There We Sat Down

Talmudic Judaism in the Making

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to b. Meg. 11a is to the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Megillah, folio 11, obverse side of the folio.

Used in this book is *The Babylonian Talmud,* translated under the editorship of Isidore Epstein (London: Soncino Press, 1935-1948).

Introduction: Society and Scripture

When the Babylonian Empire conquered Jerusalem in 586 B.C., Judaean Jews were deported to Babylonia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers near present-day Baghdad, capital of Iraq. There they settled. Psalm 137 conveys the mood of the exiles from Jerusalem and from Mount Zion, where the Temple had stood:

> By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down, and we wept
> when we remembered Zion.
> On the willows there we hung up our lyres.
> For there our captors required of us songs,
> And our tormentors, mirth, saying,
> "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
> How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?
> If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!
> Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,
> if I do not remember you,
> if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!

While the exiles mourned for the destroyed Temple on Mount Zion and vowed to preserve the memory of Jerusalem, they nonetheless set out and built a community that endured for nearly twenty-five centuries, from 586 B.C. to A.D. 1948. Then the State of Israel received the Jews of Iraq in their return to Zion. For the intervening millenia, a Jewish community flourished on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and along the canals in between. This volume

focuses upon seven centuries of that history—from approximately 100 B.C. to approximately A.D. 640—and in particular upon the religious history of that period.

A historian of the Middle East would not limit himself to that relatively brief period, much less to such an unimportant group of people. A student of the languages of the region would likewise approach with a far wider range of interests. Why is it that for historians of religions, the particular period and people under study are of special concern? It shall be seen that in this period, a number of abiding issues in the study of the history of religions came to the fore in the life of Babylonian Jewry. Furthermore, the particular events and institutions here examined produced a lasting effect upon the history of Judaism from that time to the present.

Both Judaism and Christianity claim to be the heirs and product of the Hebrew Scriptures—*Tanakh* to the Jews, Old Testament to the Christians. Yet both great religious traditions derive not solely or directly from the authority and teachings of those Scriptures, but rather from the ways in which that authority has been mediated, and those teachings interpreted, through other holy books. The New Testament is the prism through which the light of the Old comes to Christianity; the Babylonian Talmud is the star that guides Jews to the revelation of Sinai, the Torah. The claim of these two great Western religious traditions, in all their rich variety, is for the veracity not merely of Scriptures, but also of Scriptures as interpreted by the New Testament or the Babylonian Talmud.

The Hebrew Scriptures produced the two interrelated, yet quite separate groups of religious societies that formed Judaism and Christianity. Developed along lines established during late antiquity, these societies in modern times come near to each other in the West. Here they live not merely side by side, but together. However, while most people are familiar with the story of the development of Christianity, few are fully aware that Judaism constitutes a separate and distinctive religious tradition. The differences are not limited to negations of Christian beliefs—"Jews do not believe in this or that" —but also extend to profound affirmations of Judaic ones. To understand the Judaic dissent, one must comprehend the Judaic affirmation in its own terms.

What is it that historical Judaism sought to build? What are its primary emphases, its evocative symbols? What lies at the heart of the human situation, as constructed and imagined by classical Juda-

ism? The answers come first of all from the pages of the Babylonian Talmud and related literature. From late antiquity onward, the Talmud supplied the proof texts, constructed the society, shaped the values, occupied the mind, and formed the soul of Judaism. For all the human concerns brought by Christians to the figure of Christ, the Jews looked to Torah. Torah means revelation: first, the five books of Moses; later, the whole Hebrew Scriptures; still later, the Oral and Written Revelation of Sinai, embodied in the Talmud. Finally it comes to stand for, to symbolize, what in modern language is called "Judaism": the whole body of belief, doctrine, practice, patterns of piety and behavior, and moral and intellectual commitments that constitute the Judaic version of reality.

However, while the Christ-event stands at the beginning of the tradition of Christianity, the Babylonian Talmud comes at the end of the formation of the Judaism contained in it. It is the written record of the constitution of the life of Israel, the Jewish people, long after the principles and guidelines of that constitution had been worked out and effected in everyday life. Moreover, the early years of Christianity were dominated first by the figure of the Master, then his disciples and their followers bringing the gospel to the nations; the formative years of rabbinic Judaism saw a small group of men who were not dominated by a single leader but who effected an equally far-reaching revolution in the life of the Jewish nation.

