

THE RABBIS VS. THE SPIRIT

How the leaders of Judaism claimed God's authority for themselves

By Dr. Galen Peterson
© 2018 American Remnant Mission

There is more to religion than outward rites and traditions. What matters most are the underlying beliefs that shape individual and corporate identity. Such is the case for the two belief systems with foundations in the Bible.

The Christian or Messianic way is in harmony with every aspect of faith that preceded it. The atonement brought about by Yeshua (Jesus) is consistent with the principle of atonement described in the Torah, because both are based on a substitute that bears the penalty for sin, and requires the shedding of blood in order to accomplish that. The nature of Yeshua as the divine Son of God and the many attributes of the Messiah are exactly as the prophets foretold. So there is nothing about Yeshua that deviates in any way from over 1,000 years of revelation from God before He dwelled on this earth. It is a single path and a preservation of the biblical principles that were established by God.

But those who rejected Yeshua as the Messiah and the Son of God took a divergent path away from those principles because the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. was not only a life and death calamity, but it sent a shockwave throughout Judaism. It led to a process of reevaluation about how to retain meaning for the commandments of the Torah without a place and a priesthood to carry them out. Thus traditional Judaism had to completely redefine concepts like atonement. And that was a process that took considerable time.

The formulation of Rabbinic Judaism

The first major development was the compilation of the *Mishnah* in the early part of the third century. Those are the teachings that were originally handed down orally during the second temple period. For that reason, the *Mishnah* is also called the "Oral Law" or "Oral Tradition."

Many of these teachings are practical in nature. Some are what we call today case law. Those are rulings by authorities regarding specific situations that are not directly spelled out in statutory law like we have in the Torah. Clearly such rulings took place in the early days of Israel, as evidence by Moses having to appoint judges in Exodus 18:25-26. And later the Sanhedrin acted in a similar manner. These rulings were not recorded in the Bible and thus were only part of an oral tradition. Some aspects of the *Mishnah* relate to the way that priests carried out their responsibilities in the temple that weren't specifically given by God in detail in the Torah. These tasks were passed on by the priests orally from generation to generation.

Other elements described in the *Mishnah* are expansions on what was prescribed in the Torah. For example, there are descriptions on how the week-long festival of *Sukkot* (Tabernacles) was observed in second temple times, including the daily services at the temple, the water libation purification ceremony and the massive menorahs erected in the temple courtyard. Such things were never directly ordained by God, yet those were clearly established

practices in those days, and Yeshua used them to reveal His purposes by declaring He is the living water (Jn 7:38) and the light of the world (Jn 8:12) at *Sukkot*. So we need to recognize that there were additional elements to the written Torah that were not contradictory and were only passed down orally, until they were later written down in the *Mishnah*.

But not everything in this oral tradition was consistent with the ways of God, because it included the burdensome requirements established by the Pharisees that Yeshua directly confronted as being wrong (Mat 15:3). So it is important to know that in the days of Yeshua, there were streams of Judaism that were straying from God’s true way of life and plan of redemption. Those errant ways were blended in with the biblically compatible ways and then written down in the *Mishnah*. Thus considering the *Mishnah* as a source for understanding the Bible requires discernment in terms of separating that which is informative from that which is burdensome and inconsistent with biblical foundations.

The recording of the Oral Tradition in the *Mishnah* was not the end of the story. With each succeeding generation of rabbis who rejected Yeshua, their opinions were also considered to be noteworthy. Their interpretations were also recorded over the next 300 years, and then compiled together in what is called *Gemara* (Heb. “study”). It was not a study of Torah or other parts of the *Tanakh* (Old Testament). It was specifically a study of the *Mishnah*.

All of these things were then compiled into the *Talmud* (Heb. “learning”). The first compilation was completed in Jerusalem around 350 A.D. and the Babylonian version was completed around 475 A.D. Each of the two versions of the *Talmud* has two parts—*Mishnah* (the Oral Tradition) and *Gemara* (the interpretations and teachings on the *Mishnah* by later rabbis). Among these rabbinic interpretations in the *Gemara* are two that contributed greatly to the transformation of Judaism.

