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The Holy Writ, 1987.

HOLY WRIT

YOU CAN PUT DOWN THIS SERMON TO A BRIGHT-EYED, YOUNG CONFIRMAND WHO NOTICED THAT HIS CONFIRMATION BIBLE WAS NOT ENTITLED THE BIBLE BUT THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES, AND WAS QUICK TO CHALLENGE ME AS TO THE REASONS WHY. WHAT IS A SCRIPTURE? WHAT IS THE ~~TITLE~~⁴ ~~TITLE~~, HEBREW SCRIPTURES, ~~AND WHY~~¹⁰ THE PLURAL? IT'S A SINGLE BOOK I'VE BEEN GIVEN, ~~HE POINTED OUT TO ME~~. I KNOW, HE SAID, THAT THE HOLY SCRIPTURES AND THE BIBLE ARE ONE AND THE SAME--BUT WHY THE SECOND TITLE, HEBREW SCRIPTURES? ARE THERE OTHER SCRIPTURES?

LET'S DEAL WITH THE QUESTION OF THE PLURAL, "SCRIPTURES," FIRST. THE BIBLE IS PRINTED AS A SINGLE BOOK, BUT IT IS IN FACT AN ANTHOLOGY OF 26 BOOKS, SET DOWN, EDITED AND RE-EDITED, SOMETIMES OVER A THOUSAND YEARS OF TIME. THE BIBLE IS NOT OF A PIECE. SOME OF THE BIBLE IS SIMPLY A REWORKING OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN LAW. OTHER PORTIONS REPRESENT THE POETRY, PROPHECY, AND THE WISDOM OF ISRAEL'S SAGES.

THE TERM BIBLE OR SCRIPTURES WAS NEVER USED IN BIBLICAL TIMES. INDEED, FOR MOST OF THAT 1200-YEAR PERIOD, ISRAEL DID NOT KNOW THE CONCEPT OF ANY SCRIPTURE, ~~ANY HOLY BOOK~~. THE CONCEPT OF A HOLY BOOK DID NOT BEGIN TO DEVELOP UNTIL HELLENISTIC TIMES.

LATER, DURING THE EARLY RABBINIC PERIOD--THE FIRST CENTURIES AFTER THE DESTRUCTION OF THE SECOND TEMPLE IN THE YEAR 70--WHEN EVERYTHING WAS BEING SYSTEMATIZED AND PUT IN ORDER, THE RABBIS BEGAN TO CALL WHAT WE WOULD CALL THE BIBLE, ~~THE~~ MIKRA, WHICH MEANS THE READINGS--OR, TANACH, AN ACRONYM MADE UP OF THREE TERMS: T FOR TORAH, THE FIVE BOOKS OF MOSES; N FOR NEVIIM, THE PROPHETS; AND KH FOR KETUVIM, THE HOLY WRITINGS. THE VERY TERM TANACH--WITH ITS ORDERING OF FIRST, TORAH, THEN NEVIIM, THEN KETUVIM--IMPLIES ^{that} A DIFFERENCE IN AUTHORITY ^{was} ASCRIBED TO EACH OF THESE ^{UNIT} ^{UNITS} ^a WORKS.

THE FIVE BOOKS OF MOSES, THE TORAH, WAS THE PRIMARY TEXT. ACCORDING TO MEDIEVAL RABBINIC THEOLOGY, IT HAD BEEN REVEALED TO MOSES BY GOD AT MT. SINAI. THE PROPHETIC WORKS --NEVIIM--INCLUDED A GREAT DEAL WHICH WAS FROM GOD BUT ALSO INCLUDED HISTORIES AND ^{biographies} ~~ANALS~~ WHICH WERE OF INTEREST BUT CLEARLY WERE NOT CONSIDERED DIVINE. AND THE KETUVIM, THE ~~WRITINGS~~ WRITINGS, WERE MOSTLY A COLLECTION OF THE LITERATURE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE DURING THE POST-EXILIC PERIOD--INSPIRED, INFORMATIVE, BUT NOT REVEALED.

NOR WERE THE 26 SEPARATE BOOKS EACH OF A PIECE. THE TORAH PARTICULARLY REPRESENTED A COLLECTION OF ANCIENT MATERIALS WHICH HAD BEEN RE-WORKED AND RE-EDITED MANY TIMES OVER TIME. OTHERS, PARTICULARLY THE KETUVIM, THE HOLY WRITINGS, --FOR INSTANCE RUTH AND ECCLESIASTES--SEEM TO HAVE BEEN FROM A SINGLE HAND. THE HOLY SCRIPTURES ARE, THEN, AN ANTHOLOGY OF ANTHOLOGIES, COLLECTIONS OF WRITINGS FROM DIFFERENT TIMES AND DIFFERENT PENS.

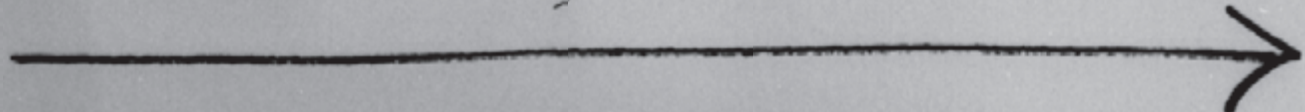
THE CENTURIES AFTER THE EXILE--THAT IS, BEGINNING ABOUT THE 6TH CENTURY BCE--^{WERE WERE}~~ARE~~ A PERIOD WHEN ISRAEL MOVED FROM A PRELITERATE SOCIAL STRUCTURE INTO A SEMI-LITERATE ONE, AND FROM AN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY TO A PARTIALLY URBAN ONE. THE CULTURE REFLECTED VAST SOCIAL CHANGES WHICH AFFECTED THE WHOLE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND POLITICAL AND THEOLOGICAL IDEAS. THESE CHANGES ARE EVIDENT IN THE TEXTS.

