

# The Hebrew Bible in Ancient Jewish Education

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After the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE the Torah, and the Hebrew Bible in general, became the basis of Jewish identity and religious practice, at least as far as the newly emerging rabbinic movement is concerned. This new centrality of the Torah does not necessarily imply that all Jews received a Torah-based education, could read biblical texts, and were knowledgeable of Torah law. Rather, we have to reckon with a wide range of biblical knowledge and expertise, ranging from those who followed customary practices such as Sabbath and holiday observance at home to those who attended Torah readings and rabbinic *drashot* in late antique synagogues—some of which also displayed certain biblical scenes such as the Binding of Isaac, the Building of the Tower of Babel, and Daniel in the Lion’s Den visually on their mosaic floors—to scribes with the technical skills to write Torah scrolls and, at the very top of the pyramid, rabbinical scholars and disciples of sages who were able to augment Torah law to make it applicable to new situations. These Torah sages also provided learned interpretations for specific biblical verses and passages. Only a few individuals of each generation would have possessed such scholarly expertise, which is comparable to that of other ancient intellectuals including Graeco-Roman philosophers such as Epictetus and Christian scholars such as Origen. We therefore have to reckon with a hierarchy of Torah knowledge that was also, at least to some extent, a social hierarchy, with the illiterate rural labourer at the bottom and the urban rabbi at the top of the Jewish edu-

cational pyramid. In the following I shall discuss some of the factors that determined this development.

## KNOWLEDGE OF THE JEWISH BIBLE BEFORE 70 CE

In pre-rabbinic times knowledge of the Bible is likely to have been less prevalent amongst the Jewish populace than in post-70 times. In late Roman and early Byzantine Palestine synagogues decorated with biblical scenes and Jewish symbols became the religious centres of local communities.<sup>1</sup> At approximately the same time some rabbis seem to have given sermons on the Sabbath that were probably based on the Torah portions that were read out aloud in synagogues that week.<sup>2</sup> Rabbis were also available for giving Torah-based advice to their fellow-Jews in all situations of daily life.<sup>3</sup> Their goal was to enable them to lead a life that was pleasing to God. Whether and to what extent ordinary Jews made use of

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<sup>1</sup> Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 BCE to 640 CE* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 275–290, has argued that synagogues became religious centres of Jewish communities from the late fourth and fifth centuries CE onwards only, when they competed with churches. On the development and decoration of synagogues see also Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). On the depiction of biblical scenes and Jewish symbols in late antique synagogues and churches, see recently Shulamit Ladermann, *Jewish Art in Late Antiquity: The State of Research in Ancient Jewish Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); cf. Catherine Hezser, *Bild und Kontext: Jüdische und christliche Ikonographie der Spätantike* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 31–80, 114–147. More recently, the excavations of the Huqoq and Wadi Hamam synagogues have expanded our knowledge of biblical scenes displayed on synagogue mosaic floors.

<sup>2</sup> On rabbinic sermons see Richard Hidary, *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric: Sophistic Education and Oratory in the Talmud and Midrash* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 43–47.

<sup>3</sup> This practice is reflected in the so-called case stories, see Moshe Simon-Shoshan, *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

those options depended on the local availability of synagogues and rabbis, on personal circumstances and individual choice.

At the time when the Jerusalem Temple existed, the Temple service conducted by priestly professionals was the central religious activity in Judaism. Torah study is associated with Pharisees, whom Baumgarten identified as wealthy literate urban intellectuals and who are considered a sectarian movement, that is, they did not represent the values and practices of the entire Jewish populace.<sup>4</sup> Although Pharisaic influence varied in the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods, there is no evidence that they were able to increase Torah study amongst the general Jewish population. Whereas upper-class Jewish intellectuals such as Josephus may have sympathized with their teachings, the very fact that the gospels distinguish “Pharisees and scribes” from the rest of the Jewish population suggests that their scholarly reputation was considered elitist.<sup>5</sup> Since we lack first-hand evidence about their studying and teaching methods, we can merely assume that Torah study and observance was their own priority at a time when the Temple still existed and that they alerted their fellow-Jews to the importance of the Torah for the maintenance of Jewish identity under Roman rule.

