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THE 'ORAL LAW' OF THE JEWS. ITS HISTORY, ITS STRENGTHS AND ITS WEAKNESSES

When you look up information about the Talmud, the oral law of the Jews, in an encyclopedia, you may find statements along this line:

"TALMUD, body of Jewish civil and religious law, including commentaries on the Torah, or Pentateuch. The Talmud consists of a codification of laws, called the Mishnah, and a commentary on the Mishnah, called the Gemara. The material in the Talmud that concerns decisions by scholars on disputed legal questions is known as the Halakah; the legends, anecdotes, and sayings in the Talmud that are used to illustrate the traditional law are known as Haggada."

"Two compilations of the Talmud exist: the Palestinian Talmud, sometimes called the Jerusalem Talmud, and the Babylonian Talmud. Both compilations contain the same Mishnah, but each has its own Gemara. The contents of the Palestinian Talmud were written by Palestinian scholars between the 3d century AD and the beginning of the 5th century; those of the Babylonian Talmud, by scholars who wrote between the 3d century and the beginning of the 6th century. The Babylonian Talmud became authoritative because the rabbinic academies of Babylonia survived those of Palestine by many centuries." [Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia]

I have a couple of other encyclopedias which make very similar statements to the quotation above.

Now when people read statements to the effect that the Talmud was only "WRITTEN" from the third century onwards, they may easily assume that for the first two centuries A.D. the Talmud was nothing more than an ORAL record, supposedly faithfully handed down from father to son in each generation.

THE TALMUD ACTUALLY CONSISTS OF SOME WRITTEN RECORDS (NOW LOST) WHICH WENT AS FAR BACK AS THE SECOND CENTURY B.C.!

So let's take a closer look at the history of the Talmud.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Old Testament closes with people like Ezra, Nehemiah and Malachi. Malachi and Chronicles (the last books in the sections of the Prophets and the Writings respectively) are chronologically the last books of the Old Testament. Ezra, Nehemiah and Malachi lived in the period of the Persian Empire. The last Old Testament records written (i.e. Malachi and Chronicles) were somewhere between 440 B.C. and 400 B.C.

THEN A CURTAIN IS DRAWN ON DIVINE REVELATION!

It is not until approximately 400 years later that this curtain is again lifted, when Luke 1:5 tells us about Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist. And from there on the New Testament unfolds before us.

For a period of approximately 400 years there is no record of any divine revelation to any individual person or to any group of people.

So here is what we have:

When the OLD TESTAMENT CLOSES we see the known world under the control of the Persian Empire. The culture, customs and traditions of the Medo-Persians dominated that time period.

When the NEW TESTAMENT OPENS we find that the world is under the control and domination of the Roman Empire. Its customs and ways were what counted.

In this process ONE WORLD EMPIRE with its influence and customs is glossed over. And that is the Greco-Macedonian Empire and culture! It is important to understand that the Greek Empire did not come on the scene until after the Old Testament was concluded and that the Greek Empire had already come to an end before the New Testament opens.

But the Greek culture, the customs and traditions of the empire of Alexander the Great, have had a profound influence on every subsequent society in the western world.

Some biblical background from the Book of Daniel may be helpful at this stage.

From Daniel chapter 2 we know that today's culture, customs, traditions and religions can be led back to Babylon (the head of gold of a society that leads down to the very time of the establishment of the Kingdom of God). Daniel chapter 2 also identifies Medo-Persia as "silver", the Greek Empire as "brass" and the Roman Empire as "iron".

Daniel 8:20 identifies Medo-Persia as "a ram", and Daniel 8:21 identifies the Greek Empire as "a he-goat". Daniel 8:7 tells us that Greece (the he-goat) cast Medo-Persia to the ground "AND STAMPED UPON HIM". What this tells us is that the Greek Empire TOTALLY BLOTTED OUT any influence the Medo-Persian Empire might have had on the nations it had controlled. The subsequent history of all those nations (in the western part) would not reveal any cultural or religious influence imposed on them by the Medo-Persians.

This is further explained in Daniel chapter 4. There the Babylonian Empire of Nebuchadnezzar is pictured as an enormous tree. In Daniel 4:14 we see that this tree was to be "CUT DOWN"; i.e. the Babylonian Empire was to fall. However, THE INFLUENCE of this Babylonian Empire was to survive the empire itself. This is made clear in Daniel 4:15, where the stump of the tree with the roots was guaranteed to survive! It was not "stamped upon" like the next empire would be. It was to survive.

But notice what it was that would ensure the survival of the Babylonian culture, religion and traditions. This survival would be ensured by ONE band made of iron and brass (Daniel 4:15). In plain English: it would be the ROMAN (i.e. "iron") and the GREEK (i.e. "brass") cultures that would ensure the survival of the BABYLONIAN system. Daniel 4:15 is a key to understanding this point.

So the Greek Empire was responsible for two things:

A) It was to BLOT OUT any influence the Medo-Persians might have had on the nations they had controlled.

B) It was to PRESERVE the religion, culture and traditions of the empire that preceded the Medo-Persians, the Babylonian Empire. It was to ensure the survival of the Babylonian ways. This the Greek Empire achieved not only by the military conquests of Alexander the Great, but by exporting its language, its religion, its literature and its culture to every nation it came into contact with.

Now the statement that the Babylonian system would be preserved by ONE band tells us that when

Rome conquered the Greeks, they did not abolish and destroy the Greek culture and language. No, they TOOK OVER the language, culture and traditions of the Greeks. The Greek language continued to flourish throughout the early Roman Empire and Greek learning was accepted by the Romans. At the time of the New Testament apostles, the Greek language was as much the language of the Empire, as was Latin. And the New Testament itself was preserved in the Greek language, even though the Greek Empire was already a thing of the past.

So here we have a contrast: When the Greeks conquered the Medo-Persians, they destroyed and blotted out the influence the Medo-Persians had had. This they had to do in order to ensure that the earlier system (i.e. Babylon) would survive. But when the Romans conquered the Greeks they accepted and preserved the influence the Greeks had had on the world. So this Roman acceptance of the Greek culture and ways also ensured the survival of the Babylonian ways. And Daniel 4:15 should help us to understand this.

