MS-4850: Daniel Jeremy Silver Papers, 1972-1993.
Series 4: Writings and Publications, 1952-1992, undated.
Sub-series A: Books, 1961-1990, undated.

Reel	Box	Folder
71	22	1389

The Story of Scripture, draft, chapters 1 and 2, 1989.

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Chapter 1 - SCRIPTURE

It was through trial and error that people learned that a certain herb is a proven cure for stomach pains or that baiting a trap a certain way is effective or that planting crops after the early spring rains is the best guarantee of a good harvest. No one felt compelled to investigate why and how. Each accomplishment stood alone. There were cures but no field of medicine. When people began to write down their observations, they began to reflect on them in ways they had not done before. They now could abstract theory from a maze of discrete statements and, by going back and rereading half-remembered parts, develop broad concepts.

Since the dawn of what we call history, humans have been conscious of the limits of communication in a purely oral culture and have wanted to equip knowledge with permanence and greater reach. Early attempts to give staying power and transferability were simple: a tribesman might tie knots of various sizes into ropes to represent different weights or measures; a bedouin might draw on a rock the outline of a circle with a line above it as a sign to whoever might come by that he had dug for water at this place and found it. By our standards this was simple stuff, but by using objects to represent ideas, the tangible to suggest the intangible, society had taken the first step toward a written language. The goal was somehow to reify speech, to convert what was a fugitive event into an object which could be handled, carried from place to place, and consulted at will.

Mastery of the skills which make literacy possible represented a critical step in the development of civilization. To be sure, there were cultures before humans learned to read and write. Preliterate societies were governed by laws, pleased their gods by formal rituals, healed their sick with herbs and amulets, and accumulated practical knowledge about hunting, food gathering, and child rearing. Few, however, would argue against the proposition that literacy allowed civilization to develop at a brisker pace.

In an exclusively oral culture, knowledge reaches no farther than the human voice can carry it and remains available only as long as it can be recovered from someone's memory. The spoken word is evanescent. As soon as it is spoken it disappears. If a father did not teach his son his trade or a shaman reveal to a disciple the magical powers of roots and plants, that knowledge died with him. Literacy provided men and women with a recoverable past and sped the expansion of knowledge by making it possible for information to be exchanged over distances and [redacted] time. Though no one alive remembered a set of facts or a piece of poetry, these facts and that poetry once captured in written form could be recaptured at will.

Elaborate pictographic, ideographic, and hieroglyphic writing systems were slowly and painstakingly developed by Chinese, Sumerian, and Egyptian scribes, but such symbol systems were so complex that literacy remained a technical accomplishment which could be mastered only by professionals who spent years

equipping themselves with the necessary skills. These early scripts had many limitations, not the least of which was complexity. Each object and action had its own symbol. Scribes had to memorize thousands of signs. Someone took the trouble to count the number of Chinese characters in the K'anghsi Dictionary of 1716 and came up with the number 40,545. The number of Egyptian hieroglyphs is of the same order of magnitude. Pictograms could suggest simple actions but not tense or relationship. With pictograms you can make lists which tell the number of barrels of wine or bushels of wheat in a storehouse; but you cannot describe the special qualities of a single barrel, say, a light red wine from the Galilee with its special bouquet or aroma.

During the third millennium B.C.E., the Sumerians, among others, discovered ways to relate their signs to sound rather than to objects. Scribes began to develop syllabaries of language symbols based on sound. This was a major breakthrough since there are an infinite number of objects but a finite number of sounds. At first ~~these~~ thew syllabaries were fairly complex but, ultimately, a usable consonantal alphabet was developed -- in effect, a phonetic system in which a limited number of symbols stood for all the sounds used in a language. Various places and cultures have been awarded the laurel for that critical development -- Cyprus, Crete, various tribes of the Sinai Peninsula -- but because its final development, a system of twenty-two consonants, is, as the name alphabet implies, aleph, beth, Semitic in origin, it seems likely that much credit is due the

royal scribes of the Canaanite city-states. During the middle of the second millennium, Cannanites developed the consonantal alphabet which later passed from Phoenicia to Greece where, improved by the addition of a vowel system, it became the building block out of which the communication systems of most Western cultures were developed.

The alphabet, like the computer in our day, revolutionized information transmission and retrieval. Language signs could for the first time convey ideas, feelings, and shades of meaning as well as designate objects and simple actions. Acceptance of the written word as reliable came slowly, because so much guesswork was necessary in reading the unstandardized texts, and early language systems of pictograms or primitive phonetics. As syntax, grammar, and spelling were slowly standardized, much of the guesswork involved in reading disappeared. Societies began to look on documents as a reliable means for recording a treaty, a business contract, or the testimony of a witness. The new technology was constantly improved, and mankind had at its disposal a new and powerful tool.

The mystery associated with the new, little understood alphabet symbols which had the wondrous power of conveying sound gave the early writings a magical presence in the popular mind. We who drown in words and paper and look at words without any sense that a script is unusual can hardly credit that literacy was originally seen as magical. We will not rightly appreciate the early scriptures if we do not credit them with a power which transcended

their context. At the time only a few men could read. Most could not comprehend how a few black squiggles could communicate meaning; for them the written word was both indecipherable and magical. We can see the magic in the way men flocked to scribes for amulets whose images and texts would keep evil spirits from their homes and protect their wives during childbirth. The written words had power -- the power to confiscate their lands or conscript their sons -- and many did not understand how this was so.

For us the words lie inert on the page. For the ancient words were inextricably related to sound. No one read, as we do, silently. All who read read aloud. Words had that miraculous power of becoming another category of being. Stories were heard as well as seen and so they summoned as well as described. The name of a god inscribed on an amulet was not simply a name but a spoken appeal and a summons. The God heard the writing. The Bible speaks of priests who "placed" God's special name, YHWH, on the people when they blessed them. Egyptians of the Middle Kingdom period wrote on the inside of coffins formulas which mentioned various gods, names which the deceased could use to call these gods to his aid as he passed into the realm of the blessed dead and so assure himself of admission. In India I have watched illiterates rub their foreheads with palm leaves which were inscribed with words from the Vedas, and in Nepal Tibetan pilgrims circle the great Swayanbu Stupa in Katmandu, twirling prayer wheels whose inscription they cannot read, although the words were alive to them and powerful.

Num 6:27 (22-27)

ok spelling

Writing was first cultivated for its practical value. The written word allowed kings and governors to keep records of taxes due, treaties entered into, land registries, and inventories of palace possessions. At first scribes were no more than crafts-men who plyed a useful trade; but it was not long before talented practitioners recognized that their skills had other applications. Tablets and scrolls which recorded magical formulas, venerable myths, and prudential advice appeared, and mankind embarked on the long love affair with the written word as literature which has characterized, indeed obsessed, Western civilization until our day.

Although writing was first sponsored by tyrants as a way of increasing their revenues and control, people soon recognized its value in the transmission of ideas. By the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., perhaps three thousand years after Sumerian scribes had developed the first system which can be called a proper system of writing, the Greeks, among others, began to insist on a set of radically new ideas: that books contained what was valuable, noble, and worthy of being pre-served, that "real" knowledge required book learning, and that schools were places where young men should learn what was in books. Literacy had become the key to civilization.

The spread of literacy ultimately affected all areas of human culture. The early religions emerged without benefit of the written word and, as we shall see, were never entirely com-fortable with it. The religious spirit, conservative by nature,

took a surprisingly long time to recognize the potential of a "scripture". But inevitably, religion began to use the written word to state and disseminate its teachings.

Once writing became common it was inevitable that every religious culture would have a literature. What was not inevitable was that the religions, most notably Judaism since it was the first to do so, should turn some of that literature into a scripture. The five scrolls of Moses and those of the prophets, which were edited in their present form after the fifth century B.C.E., are in fact the first set of religious writings ever consecrated by a community. This historical note is not a claim that "we did it first" but makes the point that it took a long time -- a gap of at least 800 years between Moses and the appearance of the writing we call the Five Books of Moses -- for the community to set down their religious records and longer yet to consider such documents as fundamental and divinely inspired elements in their tradition, as scripture.

Why and how did this happen?

Scripture comes from the Latin scriptura, writing. As the name suggests, it originally defined a manuscript, any manuscript. For reasons no longer recoverable, quite early in the development of the English language, the word scripture began to be used as a specific description for sacred writings, particularly those sacred to Christians. A catechism of the early fourteenth century already uses the term in this context: "For hi es godd, al sais scripture" (Cursor M. 327).

The Oxford English Dictionary narrowly defines scripture as books held to be sacred and inspired, citing the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Putting aside the parochialism of this definition -- the Koran and the Vedas are also unquestionably scriptures -- we can accept a more spacious definition of scripture as a volume or collection of writings accepted by a particular community as divinely inspired and, therefore, authoritative.

Each of the major religious communities treasures a scripture, a sacred text, which records and presents its special message, truths which define doctrine and duty and offer salvation. Each believes its scripture was inspired by God. When texts are quoted in the name of Moses, an Evangelist, Mohammed, or another, it is assumed that these men spoke and wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that these texts are free of personal bias and that, being divine in origin, they transcend the limitations of human intelligence.

Scriptures tend to draw to themselves such adjectives as inerrant and infallible. Believers routinely claim that the text is not only pregnant with divine wisdom but flawless, so that for many the common phrase 'holy scripture' seems almost a tautology. Generally, a scripture is seen as the ultimate arbiter of truth. The preacher carries The Book in his hand as he speaks to the faithful. Among medieval scholastics to cite a text proved that an argument was irrefutable.

Like the presence of the Sefer Torah in the synagogue ark, a pulpit-sized Bible on the church lectern gives assurance that

what is prayed and said there conforms to God's wishes and is right. Enter a synagogue and your eye will be drawn to its most prominent architectural feature, an ark, fronted by a brightly decorated curtain or sliding door which closes off the cabinet's interior. The ark houses parchment scrolls, bound and mantled, inscribed with the Hebrew text of the Five Books of Moses. Each Sabbath and on festivals, holy days, and market days this scroll, the Sefer Torah, is ceremoniously removed and carried to the reader's desk where it is unrolled so that a designated portion can be chanted. Like the synagogue's architecture, the liturgy underscores the centuries-old claim that these texts present God's own words and will; in short, that this is Scripture, "This is the Torah which God commanded us through Moses. . .".

As Galileo and many others learned to their sorrow, Scripture may hold sway even when directly contradicted by empirical knowledge. Why so? Here we must credit -- or blame -- the powerful urge for certainty and confirmation which lies at the base of human need and provides the motive power behind the religious enterprise: we need to know that what we have been assured is truth is in fact true and has been accurately reported to us. Since the text is ascribed to God or divine inspiration, a scripture is God's teaching, presented exactly as it was by God to the founding fathers. The text of a scripture exudes certainty. Who can argue with God? It was and is more comforting to accept a scripture as truth than to consider it a

classic which has certain ideas of value. We stake our lives on what we believe rather than on critical thinking.

Those who do not belong to a scripture-cherishing community easily think of scripture as an anthology of classic literature a group accepts as sacred. The believer adores it as the word of God. Rabbinic Judaism describes the Sefer Torah, the Five Books of Moses, spoken and written down by Moses at God's dictation without change or addition. Maimonides' careful formulation sums up the rabbinic position: "The Torah has been revealed from heaven. This implies our belief that the whole of this Torah found in our hands this day is the Torah that was handed down by Moses and that it is all of divine origin. By this I mean that the whole of the Torah came with him from before God in a manner that is metaphysically called 'speaking'; but the real nature of that communication is unknown to everybody except to Moses to whom it came. In handing down the Torah, Moses was like a scribe writing from dictations the whole of it, its chronicles, its narratives and its precepts." ( )

Both Catholic and Protestant Christianity taught that the Bible was written by men inspired by the Holy Spirit. Islam knew the Koran as the uncreated and direct word of Allah, "The best of histories" (Sura 12:3), Mohammed's recitation of what he had heard from God.

Over the centuries Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have raised vast and imaginative religious edifices on the foundation of their scriptures. For Western man there was until recently

no more precious object than the Sefer Torah, the New Testament, or the Koran.

Conventional religious wisdom so emphatically declares the existence of a scripture a good thing that the claim was often advanced that possession of a scripture was a clear indication of a religion's superiority over more primitive, largely oral, traditions. During Islam's period of rapid military expansion, when Muslim lawyers had to determine how to treat large non-Muslim captured populations, they developed the category of ahl-ul-kitab, a people of the book, to distinguish groups who could be tolerated in the lands of Islam, dar-al-Islam. Such ahl-ul-kitab, followers of faiths which held a scripture sacred, could be tolerated. Those who did not were to be eliminated by conversion, exile, or death. This distinction was based in part on the assumption that possession of a scripture was evidence of an advanced culture and provided at least a rude measure of the cultural level of a community.

Since that assumption is still widespread -- that any religion worthy of its salt has a scripture -- all the "new" religions, Mormonism, Christian Science, even the recently modish cults, quickly developed one. Indeed, contemporary political and economic ideologies which play the role of religion for millions in our heavily secular age have followed suit and, despite blatant anti-religious doctrine, enshrine a scripture: Marx's Das Kapital, Hitler's Mein Kampf, and Mao's Little Red Book. The followers of such doctrines ~~found~~ find spiritual comfort in the

knowledge that the ideas they hold dear exist on paper as well as in the mind and have a solid form, more substantial than evanescent speech.

If we define religion as the human 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 cannot be detached or theoretical but 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 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, using holy as a synonym for a dimension of ultimate mystery, God's presence in our lives. A scripture captures and presents 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 which deal with themes of stability and permanence, the religious response personifies this sense of permanence in the concept of scripture. A scripture is unchanging, the stable heart of the faith, God's certain teaching and promise. In this sense, a scripture is the quintessential religious object. One of its most characteristic aspects is its immutability. Religions prefer the tried and true, tradition to innovation. Jeremiah's is the typical religious voice: "Stand

you in the way, and see [which] is the good way, ~~It is the old way,~~ and walk therein, ~~there~~in shall you find peace of mind."

6:16 (Jer. ~~6~~0). When innovation proves inescapable, the religious community generally dresses it up as a return to some original teaching.

A scripture's shared purposes and hopes, its narratives, wisdom, and idioms, define a universe of discourse. This sense of bonding becomes particularly important as the close-knit tribal cultures begin to break down and the community can no longer count on daily contact, personal ties, and shared customs to hold it together. With the growth of urban societies and the development of schooling, a scripture provided members of far-flung communities with a focal point, the knowledge that they belong to a single community.

The existence of a scripture is not a prerequisite for a faith's effectiveness but not irrelevant to it. Words are indispensable in communicating the religious vision -- "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God" (John 1:1) -- but the spoken word swiftly disappears. Evanescent and unfinished, the spoken word from the lips of a single individual can be doubted, corrected, argued with, or applauded, and discussion may even persuade the speaker to change his mind. Knowing that the word has become text and assumed a permanent form is reassuring, and having a scripture which has been handled with great care, such as books usually are, offers reassurance that God's words have been transmitted faithfully.

The written word is set. Discussion will not change it. A reader can refute a manuscript point-by-point as he reads it, but the author is not present to be argued with, and the text stubbornly remains unchanged. I have often thought that book burnings are fueled by feelings of frustrated impotence. Someone is deeply disturbed by what he read or has been told is in a book. He feels he can rebut its every argument, but to cancel its teachings he has no recourse but to destroy the offending work, consign it to the flames.

Why did scribes write down and edit the material which became Scripture? Because they were able to do so. They had parchment and quills and the necessary skills. Those who first wrote out this material had no idea that anyone would ever treat their text as sacred. Many texts had ordinary origins, in a well-known story or an ancestor's geneology or royal annals. Others may have been something the scribe had on his mind when he found himself with an unused portion of a parchment sheet and the time to fill it. Though believers find it difficult to admit the lack of any real significance in some scriptural texts, since all are now part of a volume they declare holy, in fact much in every scripture is mundane. The crucial point, of course, is that much is not.

Religions tend to attribute their scriptures to divine inspiration, but the prosaic truth is that scriptures exist in the first instance because men learned to read and write. It was the spread of literacy which was the proximate cause of the publication of scripture. Contrary to conventional wisdom,

religions do not begin with a scripture; rather, a scripture presents some of the literature of that religious tradition at a particular stage in the tradition's development. To use a phrase applicable to the Jewish experience, there was Torah, a body of teachings accepted as sacred, long before there was a Sefer Torah, a text containing those teachings.

Founders speak. They rarely write. One has the feeling that Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed would be surprised to discover that their teachings have become written scripture. Moses was a prophet, a speaker, not a scribe: "and the Lord spoke to Moses, say to the whole assembly of the Children of Israel" (Lev. 19:1). Jesus talks to his disciples and preaches in the synagogue. He did not ask or require his disciples to write down his sayings. The Koran, as the name implies, is a recitation, a record of Mohammed's speech. Mohammed also was a speaker, not a writer. His speeches, with additions and emendations, were written down more than a generation after his death. He saw himself as the last of a long line of prophet-speakers: Adam, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, John, Jesus. . . Muslim folklore often portrays Mohammed as illiterate, confessedly to emphasize that he had recited God's message exactly as he had heard it.

Just as eight centuries passed before the Jews wrote down the stories of the patriarchs and Moses, so for several centuries the early church had texts but no scripture -- the gospels were composed not as scripture but as a life of an exemplary man-God. Several centuries passed before there was general agreement on

the contents of the Christian Scripture. Critical study of the Koran is still in its infancy; but certainly the first two generations of Mohammed's disciples knew his teachings only by verbal report, and a considerable period of time passed before the leaders were satisfied that they had fully sorted out authentic teachings from spurious ones.

In religion the message precedes the manuscript. Scriptures record primarily the creativity of the past and are themselves creative only in redefining existing traditions by including some and excluding others and thus establishing an authoritative anthology of tradition. 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 a frame of reference they would have understood. In their days the Middle East did not have 'holy' books.