The shifting of authority to the Oral Law

The first new interpretation was the claim that the Oral Tradition was not just a set of teachings developed over time and handed down from one generation to the next, but it was given to Moses along with the written Torah on Mt Sinai. This interpretation was based on a series of premises with flawed reasoning:

THE RABBINICAL ARGUMENT	THE FLAW IN THE ARGUMENT
<p>Because Moses taught people under his authority, there had to be an Oral Law that came directly from God.</p> <p>They described the procedure for the Oral Law as beginning with God giving instructions to Moses, then Moses telling Aaron, then Aaron’s sons, followed by the elders and then all of the people (<i>Babylonian Talmud, Berachoth 5a</i>).</p>	<p>Just because Moses gave instructions to Aaron and his sons does not mean that the words were given to him on Sinai but never recorded. He could just as easily used wisdom to give practical applications of the commandments that he had written down on Sinai.</p>

THE RABBINICAL ARGUMENT	THE FLAW IN THE ARGUMENT
<p>Because God refers to a commandment given by Him that is not recorded in the Torah, He had to have given an Oral Law.</p> <p>The influential 11th century rabbi known as Rashi said that Deuteronomy 12:21 is the first verse in which God gave a commandment regarding the slaughter of animals from individual flocks and herds, yet God alludes to a prior commandment (“as I have commanded you”). Therefore, there had to be an Oral Law that God <i>did</i> command (<i>Sifrei Devarim 12:21</i>).</p>	<p>Rashi’s claim of there being no previous commandment in this regard is inaccurate. In fact, God gave a commandment about slaughtering earlier in that same chapter (Deut 12:13-15).</p>
<p>All of God’s revelation was given by God on Mt Sinai, including the teachings of the rabbis of the Talmudic era</p> <p>The rabbis completely allegorized God’s words in Exodus 24:12, claiming that it shows He communicated to Moses everything that would ever be taught by the rabbis in later history. But Moses never wrote them down and God concealed them. Then, after many centuries passed, the rabbis rediscovered those concealed principles in their studies.¹</p>	<p>This way of thinking is completely illogical and is a distortion of the plain sense of Exodus 24:12, a verse that is a simple call from God for Moses to come up and receive the Law. The rabbinic interpretation merely self-justifies their quest for authority.</p>
<p>There are two Torahs, and the Oral Torah belongs to Israel alone.</p> <p>The rabbis set out to secure their control over their disciples by creating a sense of secret knowledge.² They claimed to have access to divine revelation that could only be obtained through study under their leadership.</p>	<p>The claim that God established a written Law for all people and a secret oral Law for Jews alone contradicts God’s declaration that there is to be only one Torah for native born Jews and God-fearing Gentiles (Ex 12:49). It is an echo to what the Gnostics taught earlier in terms of having secret knowledge that only they could reveal.</p>

¹ Exodus 24:12 reads: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Come up to Me on the mountain and remain there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the law and the commandment which I have written for their instruction.’” Those words were interpreted rabbinically in this manner: “Tables of stone”: these are the ten commandments; ‘the law’: this is the Pentateuch; ‘the commandment’: this is the *Mishnah*; ‘which I have written’: these are the Prophets and the Hagiographa; ‘that you may teach them’: this is the *Gemara*” (*Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 54b*). Centuries later, Rashi made the same kind of claim (*Sifrei Shemot 12:21*).

² Their argument was based on this interpretation of Hosea 8:12 – “Moses desired the *Mishnah* to be also in writing, but the Holy One foresaw that the nations of the world would translate the Torah, read it in Greek, and assert: ‘We, too, are Israel.’ The Holy One thereupon said to Moses: ‘Were I to write for you the multitudes of my Torah then they would be considered as a stranger’ (Hosea 8:12). Why so? Because the *Mishnah* is the mystery of God which He transmits only to the righteous” (*Midrash Tanhuma; see also Jerusalem Talmud, Peah 2:6*).