Since no organized school system existed in Roman Palestine throughout antiquity, Josephus’ statement that all (male?) Jews are knowledgeable of Jewish law (cf. *C. Ap.* 2.18, 175) cannot be considered historically reliable. In any case, the text merely refers to people listening to public Torah readings, probably in the synagogue, on the Sabbath, a regular form of popular instruction that lacks analogies in Greek and

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<sup>4</sup> Albert I. Baumgarten, *The Flourishing of Jewish Sects in the Maccabean Era: An Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 96–100. On Pharisees see also Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989); Joseph Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine (eds.), *The Pharisees* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> On Josephus’ own allegiance with Pharisees and their representation in his works see Steve Mason, *Flavius Josephus on the Pharisees: A Composition-Critical Study* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 342–356, on the Pharisees in Josephus’ *Vita*.

Roman societies.<sup>6</sup> Besides such public readings, which some may have attended and others not, knowledge of Jewish religious practices and biblical moral narratives were mainly transmitted within families, from one generation to the next, that is, most Jews would have followed local and family customs rather than having read biblical texts themselves.<sup>7</sup> The level of their Torah education would have depended on their father's (and as far as girls are concerned their mother's) own learning and the socio-economic situation of the family.

### THE EARLY RABBINIC PERIOD

This situation would have generally continued after the destruction of the Temple. Although rabbis as a group are no longer seen as the mere successors of the Pharisees, children's Torah education continued to be the father's responsibility (cf. t. Hag. 1:2; Mek., Pisha 18).<sup>8</sup> In Jewish as in Graeco-Roman society, male householders of the upper strata of society would have been the most literate members of society in terms of their reading ability and education. Therefore scholars have argued that the first generations of rabbis stemmed from wealthy families. Based on a study of rabbinic civil law in the Mishnah tractate Bava Metzia, Hayim Lapin has concluded "that the Mishnah regularly addresses the con-

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<sup>6</sup> See also Geza Vermes, "A Summary of the Law by Flavius Josephus," *NovT* 24 (1982): 289–303, who attributes a didactic purpose to Torah reading on the Sabbath.

<sup>7</sup> Such household practices would have stood in line with general ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern practices, see the contributions in Rainer Albertz and Rüdiger Schmitt (eds.), *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012); John Bodel and Saul M. Olyan (eds.), *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> On the relationship between Pharisees and rabbis see Peter Schäfer, "Der vorrabbinische Pharisäismus," in *Paulus und das antike Judentum*, ed. Martin Hengel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), 125–175; Shaye J. D. Cohen, "The Significance of Yavneh: Pharisees, Rabbis, and the End of Jewish Sectarianism," in idem, *The Significance of Yavneh and Other Essays in Jewish Hellenism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 44–70.

cerns of one particular group of people: substantial landowners whose wealth is sufficiently great that they need not engage in the labor of production themselves.”<sup>9</sup> He locates rabbis who created, transmitted, and edited these rules amongst such wealthy landowners.<sup>10</sup> Whether and to what extent his assessment of mishnaic rules is correct and whether or not a direct relationship between the social issues addressed in the texts and the social status of the rabbis who transmitted them can be established, what is clear is that a certain amount of leisure time would have been necessary to even acquire elementary Torah reading knowledge, which was a prerequisite for “secondary” rabbinic study. At a time when the majority of children worked alongside their parents in agriculture and handicrafts, only reasonably well-off parents would have considered the acquisition of such knowledge useful, since it was not valuable economically. Furthermore, if the father was not learned himself, an elementary teacher had to be hired for a fee. Scribes who functioned as extra-familiar children’s teachers are rarely mentioned in tannaitic texts, however.<sup>11</sup>

At least in the tannaitic period, the rabbinic propagation of Torah study (cf., e.g., m. ’Abot 1:15: “Shammai says: ... Make your Torah [study] a fixed obligation”) is therefore likely to have mostly found resonance amongst fellow-rabbinic families, with potential students from poorer backgrounds constituting an exception. The study with a rabbi, that is, to become his personal disciple, was a form of higher learning analogous to philosophical and sophistic study in Graeco-Roman society.<sup>12</sup> As I have already argued elsewhere, the study of the Torah was seen

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<sup>9</sup> Hayim Lapin, *Early Rabbinic Civil Law and the Social History of Roman Galilee: A Study of Mishnah Tractate Bab’ Mesi’a’* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995), 233.