A scripture is a repository of ideas rather than their first 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 was ever reduced to writing. God's dependable relations to man and history seen as a drama of God's power and justice developed in the minds of prophets.

The most imaginative and radically new religious perspectives often emerged before there was a scripture. Amos and Isaiah heard God or experienced a vision. They did not consult texts. Nor did Jesus or Mohammed, who spoke under the direct influence

of an overwhelming experience in which holy books and proof texts played no role.

Once a scripture emerges and is certified, all this changes. Speakers must then tie their message to what is written in The Book. However valid his reasons, no one today could erase or add a text to scripture. Unlike Moses, Jesus knew what a scripture was -- the Sefer Torah and the Prophets had become scripture by his time -- and he refers to ideas which he has heard from these books. Yet he shows no eagerness to have his own teachings written down and certainly did not expect that later generations would consider his every word sacred, scriptural.

Most of the texts which became scripture seem little, if at all, different from those which did not. Genesis talks about God and occasionally quotes a few words from Him but does not introduce its narratives as "the words of God spoken to. . .". Only a small percentage of any Biblical text or of the Koran unabashedly presents itself as revelation. In the Book of Jonah the only words attributed to God are the short oracle, "yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed." The two long histories -- Samuel-Kings and Chronicles -- make no claim to a nobler status than that of history books. 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 Bible.

A scripture can be taken from place to place; it can be copied over and over again. This was both asset and liability -- the text can reach a wide audience, but how can consistency between versions be guaranteed? In the days of manuscripts, each copy was the work of an individual scribe who 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, add or amend, believing that the text was as much his as the original author's. This sense of creative partnership came to an end when the work was declared scripture. A scripture is God's work. No scribe would tamper with God's words.

A scripture cannot be amended. "You shall not add or subtract from it" (Deut. 4:2). Yet, a scripture's authority was not always honored. Think of Jesus speaking of the Torah: "You have heard it said but I say. . .". Only a non-believer or one who believes he speaks with God's authority can directly challenge a scripture. Such is the hold of a scripture that it is, even when challenged, rarely completely rejected. The church bound what it called the Old Testament to its Gospel, and Mohammed spoke of himself as the last and ultimate prophet and in his speeches quotes from the Bible.

A scripture is more than a sacred teaching. Its sentences and words, even its individual letters, are accepted by the faithful as having power of their own. As God's own they participate in His power. Christian exorcists held up a Bible as a shield against the forces of darkness. Believers placed

cherished phrases from their scripture in protective amulets to shield their persons from harm. In the first World War soldiers on both sides carried into battle pocket Bibles inside whose covers were inscribed the soldiers' family lineages as a way of protecting the living and the dead.

I believe that the claim that a particular scripture was revealed often reflected a desire to protect the specific language of some treasured text as much as it was a claim to God's authorship. As communities became more literate they recognized the free and easy way traditions were handled and, needing to believe that they possessed rock-solid, sacred writings, they protected these writings from change by claiming that they were from and by God and by surrounding them with taboos that humans might fear to tamper with them.

The transformation of a body of religious literature into scripture placed authority and truth squarely in the text. Where preliterate societies grounded faith in and derived definition from prophetic statements or community sentiment, literate societies claim faith based in and defined by a text. Text and tradition are declared to be one. Certainty and stability are gained but as the written word defines, it restricts, and flexibility and spontaneity are lost. A scriptural faith must always consider its texts, but the text is not always relevant or helpful to the community's needs.

To speak of scripture is to speak of a defined body of writings, and of no other, as inspired. Believers may assume that

scriptural texts are recognizable; yet the Talmud reports that the sages were still debating in the second century of this era whether Esther, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs were or were not scripture. Greek Jews had a significantly different text of Jeremiah than the one that found its way into our Bible. The early Church Fathers debated the canonical status of John and a number of apocryphal works, and Christian gnostics had a fifth gospel. Innumerable sayings of Mohammed circulated before and after the official arrangement which is the Koran emerged. Scriptural material is not self-evident. Few scriptural passages begin "thus says the Lord". When a scripture describes the Exodus from Egypt, the miracle of the fishes and the loaves, or Mohammed's ascent from Jerusalem, it does so as if it were writing history, as an observer rather than as God. The begats of Genesis would be nothing more than archaic lists of Israel's presumed ancestors, worth only a learned article on ancient Mesopotamian names, had they not found their way into scripture. God did not determine what is scripture; the community did.

Many of the writings which became scripture originally circulated without sanctifying labels and were treated as no more than pieces of interesting literature. Here and there, for reasons we can no longer detail, a scribe set down a short collection of customary legal formulas or a version of an ancient victory hymn or a well-known story or saga; once the clay or papyrus had been inscribed, there was a chance that some later scribe might come across it and incorporate it into a larger piece he was

working on. Another scribe in a still later generation might introduce this material into a scroll of ancient traditions he was working on and which by good fortune might find its way into an important archive. In these early stages the writing out of texts did not necessarily define them as divine speech. The Deuteronomic histories (Samuel-Kings) actually cite earlier annals; those who claim the whole Bible to be revelation are therefore forced to affirm the absurdity that God, like any professional historian, needed to provide footnotes to validate His observations. Luke indicates in his opening chapter that he knew of several inadequate biographies of Jesus and intends his book to be a useful and accurate correction of their failings; there is not a word in his explanation of his purpose that he had prepared his scroll under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Many of Paul's letters were clearly written as private letters to a particular church.

Yet each scriptural tradition claims otherwise. Islam insists that the entire Koran is the word of God. During the ceremony that attends the reading of the Sefer Torah in the synagogue, an encomium from Psalm 19 is recited: "The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul, the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple, the precepts of the Lord are upright, delighting the mind. . .~~Behold a good doctrine has been given to you, My Torah. Do not forsake it. It is a tree~~ of life to those who ~~hold fast to it and its~~ supporters are many. Its ways are ways ~~of pleasant~~ness and all its paths are peace." Unlike Judaism

and Islam, Christianity has tended to prefer the term inspiration to revelation and to describe its scripture as written under the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, but it has treated the Testament as a unique and sacred literature which it often unabashedly claimed to be inerrant.

Despite their ubiquity, such dramatic claims present problems. Some scriptural material is neither high-minded nor significant. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" and "You shall not hate your brother in your heart" are found in the same list of divine instructions as "you shall not let your cattle gender with diverse kind" and "you shall not round the corners of your hands nor mar the corners of your beards" (Lev. 19). It is hard to imagine what inspirational benefit comes from the New Testament passage, ~~which speaks of~~ "Come, and I will show you the judgment of the great mastery that ~~sits upon many waters with whom the~~ kings of the earth, committed fornication" (Rev. 17:1-2). Some passages are ascribed to God, but others are specifically ascribed to individuals: David, Solomon, Agor, Sons of Korah, Matthew, Mark, Luke. . . Some material is inconsistent, even contradictory.

Though as a matter of fact, none of the Western faiths admitted that their scripture was anything but uniformly divine, in practice they tended to emphasize some parts of scripture over others. The rabbis distinguished the Sefer Torah, the Five Books of Moses, from the rest of the Hebrew Scripture. The Sefer Torah was accepted as directly revealed by God. No one, not even the prophet Moses who presumedly first spoke these words to the

community, in any way intruded on God's revelation. The special sacredness of the Sefer Torah was emphasized by the fact that the only scroll kept in the synagogue ark and read through systematically and publicly, on an annual schedule, was the scroll in which these books of Moses were inscribed. Readings from other parts of the Hebrew Scripture, particularly from the Prophets, were chosen for their relevance to the Torah portion, but no attempt was made to place such readings on a symbolically equal level. The church, too, made distinctions. Old Testament readings were considered scriptural, but not in all aspects definitive for Christians. Many groups within the church did not treat apocalyptic readings like the Book of Revelation with the same reverence as the Gospels and Pauline literature.

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 a high degree of authority, and infallibility, was ascribed. 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 the dominant role a scripture occupies 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 Sefer 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 cancelled Torah laws which 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.

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. When the Biblical tradition says "Love your friend as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) is it encouraging simple respect for others, charity, sacrificial concern for another's

life and person, or simply counseling unselfishness? Who is that "friend"? An intimate, any passerby, or simply one of your own tribe? What does the command "love" require? An occasional helping hand? Sacrificial care? The Biblical sentence provides a few clues. Interpretation is inevitable.

Scriptures are unabashedly praised by the faithful as books of unique and inestimable worth, but such praise does not tell us with any precision wherein lies its special merit. Is the text holy because it presents the inspired wisdom of a God-intoxicated sage or seer? Does its merit 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 so 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 particular religious enterprise a necessary centerpiece, defining and giving shape, from which all teachings flow. Others emphasize a scripture's importance in confirming values and teachings in a world where any teaching or value can be disputed and any assertion questioned; a scripture declares that certain values and teachings are God's own and, therefore, beyond debate. Others argue that a scripture is no more than an artifact of literate societies, an inevitable consequence of the growing numbers of those who could and did read and write, who sanctified certain teachings and set these teachings into texts.

The shrine libraries of the ancient Middle East included works of law, myth, hymn, and wisdom -- in style, and sometimes even in substance, not unlike much of the material which found its way into the Bible. In Hellenistic times The Temple in Jerusalem had a sizable library which included, among many other works, scrolls which ultimately made their way into the Hebrew Scriptures. Many of these rolls, those that would be chosen and those that were 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 narratives in circulation. Scribes who copied these scrolls felt free to add and emend.

However venerated, a classic is not yet a scripture. A question which is 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 felt impelled to turn certain of their scrolls into scripture? That they did feel so impelled cannot be denied.

A thorough knowledge of its scripture is helpful in understanding a particular religion, but you cannot build an image of that religion on the basis of its scripture. A Martian who had read a scripture before visiting the faithful earthlings, observing their ways and listening to their views, would have a difficult time relating what he had seen and heard of the living community to what he had read in their Holy Book. The Hebrew Scripture

does not mention the synagogue, the office of the rabbi, the separation of men and women at worship, or even the requirement of a public ritual of reading from the scripture. On the other hand, the Five Books of Moses go on at great length about the sacrificial cult, a dynastic priesthood, and stipulates that a witch must be burned and an adultress stoned, all completely irrelevant to today's practice. The New Testament makes no mention of popes, the divinity of Mary, Christmas, or tithing.

Most religions gloss over the many ways in which current practice and doctrine diverge from that presented in Scripture, but the Catholic Church, which has a penchant for neat and careful formulation, has said openly that the Church affirms teachings which are not found in its scripture. At the Council of Trent in 1648, and more recently at the Second Vatican Council in a dogmatic Constitutional on Divine Elevation entitled Dei Verbum,. Rome made clear that there are fundamental teachings -- the immaculate conception, Mary's bodily assumption into heaven, and papal infallibility -- which do not derive directly from scripture but "from the non-written traditions which the apostles had received from Christ, Himself, or through the dictation of the Holy Spirit", traditions which were "by continuous succession preserved in the Catholic Church" and so "are to be accounted with the same sense of devotion and reverence as scripture."

Judaism has its Sefer Torah, its Scripture, but it also has a Talmud, a massive body of teaching and law, edited more than fifteen hundred years after Sinai, which rabbinic piety

associates with that revelation and on whose authority it declares authoritative many practices and principles. In many discussions the sages readily admitted Mishnah Kodemet Le-Mikra, that in defining practice the Mishnah, a rabbinic text of the second and third century of this era which is the basic text of the Talmud, takes precedence over scripture. So, too, in Islam; it is the Sunna, as codified in the Shariyah, a large body of tradition about the life and teachings of Mohammed, not the Koran, to which Muslims turn for doctrinal and judicial guidance.

The conventional wisdom has been that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are and have been from the beginning definable and consistent entities. At times heretics and enthusiasts tried to reshape the tradition, but the scripture was there, acting like a magnet, pulling deviants back to the source. An attractive idea, and inaccurate. Most scriptures lacked the range or detail to give full shape to their evolving traditions. They become important symbols, but the actual task of definition is left to other works.

Because a scripture occupies a central role in its community's religious life, presumedly it defines for all times doctrine and duty. In fact, this is not the case. Once a tradition enshrines a scripture, it discovers it needs a second scripture. The original scripture may be imaginative, even stylistically powerful, but it is an expression of private experience rather than systematic. Its ideas are time-bound and 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.

Where a scripture tends to be effective 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. 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 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. These second scriptures are not given a major place in the worship hall but are essential in the study hall and council chamber.

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 relationship among the women. 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 since authority must be acknowledged as central to the community's well-being, it is dressed up with some of the symbols of scriptural authority and

presents itself as inspired interpretation rather than as direct or inspired revelation.

A scripture may be venerated and symbolically affirmed as the centerpiece of the religious enterprise, but in matters of practice it often does not have the last word. Scriptures are texts assumed to be central; but in an effective sense the meaning derived from them is determined by the evolving life of that society. The needs and interests of the synagogue, church, or mosque determined the Scripture's meaning. 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, the Church has made its scripture yield strong positions on such issues as birth control and abortion which the scripture really does not deal with. The Bible as read by liberal American Protestantism is an historically conditioned document which espouses Christology and the social gospel. The same Bible in the hands of evangelical American Protestantism is a messianic document which espoused the transforming power of faith in a person's life. In every way possible each faith community emphasized the incomparability and crucial importance of its scripture.

Scriptures are books which paradoxically are meant to be heard rather than read. Muslim worship begins with the recitation of the first Sura. On certain occasions the recitation of the

whole Koran is required. The church and the synagogue developed formal cycles of scripture to be read aloud during worship. The spoken word conveys an immediacy denied to the written word. When I hear portions of the Torah aloud, I sense its sacredness; when I scan the same text in my study I search rather carefully for its meaning. I read to learn. I listen to respond. Scriptures have been carefully studied, declared both pious and meritorious, but their ultimate power comes in hearing God's words spoken, intoned, or chanted. A text read aloud regains some of its original power as God's words. Hearing the scripture read aloud allows the worshipper, even if the words are not fully understood, to participate in the original revelation and, therefore, in a truly redemptive experience which brings him close to God and can change his life.

If I hear a prophet speak I may be moved by his voice, manner, or commanding presence as well as his words. If I am in a room which contains a manuscript of his words ~~but which contains a manuscript of his words~~ but I do not open it, it may as well not be there. It is one thing to be, say, part of Amos' audience at Beth-el, quite another to read what survives of his speech in the quiet of a study. God did not write to Moses. God spoke to him. God did not send Jeremiah a letter detailing his mission. Jeremiah felt the word of God as a burning fire within him. Paul had a transforming vision on the road to Damascus. Islam accepted the Koran as Mohammed's repetition of the Word of God mediated through the Angel Gabriel. The power of the religious moment depends upon immediacy. Congregational worship

acknowledges the power ascribed to the scriptural word by always including a section in which someone reads aloud or recites a portion of scripture. When a minister begins to read the scripture lesson, he announces: "Hear the word of God."

Physically, a scripture looks like any other book, but it is treated as a book like unto no other. As a physical object, a scripture is handled with great care, lovingly. Once established, the text is copied with great care, lovingly. Piety inevitably surrounds a scripture with rites and practices which emphasize its sacredness and unique importance. A worshipper in the synagogue crossing in front of the Ark containing the scrolls of the Sefer Torah will stop and bow before passing on.

Jewish scribes developed formal rules which governed the preparation of the Sefer Torah. It was to be handwritten on parchment, using the Ashurit or square script. Forty-two lines to a column, the opening "B" of "In the Beginning" must be set down double-sized. In the Middle Ages Hebrew scribes were warned not only to set down certain letters double size or half size according to ancient patterns of inscription but to make sure that the crowns which adorn certain letters were in place and had their proper number of strokes.

Muslim law insists a Koran must not be laid on the ground or allowed to come in contact with anything dirty. The Koran could be written in any of a number of Arabic scripts, but care was always taken with the writing, and systems of ornamentation were developed to indicate the beginning and end of

verses and when the reciter should prostrate himself. Until quite recently Muslim religious leaders resisted the publication of printed editions of the Koran on the grounds that a special sense of the sacred inhered in a hand-copied manuscript which the mechanical process of printing could never impart. Among the glories of medieval Christianity are the magnificent illuminated Gospel and Bible manuscripts inscribed and painted in the monasteries of the time.

Preliterate and semi-literate societies treasured traditions which passed on through the generations with a significant degree of fidelity. Still, changes were constantly made in oral presentations. The general conservatism which surrounded the transmission of well-known material has led students to exaggerate the degree of fidelity maintained by oral transmission. Studies of rhapsodists and storytellers in traditional cultures have shown that though they believe that they repeat the material without change, they never tell the story quite the same way twice. The teller responds to his audience and they to him and this interchange causes subtle changes as the teller chooses the words and images which will be most attractive and understandable to his audience. Storytellers constantly modify their narratives to make them more understandable or exciting to an audience. Myths were subtly reshaped with each retelling to fit new social or ethical attitudes. Even the formulas in which laws were presented were modified over time to fit changed circumstances. Some mythological tales like that of the flood and Noah can be traced back

to earlier prototypes, but the Biblical story is not a stencil of the earlier Gilgamesh epic. Rather, it is a much transformed version which reflects meanings appropriate to the Israelite ethos. Where Utnapishtim, the Gilgamesh hero, was saved by the goddess Ea because she had taken a fancy to him, Noah is saved by God because he was a righteous man.

Judaism emerged in an environment where writing was little known. There was no history in West Asia of communities enshrining Holy Books. Worship consisted of sacrifices and sacred formulas chanted by priests. There was no tradition of books being read as part of a public ceremony. Habits of mind which had developed in oral societies, particularly a strong awareness of the importance of immediacy in religious experience, worked against the enshrinement of the written word. The written word is a record of a religious experience, not the experience itself. Traditions of an oral society may be primitive, but they have the advantage of a compelling intimacy and directness which tend to be lost when traditions are written down. Putting words on parchment or paper places them outside the mind. But the wellsprings of commitment lie inside the human soul. While a literate culture can have a rich and imaginative religious literature, its dependence on the written word inevitably creates distance between the community and its faith. The written word is useful for analysis rather than a compelling method for meeting God. Even the most compelling and powerful speech become text, loses something of its vitality.