Moreover, there is no direct reference to an Oral Law originating at Sinai anywhere in the Bible. Nothing by Moses, or by any of the Prophets or other Writings or the New Testament. Nothing is found in the writings of Qumran and Josephus. So in all of Scripture and all of the extra-biblical works of that era, spanning over 1500 years, there is not a single reference to an Oral Law being given to Moses on Mt Sinai. It is only found in the writings of the rabbis beginning in the *Gemara* long after the destruction of the temple.

The Bible itself shows that it is impossible for the Oral Law to have existed unbroken from Sinai to the Talmudic era. The book of 2 Kings describes how Josiah became king over Judah following many generations of rulers who did evil and basically put an end to biblical worship. Josiah instituted reforms that set aside the worship of false gods and ordered the House of the Lord to be restored from years of neglect and abuse.

Discovered among the rubble was something unknown to the Jewish people of that day—the Torah. When Josiah had it read to him for the first time, he was so moved by the words that he tore his clothes in grief because of what had been lost. Then it was presented to the people of the nation and they received it as well. The point here is that there was not a single Torah-observant person in the nation, nor were there any priests serving in the temple according to God’s commandments. For all intents and purposes, Judaism had been dead and non-existent for a long period of time.

But the rediscovery of the Torah along with the willingness of the people changed all that. And that is where we see a great distinction between a written and an oral law. A written law can become dormant for a long time and yet be revived when rediscovered. But an oral law disappears forever when people abandon it and die without passing it on.

The last piece of evidence we are given is an explicit statement in the Torah disproving the rabbinic teaching of the Oral Law being given on Sinai. After receiving the Torah from God on Mt Sinai, we are told:

“Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice and said, ‘All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!’ **Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD**” (Exodus 24:3-4).

In spite of the fallacy of their reasoning, rabbinic Judaism used it to claim authority that was equal to the Torah. But that was not the end to the transformation of Judaism. The next step was to supplant God’s authority entirely.

The Rabbinic seizure of ultimate authority

A story is recorded in the *Gemara* entitled, “The Oven of Akhnai” (*Baba Metzia 59a-b*). It tells about a man who invented a new kind of oven in which sand was placed in between tiles. He brought it before the Sanhedrin in order to get a ruling regarding its ritual purity and thus approval for use in the Jewish community. The question was whether this new oven was a complete vessel or a reconstituted pile of rubble.

Rabbi Eliezer ruled that it was *kosher* (ritually clean and suitable for use). But the rest of the Sanhedrin, including Gamaliel, its president, ruled that the oven was *tamei* (defiled and unacceptable). Rabbi Eliezer was not satisfied with the ruling of the body of leaders. He kept arguing his point, but the rest were not convinced.

As the story continues, Rabbi Eliezer said: “If *halacha* (the legal portion of Torah) is accordance with my opinion, let this carob tree prove it,” and the carob tree was uprooted by itself and moved one hundred cubits away. The majority replied, “That proves nothing about *halacha*.”

Then Rabbi Eliezer said: “If I am right, let the stream of water prove it,” and the stream flowed backwards. The majority responded, “The stream proves nothing.”

So Rabbi Eliezer said: “If I am right, let the walls of the study house prove it,” and the walls began to fall. But the rabbis rebuked the walls for interfering.

Then Rabbi Eliezer said: “If I am right, let it be proven from heaven.” At that moment, a heavenly voice cried out: “Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, because in all matters *halacha* agrees with him!” In other words, God was saying, not only is Rabbi Eliezer right about the oven being acceptable for use, but he is always right in matters of the Law.

Not being satisfied by Eliezer’s divine vindication, Rabbi Joshua then stood and exclaimed: “It [Torah] is not in heaven.” That is a quotation from Deuteronomy 30:12. In this *Talmudic* story, another rabbi named Jeremiah explained their interpretation of this verse, saying:

“Because the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because You have long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai. Now, we follow the decisions of the majority.”

To put it another way, God had His say on matters of human behavior and then returned to heaven, leaving people to decide what is right and wrong. Nevertheless, according to this story, God responded by laughing and declaring, “My sons have triumphed over Me.”