So the Greek empire, which only started after the end of the Old Testament had concluded, and which came to an end before the New Testament started, is a vital link in the preservation of the religion, culture and ways of Babylon. In a sense, this Greek influence worked behind the scenes. And it had, as I will show, a profound effect on the religion of the Jews in this period between the two Testaments.

Now let's go back to the history of the Jews.

AFTER THE CLOSE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament closes with an extremely severe criticism of the priesthood, as recorded in the Book of Malachi. There is no question that this book has a prophetic significance and application. But at the same time it also had an application to the time then, the time immediately after Ezra, Nehemiah and Malachi had disappeared from the scene. We have sometimes tended to ignore the immediate application of this book to the Jews, focusing instead on the prophetic application for our time.

When the Greeks overthrew the Medo-Persians, the Jews welcomed the Greeks with open arms, so to speak. Greek ways and the Greek culture found a very ready acceptance amongst the Jews. This was especially the case with the upper classes amongst the Jews. They became extremely hellenised, readily embracing the ways of the Greeks. This Greek influence amongst the Jews continued for well over a century.

During that entire period of time there was no divine revelation from God, at least none that has been recorded for us today. It was not unlike the way it had been in Israel in the time of the High Priest Eli ... "the word of the LORD was precious (i.e. rare) in those days; there was no open vision" (1 Samuel 3:1).

By the late third century B.C. and into the early second century B.C. the Jewish religious customs had undergone major changes, changes which incorporated into the Jewish religion many of the customs and traditions of the Greek world (which in turn had really come from Babylon, preserved by that band of iron and brass). Even the priesthood had, by and large, become thoroughly hellenised.

IT HAD BECOME A TOTALLY DIFFERENT RELIGION FROM THE ONE EZRA HAD BEEN USED TO RE-ESTABLISH IN THE AREA OF PALESTINE.

God's condemnation of the priesthood in the Book of Malachi should also be seen in the light of this state of affairs.

It is the same cycle which always repeats itself. It goes as follows: God uses some man to establish God's true teachings. This leader becomes the focus for God doing a work for a period of time. Then this

leader is taken from the scene. Soon he is replaced by others who don't follow in his footsteps. Changes are introduced to the religious system that had been established. As more and more changes are introduced, a point is reached where the new religion has nothing more in common with what went before than some outward superficial resemblances, perhaps retaining certain names or certain religious terms and expressions. But it has, in effect, become just another religion of this world. This continues until God then raises up another man to re-establish "the faith once delivered". And the whole cycle is repeated once again.

Now let's understand something.

In this process of becoming hellenised in the course of more than a full century, the Jews had NOT somehow also continued to "pass on by word of mouth" the haggadas ... the LEGENDS surrounding biblical characters, the SAYINGS attributed to biblical characters and the ANECDOTES about people in the Bible. They had freely accepted large portions of the Greek culture and the Greek customs, while their own heritage faded into the background to a very large degree. The one thing they did have was the WRITTEN Word of God, all of the books of the Old Testament, but very little else. And the religious customs they were practicing were to a large degree already in opposition to the customs enjoined on them by the written Word of God they were preserving.

The haggadas are something that was "DEVELOPED" amongst the Jews; they are not something that had been "PRESERVED" from Moses down to Ezra. Notice this quotation from the Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia (which is also used by Microsoft's Encarta 96 Encyclopedia):

"Hebrew literature may be divided chronologically into 12 periods. Ancient Hebrew literature consists mainly of the Old Testament (see BIBLE), and the first three periods of the literature were devoted to the writing of various portions of the Old Testament."

"In the fourth period (165 BC-AD 135), the Midrash (q.v.), which had been begun during the Babylonian captivity, was divided into two parts, the Halakah and the Haggada (qq.v.). Among other works of this period were a number of the apocalyptic writings (q.v.) of the Old Testament, including those pseudonymously ascribed to Moses, the prophet Daniel, the patriarch Enoch, and the priest and reformer Ezra; the Dead Sea Scrolls (q.v.), attributed to Jewish monastic communities of the Essene type; and the writings of the philosopher Philo Judaeus and of the historian Flavius Josephus." (Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia, article "Hebrew Literature")

It is this "FOURTH" period that we are particularly concerned with when we speak about the roots of the oral law. Notice that the haggadas are a product of the period from 165 B.C. to about 135 A.D. They were written at exactly the same time when numerous fabricated works were produced, being ascribed to people like Moses, Daniel, Enoch and Ezra. The haggadas are exactly the same thing, and they originated in the same period of time.

In the article entitled "Haggada", Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia states:

"Although the Talmud contains numerous Haggadic passages, the great bulk of Haggadic lore was assembled in separate compilations known as Midrashim, that is, homiletic interpretations of the Old Testament. For the most part, the oldest Midrashim reflect Halakah rather than Haggada. The greatest of the Haggadic Midrashim is the Midrash Rabbah, or Great Midrash, a verse-by-verse interpretation of the entire Pentateuch and also of the five scrolls (Esther, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs) that are read on the various Jewish holidays. The Haggada is the primary source of knowledge of the theology of the ancient rabbinic

Judaism." (Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia)

"Rabbinic Judaism" is something that started in this period from 165 B.C. onwards. The haggadas are "interpretations" and they are "commentaries", but they are NOT a record of things that had been faithfully preserved by word of mouth from the time of Ezra, let alone from the time of Moses.

By the 180's - 160's B.C. Palestine was under the control of the Syrian rulers. When Antiochus IV (also known as Antiochus Epiphanes) tried to install certain pagan rites in the Temple in Jerusalem, the Jewish priest Mattathias fled and led a revolt against the Syrians, which became known as the Maccabean revolt. This revolt was continued by the sons of Mattathias.

