

IS THERE A THEOLOGY OF RABBINIC JUDAISM?

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What is at stake in the problem of theology? It is whether or not, out of a given body of authoritative writings, we may appeal to that -ism, that (for the present case) »Judaism,« that all of us assume forms the matrix for all the documents all together. That is to say, the issue of theology bears consequence because upon the result, in the end, rests the question of whether we may speak of a religion, or only of various documents that intersect here and there. The conception of »Judaism,« or »Christianity,« or »Buddhism,« serves the purpose of holding together in a coherent philosophically harmonious and proportionate construction diverse and otherwise inchoate facts, e.g., writings, artifacts of material culture, myths and rites, all of them, without distinction as to provenience or origin, deemed to contribute to an account of one and the same systematic composition, an -ity or an -ism; and, further, all of them - beliefs, rites, attitudes and actions alike - are assumed to animate each. So when we speak of a religion as a whole, not simply a body of texts - documents or archaeological findings or contemporary social scientific description - of a particular group of people who confess a single set of beliefs, we take for granted that beyond the social facts there is a system of thought that can be defined in a systematic way.

That assumption serves to clarify and organize otherwise chaotic facts. The reason is that, assuming all facts pertain to one whole and cogent construction of ideas, one thing, we form an account, frequently framed in terms of propositional beliefs, of that one thing, assumed to encompass everything in its classification and, I stress, also to infuse each item of its class. That is what happens when we define a religion, in the present instance, Judaism. We then define a religion not only in terms of its social order - the way of life, world view, and theory of the social entity of people who believe certain things and consequently form a community that does things in one way, rather than some other - but in terms of its abstract system of belief and behavior. This we view out of all context, imputing the presence of this -ism at all points at which any of its characteristic data turn up.

Having formed such a definition, we therefore take for granted that a datum that falls into the classification of that systematic statement or that -ism bears within itself not only its own facts but a large body of other facts imputed to the datum by reason of the character of the classification that encompasses it. When we speak of »Judaism,« for example, we take for granted that beyond a given datum we define as »Judaic« lies an entire structure, one that imparts context and meaning to each of its data in turn and that both encompasses transcends them all. On that basis, we may speak of Judaism: the Judaic view of this, that, and the other thing, and so too with Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and a variety of other -isms and -ities. When, therefore, in the study of religion, we invoke the conception of an -ism that transcends its own data and organizes them, much is at stake. Precisely what we study when we study religion comes under discussion.

When we ask not merely for a compendium of what a given religion alleges, e.g., about God, the world, and the human person, but for a systematic and philosophically coherent formulation of convictions in a statement that is not only true but also harmonious and genuinely cogent (one part connecting with another and all holding together), then our problem in

answering the question at hand proves not so readily resolved. For if we take all of the components of the canon of the Judaism of the dual Torah as matters had unfolded in late antiquity - that is, the Mishnah and Tosefta, the two Talmuds, and the Midrash-compilations of that early period - and we ask how we are to find out whether these several documents all together present a cogent theological system, the correct method for theological inquiry hardly presents itself in a prompt and unambiguous manner. For once we take as our criterion for identifying the presence of theology the clear marks of system, structure, and order, matters prove chaotic.

The source of the confusion lies in the state of the written evidence of the religion, Rabbinic Judaism, or the Judaism of the dual Torah, or Classical Judaism, or Normative Judaism, as people may prefer to call it. When I refer to the state of the evidence, I refer not to problems of philology or textual tradition, but to the diversity of conviction, and, even more, to the episodic character in which convictions are set forth. To state matters simply: the various documents that comprise the canon of Judaism scarcely cohere in more than formal ways. That is not because the various writings contradict one another, but because each of the documents pursues its own program, and all together, the components of the canon scarcely intersect at the deepest layers of premise and presupposition. Consequently, we may readily set forth the theologies of the various testimonies to that single Judaism of the Rabbinic species, but we face obstacles in defining the single theology to which all the diverse documents appeal, and upon which each of them builds its particular statement. That the documents stand autonomous of one another in conviction, focus, and points of emphasis, does not mean they contradict one another, but it does mean we cannot readily figure out how diverse positions hold together. We do not know what is primary and generative, what is secondary and derivative. Hence we have theological statements but no clear system. But to maintain there is a theology of Rabbinic Judaism is to claim for the matter systemic, not merely random and notional, standing.

