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THE DEVELOPMENT OF JEWISH LAWS THROUGH THE AGES

I have no desire to find fault with the Jewish religion, or with any other religion for that matter. However, there are now many people in the churches of God who seem to feel that we should be looking to the Jews for guidance regarding anything that pertains to the Old Testament. That feeling is based on the assumption that the Jews have somehow preserved "additional information", things that are not recorded anywhere in the Bible. This feeling is further reinforced by the reasoning that Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament Scriptures, is after all the language of the Jews, and therefore they should know best what the Hebrew Scriptures really mean.

And so if we want to "better understand" many things about the instructions contained in the Old Testament (e.g. things pertaining to the observance of the Passover, the calendar, the use of sacred names, etc.), this reasoning asserts that we should be looking to the Jewish religion to tell us what God's instructions really mean.

But the people in the churches of God who hold these views typically are totally unaware of how the present Jewish views, teachings and understandings actually developed. They don't even remotely understand that the teachings of modern Judaism are just as far removed from the teachings of the Old Testament, as are the teachings of most so-called "Christian" churches removed from the teachings of the New Testament. Nor do they understand the distinct parallel between the development of the teachings of Judaism and the development of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

This article presents an examination of the development of laws and traditions and beliefs in the Jewish religion.

The word "Halakha" (or "Halacha") refers to a collection of ALL the Jewish laws. It includes the biblical laws (known as the 613 "mitzvot", which are made up of 248 positive mandates and 365 prohibitions), the talmudic and rabbinic laws, and the customs and traditions that have been developed. The word "halakha" is derived from a verb that means "to walk", and it is thus used to designate "the way of life" for the Jewish people.

In Judaism biblical laws are not necessarily accorded a greater importance than the laws enacted by the tannaim, or even the laws that regulate the secular affairs of the Jewish people. In plain language, the laws that God Himself gave in the Old Testament do not necessarily carry any more weight than the laws that were devised by various Pharisees and rabbinic sages during talmudic times. At times some instructions given by God in the Bible may in fact even be overruled by instructions given by certain tannaim, a non-biblical law being used to overrule a biblical law.

This is something most people in the churches of God would not realize, that in Judaism it is considered perfectly legitimate to contradict and override a clear biblical instruction with a non-biblical talmudic law. But this process is precisely what Jesus Christ was speaking about when He said that the Pharisees through their traditions "made the Word of God of none effect" (Mark 7:13), by attaching more importance to a requirement they themselves had originated than to a clear biblical instruction from God.

The Jewish scholars and sages that were involved in the development of the halakha were known by different titles in different ages. Here is a brief overview of how the whole body of Jewish laws and customs developed.

EZRA THE SCRIBE: Around 457 B.C. Ezra the priest went from Babylon to Jerusalem. Together with Nehemiah he strengthened the Jewish community that had returned from the Babylonian captivity. Ezra taught the people the law of God. Because the Old Testament books were written in Hebrew, but by then the people were speaking the Aramaic language, there was a certain amount of difficulty in people understanding the Hebrew text. So Ezra introduced the three step system we see in Nehemiah 8:8.

Step 1: "They read in the book in the law of God distinctly" means that Ezra and the Levites that assisted him in this task read the Hebrew text correctly to the people. However, this was not enough for people who no longer spoke Hebrew as their daily language and therefore did not understand everything that was read to them. So step 2 is next.

Step 2: Then "they gave the sense" means that they then literally translated the Hebrew text they had read into Aramaic, the common language of their audience. This step already made things a whole lot clearer to most people. But this still did not mean that people necessarily understood exactly what God was telling us in those specific Scriptures. So then step 3 follows.

Step 3: Having translated the Hebrew text into Aramaic for the common people, Ezra and the Levites then "caused them to understand the reading". This means that they then explained and expounded on the passage they had read and translated to the people, in effect giving people a verbal commentary on the passage in question. This step involved interpreting the intended meaning of the Scripture in question, and finding specific applications for the inherent principles in the daily lives of the people.

With this three step procedure Ezra and the Levites had in fact established the concept of "preaching the Word of God" in a way that is still basically followed today in most churches: read God's Word in the original language (this step is typically skipped), present an accurate translation of the text into the language of the audience (whatever translation a preacher is using is usually assumed to fulfill this requirement), and then expound on the intended meaning of that text.