To understand this in our terms: it was not unlike the revolt against the excesses of the Catholic Church which Martin Luther started in the 1500's A.D.. While Luther rejected some of the pagan practices of the Catholic Church of his time, by no means did he initiate a return to "the faith once delivered". Likewise, while the Maccabees rebelled against certain customs the Seleucid kings tried to force upon them, by no means did the Maccabean rulers set in motion a return to the faith delivered at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. They simply rejected SOME of the extreme things the Seleucids were trying to force on them.

But the Greek customs and the Greek traditions and the Greek religious ideas, which the Jews had by then been absorbing for well over a full century, were never questioned. By the 160's B.C. those things had ALREADY become a part of "the traditions of the fathers" and they went unchallenged ... just like Martin Luther at a later time left many pagan customs of the Catholic Church unchallenged.

At about the same time as the Maccabean revolt took place, a movement was started amongst certain educated Jews who were NOT of the priestly line. These non-priestly Jews could clearly see the excesses the priests had become involved in (refer again to God's indictment against the priests in the Book of Malachi), and they started a religious reform movement, which later became known as the "Pharisees" ("perushim" meaning "separatists"), as they attempted to "separate" from those they deemed to be involved in pagan practices. This movement of the Pharisees is again a parallel to what we find in the "Christian" arena from the time of Martin Luther onwards ... something like the movements started by men like Martin Luther (1483-1546), John Calvin (1509-1564), John Knox (1513-1572) and Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531).

And just like their counterparts in the Protestant arena, these Pharisees did NOT return to the faith once delivered. Instead, they focused very intently on justifying all of the customs which they were already in the practice of observing (sound familiar ... Christian leaders looking for ways to justify Christmas and Easter, Sunday-observance, etc.?). Since it was impossible for them to justify from the written Word of God (i.e. from the Old Testament) the pagan customs they were already observing, they turned instead to "THE ORAL LAW".

UNDERSTAND THIS!

THE ORAL LAW was developed for the explicit purpose of providing a means to justify all of the non-biblical customs which Judaism had absorbed and developed since the time of the close of the Old Testament (i.e. since the time of the end of the Book of Malachi).

Had they been able to justify their customs and traditions from the Scriptures, there would have been no need to develop such an elaborate system of "oral laws".

[The "oral law" is to the Jewish religion what "The Ante-Nicean and The Post-Nicean Church Fathers" are to the Catholic religion. They serve exactly the same purpose in both cases ... to establish a primary source of authority, even ahead of the written Word of God, for the religious customs and practices of

these two religions respectively.]

Here is what basically happened.

In the religious revival initiated by the Maccabees, it very quickly became apparent that many of the religious customs that were being observed by the Jews did in fact not have any scriptural basis or support. Therefore these religious Jews were faced with two options:

EITHER:

They would have to admit that they had accepted many pagan customs and ideas over the previous two centuries. That was nothing new, since that had ALWAYS been their history in the past ... from the time they left Egypt under the leadership of Moses right through the period of the judges and through the period of the various kings; sooner or later they had always ended up with some form of paganism. The consequence of such an admission would have had to be to once again give up and eradicate all of these pagan customs.

OR:

They could look for some justification to retain all of these pagan customs. The way to do that would first of all be to deny that these pagan customs were in fact "pagan". This would have to be in spite of the obvious fact that these customs were VERY SIMILAR to many of the religious customs of the nations around them. The way they decided to deny the pagan character of these customs and these religious practices was by claiming that all of these unbiblical customs were in fact based on ORAL instructions handed down, in tandem with the written Word of God, from the time of Moses.

THIS is the approach they decided to follow ... it was the course of least resistance. It is basically the same approach the Catholic Church has taken in its missionary conquests around the world ... people who converted to Catholicism in many of the far-flung areas of the world were free to retain their pagan beliefs and customs, while being fully accepted by the Catholic Church. That is why the so-called "Christian" churches today are riddled with customs and traditions that have been accepted straight out of paganism. The Jews in the second century B.C. were not any different; they too looked for ways to retain the pagan customs they had come to view as their own for more than a full century.

The consequence of this approach was that there was nothing the Jewish leaders, these "separatists", needed to change ... EVERY CUSTOM they were observing was claimed to be of Israelite origin. In cases where pagan nations around them had very similar customs, it was simply asserted that the pagans had actually copied these particular customs from the Jews. This was a convenient way to deny the pagan origins of the customs concerned.

This whole approach is also evident in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus (writing in the first century A.D.). In writing his major work, "The ANTIQUITY of the Jews" (a history of the Jews from creation to 66 A.D., written in 20 books), it was Josephus' explicit purpose to prove that the Jewish people, WITH ALL THEIR CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS, were older than the Greeks! There was no way that Josephus was going to concede that the Jews had in fact accepted many customs from the conquering Greeks, no matter how closely those "Jewish" customs resembled the customs of the Greeks. He reasoned: the Jews were older than the Greeks and therefore their customs had not been copied from other people. This obviously ignored God's powerful admonition, given almost 700 years before the time of Josephus, that the Jews (and all of God's people!) ... "LEARN NOT THE WAY OF THE HEATHEN" (Jeremiah 10:2). The reason God gave that admonition through the prophet Jeremiah is because that is precisely what the Jews did do ... and had always done ... TAKE UP AND ACCEPT "the way of the heathen". Only, after the deaths of Ezra and Nehemiah and Malachi, and without strong

godly leadership, they did it to a far greater degree than previously.

And so the "oral law" was born.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE "ORAL LAW"

One of the most notable things about this "oral law" is the staggering number of contradictions it contains. It is questionable whether there is any other major written work anywhere on earth today, which contains within itself as many contradictions as does the Jewish Talmud. This is hard to grasp without making an actual study of the Talmud. The number of contradictions is overwhelming, and the pettiness and the superficiality of most of the reasoning in this vast literary work is almost unbelievable.

It only becomes somewhat understandable when we keep in mind how and why this whole "oral law" came into existence.

Its purpose was to justify customs and traditions which were already being observed, and for which there was no support in the written Word of God, the Old Testament.