The written evidence comes to us in a variety of compilations or documents, all of them rather carefully crafted, but none of them brought into clear relationship with any other of its genre (the two Talmuds, for instance, stand in total isolation from one another). Now, by definition, that fact - the autonomy of the score and a half of major compilations - need not set an insuperable obstacle in the way of investigating the theological structure and order of the canon all together. Much theological work begins with the definition of structure and order and proceeds to utilize the historical, canonical writings to fill in the blanks of the questionnaire prepared out of that definition. Whether the dogmatic theology of George F. Moore in his *Judaism. The Age of the Tannaim* (1927), and in the continuators and imitators of Moore such as E. P. Sanders's *Judaism: Practice and Belief. 63 BCE-66 CE* (1992),¹ or the systematic-historical theology of Solomon Schechter or of Abraham Heschel in his *Torah min hashshamayim*, the problem is the same. Categories formed outside of the canon impose upon the canon a structure and a system that the canonical writings themselves have not yielded - and to which they conform only with difficulty. We are left with theology that is neither systematic - being limited to authoritative writings of the long-ago past - nor historical - being formed in isolation from the category-formation of the sources themselves. The result succeeds as neither theology - lacking the autonomous intellect of the theologian - nor historical - imposing contemporary categories upon the theology of another age altogether.

Clearly, the data to be sorted out in the study of whether Rabbinic Judaism rested upon a coherent theology must derive from the sources, read within their categories - but for our

¹ On Sanders's methodological dependence upon Moore, see William Scott Green, »Introduction: The Scholarly Study of Judaism,« in J. Neusner, ed., *Judaism in Late Antiquity*. (Leiden, 1995), I. *The Literary and Archaeological Sources*, pp. 1-12.

purposes. That the categories must find definition in the documents, not in our program, takes priority. If we bring our categories, for example, God's love for Israel, or God's election of Israel, the theology we impute to the documents turns out to sustain the theology we deem critical. But to describe the theology of Rabbinic Judaism in its formative documents, we make a historical claim: in those days, in these writings, this category took priority. And to make such a claim, we have to allow the documents to dictate their categorical formation and stand in judgment upon our hypothetical definition of it.

To take up our purpose next: it is to determine whether a cogent and internally coherent body of ideas forms the foundation for the specific propositions as to religious truth that the documents set forth, severally but also jointly. If we can uncover such a theological system that forms the structure upon which sayings that episodically take theological positions depend, then we may affirm, Rabbinic Judaism sets forth not only religious convictions and attitudes, but also a coherent, philosophically founded theology. But if the sources on their own do not stand upon or appeal to a single system of ideas that hold together in a consistent and proportionate way, then we must conclude, Rabbinic Judaism, as portrayed by its foundation-documents, sets forth religious truth but no theological structure worthy of the name.

Now let me spell out the principal obstacle to a documentary theological category-formation. It is that the canonical documents do not coalesce. They not only are to be distinguished from one another in the indicative traits of rhetoric, topic, and logic.² They also do not come together at the deep structures of presupposition. Each document stands for not only its own program, but also its own deepest, most pervasive and implicit premises. None intersects with any other when we move beneath the surface of detail to penetrate into the main point and the ubiquitous and generative problematic. So each document goes its own way, investigating the problems its authors or compilers deem urgent, and rarely do two or more documents intersect anywhere but in convictions or principles that for them all prove inert and in none of them provoke deep and systematic thought.

