

Written Torah

THE TORAH - WHEN IS IT AUTHORITATIVE AND WHEN IS IT NOT

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Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to present their assessment concerning the Word of God, it seemed good to this writer also to produce a similar paper. By now, however, you may already have the faintest suspicion that scholars don't need any excuse to write, they just write!

When considering the Written Torah, or the Word of God, this writer has always been intensely interested in its authority and implications for the wider issue of biblical theology. Jewish people have been known as the people of The Book, largely because they are the ones who have been entrusted with the very words of God (Rom. 3:1). Unfortunately, the phrase today does not have reference to the Word or Torah as God gave it, but rather, to The Books, or what has been produced by man. Jewish writers have always had the reputation of being incisive (or not so) on a number of subjects, but somehow, when it comes to the sacred writ God gave, and how it should be interpreted, a critical problem exists over its authority ever since the days of the Enlightenment.

Our task will be to examine how the more conservative rabbis and scholars assessed the Written Torah, and then what happened to an interpretation of the Torah, in the Oral Law, in the philosophical theologies of the Middle Ages, and in the modern period of the Enlightenment, all in selected areas, comparing their efforts with a Messianic Jewish analysis. Offhand, there might not seem to be

any question concerning the Written Torah, but on the other hand, one could wonder what happened to the written Torah when examined from the point of view of what various Jewish thinkers have stated.

Terms

The Meaning of Torah

The term, Torah, comes from the Hebrew verb, (yarah), meaning "throw, cast, shoot."¹ A noun from the verb, (moreh) is "teacher," who aptly, "throws," or "casts" instruction at his disciples! Another noun from the verb is: (torah), defines instruction.² A wise father who instructs his son is actually imparting Torah, as model of wisdom pictures it (Proverbs 1:8). God likewise, as the divine Teacher (moreh), imparts His "instruction" to Israel. With this meaning for Torah, as it is applied to the Written Law, no taint of legalism exists in it. In time, Torah has also come to have several wider meanings, such as: the Torah of Moses, or, the Mosaic Covenant or Constitution, which is also divine instruction, as well as the entire body of Oral Law, or, traditions,³ which may, or may not reflect the written Torah.

An understanding of the written Torah from the more conservative

¹ William Gesenius, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, Edward Robinson, tr., F. Brown, S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs, eds. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968 reprint), pages 434, 435.

² Ibid., pages 435, 436.

³ Harry Cohen, Basic Jewish Encyclopedia, (Hartford, CT: Hartford House, 1965) p.28

perspective is viewed in three specific areas: Gillui Shekinah (revelation), Torah Min HaShamayim (inspiration), and Torah Lo BaShamayim (interpretation).

Gillui Shekinah (Unveiling of the Shekinah)

Revelation has been defined as "the manifestation of God in acts of appearance which overawe man," a theme which occurs in many areas of Talmud and Midrash.⁴ From this perspective, the "unveiling" or revelation of God is where He seeks to bridge the gap between Himself and man. In a general sense, God does reveal Himself in nature and the universe and it will depend on what man wants to accept of this kind of revelation. In a specific sense, the written Torah reflects what God has made known to man through the revelation of His Word (Devar Adonai). Other biblical terms used for revelation are: "mahazah. hazon, and hizayon, "vision" - whence hozeh, "seer"; or mareh, "sight," whence roeh, "seer."⁵

Kohler also provides a twofold sense of revelation: "First, God's self-revelation, which the rabbis called Gillui Shekinah, 'the manifestation of the divine presence,'⁶ ... " "which overawes man and impresses him with what he hears, sees, or otherwise perceives." But another sense also appears in revelation which is the "manifestation of God's message through oracular means, signs, statutes and laws."⁷

⁴ Joshua J. Ross, "Revelation, in Talmudic Literature," in Encyclopedia Judaica (New York: MacMillan, 1972), page 119.

⁵ Kaufman Kohler, Jewish Theology (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1968, reprint), p.35, footnote 1

⁶ Ibid., p.34

⁷ Kaufman Kohler, " , " The Jewish Encyclopedia, Vol. X, Isadore Singer, ed. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908), page 396.

In the first sense, Kohler provides an excellent understanding of the biblical idea of revelation, but in the second sense, Kohler provides the various forms that revelation takes.

The Forms of Gillui Shekinah

As already noted, God's message appears in words which He speaks to man, signs, visions and dreams. Revelation is both oral, when God speaks to man directly, but can also be written when the recipient records what he experienced.

Oral Revelation -- In revelation, we note how God spoke to man, in various ways, but to Moses, "He spoke mouth to mouth...as a man would speak with his neighbor" in clear sight of all.⁸ One would expect this because Moses is preeminently the one God used in delivering Israel from Egypt, who led Israel to Mt. Sinai, and the one who became the channel through which Israel was bound to God in a covenant. Subsequently, in the Jewish mindset, Moses became Moshe Rabbeinu, or Moses our teacher.