SO--THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES ARE AN ANTHOLOGY OF MATERIALS, SOME ORIGINAL, SOME EDITED, SOME ~~EDITED ANY NUMBER OF TIMES~~, WORKED OVER FOR A THOUSAND YEARS OR MORE. AT FIRST THERE WAS NO WRITTEN TRADITION. ANCIENT ISRAEL WAS [^]PRE-LITERATE SOCIETY. IT IS DOUBTFUL THAT ITS LEADERS--MOSES, DAVID, EVEN A PROPHET LIKE AMOS--COULD READ OR WRITE. LITERACY IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST WAS A RARE ACCOMPLISHMENT AND A DIFFICULT ONE.

THERE WAS CERTAINLY NO REQUIREMENT THAT A LEADER
BE LITERATE--ONLY THAT HE BE A SUCCESSFUL LEADER.

THE FIRST WRITINGS THAT EMERGE AS
APHAZARDLY. A PROFESSIONAL SCRIBE MIGHT
COME EXTRA SPACE ON HIS BABYBUS OR CLAY TA

ONE OF THE PARADOXES OF THE HISTORY OF SCRIPTURE



THERE WERE RECORDS OF VARIOUS TYPES AND PARCHMENT SCROLLS,
but NONE WAS TREATED AS SACRED. NONE WAS READ DURING PUBLIC
WORSHIP. NONE WAS WRITTEN WITH ATTENTION TO STYLE AND FORM
OR IN A WAY THAT SEPARATED IT FROM ALL THE OTHER COMMERCIAL
AND BUSINESS SCROLLS WHICH WERE THE BULK OF THE WRITING OF
THE PERIOD.

SINCE MANY OF THE WRITINGS WHICH BECAME SCRIPTURE
CIRCULATED FOR CENTURIES WITHOUT ANY SANCTIFYING LABEL,
THEY WERE TREATED AT FIRST AS NO MORE THAN COMMUNAL RECORDS
OR INTERESTING LITERATURE. HERE AND THERE, FOR REASONS WE
CAN NO LONGER UNDERSTAND, THE SCRIBES CHOSE AND SET DOWN
SHORT COLLECTIONS OF CUSTOMARY LEGAL FORMULAE OR A VERSION
OF AN ANCIENT VICTORY HYMN OR A WELL-KNOWN STORY.

ONCE THE CLAY OR PARCHMENT HAD BEEN INSCRIBED,
THERE WAS A CHANCE THAT SOME LATER SCRIBE MIGHT COME
ACROSS IT AND INCORPORATE IT IN A LARGER PIECE HE WAS
WORKING ON. ANOTHER SCRIBE IN A LATER GENERATION MIGHT
INTRODUCE THIS MATERIAL INTO A SCROLL OF ANCIENT TRADITIONS
HE WAS WORKING ON, WHICH BY GOOD FORTUNE MIGHT GAIN POPULAR
APPEAL OR FIND ITS WAY INTO AN IMPORTANT ARCHIVE.

AS THE COMMUNITY BECAME MORE AND MORE LITERATE DURING THE BABYLONIAN EXILE AND THE RETURN FROM THE EXILE, AS MORE AND MORE PEOPLE LEARNED TO READ AND WRITE, THERE WAS OBVIOUSLY MORE WRITING. BOOKS OF ALL KINDS EMERGED. BUT IT WAS NOT UNTIL THE IMMEDIATE POST-BIBLICAL PERIOD--ABOUT THE 2ND CENTURY OF THE COMMON ERA--THAT A CONCEPT OF SCRIPTURE, SACRED ANTHOLOGY, BECOMES MANIFEST.

~~COMMON CONCEPT OF SCRIPTURE, SACRED ANTHOLOGY, BECOMES MANIFEST.~~

~~COMMON CONCEPT OF SCRIPTURE, SACRED ANTHOLOGY, BECOMES MANIFEST.~~

WHAT MADE THESE PARTICULAR TEXTS BECOME SACRED, HOLY? PRESUMABLY WHAT WAS CHOSEN BY THE SCRIBES CONTAINED HOLY THOUGHTS. WE CAN READILY UNDERSTAND WHY THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OR ISAIAH'S VISION OF PEACE ARE SCRIPTURE:

IN THE DAYS TO COME,

THE MOUNT OF THE LORD'S HOUSE

SHALL STAND FIRM ABOVE THE MOUNTAINS

AND TOWER ABOVE THE HILLS;

AND ALL THE NATIONS

SHALL GAZE ON IT WITH JOY.

AND THE MANY PEOPLES SHALL GO AND SHALL SAY:

THAT IS THE WHOLE TEXT.

"COME,

LET US GO UP TO THE MOUNT OF THE LORD,

TO THE HOUSE OF THE GOD OF JACOB;

THAT HE MAY INSTRUCT US IN HIS WAYS,

AND THAT WE MAY WALK IN HIS PATHS."

FOR INSTRUCTION SHALL COME FORTH FROM ZION,

THE WORLD OF THE LORD FROM JERUSALEM.

THUS HE WILL JUDGE AMONG THE NATIONS

AND ARBITRATE FOR THE MANY PEOPLES,

AND THEY SHALL BEAT THEIR SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES

AND THEIR SPEARS INTO PRUNING HOOKS:

NATION SHALL NOT TAKE UP

SWORD AGAINST NATION;

THEY SHALL NEVER AGAIN KNOW WAR.