A recitation is flexible. A scripture text is frozen. Times change. Conditions change. Constitutions require amendment. Calling ideas timeless does not make them so. Scriptures claim to present general truths but, in fact, they contain materials written at a particular time and place and use the language of their day, its images and idioms as well as its science and superstition. Fixed texts need to be provided with flexibility so they can address new needs and fit new outlooks.

The meaning of any text lies in the eye and mind of the reader who provides the text with context, his context, and therefore, with meaning. The meaning that the faithful found, and find, in their scripture reveals more about their interests, needs, level of culture, and the state of their faith at a particular juncture than it does about the original intent of the text.

Over the years religionists devised intricate systems of interpretation, some of which simply drew out a text's logical inference while others came to remarkable conclusions by defying every canon of logic. People read into their scripture what they needed to find there and all the while apologetes proclaimed proudly that their teachings were scriptural. An analogy can be usefully drawn between scripture and the American Constitution in respect to their roles in society. The Constitution's text and the arguments advanced by those who wrote its paragraphs have a certain force which the courts take under advisement, but in rendering decisions the courts also take into consideration,

although not always acknowledging that they do, the needs and attitudes of contemporary society. The language of the Constitution exerts an authority which cannot be willfully flaunted and is sometimes inescapable; but when there is a desire to do so interpreters can stretch the letter of the law until the spirit of the times overwhelms it. The power of judicial review is the power to change the Constitution. Interpretation and commentary represent the ways religionists change their scripture and thereby their faith.

Ingenious systems of interpretation were developed. Since words can be understood many ways, once that interpretive process is begun there is a problem of limits. The rabbis found the basis for the prohibition of mixing meat and milk dishes in an old agricultural law, "not to boil a kid in its mother's milk" (Ex. 23:19, which apparently was originally designed to protect a farmer in desperate times from the temptation of killing off his only breeding animal. The relationship of ideas is tenuous and, as in many cases, based on the most slender of connections.

Recognizing the various ways in which a Biblical sentence could be interpreted -- according to common sense and context, metaphorically, by various techniques of association, allegorically, esoterically -- the rabbis often quoted a line from Jeremiah, "Behold My word is like fire - declares the Lord - and like a hammer that shatters rock" (23:29). Interpretations, like sparks, fly off in all directions and each spark gives off some light. The issue for us is no longer, if it ever was, what the text

originally meant but what it means to the present generation. Those who wrote official commentary asserted that they were simply making clear their scripture's original meaning, presenting to the community what was there and had always been there, but more was there than met the eye. Though they did not know the term and would have emphatically denied its implications if they had, the leaders of the scriptural religions took an existentialist attitude toward scripture. It meant what they needed it to mean. Christian commentators found references to Jesus and the Christ in literally hundreds of nooks and crannies of the Hebrew Scripture, references which were not apparent to non-Christians.

A medieval rabbi used a homely but effective illustration to make the point that God had intended His word to be interpreted:

> A king had two slaves whom he loved intensely. He gave each one a measure of wheat and a bundle of flax. The intelligent one wove the flax into a cloth and made flour from the wheat, sifted it, ground it, kneaded it, baked it, and before the king returned set it (the bread) on the table on a cloth he had made. The stupid one did not do a thing (with the gifts the king had given him). After some time the king returned from his trip and said to them: "My sons, bring me what I gave you." One brought out the table set with bread on the tablecloth; the other

> brought out the wheat in a basket and the bundle of flax with it. What an embarrassment that was! Which do you think was more beloved?. . . (Similarly) when the Holy One, Blessed Be He, gave the Torah to Israel, He gave it as wheat from which to make flour and flax from which to make clothing through the rules of interpretation." ( )

Since a scripture is, as we have seen, an anthology of diverse thoughts and elements believed to have an inherent unity because they came from God, the learned and thoughtful had to interpret in order to define and make clear a message that is coherent despite appearances that it is not. To impose on the text the unity they knew was there, they necessarily emphasized some texts and pushed aside others. This was not simply an intellectual exercise. Christians, such as Augustine, insisted the Bible was infallible in all its parts, without contradiction between its elements, for a properly defined faith was necessary for salvation. "Faith," he wrote, "will stagger if the authority of the divine scripture wavers." ( ). For Augustine a proper understanding of the Bible was essential; God had chosen and equipped the Church to be its infallible interpreter.

Probably from On Christian Doctrine.

One of the least examined commonplaces of our times is that a Bible is a good book, many would say 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. Many have found the courage to keep going on the basis of texts which have been quoted or read to them. But these texts can also mislead. The ~~Biblical~~ warning "as you shall sow so shall you reap," ~~(Galat. 6:~~15) has caused many who were simply unlucky to suffer guilt and heartache. Paul's "it is better to marry than to burn" (I. Cor. 7:9) has seriously confused society's understanding of the appropriate role of the sexual in human relationships. Mohammed's justification of war as a means of gaining authority over unbelievers and converting them to Islam (Koran 9:5, 4:76, 2:214, 8:39) continues to encourage political violence in the Middle East and elsewhere. Since scripture fixes for all times its community's sacred teaching, a scriptural religion must resort to restatements -- Vatican II declarations are good examples -- which speak the old phrases in a "new" light or develop ingenious commentary which permits it to dismiss most changes as no change at all. Scriptures are elemental forces which can be helpful or harmful, and sometimes both.

When ~~community~~ commentary cannot fix up a scriptural text, the text may impose on a community ideas it no longer accepts and burdens it cannot bear. The Torah rule requiring that all debts be remitted each sabbatical year is a case in point. Designed to prevent the impoverishment of a population which consisted largely of farmers and herdsmen who survived on the edge of economic disaster and regularly fell into debt when crops failed or someone took over the market, this rule gave the herders and farmers a second chance and reflects a concept of morality appropriate to a simple

agrarian economy. During Hellenistic times, as commerce began to play a major role in the economy of an increasingly urbanized community, the sabbatical rule became a stumbling block to economic development. No one would lend money during the later years of the sabbatical cycle, and without money the economy ground to a halt. To get around the text, which is presented in the Sefer Torah as one of God's specific commands for all times, the sages devised a complicated legal fiction to circumvent the express intent of scripture. Their actions were understandable, even commendable, responsive to a recognized communal need, but what kind of scripture is it that imposes unacceptable rules on a community? If a scripture has elements which need to be set aside, is it really a repository of eternal truth?

M. Shevuit 10:3-4

The Sefer Torah, the New Testament, and the Koran are seen by their faithful adherents not only as literatures of exceptional and unique merit but as the inspired and sacred platform on which their house of faith rests. But the relationship is not consistently and purely benevolent. A scripture is a written document full of worthy themes seen as ultimate truths. As such it is definitive and restrictive. Writings accepted as sacrosanct provide the faith an unchanging universe of discourse: idioms, personalities, a calendar, laws. As conditions change the words may be quoted to quite different purposes, but they remain the same words. The phrases and ideas of a scripture, like those of the American Constitution, are used in every generation, not always to the same purpose. Yet, its unshakable presence often serves to limit the faith's ability to adjust to inevitable changes in the

social order. The presence of an unchanging scripture cannot in itself enable a community to avoid change. Issues come up which the scripture never imagined or, as with the Sabbatical law, rules apposite to one situation may not be to another.

A religious tradition must continuously adjust to a changing environment. Commentary and interpretation provide that possibility. Interpretation finds fresh and unexpected meanings in a text. If a religion is to survive, commentary is necessary, but commentary also introduces into the faith a new kind of priesthood -- the authority of those who can read and interpret. With commentary comes the dominance of a new elite, the learned and the trained, who "do" the commentary and determine which interpretations are acceptable. Particularly during those centuries when literacy was a rare accomplishment, a scriptural religion tended to give authority to those who claimed the power to interpret. Those who could not read were urged to submit and abide. A scriptural religion tends to be defined from above.

Inevitably, distance opens between the leaders, those who define, and the faithful, those who obey. Inevitably, an official church emerges as a separate entity distinct from the community of believers. When this happens religious coercion is usually not far behind. The community's ultimate response to coercion will be to rally behind leaders who claim that the present elite have misdefined scripture for them. More often than not, the rebellious message is: "read" scripture, do not leave it to others to tell you what God has said. That was the basis of the

Protestant Reformation, which urged, in effect, that the substance of the faith was not in the church but in the Bible. The Protestants quickly found that many could read the text and make sense of it, so within a generation or two Protestants had formed sects which accepted the interpretation of one or another leader: Calvin, Luther, Żwingli. . . A measure of unity was achieved because groups tended to follow their leaders' interpretations as they had once followed Rome's lead, the only difference being that Rome had insisted on submission and the protesting churches continued to emphasize independence of thought, making up one's own mind about scripture.

The co-existence of a scripture and an accepted commentary also gave institutional authorities a basis for opposing any claim that a new message had been received from God that ran contrary to official teaching. Continuity was assured but at the price of silencing or driving off those who felt they had known God intimately or heard Him speak.

When speech becomes text, a problem of language often arises. The later reader may not understand the language of the original version. Even if he reads Hebrew, Latin, or Arabic, it will likely be a modern dialect like Mishnaic Hebrew, Church Latin, or medieval Arabic and not the classic tongue. Idioms which meant one thing when they were spoken may now be read differently and suggest other meanings. The meaning of certain words may no longer be known. The best of today's scholars, armed with the results of centuries of textual and linguistic research, admit that many translations present difficulties. No one can honestly

say he believes every line and word of his scripture because no one knows exactly what every line means. Until recently every line of Scripture was translated, but a number of recent translations admit textual difficulties by noting in appropriate places that the meaning is uncertain or that there are other possible translations.

If scholars do not fully understand The Book, few of the faithful are put off by that fact. They accept that The Book is holy, that its language is holy. Many accepted that the Scripture was written in God's native tongue. Jews assume God speaks Hebrew, Muslims that He speaks Arabic. To this day while synagogue liturgy can be recited in any vernacular, the Sefer Torah is to be read in Hebrew. Islam discouraged translations of the Koran. School boys in all parts of the Muslim world, even if they do not speak Arabic, learn the Koran in Arabic. To translate God's speech into another language than His own, Arabic, would not only distort its meaning but deprive the words of much of their innate power. Christians have a somewhat different approach to language since, unlike the Torah and the Koran, their Bible is a translation. Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek, but the Greek and Syrian Bibles in the East and the Latin in the West were quickly accepted not as translations but as scriptures and their texts accepted as sacrosanct.

Scriptures provide communicants a powerful and compelling symbol: 'Here is your duty. Here are your hopes. It is all here, you do not have to guess about it.' But when you look

behind the symbol to the text's substance it becomes clear that the sense of certainty comes at a price. Part of that price has already been paid during the selection process. Inevitably, words and themes of beauty were left out. Archeologists recovered from the caves above Qumran a Psalter which contained several beautiful psalms which were not included in the received text. Someone made an arbitrary selection from the available collection of psalms and hymns in order, for some scribal reason, to limit the collection to one hundred and fifty hymns. In defining the scriptural canon, the rabbis excluded a considerable literature; some like Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon have survived outside the canon and their value can still be appreciated. It would be hard to explain why the apocryphal additions to Jeremiah and Daniel were not included in their respective rolls. Much of the richness and variety of Christianity's and Islam's formulation period were also left behind. There were other gospels and many other teachings attributed to Mohammed. A scripture inevitably denies a community some of its past.

Preliterate societies were organized within a tight web of custom, law, and tradition accepted as natural and required by the gods. Social tradition enshrined in the collective memory such diverse elements as formulae for keeping evil spirits at bay and knowledge of when to plant and when to harvest. No one distinguished between tradition and revelation. Well known, implicitly trusted, and repeated over generations with a high degree of reliability, this body of material carried the highest authority. The gods of West Asia interacted with humans and

inspired them with ideas of justice and responsibility, but they did not speak through texts. This world is still reflected in the book of Genesis which never claims that its text is divinely inspired, yet presents a narrative which was clearly fully trusted. Traditions were true because they were familiar. There was little inclination to fuss about their historical facticity. The famous first line of the Bible might, without contradicting its original spirit, be translated as an early storyteller might have spoken: "Once upon a time long ago God created the Heavens and the Earth." Only when Genesis became scripture did it become a matter of doctrine that God had created the cosmos and life on earth in six days, and only then was it required that not a word be changed by the scribes who copied it.

Much in the Hebrew Scriptures began as ordinary literature. The editors of the New Testament were aware that much that they included had not been written as sacred literature. The author of Luke wrote to a friend that "many writers have undertaken to draw up an account of the events that have happened among us, following the traditions handed down to us by the original eye-witnesses. . ." and speaks of his desire "to write a connected narrative for you so as to give you authentic knowledge about the matters of which you have been informed" (1:1-4). This is the way a historian writes who is setting down a particular report of a series of events.

Certainly, in the early centuries no one involved with what became scripture had a scripture in mind. Many of the stories, proverbs, and laws had circulated orally for a considerable

period of time. What was written down can puzzle us in many ways, particularly as to why it became scripture. It may occur in several versions; it may be unedifying (the story of a frightened Abraham passing off his wife as his sister). A particular story may simply have been well known and well loved or part of the established notes from which storytellers recited the life of a patriarch. Familiarity was often enough. Chance also played a role in what became scripture; a scribe might add a sentence or two to the parchment he had copied and forever after a psalm had a few extra lines. We think of an anthology as a collection of the best writing of a certain type, that scripture includes works of high quality and important to the community's life; but there is also much that is not. To be included in scripture's table of contents was a consequence of other criteria as well as of quality.

Some texts in Scripture acquired more importance as circumstances changed. "Repent ye, for the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15) rang with a sense of urgency in the first century when people believed that Jesus was about to return and then lost much of its force when Christians had to abandon hope in a proximate Second Coming. Even if few had confidence it would happen in their lifetime, the Second Coming theme remained Christian doctrine, cherished for its message of hope, but not insisted upon in any literal way. 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 once confidently held beliefs became more numerous and more persuasive, the once indisputable consensus began to unravel. As the multi-disciplined university curriculum took over from the homogeneous curriculum of the cathedral school, the Madrasa, 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 Exodus the sun did not stand still for the Israelites to complete their destruction of a Moabite army. The story of a virgin birth and an immaculate conception were not historical facts but recreations of pre-Christian myths.

In the 19th and 20th centuries people began to notice the seams which hold the parts together and to question the accuracy of scriptural statements. As knowledge grew of the oral pre-history of a scripture and the recognition that scripture 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 relation-ship between scripture and current church teachings, about the 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? In one chapter of the Book of Samuel God orders a judge to anoint a king over Israel (I. Sam. 12). In another God complains to Samuel because the tribes are demanding that a king be appointed (1 Sam. 8:7). 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).

I watched the other night a televangelist encourage his viewers to mount a campaign to require their local schools to teach a literal version of Genesis I including the doctrine of man's special creation. He 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 long since had revealed in the Bible the truth of these matters. Interestingly, that preacher did not encourage his flock to celebrate the calendar of holidays and the dietary laws which his Bible specifically mandates. His literalism was selective.

This evangelist would claim that those were Old Testament laws and that he follows the New Testament. But does he? Actually, 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" (Mat. 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, or even his 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 which do not conform to an evangelical Christianity and small-town, mid-American morality.

We are more conscious today than perhaps ever before that a scripture, any scripture, is a mixed bag in which proponents of opposing views can usually find some support. 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 from your midst," but the white supremacist, the male chauvinist, and the defender of privilege can also cite texts which seek to validate his convictions: texts about "hewers of wood and drawers of water," (Josh. 9:21) laws which gave a father control of his daughter's person, and Samuel's acquiescence in the sacralization of royal prerogatives.

Though the Hebrew scripture represents itself as an inspired text and is acclaimed by many as the word of God, it includes not only factually suspect history but some teachings that seem unworthy of man, 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 the brutal stories of conquest and battle in the Book of Judges as inspired?

No scripture is noble in all its parts or even sensible. Read any enshrined apocalypse. The Islamic 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 whitened 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. This fact is so well known that forty years ago it became a popular lyric in Rogers and Hamerstein's musical Oklahoma: "The things that you're liable to read in the Bible, it ain't necessarily so." Some 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.

Moreover, the problem is not simply one of exuberance. Scriptures contain contradictory statements. 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 (Ex. 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."

At times a text leads to contradictory conclusions. The rule in Leviticus is that Pentecost is to be celebrated seven weeks after "the day after the Sabbath," from the day when you bring the sheaf of the wave offering (Lev. 23:15). The key term here is 'Sabbath'. Most of us think of Sabbath as the seventh day of the week, the day of rest. In the Bible Sabbath sometimes designates simply a holiday. Yom Kippur is called a Sabbath of complete rest. When, then, shall the count of the seven weeks begin? From the Sabbath day which falls during the Passover Festival? From the first Sabbath which occurs after the Passover Festival? As it stands, this text admits either of these explanations and it turns out that each of these explanations reflects traditions which were well-known in Biblical times. The Pharisees counted from the day after the opening day of the Festival. The Qumran monastics counted from the day after the first Sabbath following the close of Passover, and the medieval Karaites, picking up older traditions, counted from the day of the first evening of the Festival.

It was a traumatic 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 of a shock when it was 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 we find in 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 which 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 viewpoint] are the words of the living God." (~~citation~~). In fact, there is no methodology which can assimilate, evaluate, and draw into a single coherent and consistent teaching every sentence of a scripture.