Visions -- The prophets also received revelation from God in what was called "the vision." Kohler notes that this was also provided to "non-Israelites as well as to the patriarchs and prophets of Israel, -- to Abimelech and Laban, Balam, Job, and Eliphaz."⁹ Kohler, however, notes the difference between the prophets of Israel and other nations in that "the Jewish genius perceived God as the moral power of life," suggesting that the prophets of Israel perceived God

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kaufman Kohler, "Jewish Theology," Op. Cit., page 35.

as a moral God.¹⁰

History -- The Gillui Shekinah was also revealed through His dark acts in the accounts when God states, "I AM," (Exodus 3:14), but this is seen as God acts through Moses to bring Israel out of Egypt. The revelation of God is seen in historical events, "The Lord is the God who brought Israel out of Egypt, and Who guides them through history. The God of Israel thus reveals Himself as acting in historical events...history is the milieu of God's revelation."¹¹

The Climax of Gillui Shekinah -- Fishman suggested that after the revelation at Mount Sinai (Exodus 20:19), whereby "You yourselves have seen that I have talked with you from heaven," explaining that this is intended to mean that all the people of Israel were present at Sinai. So, at this juncture of history in the greatest climax of revelation, everyone in Israel are to then be bound to this revelation and revelation has reached its climax at Mount Sinai.¹² Kohler describes the revelation of God to the people of Israel as part of the great world - drama of history ... we see here the dramatized form of the truth of Israel's election by divine Providence for its historic religious mission."¹³

Torah Min HaShamayim - The Torah From Heaven

¹⁰ Kaufman Kohler, " , " Op. Cit., page 396. This emphasis on moral could also, no doubt, come from Kohler's theological persuasion as a reformed Jew.

¹¹ Edward Lipinsky, "Revelation," in Encyclopedia Judaica. Vol. 14, Op. Cit., page 118.

¹² Isadore Fishman, Introduction to Judaism, (London: Valentine Mitchell and Co., 1958), p.15.

¹³ Kaufman Kohler, Jewish Theology, Op. Cit., pages 36,37.

While Gillui Shekinah can be described as the revelation of God whereby He reveals Himself to man and shares with him what he must know, Torah Min HaShamayim becomes the subject of inspiration whereby what is recorded becomes Scripture.

The subject of inspiration is a complex one. No difficulty seems to appear when considering direct revelation which, upon its reception, Moses or any of the prophets recorded directly what was shared. The problem begins to compound when those portions of Scripture are also considered inspired when writers use: 1) historical records from the archives, gathered and placed there by historians, and, 2) other outside materials which have been passed on orally from generation to generation. A Biblical view of inspiration suggests, however, the Holy Spirit is sovereign in leading sacred writers to select the materials and enable them to commit to writing what God actually desired.

As early as the period of the Mishnah, this phrase, Torah Min HaShamayim, is already noted, which insists that the Israelites who have no portion in the world to come are those who deny that the Torah is from Heaven (Torah Min HaShamayim).¹⁴ Later in the Amoraim period of the Gemara, a Baraita states that:

"With reference to him who maintains that the Torah is not from heaven ... if he has searched that the whole Torah is from heaven, excepting a particular verse, which (he maintains) was not uttered by God, but by Moses himself, he is included in those who despise the Word of God."¹⁵

Testimony to Torah Min HaShamayim -- Various writers have recognized the

¹⁴ Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1, H. Danby, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), page 397.

¹⁵ Sanhedrin 99a in Nezikin III, H. Friedman, ed. (London: Soncino, 1935), page 672.

high view of Torah Min HaShamayim. Again, E. Li. points out that this concept is "associated primarily with the notion that every syllable of the Bible has verity and authorship of the Word of God. The contents of the sacred books are to be regarded throughout as conscientious and homogeneous, with no contradiction in them, ... ¹⁶ Such a view reflects a high regard for the written law as inspired, or, God breathed.

Shimshon Rafael Hirsch, who restructured a traditional Judaism in a modern setting, stated:

"Is the statement 'and God spoke to Moses saying,' with which all the laws of the Jewish Bible commence, true or not true? Do we really and truly believe that God, the Omnipotent and Holy spoke thus to Moses? Do we speak the truth when in front of our brethren we lay our hand on the scroll containing these words and say that God has given us this Torah, that His Torah, the Torah of truth and with it of eternal life, is planted in our midst?...This Word of God must be our eternal rule superior to all human judgement, the rule to which all our actions must at all times conform: and instead of complaining that it is no longer suitable to the times, our only complaint must be that the times are no longer suitable to it."¹⁷

Schechter declared:

"It is the Torah as the sum total of the contents of revelation, without special regard to any particular element in it, the Torah as a faith...the Torah in this abstract sense, as a revelation and a promise, the expression of the will of God,..."¹⁸

Even though many other scholars of various persuasions in the field of Judaism will disagree with these assertions, nevertheless, many thinkers in the Jewish community, both ancient and modern, did and continue to hold to a high view of inspiration, assigning to it the greatest revelation that God could give to any nation on earth.

¹⁶ Joshua J. Ross, Op. Cit., p.120

¹⁷ Samuel Hirsch, Judaism Eternal II, L. Grunfeld, ed., & tr. (London: Soncino, 1962), p.216

¹⁸ Solomon Schechter, Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology, (New York: Behrman House, 1936), p.127

The "How" of Inspiration -- Granted that the Torah is special because of a high view of Torah Min HaShamayim, a serious question arises as to how was it accomplished. How did God interact with the writers of Scripture, how did it get from God to man, and how did it end up as holy writ.