<sup>10</sup> Lapin, *Civil Law*. On the socio-economic background of early rabbis see also Shaye J. D. Cohen, “The Place of the Rabbi in Jewish Society of the Second Century,” in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lee I. Levine (New York: JTS, 1992), 169–171.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the literary evidence of children’s teachers and schools see Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 40–68.

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Hezser, “Rabbis as Intellectuals in the Context of Graeco-Roman and

as an “indigenous” alternative to Greek *paideia*, which some Jewish aristocrats may have acquired to join the social circles of provincial grandees.<sup>13</sup> Within the Graeco-Roman cultural context, devoting time to Torah study may therefore have contained an element of rebellion against Roman imperial rule, comparable to the so-called Second Sophistic with its emphasis on Greek cultural identity under Rome.<sup>14</sup>

### BIBLICAL KNOWLEDGE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

The emphasis on Torah study and the dissemination of biblical knowledge would have received a boost in late antiquity, for several reasons. By the third and fourth centuries, rabbis had established themselves as Jewish religious experts in major cities of Roman Palestine.<sup>15</sup> Their teaching and comportment became increasingly visible in the public sphere.<sup>16</sup> Their public visibility as urban Jewish intellectuals and role models would have increased the number of young men who wanted to study with them. Another major development was the increased availability of elementary Torah teachers, perhaps as a consequence of rabbis’ propagation of Torah study amongst the wider public but also because

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Byzantine Christian Scholasticism,” in *Scholastic Culture in the Hellenistic and Roman Eras: Greek, Latin, and Jewish*, ed. Sean A. Adams (Berlin: de Gruyter 2019), 169–185.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Hezser, “The Torah versus Homer: Jewish and Greco-Roman Education in Late Roman Palestine,” in *Ancient Education and Early Christianity*, ed. Matthew R. Hauge and Andrew W. Pitts (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 5–24.

<sup>14</sup> On the Second Sophistic see Tim Whitmarsh, *The Second Sophistic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); idem, *Beyond the Second Sophistic: Adventures in Greek Postclassicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> On the so-called “urbanization” of rabbis see especially Hayim Lapin, “Rabbis and Cities in Later Roman Palestine: The Literary Evidence,” *JJS* 50 (1999): 187–207; idem, “Rabbis and Cities: Some Aspects of the Rabbinic Movement in Its Graeco-Roman Environment,” in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Catherine Hezser, 3 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 2:51–80.

<sup>16</sup> See Catherine Hezser, *Rabbinic Body Language: Non-Verbal Communication in Palestinian Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 24–68, 243.

synagogues would have needed male Torah readers. Amoraic sources mention children's teachers and the practice of teaching children not only in the courtyards of *insula* buildings but also in synagogues and study houses when they were not used for other purposes.<sup>17</sup> The greater availability of primary Torah education would have enabled children from more diverse socio-economic backgrounds to gain Torah reading skills. An example highlighted in Avot de Rabbi Natan is Rabbi Aqiba, who is said to have been extremely poor, unable to afford proper clothes and food (cf. ARNA 6). He is said to have started Torah study as an adult, together with his son.<sup>18</sup> They "sat before a children's teacher" who taught them Torah reading by writing Hebrew letters and then small Torah portions from the books of Leviticus and Numbers ("the Torah of the Priests") on a tablet for them to read out aloud and memorize.<sup>19</sup> Although the story cannot be considered historically reliable, it would have been used by rabbis to indicate that Torah study requires dedication and commitment and that even men from lower backgrounds can become Torah scholars if they set their minds to it.

Another major development of late antiquity is the emergence of lavish synagogues as the religious centres of local communities. Some of these synagogues were richly decorated with mosaic floors that showed biblical scenes such as the Binding of Isaac (Sepphoris, Bet Alpha, cf. Dura Europos), Daniel in the Lion's Den (Na'aran, Susiya), Noah's Ark (Gerasa, Misis-Mopsvestia), King David with his Harp (Gaza), the Exodus story (Huqoq), and the Building of the Tower of Babel (Huqoq and Wadi Hamam). As Hachlili has pointed out, these depictions are not illustrations of biblical texts but free renderings of orally transmitted narratives.<sup>20</sup> They probably indicate which biblical narratives were best known, that is, retold within the Jewish community, and held the great-

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the source material see Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 76–82.