WHAT IS HARD TO UNDERSTAND IS THAT THE GENEALOGIES OF GENESIS ARE ALSO SCRIPTURE OR THAT THE TALE OF MOSES ON HIS RETURN TO EGYPT IS SCRIPTURE. HERE IS THAT TALE:

"AT A MIDNIGHT ENCAMPMENT ON THE WAY, THE LORD HAD ENCOUNTERED HIM, THAT IS MOSES, AND SOUGHT TO KILL HIM. ZIPPORAH TOOK A FLINT, CUT OFF HER SON'S FORESKIN AND TOUCHED HIS LEGS WITH IT AND SAID, 'YOU ARE TRULY A BRIDEGROOM OF BLOOD TO ME.' AND HE LEFT HIM ALONE AND SHE SAID, A BRIDEGROOM OF BLOOD BECAUSE OF CIRCUMCISION.

THAT IS THE WHOLE TEXT.

IN ITS CONTEXT, IN THE BOOK OF EXODUS, THE STORY IMPLIES THAT GOD, HAVING JUST COMMISSIONED MOSES TO RETURN TO EGYPT TO FREE THE SLAVES, SUDDENLY CHANGES HIS MIND AND ATTACKS MOSES. MOSES'S DEATH IS AVERTED ONLY WHEN ZIPPORAH CIRCUMCISES THEIR SON. MOSES SEEMED TO BE A HAPLESS BYSTANDER DURING THIS EPISODE, WHICH IS UNRELATED TO ANYTHING WHICH PRECEDES IT OR SUCCEEDS IT.

THE STORY IS USUALLY EXPLAINED AS A RELIC OF AN OLD TRADITION ABOUT MOSES, THAT HE HAD OMITTED THE CIRCUMCISION OF HIS SON AND THAT ZIPPORAH SAVED HIM FROM DEATH BY HER QUICK ACTIONS. WE CANNOT BE SURE, BECAUSE THE STORY ITSELF IS TOO TERSE FOR REAL INTERPRETATION.

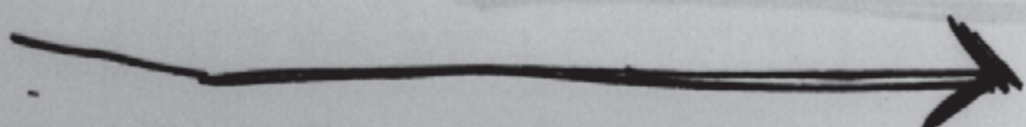
BUT HAVE THESE FEW SENTENCES ANYTHING TO DO WITH WHAT WE CALL THE SACRED OR THE HOLY? ON THE SURFACE, NOTHING. BUT THEY DO SERVE AS A TELLING REMINDER THAT THE HOLY SCRIPTURES DID NOT DEVELOP OUT OF MATERIALS NECESSARILY DEEMED HOLY BUT OUT OF MATERIALS DEEMED VENERABLE OR ANCIENT. SOMEONE IN ANCIENT TIMES OBVIOUSLY WANTED TO STRESS THE IMPORTANCE OF CIRCUMCISION AS A CENTRAL RITE IN JUDAISM AND DID SO THROUGH THIS STORY, AND A LATER SCRIBE ADDED THE STORY TO THE MOSES CYCLE.

THAT DURING THE FIRST 700 YEARS OR SO OF JEWISH LIFE--A PERIOD THAT COVERS THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN AND THE FIRST KINGDOM-- VERY LITTLE WAS WRITTEN DOWN.

IN THE WEST, ALL THE MAJOR RELIGIONS HAVE A SCRIPTURE --JUDAISM HAS THE BIBLE, CHRISTIANITY THE NEW TESTAMENT, ISLAM THE KORAN. IN PART, I BELIEVE, BECAUSE OF THE STORY OF THE SINAI REVELATION IN THE TORAH, WE TEND TO ASSUME THAT A FAITH BEGINS WITH ITS SCRIPTURE AND IS DEFINED BY THAT SCRIPTURE. ~~A CONSCIOUS EFFORT WAS MADE IN BIBLICAL TIMES TO LOCATE THE LAW IN THIS SINAI EPISODE.~~

THE BIBLICAL STORY ASSUMES THAT THE LAW WAS GIVEN BY GOD TO MOSES AT MT. SINAI AND THAT MOSES WROTE DOWN THAT LAW. THE IMAGE CONVEYED IS THAT SCRIPTURE EMERGES AT THE BEGINNING OF A TRADITION AND STATES ITS BASIC CONTENT AND THOUGHT. AS WE HAVE SEEN, THIS IS NOT THE CASE. SCHOLARS HAVE TRACED THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TEXT ABOUT THE GIVING OF THE LAW AT MT. SINAI AND HAVE SHOWN THAT IT IS A MANY-TIERED STORY WHICH BEGINS BY DETAILING A COVENANT CELEBRATION AT MT. SINAI AND LATER DEVELOPS THE THESIS THAT THE ENTIRE LAW WAS, IN FACT, GIVEN TO MOSES ON MT. SINAI. PROBABLY 600 TO 800 YEARS SEPARATE THESE TWO VERSIONS.