Kohler is helpful when he describes:

"This is not merely a psychological process in which the human imagination or mental faculty constitutes the main factor, but that man is but the instrument upon which a suprahuman force exerts its power."¹⁹

The point is that God somehow worked through man so that he wrote His words. But do the rabbis speak in terms of how did it come about? Three possibilities seem to predominate: a) Through a means difficult to understand, God prompted the biblical writers to communicate His word.²⁰ b) Moses and other men of God "acted as a scribe writing from dictation, as was the case with Baruch and the prophet Jeremiah"²¹ c) Parts of the Scripture could have been dictated, but other parts could have been by the writer, e.g. Moses, in which God had confidence Moses would not inject his own ideas into the Torah, "but even if he did he could be trusted to represent reliably the divine will."²² It would appear that in later assessments of inspiration, the rabbis and scholars took a more moderate position in the view of inspiration, allowing for the writer to reflect what God wanted as he put it in his own words, but that God would superintend the final product.

¹⁹ Kaufman Kohler, " , " Op. Cit., page 397

²⁰ Kaufman Kohler, "Inspiration," The Jewish Encyclopedia, Vol. 6, Isadore Singer, ed. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1904), page 608.

²¹ Joshua J. Ross, "Revelation-in Talmudic Literature, Op. Cit., page 121. See also Baba Batra 15a in Nezikin II, The Babylonian Talmud, M. Simon, ed. (London: Soncino, 1935), page 72.

²² Exodus Rabba 47:9, S.M. Lehrman, ed. in Exodus Midrash Rabba, H. Freidman and M. Simon, eds. (London: Soncino, 1939), page 545.

Nevertheless, because of the different views by different Jewish writers, the "how" of inspiration seems to be left open and, in a sense, a mystery. Some statements appear quite puzzling, suggesting that the transmission of the text of Scripture itself is inspired.²³ This brings up how Scripture is inspired and Rv Shaul (Paul) states that, "All scripture is God-breathed..." (II Timothy 3:16), therefore, the Scripture itself is inspired, or God-breathed, and not the writers who are "inspired." On the other hand, Peter states that "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit," and here the apostle describes the unique work of the Holy Spirit within the mind and heart of the writer to produce the sacred text.²⁴ Therefore, God somehow does a work within the writer and he is led to provide an authoritative text. Perhaps this is good reason to suggest why the rabbis never provided a full definition of inspiration because of its complexity, but did assert that "when the Voice went forth" at Sinai, "coming to each Israelite with a voice proportioned to his individual strength. God addressed each person with a voice he could endure."²⁵

Given the different views today in evangelical circles concerning the method of inspiration, perhaps the more conservative Jewish scholars were wise in not saying too much about the "how" of inspiration. The final product would be regarded as from HaShem Himself.

²³ Kaufman Kohler, "Inspiration," Op. Cit. page 608.

²⁴ In fact, the very word, "they were carried along," (II Pet. 1:21) is the same word which describes how the wind of the storm caught the ship, "we were driven along" (Acts 27:15), on which Paul and other prisoners sailed and no one could control it. This could serve to picture how the writers were under the strong guidance of the Holy Spirit, and while they were free to choose the words, yet the final product was what God wanted.

²⁵ Exodus Rabba 5:9, Op. Cit., page 87.

Degrees of Inspiration -- In a peculiar understanding of the authority of the sacred text, Schechter points out that:

"It is true that in rabbinic literature the term Torah is often applied to the Pentateuch to the exclusion of the prophets and the Hagiographa (Exodus Rabba 31:15). ...It is also true that to a certain extent the Pentateuch is put on a higher level than the prophets - the prophetic vision of Moses having been, as the Rabbis avow, much clearer than that of his successors (Jebamoth, 49b; Leviticus , Rabba 1)." ²⁶

Nevertheless, Schechter hastens to add that the prophets also had the Scriptural authority of the Torah (Num. 12:6-8; Deut. 34:10). On the other hand, nothing is ever found in the prophets which could take away from the superior authority of Moses. In other words, the prophets themselves recognized Moses' authority. To a certain extent, one of the qualifications of the prophet is that he did indeed derive the content of his preaching from the writing of Moses and then shared it in specific applications on numerous occasions with their generations.

Nevertheless, the particular understanding of inspiration nags at the conscience if it will be asserted that the prophets are less inspired than Moses. While Moses did speak to God face to face and saw more clearly what was revealed, no one must never deprecate the message God gave to the prophets which have great significance concerning the future of Israel, its land and people. If it will be stated that Scripture is Torah Min HaShamayim, or God-breathed, this writer would never think God intended man to consider the writings of the prophets any less inspired than Moses. To do so will detract from the authority of the Written Torah, or Word, which includes the Prophets as well as the Writings. Rav Shaul (Paul) insisted that all the writings of the Written Law are "from Heaven," and not where one part of Scripture is greater, or higher, than the rest. That should be our position as well.

²⁶ Solomon Schechter, Op. Cit., p.118.