To make this point clear: we may take for granted all documents concur that God revealed the Torah to Moses; but in none of the documents does that point precipitate sustained exegetical inquiry. Much that would characterize all documents would elicit agreement beyond the limits of Rabbinic Judaism, even beyond the boundaries of all Judaisms, since Christianity in all of its systems would agree, to take one obvious point, that God created heaven and earth and upon much else. So the areas of shared conviction prove either systemically neutral for all the religious systems that emerge from the Hebrew Scriptures of ancient Israel, on the one side, or quite beside the main point that a given piece of writing wishes to make in its own terms. A simple example will clarify matters by way of contrast. All of the Gospels intersect in fundamental ways, sharing convictions of program and problematic, so that we may indeed produce not only a theology of the school of Matthew but a Gospels, theology. Common premises, concerning for instance the standing as to divinity of Jesus Christ (to use the Christian language), infuse the whole; a common program of exegesis - the life and teachings of God Incarnate upon earth - governs throughout.

So we may say that the Gospels at the level of premise and presupposition stand together and set forth, beyond difference, an area of common convictions concerning a single coherent theological program. If the Gospels present us with diverse groups writing about a common topic, appealing to a set of convictions held in common, conceiving of a common audience, then the Rabbinic canonical writings by the same criteria profoundly differ. That is because they do not write about common topics that pervade the entire corpus; they do not appeal to a set of

² My complete statement is in my *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*. N.Y., 1994: Doubleday. The Doubleday Anchor Reference Library.

convictions that govern throughout but only to different convictions, each shaped within the limits of a single document; and if, beyond the circle of sages themselves, a single audience is contemplated, it is difficult to identify that audience in terms that transcend the merely platitudinous.

Let me briefly summarize the results of an inquiry into the Judaism that the various canonical documents presuppose, the Judaism that encompasses them all and holds together the concerns and convictions of each.³ Through a systematic inquiry into the premises and presuppositions of the data of the canonical documents, I have reached a negative conclusion. It is that all we know concerning the Judaism that the rabbis take for granted in a long sequence of basic writings concerns diverse documents, specific propositions and the presuppositions they yield, the premises of various writings. These need not be found internally contradictory, but they also do not coalesce into a coherent systemic statement. The sources at hand do not validate the conception of an encompassing Judaism that underpins everything every document states and that reaches expression, in one detail or another, in one document or another. On the basis of the evidence in hand, we cannot describe the »Judaism« that the rabbis of the Judaism of the dual Torah took for granted. What we can describe is only what the authors of the various documents, respectively, took for granted, and the result of that description proves local and topical: particular to the various documents, respectively.

When we examine the premises and presuppositions of sages' writings, we find sherds and fragments of this and that, not a complete and coherent theology of this Judaism; and, moreover, propositions in the form of premises or presuppositions do not circulate from document to document at all. Some form the foundations of one document or a set of documents, others prove critical elsewhere. Few presuppositions play an active, provocative role in the formation of writings in all canonical documents treated here, that is, everything except for the two Talmuds. Generalizing on the cases we are given, whether of law or of exegesis, we produce generalizations that remain particular to their documents or to the genre of their documents. So if there was a Judaism that formed the ground of thought and speculation for sages, we do not have much evidence of its character or contents.

Until now I have taken for granted that there certainly was one cogent Rabbinic Judaism, with a coherent corpus of myths, symbols, and rites, and deriving from a linear, unitary history, such as I have outlined in a variety of works, most notably, *The Transformation of Judaism. From Philosophy to Religion*.⁴ That history struck me as incremental and harmonious; that impression guided me through more than a quarter-century of systematic work. But now, having addressed a question about considerations of premise and presupposition and asked how the Rabbinic writings reveal what their authors take for granted, I have to call into doubt what I had taken for my generative principle. It is that the writers of the Rabbinic documents take little for

³ I refer to *The Judaism the Rabbis Take for Granted*. Atlanta, 1995: Scholars Press for South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism. That book summarizes the systematic source-analysis in the following seven works: *The Judaism Behind the Texts. The Generative Premises of Rabbinic Literature*. Atlanta, 1994: Scholars Press for South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism. I. *The Mishnah*. A. *The Division of Agriculture*; I. *The Mishnah*. B. *The Divisions of Appointed Times, Women, and Damages (through Sanhedrin)*. I. *The Mishnah* C. *The Divisions of Damages (from Makkot), Holy Things and Purities*; II. *The Tosefta, Tractate Abot, and the Earlier Midrash-Compilations: Sifra, Sifré to Numbers, and Sifré to Deuteronomy*; III. *The Later Midrash-Compilations: Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah and Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*; IV. *The Latest Midrash-Compilations: Song of Songs Rabbah, Ruth Rabbah, Esther Rabbah I, and Lamentations Rabbati*. And *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*; V. *The Talmuds of the Land of Israel and Babylonia*.