Ezra had established a good foundation for teaching people God's laws and God's way of life. Starting with that time, the development of Jewish laws and customs went through the following stages.

THE SOFERIM approx. 450 B.C. - 270 B.C.: The word "soferim" means "scribes", and the word came to designate a specific class of scholars. The soferim were the scribes of the law. They made copies of the books (scrolls) of the Old Testament. The start of this period coincided with the writing of the last books of the Old Testament (i.e. Ezra, Nehemiah, Malachi, Chronicles). By the time Ezra died, the Old Testament had been completed.

The soferim as a class were priests and Levites. They were all from the tribe that God had set apart for religious duties in the nation of Israel. Ezra was the first of the soferim.

The soferim taught the people God's laws. After the death of Ezra and the leaders of his generation this process of teaching was exposed to outside influences. With the conquests of Alexander the Great much Hellenistic influence entered Jewish culture and society. Many Greek customs were accepted into Jewish society, and this also influenced the teachings of the later soferim.

By the time of the last member of this class of scholars known as soferim (Simeon the Just, who was one of four possible Simeons during that age) the process of teaching God's laws had been corrupted considerably from the faithful standard that had been established by Ezra. By that time the process had been changed to justify acceptance of many unbiblical Greek customs by appeals to the Scriptures, claiming that the Scriptures supposedly sanctioned these customs. The Levites had not remained faithful to the written Word of God (i.e. to the Old Testament); in fact, some of the most zealous Hellenists amongst the Jews were found amongst the priests and the Levites.

Eventually by the 160's B.C. things had become extremely corrupt, and at that time the Seleucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes defiled the temple in Jerusalem. This provoked a rebellion led by Judah Maccabee, which spurred on something of a religious revival, a desire to return to the ways established by Moses and upheld by Ezra.

The priests and the Levites, by embracing Hellenism, had become some of the worst offenders. So the religious fervor that was aroused was led primarily, though by no means exclusively, by "laymen", meaning leaders who were not from the tribe of Levi. This led to the birth of the sect of the Pharisees, the word "pharisee" generally being taken to mean "the separated ones"; meaning that they separated themselves from the corrupt priesthood and claimed to get back to the ways established by Ezra.

The stage was set to start the process that would culminate in the production of the Talmud.

THE ZUGOT approx. 142 B.C. - 40 B.C.: The Hebrew word "zug" means "pair", and "zugot" means "pairs". Zugot refers to 5 successive pairs of scholars, who are supposed to represent the link between the prophets that went before them, and the tannaim who came after them. They cover a period of about 100 years. In theory they are the scholars who "maintained" the knowledge of the "oral laws" that had supposedly been handed down by Ezra. In practice they are the ones who sanctioned the acceptance and retention of many customs and traditions that had nothing whatsoever to do with the Bible, or with Ezra, or with any other biblical servant of God.

Each of these 5 pairs of scholars controlled the religious developments amongst the Jews for a whole generation.

Many of the things they sanctioned are in conflict with biblical instructions and with biblical principles. Ezra had not handed down any kind of "oral instructions" whatsoever. The priests, who would theoretically have been the ones to preserve and pass on any "oral laws", were the worst Hellenists amongst the Jews, and had lost much religious credibility. And the non-levitical Jews who became Pharisees had never been privy to anything that they might have been capable of "passing on".

Basically these scholars gave laws and instructions which seemed right to them in their own eyes, without any regard for instructions that are recorded in the Old Testament. It was once again a situation like Judges 21:25, when there was no God-appointed leader, and "every man did that which was right in his own eyes".

Of note is that the zugot were NOT from the tribe of Levi. So with the advent of these sages religious authority had been wrested from the tribe God had selected, and had been assumed by non-Levites. What is interesting to note is that a number of the key leaders within the development of Jewish laws and the Jewish religion were in fact not even Israelites themselves; they were only converts (i.e. proselytes) from other nations, yet they exerted a powerful influence on the development of the Jewish way of life.