Torah Lo BaShamayim

An account by some of the rabbinical leaders among the Amoraim in the Gemarah period over a point of law describes how a voice from Heaven confirmed a minority opinion held by Rabbi Eliezer, but Rabbi Joshua sought to block the affirmation, stating that the Torah is Lo BaShamayim, or Torah is not in Heaven. Another rabbi, Rabbi Jeremiah then declared the Torah had already been given and it was up to the leaders to interpret it.²⁷ This phrase becomes the means by which Torah, or the Word, is interpreted and applied to the needs of every generation.

Hillel's Rules of Interpretation -- Hillel the Elder (d. 10 B.C.) was one of the outstanding leaders in Judea, having founded one of the main schools for study. One of his formulations for hermeneutics were the seven rules for interpreting Scripture,²⁸ although indications exist that these rules are earlier than Hillel.²⁹ These were expanded a little more than a century later by Rabbi Ishmael, although without materially changing the substance of Hillel's work,³⁰ and eventually these rules became one of the standards for Talmudic Rabbis engaging in exegesis.

²⁷ Baba Metzia 59b, in Nezikin I, H. Friedman, ed., The Babylonian Talmud, Op. Cit., page 53

²⁸ Avot de Rav Natan (The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan), Judah Golden, tr., (New York: Schocken, 1955), Chapter 37, page 54.

²⁹ Louis Jacobs, "Hermeneutics," Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 8, Cecil Roth, ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1972), page 567.

³⁰ Ibid. pages 567-570.

These rules are listed;³¹ some comments will be offered when the authority of the Written Law is upheld, but no exhausting analysis will be undertaken. The objective of this paper is to check if these guidelines do honor the authority of the Written Law, or detract from it.

a. A fortiori inference from a premise of minor importance to one of major importance. For example, when Miriam spoke disparagingly of Moses, she was struck with leprosy by the LORD (Num. 12:14). The question now was how long should she be quarantined from the camp. The issue was settled on the basis of an inference. The LORD suggested that if her father had but spit in her face (a minor inference), would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? Therefore, she had also fallen into God's disfavor (a major inference) and would be sent out of the camp for seven days (conclusion). The father's disfavor was considered minor in comparison to God's disfavor.

Bernfeld indicated that three restrictions limit the use of the inference:³² 1) "The conclusion of a minor to major inference should be equivalent in quality or degree to the premise from which it is inferred. One cannot infer more than what is contained in the premise which is the basis of our inference." 2) "A new law cannot be derived by inference from a traditional law." 3) "This principle does not apply to criminal procedure." One does not inflict punishment on "the basis of a principle which is subject to error."

b. Analogy. The rule is called Gezerah Shavah, meaning that when two verses in the Written Law have the same key word, then those two verses are mutually interpretive. For example, Rav Shaul (Paul) interpreted Genesis 15:6 through

³¹ The seven rules are listed with some observations by Benjamin Bernfeld, "Hermeneutics," in The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia Vol. 5, I. Landman, ed. (New York: Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, 1948), page 324.

³² Ibid.

Psalms 32:2, Abraham was counted righteous, even as his sin was not counted to him.

c. Deduction from one verse. In this rule, one generalizes with the reasoning behind a particular law into a general principle. The idea then is take this generalization and apply it to analogous situations.

d. Deduction from two verses. One generalizes the reasoning behind two different but related laws possessing a common characteristic into a principle for application to analogous situations. In Exodus 21:26, 27, the two passages state that if one destroys his servant eye, and destroys another's tooth, in either case, the servant can go free. The conclusion is that since the eye and tooth are parts of the body, then if a servant suffers injury to any other part of his body, he can also be set free.

e. Inference from general and particular, and from particular and general. When a general term is followed by a particular term, the general term is limited and speaks only for its particular. But if the reverse is true, when a particular term is followed by a general one, the general covers the particular as well as whatever is related to the general term. Rabbi Ishmael covered the explanation of this principle in his rules of interpretation, 4-11, in his list.

f. Similarity elsewhere. The rule derives an analogy based on two similar passages which Rabbi Ishmael omits as a separate rule of Hillel and treats it in two parts, one under his rule two and the other in his rule three.

g. Deduction from the text. Whatever can be derived from its context, where one can explain a word or passage based on contextual study.

Rabbi Ishmael has a thirteenth rule not contained in Hillel's rules, declaring that if two laws contradict each other, can if possible be reconciled by a third passage. For example, in the first instance, God is spoken of as coming down to

the top of the mountain (Exod. 19:20), but in another instance, His voice was heard from heaven (Deut. 4:36). The two can be reconciled, however, when God brought the heavens down to the mount and spoke (Exod. 20:18, 19).

In general, the rules reflect the major rules used in evangelical hermeneutics and therefore reflects an honest attempt to exegete carefully the Written Law. For that reason, as the rabbis interpreted the Written Law as indicated in the Oral Law, a good part of the latter represents a good exegesis of God's revelation in His Word.

The Oral Law -- The story goes that when someone in eastern Europe would ask his rabbi,

"'Pray, tell me some Torah.' The Rabbi would never answer him by reciting verses from the Bible, but would feel it incumbent on him to give him some spiritual or allegorical explanation of a verse from the Scriptures."³³

This illustrates the example that the Written Law is not sufficient in itself to help Jewish people in their daily lives to live piously for God, or have hope for the future. Rather, the rules of interpretation helped to provide the literal, allegorical, spiritual and mystical understanding of the Written Law, resulting in Oral Law, which in turn is what helps a person live the Written Law.

