status.<sup>32</sup>

31. This is Hammer's paraphrase (*Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary*, 411 n. 19) of Finkelstein's note ad loc.

32. For other expressions of an egalitarian Torah ethic, note the following: "The commoner is equal to the king with regard to words of Torah" (*Sifre Deut.* §161; Finkelstein 212.5); the Torah is an inheritance to royalty and commoners alike (*Sifre Deut.*

Notwithstanding the comment that "all are equal with regard to Torah," the next section (paragraph B) stresses that certain individuals are "equal to all the rest together" because of their labors to preserve Torah at times when the people as a whole might otherwise have forgotten it. The three individuals mentioned are presented in chronological order, constituting, in a sense, a chain of Torah preservers. They are significant for the fact (according to tradition) that they all lived at times of crisis and restoration, and were either directly or indirectly involved in the *scribal* activity of collecting and editing Torah. Shaphan was the scribe who read to King Josiah the newly discovered "scroll of the Teaching," resulting in Josiah's sweeping reforms (2 Kgs 22:8-20, 2 Chr 34:14-28). Ezra, also a scribe, established the Torah as the constitution for the third generation of the restored community after the Babylonian Exile. R. Akiba, one of the foremost early rabbinic sages and master of disciples, was active during the critical period between the destruction of the temple in 70 c.e. and the Bar Kochba revolt in 135, and is credited with having initiated the editorial compiling of the "oral Torah."<sup>33</sup> While Shaphan held an official position in Josiah's royal court and Ezra was a priest who acted with the authorization of the Persian empire, R. Akiba, as far as we know, enjoyed neither acquired nor hereditary status apart from his learning. By placing R. Akiba on a par with the scribes Shaphan and Ezra, the text implicitly places R. Akiba's status on a par with theirs. Since they were responsible for preserving texts of Scripture and he for collecting and ordering the traditions of the sages, this commentary also equates the status of the latter (of which its text must be seen as part) with the former.

The special status claimed here for Shaphan, Ezra, and R. Akiba derives not from hereditary pedigree, but from their work of preserving Torah in *their* own times. Implicitly, however, they form a scribal chain of authority, by virtue of which they stand apart from and superior to the people as a whole. The rabbinic sage, as represented by R. Akiba, derives from the people with whom he is "equal with regard to Torah." Yet, as one who sustains his learning through constant study and review, he is "equal to all the rest together." The tension between these two rabbinic Torah ethics—egalitarian and elitist—is not resolved

§345 on Deut 33:4; Finkelstein 402.6-8); for the Rabbis as a recognizable class within Israel, see *Sifre Deut.* §343 (Finkelstein 400.5-6): "The disciples of the sages can be recognized by the way they walk, by the way they speak, and by the way they dress in the marketplace."

33. For reports of R. Akiba's editorial activity, see *ʿAbot R. Nat.* A 18 (see the edition of Solomon Schechter, *Masekhet Aboth de-rabbi Nathan* [Vienna: C. D. Lippe, 1887; repr. Hildesheim/New York: Olms, 1979] 67); and *y. Seqal.* 5:1 (48c), as understood by Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1962) 90-91.



by the commentary, which in juxtaposing them leaves it to the student of the text to struggle with their dialectical implications.

#### “OR THE MAGISTRATE IN CHARGE AT THE TIME”

The above chains, like the chain of tradition cited above, conspicuously omit the priesthood, both horizontally as the authorized transmitters of Torah and vertically as the intermediaries between Israel and God. Yet Scripture, and the Book of Deuteronomy in particular, assigns primacy of place to the priesthood in these two regards, and especially in the realm where they join, that is, in effecting of God’s will within Israelite society through the implementation of Scripture’s system of justice. Deut 17:8–13 prescribes that when a local court is unable to decide a case, it is brought before a centralized tribunal, which is located at the place designated by God and which is comprised of levitical priests and a (lay?) magistrate. In two ways *Sifre Deuteronomy’s* commentary transforms the biblical passage with which it is engaged: (1) It emphasizes that the central tribunal of Deuteronomy is in fact a series of three courts, all of them located in the temple domain. Through the text’s repetitive detail, its students are drawn into the very process of progressing and ascending by stages from one to the next of these three courts. It is only upon completing this process that we are told that is from the temple, and from the high court in the Chamber of Hewn Stone in particular, that Torah emanates to *all* of Israel. Thus, the central place of Deuteronomy has been transformed from a place to which difficult cases are brought for adjudication to a place of origin for all Torah teaching. The double verb for ascending is interpreted doubly: not only is the temple the highest place within the land of Israel, but the land of Israel is higher than the rest of the world. The pathos of such a text being created (at least in its present, redacted form) and studied at a time when that temple had long ago been destroyed and its Mount long ago desecrated, with little immediate hope for a reversal of that calamity, is fully experienced only upon arriving at the end of the section. (2) Paradoxically, even as the central court(s) of Deut 17:8–13 are consigned to a presently unrecoverable past, their functions are contemporized (rabbinized). These courts, according to this commentary, do not so much decide between conflicting parties in civil or criminal dispute as between *teachers* who differ in their legal interpretations.