<sup>18</sup> Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 76–82.

<sup>19</sup> Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 76–82.

<sup>20</sup> Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements: Themes, Issues, and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 93.

est religious significance at that time. The story of the Binding of Isaac, for example, emphasized obedience to God. The motif of Isaac's so-called "sacrifice" was also used in Christian contexts as a symbol of Jesus' alleged salvific death and redemption. The different Jewish and Christian interpretations of the same biblical narrative stood in an indirect dialogue with each other and exemplified the phenomenon that each community used biblical narratives to express its own beliefs, religious values, and identity.<sup>21</sup>

Another late antique phenomenon mentioned in amoraic sources are rabbinic sermons or *drashot* in synagogues and study houses on the Sabbath. Especially from the third century onwards some prominent rabbis are said to have expounded Scripture in public settings on a weekly basis.<sup>22</sup> Not only men but also women and children had access to these lectures. That they attracted (especially?) women is suggested by a famous story about "R. Meir [who] was sitting expounding [Scripture] on Sabbath nights" (Lev. Rab. 9:9). A woman used to go there and listen to his *drasha* every week. Her jealous husband locked her out of her home until she had spat into the rabbi's face.<sup>23</sup> Such Scripture-based lectures, probably based on the weekly Torah portions, would have enabled the wider public to gain some knowledge of the Bible from hearsay, even if they were illiterate and lacked direct access to the texts themselves. Such knowledge would have been mediated by rabbis and reflect their personal understanding and values. Sometimes lay people are said to have challenged the rabbinic monopoly on the Torah, as in the story about Rabbi Yannai who tested the biblical knowledge of his wealthy host during a

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<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the Jewish and Christian literary and artistic use of this narrative see Hezser, *Bild und Kontext*, 37–80.

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 371; idem, *Jewish Literacy*, 206; Hidary, *Rabbis*, 46.

<sup>23</sup> On this story see especially Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood: Jewish Narrative Dialogues in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 55–85.



meal (Lev. Rab. 9:3). The host exclaimed that the Torah was the heritage of all Jews and he proved to be living according to its moral standards (*derekh eretz*). Such stories underlined the difference between rabbinic scholarly expertise and lay people's practice, based on their more general knowledge of biblical narratives.

### RABBINIC SCHOLARLY APPROACHES TO THE HEBREW BIBLE

The Torah had a huge symbolic value after 70 CE.<sup>24</sup> It was the Jewish religious heritage that had survived the destruction of the Temple. From Yohanan b. Zakkai onwards, rabbis presented themselves as experts not only in Torah knowledge but also in its expansion and application to new contemporary circumstances. They came to consider their "Oral Torah" as important and divinely inspired as the "Written Torah" and thereby legitimized their innovative halakhic rules.<sup>25</sup> The dual notion of "Written" and "Oral" Torah not only emphasizes their equal value but also indicates difference and distinction. In amoraic times rabbis were aware of the phenomenon that their own traditions were much more numerous in volume than the Torah itself and they discussed the relative value of the two corpora (cf. *y. Pe'ah* 2:6, 17a). The claimed divine origin of rabbinic traditions also meant that rabbis' innovative halakhic rulings, while broadly inspired by the Torah, were not simply gained through exegesis but went far beyond biblical law.

An example is Sabbath practice. In the Torah, the Sabbath is presented as a "holy" day (cf. Exod 20:8) and a "day of rest" (cf. Exod 20:10: "you shall not do any manner of work"; 31:15; 35:2; Lev 16:31), on which all members of a household including domestic animals shall refrain from work (Deut 5:14). The Deuteronomist connects the Sabbath

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<sup>24</sup> See Schwartz, *Imperialism*, 59.