Offhand, the assessment that the Written Law is not sufficient to help a person live for God almost seems to border on heresy, except as we stop to reflect that when we attend services to hear the Word, we likewise do not wish to hear a message based only on a long string of Scripture passages! Our desire is hear the Word interpreted and then applied to our lives, where we live, to enable us to face our day and its problems. The only difference was that Jewish people codified their interpretations and applications into what has come to be

³³ S. Schechter, Op. Cit., page 126.

known as Oral Law, or Traditions, while the Evangelical has no such procedure.³⁴

What remains now is to see in a few instances how the Written Law was interpreted by the ancient leaders and if or any use can made of Oral for today. Offhand, Messianic Jewish people have various ideas on it, rejecting it altogether, using some of it, or, taking more of it than might be warranted. This writer would suggest three possibilities: 1) As already noted from Hillel's and Ishmael's rules of hermeneutics, a good part of the Oral Law reflects good interpretation of the Written Law by the rabbis and can be used appropriately on many occasions when seeking to witness to the more identified religious Jew; 2) features of the Oral Law can be adapted by believers in seeking to express a Scriptural faith; and 3) certain elements of the Oral Law go far beyond what the Written Law declares and is even contrary to it. In the brief space of this paper, only a few suggestions for each area will be noted.

(1) Oral Law substantiated by the Written Law

Many rabbis had keen insights in their interpretation of the Written Law. For example, when commenting on Leviticus 19:16, "Do not go about spreading slander among your people, "The suggestion is that slander is the third tongue and with it, three people are killed."³⁵

The rabbis once discussed the phenomenon of the red string which was fastened to the wall of the temple on the Day of Atonement. The assertion was made that if God accepted the atoning sacrifice on this Day, the red string

³⁴ It just might be, however, some believers might, tongue in cheek, of course, use the writings of the founders of their denominations in the Middle Ages as the means to interpret the Word for today through their writings!

³⁵ Arachin 15b, in Kodashim III, The Babylonian Talmud, Leo Jung, ed., (London: Soncino, 1948), page 89.

turned white. If God did not accept the sacrifice, the string remained red. After discussing the obvious curiosity of Israelis, looking more at the string than the sacrifice, and what eventually happened to this string, the rabbis turned to discuss other issues. However, one rabbi came back to this specific conversation and made a very pointed statement: For forty years before the temple (the second) was lost, the red string never turned white again!³⁶ The destruction of the temple took place in 70 C.E., what transpired forty years prior to this date that made it so important for R. Nahman b. Isaac to say that God never again accepted the atoning sacrifice?

Another lesson in morals, somewhat similar to what Yeshua himself had said (Matt. 7:3, 4) that we are not to judge others because we can fall in similar situations. The rabbis chided that if you ask your neighbor to remove the splinter from his eye, he may well retort, "First take the beam from thine own,"³⁷ or credence and integrity should be given to one's word, "Let your 'Yes,' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No,'" (Matt. 5:37).³⁸ The rabbis also indicated we cannot overlook sin or wrong doing. A sin is always a sin. The wife of Rabbi Meir suggested that we must still pray that sin may disappear from the earth, while interpose a kindly word for the sinner so he could repent.³⁹

³⁶ Rosh Hashanah 31b, in Moed IV, The Babylonian Talmud, Maurice Simon, ed. (London: Soncino, 1938), page

³⁷ Baba Bathra 15b, in Nezekim II, The Babylonian Talmud, M. Simon, ed. (London: Soncino, 1935), page 76.

³⁸ Baba Metzia 49a, in Nezikin I, The Babylonian Talmud, H. Friedman, ed. (London: Soncino, 1935), page 291.

³⁹ Berakot 10a, in Zeraim, (The Babylonian Talmud), I. Epstein, ed. (London: Soncino, 1948), page 51.

(2) The Oral Law Can Be Adapted.

Portions of the Oral Law can be adapted for use by Messianic Jews for a biblical lifestyle which will reflect the sense of the Written Law. Yeshua himself did so with the Mishnaic observance of the Pesah, introducing the special use of Maṣah after the meat, and then giving it a special application as to how he will in his own bodies bear our sins (Matt. 26:26). He also adapted the meaning of the third cup, The cup of redemption marking the deliverance of the nation from Egypt, but he added to its significance the element of personal redemption because he is our atonement.

The rest of the holidays were also adapted to demonstrate the uniqueness of Yeshua as the Messiah and Redeemer (cf. John 7:37, 38; Isa. 12:3). The Shabbat liturgy can be adapted into a Messianic siddur, reflecting accurately the truths of both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Covenant.⁴⁰

(3) Drawing the Line with the Oral Torah

Lessons do exist in the Oral Law which cannot be supported by the Written Law. Whatever interpretations are brought forth in the Oral Law for a specific message or application to lifestyle must always be under the guidance of revealed truth.

Yeshua himself commented on the plethora of Sabbatical practices, making it quite clear that "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). On another occasion, Yeshua stressed that people had let go the commands of God and were holding on to the traditions of men (Mark 7:7-13), and His observation was intended to mean some and not all the traditions. Man's ideas

⁴⁰ John Fischer and David Bronstein, Siddur for Messianic Jews (Palm Harbor, FL: Menorah Press, 1988).

about work on Shabbat can go far beyond what God ever intended, and mere outward observances must never minimize the Written Law but enhance a right attitude for belief, lifestyle and worship.