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. Many can no longer accept Maimonides' exposition of the doctrine that there is no difference in significance between verses like 'and the sons of Ham were Cush and Mizraim, Phut and Canaan' (Gen. 10:6). . .and verses like 'I am the Lord your God' (Ex. 20:2) and 'Hear O Israel' (Deut. 6:4). They are all equally of divine origin and all belong to 'the law of the Lord which is perfect, pure, holy and true.'" To prove his point Maimonides quotes a rabbinic

legend which describes Manasseh as the worst of all infidels because he had taught that there were significant and insignificant sentences in the Sefer Torah ("a kernel and a husk"). "Truly," Maimonides concluded, "there are in every letter of the Torah wise maxims and admirable truths. . ." ( ).

Recognizing that such claims could not be sustained, some abandoned their religious heritage. If the faith claimed Scripture as its authority and the Scripture contained inaccuracies, then they felt that their faith was without basis. Others were not disturbed by the evidence of modern scholarship. Many did not know or care to know what research had shown, or if they knew about it they were satisfied by the argument that God's ways and words were unique and cannot and must not be judged by the same canons we apply to other writings. Others accepted the idea that Scripture is not inerrant but insisted that the value of scripture lay in its unique spirit and moral vision and that its essential teaching remained as valid today as it had ever been.

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's the essence of the social gospel. Yet, in our era of technical triumphs we have seen the re-emergence of evangelical groups who, despairing over man's capacity to build a bright future, turn back to texts which speak of a Second Coming and of a supernatural intervention.

In modern times non-fundamentalist 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 imaginative and intellectual capacity who, in thinking about ultimate questions, has touched on the truths which animate the universe. They see the great spiritual truths which 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 which animates the whole rather than in accuracy of particular facts and detail. They like to talk of the great themes which 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 nonetheless remain easy within their faith, easily participate in liturgies which 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 notoiety a quarter century ago by writing about The Death of God. Yet, he found nothing unusual in speaking on God's disappearance from history from a pulpit which prominently displayed a Bible proclaiming God's presence. Scriptures have a power which transcends their contents and humans have spiritual needs which transcend the need for accuracy in a scripture.

In the centuries when the claims of faith went largely unchallenged, interpreters honestly felt that they were simply bringing out their scripture's deepest meanings. In fact, much of what was discovered in the text was not there: vide any concept of resurrection in the Sefer Torah or the Prophets or any prophecy

about Jesus in the Hebrew Scriptures. Interpretation reflected what those who guided their communities needed to find there.

In Judaism this was achieved by a process called midrash. Midrash accepts as self-evident the proposition that Sefer Torah is a unique literature, God's, but it 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 in part depends on understanding these non-contextual 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 straight-forward 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 the Peshat, their system of straight-forward contextual interpretation. 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 which 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 handled; but if God is the author, then every part of scripture must be without error.

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 which 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 would 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

is not scriptural dies hard. Many a Biblical scholar, particularly if he comes out of a Protestant community whose sense of unity depends almost entirely on the assumption of the value and unity of Scripture, will end his major work with a chapter entitled "Toward a Biblical Theology."

Both fundamentalist and modern believers assert on faith that their scripture presents a coherent teaching, though they will differ in describing that teaching. But if we approach the text without the assumption that it must necessarily carry coherent teaching, then no one interpretation fits all its parts and the scripture permits several interpretations. A close reading of the 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.

To understand the complex relationship of faith and text, we will follow the history of one scripture, the oldest, the Hebrew Scriptures, seeking to define at each stage the complex relationship of a living faith and its texts. We will see that the relationship 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 Talmud -- or to Canon Law and Shariyah -- for discipline.

To the surprise of many, scripture has again become of interest 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. Intense groups of believers insist that they base their ways of life on their scripture. 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 option. Some believe that this kind of piety exists only in 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 life of the faithful and some of the not so faithful and, therefore, need to be understood. Understanding necessarily requires that we search out their symbolic and actual role in faith. We will find that the relationship between Scripture and faith, even for those who unabashedly 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.

Even if scriptures are not, in fact, the comforting and rock-solid presences 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 which, it is claimed, has proven its worth over time. Sermons are preached to show how the text, 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 desire for certainty. One weakness of modern learning is that it is so 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 the truth. Many seek just such reassurance, and many accept that it cannot be found.

Chapter 2

SACRED SPEECH

Once upon a time and for quite a long time, perhaps as long as eight centuries, there was a scriptureless Judaism. This is surprising to many since for most of the past two thousand years Jews readily accepted as historic fact the piety that God had dictated to Moses the entire Sefer Torah, from Genesis' description of Creation to God's eulogy of His faithful servant at the end of Deuteronomy.

Torah min ha-Shamayin, the revelation of the Torah by God, was and remains for traditional Judaism a central tenet of the faith. The Torah is from God. It presents His version of early history, His Instructions, and His promises as He wishes them to be known. The Torah was revealed at a particular place and time, early in Israel's history. Sinai, the place, became the rabbinic shorthand for this revelation which, if one accepts the Biblical claim that it took place just a few months after the Exodus from Egypt, means that Judaism began as a self-conscious faith in the 12th or 13th pre-Christian century.

This view emphasizes the originality of the Torah's teachings and their origin in God's will. Those who accept this view describe the subsequent history of the Jewish people as a conscious effort by the community to understand and abide these instructions. Sinai represents the gift of truth, promise, and identity and presumedly set the shape of the religious life of the Jewish people for all time.

There is nothing inherently illogical in the idea that God did in fact reveal His will to Israel at Sinai. God is omniscient. He knows what was and what will be and He makes known to those He chooses what He chooses. But life is one thing, fact another, and thanks to several centuries of literary and historical research ~~it has become clear~~ most researches have concluded that the Sefer Torah is not an exact copy of what God dictated to Moses but a compilation of various themes and traditions composed at various places over many centuries, sometimes inconsistent, occasionally contradictory.

Judaism did not emerge as a full-blown religious tradition at Sinai any more than Christianity did when Paul had his vision on the road to Damascus, or Islam when Mohammed was moved to oracular speech. Individuals played formative roles, but religions are complex human institutions which evolve slowly and draw ideas from many sources. The Sefer Torah, the New Testament, and the Koran each represent a largely unplanned selection of texts and traditions which has passed through many hands and minds, scribes and editors, until they achieved the form in which we know them.

A scripture often appears to be what it is not, the source book and summation of a tradition. A scripture presents a selection of cherished traditions found acceptable by a particular group of religious leaders at a particular moment in their faith's evolution. No scripture contains the first word or the last word. Many of the faith's formative ideas precede the assumed moment of revelation and much of a faith community's subsequent development represents the community wrestling with the text it has declared holy, whose words, ideas, and insights continue to play an important role in the minds and lives of communicants.

Of the classic religions of the West, Judaism went the longest without a written scripture. This is hardly surprising since, despite the occasional late Biblical reference to Moses writing down God's Instructions in a book, the Hebrew tribes of his day were not yet literate or interested in literacy. In such early semi-nomad societies neither leadership nor a reputation for wisdom depended on being literate. Moses may not have been able to read or write. In any case, in the development of Judaism tradition preceded text by a considerable period, precisely when some of the most creative and revolutionary thinking took place. Long before Israel had a scripture, it had developed the idea of the oneness of God and God's incomparability, the idea of God as Creator and a dependable power outside nature who judges men and nations by their actions rather than by the gifts brought to his altar; of man as in some measure responsible for his fate, of man created in God's own image, and of the common origin of the nations, humanity. Scripture would embody these ideas and many others, but they did not begin in Scripture; they began in the immediacy of individual religious experience, in the minds of prophets and sages, and worked their way toward the forefront of Israel's consciousness in the living situation of the community. The medium of religious revelation was the spoken rather than the written word.

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 which seems to be based on elegant but improbable legends, and who wants to make his ultimate commitments to a set of teachings which are clearly not what they have long been claimed to be.

The facts seem to be these. In the beginning the tribes of Israel, like all preliterate groups, carried their traditions in their heads and their hopes in their hearts. There was no scripture. Few, if any, could write or read. They certainly felt that the gods at times made known their will to shamans, prophets, or sheiks; their traditions certainly included reports of oracles and of divine activity, but these were treasured not on clay or papyrus but in the community's collective memory. The historical fact is that for most of what is commonly described as Biblical times, there was as yet no Bible. Each tribe had its own oral traditions. There is evidence in the later literature that priests and prophets knew certain well-established narratives and legal formulae and referred to these in their speeches and judgments.

Oral traditions evidence a strong tendency to use and reuse incident, image, and idiom. These texts were written in the mind and stored in the tribe's collective memory and subjected to emendation when the community's interests demanded it.

The donkeys which carried the worldly possessions of the Hebrew tribes who began to enter Canaan toward the end of the second millennium B.C.E. were laden with tools and textiles but not with inscribed clay tablets or papyrus texts. The tribes of Israel enter history as preliterate semi-nomads whose various cultures consisted of seamless webs of practices and of traditions learned by imitation, hands-on instruction, or from the recitations of storytellers. Fathers taught their sons husbandry, the art of self-defense, and a code of responsibility and virtue. Mothers taught their daughters to sew, work in the fields, cook, and care for their infants. Holy men whispered magic formulas to carefully chosen disciples. Old women taught willing girls the skills of midwifery and herbal medicine. Rhapsodists regaled the community with well-known epics about their ancestors and well-known myths which explained the origins of life and the mysteries of nature, and they taught their sons those traditions so that they in turn could regale another generation.

The tribes had no written literature. Theirs was an oral culture, an amalgam of law, saga, cherished geneologies, sacred hymns and formulas, myths, a calendar, customs, and, of course, a many-sided folk wisdom which was both practical-- when to plant and when to harvest-- and philosophic-- how life had begun and how evil had come to be. Since their cultural and physical

environment changed little from generation to generation, conventional wisdom was confirmed by experience, consecrated by time, and accepted as right, sacred to the god(s). The way of the fathers felt natural to the sons. There was no generation gap.

The tribes that ultimately formed the Israelite confederation moved about West Asia and during their migrations must have come across scribes plying their trade, but there is no indication that any of the Hebrews undertook to master the art of writing. They had no need of documents. Cases brought before tribal sheiks like Abraham and Jacob were argued orally and decided on the basis of well-known legal norms. Oral testimony was taken. Documents had no standing in court. Judgments were publicly announced and recorded in the community's collective memory. A pile of stones at the corners of a field registered ownership. The early Biblical narratives confirm this picture. Abraham's purchase of a burial cave, the Machpelah, is described as a purely oral arrangement. When Jacob seeks to be reunited with Esau, he sends presents and a spoken message. The drama surrounding Jacob's unwanted marriage to Leah assumes a preliterate society; had there been a written marriage contract, Laban would not have been able to trick Jacob into marrying Leah rather than Rachel.

The elders served the god(s) on various high places, seeking protection for the tribe, their trek and their flocks. They did so without benefit of Bibles or prayer books. Those who conducted the mandated rites learned the proper hymns and practices from their predecessors and the community knew through these what was

expected of them. When there was a need to consult the gods, a sheik or priest cast lots or consulted the oracles and reported back at a public assembly the God's(s') instructions. God repeatedly reveals His will and then tells Moses: "Speak to the tribes of Israel. . ." In most tribes there was a family of specialists, speakers, trained rhapsodists, who had mastered and practiced the art of the formal recitation of the tribe's myths and sagas and were prepared to rehearse these traditions at appropriate ceremonies, as Moses is reported to have done on the 'other side of the Jordan' (Deut. 1) and Joshua at Schechem (Josh. 24).

Today, if a fact or quotation slips our mind we take down the Britannica or Bartlett's and look it up. Their situation was quite different. There were no libraries. If what had once been known was not stored in someone's memory, it was no longer recoverable. Careful attention was paid to the cultivation of the memory faculty. Stories were simply told, generally in a poetic style because rhythm and assonance make them easier to remember. 'Literature' necessarily was presented in as compact and memorizable a form as possible.

Israel's first literature was written in the mind rather than on clay, parchment, or papyrus and "read" by those who heard it spoken. Over time some of this literature, after going through many oral revisions as it was told and retold, was written down; but even after an extended passage of time such a text often reveals the hallmarks of its origin in an oral tradition, what Walter Ong has called its "orally constituted sensibility and tradition."[1] The language is spare, highly compressed, lacking

embellishment. Nouns and verbs appear without modifying adverbs and adjectives. Phrases tend to be alliterative and rhythmic. An incident is quickly sketched. No attempt is made to analyze motivation. Images are concrete. Lists rely on repetitive formulas, "When Mahalalel had lived 65 years, he begat Jared" (Gen. 5:15), or employed a series of similar incidents as an aid to memory: "The Israelites set out from Rameses and encamped at Succoth. They set out from Succoth and encamped at Etham. . ." (Num. 33:5-6ff). The apparent willingness of Biblical narrative to let the imagination of the reader fill in the details and provide context has often been commented on as one reason for the book's unceasing appeal. It is a virtue born not of a conscious decision but of necessity. There was a need to compress as much text as possible into the finite capacity of the mind, or, if the text was to be written, it had to be written on a given and limited surface, for writing materials were expensive. Compression was not a conscious literary decision but the imperative of an oral culture where literature was created and stored in the memory.

We find it difficult to repeat a three-line story without significant distortion from one end of a classroom to the other, so we have difficulty accepting the idea that an oral literature could be kept for generations in something approaching a stable form. Yet, that in fact was the case. To be sure, stories changed slightly with each retelling, but the outlines of the incident and familiar idioms associated with the telling tended to remain stable.

Audiences prized and sought the familiar rather than the radically new. Such schooling as there was emphasized rote learning. Indeed, rote learning and the memorization of texts would remain the basis of the educational process of almost all West Asian and Mediterranean cultures long after books and literacy had become familiar elements in the community's life. "Once I was a son to my Father, the tender darling of my mother. He instructed me and he said to me, 'let your mind hold on to my words'" (Prov. 4:3-8).

Formal education was the exception rather than the rule for boys and almost entirely unavailable to girls; and this remained the situation during the entire pre-exilic period. Boys learned by being apprenticed, by listening, and by aping their elders. Traditions remained alive through the recitals of well-known sagas, and lessons about custom and law were learned in the course of everyday life. People lived within a silence broken only by the sounds of nature and on occasion by the human voice, the voice of the town crier, the storyteller, the chanter of hymns and the public orator. Prophets brought oracles vouchsafed to them from on high. There were few distractions. You heard what was said and had the quiet in which to reflect on it and a need to remember. When alone for any long period of time, I find myself repeating passages of poetry memorized in childhood, in this way providing myself with the companionship of others. The men and women of ancient Israel who lived, for the most part, in a world of pervasive silence anticipated my habit by repeating the popular sagas and hymns for the same reasons.

People not only paid close attention to what they heard, but were able to remember the recitations since one speech or story was not immediately followed by another and yet another and so the impression of the first was not blurred. Audiences generally anticipated what came next in a recital and were disappointed rather than pleased by innovation. Frequent hearing of the same tale, told using largely the same phrases, imprinted familiar phrases and incidents on the people's minds.

The art of rhetoric was cultivated. The ability to speak effectively was a prerequisite for leadership. A sheik did not have to be able to read or write, but he had to be able to make himself heard and understood. Moses tried to beg off from God's commission to be the agent of the slaves' liberation by arguing that he was slow of tongue and therefore would not be effective.

Words were not merely means of communication but objects of inherent power . Words spoken by priests and prophets, and almost certainly by poets, were felt to possess an innate power not unlike the power of a magical spell. Once uttered, such words took on a life of their own. A spoken oath was binding. Isaac recognized that he had been tricked into blessing Jacob instead of Esau, but his culture did not provide him the means to cancel the blessing (Gen. 27). Legend had Joshua stop the sun in its course with incantation. Blessings, curses and oracles once spoken were believed to carry weight. Had God not put words of blessing rather than the proposed curse into the mouth of the prophet Balaam, the tribes would have been effectively cursed. Jerusalem's conservative nobility demanded that Jeremiah be imprisoned because he had

spoken aloud a prophecy of the city's destruction. Presumedly, had he not spoken aloud the oracle, the threat it contained would have remained dormant. By bringing words of promise, a prophet certified the community's hopes. "The word that issues from My mouth does not come back to Me unfulfilled but performs what I ~~propose~~ purpose" (Is. 55:11).

All voices counted, but the voice that counted most was God's. God speaks, "thus says the Lord," Israel is encouraged to listen: 'Hear, O Israel.'" God's spoken Instructions lie at the heart of the Biblical record. Indifference to God's admonitions was defined as a form of deafness: "You [the prophet] are to them like the one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it" (Ez. 33:32). It was the spoken, not the written, word which had standing. One of the signs that messianic times have arrived is "that the deaf shall hear even written words" (Is. 29:18).

The earliest extant Hebrew writings, a number of inscribed ring seals and the Gezer Calendar, a small limestone tablet which presents a list of months together with the agricultural tasks appropriate to each, are generally dated to the century which follows the establishment of David's monarchy (circa 1000 B.C.E.). Unfortunately, little Hebrew writing survives from the next three or four centuries, so the spread of the literary craft cannot be described, but certainly, once settled in Canaan, a few bright young Israelites must have set out to master the writing and reading skills in which they found many Canaanites adept and whose value as a useful and administrative tool became increasingly evident and

necessary as the community settled in. They knew the scribe as a craftsman who offered his skills in the same way as the local smith or mason; as a tradesman the scribe learned his art by the time-honored way of apprenticeship.

There was, however, another level of scribe - administrators who, since Sumerian times (mid fourth millennium B.C.E.), had been the real promoters of writing because of its usefulness in managing affairs of state, collecting taxes and tribute, conscripting forced labor and troops, maintaining land registration, palace inventories, and the like. Such officials worked in the bureaus of the Canaanite city-states. They learned their skills in the way these arts were universally mastered by men of their class in ancient times -- in palace schools. There a teacher sounded the letters or spoke the phrases of the poem or saga being used as a text and the student repeated the lesson aloud while copying the letters on a wooden tablet. This process was repeated until the teacher was satisfied that the text was stored in the student's memory bank and that he could write out and perhaps also read aloud his copy.