THERE ARE CLEAR INDICATIONS IN SCRIPTURE ITSELF THAT THERE WERE OTHER CONSTITUTIONAL MOMENTS IN THE LIFE OF THE PEOPLE--JOSHUA AT SHECHEM, SAMUAL AT MIZPAH. THE FACT IS THAT DURING THE FIRST 700 YEARS OR SO OF JEWISH LIFE--A PERIOD THAT COVERS THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN AND THE FIRST KINGDOM--VERY LITTLE WAS WRITTEN DOWN.



ISRAEL HAD A CULTURE, AN ORAL CULTURE, NOT A WRITTEN ONE. THE EARLY HEBREWS WERE A COMMUNITY OF SEMI-NOMADS WHO WANDERED UP AND DOWN THE OUTER EDGES OF THE FERTILE CRESCENT. PART OF OUR SCRIPTURES REFLECTS THIS EARLY ORAL CULTURE, BUT PARTS DO NOT. GENESIS 1, THE GRAND DESCRIPTION OF THE CREATION, IS GENERALLY ATTRIBUTED TO THE WRITING SKILLS OF A ~~PALESTINIAN~~^{PRELATE} SCRIBE, PROBABLY OF THE 5TH OR 4TH CENTURY, AND BASED ON A RICH TRADITION. THERE IS ANOTHER, SHORTER VERSION OF CREATION IN CHAPTER 2 WHICH PROBABLY REPRESENTS THE THINKING OF THE 8TH OR 7TH CENTURY. LET ME READ YOU THAT EARLIER VERSION.

"THESE ARE THE GENERATIONS OF THE HEAVEN AND OF THE EARTH WHEN THEY WERE CREATED, THE DAY THAT THE LORD GOD MADE HEAVEN AND EARTH. NO SHRUB OF THE FIELD WAS YET IN THE EARTH, NO HERB OF THE FIELD HAD YET SPRUNG UP. THE LORD GOD HAD NOT CAUSED IT TO RAIN UPON THE EARTH. THERE IS NOT A MAN TO TILL THE GROUND. BUT THERE WENT UP A MIST FROM THE EARTH AND WATERED THE WHOLE FACE OF THE GROUND, AND THE LORD GOD FORMED MAN OF THE DUST OF THE GROUND AND BREATHED INTO HIS NOSTRILS A BREATH OF AIR, LIFE, AND MAN BECAME A LIVING SOUL. THE LORD GOD PLANTED A GARDEN EASTWARD IN EDEN AND THERE HE PUT THE MAN WHOM HE HAD FORMED. OUT OF THE GROUND MADE

THE LORD GOD TO GROW EVERY TREE THAT IS PLEASANT TO THE SIGHT AND GOOD FOR FOOD. THE TREE OF LIFE ALSO IS IN THE MIDST OF THE GARDEN AND THE TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL."

THIS EARLIER STORY IS OBVIOUSLY A MUCH SIMPLER AND MORE NAIVE DESCRIPTION THAN THE GRAND SYMPHONY OF WORDS WHICH ARE GENESIS I. BUT IT WAS BELIEVED IN ITS DAY AND REMAINED IN SCRIPTURE FOREVER.

ONE OF THE TRAITS OF A CULTURE WHICH IS EMERGING INTO LITERACY IS THAT IT TENDS TO RETAIN ITS TRADITIONS IN RELATIVELY SECURE ORDER, BUT NOT COMPLETELY SO. SCHOLARS OF THE LAST GENERATION WERE SURPRISED AT THE NUMBER OF DETAILS WHICH THE TRADITION RETAINED LONG AFTER ANYONE WOULD HAVE PRACTICED OR UNDERSTOOD THEM. RECENT ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT WHEN A RHAPSODIST OR STORYTELLER REPEATS THE HISTORIES AND STORIES THAT THEIR PEOPLE LOVE, THEY CHANGE THE STORY A LITTLE EACH TIME TO MAKE IT CONFORM TO THE ATTITUDES AND KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR AUDIENCES. SOMETIMES THE STORIES WERE SIMPLY REPRODUCED; SOMETIMES VARIOUS VERSIONS OF A STORY WERE KEPT. EXAMPLE: IN THE CHAPTER OF EXODUS IN WHICH THE GIVING OF THE TORAH TO ISRAEL AT MT. SINAI IS DESCRIBED, THERE ARE AT LEAST THREE DIFFERENT TRADITIONS IN 20 LINES OF WHO WENT UP THE MOUNTAIN: MOSES ALONE; MOSES AND JOSHUA; MOSES, JOSHUA, AARON, NADAV, ABIHU, AND THE 70 ELDERS OF ISRAEL. CONSISTENCY WAS NOT A REQUISITE FOR THE TEXT TO BE INCLUDED IN SCRIPTURE.

IN RELIGION, THE MESSAGE PRECEDES THE MANUSCRIPT.
SCRIPTURES RECORD PRIMARILY THE CREATIVITY OF THE PAST.
BY THEMSELVES THEY ARE CREATIVE ONLY IN SELECTION, INCLUDING
SOME TRADITIONS AND EXCLUDING OTHERS, THUS ESTABLISHING AN
AUTHORITATIVE ANTHOLOGY OF TRADITION.

WRITING SOMETHING DOWN PRESERVES IT, BUT THE BOOK
IS NOT USUALLY THE ORIGINAL STATEMENT. MOSES, ISAIAH, AND
JEREMIAH NEVER SAW A SEFER TORAH. IT IS DOUBTFUL THAT,
HAD ONE BEEN SHOWN TO THEM, THEY COULD HAVE ASSIMILATED IT
WITHIN ~~THE~~ FRAME OF REFERENCE THEY WOULD HAVE UNDERSTOOD.
ANCIENT ISRAEL DID NOT HAVE HOLY BOOKS. NO CULTURE OF
THE TIME DID. SCRIPTURE IS A REPOSITORY OF IDEAS RATHER
THAN A FIRST, OR ORIGINAL, STATEMENT.