While the rabbis at the Council of Yavneh might have felt their decisions regarding sacrifice would only be in force until a new temple could be built, thinking perhaps the interval would be as short as what occurred between the first and second temple, yet what was spawned was an emphasis other than what Moses had ever intended. Simon the Just had issued a profound statement at about 200 B.C.E., "By three things is the world sustained: by the Law, by the Temple-service, and by deeds of loving-kindness."⁴¹ He had encapsulated the biblical message, the necessity for repentance, the offer of the sin and other offerings in the temple, followed by a godly lifestyle. At Yavneh, with no temple available and trying to meet the desperate cries of other rabbis and people, Yohanan ben Zakkai declared to Rabbi Joshua in particular:

"My son, be not grieved. We have another atonement as effective as this, and what is it? It is acts of lovingkindness, as it is said, 'For I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'"⁴²

Neusner adds further on this assessment for the substitute regarding sacrifice:

"Yohanan likewise thought that through hesed the Jews might make atonement, and that the sacrifices now demanded of them were love and mercy ... just as the Jews needed a redemptive act of God of compassion from God, so they must act compassionately in order to make themselves worthy of it."⁴³

The point is that Judaism became a religion with no substitute atonement. Oral

⁴¹ Abot 1:2 in The Mishnah (London: Oxford University Press, 1993), page 446.

⁴² Avot de Rav Natan, Chapter 4 Op. Cit., page 34.

⁴³ Jacob Neusner, A Life of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, Ca. 1-80 C.E. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962), page 144.

Law, from then on, interpreted atonement in the light of Yavneh's decision, in view of the fact that no temple was ever constructed as soon as perhaps ben Zakkai imagined. Ever afterwards, when the rabbis speak of salvation, we always have to assess specifically what they have in mind, physical, nation, spiritual, or whatever else. If it relates to one's standing before the LORD, then this Oral Law from Yavneh must be assessed in light of what Moses proclaimed through the sin offering, and how the New Covenant proclaims Yeshua as the only sin offering now. The Yavneh pronouncement on this issue represents a serious break with the Written Law.

The Torah is likened many times to water, wine, oil, milk, honey, and so on, and while Torah is meant to include Written and Oral Torah, yet many times, the sense is created on a number of occasions that the Oral Law is somewhat higher than the Written Law. But, the supremacy of Written Law is an order of authority established by God, was recognized by most authorities in the ancient world and echoed by Rav Moshe ben Nachmani (Nachmanides) when he defended Judaism as a religion alongside Christianity.⁴⁴ It was his assertion in his deliberation with the Dominicans in a theological tournament before King James I in 1263 that Written Law takes precedence over that of Oral Law.

The Interpretation of the Middle Ages

When the Muslim theologians in their work of the Kalam translated the Greek classics into Arabic in the latter 700s and 800s and sought to contextualize their beliefs into Aristotelian categories throughout the 800s, the relation of revelation and reason became a hot issue. The libraries are full of

⁴⁴ H.H. ben Sasson, "The Middle Ages," in A History of the Jewish People, ben Sasson, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), page 488.

volumes where writers debate whether religious truth is a matter of revelation alone, or if it can be ascertained through the intellect. Our task is not to debate this point, but to see how Jewish thinkers related to these issues regarding the Written Law.

Saadya HaGaon (882-942)

The Muslim work had its impact on Saadya in Babylon and by the 900s, he became the father of Jewish philosophy when he formulated his Emunot veDeot, Book of Beliefs and Opinions. He felt that since the traditions had become such a mass of material, it was necessary to not only simplify the essence of what they taught, but the means was at hand to also indicate how the Jewish religion could also be more than adequate to answer the test of reason. Since the work of the Muslim thinkers was the crest of the wave for something new and current, Judaism also made use of this medium for proclaiming its truths.

Relation of Revelation and Reason -- Saadya knew he would be under attack for his novel approach of substantiating the truths of the Written Law by means of philosophical reason and he went to lengths to defend his position in his Introduction to his Emunot veDeot. He shares the story of a man who weighed out his money and found he had a thousand pieces of money.⁴⁵ He then began to give sums of moneys to certain people and after a certain point, he said he had five hundred pieces left, offering to weigh it out. When he does, he is proven right and people generally will believe his account.

⁴⁵ Isadore Epstein, The Faith of Judaism (New York: Soncino Press, 1954), page 84, citing the Emunot veDeot, Introduction, Slotki ed., page 13; Rosenblatt, English Translation, page 32.

But on the other hand, a certain individual desires to calculate exactly the financial account. He checks out what sums of money were given to the various individuals, adds them up, ascertains what was the original amount of money, subtracts what was shared from the original amount and thus arrives at the precise figure of five hundred pieces of money.

Saadya likened the first method of weighing to revelation, which provided the truth immediately through a direct means, while the second method of calculation is what reason provides. The great teacher suggested that the religious teaching of Judaism cannot be contrary to reason and so revelation is a means to grasp truth quickly and directly. But what is revealed will stand the test of reason when philosophers desire to examine the teaching by the mind. It is just that for those who do not have the time or opportunity, they can quickly come to the truth revelation reveals, while those who seek to search out the same truth by reason will come to the same conclusion.

