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The Story of Scripture, draft, prologue and epilogue, 1989.

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DEDICATION:

TO ADELE WITHOUT WHOSE LOVE AND HELP THIS WORK MIGHT NEVER
HAVE BEEN FINISHED.

I WANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE HELP OF MARIE PLUTH, MY MOST COMPETENT
SECRETARY; CLAUDIA FECHTER, LIBRARIAN OF THE TEMPLE AND
INDEFATIGABLE RESEARCHER; JEAN LETTOFSKY AND MERRILY HART,
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PROFESSOR OF MIDRASH AND HOMILETICS AT HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH
INSTITUTE OF RELIGION, NEW YORK, N.Y. INSTITUTIONS I HAVE RELIED
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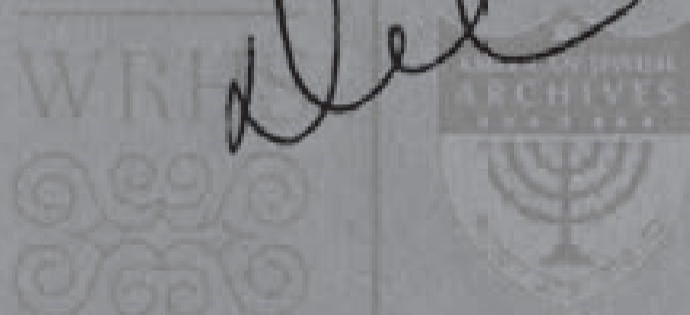


DANIEL--

I THINK THIS PROLOGUE FROM YOUR BOOK WOULD MAKE A WONDERFUL SERMON OR ARTICLE SOMEWHERE. THIS IS AN EXTRA COPY--WHICH MARIE CAN TYPE INTO BIG PRINT, EASILY, ONCE SHE GETS THE COMPUTER GOING--THAT YOU MAY WANT TO LOOK OVER AND EDIT FOR WHATEVER PURPOSE YOU THINK YOU CAN PUT IT TO.

Love,

Alfred



P-2

requirements that the Bible specifically mandates. His
literalism was selective.

PROLOGUE

I was drawn to the study of scripture by the resurgence of scriptural innocence in our times. Powerful forces are at work in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic worlds: black-hat orthodoxy, evangelical churches, and the Muslim Brotherhood, each out to coerce its community to organize around rules and practices that each insists its scripture prescribes. The revival of fundamentalist scriptural religion is one of the surprises of the late twentieth century. Those of us who received a liberal education in mid-century believed that fundamentalism was a relic of the past. Not so, as the successful activities of the Ayatollah Khomeini, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, and the Reverend Jerry Falwell have testified. The literal understanding of scripture is very much alive.

Early in 1989, I watched a televangelist urge his viewers to mount a campaign to require their local schools to teach a literal version of the first chapter of Genesis, including the doctrine of man's special creation. The evangelist dismissed the Big Bang and evolution as unproven theories put forward by disciples of a pseudo-religion called humanism. He pounded away at his claim that no one should trust mere theories, since God had revealed in the Bible the truth of these matters--that the literal interpretation of the Creation story and other biblical episodes is, in fact, fact. Yet that preacher did not encourage his flock to celebrate the calendar of holidays and the Sabbath (Mal. 2:10) or the example of strong, independent-minded women

requirements that the Bible specifically mandates. His literalism was selective.

This evangelist would claim those were Old Testament laws and that he was following the New Testament. But the New Testament is inconsistent on this point: Paul denies the continuing authority of the Mosaic law; Jesus does not. In Jesus' eyes, the law will remain binding at least until End Time: "Not an iota or a dot of the law would pass away until all will be accomplished" (Matt. 5:11). One can legitimately prefer Paul to Jesus; but at the least, the preacher should recognize that what he teaches is not the Bible but an arbitrary selection of biblical texts. Despite his claims, he does not take the scripture literally: he takes it selectively. His Bible leaves out any and all ideas that do not conform to an evangelical Christianity and small-town, middle-American morality.

One of the least examined commonplaces of our times is that the Bible is a good book, even the Good Book. To believers their scripture is an unmitigated source of blessing and a statement of redemptive truths. It cannot be doubted that the scriptures of the major faiths have been important sources of encouragement and wisdom for millions of people. Many have found the courage to keep going on the basis of texts that have been quoted or read to them. Yet we are more conscious today than perhaps ever before that a scripture, any scripture, is a mixed bag. While we may approve "Have we not all one Father" (Mal. 2:10) or the example of strong, independent-minded women

like Huldah, Deborah, and Ataliah, or the moral urgency of "burn out the evil in your midst" (Deut. 13:6), white supremacists, male chauvinists, and defenders of privilege can also cite texts to validate their convictions: texts about "hewers of wood and drawers of water" (Josh. 9:21), laws that give a father control of his daughter's person (Num. 30:4-6), and Samuel's acquiescence in the sacralization of royal prerogatives (1 Sam. 8:10-22).

Though each scripture represents itself as an inspired text and is acclaimed by many as the word of God, no scripture is noble, or even sensible, in all its parts. Read any enshrined apocalypse. The Hebrew scripture includes not only factually suspect history but teachings that seem unworthy of humans, much less of God. Abraham hardly sets an example of manly responsibility when, at Sarah's insistence, he orders Hagar out of his tent. How can anyone consider as inspired the brutal stories of conquest and battle in the Book of Judges? The Koran's concept of a holy war, Jihad, gives any humane spirit pause, as must some of Mohammed's demands that various tribes who opposed him be extirpated. The New Testament's bitter and intemperate condemnation of Jewish leaders as deicides, hypocrites, liars, and whited sepulchers are not only baseless charges but have caused centuries of suffering. Unfortunately, when such a text becomes scripture, it cannot be expunged, however pernicious its consequences.

Endorsing a scripture, a community defines it as the speech of God, holy, true, inerrant. Piety is one thing, the text

another. Every scripture contains misstatements, false statements, and contradictions--a notion so commonplace that George Gershwin used it in his 1935 opera Porgy and Bess: "The things that you're liable to read in the Bible, it ain't necessarily so." Some people see the problem as no more than accommodating exuberant stories--Joshua commanding the sun to stand still, Jesus multiplying the fish and the loaves--which can easily be explained as the enthusiastic way the ancients treated legends.

But the problem is not simply exuberance. Scriptures contain contradictions. In Numbers, God consecrates the family of Aaron as priests; in Ezekiel, the family of Zadok. According to one Sefer Torah statement, the paschal sacrifice must be roasted (Exod. 11:9); according to another, boiled (Deut. 16:7), and the roasting requirement says specifically, "you shall not eat the paschal sacrifice . . . boiled in water." Many texts fail to make clear whom an author was addressing, what specifically he wanted to accomplish, and even what general purpose he had in mind. Is the biblical tradition that says, "Love your friend as yourself" (Lev. 19:18), encouraging simple respect for others, charity, self-sacrificing concern for another's life and person, or simply counseling unselfishness? Who is that "friend"? An intimate, any passerby, or only one of your own tribe? What does the command "love" require? An occasional helping hand? Sacrificial care? The biblical sentence provides few clues. Interpretation is inevitable.

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Scriptures first became integral to religion at a particular time in human history which roughly coincides with the spread of literacy and the rise of urban society. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, all developed sacred books to which was ascribed a high degree of authority and infallibility. In each case these books became central to the subsequent development of religious practice and teaching. Each of these religions has a Book, but none is contained or fully defined by that book. Despite a scripture's dominance in religious life, it can never fully control the upsurge of the human spirit seeking communion with God, the spirit that gives a faith vitality and confidence. Even after The Book becomes consecrated, mystics and others maintain intense spiritual lives only partially determined by it. Nothing can stifle the desire of the human spirit to commune with the divine or the special capacity of those who commune with God and hear His voice. When the gates of revelation are declared closed and the scripture completed, interpreters inevitably appear who claim an authority to construe the text's meaning in ways derived less from logical analysis of the text than from the Holy Spirit or a Bat Kol, a voice originating in the heavens.

The Torah, the New Testament, and the Koran rarely enjoyed unquestioned authority within their respective communities, for official practice often deviated from the clear intent of specific scriptural statements. Rabbinic interpretation effectively canceled Torah laws that stipulated death for

adultery and witchcraft, by surrounding such cases with complex legal requirements almost impossible to meet. The Gospels assume the Jewish calendar, but the Church soon introduced its own. While each scriptural religion affirmed its Book as God's Book and treated it with reverence, each interpretation became not only a sacred discipline but a battlefield as believers fought to make scripture say what they wanted and needed it to say.