The teacher made sure the neophyte scribe properly understood the text by having him sound it out. The mentor listened and made the necessary corrections. The Chinese schoolroom whose babble became a byword to Western visitors who compared it unfavorably with our presumedly quiet and orderly classes provides, in fact, a similar scene to what a visitor would have found in a school for scribes in ancient West Asia. All reading was done aloud and since everyone was conditioned in this way, everyone in the ancient world who could read, read aloud. As late as the

fourth century C.E. Augustine in his memoirs expresses surprise when he notices a scholar off in a corner reading silently.

Education aimed at mastering what was already known rather than at enlarging the boundaries of knowledge. One of the paradoxes which accompanied the spread of literacy is that at first the existence of inscribed tablets and scrolls forced scribes to depend more, rather than less, on their memories. Writing was a primitive art and the written word was not yet corseted with a definite structure of spelling or grammar. Lines were irregular and text might run in several directions. Scribes compressed as much text as possible on a single surface, for writing surfaces were expensive. The result was that imaginative guesswork or familiarity with a text was required to make sense of it, particularly when a text was not an inventory, a list, but literature. Reading was an uncertain art. No wonder the Greeks taught that Mnemosyne (memory) was the mother of the Muses and set their sons to memorize the Iliad. Even if you had access to tablets or scrolls, what was not stored in your memory might as well not exist. Your library, such as it was, was in your mind. A neighbor or colleague might know a particular tradition you had forgotten, but the outer limit of collective knowledge was the sum of what could be recalled.

"My son, forget not my teachings. . .incise them on the tablet of your mind" (Prov. 3:1-3). Acquiring knowledge was a long, laborious, and tedious process and one never graduated. Each tablet or scroll had to be learned. Adults repeated what they knew all their lives to make sure they had not forgotten.

Not surprisingly, the Biblical tradition is full of admonitions encouraging the faithful to review God's Instructions; otherwise they might slip into oblivion. "Recite (these Instructions) when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deut. 6:7). "Remember the commandments of the Lord" (Num. 15:~~39~~ 40, "Remember to do all my commandments" (Num. 15:40) Sin was traced back to forgetfulness, "My people are ruined for lack of knowledge. You have forgotten your God's Instructions" (Hosea 4:6). Righteousness was associated with a strong memory: "The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. . .to those that remember His precepts to do them" (Ps. 103:17-18). In messianic times people will be "joined" in a covenant which shall not be forgotten" (Jer. 50:5).

We associate intelligence with literacy and creativity. The ancients associated intelligence with retentivity. "Memory," Aeschylus is reported to have said, "is the mother of all wisdom," so much so that the spread of literacy often raised fears about the future of civilization. How so? Someone who has access to a library may no longer review regularly what he knows and so may fail to keep it in mind. Many believe that what is not in the mind may as well not be, in the sense that forgotten ideas no longer have any impact on us. Their concern was fundamentally a moral concern. A well-stocked and active memory, full of noble thoughts, was held to be the mother of virtue. Why? Because what was in the mind inevitably showed up in your actions. Memory and virtue were in their thinking inextricably linked.

Shortly before the tribes entered Canaan, Canaanite scribes put the finishing touches on a phonetic system which reduced the cuneiform syllabary to a manageable alphabet of twenty-two or twenty-four consonants, a system whose manifest advantage over all previous systems gained for it quick acceptance in the various bureaus of West Asia. Because picture writing required an infinite number of signs, centuries of work had gone into the effort to replace these complex pictorial or hieratic scripts with a manageable system based on sound rather than image in which all the phonetics, the basic sounds used in a spoken language, could be suggested by a small number of symbols. With this achievement only one further change would be needed to produce the alphabet which still serves us well. That would come during the seventh or sixth centuries B.C.E. when the Greeks introduced into this alphabet a number of specific vowel signs, a change which markedly reduced the chances of making serious errors of pronunciation and, therefore, of meaning.

The Hebrews, adopting the alphabet they found in Canaan, never had to wrestle with all the complexities of an hieratic writing system, and there may be a connection between that fact and their remarkably consistent literary preference for simplicity over complexity. Language patterns affect thought patterns. Did Israel's late arrival into the world of the written word have something to do with their ability to conceive of one God over many, one creation over separate natural forces, one human family over separate and distinct tribal ancestors? The consonantal

alphabet made it possible to communicate ideas through a finite set of symbols which pointed directly to sound rather than to a visual image, and one wonders whether the fact that the Hebrews never had to accustom themselves to pictographic symbols might have made it easier for them to conceive of a God who could not be visualized or described.

In Canaan, as in all the city-states of West Asia, the development of writing techniques had been encouraged for their practical value as an administrative tool. Palaces sponsored the schools where scribes were prepared and which fostered experimentation designed to improve scribal techniques. As urban life developed and city-states grew into empires, officials found it increasingly necessary to provide help to the clerks trying to cope with the growing elaboration of political administration, the increasing number and complexity of land registries, tax records, inventories of military and palace supplies, census figures, and the palace's correspondence with provincial officials and foreign courts. Most of the inscribed tablets so far recovered from the ruins of the palaces and temples of West Asia -- the number runs into the tens of thousands -- deal with practical administrative matters: lists of taxes to be collected, registers of captured booty, inventories of items on deposit, copies of treaties, census matters, conscription documents, royal and priestly geneologies, and diplomatic correspondence. Only an occasional tablet records a venerated myth, sacred hymn, or collection of wisdom.

This was a world where illiterate kings sponsored schools for scribes because they needed graduates for the efficient and effective organization of their power. Literacy was a practical art, not as yet associated with literature. Writing was developed as an instrument of social and political control. Those who attended palace schools and mastered scribal skills tended to be the sons of the lower nobility or minor priests who in the ordinary course of events could not expect to inherit land or feudal authority but who had every reason to believe that demonstrable usefulness to those who governed would place them in the way of position, preference, and power. An Egyptian text, Teaching of Kety, Son of Duauf (~~early~~ 2nd millennium), imagines a father advising his son on the advantages of investing the long years required to master the scribal arts. "I have never seen ~~the sculptor~~ [as an ambassador] ~~but~~ I have seen the ~~smith~~ at his work at the mouth of his furnace. His fingers, like ~~the~~ crocodiles; ~~and~~ he stank more than ~~fish-roe~~ ... ~~fisherman's eggs~~. . . The farmer's ~~voice~~ is as raucous as a crow's. ~~His arms are dried up by the wind. He takes his rest -- when he gets his rest -- in the mud.~~ Therefore, apply your heart to learning."(2) This theme appears frequently in the literature, "Put writing in your heart that you may protect yourself from hard labor of any kind." "The scribe is released from manual tasks, it is he who commands." A millennium later an editor of the Book of Proverbs still found it appropriate to include a maxim which made much the same point: "See a scribe skillful at

his craft. He will serve kings. He will not serve common men" (22:19).

Ordinary folk knew and feared the clerk as an agent of a distant and feared authority whose tablets or parchments often took away their land or added to their tax burden. The Hebrew term for a scribe emerges from the root 'spr,' 'to count,' rather than from the root 'ktv,' 'to write.' A scribe was originally a sofer, a counter. Scribes compiled conscription lists, tax rolls, forced labor assignments, and records of royal lands -- all activities which took from the many for the benefit of the few. In the process scribes wrote the documents which threatened the immemorial routines of tribal life: denying access to customary pasturage or tying up simple folks in a mesh of complicated, and imperfectly understood, contractual obligations. The mysterious squiggles and lines which the scribes produced often served as the basis of proceedings which appropriated their land or conscripted their sons into forced labor battalions. Where we associate literacy with the advantages of culture and civilization, our ancestors did not look on literacy as an unmixed blessing.

Like other peoples in the ancient world, the Israelites associated writing with tax collectors and royal extortion rather than with literature and civilization. The prophet Isaiah voiced the feelings of many in one of his famous "woe" oracles. "Ha! Those who write out evil writs and compose iniquitous documents, to subvert the cause of the poor, to rob of their rights the needy of My people; that widows may be their spoil, and fatherless

children their booth!" (10:1-2). Many popular myths named the god of death as the deity who first taught literacy to mankind.

A history of the development of literacy in ancient Israel remains to be written, but it seems likely that at first it was simply a matter of Israel's kings doing what kings elsewhere had long found to be to their benefit. Having established a permanent court for his mini-empire in Jerusalem, David found that the management of his newly acquired kingdom required the maintenance of record-keeping bureaus and set about accomplishing his ends by hiring scribes from other courts.(3)

Illiteracy was not seen as a disabling handicap which precluded the exercise of power or even a reputation for learning. Not a single line in the Book of Judges suggests that Deborah, Gideon, Samson or any other leader of the settlement period could read or write. The Deuteronomic histories routinely describe the kings of Israel and Judah as listening to the speeches of their counselors or being read to by a royal scribe. The few stories in the Deuteronomic histories which describe a royal figure as actually writing are clearly revisions of earlier recitals. One is a report that David inscribed the message which ordered a field commander to dispatch Uriah on a suicide mission and another that Ahab's queen Jezebel wrote the letter plotting to charge Naboth with treason. Reading both scenes one feels certain that a later storyteller had reshaped these exciting but unseemly tales to emphasize the royal personages' need to handle an ugly business with maximum secrecy. It is doubtful that either David or Jezebel could read and/or write Hebrew. David is described

as a farm boy turned mercenary, an upbringing which would not have provided him the opportunity or wherewithal to attend a school for scribes had one been available to him. Jezebel was Phoenician and a woman; neither circumstance made it likely that she would have been able to write a letter in Hebrew.

Kings were kings, not scriveners. They needed to win wars, not write or even read books. The neo-Assyrian Emperor Ashurbanipal (668-626 B.C.E.) who lived three centuries after David is the first king of renown who ~~specifically described himself as having~~ boasted that he had mastered the scribal arts: "~~I wrote on tablets, both wrote and read them, and when I had finished with them placed them in my library so that I can peruse them for myself or read them aloud to my guests.~~"(4) In Ashurbanipal's case, literacy became something of a disabling passion. In middle age he abandoned statecraft for bibliomania and depleted the royal treasury in order to build the library of Nineveh, which was in its day the largest in West Asia.

A capable sword, a strong will, and common sense were the attributes a king required. He could always hire scribes to keep the necessary accounts, prepare and read correspondence, and record his triumphs; as well as storytellers and poets who would entertain the court with recitals of the community's sagas and legends. A quick and retentive mind combined with political and military success and, in Solomon's case, sufficient interest in culture to patronize poets and musicians, easily established a royal reputation for learning which later generations translated into legends describing Solomon as an author in his own right, .

crediting him with having written Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. A critical review of Solomon's capacities makes it doubtful that he could read any of the scrolls his scribes had begun to collect in the palace archives. Solomon's wisdom expressed itself in speech rather than script. "Men of all peoples came to hear Solomon's wisdom" (I Kings 4:34).

Solomon was shrewd enough to be concerned that the kingdom be guaranteed a steady supply of able administrators and clerks. His solution was to establish in the palace a school for scribes, Israel's first; and to appoint scribes to major posts where literacy was useful. The register of senior officials in Solomon's court includes: "Elihoreph and Ahijah, sons of Shisha, scribes. . ." (I Kings 4:3). We hear of scribe-administrators throughout the period of the kingdoms. King Jehoash assigned a scribe to serve as controller of a project to refurbish the fabric of The Temple (II Kings 12:10-12). When Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians three centuries later, "the scribe of the army commander who was in charge of mustering the people of the land" became one of an unfortunate group of officials executed on the orders of Nebuchadnezzar (II Kings 25:19, ‖ Ch. 26:11).

Not all scribes, of course, were senior administrators. Most served as notaries who maintained the tax rolls, palace inventories, and lists of tribute, and as the clerks who made copies of the court's correspondence with other governments, army commanders in the field, and provincial officials, and maintained the administrative files. As commercial life developed in the larger towns,

merchants began to use clerks to record purchases, sales and inventory. Clans like "the families of scribes who inhabited Jabez" (1 Ch. 2:55) began to specialize in this craft and trained up their sons for the work much as other families specialized in being smiths or vintners. Jars were stamped with the owner's name or mark. Inscribed seals became common, used even by illiterate commercial types to signify that they had heard a contract read out and agreed that this document recorded the agreements they had entered into. A few such seals have been found inscribed in Hebrew letters and some who owned them probably learned to puzzle out the signature which a professional had cut into the stone; but few Israelites felt a need to spend the years required to master the literate arts. The scarcity of Hebrew inscriptions earlier than the seventh century B.C.E. may suggest simply the use of perishable writing surfaces or bad archeological luck, but it certainly also suggests the numerical insignificance of the literate classes.

Neither scribes nor written records played a significant role in the religious life of the pre-exilic community, a not surprising fact since no people of the time ascribed holiness to any written document. No West Asian shrine enshrined a scripture and no liturgy of the time featured readings or recitations from sacred tablets. Some Temples had libraries, but these were little more than archives where the priests kept lists of donations and of valuables left on deposit. To be sure, some texts of myth, magical formulae, and sacred hymns have been found in these archives; but

how is we treat this?

none of these tablets or rolls was intended to be publicly exhibited or to be read out during a public service; and as far as we can tell none was treated with any special ceremony. As we have seen, the ancients had little reason to revere the written word, though they most certainly felt its mysterious presence as they did whenever they came face to face with any art or skill they did not fully understand.

One of the reasons, perhaps the main one, that it took nearly a millennium for the Five Books of Moses and the Prophets to emerge as a written scripture is that at this early date people had little reason to assume that the written word provided a truly dependable record. Later communities would be eager to compile a scripture in order to secure the text of their oral traditions; but in the pre-exilic period the art of writing had not yet developed to the point where people could be sure that anyone reading a text would get it right. Deciphering a written text, decoding its symbols, in short reading, was not, as it is with us, a fairly simple skill which once mastered allows the reader to proceed with confidence.[5] Not all scribes had a good hand. Writing surfaces were difficult to prepare and consequently expensive. Since compression was required, words and sentences were run together or abbreviated. Texts were inscribed without punctuation signs or word or paragraph divisions, without a system for capitalizing proper names, and without any particular acknowledgement of the forms of grammar. There were no accepted rules of punctuation, spelling, or grammar. There were no vowels. Spelling was not yet standardized. Few scrolls or tablets were free of scribal mistakes.

It is not hard to imagine that a text never seen before presented itself as a complicated puzzle. Often there were a number of equally 'logical' readings. Even a well-trained and intelligent scribe could not be sure of the author's meaning. Long after writing was developed, oral transmission remained the more dependable way of transmitting sacred traditions.

People who knew how to write, wrote; but people trusted what they heard from those who knew rather than from what was written down. A short oracle in the book of Jeremiah which appears to come from the very end of the pre-exilic period reflects the sense of undependability associated with written texts: "How can you say, 'why, we are wise for we possess the (written) instructions of God.' Assuredly, for naught has the pen labored, for naught the scribe!'" (Jer. 8:8).

Literacy was far more widespread in fifth-century Greece than in pre-exilic Israel (1200-600 B.C.E.) and books were more carefully edited; yet, Socrates felt compelled to say: "Anyone who leaves behind him a written manual, and likewise anyone who takes it over from him on the supposition that such writing will provide something reliable and permanent must be extremely simple-minded" (Phaedrus: 278-217).

An ambassador sent to another court might be provided with a written copy of his message, but he was expected to deliver his master's wishes orally. The letter he carried was little more than a way for the recipient to confirm that the message he was told reflected the message with which the agent had been entrusted.

At a time when ordinary folk generally feared the written document as a tool of tyranny, the emergence of a scripture which assumes and commands positive feelings of loyalty and a sense of holy awe was out of the question. Writing was accepted as a practical but somewhat anxiety-creating art. Whatever sense of the sacred attached to it came from the awe with which humans endow skills they do not fully understand, yet recognize as powerful.

Uncertainty about the value of written records affected all West Asian legal practice. Oral testimony was preferred to documentary evidence. Generally, elders dispensed justice without recording their proceedings. Witnesses could describe what they had seen and heard. They might lie, but there could be no mistaking their testimony. On the other hand, a written document was inevitably subject to a variety of readings and meanings because of the compression of text, confusion in spelling and word division, and inevitable scribal error. The use of documents in judicial proceedings was limited almost entirely to issues in which there was no alternative, such as divorce, which involved a woman as an interested party. In Hebrew law, and in the law of most West Asian societies, a woman had no standing before a court. As a consequence, the usual procedure in a divorce case of relying only on oral testimony by the husband would have excluded the wife's evidence and put her at an unfair disadvantage. Thus, the necessity of devising a bill of divorce (Get) that could be given into the woman's hand and establish her rights (Deut. 24:1).

In these pre-exilic centuries there may have been lists of torot, divine instructions, perhaps set down on papyrus or wood by a scribe associated with one of Israel's shrines who for one reason or another wrote out a list of rules he had heard recited or been taught; but such lists, like the early chronicles, were not treated as holy. The scroll of torot found during a refurbishing of The Temple ordered by Josiah in 621 B.C.E. apparently had not been missed and once found was not treated with any particular veneration. Records were useful in organizing the financial administrative work of the shrine but as yet no one associated sacredness or holiness with the written word. The Bible speaks of holy people, holy places, the holy Temple, holy things, but never of a holy book.

The ancient world knew and valued sacred speech. Torah was "heard". Prophets spoke God's message. Singers sang God's praise and that of the king. Those who were "skilled in speech" (I Sam. 16:18) were much sought after. Priests consulted oracles like the Urim and Tumim and announced God's will. Those who tended the altar knew by heart the sacred hymns. There is nd indication of a ritual involving the reading of sacred literature or the public display of sacred tablets or scrolls. Literacy was not a required attainment for those who aspired to the priestly office.(6) The priestly role was deeply identified with the spoken word: "proper rulings were in his mouth/nothing perverse was on his lips. . . The lips of a priest guard knowledge/Men seek rulings from his mouth/He is a messenger of the Lord ~~on High~~" (Mal. 2:6-7). Jeremiah equated priestly instruction, the counsel of wise men, and the speech of prophets, and describes all three as forms of spoken authority (18:18).