For example, the article on "AVTALYON" in the ENCYCLOPEDIA JUDAICA states the following:

"AVTALYON (late first century B.C.E.), colleague of Shemaiah. Together Shemaiah and Avtalyon constitute the fourth of the zugot ("pairs"), receiving the tradition from Judah b. Tabbai and Simeon b. Shetah. Shemaiah was nasi and Avtalyon av bet din. Like Shemaiah, Avtalyon is said to have been a descendant of proselytes (Git. 57b; Sanh. 96b). Avtalyon and Shemaiah were called "the two great men of their generation" (Pes. 66a), and "great sages and interpreters" (ibid., 70b), and the people held them in higher esteem than the high priest (Yoma 71b). In the earliest dispute recorded in the Talmud, concerning the laying of hands on the head of a festal sacrifice (see Semikhah of sacrifice), Avtalyon's views coincided with those of the nes'i'im who

preceded him viz., that it "may not be performed" (Hag. 2:2). It was from Avtalyon and Shemaiah that Hillel learned that the paschal sacrifice is offered even on the Sabbath (Pes. 66a). Avtalyon's decisions are also quoted in Eduyyot (1:3;5:6)."

And the article on "SHEMAIAH" in the ENCYCLOPEDIA JUDAICA states the following:

"SHEMAIAH (late first century B.C.E.), the colleague of Avtalyon (see Zugot). In talmudic sources they are always mentioned together. Both taught in the same bet midrash (Yoma 35b) and their cooperation appears to have been exemplary. Like Avtalyon, Shemaiah was said to have been descended from Sennacherib (Git. 57b)."

And the article on "PROSELYTES" in the ENCYCLOPEDIA JUDAICA states:

"A tendency to increase the honor of the proselytes and to glorify conversion can perhaps be found in the tradition which traces the origins of such great personalities as R. Meir, R. Akiva, Shemaiah, and Avtalyon to proselytes. They were descendants of such wicked men as Sisera, Sennacherib, Haman, and Nero (Git. 56a, 57b; Sanh. 96b). The name of R. Akiva's father does not appear explicitly in the Talmud, but Dikdukei Soferim, *ibid.*, 9 (1878), 283 and also Maimonides' introduction to Mishneh Torah relate that Joseph, the father of R. Akiva, was a proselyte by conviction."

Now the fourth pair of zugot were Shemaiah and Avtalyon, and neither one of them was of Jewish descent, let alone from the tribe of Levi. They were descended from non-Jewish proselytes. And these two non-Jewish sages and interpreters were held in higher esteem by the Jews than the high priest. They are also both listed as the teachers of Hillel, whose teachings became the foundation of modern Judaism.

So right from its inception foreign proselytes ended up exerting a major influence upon the development of the religion of Judaism. The Jewish religious leadership, which had been wrested from the tribe of Levi, had clearly been infiltrated by non-Jewish "sages". And that process continued in later times. Regarding "R. Akiva" (also written as "Akiba") and "R. Meir" mentioned in the above quotation, here are some quotations about them.

"AKIVA (c. 50-135 C.E.), one of the outstanding tannaim, probably the foremost scholar of his age, patriot and martyr, who exercised a decisive influence in the development of the halakhah." ENCYCLOPEDIA JUDAICA, article AKIVA

"MEIR (second century C.E.), tanna, one of the leaders of the post-Bar Kokhba generation. Essentially a halakhist, he played a decisive part in the development of the Mishnah. According to the aggadah, Meir was a descendant of proselytes." ENCYCLOPEDIA JUDAICA, article MEIR

And notice also this quotation from the Talmud.

"Raba raised an objection: R. Judah related, 'Menjamin, an Egyptian proselyte, was one of my colleagues among the disciples of R. Akiba, and he once told me: I am an Egyptian of the first generation and married an Egyptian wife of the first generation; and I shall arrange for my son to marry an Egyptian wife of the second generation in order that my grandson shall be eligible to enter the congregation'.⁴² " Mas. Yevamoth 78a

The zugot laid the foundation for Jewish society to accept instructions and requirements, which are IN ADDITION TO THE WRITTEN SCRIPTURES, as obligatory to be obeyed. Prior to the era of the zugot all appeals for religious requirements could only be upheld by appeals to what had been written in the books of the Old Testament. There was no other authority that was considered to be on a par with the written Scriptures. The pagan Hellenistic customs that had found their way into Jewish society could be, and were, defended by deliberate misinterpretations of the written Scriptures; but they could NOT be defended by appeals to any other source of authority, because there simply wasn't any other source of authority available.