It was the same thing as so-called "Christians" writing books and articles in support of Sunday-keeping and of the trinity doctrine and the ever-burning hell idea and the observance of Christmas, etc..

The way it was done was as follows:

Teacher number one amongst the Pharisees would be willing to accept without challenge that teacher number two had written down a part of the oral law ON THE RECIPROCAL CONDITION that teacher number two would likewise accept any part of the oral law that teacher number one decided to write down. In other words: I won't challenge any new revelations that you make known on the condition that you don't question any new revelations I make known, even if our two "revelations" regarding a part of the oral law happen to contradict one another. As different contingencies arose, so these religious leaders would develop the oral law further by making bold assertions (which in many cases directly contradict clear biblical statements). Later teachers then devoted their time to attempting to reconcile these innumerable contradictions, by attempting to find possible applications for each view.

This approach amongst the Pharisees is also seen in their dealings with the Apostle Paul in Acts chapter 23. There we read that the Pharisees reasoned as follows:

"And there arose a great cry: and the scribes that were of the Pharisees' part arose, and strove, saying, We find no evil in this man: but IF A SPIRIT OR AN ANGEL HAS SPOKEN TO HIM, let us not fight against God." (Acts 23:9)

This was a principle accepted amongst the Pharisees, that you didn't challenge any other Pharisee who claimed to have received divine revelation through an angel or other spirit. Paul understood this principle and based his appeal on it. Now whereas in Paul's case there really HAD been divine revelation from God, this was not true for similar claims made by any number of Pharisees to justify their personal contributions to "the oral law".

So different teachers began, from about 160 B.C. onwards, to develop their own ideas about the Bible and about biblical characters, all in an effort to justify their present customs and traditions. What resulted over the next three to four centuries was a vast conglomerate of conflicting and contradictory ideas, from which the present "oral law" was eventually extracted.

Thus Michael J. Rodkinson tells us in volume 1 of "The History of the Talmud" (published in 1903 in New York by the New Talmud Publishing Company) that when the grandson of Gamaliel the Elder, a leader named Judah ha-Nasi, came into the office of being the chief leader, that the number of manuscripts was extremely great. Rodkinson wrote:

"The second difficulty [facing Judah ha-Nasi, also commonly known as 'Rabbi'] was in selecting, from among the mass of incongruous doctrines and laws --- many of which had become obsolete, and others found to be unnecessary or impracticable --- those which were both practicable and of direct application (for a tradition relates that Rabbi found six hundred sections of Mishnayoth; and even if we admit that this number is greatly exaggerated, still if even one hundred existed, it was no light task to reduce them to six)." (Chapter 1, page 14)

Note! These manuscripts that Judah ha-Nasi had access to covered the period anywhere from about 150 B.C. down to his own time at the end of the second century A.D.. Judah ha-Nasi, or 'Rabbi', lived from about 135 A.D. till about 210 - 220 A.D.. None of the documents referred to in the above quotation are a part of the Old Testament.

On the next page Rodkinson wrote:

"... he [i.e. Judah ha-Nasi] was finally enabled to arrange in order six sections of Mishnayoth, condensed from hundreds." (page 15)

Notice what Rodkinson has acknowledged in the above quotations:

The writings from which the Talmud was finally extracted consisted of:

- INCONGRUOUS doctrines and laws
- laws which were UNNECESSARY and IMPRACTICABLE
- VAST amounts of written material.

Rodkinson also states (on pages 13-14) that Gamaliel the Elder had succeeded in declaring "the school of Shammai of no validity when at variance with Hillel's"; yet when Gamaliel was deposed for a short time from the office of Nasi (i.e. Prince), there were assembled at his college "four hundred students more of diverse opinions". The result of this was: "it was decided again that individual opinions, even those of the minority, should be considered". The result was that there were many different ideas about the same points; students and sages often disagreed on many points. Clearly, none of them were basing their opinions on "FAITHFULLY PRESERVED RECORDS, HANDED DOWN FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION". Apart from the Old Testament itself there were no such records going back to Old Testament times.

THE TALMUD CONTINUED TO BE DEVELOPED

Let's continue with the information provided by Michael J. Rodkinson in his work "The History of the Talmud". After stating that Rabbi succeeded in imparting to the Mishnayoth (i.e. to non-biblical records) ... "the sanctity of the Pentateuch itself, so that nothing is to be added to them, and what was done later after Rabbi's death, is not the place to expatiate on this subject" (page 16), Rodkinson then stated the following:

"... as soon as the Mishnayoth was completed, colleges were founded in Palestine and Babylonia to explain the meaning of the Mishnayoth and develop their laws to their ultimate consequences. After Rabbi's death, when Boraithoth and Tosepheth were discovered which did not form part of his compilation and which in many places contradicted the Mishnayoth, these colleges busied themselves in reconciling them with the Mishnayoth and with each other. They accounted for contradictions in Baraithoth by saying that one spoke of a case under same circumstances, while another meant a like case under different circumstances. So they explained the differences in the Mishnayoth themselves, often dividing a Mishna, whose parts seemed to contradict each other, and giving as explanation of the contradictions that the first part was according to one tanna [religious teacher], but the latter part according to another. These discussions and comments on the Mishna they called "Gemara", which also signifies "teaching" in ARAMAIC, WHICH WAS THE SPOKEN LANGUAGE OF THE SAGES OF THE GEMARA (see in the above-mentioned introduction for a different reason), and to the combined Mishnayoth and Gemara they gave the old name, "Talmud". (pages 16-17, my emphasis)

The above quotation is as it appears in Rodkinson's work, without any changes on my part. Let's examine what Rodkinson is telling us:

1) Rabbi managed to impart to the non-biblical writings "THE SAME SANCTITY" as was applied to the written Word of God! That is a profound admission! It is exactly the same thing that the Catholic Church has done with the writings of its "Church fathers". It should make obvious WHY the Jews must insist that this "oral law" was handed down from Moses ... because that is really THE ONLY WAY they can justify bestowing such "sanctity" on non-biblical writings!