Israel shared with other peoples of that time and place the belief that the spoken word, when uttered by a holy man in a holy place, was a vehicle of power. The prophet was a speaker, not a scribe. The tongue was sacred to prophecy. Isaiah knew that his lips had been touched with a purifying coal. Jeremiah records that "The Lord said this to me: herewith, I put My words into your mouth. See, I appoint you this day (a prophet) over nations and kingdoms; to uproot and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant (Jer.1:9-10). "God made my mouth a sharp sword" (Is. 49:2).

The prophet did not need to be literate, and probably few were. The prophet heard the voice of God in a vision, but it was not this private vision which brought to life the events described but the prophet's decision to make public what he had seen and heard. At times it appears that for the words to have effect the prophet must not only speak but speak to a specific audience. The Balaam story assumes that the prophet must travel to the place where the tribes are encamped for the curse he proposes to speak to have effect. Amos had to go to Bethel and Jonah to Nineveh.

Manuals sometimes list Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve as 'literary' prophets. The term, a modern invention, indicates no more than that, unlike other prophets named in the Bible of whom we know only incidents told about them, we have from these men texts which purport to present passages from their speeches. With one exception, Jeremiah, none of the 'literary' prophets seem to have arranged for his speeches to be written down, yet all apparently confidently expected that their messages would survive.

The occasional reference to a prophet who takes pen in hand on examination turns out to be anachronistic revisions. The scroll of Isaiah includes two versions of an oracle in which God orders the prophet to give his son a symbolic name, Maher shalal hash baz, "pillage hastens, looting spreads" (8:1) as a warning of impending destruction. In one version God simply orders Isaiah so to name the boy. In the other the prophet is told to prepare a poster "and write on it in common script maher shalah-hash baz." Today, no self-respecting demonstration takes place without attention-getting placards and God's demand seems commonplace; but one wonders about the impact of a word-filled placard on an illiterate Judean crowd. Who among them would have been able to read the emblazoned motto? It seems likely that someone later retelling this story to a post-exilic audience -- among whom there would have been a sizable number of readers -- felt that the story told better this way.

Jeremiah lived over a century after Isaiah, at a time when the urban expansion of Jerusalem was considerably more advanced and literacy far more common; but he, too, shows little interest in writing out his speeches. To be sure, the received text contains two references which suggest that God specifically ordered Jeremiah "to write down in a scroll all the words that I have spoken to you in a book" (30:2, 36:2); but in each case Jeremiah responded by hiring a professional scribe, Baruch, son of Neriah, who "wrote down in the scroll at Jeremiah's dictation all the words which the Lord had spoken to him" (36:4). When a charge of treason is lodged against Jeremiah, the king, Zedekiah, orders that a scroll

containing the prophet's speeches be prepared and brought to him. Zedekiah orders the Royal Scribe to read the scroll to him and, as the reading proceeds, the king cuts from the scroll each leaf after it had been read and throws it into the fire, apparently hoping in this way to cancel the predicted disaster. Determined that there be a written record of God's judgment, perhaps also to dramatize the fact that the king's actions lacked the power to cancel God's decision, Jeremiah has another scroll prepared; again he, himself, does not inscribe it. A true child of the age of memory, he knew the oracles by heart, even those which had been delivered years before, and simply dictated his speeches as they had been originally delivered to Baruch, who wrote out the replacement scroll.(7)

The care with which prophetic statements were transmitted and eventually recorded derived primarily from the interest of various pious groups in using such oracles to "prove" God's power. Events had happened as the oracle, God, had predicted they would. At first, evidence of this oracular kind seems to have been left entirely to the memory of the faithful. 'Bind up the message, seal the instruction with My Disciples' (Is. 8:16). Why? For "you are my witnesses, says the Lord" (Is. 43:10). But since at times there was a considerable hiatus between the pronouncement and the occurrence of the predicted event, and the witnesses who had heard the oracle spoken were no longer available, the only way to prove that God had announced the event beforehand was to show a written record; "Now, go write it down upon a tablet and inscribe it in a record that it may be with them for future days, a witness forever" (Is. 30:8). Such written witnesses must have

been particularly important to the exiled community (6th cent. B.C.E.) because their hope of return depended on the certainty of God's promises of return and the audience who had heard the original oracle might have been killed or scattered. The proof that God's word was powerful and certain assured the nation that the promises explicit in the covenant could be expected to be fulfilled if the community proved repentant and loyal.

Memory was the trusted means of keeping traditions alive. In recent years much has been written about the role of professional storytellers and rhapsodists in shaping and preserving oral and folk culture. Generally, these men have been described as highly reliable transmitters. Indeed, some students have been so impressed by what they believe to be the fidelity of the oral transmission of narratives and legal formulae that they came to some rather overly-dramatic conclusions about the reliability of the Bible's reports of events which had taken place centuries before they became a part of Israel's written record. We do find details of much older practices and customs as well as venerable idioms embedded in various later Biblical narratives. Oral traditions were handled carefully, but the Hebrews, like all peoples of the time, were not committed to an absolutely faithful transmission. True, the familiar sagas were repeated with a high degree of accuracy, and familiar details and images reappear with each telling. Innovation was not a goal. Yet, when anthropologists have been able to compare a spoken version of a preliterate tribe's history with an earlier telling, they have found that though neither the speaker nor his audience were aware of any changes, the story had

been adapted. The later version contained changes which reflected political events which had occurred since the earlier version. In one case, researchers happened to record an African saga about the tribe's origins. A generation later other researchers heard the same narrative and found that it had been adjusted to reflect the fact that two clans were no longer members of the tribal group.(8) At every telling the story must be made understandable to the immediate audience. The Homers of the ancient world recited with love and respect the well-known sagas of their tribe, using familiar phrases, idioms, and incidents, but they did so in ways which allowed them to respond to the cultural preconceptions, political knowledge, and emotional interests of their audience. The audience helped to "write" the history. The storyteller might add an incident, omit a phrase, alter a geneology or use a current idiom to satisfy the expectations of his audience. If the version he recited felt old, if the incidents and formulae passages seemed right to his audience, it was accepted as authentic. Neither he nor they might have been conscious that changes had been made. It follows that a culture which is not yet encumbered with a scripture retains a subtle but functional capacity to reshape its fundamental traditions without being conscious of doing so.

Such familiar recitations were not simply good theater but important bonding experiences which tied listeners to their past, each other, and their god(s). Part of the joy and power of such moments lay in their familiarity. The audience could anticipate words and phrases and thus have tangible proof that what they believed to be true and right was in fact so. The story's value

lay in the recital which brought the past to life and guarded their present with the security of trusted teachings. The narrator did not need to belabor the message. The experience was the message. Its value lay in the emotional security which came from sharing a common heritage and present.

Later, unfortunately, as reading replaced recitation as man's primary path to literature, much of the immediacy of the experience was lost. In a scriptural religion there is a certain distance between the word and the human soul. A reader can become emotionally or intellectually engaged in the text, but he cannot affect it. The book he puts down is the same book he picked up. Reading is a one-way experience. A scripture represents an emotional reduction from a recitation or speech since it depends on a literary approach which encourages reflection and analysis rather than engagement.

Though a scripture is a book, it was at first not developed to be read but to be read aloud. Chants which suggested the inflection and mood created by the storyteller or the prophet were formalized. Communities encouraged the reader to memorize and publicly recite the text in the same sing-song which the rhapsodists used in their recitations. Conscious efforts were taken to transmit sacred traditions orally long after literacy had become a much used social tool. To this day Muslim schools emphasize the memorization of the Koran. The actual text is used only to assure against mistakes. In India the Rig Vedas were already well known in the thirteenth century B.C.E. but were not written down for another thousand years. As far back as we can trace public readings from the Sefer Torah we find that they were not read but chanted.

Throughout the period of the monarchy (10th through 7th century B.C.E.) the kings of Israel and Judah used scribes with some regularity not only to organize tax collections, maintain correspondence, and administer their various bureaus but to prepare dynastic chronicles. Scribes discovered that the royal ego was pleased when they prepared records of royal triumphs. The earliest royal annals have been lost but are known to us by name only because a later generation of chroniclers, who edited the Deuteronomic and priestly histories, cited them in their histories (Annals of the Acts of Solomon (I K, 11:41); Annals of the Kings of Judah (I Kings 14:29); Annals of Samuel the Seer (I Ch. 29:29). The earliest chronicles recorded the king's noble pedigree, dramatic events in the life of his ancestors, his victories and munificences, and may be considered Israel's first written literature. The Psalms contain reflections of the courtly ethos in which these scribes worked: "My heart has composed a sweet melody: I shall recite my work, O King, my tongue is the pen of a skillful scribe, you are the fairest of the children . ." (Ps. 45:2-3). "How many are the ivory palaces? How many shall acclaim you? Daughters of kings shall be stationed in your mansions, the queen at your right hand in the gold of Ophir" (Ps. 45:10).

Two other early "books" are cited in the later histories: The Book of the Wars of the Lord (Num. 21:14) and The Book of Jashar (Josh. 10:13). Jashar appears to have been a collection of short poems associated with important incidents in the early history of the Israelite Confederation. The two citations of those poems which survive include a few lines of a hymn ascribed to Joshua

praising God for having commanded the sun and the moon to stand still so that the military route of the Amorites could be completed (Joshua 19:11-13) and David's moving lament for Jonathan and Saul, "Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights: How have the mighty fallen!" (2 Sam. 1:18-27). Of The Wars of the Lord we know only that it included a Northern Israel boundary list set out in memorizable form (Numbers 21:14). The appearance of such material which seems to reflect the cultural interests of the palace and to be designed for no nobler purpose than to flatter or intrigue a royal ego, in a text which will be acclaimed as scripture, underlines the role of chance and circumstance in the development of the Biblical canon and reminds us that no one set out to write or edit a Holy Bible. Scriptures represent selections from a community's literature, particularly, but not exclusively, from materials of religious interest. Many elements enter in the editorial decisions: availability, presence in a well-known text, general interest. Books became holy because readers declared them to be so, not because of the author's or storyteller's original intent. The Gentile prophet Balaam could never have anticipated that some of his prophecies spoken about Israel would become holy writ.

Early on, literacy became associated with a particular "cosmopolitan" culture which developed among the scribes of many nations. Responsible as they were for all correspondence between their court and the outside world, scribes were the first group in each community to break out of the tight-knit envelope of tribal and cultural insularity which enveloped all societies and to take a serious interest in other cultures. Humans are by nature curious

and some of these men who were, after all, an educated elite, became eager to learn about the political concerns and even the cultural interests of the scribes of neighboring groups with whom they corresponded and, when deputized as ambassadors, sometimes visited. They discovered what others thought about the brevity of life, the vagaries of individual destiny, the best way to raise a family, advance a career, tolerate fools, and manage relationships with the powerful. In many cultures the community's "wisdom," its advice for the management of a successful life, was capsuled in compact, easily remembered proverbs and maxims which were passed on as commonplace advice from father to son, from teacher to student, and from native to foreign scribe.

The sum of these reflections and observations came to be called Wisdom. Although each community had its own Wisdom tradition, the commonalities of West Asian society were such that proverb and observation tended to pass fairly easily from one community to another, hence Wisdom had a cosmopolitan character. In time, compilations of cautionary sayings and sound advice and sober speculation about the twin mysteries of life and death were compiled, often with large sections of "borrowed" material.(9)

Wisdom as we know it is a body of literature of which The Book of Proverbs is a classic example. Its style is that of brief, rhythmic, often picturesque, adages obviously shaped by the needs of memorization and everyday speech as well as by numerical formulas. "Three things there are which are stately in their stride, four which are striking as they move,. . ." (Prov. 30:29) or acrostic structures, the famous woman of valor poem with which the book closes (Prov. 31:10-31).

Wisdom still reflects its origin in an essentially oral culture. It is assumed that wisdom's truths enter the mind through the ear rather than through the eye. "Hear, my son, and be wise" (Prov. 23:19). "My son, listen to my words, incline your ear to my sayings" (Prov. 4:20). In Egypt teachers of wisdom believed that "a hearing heart" was essential to good character development. I know of no wisdom maxim which advises: 'to be wise, my son, spend your youth with the scrolls of ancient wisdom.' Rather, the prodigal confesses: "I did not listen to the voice of my teachers, my ears were shut to those who tried to instruct me" (Prov. 5:13). It was generally believed that the ideas which were memorized remained active in the mind and helped to determine behavior; it was generally agreed that unless the gods or Fate intervened, decisions were made on the basis of the ideas you had appropriated as your own, which meant those which were uppermost in your mind.

It is not surprising then that as formal schooling developed across West Asia, teachers used these prudential and monitory observations as set pieces for students who were being introduced to the scribal arts. Presumedly, in speaking aloud and copying such exercises the young scholar took them into his mind and made them his own. A good memory full of good thoughts was the indispensable prerequisite for a good character. There could be no doubt that teachers who helped to put good ideas in a youngster's memory bank shaped the youth's character.

Like the scribes who compiled the royal chronicles, these scribes, busy with their musings and their maxims, had no idea that some day their thoughts would be enshrined as scripture. They valued Wisdom highly. It had among them the status philosophy enjoyed in the Middle Ages but they made no claim that these thoughts were revealed, only that they were useful, in conformity with what we would call natural law, and in that sense ultimately true. The words were those of Solomon, Agur, or Lemuel, not God's. The identification of Hebrew Wisdom with God's words developed over a considerable span of time late in the Second Temple period.

As the kingdoms matured and their administrations became better organized and as trade's importance in the economy grew, the use of scribes increased. Inevitably, so did the number of written records. Record-keeping is addictive. After recording the rota of deposits in the shrine treasury, a scribe might record the calendar of holy days observed in that place or the number and form of sacrifices or the hymns sung during the ceremonies. Others, out of interest or when ordered, inscribed portions of familiar epics or perhaps a list of torot, divine Instructions, which local priests had collected. There were writings of various kinds and content, but during the pre-exilic period none of these documents was treated as sacrosanct.

Even the record of a divine oracle was simply a record. God spoke. The power was in the spoken word. No special care was lavished on the written form of this literature. Scribes wrote on whatever writing surface was at hand, mostly clay or papyrus, using the same script and forms they employed for their registers or

ordinary correspondence, a cursive alphabet which strongly suggested its origin in a provincial cuneiform script which later generations would call Ketav Ivri, Hebrew writing, and we, in our time, paleo-Hebrew.

There were no taboos against making a written record of any part of the oral tradition, even of power-laden sacred formulae. In 1985 an amulet was discovered at a grave site at Ketef Hinnon just outside the walls of pre-exilic Jerusalem, datable to the late pre-exilic period. It consisted of two small inscribed cylindrical silver plates. These two thin metal plaques, each incised with a text in Ketav Ivri script, bear the names of individuals, possibly the amulet's owners, and a blessing which closely resembles the formula which became the most powerful blessing known to ancient Israel, the Priestly Benediction (Num. 6:24-26). The language of this blessing is specific. The amulet writer has usefully provided this explanation: "Thus they shall link My name with the people of israel and I will bless them. . ." (Num. 6:27).

The three-fold invocation of YHWH's name was spoken by Temple priests on ceremonial occasions and believed by all to offer real protection to the community. It is a custom taken over and continued to this day in the synagogue. Whether the deceased wore these amulets during his life time or they were prepared to be placed in his grave, it is clear that they served a protective purpose. Such amulets offer further evidence of the magical power associated with written formulae invoking God's name.(10)

(10)

Incidentally, the use of phrases so similar to a well-known blessing provides us with some understanding of the way well-known proverbs, idioms, formulae and phrases were known. The universe of discourse was rich in familiar phrases which circulated broadly and were used often, sometimes in slightly changed form. So we find the separate formula phrases of this blessing -- "May YHWH bless you and keep you;" "May YHWH make His face shine upon you and show you favor;" "May YHWH lift up His countenance upon you and grant you fulfillment" -- appearing not only on these amulets but separately in various Psalms (67:2, 80:4, 8, 38).

The language of well-known forms was probably a greater force for the persistence of familiar formulae than any conscious effort in that direction. Such phrases were the ready-at-hand building blocks out of which storytellers, priests, and teachers constructed their presentations. Michael Fishbane, in an analysis of a denunciation of priestly activities by the post-exilic prophet Malachai, has shown how a skillful speaker used the idioms of the Priestly Benediction to heighten the sarcasm of his condemnation: "So, now, beseech the countenance of God that He may show us favour. . . will he be gracious to you?"(11)

There were no cultural bars to the inscription of the oral tradition, but at the same time, no compelling reason for undertaking a concerted effort to set down Israel's religious tradition. Indeed, it is doubtful if during these pre-exilic centuries anyone could have defined with any precision the boundaries of israel's sacred traditions. Religion permeated every aspect of life. The traditions were set down piecemal. A scribe who may also have

been a priest may have been ordered to prepare a list of divine instructions (torot) sacred to his shrine. Another of a more literary bent busied himself after working hours setting down the local version of the Flood story. Such material was all part of a diffuse tradition or, rather, traditions since there were local variations based on tribal traditions.

Over time bits and pieces of these traditions became text. Texts of various kinds existed but, and this is the crucial point, they were not as yet treated as sacred writings or featured in shrine worship. No presentation, oral or written, of the sagas, geneologies, dynastic chronicles, lists of torot, and wisdom sayings was accepted at any time during the pre-exilic period as sacrosanct or inviolate, though, obviously, these materials were trusted and believed. Pre-exilic Biblical Israel had religious traditions but no Bible.

