The Torah and the Jewish People

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The Torah was always the possession of all Israel. It was addressed to the entire people, who were to learn its contents and teach them diligently to their children. A number of biblical passages, in particular Psalms 19 and 119, testify to the love which the Torah evoked and the widespread concern of the people with its teachings.

The Book of Nehemiah (chs. 8–10) reports a public reading of the Torah in Jerusalem, probably in the year 444 B.C.E. This reading was conducted by Ezra the Scribe, with the aid of assistants who were to make sure that all those present heard and understood what was read to them. A few days later, the entire people entered into a solemn undertaking to obey the Torah; and this agreement was ratified in writing by the leaders. From the traditional standpoint, this incident was a reaffirmation of the covenant at Sinai. But many modern scholars explain the event as marking the completion of the written Torah in substantially its present form and its adoption as the official "constitution" of the Jewish community.

The Torah and the Synagogue

We do not know exactly where, how, or when the synagogue came into existence; it must have been some time between 500 and 200 B.C.E. From the start, one of the principal activities of the synagogue was the public reading and exposition of the Torah. A portion was read every Sabbath. But there were farmers who lived in scattered communities, too far from a synagogue to travel to it on the Sabbath. That they might not be deprived of hearing the sacred word, a Torah passage was read in the synagogues each Monday and Thursday—the market days when the country-folk came to town to sell their produce. This custom survives to the present in the traditional synagogues.

The reading of the Torah portion in Hebrew was often followed by a translation, in Greek or Aramaic, for the benefit of those who did not understand the original. It is out of such translation or paraphrase, in all probability, that the sermon arose. This explains why the sermon was normally based on the Torah reading of the week.

From an early date, the instruction of children was associated with the synagogue. The effectiveness of its educational program, for young and old, was fully recognized by the enemies of Judaism. When the Syrian King Antiochus IV wished to break down Jewish solidarity and hasten the assimilation of Jews into Hellenistic society, he not only

forbade the practice of Jewish ritual but also prohibited the reading and teaching of the Torah, on pain of death. But the decrees could not be enforced.

Similarly, the Roman Emperor Hadrian, after he finally put down the Jewish revolt in 135 C.E., proscribed all those who persisted in teaching the Torah. It was then that the aged Rabbi Akiba defied the edict and suffered death by torture. The Torah, he declared in a famous parable, is Israel's natural element, as water is the natural element of the fish. In water the fish is exposed to many dangers, but out of water it is sure to perish at once (Berachot 61b).

The Oral Torah

Thus far we have used the word Torah with reference to the Five Books. But some kind of commentary was always needed. A sacred text, and especially one containing laws and commandments, must be interpreted and applied to the concrete situations of life. Those who proposed to make the Torah the rule of their life found many provisions which required more exact definition. The Torah, for example, forbids work on Sabbath; but what precisely constitutes work, and what activities are permissible? Again, the Torah speaks of divorce (Deut. 24:1 ff.) but does not make clear the grounds for divorce. And on many important subjects—the method of contracting a marriage, real estate law, the prayers in the synagogue, to name a few—the written Torah gives no guidance at all.

Such problems generated the concept of the oral Torah, in part explanation and elaboration of the written Torah, in part supplement to the latter. This oral Torah was not created consciously to meet the need of a certain time. Much of it was no doubt derived from established legal precedents and from popular custom and tradition. Once, however, the process of applying the law to new situations was undertaken in earnest, the material grew rapidly.

For a long time this was literally oral Torah; it was deemed improper to put down in writing what Moses had not written down at God's command. Only much later was it found necessary to compile this material in the Mishnah and other works of talmudic literature. But it was generally agreed that the entire body of oral Torah was also given to Moses at Sinai. It was to learn this vast corpus of teaching that Moses remained on the mountain forty days and nights.