2) Rodkinson acknowledges THE EXTREMES the Pharisees went to in order to justify and to retain (!) all of the contradictions that the oral law contains. The reasoning employed in many of these "reconciliations" is absurd!

Here is another quotation from Rodkinson:

"... yet the study of the Babylonian Talmudists being based on scholasticism, their acuteness is evinced in their so harmonizing the contradictions and disagreements, that they appear to point to the same meaning.

Not only did they interpret the Boraithas at variance with the Mishnayoth, but when even one of the great Amoraim [Comment: a name given to the sages of the Gemara] appeared to differ from the Mishna they so distorted the latter that it should seem to agree with the Amora." (page 18)

Note again that the Babylonian Talmudists specialized in "harmonizing" disagreements and contradictions.

Next notice this statement by Rodkinson:

"As at that time the impression was general that the most important element in the study of the Torah is ingenious reasoning on Halakha, it is not surprising that the Babylonian Talmud came to be received as the important and essential part of the Oral Law, while that of Palestine held a subordinate position." (page 19)

THAT IS A PROFOUND ADMISSION!!

Notice:

- 1) By "the study of the Torah", they mean a study of the first five books of the Old Testament (i.e. Genesis to Deuteronomy).
- 2) By "Halakha" they mean "decisions by scholars".
- 3) So this above quotation says, in effect:

THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENT IN UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE IS TO INTERPRET IT THROUGH THE "INGENIOUS REASONING" OF THE SCHOLARS!

But we have already seen several references to the fact that these "scholars" twisted and distorted the plain meaning of the Bible in unbelievable ways!

Their whole approach was to make the Bible fit in with the teachings of the scholars. They did NOT acknowledge that their "scholars" frequently and blatantly contradicted clear biblical teachings.

Notice this statement from Rodkinson, himself an editor of an English edition of the Babylonian Talmud:

"It is difficult to describe accurately and clearly the mode of thinking and ways of reasoning of the Talmud, which in truth is known only to one who has made it the study of his life." (page 19)

That statement is a cop-out.

Keep in mind that this quote is NOT a reference to "The Word of God"; we are here talking about making a study of the confused and contradictory and disorganized ideas of men! Rodkinson admits that "the ways of reasoning" employed in the Talmud are difficult to describe. That is because those ways of reasoning just don't make sense!

As far as "concluding" the Talmud is concerned, Rodkinson wrote:

"And so the Talmud became a vast sea, and its waves rose with might. R. Ashi (355-427) saw, therefore, that the time had come for revising, systematizing and concluding it, when he came to restore the college of Sura (Matha Mekhasia), which had fallen into decay on the death of Rabh.

About this R. Ashi it was said (Sanhedrin, p.108) that from the time of Rabbi to his time there is not to be found a man who was unique in the possession of wisdom, riches and glory." (page 21)

This is what the references that state the Talmud was written in the 4th to 5th centuries are based on ... on the time of R. Ashi.

That gives a very brief perspective on how the Talmud came to be.

You can go through the whole of Michael Rodkinson's work; and nowhere do you find him showing us that this "oral law" was faithfully AND ACCURATELY (!) handed down by word of mouth from father to son for many centuries, before it was (supposedly) finally committed to writing.

People who insist that the "oral law" is something the Jews have faithfully preserved by word of mouth

since the time of Moses (actually a ridiculous idea, when you understand their repeated departures into paganism, their captivities, their change of language from Hebrew to Aramaic, etc.), remind me of the approach taken by the Protestant Churches, when challenged about false teachings:

1) The Catholic Church FREELY ADMITS that the Bible does NOT tell us to observe Sunday! The Catholic Church (e.g. "Faith of Our Fathers" by Cardinal Gibbon) admits that THE BIBLE teaches us to observe Saturdays. And they admit that they CHANGED this from Saturday to Sunday. They also clearly state that the Protestant Churches did not get Sunday-worship out of the Bible; they got it from the Catholic Church.

2) BUT THE PROTESTANT CHURCHES, on the other hand, will not acknowledge that their only authority for Sunday-observance is based on what the Catholic Church decided to do! They INSIST that they observe Sundays because of certain Scriptures. And so they attempt desperately, in vain I might add, to justify Sunday-observance by referring to specific verses in the New Testament; even though the Catholic Church freely admits that those verses do NOT justify Sunday-observance. To admit that their ONLY reason for observing Sundays is based on the non-biblical teaching introduced by the Catholic Church would seriously challenge any justification for their existence! After all, if the only reason for keeping Sundays is because that's what the Catholic Church teaches, then WHY are they not a part of the Catholic Church?

3) Similarly, Jews who have made a life-long study of the Talmud (e.g. Michael J. Rodkinson) will freely admit that the Talmud is NOT a written record of things that were faithfully handed down for many centuries by word of mouth. They will freely admit that it contains vast numbers of contradictions (were contradictions handed down from the time of Moses?). They will admit that the reasoning employed in justifying any number of teachings is "ingenious". They will admit that many teachers readily twisted the plain meanings of Scriptures. They will admit that the Talmud has achieved the same sanctity as the Old Testament. They will admit that the Talmud interprets the Bible to fit in with the sayings and teachings of men.

4) BUT MEMBERS OF GOD'S CHURCH, who feel they need to appeal to the "oral law" for support for their beliefs, will accept without question (i.e. they have not made a study of this "oral law" before accepting it as valid) that SOMEHOW (?), in spite of the total and complete absence of any proof, God "INSPIRED" the Jews to also faithfully PRESERVE this "oral law", even though, for some reason (?) God chose not to tell Moses to write it down, as He did very specifically for the WRITTEN law.

This is nothing more than BLIND "faith" ... it isn't really "faith" at all, but rather a desperate "wishful thinking", because if this "oral law" is taken away from them, then some of their beliefs and ideas are without any kind of support.

Let's see what we can learn from the Old Testament regarding how faithfully the Jews preserved information available to them.