⁴ Champaign, 1992: University of Illinois Press.

granted, and nothing for granted that matters very deeply in the formation of any one of those documents. We do not now know very much about that Judaism that the rabbis took for granted, because the documents that comprise their canon for late antiquity provide only very limited access to the general conceptions that underlie the specific writings in hand.⁵

To make this point concrete: .If we accept the challenge of E. P. Sanders, who says, »One must press behind the contents of the Mishnah and attempt to discover what the contents of the Mishnah presuppose,«⁶ we find the premises and presuppositions of the Mishnah. We cannot show that these form generative conceptions for other documents. We can demonstrate that most of them do not. We may dismiss as particular to its task the entire corpus of legal premises and presuppositions. Those of the Mishnah prove tied to the context of law, and the other documents have none of consequence that are comparable.

The same is true of the Midrash-compilations, with their rich heritage of theological premises. The two densest conceptions, concerning Israel and the nations and the meaning of history, do not lie at the foundations or form the presuppositions of the Mishnah or Tosefta. When it comes to the law, a single proposition strikes me as important, that the law preserves the example of the patriarchs and matriarchs or embodies what God did and does. That broadly circulated proposition then maintains that, in conforming to the law, holy Israel imitates God. As to the Mishnah's philosophical and theological premises, the most important philosophical functions only in the Mishnah. The paramount matter - hierarchical classification serves only there. More to the point, no other document works out its ideas along the lines of philosophical thought. And that leaves theology. So, in the aggregate, premises appear bound to the documents that rest upon them, and those that circulate through the canonical writings examined here are vastly outweighed in volume and impart by those that do not. True, as we noted at the outset, certain premises »surely« or »obviously« are everywhere taken for granted, e.g., the unity of God, the importance of the Torah, and the like. But these remain inert, or, when they generate thought, accommodate themselves to context, e.g., the Mishnah's use of monotheism is distinctive to the Mishnah's interest in hierarchical classification.

True, the picture is somewhat more complicated, since all documents rest upon theological convictions of one sort or another. And we have no basis on which to suppose that the convictions important in one document and absent in another will have elicited objections among the authors of the writings in which they play no role. Nonetheless, when we raise the question of whether important theological conceptions unify all of the documents, providing the substrate of conceptions or attitudes for each one, the results prove somewhat puzzling. An idea that takes priority in one set of writings attracts slight attention elsewhere; premises that prove pressing here scarcely appear elsewhere. Two absolutely critical premises show what is at stake. The emotions, sentiments, and attitudes of God and humanity correspond. With the centrality of intentionality throughout the Mishnah - along with the method of hierarchical classification the

⁵ For a long time, then, I have assumed that, while we cannot define a single Judaism characteristic of all ancient Judaists (Jews who practice a religion they call Judaism), we certainly may speak of a single, coherent Rabbinic Judaism. That is, I understood as a matter of premise that all of the Rabbinic documents hold together in a single corpus, one that is not only coherent because of its organization as exegeses of received writings (Scripture, the Mishnah), but also cogent in its principal points of belief. But now I find that that is not the case; there is no positive evidence, deriving from the documents examined here, that sustains the conception of a single cogent Rabbinic Judaism. We have little reason based on internal evidence to explain why a given document finds its place in the canon of that Judaism as it had reached definition at the end of ancient times.

⁶ E. P. Sanders, »Puzzling Out Rabbinism,« in William Scott Green, ed., *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* 1980, 2:73

generative premise of that document - simply does not prepare us for the fact that, beyond the Mishnah, intentionality does not define an area of exploration, not at all. The rabbis not only take the centrality of intentionality for granted, they build upon it. Then if they take it for granted throughout but neglect that same idea, we have to wonder whether that enormous premise of thought makes much impact where it is not urgent for a given document's larger program; then the premise follows the documentary program and gains entry only where the document requires it.