THAT WAS A WEAKNESS IN THE DEFENSE OF UNBIBLICAL CUSTOMS!

The era of the zugot laid the foundation for dealing with this weakness. Each pair of zugot had their own students and disciples. And many of the decisions and judgments these men made were recorded, creating a body of written judgments that were clearly not in any way a part of the Scriptures. But these things came to be designated as "oral laws".

In the first four of the five generations of zugot the two leaders in most cases got along reasonably well and tended to be in general agreement, though some differences always existed. The last pair of zugot was made up of Hillel and Shammai. And in this pair Shammai represented the strict and conservative and less condoning views, while Hillel represented the more liberal and less stringent and more condoning views, the views Hillel had been taught by the two non-Jewish sages before him.

Here is a quotation from THE HISTORY OF THE TALMUD by MICHAEL J RODKINSON, in connection with these two men (i.e. Hillel and Shammai).

"As the interpretations of every letter and vowel point of the written law had multiplied, and liberty had been given to every learned man to construe biblical texts at his pleasure, the differences of opinion multiplied, and the disciples of Shammai and Hillel, whose master's characters differed to the utmost, split into two factions and studied in separate colleges. Thus the teaching of the Talmud was differently interpreted by two parties, and what the one permitted, the other forbade."
(page 9)

Indeed, liberty had been given to every learned man to interpret the biblical texts at his own pleasure. That process continued unabated for the next half millennium, though this fact is not generally admitted as freely as Michael Rodkinson here admits it for the two schools of Hillel and Shammai.

Both these men (Hillel and Shammai) started schools of disciples, and numerous controversies arose between these two schools of pharisaical thought, as indicated by Rodkinson.

It is the debates between these two schools of religious thought that makes up the greater part of the "Oral Law" (i.e. the Mishnah part of the Talmud) of the last few generations of the period of the Second Temple (i.e. up to 70 A.D.).

Understanding this foundation for modern Judaism (i.e. the zugot, two men of basically equal stature holding contradictory opinions) is a vital key to understanding what the Talmud, the "Oral Law" is all about. The Talmud is NOT about "the preservation" of anything from the age of the Old Testament. The "Oral Law" is first and foremost A DEBATE BETWEEN CONFLICTING OPINIONS! It has nothing to do with the "preservation" of anything from biblical personages (Ezra, etc.); and it has everything to do with trying to resolve conflicting opinions, specifically by trying to find some merit for both positions in every conflicting situation. The "Oral Law" is a record of endless arguments for conflicting positions held by these different schools, with a desire to show some acceptance for both views in each case.

Eventually the liberals won the day, and the school of Shammai died out and lost all influence. It is the school of Hillel that survived, and from which modern Judaism is descended. Hillel is considered to have been the greatest scholar of the second temple period, and he started a dynasty of scholars that spanned more than three hundred years.

THE TANNAIM approx. 70 A.D. - 200 A.D.: The word "tanna" comes from an Aramaic word meaning "to hand down orally, to study, to teach". These are the pharisaical sages whose views are recorded in the Mishnah. By "mishnah" the tannaim meant specifically "the study of the oral law", or more accurately, "the memorization of the oral law". This forms a great part of halakha, the religious customs of the Jewish way of life.

So here is the development thus far:

1) God's servant Ezra had established a format for teaching God's laws to a people who no longer spoke the Hebrew language. After his death that process was corrupted to gradually grant acceptance to more and more pagan customs and traditions. But these unbiblical customs did not yet have any written status.

2) Then non-levitical scholars (and in a number of cases even total non-Jews) hijacked the religious authority by claiming to present customs that had been ORALLY passed on by Ezra. Their claims were without any foundation whatsoever, but they succeeded in gaining great prestige as religious teachers. Their views were recorded in writing, but not yet accorded the status of being on a par with Scripture.