DESPITE THE CLAIM THAT THE HEBREW BIBLE GAVE THE
IDEA OF MONOTHEISM TO THE WORLD, THE TRUTH IS THAT THIS IDEA,
LIKE MANY OTHERS, EMERGED IN THE MINDS OF ISRAEL'S PROPHETS
AND IMAGINATIVE THINKERS LONG BEFORE IT HAD EVER BEEN REDUCED
TO WRITING. HISTORY AS A DRAMA OF GOD'S POWER AND JUSTICE
DEVELOPED IN THE MINDS OF THE PROPHETS, NOT IN THEIR WRITINGS.

*East
SAGES, more etc
had only then*

~~THE MOST IMAGINATIVE AND RADICALLY NEW PERSPECTIVES
OFTEN EMERGED BEFORE THERE WAS A SCRIPTURE. ONCE A SCRIPTURE
EMERGES AND IS CERTIFIED, ALL THIS CHANGES. SPEAKERS MUST
THEN TIE THEIR MESSAGE TO WHAT IS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK. FOR
A VARIETY OF REASONS, NO ONE TODAY COULD ERASE OR ADD A TEXT
TO A SCRIPTURE AND HAVE THE COMMUNITY ACCEPT IT AS VALID.~~

MOST OF THE TEXT WHICH BECAME SCRIPTURE SEEMED
LITTLE, IF AT ALL, DIFFERENT FROM THOSE TEXTS WHICH DIDNOT.
GENESIS TALKS ABOUT GOD AND QUOTES A FEW WORDS FROM HIM.

THE WRITER DOES NOT INTRODUCE ANY OF ITS PARTS, OR THE BOOK
ITSELF, WITH "THE WORDS OF GOD SPOKEN TO"--AND IN THE BOOK OF
JONAH THE ONLY WORDS ATTRIBUTED TO GOD ARE A SHORT ORACLE,
"YET 40 DAYS AND NINEVEH SHALL BE DESTROYED."

THE TWO LONG HISTORIES INCLUDED IN SCRIPTURE--
SAMUEL-KINGS AND CHRONICLES--MAKE NO CLAIM TO A NOBLER STATUS
THAN THAT OF HISTORY BOOKS GENERALLY. ESTHER NEVER MENTIONS
GOD OR CLAIMS DIVINE SANCTION. NO ONE, I AM SURE, WOULD BE
MORE SURPRISED THAN THE AUTHOR OF ECCLESIASTES THAT HIS
RUEFUL RUMINATIONS ON AGE AND THE IMPERMANENCE OF LIFE
ENDED UP ENSHRINED IN A SCRIPTURE.

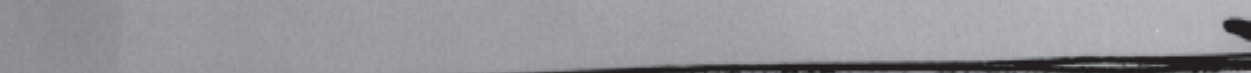
WHY IS THERE A SCRIPTURE? IN PART, BECAUSE MEN
LEARNED TO WRITE AND READ, AND WRITING INCREASED THE RANGE OF
KNOWLEDGE AND THE ABILITY OF A CULTURE TO PRESENT ITSELF
TO THE WORLD.

IN PART. IT'S WELL TO REMEMBER THAT MOST OF THE MATERIAL WE NOW CALL SCRIPTURE WAS NEVER INTENDED TO BE SO. INDEED, THE CONCEPT OF SCRIPTURE IS A LATE ONE, UNKNOWN TO THE NEAR EAST UNTIL THE 4TH OR 3RD CENTURIES BCE.

THE FIVE SCROLLS OF MOSES, AND THOSE OF THE PROPHETS, IN FACT REPRESENT THE FIRST WRITINGS EVER CONSECRATED BY A COMMUNITY. THE FIVE SCROLLS OF MOSES AND THE SCROLLS OF THE PROPHETS ~~WERE~~ WERE EDITED IN THE PRESENT FORM ^{LARGELY} AFTER THE 5TH CENTURY BCE. THIS HISTORICAL NOTE MAKES THE POINT THAT IT TOOK A LONG TIME FOR THESE FIRST CONSECRATED WRITINGS TO BECOME THAT--THERE WERE AT LEAST 800 YEARS BETWEEN MOSES AND THE APPEARANCE ^{OF WHAT} WE CALL THE FIVE BOOKS OF MOSES, AND PERHAPS ANOTHER TWO OR THREE CENTURIES BEFORE THESE BOOKS ^{as books} WERE CONSIDERED AS FUNDAMENTAL AND ESSENTIAL IN THE TRADITION--THAT IS, AS SCRIPTURE.

THIS HISTORICAL NOTE IS NOT A CLAIM SIMPLY THAT "WE DID IT FIRST." I WANT TO MAKE THE POINT OF HOW LONG IT TOOK.

WHY IS THERE A SCRIPTURE? IN PART, BECAUSE MEN LEARNED TO WRITE AND READ, AND WRITING INCREASED THE RANGE OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE ABILITY OF A CULTURE TO PRESENT ITSELF TO THE WORLD.