<sup>25</sup> On the "ideological construction" of the notion of the Oral Torah see Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE–400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 84–99.

with the Exodus from Egypt (Deut 5:15). The Torah provides very little information on Sabbath practice, however, that is, on the types of activities that should be avoided. According to Exod 16:26, one shall not gather crops from fields, and according to Exod 35:3, one shall not kindle a fire. Other activities are not specified. When discussing halakhic rules for Sabbath practice, rabbis would have found very little in the Torah that they could build upon. Although the traditions in the Mishnah, Tosefta, and Talmud tractate Shabbat are inspired by the notion that the Sabbath should be a day of rest, the specific regulations and discussions rabbis came up with are entirely innovative, geared at contemporary practices and circumstances rather than derived by biblical exegesis. Issues rabbis were concerned with included the question of whether and how one could hand out food to beggars on the Sabbath (m. Šabb. 1:1), and which items of jewelry and hair ornaments women could wear on the holiday (m. Šabb. 6:1, 3), that is, practical matters that people were confronted with in daily life. Rabbinic study took place in real life situations, while eating meals, while observing one's master's practices and listening to the advice he gave to people who approached him on the street.

This kind of study was very different from *yeshiva* study nowadays which focuses on the written compilation of the Babylonian Talmud. It was also different from Graeco-Roman and ancient Christian study which was much more book-centred, with philosophers' private libraries and the ecclesiastical library in Caesarea available to patristic teachers and their students. The notion of book learning is therefore inappropriate as far as ancient rabbinic study is concerned.

This conclusion is also based on practical matters. Only a few wealthy rabbis would have owned Torah scrolls or scrolls of other biblical books themselves.<sup>26</sup> Torah scrolls had to be handwritten in ink on parchment by scribes.<sup>27</sup> They were not only very expensive but their ho-

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<sup>26</sup> Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 147–149.

<sup>27</sup> Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 140–142.

liness required special procedures and precautions when handling them.<sup>28</sup> To unroll them and read or check specific words and phrases would have been a complex process, not to mention the problems involved in finding a word in a text that lacked chapter divisions and punctuation. Therefore it is highly unlikely that rabbis used written Torah scrolls in the day-to-day teaching of their students. Rather, they presented and discussed halakhic matters topically, based on memorized biblical texts, earlier rabbis' halakhic views, and in reaction to actual phenomena—for example, household objects in connection with purity issues—that they encountered in daily life.<sup>29</sup> In amoraic times some rabbis seem to have had access to written versions of individual Mishnah tractates which formed the basis of amoraic discussions.

Scholars hold different opinions on the relationship between the mentioned *drashot*, that is, the practice of publicly expounding the Torah on Sabbaths—though probably not in liturgical settings as done nowadays—and the literary genre of rabbinic Midrash. Gary Porton considers Midrash a “literary phenomenon” and “challenges the claim that much of our current Rabbinic Midrash originated in the Rabbinic sermons of late antiquity.”<sup>30</sup> Richard Hidary also points out that “most recent scholars agree that they [i.e., the extant Midrash collections] are literary creations ...”<sup>31</sup> This also means that the editors of the literary compositions of Midrash may have had written Torah scrolls at hand

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<sup>28</sup> See Martin Goodman, “Sacred Scripture and ‘Defiling the Hands,’” *JTS* 41 (1990): 99–107.

<sup>29</sup> On rabbinic purity rules see Mira Balberg, *Purity, Body, and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Gary Porton, “Midrash and the Rabbinic Sermon,” in *When Judaism and Christianity Began: Essays in Memory of Anthony J. Saldarini*, ed. Alan J. Avery-Peck, Daniel Harrington, and Jacob Neusner, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 2:461–482.

<sup>31</sup> Hidary, *Rabbis*, 49. Hidary goes on to say that the Midrash collections are “literary creations of rabbinic schools,” but the entire notion of “rabbinic schools” is problematic, as I am arguing in my work in progress on rabbinic scholarship in the context of late antique scholasticism.

that the rabbis who gave “words of Torah,” that is, their own personal comments on heard and memorized Torah portions and narratives, may not have had available. Unfortunately, no transcripts of rabbinic *drashot* have survived or are transmitted in rabbinic documents. The collections of diverse rabbis’ midrashic comments transmitted in literary Midrashim are unlikely to reflect rabbinic sermons, not least because of their compilatory nature, where traditions from various rabbis are combined. They are more like *Florilegia* that preserve the brief and diverse biblical comments of a plurality of commentators and exegetes. Unlike Christian *Florilegia* and *Catena*e, however, there is no evidence that rabbinic Midrash is based on extracts from written rabbinic biblical commentaries.