The teachers of the oral Torah were chiefly laymen (that is, nonpriests) who are known to us as the Pharisees. From about the year 100 C.E. on, accredited teachers bore the title of rabbi. These teachers were opposed by a conservative party, made up mostly of priests, known as the Sadducees. They denied the validity of oral tradition and regarded the written text alone as authoritative. They interpreted the commandments in a strict literalist fashion. Perhaps it was this opposition which led the Pharisees to devise the method of midrash, in order to find some support in Scripture for their oral teachings. The Midrash uses a free, creative, and—let us admit—often far-fetched method of biblical interpretation. In expounding legal passages—what the Rabbis called halachah—the teachers were subject to some rules and restrictions in the use of midrash. But it was applied with virtually unlimited freedom to nonlegal materials, to the ethical, theological, and folkloristic subject matter known as aggadah or haggadah. Many beautiful examples of midrash are to be found in this commentary, especially in the sections headed "Gleanings." (It should be noted that the word "midrash" is used in three ways: to apply to a method in general, to a single instance of the method, and to literary works in which the method is employed.)

For most Jews, the written Torah was understood in accordance with the interpretation of the oral Torah, just as in modern law a written statute means what the courts interpret it to mean. The commandment "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Exod. 21:24) meant that one who injures another must pay money damages to his victim. "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk" (Exod. 23:19) was taken to prohibit the cooking or eating of any kind of meat with milk or milk products. Similarly, people did not always differentiate between biblical stories and their aggadic elaborations.

Though the growth of the oral Torah, later written down in the Talmud, obscured the plain sense of Scripture in many instances, it was a force for progress which enriched Judaism. Beginning in the eighth century C.E., a countertrend appeared in Persia and spread widely. The rebels against talmudic Judaism were called Karaites (Scripturalists). Returning to the Sadducean position, they proposed to live strictly by the simple word of the written Torah. But this program was not easy to carry out. The Karaites disputed bitterly among themselves as to the proper interpretation of many commandments. Moreover, many rabbinic modifications of scriptural law were both reasonable and humane, and to reject them meant turning the clock back—always a futile undertaking.

Christian and Moslem Views

The Christian apostle Paul, himself a Jew by birth, proposed in his writings a new view of the Torah. Its innumerable commandments, he held, constitute an overwhelming burden; no one can ever fulfill them properly. The "Law," in fact, was given by God to make us conscious of our sinfulness, that we may despair of attaining salvation by our own strivings. Now, Paul taught, salvation is available through faith in the crucified and risen Jesus; the "Law" has served its purpose, and, for Christian believers, it is abrogated (Romans 7:8; Galatians 2:15–3:14). This view has profoundly influenced Christian thought, though the churches rarely adopted Paul's teaching in its radical form and usually asserted the validity of the ethical laws of the Pentateuch (cf. Matthew 5:17–20; 19:18 f.).

In contrast to, and perhaps in reply to, the Pauline doctrine, Jewish teachers insisted on the continuing authority of the Torah and on its beneficent character. "The Holy One, blessed be He, desired to confer merit on Israel; that is why He gave them a voluminous Torah and many commandments" (Mishnah Makkot, end). Failure to obey the Torah fully does not result in damnation; rather it calls for repentance (return) and a fresh start.

Christian teachers through the centuries found in the Torah—and indeed the entire Hebrew Bible—many passages which they interpreted as prophecies of the career and the messianic (or divine) character of Jesus of Nazareth. In the past, Jewish spokesmen had to devote much time and effort to refuting these christological interpretations; today they have been discarded by competent Christian scholars.

Centuries later, Mohammed, founder of the third monotheistic religion, was to call the Jews also "the people of the Book" because their religion was founded on Scripture. He did not know the book at first hand, or even in translation, for he never learned to read, but in his contacts with Jews and Christians he acquired a sketchy knowledge of biblical narratives with their aggadic embellishments. To these stories he occasionally alludes in the Koran (some selections will be found in the Gleanings). The Koran, which records the revelations received by the prophet, holds a position in Islam similar to that of the Torah in Judaism. It is supple-

mented by a tradition analogous to the oral Torah.[1]

The Middle Ages

In its wanderings, Judaism encountered many new constellations of ideas. Sometimes these novelties were rejected by Jewish thinkers; but often they were accepted as compatible with Judaism. In such cases an effort was made to show that these ideas were already suggested in Scripture.