Although scriptures are unabashedly praised by the faithful as books of unique and inestimable worth, such praise does not tell us with any precision wherein lies their special merit. Is the text holy because it presents the inspired wisdom of a God-intoxicated sage or seer? Does its value lie in the fact that it presents the fundamental teachings of a particular tradition? Is it, in fact, God's words?

Why did Judaism, and later other traditions, make much of the possession of a scripture after having flourished--in Judaism's case, for centuries--without a scripture? There have been as many answers to this question as students who have seriously posed it. Some speak of the importance of scripture in providing to a religious enterprise a necessary centerpiece, defining and giving shape, from which all teachings flow. Others emphasize a scripture's importance in confirming certain values and teachings as God's own and, therefore, beyond debate in a world where any teaching or value can be disputed and any assertion questioned. Others argue that a scripture is no more than an artifact of literate societies, an inevitable

consequence of the growing number of those who could and did read and write, who sanctified certain teachings and set them into texts. ^{insert 7B here}

The shrine libraries of ancient West Asia included works of law, myth, hymn, and wisdom--in style, and sometimes in substance, not unlike much of the material that found its way into the Bible. In Hellenistic times, the Temple in Jerusalem had a sizable library which included, among many other works, scrolls that ultimately would be chosen as part of the Hebrew scripture. Many of these rolls, those that would be chosen and those that would not, were studied and believed in biblical times. Few besides the Five Books of Moses were treated as sacrosanct. No one was disturbed to find different versions of various classic narratives in circulation, nor to find scribes who copied them adding and emending.

However valued, a classic is not yet a scripture. A question not often put, and less often answered, is: Why, beginning in the late pre-Christian centuries, were first the Jews and then others no longer satisfied to have a library of thoughtful and inspiring religious classics but impelled to turn certain of their scrolls into scripture? That they did feel so impelled cannot be denied. If we define religion as the emotional and intellectual response to the anxiety-laden fact of being alive but never fully at peace in a world not fully understood, it follows that a religious belief grows out of a personal search for a sanctified purpose and a believable hope. Beyond the troubles of each day, there must be some sense of the

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WITH THE GROWTH OF URBAN SOCIETIES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOLING,
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possibility of peace and security, if not in this world then in some other. In religious terms, the affirmation of life's possibilities is described as a response to the holy, with "holy" a synonym for a dimension of ultimate mystery, God's presence in our lives. A scripture captures and presents ^a that sense of purpose and hope. Scriptures are gospels, "good tidings," as well as Torah, "God's Instructions." Human life, fragile and pressured, holds as one of its fondest hopes the impossible dream of total security. Projecting this need on to written documents that deal with themes of purpose and permanence, the religious response personifies the sense of holiness in the concept of scripture: unchanging, the immutable heart of the faith, God's certain teaching and promise. In this sense, a scripture is the quintessential religious object.

But you cannot build a complete understanding of any religion on the basis of its scripture. Even if you have a thorough knowledge of another religion's scripture, you would have, observing its adherents' ways and listening to their views, a difficult time relating what you saw and heard of the living community to what you had read in their Holy Book. The Hebrew scripture does not mention the synagogue, the rabbi, the separation of men and women at worship, or even the requirement of reading publicly from the scripture. On the other hand, the Five Books of Moses go on at great length about the sacrificial cult and a dynastic priesthood, and stipulate that a witch must be burned and an adulteress stoned, all completely irrelevant to

second scripture for definitive answers on issues of obligation

today's practice. The New Testament makes no mention of popes, the divinity of Mary, Christmas, or tithing.

Once a tradition enshrines a scripture, it discovers that it needs a second scripture. The original scripture may be imaginative, even powerful, but it is an expression of private experience rather than systematic. Its ideas are expressive of the soul reaching out for new understanding of God and the purpose of life. Much is omitted. The second scripture is conceived for a more practical purpose: specifically to provide the faith with an inclusive and functional text in which doctrine and duty are defined. These second scriptures, though not given a major place in the worship hall, are essential in the study hall and council chamber. The Talmud is a child of the classroom, primarily a manual of discrete statements about Torah law and practice broadly arranged by topic. The Church tradition is a collection of individual council decisions which became canon law. The Shariyah was drawn together by Islamic jurists whose approaches to the law were in general agreement but who differed on specifics.

Where the original scripture tends to be effective, dramatic, and compelling as literature, the second scripture--the Talmud, canon law, and the Shariyah--tends to be prosaic, not at all the kind of book you would pick up to calm distress or anxiety or to find encouragement in sorrow. These second scriptures are academic and scholastic documents, written in dry, legal style. Scholastics and theologians turn to their second scripture for definitive answers on issues of obligation

and structure. The general community acknowledges the importance of its second scripture but tends to leave its study to experts. The importance of the Talmud in advanced Jewish education is probably due to a recognition of the limitations of the Sefer Torah as a basis for teaching the whole range of Jewish obligations.

The relation of a religious community to its two scriptures is not unlike the marriage relationships in polygamous societies where several wives live together in amity for a while under the same tent--until, inevitably, someone or something comes along to disturb the relations among them. In Judaism and Christianity, groups like the Karaites and Protestants came along and argued that the second "marriage" was not sanctified, that only the original testament was inspired. The second scripture is functional rather than symbolic; yet since its authority must be acknowledged as central to the community's well-being, the second scripture is dressed up with some of the symbols of scriptural authority and presents itself as inspired interpretation rather than as direct or inspired revelation.

While scripture may be venerated and symbolically affirmed as the centerpiece of a religious enterprise, in matters of practice it often does not have the last word. Scriptures are texts assumed to be central; but a scripture's effective meaning is determined by the evolving life of its society: that is, the needs and interests of synagogue, church, or mosque. Most people accept a scripture not for what it is but for what it has become in the hands of their leaders. The Roman Catholic Bible

is scripture as interpreted by the teaching of the official church. The Church affirms that its scripture is the ultimate authority on faith and morals; but, clearly, on such issues as birth control and abortion, the Church has made its scripture yield strong positions that the scripture really does not deal with. The Bible as read by liberal American Protestantism is a historically conditioned document espousing Christology and the social gospel; the same Bible in the hands of evangelical American Protestantism is a messianic document espousing the transforming power of faith in a person's life.

So long as each religious tradition endowed its scripture with sanctity and believed it was the word of God, and so long as its belief was reinforced by parochial schooling and communal conditioning, its scripture was the basis of religious life. When in modern times the challenges to beliefs once confidently held became more numerous and more persuasive, the once indisputable consensus began to unravel. As the multidisciplinary university curriculum took over from the homogenous curricula of religious academies--the cathedral school, the Madrassa, and the yeshivah--the disciplines of history, archeology, literary criticism, etymology, sociology, and a variety of other studies began to raise questions about the reliability of what was in The Book. The world was not created in six days. During the Conquest the sun did not stand still for the Israelites to complete their destruction of an Amorite army (Josh. 10:12). The story of a virgin birth and an

immaculate conception were not historical facts but re-creations of pre-Christian myths.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, people began to notice the seams that hold the parts together, and to question the accuracy of scriptural statements. As knowledge grew of the oral prehistory of a scripture, and as recognition grew that scriptures had incorporated materials from other cultures, people began to ask whether a scripture can be accepted either as a full statement of the faith at the time of its composition or even as a unique composition. Questions began to be asked: about the relationship between scripture and current teachings; about varying, even contradictory, historical interpretations; about the text's divinity. If the devil can quote scripture to his benefit, so can the minister. If various layers of human concern can be shown to exist within and behind the received text, and if the interpretation of scripture differs from age to age, what about it is divine? If the scripture is inspired, why did interpretations sometimes have to turn it on its ear? How to account for discrepancies? Divergent attitudes toward monarchy appear in the book of Samuel; in one chapter, God orders a judge to anoint a king over Israel (1 Sam. 12); in another, God complains to Samuel because the tribes are demanding that a king be appointed (8). Christian apologetes have spent many lifetimes trying to harmonize the various Gospel accounts of Jesus' career. The Koran affirms free will ("The truth is from you Lord, so let whosoever will, believe; and let

whosoever will disbelieve" [18:28]) and denies it ("God leads astray whom He wills and guides whom He wills" [16:95]).

It was a shock to most believers when research made it clear that the Five Books of Moses, the New Testament, and the Koran were composite and edited works rather than a single record written under the inspiration of God. It was even more traumatic when people realized that the "original words" could not be recaptured and that some of the text never had been spoken at Sinai. Deuteronomy presents a different view of the Exodus-Sinai trek and different formulas for certain laws than Exodus-Numbers. There are four distinct Gospel versions of Jesus' life, and a single account can be shaped only if the reader arbitrarily decides which version of a particular incident or speech is "original."