The Balance of Revelation and Reason -- Disputes arose over the interpretation of Saadya's position, where some have claimed that this Jewish philosopher declared that when reason and revelation conflict, therefore, "Reason is primary, Scripture and revelation secondary in rank as sources of truth ..." but Epstein pointed that other statements by Saadya reflect the opposite:

"In the last resort there was something inherently deficient in human reasoning so that it could not be made the final test of truth, and that the statements of revelation had accordingly to be accepted, even in cases where they could not be accommodated with reason."⁴⁶

By and large, Saadya reflected quite well what the Written Torah teaches in his philosophical theology.

⁴⁶ Isadore Epstein, Op. Cit., pages 87, 88.

The Rambam (Maimonides)(1135-1204)

The climax of the philosophic work by the Rambam is in his Moreh Nebukhim (The Guide of the Perplexed), which was an expansion of the work by Saadya, with a lot of additional material. The later philosopher also went to great lengths to demonstrate the limitations of the human intellect to comprehend certain great truths of revelation.⁴⁷ As one proof where reason must bow to revelation, the Rambam insisted, while Aristotelian philosophy was primarily the avenue by which to categorize the truths of Judaism, he could hold to this Greek philosopher's position that the universe is eternal. Since the opening statement in Genesis declares that the universe had a beginning, then to assert what Aristotle declared, the Torah would collapse.⁴⁸ Revelation then became, in this instance, the test for truth over against reason.

As the Rambam expanded and added to the work by Saadya, other assessments on this matter of revelation vis a vis reason in the Guide for the Perplexed are quite disquieting. Only a few areas will be mentioned:

The Peculiar Use of yahid -- For centuries, rabbis never wrote articles or principles of faith which would express the quintessential faith of Judaism; they felt the Torah itself was the essence of what Judaism is all about and the task of a good Jew was to spend as much time as possible studying it. Beginning in the Middle Ages, however, with the crusades and persecutions and particularly, with the ferocious attempts to convert whole populations of Jewish peoples, religious leaders began to set forth articles of faith to express the simplest

⁴⁷ Moses Maimonides, The Guide for the Perplexed, Shlomo Pines, tr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), Book One, Chapter 31, pages 65-67.

⁴⁸ Ibid., Book II, Chapter 25, pages 327-330.

and basic statement of Judaism to which a Jewish person need adhere and still remain within the fold of the Jewish people.

One of the earliest of these statements was the Thirteen Principles of Faith which the Rambam formulated, in his Commentary on the Mishnah, Introduction to Sanhedrin Chapter 10, to counteract any inroads of Christianity or Islam upon Jewish people. They are beautifully stated, in a very positive way and appear almost so innocent, but they forcefully express the essence of what Judaism does and does not believe. In the second of the Thirteen Principles, Maimonides stated: "I believe with perfect faith, that God, blessed be His name, is a Unity ... " The word for Unity is: yahid, meaning, God is only one, and never should He be perceived as the Triunity, or, three in one. With one neat statement, this Jewish philosopher undercut what the Council of Nicea undertook to express: the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, each viewed as God, are a Triunity. The Rambam stated clearly that Judaism cannot accept such a position as the Trinity.

One can understand the theological position as expressed in the second principle, attempting to clearly define Judaism's position. The disquieting feature from a Biblical point of view is to announce that God is: yahid. Nowhere in Scripture is God ever referred to as yahid, but rather, ehad, as in the Shma (Deut. 6:4). While in most cases ehad means "only one," but in a few passages, the word can also suggest "composite unity."⁴⁹ In the same way, therefore, one can understand the Shma, "The Lord is one," in a composite sense, oneness, but also allowing for a later revelation of the persons of the Godhead.

⁴⁹ When a man is married, he and his wife become basar ehad, or, "one flesh" (Gen. 2:24), suggesting that any child born of this union is the product of the two, the father and mother. When the spies brought back the huge branches of grapes where it took two men to carry them, the Scriptures what the men were carrying as "eshkol ehad" (Num. 13:23), but is this understood as: "one grape?" Obviously not, but rather, the translations will paraphrase: "a single cluster of grapes."

To refer to God as yahid when the Scriptures does not will somehow take away from the authority of the Written Law, which in a progressive sense, unfolds the mystery of who God is.

God is Completely Separate from this World -- The deanthropomorphizing of God reached its climax with Maimonides in his doctrine of the double negatives, which became his way of how one must speak of God as He relates to this world and its people.⁵⁰ Where the prophets could speak of God in anthropomorphic terms, His face, eyes, hands, feet, and so on, and that God loved Israel, across the centuries after the Babylonian exile, the rabbinical authorities sought to shield the presence of God from man. One must not refer to these anthropomorphic terms for fear of degrading His holiness. He is separate from man. Obviously, the rabbis sought to protect the people of Israel from ever bringing the God of Israel, the LORD, down to the level of the other pagan gods. The technique of avoiding the anthropomorphisms was to use substitute terms when speaking of God, e.g., Memra, Shekinah, Heaven, Power, and so on. By the end of the second temple period, God was still considered a person, but a barrier had been erected between God and man: God does not cross into the realm of man and neither does man cross into God's realm.