### MEMORY AND INNOVATION

It seems that memory and the memorization of texts, whether originally written biblical texts or oral rabbinic traditions, played a huge role in rabbinic study. The quintessential text that urges parents to teach their sons Torah (Sifre Deut. 46) emphasizes the oral nature of that teaching:

“And teach them to your children” [Deut 11:18–21]: your sons and not your daughters, the words of R. Yose b. Aqiba. On the basis of the verse at hand they have said: When a child begins to talk, his father speaks with him in the holy language, teaching him the Torah [כשהתינוק מתחיל לדבר אביו מדבר עמו בלשון]. But if he [the father] does not speak with him in the holy language and teach him Torah, he is worthy of burying him.

In a linguistic context in which the spoken language was Aramaic, it is recommended that fathers speak to their children in Hebrew at an early age, to enable them to understand the Torah in Hebrew. At this stage the “teaching of the Torah” seems to be envisioned as an entirely oral process. Perhaps the father was expected to tell his children biblical narratives as part of moral lessons and to introduce them to the most important legal rules that governed Jewish religious practice.

The next stage is indicated in the already mentioned story about Rabbi Aqiba's and his son's elementary Torah study with a children's teacher (ARNA 6):

He and his son went and sat before a children's teacher. R. Aqiba took hold of the top of the tablet and his son [took hold of] the top of the tablet. He [the teacher] wrote for him the alphabet and he learned it, the Torah of the Priests [i.e. Leviticus and Numbers] and he learned it. He continued to learn until he had learned the entire Torah.

Elementary teachers are said to have taught students to read the Hebrew alphabet and small Torah portions which they wrote for them on tablets. The students were expected to gain proficiency in reading the Torah in Hebrew aloud and to memorize the portions that they read. Once one portion was memorized—on the basis of repeated recitation—a new portion could be read and remembered as well. In this way, certain parts of the Torah text, that is, the portions the teacher considered most important and those which a student was able to memorize, would become a fixed part of his mind.

Rabbinic study, that is, the higher level Torah study with a rabbinic master, would have constantly refreshed and augmented that basic memorized knowledge. Rabbis expected their students to create and understand keyword connections between words and phrases that appeared in different narrative contexts and parts of the Bible. Once they had read and memorized a Torah portion, the most efficient memorizers may have possessed an almost photographic memory of a text. Also evident, however, are connections made on the basis of the sound of words, indicating the remembrance of spoken texts.<sup>32</sup> In their minds rabbis were able to make connections between texts that we are nowadays able to make through internet searches only.

The phenomenon of having the Torah in their minds rather than reading from—and being bound to—a written text in front of them en-

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<sup>32</sup> See Alexander Samely, *Rabbinic Interpretation of Scripture in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 52.

abled rabbis to be innovative and playful in their use of scriptural knowledge. Unlike modern commentators, rabbis did not interpret biblical texts literally and consecutively, with attention to their literary contexts and sequences. Rather, they fragmented the text by focusing on particular words and phrases that they isolated from their contexts and connected in their minds. In this way, they were able to develop ideas and rules that had little to do with the literal or original meaning of the biblical text but were meaningful to them and their fellow-Jews in their own circumstances. As David Weiss Halivni has pointed out,

Midrash derives from the reader of Scripture, who is stimulated by the text—against the text’s natural meaning—to indulge in imaginative comments ... Most of his cues come from outside the text; the reader actively brings these cues to bear on the text and interacts with it.<sup>33</sup>

In striking contrast to modern historical-critical approaches to the Bible, for rabbis the biblical text served as a springboard for their own legal, moral, and theological imagination.

In its current literary form, the rabbinic genre of Midrash presents individual earlier traditions in a skillfully arranged structure, connecting the *seder*-verse (from the Torah) with the *petichta*-verse (from elsewhere in the Bible).<sup>34</sup> In relation to the amoraic Midrash Genesis Rabbah, Lieve Teugels has pointed to the midrashic techniques of “gap filling and linkage” between seemingly disparate verses as characteristic aspects of midrashic exegesis. She points out that rabbinic midrash contains “narrative expansions and elaborations of the scriptural text which would not be allowed to be called exegesis in our day.”<sup>35</sup> The term “exe-

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<sup>33</sup> David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 159.