Contrary to conventional thinking, there is no single scriptural point of view. Saint and devil, orthodox and heretic, prophet and profit seekers can find texts that seem to justify their approach to scripture. Each will argue that those who quote scripture to contrary purpose wrench the texts out of context. Some seem to do so; others do not. The rabbis frequently admitted that the sages could espouse divergent, but equally defensible, views with the ultimate rationalization: both this and this (one sage's view and a divergent one) are the words of the living God. In fact, there is no methodology that can assimilate, evaluate, and draw every sentence of a scripture into a single coherent and consistent teaching.

Stories told about Jesus are in fact just that—stories. Such

Once the community of believers included many who accepted the Talmudic teaching that every word of the Sefer Torah came down from heaven (b. San 99b), or the Protestant thesis (Calvin's) that the New Testament was "breathed out" by God and that its teachings are inerrant. Many believers no longer do. Today there is no longer a consensus about scripture among believers. Today many affirm that if there is to be a messianic age, humans--not God--will bring it about. That is the essence of the social gospel. Yet in our era of technical triumphs, we have seen the re-emergence of evangelical groups who, despairing of the human capacity to build a bright future, turn back to texts that speak of a Second Coming and a supernatural intervention.

In modern times, nonfundamentalist communicants prefer to talk of inspiration rather than revelation and to define inspiration in relatively modest terms--as the special insight of someone of high imagination and intellectual capacity who, in thinking about ultimate questions, has touched on the truths that animate the universe. They see the great spiritual truths that underlie their faith. They look on their Bible as a product of a partnership between man and God, a human response to the divine. Their scripture's truth lies in the spirit that animates the whole rather than in the accuracy of particular facts and detail. They like to talk of the great themes that presumedly inform the text. They have no trouble admitting that the world was not created in six days, or that the miracle stories told about Jesus are in fact just that--stories. Such

is human nature and the need for reassurance that many who no longer believe their Bible remain easy nonetheless within their faith, easily participate in liturgies that eulogize the Bible, and expect those who preach to them to draw ideas, illustrations, and inspiration from the Holy Book. The Anglican bishop, John Robinson, gained some notoriety a quarter-century ago by writing about the death of God (Honest to God, 1963), yet found nothing unusual in speaking on God's disappearance from history from a pulpit that prominently displayed a Bible proclaiming God's presence. Scriptures have a power that transcends their contents, and humans have spiritual needs that transcend the need for accuracy in a scripture.

While both fundamentalist and modern believers assert on faith that their scripture presents a coherent teaching (however differently it may be described), a close reading of any scriptural text makes it clear that the work reflects a particular period and a particular culture. This is the paradox that creates commentary--that massive body of interpretation designed to remove anachronisms, rationalize outdated ideas, and read new ideas into the text.

Elaborate and elegant systems of commentary and interpretation were developed by scripture-based traditionalists to save their scripture from any imputation that it was inconsistent, mistaken, or untrue in any of its parts. These interpreters consciously and unconsciously subsumed, or sought to subsume, the entire scriptural corpus into a unitary, coherent, and consistent world view. They were so successful

that to this day most believers think of the Bible as a book that presents a consistent theology and ethic. Even those who know that the Bible is an anthology assume that all the parts ultimately reflect a single theme. They argue that the Song of Songs is not a collection of early and earthy love and wedding poems which have no particular reason to be in a scripture, but a sustained poetic allegory in which the lover and his beloved presumedly represent God's love for Israel and Israel's for God. The idea that everything in scripture is scriptural dies hard.

In Judaism this reconciliation was achieved by a process called Midrash. Midrash accepts as self-evident the proposition that the Sefer Torah is a unique literature, God's, but is not content to take a biblical text at face value. The literal meaning, its ideas clearly and fully expressed, is only one of many God placed within a particular paragraph or sentence. Each word, each letter of the text, is part of God's revelation; and therefore every sentence, phrase, word, and letter was placed there for a purpose. The Bible's full meaning depends, in part, on understanding these noncontextual matters. To make this understanding possible, God enlightened certain masters and enabled them to interpret the text so that all could understand its real meaning.

The human mind being extraordinarily imaginative, commentators have always been able to manipulate texts to give them acceptable meanings. But what of the obvious contextual meaning that is patently illogical or unacceptable? The Bible speaks of a six-day creation. The New Testament describes Jesus

as the son of God. The Koran indicates that Mohammed actually entered Heaven. In earlier times, rationalist interpreters explained these texts as allegories or metaphors. They accepted the idea that there are several levels of meaning in a scriptural text--sermonic, metaphorical, allegoric, esoteric--but also insisted that the straightforward reading must not be dismissed. It was early Protestant doctrine, if one can for these purposes put Luther and Calvin together, that the plain sense of scripture must always be considered. The biblical rabbis said the same of peshat, their system of straightforward contextual interpretation (b. Sab. 63b). Yet if the plain sense of scripture is considered and taken as authoritative, then on an issue such as evolution the fundamentalists cannot be denied: the plain sense of Genesis is that Adam was created separately and specially. Similarly, those Christians who argue against an easy acceptance of ecumenism and religious pluralism rely on texts that insist that a true Christian must separate from all who do not accept official doctrine (John 2:9-10). If you do not assume that a scripture is fully revealed by God, these issues can be easily reconciled, but if God is the author, then every part of scripture must be without error.

As today scripture has again become of crucial importance in many parts of our world and among many groups--not only as symbol, but as a first and full statement of the will of God--groups of intense believers insist that they base their ways of life on their holy Book. In their eyes, it is all knowing, infallible, the source of all truth. In this country, many

fundamentalist believers take a particular side of some of the most contentious issues of the time--birth control, abortion, what to teach about creation and evolution, the place of prayer in public life, the death penalty, and civil rights--not on the merits of the issue but because they believe their scripture has foreclosed all but one choice. Some believe that this kind of piety exists only in the middle American states called the Bible Belt, but that's not quite true. I have a friend who found civil rights and nuclear disarmament in his Bible, where millions of others find an intense and rather narrow piety.

Scriptures have played and continue to play important roles in the everyday lives of the faithful and some of the not so faithful and, therefore, need to be understood. Understanding requires that we search out their symbolic and actual role in faith. The relationship between scripture and faith, even for those who unreservedly proclaim their scripture inerrant and sufficient, is complex. However strong the claims and pressures certain books can exert on us, life cannot be lived from a book.

To understand the complex relationship of faith and text, we shall follow the history of one scripture, the oldest, the Hebrew scripture, seeking to define at each stage the complex relation of a living faith and its texts. We will see that the relation of a faith community to its scripture is never, as piety claims, a submissive and unquestioning acceptance of what the scripture affirms; that while the scripture becomes a sturdy symbol of continuity, in actual practice the community turns from a simple reading of scripture to interpretation and

interpretive process. One might say that people turn to their scripture for inspiration and to the second scripture--to the Talmud or to canon law or Shariyah--for discipline.

In retelling the story of scripture, we discover that a truly creative era occurred in each of the three major Western religions before they developed a written scripture: the time of the faith's beginnings, when the founders developed their ideas, is a period of high energy and creativity. We recognize that, as the religion matures and the insights of the early years need to be conceptualized and defined, the history of scripture tends to revolve around the question of who controlled the apparatus of interpretation and what readings they authorized. No scripture is internally consistent but is made so by believers who ascribe truth to the text, usually out of fear that they cannot manage their lives on convictions that are less than absolute about goals, values, and duties.

The emergence of scripture allowed each tradition to define its faith's teaching with greater precision and to guarantee a relatively uniform set of dogmas and practices. At the same time, the fixed text restricted the faith's development by insisting it conform to the written word. The story of the struggle between definition and restriction, and of a second scripture developed later in each tradition to justify positions not self-evident from the scriptural text, is the story of the Western faiths in their medieval development.

In the oldest of these three Western faiths, the rise of scripture tended to parallel the spread of literacy. Judaism

existed a thousand years or so without an authorized scripture and, during that era, enjoyed perhaps its most creative period. Its religious leaders--such as Moses and the other early prophets, all of them probably illiterate--emphasized a living tradition rather than a text.

The story we chronicle here is of a long-lived oral tradition transformed over many centuries into a written scripture which was then embraced and enveloped by oral interpretation that swiftly took to itself the value and validity of scripture. One aspect of the story is inevitably chronological, for it follows the Jews over time as they move, willingly or unwillingly, from place to place, or are governed, even in their own homeland, by a succession of alien rulers and cultures. But the heart of the story is the human--not uniquely Jewish--capacity to adapt to new places, times, languages, rulers, circumstances, needs, ideas. Before the Babylonian Exile, spoken words enshrined in the people's collective memory carried the burden of their religious development. It was the Exile and the attendant loss of land, home, and national shrine that made urgent the transformation of memory into manuscript. Priest-scribes struggled to keep alive the people's history by writing it down. Those Jews who returned from Exile, equally with those who lived in the Diaspora--literally, scattered outside the homeland--shaped from liturgy, prophecy, and history a scroll tradition which served as the basis for an educational system that has lasted until the present day and still serves as the basic religious tradition for all Jews. The story ends with

a question--which is, perhaps, the Jewish way: what is the role of scripture in the modern world? It is my hope that a fuller understanding of scripture's changing role over many centuries past helps to answer the modern question.