Maimonides' technique was to use the double negative. Instead of saying God loves Israel, one must say it thus: "God is in a state of non non-loving Israel!" His oneness, yahid, was so wholly other that He must never be brought into any close proximity to this world or man. It is not possible to learn directly from God where He can teach us His ways, but rather, we are to imitate

⁵⁰ See Louis Goldberg, Some Observations Concerning the Attributes of God in Jewish Philosophy, (Roosevelt University, 1975), unpublished thesis for M.A. in Philosophy

what He does as we observe Him.

The Jewish philosopher so isolated God with this emphasis on His being yahid that it could be asserted that the God of Maimonides was not the God of the Bible! And, toward the end of his life and after his death, he had many who disagreed thoroughly with him on this issue. This too is a disquieting feature where this use of reason is in danger of detracting from the authority of the Written Law.

Reason Reinterprets Revelation -- And what can be said of other assessments by this Jewish philosopher? As much as possible, the miraculous elements of Scripture were reduced to natural processes; paradise was given an allegorical explanation; angels are explained as natural forces or elements in nature and neither did they ever appear in human form; and the Messianic age, portrayed by the prophets in idyllic terms, are reinterpreted as mere metaphor.⁵¹ It is no wonder many rabbis and Jewish people disagreed with the Rambam, either quietly, or sometimes with a great uproar, even burning his books. The use of the rationale has a place in the way a person understands his faith, but reason should never supplant plain literal statements of what Revelation declares.

Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786)

While Mendelssohn would not have looked upon himself as a reformer of Judaism, he still was a product of the Enlightenment and that meant he had to make a basic decision regarding the problem of the relationship between

⁵¹ Isadore Epstein, Judaism (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1964 reprint), page 214.

revelation and reason. Saadya attempted to give precedence to revelation but argued that reason could arrive at many of the same truths which revelation provided. Maimonides would also suggest the same, but we have already seen some areas of his work which detracts from the authority of the Written Law.

When considering Mendelssohn and the many who came after him as leaders in the radical Reform movement, reason was given the supreme place. Moses Mendelssohn declared, therefore, "I acknowledge no immutable truths but such as are not only being demonstrated and warranted by human faculties."⁵² Epstein pointed out that Mendelssohn would:

"Only admit of such direct proof as should command the universal assent that is yielded to postulates of mathematics, are three: (1) The existence of God; (2) Providence; (3) Immortality ... Judaism ... is not revealed religion. It is revealed law."⁵³

Given these sentiments and similar ones by the reformers, what is left of the authority of the Written Law? It became not so much what a Jew believed, but how he behaved! Their basic presuppositions in doing the kind of philosophy in which they were engaged was to run contrary to the history of Judaism and, even further, tear out its very heart.

Was there no one to answer such an assessment of the Written Law? Yes, and because of the influence of the Enlightenment upon Jewish people to enter into German society and partake of all its educational and cultural advantages, Traditional Judaism had a spokesman in Samson Rafael Hirsch. He sought for an expression of Judaism which would take advantage of all the disciplines of knowledge and still reflect the highest respect for the supremacy of the Written Law. In a sense, he did for an Ashkenazi Traditional Judaism what the Jewish

⁵² Moses Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, M. Samuel, tr. (1834), pages 89ff.

⁵³ Isadore Epstein, The Faith of Judaism, Op. Cit., page 90.

scholars did for a Sephardi Judaism in the Middle Ages in Spain.

Hirsch wrote several essays in response to Mendelssohn's assertions, one of which was quite sarcastic, saying:

"You must admit it: it is only because "religion" does not mean to you the word of God, because in your heart you deny Divine Revelation, because you believe not in Revelation given to man but in Revelation emanating from man, that you can give man the right to lay down conditions to religion."⁵⁴

While the Reformers were looking for acceptance and toleration by society in general, what would be the result? Jewish people were left adrift, with no compass as to where they come from, and where they are going. Human judgment is liable to err and with no competent guide, where does one find truth?

Conclusion

The Enlightenment has left devastating effects upon Jewish people today. The movement spawned an apostasy to where today, most do not believe in any authoritative Word, or Written Torah. Most Jews in North America and Europe have no working knowledge of the Scriptures. While Israeli children and young people are taught the Written Torah, most would not assign any authority to it. No wonder a few young Jewish people are turning back to Traditional Judaism, trying to find some anchor for their souls because some credence is to the validity of the Written Law. But a good number Jewish people are also listening to the proclamation of Messianic Jews and find in Yeshua and the Scriptures the answers for which their souls desperately seek.

Long ago, the Prophet Isaiah declared: "To the Torah and the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn" (8:20). His proclamation recognized the Written Law as authoritative and

⁵⁴ Samson Rafael Hirsch, "Religion Allied to Progress," in Judaism Eternal, II, I. Grunfeld, tr. Op. Cit., pages 231, 232.

therefore puts a stamp of approval on how we proclaim our faith and live our lives. We would not want to avoid any interpretation that would demean or limit the authority of the Written Law. This is our task as believers today: To proclaim a Written Torah and the New Covenant as authoritative truth, as the guide for belief and the means for godly living.