These early years were a period of consolidation of various strands of tradition. During and after the period of settlement the separate traditions of the separate tribes were gradually brought together, sometimes by accident and sometimes by design, and various formulations slowly took shape -- a process that continued over some centuries. The confederation was composed of tribes, not all of whom shared a common history. The various tribes knew different versions of the creation myths and patriarchal stories and each tribe held sacred its own sagas. Not all tribes had been slaves in Egypt. Some tribes cherished traditions about the Exodus but not about the Sinai covenant, while others cherished memories of the Sinai covenant but not about the Exodus. Different

lists of the Instructions required by God's covenant were cherished at the various shrines: Beth El, Gilgal, and Schechem. It was during the period of confederation and settlement that these separate scenarios and themes began to be brought together into a more or less single narrative.

Over time these multiple traditions and discrete narratives were drawn into the chronological framework with which we are familiar. This framework within time had a certain inevitability. Professional storytellers knew that to keep an audience's attention they had best tell the story in sequence. The patriarchal stories, and the David saga, like the Iliad, are told in that fashion. The spoken word disappears as soon as it is spoken, so for memory's sake recitation tends to be of necessity linear. Walter Ong has made the useful point "that knowledge and discourse come out of human experience (so) the elemental way to process human experience verbally is to give an account of it more or less as it really comes into being and exists, embedded in the flow of time."(12)

Since no one had any idea that a record of these traditions would one day be venerated as scripture, being innocent of the very concept, the reciters who first drew traditions together and later the scribe-editors who set them down felt little need to edit out all inconsistencies. People heard and later read only parts of the tradition, never the whole. When several strands of tradition were brought together as much of the familiar as possible was maintained even if this meant inconsistent versions. What did it matter if several inconsistent versions of the Creation myth were in circulation? That's why the animals march into Noah's Ark in

pairs and also in families of seven. Editorial consistency was not a goal. The important thing about these materials is that they were familiar and trusted. Each had developed in one or another section of the community and had survived a thousand retellings and numerous editings.

Much later, looking back on their origins, Jews tended to assume that the now venerable sacred books, the scriptures, which were so central to their culture had played the same role in the lives of their ancestors. They had not. Ancient Israel lived in an essentially bookless society. Traditions and teachings were inscribed in their minds and hearts rather than on papyrus or parchment. Still, the later generations did not lack what they believed was convincing proof of The Book's central role in their faith. The proof was in The Book. It was all there, black on white, "When Moses had put down in writing the words of the Teaching to the very end" (Deut. 31:24). Since they now accepted the Sefer Torah as truth, and believed that what was had always been, it followed that Israel had had this teaching, the Torah, from the beginning of its national history, ever since Sinai. Indeed, not only had Israel had The Book but the community had been under an obligation to read and study it. Again, the proof was seen as incontrovertible. Deuteronomy contains a paragraph which has been recited daily during the synagogue service for nearly two thousand years which was understood to require that each Jew spend some time each day introducing his sons to the sacred book: "And you shall teach them (these laws) to your children and shall speak of them. . ." (6:6). That such a text required an interpretation which associated

schooling with books was deemed self-evident. It was not. At no time during the pre-exilic years was the study of the tradition as text actively encouraged. It could not have been. Pre-exilic Israel knew nothing of a written scripture. There was Torah, a body of divine tradition; but as yet no Sefer Torah, no scripture.

This Deuteronomy sentence encouraged parents to introduce their children to their traditions. Faith was a family affair. In its original context the sentence read: "You shall impress them (v'shinantem) upon your children and you shall recite them. . ." (Deut. 6:7). The verb used, v'shinantem, designated common speech, oral instruction. Recite the traditions to your children until the sagas and Instructions have become second nature to them, indelibly etched in their memory! Books were not involved here. Rote learning and cultural conditioning are. Indeed, neither reading nor writing is encouraged in the Torah. The cultivation of memory is: "My son, attend to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Keep them constantly in mind. Cherish them in your heart of hearts for they mean life to him who possesses them and health to his whole body" (Prov. 4:20-22).

Torah comes from a root yarah which originally meant to throw and which came to denote the casting of lots, more specifically casting lots to discover God's will. In the Bible the noun 'Torah' defines the specific terms of God's will and embraces many roles and duties. A Torah was a commandment which the community accepted as divinely ordained and, therefore, obligatory. Originally, these laws (torot) were not attributed to any particular historical

personality or event. They represented venerable and venerated practice and long-held concepts of right and virtue and so, inevitably, the will of God.

The various collections of torot which survive in the received text evidence some concern for a content-based arrangement, but none for comprehensiveness. Much of the arrangement seems dictated not by a desire to arrange material topically but by the habit of the time of stringing together related matters to ease the process of memorization. Matters relating to a calendar of holy occasions and rules governing the sacrificial cult are generally separated from other rules, but often instructions on a variety of topics simply follow each other without apparent logic and nowhere in the text is there a fully exhaustive list of rules governing any area of practice.

What was unique in the treatment of the emerging collections of torot was an increasingly evident determination to root them in a particular act of divine speech and to identify them as the message brought by a single prophet: "And the Lord spoke to Moses." Beginning in the last centuries of the pre-exilic period a conscious effort was made to root the various collections of torot in the Sinai covenant. Some of the torot are much older than Sinai and reflect well-known legal traditions of West Asia from the second millennium. Others, like those which were to govern the sacrificial cult, undoubtedly date from the period of settlement when Israel for the first time built shrines. This editorial effort had not been fully completed when the present text of

Exodus-Numbers was finalized and we read in those scrolls that Moses received some instructions on other occasions and in other places, such as the Tent of Meeting. Deuteronomy avoids any mention of Divine Instructions being given to Moses on any occasion other than Sinai.

To explain this tendency to relate all torot to Sinai and Moses, those who see self-interest as the primary human motivation point to the interests of the priesthood and the important role that the priests and priest-scribes played in the drive to set down the tradition. The authority of the priests was linked intimately and dynastically to that of Moses. If all the torot had been revealed through Moses and Moses had ordained his brother Aaron, the founder-dynast of the priest class, no one could mount a serious challenge to the claims by the existing priestly class that their service and privileges were divinely mandated. But more than priestly self-interest was involved. There was a need for a unifying myth which would give a sense of coherence and unity to the tradition as it slowly acquired a single form.

As the tribes became a confederation and then a kingdom, a need was felt for a single presentation of God's Instructions. Each tribe, each shrine, had its own list. There was no way to prove that one Torah formulation was more worthy than another. The authenticity of a particular formulation of torot could always be contested, so a single and singular event, Sinai, was declared to be the source of all accepted torot.[13] The reports of the covenant-enabling ceremonies organized at Schechem by Joshua and at Mizpeh by Samuel were stripped of the register of stipulations

which must have been confirmed on those occasions. These lists or parts of them may well have found their way into one or another of the anthologies of torot which today co-exist in the received text. Not surprisingly, there began to circulate torot which proclaimed it God's will that no one add to or subtract from the teachings given through Moses at Sinai.

The texts which contain the messages brought by the prophets who followed Moses contain no statutory laws. Perhaps Israel's culture did not look to prophetic oracles for laws, but if that is so, how shall we explain the major prophetic role assigned to Moses? More likely, the later prophetic texts came from a time when the myth of Sinai had become a cardinal article of the faith and when torot were expected from shrine oracles rather than from individual prophets. In any case, the Bible presents the prophets as bound to a mission to summon the community to return to God's ways rather than to practice some new duty.

The co-existence in the received text of clearly distinguishable blocks of torot, the separate "coda" which often contain divergent formulations of a particular rule, leaves no room for doubt that each "coda" had its own developmental history. The torot did not come as a unit from Sinai but represent separate traditions, each possibly related to the tradition of one or another tribal shrine. One instruction allows Levites to begin their Temple service at twenty-five years of age (Num. 8:24); another stipulated thirty as the proper age (Num. 4:23). We hear that an Israelite slave girl is to be freed after seven years (Deut. [illegible]); but another

reference to the issue of slavery makes no mention of such a requirement (Ex. 21:7). The spring harvest has three names in three different lists: (Katsir) (Ex. 23:16); the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot) (Deut. 16:9-10); and the Feast of First Fruits (Bikkurim) (Num. 28:26); and there is some confusion among them as to precisely when this many-titled holiday is to be celebrated.

Those in the post-exilic period who ultimately edited the written records into what we know as the Sefer Torah were not primarily interested in presenting a systematic and exhaustive statement of an authorized and catholic tradition. They presented those laws which for one reason or another had achieved a particular holiness and probably had served the various pre-exilic shrines as symbol of the entire covenant tradition. Ancient Israel's approach was not unlike that taken by many who still today see the Ten Commandments as symbolic of all that is good and right, God's will.

There was no original Torah, only various developing streams of tradition which were more or less shaped into a text that gave the appearance of a single tradition. There is a growing sense of national unity and a natural preference for order over disorder, although the existence of different traditions and codes was not particularly disturbing since there was as yet no scripture and no concept of one. Some in Israel know one list of torot, some another. Many were not aware that there were lists. The community accepted the authority and consistency of traditions which were part of the warp and weft of daily life. As each generation heard again the tradition, particular readings and interpretations seemed increasingly comfortable to them, and since their world seemed coherent, no one tried to find inconsistencies in what seemed to be a natural unity.

As indicated earlier, many pious folk dismiss this developmental reconstruction out of hand, offering as evidence the Sefer Torah's own testimony, a text or, rather, one or another of a small number of texts which indicate that Moses actually wrote out part or all of the received text. These texts exist, but they do not provide the solid proof claimed for them and they cannot stand against all we now know of the development of Israelite thought and practice.

No one knows what happened at Sinai, or with certainty that there was a Sinai. There are no reliable eye-witness accounts and our texts all come from much later periods. But it is clear that one of the most consistent themes in the telling, one which is described at length and in various versions, presents Moses as prophet, not scribe. Moses is the prophet through whom God's message is transmitted. He is God's man, ish ha-elohim, who cries out to the community the Instructions of the King of Kings. Again and again we find the phrase, "The Lord said to Moses: 'thus shall you say to the Israelites'" (Ex. 20:18 passim). The one consistent element in the various pieces which make up the Sefer Torah's presentation of Sinai is that there was a revelation at that place, an event where the voice of God dominated. God spoke. Moses spoke. The people heard and acclaimed.

The various scenarios of the covenant-enabling assembly presumedly held at the foot of Mt. Sinai describe a ceremony which involved sacred words cried out by a tribal leader acting as officiatory priest or prophet, the assemblage affirms and accepts these obligations as forever binding on their community, and an

enabling ritual was celebrated, probably a blood sacrifice, which declared the covenant in force. Moses is pictured throughout as a prophet, God's spokesman. The original story focused entirely on the spoken word. There was no stenographer at Sinai.

How and why, then, did the Sinai episode come to include the famous image of the two inscribed stone tablets? They are there but they were not always there. They represent a storyteller's inescapable need to dramatize events and to do so in ways his audience would appreciate and understand. The tablets served as a dramatic element which revealed the presence of God at the moment the covenant was fashioned. By their presence they served as a visible witness to the covenant's continuing power.

The Canaanites often erected stones, masseboth, in their shrines. These stones were held to represent the presence of the god(s) at the rites conducted in their honor. When Jacob fled Esau, he raised an altar on the spot where God promised him protection and put beside it a stone, a massebah, which, in the accepted symbolism of the day, witnessed to the fact that God has been present here, and by inference that God could in the future be approached here. Most of these stones were unadorned; a few, like the plinth found at the Canaanite altar at Hazor, were inscribed with some of the attributes associated with the god(s) worshipped there. An Israelite audience would have understood and appreciated a narrative which associated God's presence at a religious site with a sacred stone(s). There were such stones all over Canaan. It is unlikely that these masseboth were inscribed,

but again, an Israelite audience would have been aware of the not uncommon West Asian royal practice of setting up stone stele in various locations inscribed with the imperial law, usually prefaced with paragraphs of fulsome praise of the reigning king's magnificence and power. Would the King of Kings to establish his authority have done less than the great emperors of the time? Exodus reports, "God spoke (va'yedaber) all these words (devarim) saying," (20:1), and its narrative about the tablets comes later; here the operative words are va'yedaber and devarim from the root dvr, to speak. Speech precedes inscription, I would argue, by centuries rather than by just a few paragraphs.

Storytellers must fit well-known images to the events they are describing. Sinai was a way station on the long march out of Egypt. It would have made little sense to set up a sacred stone, inscribed or not, at a place the tribes might never revisit; so the stones had to be portable. There are two tablets, and the explanation is again cultural style. One way the ancients emphasized authority was to double the indicated phrase. God was the King of Kings. If kings inscribe their law on a selected stone, God would inscribe His law on the stone of stones.

We cannot recover with any certainty how and why Israel's storytellers wove new details into successive retellings of the Sinai events, but we can suggest how eager audiences unraveled the details. God was there. The Law is not only royal but divine, fixed for all time. God gave the Law twice to Israel. The Law is unique, God's own.

Just as ambassadors in those days took an oral message but also carried their king's instructions in a letter to assure the recipient that the agent was correctly conveying his lord's message, so the emphasis here is on the stone tablets, on which God, Himself, inscribed His words, as the confirming document. What better proof could you offer for its authenticity?

In another version of the Sinai story, God instructs Moses, His faithful agent, to do the writing. Moses' complete reliability is emphasized in the eulogy which closes Deuteronomy: "The servant of God" whose "eyes were undimmed and his vision unabated," (Deut. 34:7) becomes the text's authenticator. The tablets provide what an ancient audience would have considered tangible proof that Moses had spoken God's Instructions precisely as he had been commissioned to do. There were other narrative benefits. The tablets are of stone. Stone suggests permanence. To inscribe God's Law on stone is to testify to durability and unchangeability. Words cut into stone cannot be readily changed. This is a law for all times.

One of the many uncertainties which emerge from the present form of the Sinai narrative concerns precisely what was said. Were there only the ten statements? Just those ten? The tablet image suggests this was the case, but the received text explicitly introduces many other torot into its presentation of the Sinai revelation and at least one other slightly different version of the Ten Commandments.

That the tablets came into being in the course of pious narration becomes even more certain when we consider their subsequent history or, rather, lack of history. According to the text we possess,

the first set of tablets was shattered by an enraged Moses when he discovered that the tribes were worshiping the Golden Calf, and the replacement set, once engraved, was placed for safekeeping in the Holy Ark, Israel's portable shrine. Then, incredibly, it simply disappeared from history. We hear no more of the tablets, not a word.* Had there been tablets believed to have been written by God or by Moses, they surely would have been among Israel's most precious possessions, objects to be revered. Such tablets would have been the making of any shrine. One can imagine a constant stream of pilgrims arriving to venerate those holy objects and to draw on their power; but there is no indication that this was ever the case. After Sinai we hear much more about the ark but not a word about the tablets.

The idea that the revelation was inscribed on tablets seems to have emerged at a fairly late stage in the elaboration of the Sinai events and to have served to emphasize God's presence at Sinai and the importance of the text; but both Moses and God are unlikely scribes. Of God I cannot speak, but what we know about the cultural and social level of the Hebrew tribes in Moses' day makes it extremely doubtful that Moses could read or write. Even if we assume that the legend of a childhood spent in an Egyptian palace is not the pure invention it seems to be, we cannot take for granted that he would have been schooled there in the scribal arts, certainly not in the languages required of a Hebrew scribe. Egyptian princes were taught the arts of governance and war, not how to read and write. In the unlikely case that Moses had been

enrolled in such a palace school, he would have become adept in the hieratic script favored in the New Kingdom, not in the Ketav Ivri, the quite different script and alphabet in which the Israelites kept their records. If we assume Moses was raised as a Hebrew, the slave encampments were not places which could provide the young with the time and leisure for extended schooling.

Moses is presented primarily as a speaker. In his day literacy was not a requirement for the sheik who wished to maintain authority or even for the prophet who brought the word of God. Exodus presents a Moses sensitive to the fact that he lacks the qualifications to be God's spokesman. At the Burning Bush he worries that he will not be an effective messenger: "I have never been a man of words" (Ex. 4:10). Upon his commission Moses brings to Pharaoh a spoken message, not a letter; and another spoken message, again not a letter, to the council of tribal elders. Deuteronomy presents itself as a series of valedictory addresses in which Moses, about to relinquish the mantle of responsibility, reviews Israel's history, discourses on God's redemptive acts and the operation of the covenant: "On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this Teaching" (1:5). Phrases in which God orders Moses to speak to the Israelites occur with almost thirty times greater frequency in our text than do sentences in which he is ordered to write something down.

The few references to Moses as a writer are uniformly anachronistic. Someone has inserted into Exodus 24, which is clearly a composite of various traditions about the events at Sinai, a

sentence which reads: "Then Moses wrote down all the commands of the Lord" (24:4). After an unrelated paragraph in which an elaborate covenant-making ceremony is described, the theme of a written covenant is again picked up: Moses "took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people" (Ex. 24:7). The text is at best unclear. Which commandments did Moses record? What happened to this record? If there was a scroll why were the stone tablets necessary? None of these questions can be answered. These two sentences are a late insertion into an earlier version of the history of the Sinai covenant which described the occasion as one purely of sacred speech and sacrifice.

The why and wherefore of the appearance of the theme of a written record can only be guessed at. Some suggest that as the nation became more aware of the habits of surrounding cultures, storytellers added to the older narrative details which their audiences had come to associate with customs now broadly recognized as linked to treaty-making. In West Asia treaty texts often were placed for safekeeping in a shrine, protected by all kinds of taboos as well as high walls; the texts' presence there implied that the gods approved and took responsibility for insuring that the agreed-on terms were kept.

Similarities have been noted between the Sinai episode and descriptions of covenant and treaty-making ceremonies among the Hittites and other peoples of the area. It was common practice when making a treaty to include a eulogy to the king's power, a proclamation of the vassals' submission, and their mutual

acceptance of the treaty terms. The ceremony usually included a sacrifice, calling the god's attention to the treaty and summoning him to punish disobedience. The terms were written down so that the king could organize an annual ceremony of resubmission at which the terms would again be read to his vassals, who would be forced again to recognize publicly the overlord's superior power.