Today the traditional understanding of scripture as the word of God has tended to be vitiated by the impact of secular thought. Traditional scriptures, though recognized as important as classic texts, no longer have this power for all believers. What happens to a faith when large segments of its community no longer trust or believe its scripture? Can a religious tradition exist without the confidence that it is teaching the word of God? Yes and no. In a strictly logical sense, the answer has to be no. Once scripture is reduced to a great books course, it is no longer scripture. But that is not its only fate. The power of these scriptural works tends to transcend their claim to divine authority. Another answer is yes, it can exist as it exists today, if men and women make individual intellectual adjustments to the problem. Each of the faiths existed before there was a scripture, and can, I believe, exist today without one.

But scripture is there and needs to be assimilated into a community's thought. Even if scriptures are not, in fact, the comforting and rock-solid presences that conventional wisdom insisted they were and should be, they act in precisely that way. Once authorized, they become and remain the most significant symbol of a faith's unique and consistent teachings and authority. In every faith, people are encouraged to turn to

their scripture for advice, encouragement, and comfort; advice that, it is claimed, has proven its worth over time. Sermons are preached to show how the text, declared to be the unchanged and unchanging truth, offers answers to the problems of the day.

In an overly complex age such as ours where change is the only constant, there is an urgent and understandable desire for certainty. Modern learning is overwhelming and so full of qualifications that it provides more questions than answers to those, the already confused, who must decide whether to be faithful to their marriage, committed to a particular set of social or political values, strict or permissive with their children, or able to let an aged parent die with some dignity. What American evangelists and Iranian mullahs and those in the Jewish community who claim to be Torah-true offer is precisely that sense of certainty, a comforting sense of ancient authority and eternal verities presented as God's will. They insist that the symbol is, in fact, a statement of reality, that their scripture is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but truth. Many seek just such reassurance, and many accept that it cannot be found.

DANIEL:

I BELIEVE THIS CHAPTER--THE EPILOGUE--COULD ALSO BECOME AN ARTICLE
OR A SERMON/LECTURE. PLEASE LOOK IT OVER WITH THAT IN MIND.



Epilogue: The Authority of Scripture
in the Modern World

[The man of today] must read the scriptures as though they were something entirely unfamiliar, as though they had not been set before him ready-made, at school and after in the light of "religious" and "scientific" certainties, as though he has not been confronted all his life with sham concepts and sham statements which cited the Bible as their authority. He must face the book with a new attitude as something new.

(Martin Buber)

The power of the idea that the faith was announced at Sinai lies in its simplicity and in the simple confidence with which it is asserted. This idea, which was universally affirmed by medieval Jews, sets the faith apart at its source and seems to provide it with a sure, clear, and permanent identity. But it is an unacceptable claim for our historical and linguistically conscious generation, which no longer accepts the thesis of an original, complete, once and for all times, revelation. Simply put: if I cannot believe that God dictated the Torah in its present form to Moses, yet am told that it is the fact of that revelation which gives Judaism's teachings their authority, then the text's authority is no longer compelling. In emphasizing the event as crucial, rather than its content or the functional value

of the teaching, Judaism puts itself at risk. If there was no Sinai, then what is there to depend on--only a faith that seems to be based on elegant but improbable legends, and who wants to make ultimate commitments to a set of teachings that are clearly not what they have long been claimed to be?

Rabbinic Judaism had presented its teachings as timeless. Modernity introduced the dimension of time into all religious discussion. Joseph Albo, who lived during difficult times in early fifteenth-century Spain, was a philosophically minded sage who developed in his Sefer ha-Ikkarim (Book of First Principles) a neat model of the Torah tradition. He likened the Torah to a sprig planted by the events at Sinai. Like all young trees, its basic shape, though underdeveloped, is already in place. The trunk represents the existence and unity of God; the branches, providence, covenant, election, immortality; the smaller branches, the mitzvot, the commandments. Over the years study and interpretation nourished the tree, which has grown taller and sturdier in all its parts; but its shape has remained as it was when planted. To be sure, there have been changes. Each year the tree leafs out and blossoms appear. These are the customs appropriate to each generation which, like the leaves, fall to the ground to be replaced the next season; but nothing essential changes.

History challenged this model. Over the last two hundred years, countless careful studies have shown that a fully mature monotheism took centuries to develop, that the doctrine of physical resurrection did not emerge until the time of the Book of

Daniel (second century B.C.E.), that the concept of two Torahs first appeared in the second and third centuries C.E., and so on. Pious Jews, loving the Torah and its familiar themes and sagas, reacted to the challenges historical evidence flung at them, and began to search in the tradition for themes that seemed to reach back in time to the beginning. Many well-trained minds undertook this task of apologia, but ultimately the search found what the seekers were prepared to find. The modern orthodox found the twofold law. The moderate reformers discerned a national spirit acting and reacting on the tradition. The more radical reformers emphasized an ethic that spoke to and about moral principles rather than traditional practices. Given the religion's three-thousand-year history on all the continents of the world save the polar caps, it is not surprising that evidence could be found for diverse and divergent portraits of Judaism.

The Coming of Modernity

To the premodern Jew, scripture had been fully formed from the beginning and later authorities only filled in the details. With modernity came a new awareness of the inevitable changes that take place in all times. With that awareness came the recognition that the religions of the world are like all other human institutions, subject to development and change. This new understanding of history met with stubborn resistance, eager embrace, and nearly every response between. Some were willing to trust their own thoughts, to look for confirmation of their faith to the mind and to experience rather

than to a scripture--a willingness that is the hallmark of modernity. Others clung to established patterns of thinking and believing, while still others searched for and devised ways to wed change and tradition. The efforts and attitudes of some of our predecessors struggling with modernity's challenge to scripture may be instructive to us.

Non-Orthodox Believers

Perhaps modernity's most persistent quarrel with the old claims that the two Torahs constitute a seamless scripture is with their prescriptive nature. Torah not only sets out rules and disciplines as God's will but assumes that the community will enforce these obligations. Yet one sign of the modern spirit, at least in the West, is the loss of control by religious authority and a suspicion of all authority. Unless derived from a voluntary social contract, authority is seen as arbitrary and suspected of being entirely self-serving. It is generally, though not universally, held that political and religious loyalties should be freely chosen, church and state should be separate, and the pattern of one's life freely established.

Unhappiness with the coercive elements of religious traditions has its premodern roots in the rationalist assumptions about religion developed during the Enlightenment in the philosophies of men such as John Locke, in the spread of education beyond the clergy, and in the growing dissatisfaction among the newly powerful urban merchant class with the churches' support of traditional class-based privileges. This concern with the heavy

hand of religious authority provided the theme for what was perhaps the first modern tract dealing with the Torah: Jerusalem: On Religious Power and Judaism, which was published in 1783 in Berlin by one of the first Jews admitted into non-Jewish academic circles, the gifted philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86). He once won first place--over, among others, Immanuel Kant--in an essay contest sponsored by the Prussian Academy.

An observant Jew, Mendelssohn set out to separate personal belief and practice from institutional authority. He argued that religious institutions ought to be concerned only with enhancing man's relations with God and making clear how that relationship created the values by which one's private life should be shaped. As the Torah was the focus of these values, Mendelssohn prepared a German translation of the Torah in Hebrew letters so that it might be understood by the body of ghettoized Jews who, he believed, would profit from learning refined German.

The state has every right, Mendelssohn argued, to regulate the activities of individuals to enlarge the common good. Religious institutions, on the other hand, can only teach, encourage, and persuade. When Palestine was a Jewish state, in Roman times, the Torah was its operative law; today the Torah is no longer an operative law which may be imposed but a religious obligation to be followed out of personal conviction. In Mendelssohn's day, the Berlin Jewish community could regulate or control the lives of its members only by social pressure and, in extreme cases, by excommunication. He strongly opposed the practice of. The new values of the larger world challenged the values of the

excommunication and argued that neither the state nor the religious authorities may intrude in matters of conscience.

Mendelssohn was a paradox. Strictly observant, willing and able to hold to and carry out the prescribed rituals without any of the usual religious assumptions which normally engender such loyalty, he failed to see the inherent contradiction in his position or to foresee its disruptive consequences: Mendelssohn's grandchildren would no longer be Jews. But he had raised perhaps the major problem of modern faith: What to do with the medieval assumption of the overriding authority of scripture?