IN PART, BECAUSE OF THE PASSAGE OF TIME, FAMILIARITY. ONCE WRITING BECAME COMMON IT WAS INEVITABLE THAT EVERY RELIGIOUS CULTURE WOULD HAVE A LITERATURE. WHAT WAS NOT INEVITABLE WAS THAT RELIGIONS--MOST NOTABLY JUDAISM, AS IT WAS THE FIRST TO DO SO--SHOULD TURN SOME OF THAT LITERATURE INTO SCRIPTURE --INTO A CONSECRATED TEXT.

A WRITTEN SCRIPTURE CAN BE TAKEN FROM PLACE TO PLACE. IT CAN BE COPIED OVER AND OVER AGAIN. THE TEXT CAN REACH A WIDER AUDIENCE THAN THE SPOKEN WORD.

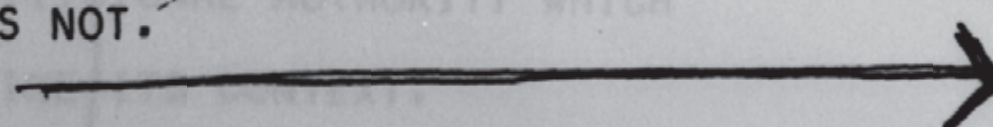
BUT HOW CAN ITS ACCURACY BE GUARANTEED? IN THE DAYS OF MANUSCRIPTS, EACH COPY WAS THE WORK OF AN INDIVIDUAL. A LEARNED SCRIBE WORKED LONG AND CAREFULLY ON A DIFFICULT TEXT AND OFTEN SAW HIMSELF AS A PARTNER IN THE CREATION OF A BOOK. HE COULD AND OFTEN DID AMEND OR ADD, ^{therefore} ~~AND THE~~ AS THE RESULT WAS AS MUCH HIS WORK AS THAT OF THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S. BELIEF IN THE CLAIM THAT SCRIPTURE WAS REVEALED ^{may have} ~~OFTEN~~ REFLECTED A DESIRE TO PROTECT THE SPECIFIC LANGUAGE OF TREASURED TEXTS AS MUCH AS IT WAS A CLAIM TO GOD'S AUTHORITY. AS THE ^{literate} ~~SCRIBAL~~ CLASS OF THE NEWLY LITERATE SOCIETIES BEGAN TO RECOGNIZE HOW THE VARIOUS TEXTS WERE HANDLED--AND NEEDING TO BELIEVE THAT THEY POSSESSED ROCK-SOLID SACRED WRITINGS--THEY PROTECTED THE WRITINGS FROM CHANGE BY CLAIMING THAT THEY WERE FROM AND BY GOD, AND ^{by} SURROUNDING THEM WITH TABOOS THAT HUMANS MUST NOT TAMPER WITH.

WHERE PRELITERATE SOCIETIES HAD FAITH IN, AND
DERIVED THEIR AUTHORITY FROM ^{AN ORAL} TRADITION ~~AND PROPHECIES~~ STATEMENTS,
LITERATE SOCIETIES INCREASINGLY CLAIMED THAT FAITH IS BASED IN
AND DETERMINED BY TEXT. TEXT AND TRADITION ULTIMATELY WERE
DECLARED TO BE ONE. CERTAINTY AND STABILITY WERE GAINED.
FLEXIBILITY AND SPONTANEITY WERE LOST. THE TRANSFORMATION
OF A BODY OF RELIGIOUS LITERATURE INTO SCRIPTURE PLACED
AUTHORITY AND TRUTH SQUARELY IN THE TEXT--AND THAT IS A
RESTRICTION.

THE EXISTENCE OF A WRITTEN SCRIPTURE CAN BE BASIC TO,
BUT NOT RELEVANT TO, A COMMUNITY'S NEEDS. PEOPLE TEND TO
ASSUME THAT THE SACREDNESS OF SCRIPTURE IS IMMEDIATELY RECOGNIZABLE,
INESCAPABLE. BUT THE TALMUD REPORTS THAT THE SAGES WERE STILL
DEBATING IN THE 2ND CENTURY OF OUR ERA WHETHER ESTHER,
ECCLESIASTES, THE SONG OF SONGS, WERE OR WERE NOT SCRIPTURE.
GREEK-SPEAKING JEWS HAD A SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT TEXT OF
JEREMIAH THAN THE ONE THAT FOUND ITS WAY INTO OUR BIBLE.
SCRIPTURAL MATERIAL IS NOT SELF-EVIDENT. GOD DID NOT DETERMINE
WHAT WAS SCRIPTURE. THE COMMUNITY DID.

IN THEIR CLASSIC APOLOGETICS, NONE OF THE WESTERN FAITHS ADMIT THAT THEIR SCRIPTURE IS ANYTHING BUT UNIFORMLY DIVINE. BUT IN PRACTICE THEY TEND TO EMPHASIZE SOME PARTS OF SCRIPTURE OVER OTHERS. JUDAISM DISTINGUISHES THE TORAH, THE FIVE BOOKS OF MOSES, FROM THE REST OF HEBREW SCRIPTURE. THE TORAH WAS ACCEPTED AS DIRECTLY REVEALED BY GOD. NO ONE, NOT EVEN THE PROPHET MOSES WHO PRESUMABLY FIRST SPOKE THESE WORDS TO THE COMMUNITY, IN ANY WAY HAD CHANGED OR AFFECTED GOD'S REVELATION. THE SPECIAL SACREDNESS OF THE TORAH WAS EMPHASIZED BY THE FACT THAT THE ONLY SCROLL KEPT IN THE SYNAGOGUE ARK WAS THE SCROLL IN WHICH THESE FIVE BOOKS WERE INSCRIBED, AND THAT THEY WERE PUBLICLY READ THROUGH DURING THE LITURGICAL YEAR. READINGS FROM OTHER PARTS OF THE HEBREW SCRIPTURE, PARTICULARLY FROM THE PROPHETS, WERE CHOSEN FOR THEIR RELEVANCE TO THE TORAH PORTION. NO ATTEMPT WAS MADE TO PLACE SUCH OTHER READINGS ON A STATUS EQUAL TO THE TORAH READING.