At the outset the two groups, the apostles and the rabbis, competed for the loyalty of Jews. Wherever, for example, rabbis founded centers for the study of Torah in northern Mesopotamia, there the Christian apostles were shut out from the Jewish community for a period of a century or more. The consequent Christianity in those towns followed Helleno-Semitic lines, and was not formed by people who were originally Jewish and became Christian Jews, as in the case of Palestine. On the other hand, wherever Christian apostles reached the Jewish community before rabbinical circles attained influence, there Christianity took root very early. Local Christian Jews built a churchly community and drew to it gentile converts as well. The consequent configuration of Christianity followed more closely the lines of the Palestinian church, which had similar foundations. Both the apostles and the rabbis reshaped the antecedent religion of Israel, and both claimed to be Israel.

That pre-Christian, pre-rabbinic religion of Israel, for all its

variety, exhibited common traits: belief in one God, reverence for and obedience to the revelation contained in the Hebrew Scriptures, veneration of the Temple in Jerusalem (while it stood), and expectation of the coming of a Messiah to restore all the Jews to Palestine and to bring to a close the anguish of history. The Christian Jews concentrated on the last point, proclaiming that the Messiah had come in Jesus; the rabbinic Jews focused on the second, teaching that only through the full realization of the imperatives of the Hebrew Scriptures, Torah, as interpreted and applied by the rabbis, would the people merit the coming of the Messiah. The rabbis, moreover, claimed alone to possess the whole Torah of Moses. This is central to their doctrine: Moses had revealed not only the message now written down in his books, but also an oral Torah, which was formulated and transmitted to his successors, and they to theirs, through Joshua, the prophets, the sages, scribes, and other holy men, and finally to the rabbis of the day. For the Christian, therefore, the issue of the Messiah predominated; for the rabbinic Jew, the issue of Torah; and for both, the question of salvation was crucial.

What draws the attention of the historian of religions to Babylonian Judaism in Talmudic times? The answer is that certain issues of special interest to historians of religions find in the period under study a measure of illumination: first, the holy man, or religious virtuoso, and his relationship to the masses; second, the place of myth in religious life; third, the way in which religious ideas produce social change. In our case, the holy man was the rabbi. The masses were those ordinary Jews who worshiped one God, believed in the truth of the revelation of Moses, and awaited the Messiah. The myth was the Torah-myth both taught and embodied by the rabbi. The social changes we shall follow led to the transformation of masses of ordinary Jews into a community living by the "whole Torah" taught by the rabbis. They constituted changes in the inherited pattern of religious action and belief, surely one of the least tractable cultural forms. The key words that will be used in this study of Babylonian Judaism are *power, myth,* and *function.*

Power here means the way by which one man caused another to do his will: How were social patterns effected and maintained? What institutions embodied power over a long period of time, so that the ability of one man to cause another to do his will was translated into the capacity of any man of appropriate status to do the same?

That capacity by definition is external to any particular individual. To be meaningful, power must be routinized, made independent of personality or the random application of force, so that it does not depend upon a particular circumstance or upon a single concrete instance. For example, as long as power comes from the mouth of a gun, it intimidates only those who believe the gun will be fired and fear death, and it serves only those willing to pull the trigger. But for an old, enduring society, that sort of power is virtually useless. It is the power merely to destroy, serving only episodically and effecting no continuing policies or programs.

Society by definition is continuous, the relationships that embody society are both normative and routine, and the structure of society is permanent, for otherwise, there can be no society at all. So, too, power must be embodied in lasting institutions, must consistently affect what people do and how they relate to one another, and must take form in orderly and abiding patterns. An institution standing within such an organization or structure of power cannot depend upon unusual events, such as the advent of a particularly strong personality. Thus a circle formed by a master and his disciples may exhibit a continuing pattern of religious and social relationships, but it cannot be called an effective institution in its own place and time if, when the master dies, the disciples cease to form a group and coalesce into other groups. On the other hand, a school not dependent upon the fortunes of a particular man or circle within its group constitutes an institution and may permanently and continuously affect the shape of the society in which it is located. Our interest in power within the religious life therefore focuses attention upon institutions and movements and their religious bases.