AN EXAMPLE FROM THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL

King Josiah was 8 years old when he came to the throne of Judah, and he reigned for 31 years (2 Kings 22:1). About 22 years after Josiah's death Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, as a direct penalty from God for Judah being steeped in idolatry.

In round figures, King Josiah reigned approximately 800 years after the time of Moses, and approximately 200 years before the time of Ezra and Malachi.

In the 18th year of his reign (i.e. at age 26 years) King Josiah sent a messenger to the High Priest

Hilkiah with the instruction that the High Priest should see to it that the Temple of God, which had fallen into a serious state of decay, should be repaired and restored to a state of respectability ... "to repair THE BREACHES OF THE HOUSE" with timber and hewn stone (2 Kings 22:5-6). By then the Temple was over 350 years old and in a very deteriorated state. Picture buildings today, which you know to be over 300 years old.

In addition to timber having rotted away or having been pillaged, some of the stones had also caved in. This Josiah intended to have repaired.

In addition to the PHYSICAL state of the Temple building being in a mess, the SPIRITUAL state was EVEN WORSE! Right by the Temple building there were houses for homosexual prostitutes, referred to as "the houses of the sodomites" in 2 Kings 23:7.

And he brake down the houses of the sodomites, that were by the house of the LORD, where the women wove hangings for the grove. (2 Kings 23:7)

Furthermore, the run-down Temple contained a standing idol, referred to as a "grove" in the previous verse, and the women would weave "hangings" for this idol. 450 years later, when Antiochus Epiphanes attempted to place such a "grove" in the Temple, it led to the Maccabean revolt; but prior to the time of Josiah such desecration of the Temple had gone unchallenged.

Furthermore, the run-down Temple had been used for Baal-worship; and it contained numerous "vessels that were made for Baal", as well as vessels used in worshipping "all the host of heaven" (2 Kings 23:4). It had over time become a place for PAGAN worship.

Judah had also lost the truth that there should be only ONE place in the whole country where there was to be "an altar"! And so by Josiah's time there were "high places" all over the country "where the priests had burned incense". This was practiced from Geba (north of Jerusalem) to Beer-sheba (in the south) ...

And he brought all the priests out of the cities of Judah, and defiled the high places where the priests had burned incense, from Geba to Beer-sheba, and brake down the high places of the gates that were in the entering in of the gate of Joshua the governor of the city, which were on a man's left hand at the gate of the city. (2 Kings 23:8)

The next verse reads:

Nevertheless the priests of the high places came not up to the altar of the LORD in Jerusalem, but they did eat of the unleavened bread among their brethren. (2 Kings 23:9)

THIS IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND!

These verses are not speaking about some "pagan" priests who were administering these pagan high places; this is speaking about LEVITICAL PRIESTS who had been functioning as pagan priests at these pagan high places! These are priests who SHOULD HAVE gone up to Jerusalem, had they not been defiled with such pagan practices! They did at least "eat of the unleavened bread". And these Levitical priests had been officiating at pagan rituals!

Notice also that there was a pagan shrine right on the doorstep of the house of the governor of the city of Jerusalem (2 Kings 23:8).

Some of the Jews in Jerusalem had also accepted the pagan custom of making a son or a daughter "pass through the fire to Molech" (2 Kings 23:10). 2 Kings 23:11 tells us that some of the kings of Judah had given horses and chariots to the sun god. There were also pagan shrines right in the dwelling places of the kings (very much like "the private chapels" you find attached to the palaces of royalty all over Europe today).

And the altars that were on the top of the upper chamber of Ahaz, which the kings of Judah had made, and the altars which Manasseh had made in the two courts of the house of the LORD, did the king beat down, and brake them down from thence, and cast the dust of them into the brook Kidron. (2 Kings 23:12)

Furthermore, there were pagan shrines right on the edge of Jerusalem, which had been there for over 300 years, which King Solomon had built for his pagan wives.

And the high places that were before Jerusalem, which were on the right hand of the mount of corruption, which Solomon the king of Israel had builded for Ashtoreth the abomination of the Zidonians, and for Chemosh the abomination of the Moabites, and for Milcom the abomination of the children of Ammon, did the king defile. (2 Kings 23:13)

So for over 300 years there had existed, right on the doorstep of Jerusalem, at least three different pagan temples or shrines. Before Josiah no one had had the courage to tear them down and to obliterate them.

All of these pagan influences Josiah set about removing from the nation. He was indeed zealous for God. But let's consider the situation in the kingdom of Judah when Josiah first came to the throne. Here's what we have:

- 1) On the edge of Jerusalem there were pagan temples, which Solomon had built over 300 years earlier, and which were still very much in use.
- 2) The Temple of God had fallen into disuse for the true religion, and was being used for Baal worship. It contained a pagan image and vessels dedicated to a number of pagan religions.
- 3) Adjacent to the Temple were "the houses of the sodomites". Sexual perversions were rife in the city.
- 4) Previous kings had built their own personal shrines right in their palaces, obviously in defiance to God's instructions regarding where people should go to worship.
- 5) Pagan altars and "high places" had been set up all over the country. They were all used for pagan rituals and rites; yet many of them, if not all, were being run by Levitical priests!
- 6) The "freedom of religion" being practiced by the people of Judah meant that a vast range of pagan religions had found followers amongst the Jews. These pagan religions all co-existed in Judah at the same time. Obviously the followers of these pagan religions had also accepted certain "customs" and "traditions". In many cases the parents and grandparents of people had already been involved in these same pagan religions and these were the only religious traditions that people knew.
- 7) There were no priests or male leaders anywhere in the country who still had a knowledge of what THE WRITTEN WORD OF GOD actually said! From the time of King Hezekiah until the 18th year of Josiah (a period of at least 75 years!) no one had seen a copy of the written Word of God. The proof for this we will

examine in a moment.

8) The civil ruler, the governor of the city, had a pagan shrine on his doorstep. In his position of authority he had not made any attempt to get rid of this pagan shrine. It didn't seem to bother him.