<sup>34</sup> On the proem see Joseph Heinemann, “The Proem in the Aggadic Midrashim: A Form-Critical Study,” in *Studies in Aggadah and Folk Literature*, ed. Joseph Heinemann and Dov Noy (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1971).

<sup>35</sup> Lieve Teugels, “Gap Filling and Linkage in the Midrash on the Rebekah Cycle,” in *Studies in the Book of Genesis: Literature, Redaction, and History*, ed. André Wénin (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 586.

gesis” may be inappropriate because the purpose of midrash is not to determine the original meaning of a biblical text in its literary context. Rather, a biblical word may provide a “clue” or “peg” for rabbis’ search for meaning. This imaginary speculation functioned within the context of a rabbinic worldview that was enmeshed in Scripture. Since rabbis “breathed” Scripture, they were able to play with it imaginatively.

For example, at the very beginning of Gen. Rab., “In the beginning God created” (Gen 1:1) is linked to a verse from Proverbs, “Then I was besides him like a little child” (Prov 8:30), attributed to Rabbi Oshaiah. The following comments provide a number of different understandings of the term אָמֵן, also identifying it with אֹמֵן, “workman,” which is even associated with a pedagogue, quoting Num 11:12. Obviously, the purpose is not to explain the literal or contextual meaning of the term אָמֵן used in Prov 8:30 but to extract as many meanings as possible from the root consonants of the word, with references to other biblical verses in which it appears. The purpose of this endeavour was to reveal the richness of Scripture—not only each word but each Hebrew root (and letter) contained multiple meanings, was significant and relevant in many contexts and for diverse ethical and theological purposes. The rabbinic assumption of the polyvalence of Scripture is one of the characteristic aspects of the midrashic approach.<sup>36</sup> It is based on the belief in the divine inspiredness of Scripture, which makes every letter and word meaningful and relevant in the context of the Hebrew Bible and beyond.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See Philip S. Alexander, “Quid Athenis et Hierosolymis? Rabbinic Midrash and Hermeneutics in the Graeco-Roman World,” in *A Tribute to Geza Vermes: Essays on Jewish and Christian Literature and History*, ed. Philip R. Davies, Geza Vermes, and Richard T. White (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 104.

<sup>37</sup> See also Sebastian Brock, “Midrash in Syriac,” in *Midrash Unbound: Transformations and Innovations*, ed. Michael Fishbane and Joanna Weinberg (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013), 85.

## THE LASTING RELEVANCE OF SCRIPTURE

In contrast to modern-day biblical scholars, classicists, and ancient historians, rabbis were not interested in reconstructing the “original” meaning of biblical texts in their historical and literary contexts. What mattered to them was the relevance of Scripture for their and their Jewish contemporaries’ own lives in the circumstances they lived in. These circumstances included Roman imperialism and the Byzantine Christian appropriation of the rabbinic Land of Israel as the Christian “Holy Land.”<sup>38</sup> To make Scripture meaningful required the reading of contemporary issues into the biblical text or rather: to understand the biblical text from a contemporary perspective. For example, in the Babylonian Talmud and later Midrashim rabbis present the biblical king David as a Torah scholar (cf. b. Sanh. 16a). This presentation served as a counter-image to the Christian appropriation of David as a forerunner of Jesus, the alleged Davidic messiah.<sup>39</sup> The biblical Edom was associated with contemporary Rome and Romans with the figure of Esau.<sup>40</sup> Scholars have also pointed to the implicit and hidden rebuke of Christian and christological interpretations of Scripture in midrashic and talmudic contexts.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See Joshua Levinson, “There Is No Place Like Home: Rabbinic Responses to the Christianization of Palestine,” in *Jews, Christians, and the Roman Empire: The Poetics of Power in Late Antiquity*, ed. Natalie B. Dohrmann and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 99–120.

<sup>39</sup> Catherine Hezser, “The Contested Image of King David in Rabbinic and Patristic Literature and Art of Late Antiquity,” in *Torah, Temple, Land: Constructions of Judaism in Antiquity*, ed. Markus Witte, Jens Schröter, and Verena M. Lepper (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 277–298.