3) Then came the tannaim, who were also non-levitical scholars. What they did is create a vast body of writings, recording their own views and the views of the zugot before them. They claimed to be "repeating what had been taught" by Ezra. This body of writings was now given the title of "Oral Law". During this period these writings increased exponentially, eventually consisting of a staggeringly large volume of written material. It included enormous contradictions and conflicts within itself, and flagrant conflicts with the written Word of God, the Old Testament. Yet with its presumed title of "Oral Law" it represented a body of writings which could compete in importance with the writings of the Old Testament itself.

As already noted above, the non-Jewish proselytes "Akiva" and "Meir" had a "DECISIVE INFLUENCE" and a "DECISIVE PART" in the development of the halakha and the Mishnah. These foreign converts imposed their stamp on the development of the Jewish way of life.

But the process was also threatening to get out of control. What was needed was for someone to say: "enough is enough, no more new oral laws please".

Enter Judah ha-Nasi, also known as "Rabbi".

THE AMORAIM approx. 200 A.D. - 500 A.D.: Judah ha-Nasi was the sixth or seventh generation from Hillel, who had been a non-levitical scholar who had assumed religious leadership. Judah ha-Nasi was the last of the tannaim and the first of the amoraim. The word "amoraim" means "those who say", meaning that they "told the oral law".

Judah ha-Nasi was a very wealthy and influential leader, with contacts to the Roman emperor. The main work for which he is remembered is his redaction of the mishnah. Out of the vast amount of material that was already extant at his time, he selected a small portion for canonization. The large body of mishnayot that Judah ha-Nasi did not accept for canonization became known as "external mishnayot", also known as "beraitot" (singular is "baraita"), and they were preserved for study purposes. Occasionally, when it is needed to support a specific argument, a baraita is preferred in authority even above a mishnah. To

support a particular position people will look for support wherever they can find it.

The ENCYCLOPEDIA JUDAICA article on JUDAH HA-NASI states:

"However, Judah ha-Nasi's redaction was not limited only to such instances but is apparent in the selection and compilation he made from the mishnaic collections of various battei midrash without even altering their phraseology. He apparently aimed at giving his Mishnah a variegated form and at making it representative of all the known collections of mishnayot in order that it might be generally acceptable. Mention is made of the "thirteen different interpretations" of the Mishnayot, some of which Judah ha-Nasi taught to Hiyya (Ned. 41a), and from which he, exercising his judgment, selected and polished his Mishnah. Due to the pains he took, his compilation became the Mishnah and all the other collections the "outside mishnayot," the beraitot. A "canon" was fixed, a standard by which the remainder of the mishnayot were judged. It marked the conclusion of the Mishnah, to which no new material was added as had hitherto been done to the other mishnayot."

The Mishnah had been completed, and no new material was permitted to be added to it. The whole work was nothing more than a record of debates and discussions of various tannaim, presenting and attempting to support their conflicting opinions. It was inevitable that such conflicting opinions would only evoke further views and opinions.

This is where the amoraim enter the picture.

Since nothing more could be added to the Mishnah, what was produced by the amoraim was the Talmud. The Talmud was basically a commentary on the Mishnah. The above quoted ENCYCLOPEDIA JUDAICA article on JUDAH HA-NASI continues to state:

"Instead, the new material was included in the Talmud, which was studied as a commentary on the Mishnah. Thus, although Judah ha-Nasi produced a legal codex, it did not put an end to the development of the halakhah but rather provided it with a solid foundation. His status and personal authority likewise helped to make his collection of mishnayot the basis of study and of legal decisions, second in significance and sanctity only to the Scriptures."

[COMMENT: The terms "Talmud" and "Gemara" are used fairly interchangeably. In the above quotation the word "Talmud" really means the "Gemara". Strictly speaking, the Talmud consists of two parts: the Mishnah, being the "Oral Law" of the tannaim, and the Gemara, being the commentary on the Mishnah written by the amoraim. But it is also common practice to use the word "Talmud" when in fact it is the Gemara that is really meant. This can be confusing to outsiders.]