The resolution of these seemingly contradictory exegetical moves comes in the succeeding section (*pisqa*<sup>7</sup>):

[A] “And you shall appear [*ābā<sup>2</sup>tā*]” [Deut 17:9]: [This is stated so as] to include the [rabbinical] court at Yavneh.

[B] “Before the levitical priests”: It is a commandment that the court include priests and Levites.<sup>34</sup> This being the commandment, might we infer that if [a court] lacks priests and Levites it is disqualified? Therefore, Scripture says, “Or the magistrate [*šōpēt*]”: Even though it lacks priests and Levites, it is [still] qualified.

[C] “In charge at that time”: R. Jose the Galilean said: Might we have thought [that one should go to] a magistrate who is not living in your time? Rather, this refers to a magistrate who is qualified and authorized [to serve] in your time. Thus, one who previously had been related [to one of the parties, and had been disqualified to judge,] but has since ceased to be related, is [now] qualified. Therefore it says, “Do not say, ‘How is it that the former days were better than these?’” [Eccl 7:10].

[D] And you shall seek their decision, and they shall declare the verdict in the case. (*Sifre Deut.* §153; Finkelstein 206.10–207.3)

The verb “you shall appear” (literally, “come”) following the previous expression, “you shall rise and ascend,” could not, from the rabbinic perspective, be a mere repetition. While Deut 17:8 was taken to refer to high courts in Jerusalem on the Temple Mount to which one ascended while the temple stood, Deut 17:9, which does not by itself mention ascending, is taken to refer to (or at least to include) the successor rabbinical court at Yavneh. This court not only is located outside the chosen place on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, but it does not require the presence of priests or Levites. The magistrate of Deut 17:8–13 is understood in contrast to the preceding “levitical priests” to be a nonpriest, presumably a rabbinic sage, given the earlier reference to Yavneh.<sup>35</sup>

The interpretation of the phrase seemingly unnecessary “in charge at that time” stresses that those who may not have been qualified to judge in the past may now be qualified. The commentary, therefore, argues that changing circumstances have necessitated a shift not only of the central court from Jerusalem to Yavneh (and, by implication, to the successor rabbinic centers), but also a change in the makeup of that court. A citation from Eccl 7:10 acknowledges yet rejects the nostalgic tendency to compare the present (rabbinic) leadership with that of the past. Finally, an interpretation of the conclusion of v 9 (paragraph D) once again intellectualizes (rabbinizes) the function of the central court:

34. On “levitical priests” becoming “priests and Levites,” see 11QTemp 61:8. Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 4:218; and Philo, *On the Special Laws* 4:36 §§188–92.

35. For the *šōpēt* as lay judge (as in Deut 19:17), see S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (International Critical Commentary; 3d ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901) 208. However, Philo (*On the Special Laws* 4:36 §§188–92) understands this to be the High Priest, and Josephus (*Antiquities* 4:218) substitutes *gerousia* (‘council of elders’).

one comes to it not so much to receive a specific legal sentence (*dēbar hammišpāt*) as to learn the fine points of legal argumentation (*dīquduqē mišpāt*).

The combined impression of these adjoining parts of the commentary is both a sense of deep loss caused by the destruction of the temple with its central judiciary, and, almost conversely, a sense of continuity between that institution and its rabbinic successors. The Torah that once went forth from the Chamber of Hewn Stone now goes forth from "Yavneh." That sense of continuity is exegetically achieved both by portraying the work of the central tribunal of Second Temple times in rabbinic intellectual terms, and by loosening the scriptural requirements for its location (Temple Mount) and makeup (priests) "in that day" (the commentary's present).