<sup>40</sup> Sacha Stern, *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 19; Carol Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 79–80; Jacob Neusner, *Persia and Rome in Classical Judaism* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Burton L. Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates: Studies in Midrash Leviticus Rabbah* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 154–172; Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).



Contemporary concerns also led to rabbinic legal innovation. Rabbinic *halakhah* addresses numerous legal situations that are not covered by biblical law or to which biblical law relates in a general way only. The Roman imperial context and the presence of Roman jurists in the cities of Roman Palestine made rabbis familiar with Roman law.<sup>42</sup> In many legal areas scholars have noticed diversions between biblical and rabbinic law and analogies between rabbinic and Roman law, that is, a legal development that not only takes changing legal situations but also changing legal cultures into account.<sup>43</sup> For example, the matrilineal principle that associates the ethnic, religious, and social status of children with that of their mother is a rabbinic innovation that seems to be based on the Roman principle that the offspring of illegitimate unions, such as those between male Roman citizens and slave women, has the status of the mother.<sup>44</sup> Rabbinic rules enabling slaves to do business with their masters' property resemble Roman notions of the *peculium* that slaves could use; in both cases the proceeds belonged to the master.<sup>45</sup> Rather than sticking to the letter of the Torah and merely repeating and ex-

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<sup>42</sup> Catherine Hezser, "Did Palestinian Rabbis Know Roman Law? Methodological Considerations and Case Studies," in *Legal Engagement: The Reception of Roman Law and Tribunals by Jews and Other Inhabitants of the Empire*, ed. Katell Berthelot, Natalie B. Dohrmann, and Capucine Nemo-Pekelman (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 2021), 303–322.

<sup>43</sup> See the contributions in Berthelot and Dohrmann, *Legal Engagement*.

<sup>44</sup> Roman law: Ville Vuolanto, "Child and Parent in Roman Law," in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Law and Society*, ed. Paul J du Plessis, Clifford Ando, and Kaius Tuori (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 487–497 (495); Rabbinic law: Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 293–298.

<sup>45</sup> Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 276–282. On the *peculium* see already Boas Cohen, "Peculium in Jewish and Roman Law," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 20 (1951): 135–234.

plaining biblical rules, rabbis constantly innovated and developed Jewish law to make it relevant for their contemporaries.<sup>46</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The use of the Hebrew Bible in ancient Jewish education was radically different from biblical education nowadays. Two factors are fundamental to the ancient approaches: 1) the illiteracy of the large majority of the population and 2) the lack of an organised educational system. In illiterate and largely oral societies, where only a small scholarly elite has direct access to written texts, familiarity with Scripture would have been based on public readings of the Torah and on public *drashot* provided by rabbis as literate intermediaries, especially from the third century CE onwards. Knowledge of biblical narratives and customary practices were transmitted within families and households. Whether and to what extent children received a Torah-based education depended on their father's own level of scholarship or lack of it.

By emphasizing the oral nature of their learning in contrast to other nations' production of many books, rabbis linked disciples to their masters as the embodiment of Torah knowledge. There were a number of advantages to orality and memorization rather than book-based learning: the creative distance between the base-text and its interpretation and application; the holistic approach to Scripture that understood words and phrases in the context of the entire received tradition; and last but not least the opportunity of innovation, change, and adaptation to new circumstances.

Altogether, then, rabbis' liberal use of Scripture stands out. The Torah and the Hebrew Bible as a whole provided inspiration for rabbis' own ideas and rules, providing guidance to their contemporaries. Biblical law was not fixed and static but expandable and adaptable to new

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<sup>46</sup> See also Judith Hauptman, *The Stories They Tell: Halakhic Anecdotes in the Babylonian Talmud* (Piscataway: Gorgias, 2022).

circumstances. Besides the biblical tradition, rabbis' familiarity with the non-Jewish Roman legal context inspired legal development. The higher learning, which distinguished rabbis from non-rabbis, did not consist in the mere ability to read and memorize the Torah or to write Torah scrolls but in being able to expand, innovate, and adapt biblical laws and narratives to contemporary situations, to make them relevant for people's daily lives. In modern parlance, it was the impact that mattered most.