So where the Mishnah had been developed by the tannaim as "the Oral Law" over a period of around 130 years, the next 300 years were devoted by the amoraim to writing the Talmud (i.e. the Gemara), as a commentary on the Mishnah. Note that the Talmud (Gemara) is NOT a commentary on the Old Testament itself. It is only a commentary on the so-called "Oral Law", the Mishnah; it is not a commentary on the works of any biblical authors, but only a commentary on the works of non-biblical authors. Biblical references within both, the Mishnah and the Gemara, are only incidental and never the main overall focus of attention.

The Jerusalem Talmud was completed around 400 A.D., and the Babylonian Talmud was completed around 500 A.D. The Babylonian Talmud is considered to be the more authoritative one. The bulk of each Gemara is a record of the discussions of the various amoraim. Generally speaking, the amoraim

were not permitted to dispute the statements of the tannaim recorded in the Mishnah. Thus they had to find support for their specific views by appeals to something some or other tanna had stated previously.

A great deal of the activity of the amoraim was centered on trying to extract principles and concepts of law from statements in the Mishnah. In practical terms this again greatly expanded the body of laws already extant. But in the long run it was the Gemara, this commentary on the Mishnah, which became the basis of all rabbinic law.

The article AMORAIM in the ENCYCLOPEDIA JUDAICA contains the following statement:

The amoraim clearly recognized that the method of study derived by the tannaim and themselves, contained much which was original, as compared with the earlier tradition. In homiletical vein some of the amoraim pointed out that even Moses himself was not familiar with the discussions in the academies. One aggadah belonging to the school of Rav states that when Moses appeared on high, the Holy One blessed be He, showed him R. Akiva, who was deriving "mountains of halakhah" from every "jot and tittle of the Torah" and he could not understand a word (Men. 29b). The purpose of such legends was to emphasize the evolutionary aspect of the teachings of the tannaim and amoraim.

This comment makes the point that the tannaim and the amoraim originated mountains of laws, of which even Moses could not understand a word. So how much credibility should such laws receive by people in the churches of God? And they devised these new laws with nothing more than the flimsiest and clearly contrived (i.e. "jots and tittles") references to the text of the Old Testament. Yes, the above quotation is only a legend (i.e. aggadah), but it represents a clear admission that all this "halakha" (i.e. laws and regulations) had nothing to do with ANYTHING that Moses had taught the people of Israel. They (the halakha) are all fabricated and without biblical support of any kind.

A PARALLEL IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: The Roman Catholic religion started its development soon after the lives of the original apostles. There is a parallel between the tannaim of the Jewish religion and the ANTE-NICENE CHURCH FATHERS of the Catholic Church. And the writings of the Mishnah (written by the tannaim) are like the writings of the ante-Nicene church fathers of the Catholic Church. The amoraim of the Jewish religion are like the NICENE CHURCH FATHERS and POST-NICENE CHURCH FATHERS of the Roman Catholic Church. And the writings of the Gemara (written by the amoraim) are like the writings of the Nicene and post-Nicene church fathers of the Catholic Church.

The whole Talmud (Mishnah plus Gemara) is to the Jewish religion what the writings of the ante-Nicene, Nicene and post-Nicene church fathers are to the Roman Catholic religion. And in both cases it involves a staggeringly huge volume of writings, which has only the most superficial connection to the Scriptures which make up the Bible.

Where the dividing line between the tannaim and the amoraim of the Jewish religion was around 200 A.D., for the Catholic religion the dividing line was 325 A.D., the year of the First Council of Nicea. There is a distinct parallel in the development of both these religions, Judaism and Roman Catholicism.

Let's get back to the development of the customs and traditions of the Jewish religion.

Once both sections of the Talmud had been written, the process was ready to move on to the next stage.

THE SAVORAIM: approx. 500 A.D. - 700 A.D.: With all this material for the Talmud now in existence, nothing further needed to be added. So now there was a period in which the leading rabbis were involved in sorting out all this vast volume of material. The savoraim (meaning "scholars competent to

render decisions") edited the Talmud and gave it its current structure, arranging the text in all its chapters. Not much is known about this group.