In the medieval world, corporate entities had been the accepted pattern of community organization. Wherever they lived, Jews belonged to a separate corporate body and were treated as a community apart. They governed their communal life, always accommodating to the particular, rarely benevolent, requirements of the local ruler.

By the first half of the nineteenth century, the corporate character of life had begun to break down. Jews in Western Europe and the United States could, for the first time, become citizens of a state. By the middle of the century, some were admitted to the universities of Central and Western Europe. For the first time in European history, some Jews could come out of the isolation that had been the norm in the Middle Ages for all, and that for Jews lasted down to the nineteenth century. New ideas, new political constructs, and new institutions were casting doubt on ways of life that had been taken for granted. The new values of the larger world challenged the values of the

traditional Jewish world. Some Jews began to feel constrained by the authority the religious community exercised over major elements of their personal lives. Many resented anyone telling them they could not shorten the prayer service or add a sermon in German, their vernacular, or teach girls together with boys in their schools.

In Eastern Europe, where Jewish self-government and corporate responsibility persisted for another century, the issue of religious freedom and Torah authority remained smoldering. Eastern European Jewish communities were more resistant to new ideas and change, in part responding to the resistance of their societies, which were generally less educated than those of Central and Western Europe.

Modernity was not a condition that described all segments of Jewish life. The modern spirit came to Frankfurt and Philadelphia in the early decades of the nineteenth century, to Warsaw and Lublin more than half a century later. It never penetrated the hamlets and villages of the shtetl. When it came, it often came suddenly. The Jews of Europe did not have the time to enjoy a Renaissance, a Reformation, or an Age of Reason. Many who bought steamer tickets in Hamburg and disembarked eight weeks later in New York were thrust into a modern world they had no preparation for. Mendelssohn's philosophical system, based on ideas of the Enlightenment, raised, albeit indirectly, a question that has faced Jewish life ever since. As long as the Sefer Torah was accepted as scripture, God-inspired, the unity of all its parts could be assumed. Modernity destroyed this comforting

consensus. From the world outside Torah, modern Jews brought to Torah ideas they found satisfying.

Mendelssohn was one of the first to articulate the growing belief among Western Jews that scripture had ceased to be the sole source of revealed doctrine and became largely a confirmation of what the age of reason taught.)

Mendelssohn himself was a son of the age of the Enlightenment, the Aufklärung, the belief then popular among many intellectuals that revelation could not disclose any ideological truths that were not also discernible through reason and experience.

Theologians of the age translated this idea to mean that there are three elemental religious truths: the existence and oneness of God, Divine Providence, and the immortality of the soul. To be sure, one finds these cardinal beliefs enunciated in scripture, but one can also find there much else--the resurrection of the dead, various messianic themes, the special creation of human beings--that is not self-evident. Mendelssohn acknowledged that the three central beliefs were unmistakably self-evident, arising naturally in the human mind. These truths are universal truths, as valid in Christianity as in Judaism. They do not depend on scripture. Therefore, Judaism does not wholly depend on scripture.

Mendelssohn's philosophical system, based on ideas of the Enlightenment, shaped his religious beliefs and led to his insistence on the three cardinal doctrines.)

Judaism is, according to Mendelssohn, a combination of these three essential doctrines and a revealed code of practice. To

him, it was manifestly clear that "you are not commanded to believe, for faith accepts no commands; it accepts only what comes to it by reasoned conviction" (1969, p. 71). (Jerusalem, trans. by Alfred Jospe, Schocken, New York, [1969, p. 71]) Yet he went on to argue that scripture does, in fact, command a special discipline, the familiar and eternally valid code, to which the Jew should give assent because it is God's generous gift, designed to confer distinction on and give a sacred purpose to Jewish life. Ceremonial law is obligatory; doctrine is not.

As we have seen, generations of Jews before Mendelssohn had also shaped their religious beliefs according to the ideas of their times--but in the belief that they were simply interpreting the text; they were not conscious of bringing a set of preconceptions to scripture. By contrast, however much we moderns appreciate elements within scripture, we consciously bring to it outside material. We no longer make the connection our ancestors would have assumed: that somehow out of scripture's depth the truth that we seek will emerge. We may read appreciatively, but we also read critically. The scripture is not our world; rather, we bring our world to scripture.

Modernity developed quickly in nineteenth-century Europe. From a few favored Jews and exceptional individuals like Mendelssohn, it grew into a way of life and thought popular with many Jewish businessmen and intellectuals. Again and again, Jews challenged the old assumptions of a fixed and all-encompassing truth expressed by scripture. Some laymen were eager to introduce German sermons and texts into the liturgy and to introduce into

worship a modern esthetic. Some took advantage of citizenship and converted to Christianity. Others worked out their own ways of adjusting tradition to their beliefs. There were those, who--like Elijah, gaon of Vilna, the leading rabbinic light of the eighteenth century--held to traditional religious ways and practices while encouraging a broad secular education.

In the nineteenth century, the best-known advocate of this last approach was a German rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-88). He took a mishnaic statement attributed to Rabbi Gamaliel--"an excellent thing is study of Torah combined with worldly occupation for toil in them both puts sin out of mind" (M. P. Avot 2:2)--and interpreted "worldly occupation" to signify not simply "employment" but the high culture of the day. Hirsch's motto, Torah im derech eretz--Torah, together with a contemporary standard of manners and culture--encouraged a scrupulous observance of the halacha and legitimized a curriculum that included modern learning and science as well as the written and the oral law. Those who followed Hirsch's way read the creation stories literally and midrashically as a source of some truths but not necessarily of science; yet they did so in a reverent manner, accepting the general authority of the Torah. While not unaware of studies that were finding the biblical accounts of Sinai inconsistent and inconclusive--evidence was piling up that many tribes of the confederation were never in Egypt and that the Mosaic law reflected both earlier and later conditions than those of the Sinai years--they judged this irrelevant to Torah study;

Torah was affirmed; affirmation was more a matter of faith than

yet they did not insist that all the details of the Exodus and the Sinai revelation be taken literally.

Hirsch insisted that the task of the modern Jew is not to question the mystery of revelation but to search out and, as best one can, understand its meaning and live up to its obligation.

His followers were not simple literalists who would join a search for Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat, but ^{they} affirmed on faith that the whole Torah is revealed, full of wisdom, and authoritative; and that, combined with the disciplines taught by the oral law, it provides the basis from which the values of modern life are to be judged. They believed that Jews have in the Torah a standard against which any and every contemporary philosophy or value system should be judged. They were adamant on the revelatory nature of the Torah and took seriously the tripartite division of the written scripture: The Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

Toward the oral law they tended to take a similar position. They readily acknowledged that the Mishnah and the Talmud are not identical with the Torah she-be'al Peh but insisted that the understanding derived from pious study and living by generations of sages (tradition) is inspired and authoritative. They took delight in much of the aggadah of the Talmud and Midrash but did not look on these as literally true. Many engaged in careful study of the history of talmudic composition but with the assumption that the rules set down there are authoritative and the teachings consequential.

In neo-orthodox congregations where the authority of the two Torahs was affirmed, affirmation was more a matter of faith than

of liturgical proof. The Torah is revelation, a unique document, a miracle that God in His kindness gave to Israel through His prophet, Moses. It is the source of Israel's faith and contains liberating truths that the generations have sought to make real in their lives. Unlike some modern orthodox Jews who see the secular university as a threat, Hirsch's spiritual heirs rejoiced in the knowledge explosion. While standing on the foundation of Torah, Hirsch's disciples accepted as useful modern knowledge of all kinds: insofar as knowledge is true, they say, it cannot be a threat because the seal of God is truth. They challenge the logic of modern knowledge only where it touches the nature of Torah: the Torah is Torat Emet, true in every way.