The first examplar using this method was Philo of Alexandria, who lived at the beginning of the Christian era. A devout Jew, Philo was deeply influenced by Plato and the Stoics; and so he was led to "discover" the ideas of the philosophers in the text of the Torah. For Philo, the biblical word veiled deeper meanings and had to be explained allegorically. (For instance, Sarah symbolizes divine wisdom, her handmaid Hagar typifies secular learning.) The Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages also employed allegorical interpretations, though with more restraint. They used this method to deal with Bible passages which appeared to contradict reason or morality, especially those describing God in human terms. Such authors as Saadia, Maimonides, and Ibn Ezra frequently found sophisticated philosophic concepts in the biblical text.

Still more extreme were the methods of the mystics. "We possess an authentic tradition," wrote Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, "that the entire Torah consists of the names of God, in that the words may be redivided to yield a different sense, consisting of the names." In general, the Kabalists found cryptic meanings in the words and letters of Scripture, without any reference to the meaning of the text as a coherent whole. The Zohar, the chief work of the Kabalah, is a vast mystical midrash on the Torah; and many Kabalists, and later on Chasidim, wrote their mystical treatises in the form of commentaries on the Pentateuch.

Ultimately the view emerged that there are four ways to expound the Torah, each valid in its own area: the rabbinic midrash, the philosophical implication (*remez*), and the mystical arcanum (*sod*), in addition to the plain meaning (*peshat*).[2]

In the Middle Ages, in fact, Jews recovered an awareness of the literal meaning of Scripture. This trend away from midrash to a simpler exegesis may have been stimulated by the Karaite revolt. The first great exponent of the *peshat* was Rav Saadia Gaon, the outstanding critic of Karaism. He was followed by a distinguished school of grammarians and commentators in Moslem Spain, who developed a genuinely scientific approach to the Hebrew language and to textual studies. These scholars wrote chiefly in Arabic; their findings were made accessible to the Hebrew reading public by Abraham ibn Ezra, who hailed from northern (Christian) Spain, and the Provençal Hebraists Joseph and David Kimchi.

Meanwhile another school of biblical scholars appeared independently in northern France; they were more traditionalist, less systematic and philosophic than the Spaniards, but they displayed a keen sense for niceties of language and for the spirit of the Bible. The outstanding production of this school is the Torah commentary of Rashi (Rabbi Solomon Itzchaki of Troyes), the most popular commentary ever written in Hebrew. Its popularity was due both to the

[1] The Arabs regard themselves as descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's oldest son. Some of the Moslem teachers accused the Jews of misinterpreting (or even falsifying) the biblical text in order to give preference to their ancestor Isaac. Similar charges, that Jews have tampered with the Hebrew text of the Bible, were made by some early Christian teachers.

[2] A similar doctrine of the fourfold sense of Scripture was held by Christians.

clarity of Rashi's style and to the fact that he combined the exposition of the plain sense with a judicious selection of attractive *midrashim,* legal and nonlegal. His successors, however, concentrated more and more on the *peshat.*

The last of the great medieval expositors, Moses ben Nachman, despite his mystical tendencies, also offered original and independent comments on the plain sense. He and his predecessors had no difficulty with the fact that their simple exegesis sometimes contradicted biblical interpretations given in talmudic literature. In nonlegal matters there was no problem, since the aggadists gave many diverse explanations of the same verse. On halachic matters, these writers accepted the talmudic expositions for practical legal purposes but noted that, according to the rules of grammar, a given verse might be understood differently.

These medieval exegetes (and others we have not mentioned) made a permanently valuable contribution to the understanding of the biblical text. Though many other Hebrew commentaries on the Torah were written between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries, they added little that was new. Only in the last two hundred years have new resources been available to broaden our understanding of Scripture; at the same time, new problems have arisen for the modern Bible reader.

The Torah Scroll

From an early date in the Christian era, manuscripts, including Hebrew manuscripts, were written in the form of books, consisting of a number of pages fastened together along one edge. We have many manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible of this sort; they are usually provided with vowel signs and with the punctuation indicating both sentence structure and the traditional chant. It is on such vocalized manuscripts that our printed Hebrew Bibles are based.