YET SCRIPTURES ARE NOT THE ULTIMATE WORD IN A FAITH'S RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT. THEY ARE A CRYSTALLIZATION OF THE ORAL TRADITIONS OF THE PEOPLE, AND LATER OF ^{SOME OF} THEIR WRITTEN TRADITIONS AS THESE DEVELOPED. MOST PEOPLE THINK OF THE TORAH AS ENJOYING UNQUESTIONED AUTHORITY IN JUDAISM. IT DOES AND IT DOES NOT.



SCRIPTURE REQUIRES COMMENTARY, AND THE JEWISH COMMENTARY ON SCRIPTURE IS THE TALMUD. SO IMPORTANT WERE OTHER MATERIALS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF JUDAISM THAT THE RABBIS OF THE 2ND AND 3RD CENTURIES ^{DECLARED} ~~THEY~~ THEM TO HAVE BEEN GIVEN TO MOSES AT MT. SINAI ALONGSIDE THE WRITTEN TRADITION, THE TORAH. RABBINIC JUDAISM CALLED ON THESE OTHER SOURCES TO MODIFY TORAH LAW--AS THEY DID WHEN THEY ~~EFFECTIVELY~~ ~~PRACTICALLY~~ CANCELED A TORAH LAW STIPULATING DEATH FOR ADULTERY AND FOR WITCHCRAFT BY SURROUNDING SUCH CASES WITH LEGAL REQUIREMENTS SO COMPLEX THAT THEY WERE ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO MEET.

A SCRIPTURE PLAYS A MAJOR ROLE IN EVERY RELIGION, BUT IT IS NEITHER THE FIRST NOR THE FINAL STATEMENT OF THAT RELIGION. INDEED, SCRIPTURE'S ROLE IS QUITE OTHER.

^{13th century} A' SCRIPTURE ~~ADDRESSES~~ ^{PRESENTS} THE EMOTIONAL AND HISTORIC DRIVES WHICH SET THE RELIGION ON ITS WAY. IN A SENSE, SCRIPTURE IS THE RAW ENERGY OF THE FAITH ^{AND} REFLEX OF AN ALL-IMPORTANT PERIOD OF TIME. THE DISCIPLINES OF THE FAITH ARE BETTER REPRESENTED AS CODES, RATHER THAN AS MYTH OR PARABLE. IN JUDAISM THAT CODIFIED TRADITION IS IN THE TALMUD, WHICH IS LIKE CANON LAW IN CHRISTIANITY AND THE SHARIYAH IN ISLAM, THE MODEL OF LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AUTHORITY WHICH SET THE LAW IN PLACE AND DEFINE ITS CONTEXT.

^{unhinged}

SCRIPTURES ARE UNABASHEDLY PRAISED BY THE FAITHFUL AS BOOKS OF INESTIMABLE WORTH. SO WE MUST ASK A QUESTION. WHY DID JUDAISM, AND OTHER ~~TRADITIONS~~ TRADITIONS, MAKE SO MUCH OF THE POSSESSION OF A SCRIPTURE--^{Judaism had been} ~~THEY HAD SURVIVED,~~ ~~IN JUDAISM'S CASE~~ FOR CENTURIES, WITHOUT SACRED WRITINGS.

~~been~~ ~~CREATIVE~~

IS THE TEXT HOLY BECAUSE IT PRESENTS GOD'S OWN DICTATION?

IS IT ^{SACRED} ~~SCRIPTURE~~ BECAUSE IT PRESENTS THE INSPIRED WISDOM OF GOD-INTOXICATED SAGES OR SEERS?

DOES ITS MERIT LIE IN THE FACT THAT IT PRESENTS THE FUNDAMENTAL TEACHINGS OF A TRADITION?

THERE HAVE BEEN AS MANY ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS AS STUDENTS WHO HAVE SERIOUSLY POSED THEM. SOME SPEAK OF THE IMPORTANCE OF SCRIPTURES PROVIDING THE NECESSARY CENTERPIECE TO THE RELIGION'S ENTERPRISE, DEFINING AND GIVING SHAPE FROM WHICH ALL TEACHINGS FLOW. OTHERS EMPHASIZE THE SCRIPTURE'S AFFIRMATION OF CONSISTENT VALUES AND TRADITIONS IN A WORLD WHERE ANY ASSERTION CAN BE QUESTIONED OR CONTRADICTED, FOR SCRIPTURE DECLARES THAT CERTAIN VALUES AND TEACHINGS ARE GOD'S OWN, AND THEREFORE BEYOND DATE.

THIS IS BOTH THE CASE AND NOT THE CASE--TEACHINGS CHANGE, AS EVIDENCED IN THE AFFIRMATION OF RESURRECTION IN THE LATER SECTIONS OF THE BIBLE, WHILE EARLIER SECTIONS ARE IGNORANT OF THIS IDEA. A THOROUGH KNOWLEDGE OF SCRIPTURE IS USEFUL IN UNDERSTANDING A RELIGION, BUT YOU CAN'T BUILD AN IMAGE OF THE LIVING RELIGION ON THE BASIS OF ITS SCRIPTURE. A MARTIAN WHO HAD READ THE HEBREW SCRIPTURE BEFORE VISITING THE FAITHFUL AND OBSERVING THEIR WAYS AND LISTENING TO THEIR VIEWS WOULD HAVE A DIFFICULT TIME RELATING WHAT HE SAW AND HEARD IN THE LIVING COMMUNITY TO WHAT HE HAD FOUND WRITTEN IN THEIR HOLY BOOK.