A former classmate of Samson Raphael Hirsch at the University of Bonn, Abraham Geiger (1810-74), provided the best-known statement of the liberal position. Geiger was especially influential because of his reputation as an exceptional scholar whose learning encompassed virtually all Jewish thought and history. In a series of theological essays, he described Judaism as a religious culture always in the process of becoming. There had been revelation at Sinai and, subsequently, to the prophets, out of which had emerged the insight that there is one Creator, God, who is known primarily by knowledge of His moral will. Priests, Wisdom teachers, and sages developed these ideas, criticized some, elaborated some, and developed others. The Tannaim did not simply interpret what they received, but accepted new ideas according to their needs. Revelation was not a once and only phenomenon, limited to a single event that presumably defined

the tradition for all time. Geiger taught that revelation takes place at many times and in many ways--his concept of "progressive revelation"--and is vouchsafed not only to prophets but to poets, artists, and scientists. New truths are constantly being ~~over-new~~ discovered, and any theological tradition that claims to be ~~action~~ committed to truth must adapt itself to this fact. By definition, then, no scripture can contain all truth. ~~holly dependent on the~~

Geiger did not see Judaism's development as ever upward. In Sinai had set Israel on the way. Inspiration, piety, concern, commitment, and an openness to new ideas kept it ~~on the way~~. ~~Once~~ the Talmud was in place and the philosophical-minded like ~~can~~ Maimonides had made their contribution, Judaism had, unfortunately, closed itself off from the sources of life and truth. As a leader of reform in his day, Geiger was moved to preach on the imperative of reawakening the tradition's slumbering vitality. He believed that some of the disciplines of observance, which such men as Mendelssohn had praised, discouraged the best spirits of his age, whose interests and aesthetics required new forms of expression. He emphasized instead the centrality of the moral law ^{following Isaiah 42:6,} and urged his followers to be "a light unto the nations"

~~arrives, the~~ ~~the~~ ~~rabbi~~ ~~discovers~~ ~~a~~ ~~single,~~ ~~trivial~~ ~~scribal~~ ~~error~~ and Just over a century after Mendelssohn, the noted Hebrew and Zionist master Aha^d Ha-Am (Asher Ginzberg, 1856-1927) published a fiery essay in which he protested against the insistence of ~~law~~ traditionalists that justice and morality are fully and ~~on~~ satisfactorily defined by a scripture developed long ago by sages facing quite different circumstances. He worried that the people

of the Book had surrendered their souls to the book, to the arbitrary and sometimes anachronistic authority of the written word:

The book ceases to be what it should be, a source of ever-new inspiration and moral strength; on the contrary, its function in life is to weaken and finally to crush all spontaneity of action and emotion, till men became wholly dependent on the written word and incapable of responding to any stimulus in nature or in human life without its permission and approval. (1894, p. 59) ("The People of the Book," 1894, in Ahad Ha-Am, by Leon Simon. Philosophia Judaica, Oxford, East and West Library, 1946, p. 59)

Ahad Ha-Am argued that life, not ancient legal formulas, must govern a community's concept of morality and justice. He illustrated his argument with a story he had found in a poem by the Hebrew writer A. D. Gordon: A Talmud student goes abroad to make a living. He leaves his young wife behind. Years pass. He does not send for her, and she meets a man she would like to marry. She writes asking for a divorce; the husband agrees and has a scribe prepare the appropriate document. But when it arrives, the local rabbi discovers a single, trivial scribal error and declares the document invalid. A corrected copy is requested but never arrives. The husband has by now been lost at sea. There are no survivors of the shipwreck; and since rabbinic law requires at least one witness to certify a death, the woman becomes an agunah, a deserted wife, forbidden by Jewish law to remarry out of fear that her husband might some day turn up alive.

Ahad Ha-Am wanted to end Judaism's reliance on texts and rescue it from the lifeless, frozen orthodoxy he believed it had become. To restore Judaism, more than words were required. It was necessary for Jews to move from minority status in a non-Jewish world into their own world--Zion. He was convinced that in Zion, in Palestine, in the Promised Land, their own land, Jews could create a social and cultural life that would inspire others. More important, the new life would enable Jews to re-create themselves as a people. His is one of the first voices to call for a Jewish people bound together by other than purely religious ties.

Orthodox Believers

There are still groups who readily and without reservation accept the Torah's authority. For them the infallibility of the tradition is a matter of faith and historical fact. For them the Torah's description of the thousands who were at Sinai, who saw God's presence descend on the mountain and heard His voice and later Moses' proclaim the teachings, is the best possible evidence that these events happened just as the Bible describes them. In their eyes, the text is sacred and the source, together with the oral law, of all significant truth. Such believers accept obedience to God's instruction as the key to redemption, both for the individual and the nation: "This Book of the Law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate therein day and night that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it." To all these Jews, save the Sefer Torah, the Book of the Law, is the most sacred object that the Jewish people possess. It is the symbol of the covenant between God and His people, the source of the Jewish law, and the key to the Jewish redemption.

written therein; for then you shall make your way prosperous and you shall have good success" (Josh. 1:8). Other, simpler folk

Members of such groups within the Jewish community generally send their children to parochial schools whose teachings reinforce their religious assumptions and equip the child with knowledge of the rich tapestry of ideas and tales the sages and folklore have drawn from or into the texts. Those texts are, they believe, far more extensive than the Sefer Torah: together with what we call the Bible, they include the Talmud, the Midrashim, the codes, the philosophers, the Kabbalah, and the Responsa, the literature of questions and rabbinic answers ~~that is similar to case law in the American system~~. To all these texts, save the Sefer Torah, critical analysis can be applied; but they insist that the Sefer Torah is God's word and therefore unique, exempt from such examination. They do not question the Torah's authority over their lives. Indeed, they say they are saddened by the indifference of most Jews to the pattern of lifelong study and commitment they call the Torah way.

There is a world of difference between neo-orthodox Jews, such as Hirsch's followers, who are today exemplified by the faculties of Bar Ilan and Yeshiva universities, and the groups who continue as if the knowledge explosion of the last several centuries had not taken place. For these Torah study is the only knowledge that counts for anything. The world outside has little of value to teach. They continue the pattern of culture of European Jewry before it was challenged and reshaped by modernism. They live to a surprising degree in and for books--more specifically, in and

for Torah. In that European Jewish world, men spent their lives studying the Talmud and its commentaries. Other, simpler folk spent hours each day reciting Torah texts as an act of devotion. Book study was held to be a consummately worthy way to spend one's life--but study only of the books of the Torah, which were held to contain all wisdom and even the presence of God.

George Steiner, a European critic-playwright who makes sporadic forays into matters

The People of the Book Today (Salmon, #66, Winter-Spring 1985)

In the early days of printing, many Hebrew books contained a title page called sha'ar; the usual introductory information was printed within the outline of a gate bearing a motto that suggested that all who passed through it and studied what lay beyond performed a pious act: "This is the sha'ar [gate] of the Lord, the righteous shall enter therein" (Ps. 118:20). Talmud Torah, Torah study, was seen as a virtuous way to spend one's life and accepted as a technique of moral and spiritual improvement, as a key to the mysteries, and as a way to approach God.

It is this pre-modern European culture that gave rise to the conventional judgment that Jewish culture is book-centered, even book-dominated. Telling the extensive and fascinating story of the authors, editors, scribes, and printers who developed and made available the literature of the Jewish people, The Hebrew Book (edited by Raphael Posner and Israel Ta-Shema, one of a series of single-theme volumes developed from the materials prepared for the 1974 Encyclopaedia Judaica) rehearses this conventional judgment: "Not for nothing has the Jewish people been known as the 'people of the book.' The most important object in Judaism is--albeit in

scroll form--a book, the Torah. And the cultural history of the Jewish people is a story told, not in pictures, buildings, or statues, but in books" (introduction, n.p.). This is a clumsy version of Jean Paul Sartre's mordant observation that "Jews live in books, not in landscape," and its elegant elaboration in "Our Homeland, The Text," the title of an essay by George Steiner, a European critic-playwright who makes sporadic forays into matters of Jewish interest (1985). (Salmagundi, #66, Winter-Spring 1985) The judgment, however conventional and popular, is a strange one for a people who, as we have seen, made prodigious efforts to prevent just the fate of being smothered by texts.

There is today no synagogue without an ark and no pattern of synagogue worship without Keriat ha-Torah, the ritual of reading from the Sefer Torah. Orthodox congregations follow the traditional cycle of Sabbath and holy day readings, while non-orthodox groups may read only a section of the weekly portion each Sabbath. All congregations read at least a few verses. Keriat ha-Torah was, and remains, the central Jewish ritual act honoring the tradition. Unhappily, one of the hallmarks of modern life is its swift pace; few come regularly to the synagogue, and those who come no longer linger in God's courts. There is so much else of interest for Jews to do. Yet few Jews would deny the value of Keriat ha-Torah. Its old forms are maintained. The number called up to read from the Torah, or more customarily simply to offer the blessings, has remained fairly constant over the centuries: seven on the Sabbath, three on the weekdays. In every congregation, the reading is preceded and followed by familiar blessings which thank

God for the gift of Torah, which is seen as the sign of Israel's election and, as such, the source of Israel's immortality as a people:

Praised be you, O Lord, our God, King of the universe, Who has chosen us from among all peoples and given us his Torah.

Praised be you, O Lord, giver of the Torah.

Praised be You, O Lord, our God, King of the universe, Who has given us a Torah full of truth and in so doing planted within us eternal life. Praised be you, O Lord, Giver of the Torah.

Nineteenth-century liberal congregations fought for the right to meet, teach, and organize the life-cycle events in their own ways. Such a synagogue was receptive to the music, art, and culture of the day and used them in worship. Its congregants recognized ideas from other cultures and other ways of life and were willing to adapt these to Jewish practice. This eclectic approach assumed that what the rabbi and congregants felt to be valid had validity--and what they did not, did not.