For ceremonial use in the synagogue, however, Jews have continued to employ Torah manuscripts in the more ancient scroll form. Each scroll is made up of numerous sheets of parchment, stitched together to make a continuous document, which is attached at either end to a wooden roller. The public reading of the Torah, to this day, is from such a scroll (*Sefer Torah*), containing only the consonantal text, without vowel points or punctuation, written on parchment with a vivid black ink. Tradition prescribes many details concerning the Sefer Torah—the beginning and end of paragraphs, the arrangement of certain poetic passages in broken instead of solid lines, the care of the scroll, the correction of mistakes, even the spiritual preparation of the scribe.

A synagogue usually possesses several scrolls. In ancient times they were kept in a chest (Hebrew *tevah* or *aron*), which was placed by the wall of the synagogue on the side nearest Jerusalem. In many early synagogues this "ark" stood in a niche, before which, in some cases, a curtain was hung. In modern synagogues the ark is usually a built-in recess, with a shelf for the scrolls; it is closed either by a curtain or by ornamental doors of wood or metal.

The removal of the scroll from the ark to the pulpit for reading and its return to the ark after the reading constitute a ceremony of considerable pomp, including the singing of processional melodies and demonstrations of respect and affection on the part of the congregants. When the ark is opened, and especially when the Sefer Torah is carried in procession, everyone stands.

The reverence and love evoked by the scroll is expressed in its outward adornments. Oriental Jews generally keep the scroll in a hinged metal or wooden case, often handsomely painted or carved, from which the

ends of the rollers project. The scroll remains in the case while it is open on the reading desk, and it may be rolled to a new passage without removing it from this receptacle. When it is closed, the upper rollers are often adorned with artistic metal finials (called *rimonim*, "pomegranates"). In most European and American congregations, however, the scroll, after being fastened with a band of some woven material, is covered with a robe of silk or velvet, through which the top rollers protrude. It may be decorated with a silver (or other metal) breastplate (*tas*) as well as with *rimonim*. Sometimes a single crown covers both wooden uprights. Eastern and Western Jews alike use a pointer (*yad*, literally, "hand"), most often of silver, with which the reader keeps his place in the scroll.

Some congregations, chiefly Sephardic, attach a silk or other woven strip to the outside of the parchment, which is rolled with the scroll to provide additional protection.

The Public Reading

It is customary to read from the scroll during every Sabbath and festival morning service, as well as on Monday and Thursday mornings. At the Saturday afternoon service (*minchah*), part of the following week's portion is read. There is no Torah reading on holy day afternoons, with the exception of the Day of Atonement and certain other fast days.

In the early centuries of the Christian era, the Jews of Palestine completed the reading of the entire Torah once in three years. We know, for the most part, how the text was divided into sections for this purpose; but scholars disagree as to when the triennial cycle began and ended—i.e., at what time in year 1 of the cycle the first chapter of Genesis was read.

Babylonian congregations, however, read through the entire Torah each year, and their custom ultimately became standard. It was the Babylonian Jews who created the festival of Simchat Torah, rejoicing over the Torah. On this day, all the scrolls of the congregation are carried around the synagogue in joyous procession; the closing chapter of Deuteronomy is read from one *sefer*, and then the first chapter of Genesis is read from another.

For the annual cycle, the Torah is divided into fifty-four sections, called *sidrot*. They are read consecutively, starting with the Sabbath following Simchat Torah. To complete the reading in a year, two sections must be read on certain Sabbaths, except when a leap year adds an additional month. Each *sidrah* is known by its first (or first distinctive) Hebrew word. For each holiday, a suitable selection is designated, apart from the weekly series. On holidays and certain special Sabbaths, an additional passage is read from a second scroll.

Each *sidrah* is divided into seven subsections. It is customary to "call up" seven worshipers to take part in reading the several subsections. (The number of participants varies on holidays, weekdays, etc.) Originally each person called up was expected to read a passage with the correct chant.

The participants who were insufficiently familiar with the text recited the benedictions and someone else read the portion for them. This was embarrassing to the unlearned; so it became customary long ago to assign the reading to one qualified person (the *ba-al keriah*), and those "called up," no matter how learned, recited only the benedictions.

In many traditional congregations, the lengthy period of the Torah reading became a disorderly part of the service. Those who had the honor of participating were expected to make contributions, which were duly acknowledged in the prayer (*Mi Sheberach*)

recited on behalf of the donor or the donor's dear ones. Others present might also have recited special prayers of thanks or petition. On important holidays, moreover, the honors were sold at auction before the Torah service was conducted.

