

PREFACE

James Joyce is reputed to have said that if Dublin were destroyed, it could be reconstructed, brick by brick, from the pages of *Ulysses*. Along these same lines, I allege, if the Hebrew Scriptures of ancient Israel, the Written Torah, were lost, the main lines of the narrative of Israel's life with God and the consequent social vision could be reconstructed out of the details of the Halakhah, norms of conduct, and of the Aggadah, norms of conviction, that are set forth in the Oral Torah, that is, the canon of Rabbinic writings of late antiquity.

Here I show that the Rabbinic documents of the formative age of Judaism, the first six centuries C.E., make use of a generative theological grammar to set Scripture forth as a comprehensive, rational theological system of conviction and to construct a cogent theological structure of the social order—thus the “language, system, and structure” of the title.

This handbook presents in condensed form the results of three of my systematic works on the theology of Rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism set forth by Scripture as mediated by the Mishnah, Talmuds, and Midrash-compilations of late antiquity. The three titles here formed into a single coherent statement are *The Theological Grammar of the Oral Torah I–III* (1999), *The Theology of the Oral Torah: Revealing the Justice of God* (1999), and *The Theology of the Halakhah* (2001). The three were conceived to form a single continuous statement, covering the theological language, system of belief, and structure of behavior that animates the definitive documents and characterizes the age and thought of those that produced them.

Accordingly, in the principal parts of this reprise, I lay out [1] how the Rabbinic system speaks, [2] what it says, and [3] how it is embodied in the social order of the community for which it constructs its encompassing conception. Parts Two and Three turn to the functioning system and categorical structure. The former concerns how the theological corpus set forth in the Aggadah (“narrative”), the corpus of Scriptural interpretation, doctrine, ethics, and narrative actually functioned in explaining Israel's condition, the latter addresses how the Halakhah (“norms of behavior,” “law”) identified the building

blocks of Israel's social order and defined in rules of conduct the consequences of the human condition set forth in mythic monotheism, a term defined presently. To state the matter simply: the Aggadah tells the story of mankind in relationship to God, then the Halakhah states what to do about the human situation.

The foundation of the work is the conviction that the Rabbinic canon is made up of intelligible, rational documents, coherent statements of viewpoints, not merely collections of episodic remarks about one thing and another. These documents—so I allege and demonstrate—re-present the Torah of Sinai with this implicit claim: if at Sinai God had chosen a different mode of thought and expression for conveying his will, here is what we should have as the Torah. Specifically, had he selected the modes of thought and expression of philosophy for the shaping of religion, had he preferred to set forth the Torah as theology and law validated by a self-evident rationality—rather than in the episodic rulings, framed in ad hoc narratives, and validated by notional prophecy such as Scripture sets forth—this is how he would have given the Torah.

Here is the system and structure that would have emerged in accord with the vocabulary, syntax, and semantics of God's language. By that I mean, as to God's self-manifestation in the Torah, this is [1] how his language works, [2] how his laws, narratives, and exhortations translate into a working theological system of conviction, and [3] how that system organizes the received revelation into coherent building blocks for the cogent conduct of society. Thus are the religious facts of the Torah of Sinai reshaped into a cogent theology of the social and cosmic order of the holy people that at Sinai entered God's kingdom by accepting the Torah.

The embodied theology encompasses other issues besides grammar, convictions, and conduct. Language, system, and structure constitute only the most important components of the Rabbinic theology. Three instances suffice to suggest what more remains. Rabbinic Judaism sets forth a theology of history. It contains within itself a theological hermeneutics, which defines the theological foundations of Rabbinic Midrash, or interpretation of Scripture. There is a theology of the social order that defines the Israelite individual and Israel as corporate community. Not only do those three issues receive sustained attention, but Rabbinic theology takes up the religious experience afforded by the Torah of Sinai. It comes to realization, also, in

liturgy, in the rhythm of the synagogue year and its lections, and in other critical components of Judaism. I have worked on these and other special theological problems of description, analysis, and interpretation of systems of ideas. So the appended list of prior studies shows. The three treated here, however, strike me as the ones on which all else builds.

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