In Europe, there was a mixed pattern of congregational autonomy, varying from region to region. In some regions and cities, local Jewish councils limited the ability of liberal Jews to experiment, to drop old rituals and create new ones. In other regions, liberals gained control of their local councils and ensured that their way was acceptable to the Jewish community and to the local non-Jewish authorities, to whom all changes in worship and unresolved frictions within the Jewish community had to be submitted.

In the United States, where there was no tradition of Jewish corporate life, from the beginning there was full congregational autonomy. Each congregation organized itself on its own authority; and during most of the nineteenth century, there was no official national body that could impose its will. All efforts to treat the American Jewish communities as a single organism, and to put communal restraints on changing attitudes, were unsuccessful.

Perhaps the central issue on which attitudes were changing was the authority of scripture--changes that applied equally to the first and the second scriptures. In Europe, the issue could not be avoided, for if it led to strife within the Jewish community, the local government stepped in. In the United States, it was not an issue that disturbed the outward unity of the Jewish community. There was little unity to begin with. Scriptural translations and commentaries were many and varied, and communal standards no longer encouraged obedience to the Torah's full authority.

The issue did not disappear in the United States. There were always fervent orthodox believers; and with the creation in the mid-twentieth century of the State of Israel, the issue became a matter of increasing concern and national division: What degree of authority shall an organized, yet pluralistic Jewish community give to the bodies who claim to govern in the name of Torah?

The reach--or limits--of scriptural authority have been defined in several contradictory ways in modern times. Some Jews accept scripture. Some see only claims they can no longer affirm, and categorically deny any divinity to scripture: if the texts are inspired at all, it is the inspiration that comes to artists and

poets. Some see the scriptures as interesting but archaic. Others see their seminal role in Western civilization and the continuing power of some of their ideas; in their eyes, the Bible is a classic but no longer a commanding voice. Or if it is a commanding voice, the orders it gives are so nobly and broadly ethical as to be capable of affirming what one wishes to affirm. Some claim that Judaism's long reliance on texts stands in the way of the sense of immediacy in religious experience; the call to obedience to the text overwhelms the emotions and feelings that play so great a part in the religious life.

Those who accept scripture--to be exact, both scriptures--sense God in the word. Some accepting believers become belligerent about their faith, perhaps because the rising tide of fundamentalism in the outside world reinforces their faith in "Bible." Other believers may have doubts but allow the evidence of the centuries of a rich Torah-based culture to silence their doubts. They treat the Torah as inspired, unique, a miracle. They believe that the rabbinic ethos, their understanding of Torah, remains authoritative. They insist that they--and they alone--do not bring foreign fires to the altar; and that they, and they alone, are open to the specialness of God's will.

For other Jews, the scriptures have become simply a series of documents that reveal various concerns and interests of Judeans and Israelites over the course of the first millennium B.C.E. From this secular vantage, many of the Bible's constraints do not commend themselves today and cannot be accepted on faith or on any other basis. Jews it is not only Jewish law. That is binding upon

To many more Jews, the scriptures have become a seminal document, the source but not necessarily the substance of their traditions. Accepting the idea that Torah law is inspired and therefore, necessarily, good, they nonetheless do not accept the position of those who wish to impose it. They see Judaism as a living, changing religious culture which began at Sinai and was afterward constantly in the process of development. In the nineteenth century, this view of the Torah as the catalyst but not the all-inclusive teaching was generally combined with that century's confidence in progress.

The liberal traditions in the West, as they were developing a hundred years ago, put forward arguments based on then-current ideas about human progress. Confident that science and technology were improving human life, that what was early was necessarily primitive and what was contemporary was "advanced," liberal Judaism trusted that there had been and would be many revelations, not just one. Vivian Simmons, a mid-twentieth-century English liberal rabbi, has expressed these thoughts in popular form in The Path of Life:

Liberal Judaism cannot accept the old teaching of the verbal inspiration of Torah. Nevertheless, Jewish tradition, the best of Jewish tradition, a great deal of it, is still sacred to us. The scroll of the law is still the outstanding symbol of Judaism. In the Synagogue it plays a prominent part. Though it contains only the Five Books of Moses, it stands for the great Jewish principle that man is bound by law. But to Liberal Jews it is not only Jewish law. That is binding upon

us only insofar as it harmonizes with the best thought and the circumstances of our own age. For us religious truth and command mean: all those spiritual and moral obligations, whether expressed in the Law of Moses or in any other form, ancient or modern, which we acknowledge as commands for us to obey, though naturally we look primarily to Jewish law and tradition. The scroll of the Law is the symbol of our human duty--to God, to our neighbors, to ourselves. It stands for the supreme principle of Revelation: the belief that God reveals Himself and His will to man, not in one age, but in every age, not in one form, but in many (1961, p. 48). (The Path of Life, Valentine-Mitchell, London [1961, p. 48].)

Simmons describes the use of the scripture in a liberal synagogue: We still read out of the Scroll of the Law at the services of the Synagogue. But we do not read all of it, as is done in Orthodox synagogues. We read those parts that have for us a present-day meaning, and are either the source or an illustration of the moral and spiritual teachings which guide our lives. (Pp. 46-47)

His explanation that the traditional customs and rules "are not divine in origin, and are therefore subject to change and replacement" (1961, p. 48), makes clear that the scriptures have become sources from which critical spirits choose what is satisfying to them; and, further, that the scroll's "prominence in the Synagogue does not imply a pledge to accept all its teachings or to obey all of its commands." Arguing that the central command is "justice, justice shalt thou follow," Simmons says that the

Mosaic code is justice "in an early form," and "our interpretation of what justice means and demands has gone far beyond the Mosaic Law in its application to the life of today. It is by means of these progressive conceptions of justice that the Jew and his neighbours advance towards the ideal of human society" (pp. 48-49).

What all non-orthodox views of scriptural authority have in common is acceptance of the value of the scripture as a seminal and suggestive document, even though it has been drained of the divinity that gave it its original authority and power. The Bible's value is as a chronicle of the extraordinarily significant development of the idea of ethical living and of the attempts of a nation to build a way of life on the basis of new ideas and structures. The non-orthodox belief that neither the first nor the second scripture actually presented God's words has in no way eroded the conviction that the two scriptures made critical contributions to Jewish civilization. Modern ideas about history and historiography influenced liberal Jews to recognize that revelation must always be transmitted through human minds and is, therefore, inevitably conditioned by human circumstance. Sinai reveals as much about Moses as about God--perhaps more.

When scripture, while remaining scripture, began to be read as literature--as material that could be classified as myth, saga, narrative, law, and psalm--parallels could be and were found in other West Asian cultures, and studies were made of the distinctiveness of the Torah: how, for example, its law codes differed from Hammurabi's. The question that faced everyone was

whether the Bible was, in fact, just another national literature, albeit one that had played and continued to play an unusually important role in the development of Western civilization. Despairing of being able to use history to prove the Bible's distinctiveness, some began to speak of transcending history. The search for the essence of Judaism became a search for Judaism's existential meaning: What does the tradition as I know it mean to me? Modern Jews like Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) and Martin Buber (1878-1965) argued that religious truths are not found by applying some philosophical or sociological judgment to what people have said and written. There are, in fact, no objective and universal truths. What there are are moments of intimacy and personal moments of revelation when one confronts another's concerns or ideas and finds that they speak to one's innermost needs and awaken new ideas and feelings. The Bible, and presumably also the Talmud, are to be seen not as a copy of some divine dictation but as records of humans, like ourselves, opening themselves to ultimate reality. The Bible is the record of a dialogue between God and Israel, and this unique quality gives it its power and moral and spiritual authority. The ultimate seriousness of the original experience has not been completely lost in the reporting.