This is no incidental story in the *Talmud*. It became the justification for granting full authority to the rabbis. This way of thinking is now manifested throughout all branches of Judaism. Human beings are said to decide what is right or wrong with no need for knowing God’s will on the matter. We see it manifested in Orthodox Judaism with its focus on studying the opinions of other rabbis from the past and present, not the Bible. And we see it manifested in Reform Judaism with its focus on redefining biblical concepts like the Messiah, atonement, and sin to that which is desired by the majority of the people.

Clearly, Judaism has followed a path that has wandered a great distance away from trusting in God’s authority alone. By shifting the focus to the opinions of the rabbis, there are some key biblical principles that have been neglected:

Godly living is not intended to be complicated

Right before the Israelites entered the promised land and thus needed to put the Law completely into practice that had been given forty years earlier, Moses gave the people this exhortation:

“For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’” (Deut 30:11-13).

Moses was saying that we simply need to let the words of the commandments speak for themselves without reading in to them. It was a call just to follow what God has stated:

- Loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and might is simply an attitude and on-going relationship with Him.
- Loving your neighbor as yourself never needs to be legislated.
- Having a sabbath rest really doesn't require an exhaustive list of allowable actions and

those that are prohibited. Rather, God intended it to be a day that is set apart and dedicated to Him.

The reality is that the rabbis made it very difficult to observe, while God made it easy to observe. And the same is still true for us today. The question, then, is how can living a godly or a Torah-observant life be easy?

Godly living results from being led by the Spirit

Moses went on to say: “But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it” (Deut 30:14). According to the understanding of people in the Ancient Near East, having something in your heart meant that it was part of your thinking. It refers to an internalization of God’s ways that do not require outside control. And that involves the Holy Spirit.

The prophet Ezekiel foretold this promise from God: “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (Ezek 36:27).

Paul writes in Galatians 4:6 that when we believe in Yeshua by faith, God places His Spirit into our hearts. And when that happens, the Spirit leads and teaches us how to apply God’s truths:

“As for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him” (1 Jn 2:27).

That is the ultimate fulfillment of what Moses was talking about in terms of God’s Word being near to us. It is the Spirit indwelling our hearts—our way of thinking—that enables us to be faithful to God in a way that no rabbinical mandate could ever do.

Because the rabbis used Deuteronomy 30 in “The Oven of Akhnai” story in the *Talmud* to wrestle away all authority from God and claim it for themselves, they missed the point entirely. The best authority—indeed the only true authority—belongs to God alone. He never lost it. And the only way to remain under that authority is to let the Spirit of God be at work within you.

In Galatians 5:1, Paul writes: “It was for freedom that Messiah set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.” He is describing a freedom from the bondage of a legalistic approach that was clearly present in that particular community. But he is not talking about freedom from the commandments themselves, because he immediately goes into a discussion on the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.

He exhorts us in verse 13: “do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” His solution is not to ignore the commandment simply because we have “freedom in Messiah,” but to do it the right way. And that solution is to “walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (v. 16).

Living a Spirit-filled, Spirit-led life doesn’t just give us a freedom from the consequences of the Law, it gives us the freedom and the ability to be faithful to what God has commanded us. And that is exactly what Yeshua did. He was the most exemplary Torah-observant Jew who ever lived. He never went against anything that Moses wrote down. He lived out the commandments, He taught them, and He died in fulfillment of those that were sacrificial in nature. He made it clear that living faithfully was a result of what was in your heart, not according to the burdensome requirements of men.

It is human nature to have issues of authority. Some of us might want to place ourselves under the authority of others who deny the Lordship of Yeshua. Some of us might say that God is our only authority, when in reality, we reserve that right for ourselves, as we pick and choose what applies to us. In either case, you miss out on what God desires for us.

He wants us to be *indwelled* by the Spirit, which means believing by faith in Yeshua. And He wants us to be *led* by the Spirit, which means setting aside all other things that claim to lead us. Instead of accepting the misleading claims of others, may we all trust in God's authority alone.