THE HEBREW SCRIPTURE NEVER MENTIONS THE SYNAGOGUE, THE OFFICE OF RABBI, THE SEPARATION OF MEN AND WOMEN AT WORSHIP, EVEN THE REQUIREMENT OF A RITUAL OF REGULAR READING FROM A SCRIPTURE.

ON THE OTHER HAND, THE FIVE BOOKS OF MOSES GO ON AT GREAT LENGTH ABOUT SACRIFICIAL CULT, ~~AN EARTHLY ELITE~~ ^{AN EARTHLY ELITE} ~~MONASTIC~~ ^{MONASTIC} PRIESTHOOD, ~~AND ADULTERERS~~ ^{AND ADULTERERS} STIPULATES THAT WITCHES BE BURNED AND ADULTERESSES STONED-- ALL COMPLETELY IRRELEVANT TO TODAY'S AND YESTERDAY'S FAITHFUL.

BUT THE ACTUAL TASK OF DEFINITION WAS LEFT TO OTHER WORKS.

JUDAISM HAS A SACRED TORAH TODAY, AND THE TORAH DOES CARRY WEIGHT. IT CONTAINS THE BASIC MYTHS AND HISTORIES OF THE PEOPLE AND SOME OF THE ORIGINAL LAW. SO DOES THE TALMUD, ^{THE} ~~A~~ MASSIVE BODY OF TEACHING, EDITED MORE THAN 1500 YEARS ~~1000~~ AFTER SINAI, WHICH RABBINIC PIETY ALSO ASSOCIATES WITH THAT REVELATION AND ON WHOSE AUTHORITY IT DECLARES ~~THE~~ DISCIPLINES VALID OR INVALID. IN MANY OF THEIR DISCUSSIONS, THE SAGES READILY ADMIT MISHNAHKODEMET L'MIKRA, THAT IN DEFINING PRACTICE, THE MISHNAH, THE RABBINIC TEXT OF THE 2ND AND 3RD CENTURIES, ~~TAKES~~ PRECEDENCE OVER SCRIPTURE.

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM HAS IT THAT JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM ARE, AND HAVE BEEN FROM THE BEGINNING, DEFINABLE AND CONSISTENT ENTITIES--THAT AT TIMES ENTHUSIASTS HAVE TRIED TO RESHAPE THE TRADITION BUT THAT THE SCRIPTURE WAS THERE, ACTING LIKE A MAGNET, PULLING ~~THE~~ DEVIANTS BACK TO THE SOURCE.

AN ATTRACTIVE IDEA, BUT THAT'S NOT THE WAY IT HAPPENED. THE SCRIPTURES LACKED THE POWER TO GIVE FULL SHAPE TO THE TRADITION. THEY BECAME IMPORTANT ^{TESTS} ~~SYMBOLS~~, BUT THE ACTUAL TASK OF DEFINITION WAS LEFT TO OTHER WORKS.

ONCE A TRADITION ENSHRINES A SCRIPTURE, IT DISCOVERS IT NEEDS A SECOND SCRIPTURE. THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT MAY BE IMAGINATIVE, EVEN POWERFUL, BUT IT IS AN EXPRESSION OF EXPERIENCE RATHER THAN A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF DOGMA AND PRACTICE. IT IS A BODY OF TRADITION FROZEN IN TIME, AN EXPRESSION OF SOULS REACHING OUT FOR NEW UNDERSTANDING OF GOD AND THE PURPOSE OF LIFE.

WHICH BRINGS US TO THE ROLE OF SCRIPTURE IN OUR LIVES TODAY. MOST OF US ARE COMFORTABLE WITH A DEFINITION OF SCRIPTURE WHICH SEES IT AS A COLLECTION OF MYTH, LEGEND, LAW, WISDOM, PROPHECY AND THE LIKE, AND WE'RE NOT TROUBLED BY ITS MANY CONTRADICTIONS.

ARE WE, THEN, POST-SCRIPTURAL JEWS? IN A SENSE, WE ARE. WE DO NOT AFFIRM THE INEFFABILITY OF SCRIPTURE. WE AFFIRM PROGRESSIVE REVELATION, THE IDEA THAT GOD REVEALS HIMSELF TO MAN OVER TIME, THAT NEW IDEAS EMERGE AND REPLACE OLDER ONES.

YET, SCRIPTURE DOES PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN OUR LIVES. IT IS A MAJOR PART OF THE LONG TRADITION WHICH STRETCHES UNBROKEN, BACK ^{NEARLY} FOUR THOUSAND YEARS, WHICH KNOWS OUR STORY OF THE PASSOVER AND THE ORIGIN OF THE HOLIDAYS.

IT CONTAINS MANY OF THE STORIES WHICH HAVE BEEN TOLD AND
RETOLD. IT CONTAINS A RECORD OF CHANGES WHICH ARE NOT
SIMPLY HISTORICAL MEMENTOS BUT IMPORTANT STANDARDS IN THE
STRUGGLE OF MAN TOWARDS A HIGHER CIVILIZATION. ~~IT IS~~

SEE IT PLAYS A MAJOR ROLE IN JEWISH
SELF-DEFENSE