9) None of the priests had preserved VERBALLY what was written in the Word of God; i.e. even though they had not seen a copy of the written Word of God for over a full generation, THEY HAD NOT PRESERVED ORALLY WHAT WAS WRITTEN IN GOD'S WORD! Thus when a copy of the law was finally found, they were absolutely staggered at what the Word of God actually said!

10) So here is the point to consider:

IF THE PRIESTS HAD NOT EVEN FAITHFULLY PRESERVED AN ORAL KNOWLEDGE OF THE THINGS THAT ARE WRITTEN IN THE BOOKS OF MOSES, WHICH BOOKS HAD BEEN READ AT VARIOUS TIMES OVER THE PRECEDING 8 CENTURIES, ... HOW LIKELY WERE THEY TO FAITHFULLY PRESERVE A KNOWLEDGE OF SOMETHING THAT WAS SUPPOSEDLY GIVEN VERBALLY AT THE TIME OF MOSES BUT WHICH HAD NEVER EVEN BEEN WRITTEN DOWN IN THE FIRST PLACE?

If they couldn't preserve an oral knowledge of things for which a written record does exist, how could they possibly preserve an accurate record of things that were NEVER at any time recorded in writing?

The answer here should be obvious.

Let's now notice what happened when King Josiah in his 18th year instructed the High Priest to set about restoring the Temple. Notice what the priest said to the king's messenger:

And Hilkiah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I HAVE FOUND THE BOOK OF THE LAW in the house of the LORD. And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. (2 Kings 22:8)

It wasn't until he had been instructed to repair the Temple that the High Priest "discovered" the books Moses had written. He had apparently never seen this "book of the law" before. He clearly was not aware of the content of this book.

So Shaphan took the book to King Josiah and read it to the king (2 Kings 22:10). What was read to Josiah was an utter revelation to him. He had never heard anything like this before. He understood from what was read to him that the people of Israel were going to be punished very severely by God for all their idolatry and their other transgressions of God's laws. The king's reaction was one of immediately humbling himself before God, as shown by "rending his clothes".

And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes. (2 Kings 22:11)

The king then sent a delegation, including the High Priest and Shaphan the scribe, to "enquire of the LORD" for him (2 Kings 22:13). So this delegation went to "Huldah the prophetess" (2 Kings 22:14). This in itself shows that the High Priest himself did not have any direct communications with God, as had for example been the case in the days of King David, when the High Priest would enquire of God by means of the Urim and the Thummim (e.g. Exodus 28:30; Numbers 27:21; etc.). However, this High Priest did at

least know who he could go to to get an answer from God: in this case the only person available being "a prophetess".

QUESTION:

How much information from God, given in the days of Moses, were the priests and the Levites faithfully passing on from one generation to the next ... when they didn't even seem to know what was written in "the book of the law"?

The answer that God gave to King Josiah was that the penalties for sins, which Josiah had found written in the book would not come upon Josiah's people until after Josiah's death.

A statement God made in the previous chapter during King Manasseh's time is also of interest:

Because they have done that which was evil in my sight, and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came forth out of Egypt, even unto this day. (2 Kings 21:15)

God made a similar statement in His reply to King Josiah, when the prophetess Huldah gave God's message as:

Because they have forsaken me, and have burned incense unto other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore my wrath shall be kindled against this place, and shall not be quenched. (2 Kings 22:17)

QUESTION:

How can we claim that the people about whom God speaks in THIS fashion (provoking Him to anger ever since the time they came out of Egypt!) were possibly faithfully preserving some "oral laws" or instructions from God?

The point of this information which we find in the Bible about the days of King Josiah is that it shows us HOW LITTLE the Jews just before the Babylonian captivity actually knew about God's WRITTEN instructions and revelations. When the "book of the law", called "the book of the covenant" in 2 Kings 23:2, was then read to all the people, it was new information to the people ... things they hadn't been told before.

But didn't they know all these things because they were also faithfully preserving "the oral law"? There was NOTHING like any "oral LAW" that they were preserving.

Almost 200 years later the situation was again very similar.

AT THE CLOSE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

About 22 years after the death of King Josiah Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and the Jews went into captivity (some were by then already in Babylonian captivity). About 150 years after the death of Josiah, the High Priest Ezra returned to Jerusalem, and shortly thereafter Nehemiah also went to Jerusalem.

The Jews who had just returned from Babylonian captivity also had only a very scant knowledge of what God had actually said in His Word. And so in Nehemiah chapter 8 we have an account of the High Priest Ezra reading from "the book of the law of Moses" to people on the Day of Trumpets (Nehemiah 8:1-2).

Verse 8 tells us:

So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. (Nehemiah 8:8)

Nehemiah and Ezra then told the people not to weep because the Day of Trumpets is a Holy Day to God (Nehemiah 8:9). Notice the last part of verse 9:

"... For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law."

Why did they weep?

Because what had been read to them was new information to them. They were not familiar with these things Ezra had read to them. And many of God's statements (like national penalties for sins) were very sobering (they had just returned from Babylon).

How much knowledge did the people in general have of what was written in the Old Testament? Very little! So God used Ezra to once again initiate a religious zeal and revival.

And how much information had they actually "faithfully preserved from the days of Moses" and passed on by word-of-mouth from generation to generation? There was NO INFORMATION AT ALL, apart from the written Word of God, that they actually had from the days of Moses. And what Ezra taught them came from the written Word of God.

So once again the Jewish people actually knew VERY LITTLE apart from what Ezra taught them from the written Word of God.

And then Ezra and Nehemiah and Malachi died. And there were no other strong leaders. And their religious knowledge and understanding again decreased. And then they were conquered by the Greeks, and they LOVED the culture the Greeks introduced. And they readily absorbed the Greek customs and traditions, adapting them to their own circumstances. They became deeply involved with astrology. And they LOST the truth of God.

Once again, without a strong leader to hold them to God's ways, they slipped back into paganism! THEY HAD ALWAYS DONE THIS!