Central to the investigation of power is an interest in *myth:* namely, the stories people told and the beliefs they held to account for and justify the power-relationships they experienced. *Why* did people do what they did? What were the beliefs that men referred to in order to shape, understand, and explain reality? What were the fundamental convictions about reality that underlay all their actions? How did they justify themselves to other men and before God?

The third key word, *function,* means simply how things worked. Granted the existence of power, the ability of some men to coerce others to say and do their will, either by force or, more amiably, by moving them through an internalization of values; and granted

knowledge of the imagination of those men and their community, knowledge of their mythic life—granted these two, how did the system work? What was adaptive behavior within such a power-structure? What sort of *history* took place? What institutions embodied the power and the myth, what programs carried them forward, what was their thrust and dynamism? What were the events that at specific times and places realized these abstract forces of power and of myth in historical facts?

These are issues both pertinent to the study of the history of religions and formative of the later history of Judaism, which are illumined by the historical records of Babylonian Jewry. Obviously they do not exhaust all questions to be answered from those records. But they do stand at the top of the agenda for students of religion, and, moreover, predominate, through a multitude of detail, in the Babylonian Talmud, which is essentially a compilation of religiously grounded law.

What form would Western civilization have taken had the Judaic, rather than the Christian, formulation of the heritage of Hebrew Scriptures come to predominate? What sort of society would have emerged? How would men have regulated their affairs? What would have been the shape of the prevailing value systems?

Behind the immense varieties of Christian life and Christian and post-Christian society stand the evocative teachings and theological and moral convictions assigned by Christian belief to the figure of Christ. To be a Christian meant, and means, to seek to be like him, in one of the many ways in which Christians envisaged him.

To be a Jew may similarly be reduced to the single, pervasive symbol of Judaism: Torah. To be a Jew meant to live the life of Torah, in one of the many ways in which the masters of Torah taught.

We know what the figure of Christ has meant to the art, music, and literature of the West; the church to its politics, history, and piety; Christian faith to its values and ideals. It is much harder to say what Torah would have meant to creative arts, the course of relations among nations and men, the hopes and aspirations of ordinary folk. For between Christ, universally known and triumphant, and Torah, the spiritual treasure of a tiny, harassed, abused people, seldom fully known and never victorious, stands the abyss: mastery of the world on the one side, the sacrifice of the world on the other. Perhaps the difference comes at the very start when the

Christians, despite horrendous suffering, determined to conquer and save the world and to create the new Israel, while the rabbis, unmolested and unimpeded, set forth to transform and regenerate the old Israel. For the former, the arena of salvation was all mankind, the actor was a single man. For the latter, the course of salvation began with Israel, and the stage was that singular but paradigmatic society, the Jewish people.

To save the world the apostle had to suffer in and for it, appear before magistrates, subvert empires. To redeem the Jewish people the rabbi had to enter into, share, and reshape the life of the community, deliberately to eschew the politics of nations and patiently to submit to empires. The vision of the apostle extended to all nations and peoples. Immediate suffering therefore was the welcome penalty to be paid for eventual, universal dominion. The rabbi's eye looked upon Israel, and, in his love for Jews, he sought not to achieve domination or to risk martyrdom, but rather to labor for social and spiritual transformation which was to be accomplished through the complete union of his life with that of the community. The one was prophet to the nations, the other, priest to the people. No wonder then that the apostle earned the crown of martyrdom, but prevailed in history; while the rabbi received martyrdom, when it came, only as one of and wholly within the people. He gave up the world and its conversion in favor of the people and their regeneration. In the end the people hoped that through their regeneration, if need be through their suffering, the world also would be redeemed. But the people would be the instrument, not the craftsman, of redemption. As we come to Babylonia, we approach the community that came fully to replicate, then to transmit, the values and hope of the rabbi, and that marked the beginning of the realization of Torah in human society.