Num. 33:2 introduces a detailed list of the forty-two camps occupied by the tribes during their trek with this sentence: "Moses recorded the starting points of their marches as directed by the Lord" (עַל־פִּי). On the basis of style as much as substance, scholars confidently assign this text to priestly traditions drawn together in exilic or post-exilic times. A sentence such as this proves no more than that a priest-scribe who lived some seven centuries after Moses knew, or thought he knew, of an old tradition of the trek which went back to Moses. Perhaps he even had seen a parchment. As any guide in the Holy Land will tell you, the document in your hand may be, and probably is, a pious forgery.

Finally, there are several references to Moses as a scribe in Deuteronomy 31 which are the texts cited repeatedly by the sages to prove their claim that Moses wrote down the entire Sefer Torah following God's dictation. Deuteronomy 31 is set during the last days of Moses' life just before he transfers authority to Joshua. After counseling Joshua on his responsibilities, we are told, Moses wrote down "this Teaching," contents unspecified, and presented the text to the levitical priests and the elders of Israel who are instructed to read from this teaching to the entire

community each sabbatical year during the Feast of Booths (31:9-13). The language is formulaic and seems to pick up one of the conventional requirements that a treaty be renewed every year by the kind of enabling ceremony already described, that is, an annual ceremony which featured a public reading of the treaty's terms and the vassal's resubmission to them. There is no evidence that the practice of a regular sabbatical reading of the Torah text was ever the custom in Israel and certainly no reason to believe, as the rabbinic tradition would claim, that the document referred to as "this Teaching" necessarily contained the entire Pentateuch as we know it.(14)

Deut. 31:24 is the text most frequently cited by those who insist that Moses wrote the whole Sefer Torah on God's specific command. Moses is described as using his last hours to write the words of "this Torah" to the very end. God further commands Moses to have the Levites place "this book of Teaching (presumedly the scroll he has been working on) beside the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord your God and let it remain there as a witness against you" (v. 26). What the phrase "this book of Teaching" specifically refers to can no longer be ascertained. Rabbinic Judaism related it confidently, but without warrant, to the whole Sefer Torah. In recent times some scholars have claimed it to be a reference to Deuteronomy, which is known to have circulated for a considerable period as a separate scroll, but this identification assumes a much earlier publication of the Deuteronomy scroll than most researchers would accept. A more enlightened opinion has the sentence refer to some portion of Deuteronomy's legal code, a

portion which developed independently of other parts of the book. This may be the case. If it is, then Moses is described here as writing out a selection of torot which were not drawn together as a separate unit until centuries after his death.

The reference to a written scroll is late and singular; no other reference exists to such a scroll. This scroll disappears without a trace. There is no further reference to it. As far as we know, during the entire Biblical period, this scroll, which would have been precious beyond price since it contained God's teachings in Moses' own hand, was never consulted or made the centerpiece of tribal ceremony. There is no suggestion that the scroll found in Josiah's day (late seventh century B.C.E.) was related to it. When, two centuries after Josiah, Ezra brings a scroll of torot to Jerusalem from Babylon he does not advance the claim that he has brought back Moses' scroll or even a faithful copy.

The earliest and most consistent image of Moses presented to us is that of a prophet, not a scribe. Indeed, Moses may not have been literate. He need not have been to serve effectively as prophet or as sheik. Joshua almost certainly was not. Joshua is described as Moses' aide-de-camp, a field commander, who succeeded his leader as sheik of the tribal confederation. The governance of a semi-nomadic tribe required military skill, courage, and good sense but not the ability to read and write. The details we are offered about Joshua's life raise the question when this man, born into slavery, who spent his adult life on a desert trek, might have found the opportunity to spend the required years of training.

A scribe has bridged the end of Deuteronomy and the opening of the scroll of Joshua with a speech in which God advises Moses' heir that "this book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you should meditate therein day and night, that you may observe to do all that is written therein. . ." (1:8); and the Joshua scroll closes with the description of a covenant-enabling ceremony in which he again is made to appear as a writer. The tribes are assembled at Schechem. Joshua presents a lengthy oration in which he details the record of God's protection of Israel. He warns the sub-chiefs that they must not serve alien gods. The assembly shouts "we will serve the Lord."

The earliest presentations of this event probably included a list of torot, covenant rules, which Joshua, as was the custom, had recited during the ceremony and which the assemblage had acclaimed, but these have been eliminated in line with the over-riding priestly concern to locate all torot in the prophetic mission of Moses. What we have instead is an editorial postscript. "On that day at Schechem, Joshua read a covenant for the people and he made a fixed rule for them. Joshua has recorded all this in a book of divine instruction. He took a great stone and set it up at the foot of the oak in the sacred precinct of the Lord; and Joshua said to the people, 'see, this very stone shall be a witness against you lest you break faith with your God.' Joshua then dismissed the people to their allotted portions" (24:25-28). Other than the list of torot enshrined at this ceremony, what was there for him to record? Again, if there was such a scroll, what

happened to it? The stone which witnessed to God's presence reiterate a familiar thematic element in a covenant ceremony, but Joshua's role as a notetaker is clearly out of character for a twelfth century B.C.E. sheik of semi-nomad tribesmen. It suggests, as does the book's preface, a much later and more literate age, probably the early post-exilic centuries, when priests took for granted that lists of torot and records were to be inscribed and kept. Otherwise again, we have to account for the surprising disappearance from Israel's history of what would have been an infinitely precious document.

The only other references to Joshua as a writer can readily be dismissed. Chapter 8 presents various traditions about an altar which Joshua is reported to have erected on Mt. Ebal. A short insertion which clearly breaks the flow of the narrative reports that Joshua "inscribed (on the altar stones) a copy of the teaching which Moses had written for the Israelites" (v. 32). Joshua is also said to have "read all the words of the Teaching" (v. 34). Again, the language of this section reflects the late priestly concerns with amassing detail and is in fact a rather self-conscious midrash, a story invented to prove Joshua's fidelity to his predecessor who, according to a narrative in Deuteronomy, had ordered Joshua to erect an altar upon his successful entrance into the promised Land: "And coat the stones with plaster and inscribe upon them all the words of the Teaching" (Deut. 27:3). How this passage came to be need not detain us. It seems to reflect the massebah tradition and/or the Egyptian practice of writing laws

and history on the plastered wall surfaces of their shrines. All that needs to be said is that at some point a late priestly editor or historian felt it important to indicate that Joshua had faithfully fulfilled his commission. But the image of Joshua as a fresco painter is hard to credit and there is no other evidence that the Israelites ever inscribed texts on the plastered surfaces of their shrines.

Samuel, the last of the trio of pre-exilic giants, is described in the Bible as organizer of a covenant ceremony for the tribal confederation. Presumedly he celebrated it at Mizpeh where he cried out various rules respecting the office of the king and recorded God's Instructions in a scroll document which we are told "he depposited before the Lord" (I Sam. 10:25). Samuel may have been literate. By the beginning of the eleventh century, the tribes were already fairly well settled and had adopted many Canaanite ways. Samuel is said to have been raised by a shrine priest and to have lived in settled communities where literacy would not have been that uncommon. Still, the image of Samuel as a scribe is an unlikely one. A "child of prayer," Samuel is said to have been dedicated at birth to the rule of Nazarites, an ascetic group which promoted the simple life and sought to revive the austere virtues of Israel's nomadic origins. Nazarites had little need for, and no interest in, the administrative arts; and it is unlikely that they would have sent a neophyte, however promising, to a shrine school to master this Canaanite skill. In later years, Samuel is variously described as a circuit-riding charismatic, clairvoyant, judge and prophet. None of these roles required literacy.

There is in the entire pre-exilic literature only one creditable reference, a late one, to a scroll of torot which was apparently of some religious significance. The story is that during a refurbishing project organized by King Josiah in 621 B.C.E., a "scroll of the Teaching" was found in the treasury of the Jerusalem Temple. Two reports of this incident exist (II Kings 22; II Ch. 34). In one, workers discover the scrolls; in the other the High Priest does. In both versions the find is treated as interesting but not momentous. In both versions the scribe-administrator who reports the find to the king raises with him a number of routine business matters before mentioning the find.

The accounts agree that the find was unexpected. Apparently, no one had noticed or cared that the scroll was missing. Perhaps no one had bothered to list this scroll in the inventory of Temple possessions though scrolls were expensive, hand-crafted items of some value.

Set against the rather unexcited reaction of the court officials, the king's reaction seems surprising. Once the scroll had been read to him, Josiah is said to have rent his garments, adopted a formal state of mourning and ordered his staff to inquire of God what must be done. A prophetess was consulted. Huldah confirmed that the Instructions were authentic and announced that God intended to punish Jerusalem because of the sin of idolatry, but that the king would be spared because he had humbled himself and devoted his energies to religious reform. This scroll then seems to have become the centerpiece of a covenant-enabling ceremony of the type with which we have become familiar. In one version Josiah himself

is said to have read the entire text to the assembly. We are not told how this man, who just a few paragraphs earlier had required the service of the Royal Scribe to read to him from the text so that he might know what was in it, managed this feat. The ceremony ends with the removal from The Temple of "all the objects made for Baal and Asherah and all the hosts of heaven" (II Kings 23:4).

It is hard to know what to make of all this. The incident is twice told. There seems little doubt that it rests on a kernel of fact. But what are the facts and what point is being made? Because of the importance scripture has assumed over the centuries in both Jewish and Christian life, researchers have tended to focus their interest on the scroll and to ask such questions as what text the scroll contained. The usual answer to this question is that it presented portions of the legal sections of Deuteronomy. Without further information, there is no way to prove or disprove this thesis. Indeed, one wonders if the issue of content was that important to those who first reported this incident. It seems more likely that in the sixth century Huldah's prophecy about Jerusalem's fall and Josiah's being spared would have been the focus of popular interest, rather than the covenant torot that might have been contained in the scroll.

This story in its present form could not have been shaped earlier than Josiah's death in 608 B.C.E. and probably must be dated sometime after the Babylonian invasions of 597 B.C.E. and the destruction of The Temple in 586 B.C.E. That traumatic event and the consequent exile preoccupied the religious feelings of the defeated nation. They wanted to know why the disaster had occurred

and why God allowed a king who had permitted idolatry in the royal shrine for the first eighteen years of his reign to escape punishment and die peacefully while many who had never accepted the presence of the idols were made to suffer God's punishment. The answer this text offers is that this was God's will. Josiah had repented. In this context the scroll seems to be an almost incidental agent of God's will.

Some have suggested that the scroll was a pious forgery executed on Josiah's order to justify a program of religious reform on which he was determined. In the absence of any other evidence it seems unlikely that at this stage of Biblical development a scroll, whatever its contents, could have played a pivotal role in determining the community's structure of belief. Documents, even documents which dealt with important religious themes, were simply confirming records. The spoken word and the oral tradition were still primary.

If the whole episode is not pure invention then we must suppose that a scroll of torot was, in fact, discovered during Josiah's reign and that memory of this event later was merged with memory of Huldah's prophecy about one of Judah's best known and most powerful kings.

If so, how and why did such a scroll come to be written and how could such a scroll be lost? These questions cannot be readily answered. Josiah's scroll is another scroll which is never again mentioned. After the king's first excitement over the find there is no mention of further exhibition or consultation of the scroll. We are not even told that the text was placed in the Holy of Holies or in some other sacred location. Neither this scroll nor any

other is listed among the sacred objects taken as booty from The Temple by the Babylonians. If, in fact, there was such a scroll, it was either a personal scroll inscribed by a priest-scribe for his own purposes and forgotten when he laid it aside or died, or a list of torot cherished at a particular shrine which had been brought to Jerusalem sometime during the preceding century, as local shrines were closed as part of a cult centralization program, and forgotten. In either case, the scroll seems to have been the product of private initiative rather than of anyone's sense of sacred duty. It had no public standing.

The idea that Moses or Samuel or Amos or Isaiah may have been non-literate troubles many. These were respected and wise men whose lives have served as role models to a hundred generations of literate folk and whose teachings are held sacred throughout the West; we must not impose on them attainments appropriate to our times but not to theirs. Today literacy is a prerequisite for standing in the community and there is a proven link between incapacity and illiteracy. That linkage, self-evident to us, was not self-evident to our Biblical ancestors. In pre-exilic Israel, scribes were useful folk who could be hired by the day and paid piece work wages. Not everyone needed to master that skill any more than everyone needed to be a smith or a potter. Many were learned but not literate. Literacy was not essential to the creative process. People composed in their minds, spoke their compositions, and the audience soaked up and in effect memorized what they heard. Developed as a tool of administration, literacy was not as yet universally acknowledged as essential to civilization and private advancement.

Literacy has proven to be a boon to civilization, but civilization did not have to await literacy any more than the development of Biblical religious thought had to await the publication of the Sefer Torah. Few periods in Israel's history were as productive as the seven centuries between Moses and Jeremiah. This was the time when the idea of monotheism surfaced, was refined and purified, when the wise and sensitive in Israel began to recognize God as not only powerful but dependable, not only as Creator but as Redeemer, not only as Lawgiver but as trusted Judge. This was the period in which Israel's prophets defined righteousness as a covenant-faithful way of life and developed a definition of religious obligation which went far beyond conventional ideas about placating the gods through sacrifices and shrine attendance. Poets composed in their minds moving hymns which expressed their needs and faith. A Promised Land was settled and the concept of stewardship was developed as Israel's teachers warned the community that peace and prosperity depended not on power or might but on their careful management of their patrimony and their willingness to obey God's Instructions. Wisdom balanced these doctrines with a down-to-earth prudential morality and a tendency to reflect seriously on the brevity of human life and the uncertainties which accompany every life.

Religious development did not have to wait for the publication of a scripture. Tradition preceded scripture. People thought and spoke. Some began to write down what they heard, but no one, as yet, was aware that some day a selection of those writings would be part of a published anthology which millions would call scripture and declare to be inspired and sacred.

NOTES

Note 1 - Ong, Walter J.; Orality and Literacy, p. 99

Note 2 - [illegible] Pritchard, J. B. Ancient Near Eastern Texts. Princeton, P.U. Press, 1950. pp. 432-4

Note 3 - A certain Seraiah is described as a senior official who had charge of David's palace buildings and grounds as well as responsibility for the court's provisioning and possibly, also, for diplomatic correspondence. Some scribes were merely clerks; others became administrators.

Note 4 - Richardson, E.C. Biblical Libraries. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1914, pp. 22, 128

Note 5 - The problems of deciphering a manuscript were of such a magnitude that despite the reverent attention of generations of editors and, in recent years of experts in linguistics and lexicography, many textual questions involving the Biblical text remain unsolved. As an example: to this day we are not sure whether an ancient legend about the prophet Elijah indicates that he was fed by ravens or by wandering Arabs while hiding from the king's wrath. The problem is that the consonants in question allow either reading.

Note 6 - The stories which report the finding of the scroll of torot during Josiah's refurbishment of the Temple suggest that the senior priest, Hilkiah, had to ask a royal scribe, Shaphan, to read him the contents (2 Kings 22:8 ff. 2 ~~Ch~~ 34:15).

(90) p. 87 Note 7 - One other reference connects writing with Jeremiah's career. In the narrative sections which were added to the scroll considerably after the prophet's active career there is a report that shortly after the defeat of 597 B.C.E. Jeremiah wrote a letter to those who had been taken to Babylon as captives, urging them to settle in. If such a letter was actually sent, it is likely that Jeremiah dictated it to a professional scribe; that was his way. (Jer. 36) (?)

(92) p. 91 Note 8 - A remarkably similar situation exists in the Biblical literature where several different lists of the twelve tribes which presumedly comprised the Israelite Confederation are presented; each is obviously the grouping as it was known at a particular moment in the community's history. An oral culture can forget or change details as long as the general theme, in this case, the existence of a twelve-tribe confederation, is maintained.

Goody, J., ed. Literacy in Traditional Societies, Cambridge U. Press, 1968, p. 33 cf also Lord A.B., The Singer of Tales, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, #24, 1960. Comparing a series of recitations by a Yugoslav Bard and finding that no two presentations were absolutely identical, Lord concluded that the singer adjusted his material to the reactions of the audience, the feel of the meeting, and his own feelings and that he was unaware of having made any change.

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(96) p. 95 Note 9 - A classic example of such borrowings is the close paraphrase in the book of Proverbs to some thirty Egyptian sayings known as The Teachings of Amen-em-ope (c. 11th cent. B.C.E.).

(99) p.91 Note 10 - The existence of a tiny space between the two plaques through which a string could be threaded makes the identification of these plaques as amulets fairly certain and the use of a precious metal, silver, and of God's most powerful Name, the Tetragrammaton, makes it clear that this plaque was highly valued as a protective device or charm.

(100) p.97 Note 11 - Fishbane, Michael, Biblical Interpretations in Ancient Israel, Cirendon Press, 1905, pp 332.

(102) p.101 Note 12 - Ong, Op. cit., p.140

(104) p.105 Note 13 - The signal importance of Sinai is shown by the proliferation of versions which have gone into the received presentation. A single chapter in Exodus (24) tells us that Moses went up in the mountain alone (v. 2), that Moses was accompanied by his brother, Aaron, and Aaron's two eldest sons and seventy elders (v.1), and that Joshua accompanied Moses on the climb (v. 13). In one version God, Himself, inscribes the stone tablets; in another this task is left to Moses, and so on. All versions emphasize the importance and accuracy of these Instructions. They are God's own, stated exactly as God had intended.

(117) p.114 Note 14 - At this late date it seems hardly necessary to make the argument that one cannot assume the existence of the received Torah at the time this sentence became part of the tradition. Deuteronomy's history is a long and complicated one and any reference to this 'teaching' cannot refer to the entire scroll but only to certain specific torot.