Martin Buber wrote of the Hebrew Bible as a compilation of the records from that centuries-long dialogue between a speaking God and human beings who were ready to listen. The value of scripture for the modern is that, if we would devote time and sensitive attention to the texts, we could listen in to that original

conversation. We, too, could stand at Sinai or with Joshua at Bethel. We must read the book with a new attitude as something new. We must

One of the challenges faced by moderns who seek to present the aliveness of the Bible to a generation of silent, critical readers is to get them to hear its voice. We find Martin Buber encouraging reading aloud, reading over and over, letting the words and cadences wash over the reader, letting the Bible speak rather than simply reading it. The German translation that Buber and Rosenzweig undertook, as well as their encouragement of reading aloud, meeting the text, sought to breathe life, immediacy, into Bible-reader relationships:

The man of today has no access to a sure and solid faith, nor can it be made accessible to him. If he examines himself seriously, he knows this and may not delude himself further. But he is not denied the possibility of holding himself open to faith. If he is really serious, he too can open up to this book and let its rays strike him where they will. He can give himself up and submit to the test without preconceived notions and without reservations. He can absorb the Bible with all his strength, and wait to see what will happen to him, whether he will not discover within himself a new and unbiased approach to this or that element in the book. But to this end, he must read the scriptures as though they were something entirely unfamiliar, as though they had not been set before him ready-made, at school and after in the light of "religious" and "scientific" certainties; as though he has not been confronted all his life with sham concepts and sham

statements which cited the Bible as their authority. He must face the book with a new attitude as something new. He must yield to it, withhold nothing of his being, and let whatever will occur between himself and it. He does not know which of its sayings and images will overwhelm him and mold him, from where the spirit will ferment and enter into him, to incorporate itself anew in his body. But he holds himself open. He does not believe anything a priori; he does not disbelieve anything a priori. He reads aloud the words written in the book in front of him; he hears the word he utters and it reaches him. Nothing is prejudged. The current of time flows on, and the contemporary character of this man becomes itself a receiving vessel (1936, p. 181). (Buber, Martin, and Rosenzweig, Franz, Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung, Berlin, [1936, p. 181].)

One further mode--a purely academic one--of dealing with the scripture in the mid-twentieth century is perhaps best illustrated by the new Jewish Publication Society translation of the Torah, first published in 1962 and revised in 1967. One of its goals is to be as accurate and exact as possible, identifying textual errors and untranslatable words: "Meaning of Hebrew uncertain" appears throughout. The new translation admits openly that a variety of English translations are possible for given Hebrew sentences, and even that there are sentences in the Hebrew that cannot be translated, thereby raising the question, albeit indirectly, of whether the Torah represents the word of God. This is fixed. The text is frozen. Some say that Judaism has come

approach ascribes fallibility to scripture itself. Academically sound, the translation denies any literal acceptance of Torah.

This is perhaps the final step in a gradual acceptance of the idea that the scripture is not God's words. Israel's scripture has become for many a human document, a classic work inspired in the sense that successful art is inspired, but no longer an unquestioned source of authority or an all-knowing, unquestioned guide to deed and doctrine. In that sense, for many Jews there is no longer a scripture. The power of the book and the value of many of its ideas are acknowledged, but it is no longer altogether holy.

For many, the model of their religious tradition is no longer Albo's tree, but a river, a great river like the Mississippi. It begins in small fresh-water lakes in Canada and Minnesota and flows several thousand miles across the North American continent to the Gulf. The current flows in one direction. Its past is present but not necessarily visible. At St. Louis, the river is quite different from the way it is at its source or at its mouth. Over its course much changes. Rains fall. Tributaries flow in. The sun evaporates water from the surface. Cities draw out water for their reservoirs, and farmers for irrigation. At times, pollution enters the river. From high in a plane, one can see the whole river. Science can today color a water molecule and follow its passage. Some may make it to the Gulf. Others won't. There is continuity and significant change.

Scriptures do not fit easily into such a model. A scripture is fixed. The text is frozen. Some say that Judaism has come

full circle, and that we are back at the time when there was Torah, tradition, but not yet a Sefer Torah. For many, scripture has again become simply a part of tradition, its value beyond debate but its authority not beyond question. The age of scripture as authority is for many over and done.

In the creative ebb and flow of Jewish life, the rise and fall of scripture has played a key role. But there was a distinctive faith tradition long before a written scripture appeared, and the tradition can adjust to its dethronement. What it may not be able to adjust to is the radically different world views that exist now within major segments of the community and determine their attitudes toward authority and faith.

In the late twentieth century, there are still Jews who would sacrifice life to text. Much of the political struggle in Israel with the extreme right-wing, the so-called Black Hats, is over this issue of Torah authority. In 1948, the government of the new State of Israel, for political reasons and following the old British mandate law that each religious community govern according to its own traditions, gave to traditional religious authorities control over the laws of personal status: marriage, divorce, issues of inheritance, adoption, and the like. From that day, the battle has been joined between those whose idea of a Jewish state is one governed by the two scriptures and those who would take a modern stance and follow the model of the United States Constitution by creating secular laws and separating state and synagogue. Since Ahad Ha-Am's day, the issues of conflict between those who go by the Book, and those who insist that the Torah

often blurs real justice and equity, have multiplied: autopsies, women as religious leaders, the authenticity of nonrabbinic interpretations of Judaism, the rights of non-orthodox Jews to have their marriages and conversions accepted. Ahad Ha-Am feared Torah fundamentalism, and the acts of those orthodox Jews who desecrate graves of reform rabbis in Israel show that he had reason for his fears. He worried that "'a people of the book,' unlike a normal people, is a slave to the book. It has surrendered its whole soul to the written word" (1894, p. 59).

(The People of the Book)

Since 1948, Israel has been the focus of a heated struggle between those who insist that a Jewish state must be governed by God's law, Torah, and those who insist that in matters of belief each should do what is right in his or her own eyes. What happens in Israel has repercussions throughout the diaspora. In American communities before 1948, it was a matter of live and let be. Today there are pressures to obey the Torah as law. American Jews of Conservative or Reform groups may not be able to settle in Israel unless their marriages, divorces, and adoption procedures follow certain halachot. The fiery battles over Torah authority that worked themselves out in Europe and America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are flaring again in Israel today and are major causes of division. Since the world thinks of the Jews, and the Jewish people think of themselves, as a single body, the issues that divide them are not purely philosophical.

Modern non-orthodox Jews are conditioned by the societies they live in. Though ours may be a "post-Christian" society,

traditional Christian norms still shape its thoughts and attitudes. Christianity emphasizes the experience of the mass and the presence of the spirit. It is, therefore, to the service, rather than to the scripture, that many modern Jews are conditioned to look for the sacred. Many such Jews have come to think that the only valid religious experience is one that is immediate and intensely personal. Seeing what we are prepared to see, interpreting sensation and experience in terms appropriate to our time and place, we hope for intensity in a conversion experience and for the sense of peace within a sanctuary. One can, of course, use the texts as a worshiper uses a cathedral, as an environment in which God's immanence is felt as present. The great religious traditions have, after all, incorporated into their scriptural texts the records of what individuals have felt in the presence of the sacred, so that the texts and their recorded traditions can be used as supportive models of custom and practice. But few moderns are prepared or willing to explore those possibilities. Not the scripture, but the service, seems the place where sacredness may dwell.

Thus, Jews who search for a scripture will probably seek it in the prayer books. The language of the worship service is generally nonspecific, broadly human, yet phrased in traditional idioms, often those of the Bible. Its themes are noble, capable of the most varied interpretation. Past statements and present needs are fused and offer a way to touch scripture: the cycle of Torah reading, a selection from some traditional passage, a talk allowed them to emphasise a bond they hoped the other people of

that can bring in relevant and acceptable bits of the rabbinic tradition.

The time is appropriate to clear up as far as one can the conventional idea about Jews and their books. Since book learning was increasingly prized in the modern world Jews began to move into, talk of Jewish traditions of book learning emphasized the intellectual nature of the Jewish ethos. Jews secularized their unique tradition of sacred learning as they entered civic life in the larger world. At a time of industrial transformation, when trained minds were in great demand, Jews found that their age-old habits of education could become the basis of economic success in the West. All the accomplishments of their traditional world--literacy, cultivation, erudition, achievement--were admired in their new one.

But book learning is one thing; the Jewish tradition of Talmud Torah, quite another. Torah recitation is not speed reading; it is not keeping abreast of the research in one's field, dabbling in world literature or political analysis, or an acquaintance with contemporary writers. It is a process of immersing oneself in a special culture. What the rabbinic world called lernen, too easily translated simply as "learning," was and is a discipline intended to transform scripture into life.

When Jews in the twentieth century began to apply to themselves the label "the people of the book," they meant it as both a literary compliment and a passport into the larger arena. Sharing, as they did, with the Christian world love of "the book" allowed them to emphasize a bond they hoped the other people of

the book would also feel. In their minds "the book" was the basis of a new entity, which they called the Judeo-Christian tradition.

It is my argument in this book that the Jewish spirit did not set out to develop a scripture; that during most of the biblical period a written scripture played no significant role; that the rabbis made prodigious efforts to mitigate the limitations imposed by the existence of a scripture; that the concept of an oral memorized law in part reflects these efforts; and that until the European centuries, Judaism more or less effectively escaped the limitations of scripture.

Judaism is not and never has been just the teachings of a set of authorized books. The text is not our homeland; life is. Commentary reads in as readily as it reads out. Our books were meant to become part of us, the living voice of God and tradition. Except under rare circumstances in Jewish history, the texts did not define life. Far more than has generally been recognized, life defined the texts.