People who practice "pagan" customs and traditions don't somehow faithfully preserve "oral" laws of God! Those things just don't go together.

By the 160's B.C. the religious customs of the Jews were more pagan in their content than they were godly from Ezra's restoration. For about 250 years there had been no godly leaders to speak of. Never in its history (after Joshua's time) had Israel ever managed to go for even 100 years without sinking into idolatry, let alone go for as long as 250 years! The Jewish people who lived after Ezra and after Malachi were no different from the Jewish people at Solomon's time or at Josiah's time or at the time of the Babylonian captivity. They had NEVER stayed with the truth of God for very long. All they did was PRESERVE the written Word of God ... and even that had disappeared from view at various times (as at

the time of Josiah). And this "preservation" occurred simultaneously with the people adopting pagan customs and beliefs.

That should help to give us some background to the "oral law" of the Jews. Now what about "the strengths" and "the weaknesses" of the oral law? What is reliable and what is patently untrue?

THE STRENGTHS AND THE WEAKNESSES OF THE ORAL LAW

The Talmud is a historical document. The first parts of it were produced from the time of the Maccabees onwards (160's B.C. onwards). From that time forwards it represents a record of what certain people said and what they did. It is also a record that tells us WHY the Jews have certain beliefs and traditions, because for many of these statements the Talmud will refer to a specific verse in the Old Testament as justification for that belief and tradition. In those cases it is a simple matter to establish whether the verse cited is applied correctly or whether it is actually being MIS-interpreted. And mostly it is a matter that verses are grossly misapplied.

A common phrase in the Talmud (used 699 times) is: "WHENCE DO WE KNOW ...?". Most of the time the source of information that is cited is a reference to some verse in the Old Testament. Frequently this is in fact a clear misapplication of the verse. Similarly, the expression "HOW DO WE KNOW ...?" is used 550 times in the Talmud, and this too in many cases involves a wrong interpretation of some biblical passage. As Michael Rodkinson told us: "... the most important element in the study of the Torah is ingenious reasoning on Halakha"; and this is precisely what we find in the Talmud ... "INGENIOUS REASONING".

So what is good about the Talmud?

1) The Talmud shows us the customs and traditions that have been observed by the Jewish people since the second century B.C. From that time forward it represents a contemporaneous record. So it can show us what customs were being observed in the first century A.D., at the time of Christ's ministry and the ministries of the original apostles.

When things were done a certain way, then for that period of time the Talmudic record is correct, stating what they did and how they did it. This does NOT mean that everything they did was necessarily correct and in accordance with God's instructions in the Bible ... but the record is very likely to be accurate, because it was written down at that very time in history.

THUS, TO BE SPECIFIC:

When the Talmud records that the Day of Atonement DID fall on Fridays and on Sundays, then that is true FOR THE TIME OF HILLEL AND GAMALIEL and other leaders in the first two centuries A.D., leaders who are specifically mentioned by name in the Talmud. That is not necessarily true for 200 or for 600 years later, nor is it "necessarily" true for 500 years earlier! But IT IS TRUE for the time of Christ's ministry and for the lives of the New Testament apostles, because that is the specific time-period during which this information was recorded for the Talmud.

Similarly, when the Talmud records that in the days of Gamaliel the beginnings of the months were decided based on WITNESSES who testified having seen the new moon crescent, then that is true for the first and the second centuries A.D.. It is not necessarily true for 200 or for 600 years later, nor is it necessarily true for 500 years earlier. But it IS TRUE for the time of Christ and the time of the original apostles. The Talmud is a historical record of that time, with specific and detailed information about the Pharisaical leaders alive at that time, recording some of their deeds and actions.

2) When we examine statements in the oral law, we need to always differentiate between statements that are supported by clear proof (a small minority), and statements that are arrived at by "ingenious reasoning" (by far the vast majority of cases). We need to ALWAYS be on our guard when a statement is supported by something like: "whence do we know ...?" or by: "how do we know ...?", as both of these phrases are very popular introductions for "ingenious reasoning".

And what is NOT good about the Talmud?

The vast majority of claims and assertions made for biblical characters (i.e. from Adam down to Ezra) are without any substance and without proof of any kind. Because they refer to people and events long before the records for the Talmud started to be produced, they have no credibility. Many of these claims are supported not by references to "oral preservation", but by appeals to ingenious reasoning from specific Old Testament verses.

For example, the assertions that certain biblical characters (Isaac, Samuel, etc.) were conceived or born on specific important days are NOT based on oral information; rather, those assertions are based on "ingenious reasoning" from specific verses in the Old Testament. Yet ministers in God's Church, who have at times referred to these supposed dates for the births of prominent people, have simply ASSUMED that the Jews know this to be correct because it was (supposedly) handed down by word-of-mouth. But that is simply not the case!

"REASONING" from the Old Testament is not the same as "an oral record of instructions God gave to Moses"! Frequently it requires only a casual knowledge of the Scriptures to discern that the reasoning presented in the Talmud is in fact incorrect! The Scriptures called upon for support simply do not justify the conclusions presented in the Talmud.

The history of Israel should make quite clear that they CERTAINLY did not preserve an accurate record of some instructions that God supposedly gave in the days of Moses, and which supposedly were faithfully preserved "by word of mouth, from generation to generation". We only have to recall that, between the time of Moses, and the time when the documents on which the Talmud is based were first written, there were NUMEROUS LENGTHY EPISODES when the entire nation went into paganism! During times when pagan teachings were followed by the vast majority of the population, any information that was not recorded in writing WAS LOST!

Recall God's indictments against Israel and against Judah, when God points out that ever since coming out of Egypt they had constantly and repeatedly gravitated into paganism ... and for this cause God sent them into NATIONAL CAPTIVITIES, AS SLAVES!

So, while the Talmud can provide us with some fairly accurate information about the first century A.D., the time of Christ's ministry and of the early N.T. Church, it is utterly unreliable when it makes claims about biblical characters, which claims are not supported by the Bible itself.

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