THE GEONIM: approx. 589 A.D. - 1038 A.D.: Gaon (singular of Geonim) means "pride" or "splendor" in biblical Hebrew (in modern Hebrew it means "genius"), and it was originally a title for the heads of the two academies (Sura and Pumbedita) of religious study. Those who carried this title were recognized as the highest authorities on the halakha. (Later this became a title for any rabbi with great knowledge of the halakha.) The geonim interpreted the Talmud and they answered questions brought to them.

By this time the religious studies focused almost exclusively on the Talmud. The books of the Old Testament were only referenced in as far as they were needed to support specific statements in the Mishnah or in the Gemara. Scriptures that clearly contradicted the points people wanted to make were always willingly overlooked.

It was during this period of the geonim, these men who were recognized as the highest religious authorities, that there was another class of scholars, who are of interest to us.

THE MASORETES: approx. 600's A.D. - late 900's A.D.: The Masoretes were a group of scribes centered in three locations: Jerusalem, Tiberias, and Babylon. They made faithful handwritten copies of the Tanakh (the books of the Old Testament). As such they don't really feature directly in the development of the halakha, the laws of Judaism, which development was concerned with the Talmud.

Where the soferim had been scribes who strictly copied the text of each book of the Old Testament, without additions or alterations, the masorettes added something to this process. Besides meticulously copying the text of each book, they also copied "the masorah", i.e. marginal notes that had over time been added to the side margins and also to the top and to the bottom of each scroll. These notes were intended to provide explanations and to point out places in the text that were thought to contain some or other error, as well as comments pertaining to punctuation and to grammatical issues. Over time a considerable body of such "marginal notes" came into existence.

The version of the Masoretic Text that is generally accepted as authoritative today was produced by Aaron ben Moses ben Asher (commonly referred to as "Ben Asher"). While Maimonides accepted Ben Asher's version of the text, another prominent leader, Saadia Gaon was critical of Ben Asher. [Saadia was the gaon in Babylon from 928 A.D. to 942 A.D.] This illustrates that the masorettes carried out their responsibilities of faithfully copying the texts, independent of the wishes of the geonim, the chief religious leaders at the time.

The Masoretic Text used today was produced in Venice in 1524 - 1525 A.D., by Jacob ben Hayyim ibn Adonijah, who selected the Ben Asher text from a large number of different Masoretic texts at his disposal. Jacob ben Hayyim is also responsible for the only complete Masorah (marginal notes) that is in print. Thus the text of the Old Testament that is the basis for all our English language Bibles has come to us from Ben Asher via Ben Hayyim. Other versions of the Masoretic Text have mostly been lost.

Now back to the development of the Talmud and the halakha. The time after the end of the age of the geonim has been dominated by leading rabbis and poskim (people empowered to make legally binding decisions). They are the leaders who made rulings on the law, meaning rulings based on what is written in the Talmud, not rulings on what is written in the Old Testament. In this way the halakha continued to grow and to expand.

Based on when these leading rabbis and poskim lived, they are divided into two groups: the first ones, and the later ones.

THE RISHONIM: approx. 1250 A.D. - 1500 A.D.: This word means "the early authorities". The reasoning employed in the development of the halakha is that the further removed scholars were from the time of Ezra (or even from Moses, for that matter), the less important their opinions become. Thus: while the rishonim also developed additional halakha, they were not supposed to contradict the geonim who had come before them.

The dividing line between the rishonim and the group that follows them is generally taken as the time when the "Shulchan Aruch" (also "Shulhan Arukh") was written. This work was first printed in Venice in 1565 A.D., having been produced by Joseph Caro. Together with some amendments added by Moses Isserles, the Shulchan Aruch has become the accepted code of Jewish law. This work basically summarizes the halakhic instructions of the Talmud.

The leading rabbis and poskim who lived before the publication of the Shulchan Aruch are known as rishonim.

THE ACHARONIM : 1500's A.D. - THE PRESENT: This term means "the later ones", and it is used to refer to the leading rabbis that have been influential since the publication of the Shulchan Aruch.

And that brings us to the present.

So starting out with nothing but the Bible (i.e. the books of the Old Testament), Jewish laws and customs and beliefs have gone through the following process:

1) Ezra taught the Jews who had returned from Babylon the laws of God. He developed a process of first translating the Hebrew text into Aramaic, the language that the people were speaking in his time, and then expounding on this translated text to convey the intended meanings.