#### "ATTACH YOURSELVES TO THE SAGES AND THEIR STUDENTS"

The rabbinic sages not only claimed for themselves roles that were formerly assigned to the priesthood, but claimed that the activity of Torah study (*talmūd tōrā*) was a paramount religious act, indeed an act of worship, not simply equal but superior to that of sacrificial worship.<sup>36</sup> But just as sacrificial worship had been a social practice, conducted under the leadership of the priests in the public arena of the temple (*bēt hammiqdāš*), so too Torah study was to be a social practice, conducted in the company of sages in the public arena of the study house (*bēt hammidrāš*). As a form of worship, study was to be not simply a religious *obligation*, but a religious *experience*, potentially of the highest order:

[A] "[If, then, you faithfully keep all that I command you, loving the Lord your God, walking in all his ways,] and holding fast to him" [Deut 11:22]: But is it possible for a person to ascend to heaven and to cleave to fire? For has it not been said, "For the Lord your God is a consuming fire" [Deut 4:24], and it says, "His throne was fiery flames" [Dan 7:9]. Rather, attach yourself to the sages and their disciples, and I will account it to you as though you had ascended to heaven to receive it [Torah]—not that you ascended to receive it in peace, but rather as though you waged war in order to receive it. And thus it says, "You went up to the heights taking captives" [Ps 68:19].

36. For study as a religious act among the Dead Sea sectaries as a group, see 1QS 6:6-8, 8:12-16. For the obligation of study as an act of "serving" God, on a level with, if not superior to, sacrificial worship, see *Sifre Deut.* §41 (Finkelstein 87.11-88.13), treated in my *From Tradition to Commentary*, chap. 3.

[B] The expounders of *haggadot* say: If you desire to come to know the one who spoke and the world came into being, study *haggada*, for thereby you will come to know the one who spoke and the world came into being and cling to his ways.

[C] If you do what is required of you, then I too will do what is required of me: "The Lord will dislodge [before you all these nations]" [Deut 11:23]. (*Sifre Deut* §49; Finkelstein 114.14-115.5)

The idea of attaching oneself to God is understood literally, only for this understanding to be rejected as an impossibility. Rather, it is by attaching oneself to the sages and their disciples, that is, by engaging in the study of Torah under the direction of the sages and in the company of their disciples, that this verse can be fulfilled. The commentary appears to be saying, in God's voice, that if you attach yourself to the sages in study of Torah, I will account it to you as if you, like Moses, had ascended to heaven to receive it. And just as Moses, according to rabbinic interpretations of Ps 68:19, had to wage war against the angels in order to reach heaven to receive the Torah, so too Moses' successors when they study Torah are considered to ascend to heaven in struggle and to return with Torah as their captive. The text does not simply state that those who study Torah with the sages are like Israel when they stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah (which is also described in rabbinic traditions as having been a struggle), but are like Moses himself when he ascended to heaven to acquire the Torah on Israel's behalf.<sup>37</sup>

The teachers of that branch of the rabbinic Torah curriculum to which the present text may be said to belong next raise their voices (paragraph B) to claim that it is only through the rabbinically guided study of the scriptural narrative of Israel's sacred history that God the creator can be known. It is at this point that God's voice reenters the discussion, linking the rabbinic interpretation of the scriptural protasis with its adopsis in the next verse: Only when you, Israel, do your part—now understood as joining the sages in the study of Torah—will "the Lord dislodge before you all these nations" (Deut 11:23). Thus, Torah study in the company of the sages is the most realizable route not only to the religious goal of attachment to God, but to the political fulfillment of God's promise to redeem Israel from the rule of the nations.

37. Moses is, in a sense, the Rabbis' rabbi (*mōšeh rabbēnā*), their intellectual progenitor. For details, see my *From Tradition to Commentary*, chap. 3, n. 28. For the equating of intensive Torah study with the receiving of the Torah at Sinai, see *Sifre Deut.* §58 (Finkelstein 124.12-14).

## CONCLUSION

Rabbinic texts, such as the ones examined here, do not so much recount stories about heroic sages as cultivate a culture and society of sages and their disciples by engaging them together in the religious and redemptive practice of Torah study. The sages and disciples who stand both behind and before such texts understood themselves to be preserving and transmitting "words of Torah," which could justify, sustain, and transform, through *rabbinic* mediation, the life of Israel as a holy nation bereft of what had once been its holy center. These sages sought not only to replace that holy center but to establish themselves both as its officiants and exemplars. To succeed in this compound task the rabbinic sages dedicated themselves to the central holy act of Torah study for its own sake even as they increasingly asserted and broadened their practical influence upon public affairs. They had to understand themselves as being of the people while also distinct from and superior to them. They had to claim being the descendants of Moses and the biblical elders while also the successors to Aaron, the priests, and the Levites. It was especially in the continuous and collective practice of transforming Torah (both "written" and "oral") through intensively engaged, multi-vocal commentary as a religious act, that the sages sought to transform *themselves* into a cohesive society whose own discourse and deeds would make them worthy and capable of transforming, in turn and in time, the practices, structures, and self-understandings of Jewish society more broadly.