In reaction against such practices, Reform synagogues abolished the entire system of honors and limited participation to the ministry and to the congregational officers on the pulpit. More recently, some temples have reintroduced participation from the membership, but eliminating the old abuses. In order to shorten the weekly reading, some of the early Reformers proposed a return to the triennial cycle; but the suggestion met with little favor. So Reform congregations follow the annual cycle, but instead they usually read only one subsection of each *sidrah*. The passage is most often read without the chant; and the reader frequently translates it into the vernacular after reading it, or even sentence by sentence.

In the interest of relevance and inspiration, Reform made a number of changes in the readings for the holy days. Recently, a few congregations have made changes also in the weekly reading, omitting *sidrot* which seem to have no message for our time (the opening sections of Leviticus, for example) and substituting selections from other parts of the Torah.

The Torah and the Modern Jew

The last three centuries have seen a great upheaval in the religious thinking of Western man, in general, and of the Jew, in particular. The development of natural science has undermined belief in the supernatural and miraculous and, thus, brought into question the authority of all sacred scriptures. Further, the champions of religion could no longer follow the method of Philo, who read into the Torah the ideas of Plato, or of Maimonides, who understood the same texts in terms of Aristotelian thought. We cannot claim to discover the findings of Darwin or Einstein in the Torah, for modern methods of Bible study preclude such an approach. Philological analysis and historical criticism make it impossible to "explain away" errors of fact and, to us, unacceptable theological apprehensions and moral injunctions. All of these must be understood in their own context and their own time. Furthermore, the rediscovery of the rich culture and literature of the ancient Near East revealed many similarities between biblical and non-Israelite writings, and even some cases in which the biblical authors borrowed from their pagan neighbors.

These new methods and discoveries have added enormously to our understanding of the biblical world. But they raise basic and difficult questions. Can the informed Jew of today regard the Torah as the word of God? And, if so, to what extent and in what sense? This question has been dealt with above, in our General Introduction to the Torah.

This commentary is an attempt to grapple with these questions. The readers are urged to base their judgments on a thoughtful reading of the Torah itself, with the aid of the comments in this volume. But a few suggestions are offered here.

1] We learn from the Torah how the Jewish people has understood its own character and destiny. For this reason it is indispensable for our own self-understanding. This would be true even if the whole Pentateuchal narrative were legendary. But modern scholarship has come more and more to the conclusion that beneath the legendary embellishments there is a solid core of historical memory, that Abraham and Moses really lived, and that the Egyptian bondage and the Exodus are undoubted facts.

2] Comparison reveals similarities between biblical writings and other old Near Eastern sources, but it also reveals striking dissimilarities. The resemblances are chiefly in concrete detail and in the use of words and phrases. In religious and ethical principles, the parallels are few. There is no other ancient writing which approaches the Torah in its lofty concept of a unique God, who is not subject to fate or destiny, has no female consort, and is concerned with the welfare of all humanity. The ethical teaching and social legislation of the Torah are unequalled in nobility and sensitivity by anything produced in Egypt or Babylonia.

3] The historical approach evokes our awe in another way. We see the vast distance between the more primitive elements of the Torah and its most sublime and advanced passages; and we marvel that such great progress occurred in a few centuries. At the same time, we no longer feel the need to rationalize or justify those things in the Torah which intellect forbids us to accept as true or conscience will not let us defend. No satisfactory explanation has ever been given in terms of climatic, geographical, economic, and political factors for the unique religio-ethical development in Israel. It is thus not unreasonable to discern revelation *within* the historical processes.

4] Though the Torah contains chapters that are, at most, of historical interest only, it also contains much that is relevant and vital today. If it sometimes expresses moral judgments we have discarded as unsatisfactory, it also challenges us with ideals we are far from having attained. Moreover, for us as for our ancestors, the line between written and oral Torah cannot be drawn oversharply. We too read the text in the light of the experiences and associations that have become attached to it. Every great classic suggests or reveals new insights to each succeeding generation. And the Torah is the classic of classics.