2) After his death the Jews in Palestine came under the influence of the conquering Greeks. They accepted many Hellenistic customs and traditions. In this regard the priests and the Levites became some of the worst offenders.

3) So certain lay people (i.e. men who were not from the tribe of Levi) took it upon themselves to teach the religious instructions to the people. This gave birth to the sect of the Pharisees.

4) This process was started by the zugot, five successive pairs of legal scholars, who claimed the authority to make decisions that would determine the religious conduct and behavior of the Jewish people. They developed a large body of laws, which they falsely claimed were "the traditions of the elders", and which traditions Jesus Christ rejected very emphatically. This gave rise to the first "extra-biblical" laws amongst the Jewish people. Of note is that ethnic non-Jews actually controlled one whole generation of this process.

5) The zugot were followed by the tannaim, scholars who vastly expanded the process that had been started by the zugot. They wrote the Mishnah, the heart and core of the Talmud. This process was again heavily influenced by the non-Jewish leaders Akiva and Meir. Eventually Judah haNasi came along and edited the whole Mishnah down to more manageable proportions. However, the portions that Judah haNasi edited out were not totally rejected; they were only relegated to the status of being the "external mishnayot", or the "beraitot", source material that can be appealed to for support when all else fails.

6) The tannaim were followed by the amoraim, scholars who wrote commentaries on the Mishnah. Their commentaries form the Gemara. The Gemara is frequently also loosely referred to as "the Talmud", though strictly speaking the Talmud is made up of both, the Mishnah and the Gemara. It is readily acknowledged that these amoraim created mountains of laws from nothing more than the flimsiest of

biblical references.

7) After the body of written material (commonly referred to as "Oral Law" or as "the Talmud") had been completed, the next stage was controlled by the savoraim (about whom little is known) and the geonim, the directors of the two religious academies in Sura and in Pumbedita. These men now interpreted the statements in the Mishnah and in the Gemara. Their decisions and judgments created further halakha.

8) After the age of the geonim, the process was continued by the leading rabbis in every age. The rabbis who lived before the publication of the code of Jewish Law known as "Shulchan Aruch" became known as rishonim, and those who lived after the publication of the Shulchan Aruch became known as acharonim.

Now in this process of the development of Jewish Law (from zugot to tannaim to amoraim to savoraim to geonim to rishonim to acharonim) one premise has always been that a later sage may not overtly contradict something taught by an earlier sage. But since vast numbers of contradictions to something somebody else had said earlier were inevitable, therefore the whole approach used by these men in presenting any new idea is always to do so with an appeal to something some earlier sage is reported to have said. However, those opposed to their new idea then voiced their opposition by appealing to the contradictory statements made by some other earlier sage. It is always deemed of the utmost importance to have an earlier authority to appeal to for support, even if such an appeal is obviously contrived.

Understanding this process of having to back up every claim and every assertion with an appeal to an earlier authority should help us to understand the endless arguments and contradictory statements that fill the pages of the Talmud. Without this understanding it is extremely difficult to grasp why the content of the Talmud is so chaotic and so filled with contradictions, and so devoid of any real and honest expositions of the Old Testament Scriptures.

What should be apparent is that the entire halakha, the entire Jewish religious way of life, is something that evolved, by constantly being added to over a period of more than 500 years. It is totally removed from the religion God gave to Israel through Moses, and which was still faithfully taught by Ezra. This evolution of the Jewish religion was also heavily influenced by foreign converts from other nations, converts who in some cases became the chief religious authorities for JEWISH customs in their day.

There is nothing whatsoever in the Jewish religious teachings that should be accepted, emulated or copied by the churches of God today, any more than the churches of God today would seek authoritative support from statements made by any of the Roman Catholic church fathers. The parallel in the development of these two great religions (i.e. Judaism and Roman Catholicism) should be easy to see, with both developments deliberately ignoring God's instructions contained in the Bible. And the churches of God should certainly not be looking to Jewish traditions, which the Encyclopedia Judaica article on the "amoraim" freely admits were fabricated with appeals to nothing more than the flimsiest of "jots and tittles" in the Old Testament, for supposed "additional understanding".

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