The upshot is that we cannot show many ideas that run from document to document, or group to group, and that enter into the definition of how a document finds its place in the canon. Then, it would appear, no traits tell us why one book would gain its place in the canon of the Judaism of the dual Torah examined here, and another would not. That is not to suggest the identification of writings for the canon is arbitrary, only that on the basis of what documents appear to have taken for granted, we do not know what the criteria for admission might have been. I find myself unable to point to a setting in the exegetical compilations, early, middle, and late, in which intentionality plays a part in the formation of a concrete idea, on the one side, or itself presents a critical consideration, on the other.

What is presupposed and also generative in one set of writings plays no role in others, with the one important exception of the general themes of covenant, commandment, Torah, and God's dominion; but these, we now realize, are topical: subjects that form premises quite particular to documents where they play a role, no more than that. Contrast the remarkable cogency of the presentation of premises particular to documents, e.g., history in the later Midrash-compilations, intentionality and hierarchical classification in the earlier legal ones, with the diffuse character of presuppositions with respect to covenant, commandment, Torah, and God's dominion. Our results point to a different conclusion from the one I had anticipated. Specifically, these represent themes that move from one document to another, rather than propositional premises that form the intellectual foundations of any one of them. Indeed, a closer look at my formulation of matters shows that I have joined as a single rubric matters that may well be differentiated, and, when differentiated, prove as particular to documents as hierarchical classification, intentionality or the meaning and structure of history.

Take covenant, commandment, and Kingdom of God, for example. While assuredly at the foundation of every Judaic writing that appeals to Scripture, the notion that Israel is covenanted with God, and that the Torah defines the terms of the covenant, is surely more critical in the Midrash-compilations than in the Mishnah and the Tosefta. There, when we speak of God's kingdom, we formulate matters not in mythic terms but in the definition of the realm of the sacred. But I was the one to identify the realm of the sacred - space and time in the interplay on Sabbath and festival, Israel's space in God's time in their interpenetration - with the kingdom of God. The notion of God's rule expressed through the space-and-time continuum does not surface in later writings, where the kingdom of God bears quite a different set of meanings.

The presuppositions or premises that form the foundations of a document's exegesis of its propositions prove particular to the document even when themes or topics or symbols or ideas appear to be shared with other writings or to have moved from document to document. For at stake are not merely opaque symbols, e.g., the Torah, the covenant, the kingdom of Heaven, but the shaping of these topics for some propositional or at least provocative purpose. And, more to the point, when we take a closer look at those premises that do appear to circulate beyond the narrow limits of a single compilation or set of compilations (e.g., Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, and Pesiqta de Rab Kahana, or the late Rabbah-compilations), what we define as premises in all their concreteness prove specific to the document, or set of documents, in which the ubiquitous idea is treated. A second glance at the treatment of the topic of the Torah leaves no doubt about that fact.

Some themes or ideas or images or symbols recur here and there. But when they do, they reach the level of premise and presupposition of concrete compositions in formulations that prove specific to the document that uses them. It follows that the premises of the canonical documents of Judaism do not transcend their documentary setting. That result calls into question the conception that a corpus of ideas at the deepest structure of the canonical writings hold those writings together and form of them all a single coherent statement. The opposite is the fact. In substance, we are unable to find ideas that are both active, not inert, and ubiquitous, not specific to a kind of writing (e.g., law or exegesis) or a set of closely related writings (e.g., the Mishnah and the Tosefta, or some of the subsets of the Midrash-compilations). If, therefore, we had to explain what accounts for the inclusion, in a single coherent canon, of both the Mishnah and, e.g., Song of Songs Rabbah or the Tosefta and Leviticus Rabbah, on the strength of matters of substance - premises that circulate throughout, givens of conviction or conception, attitude or sentiment - we should be unable to answer that question.

When we »press behind the contents of the Mishnah and attempt to discover what the contents of the Mishnah presuppose,« we do not find »Judaism,« in the sense that by »Judaism« we mean a coherent body of ideas that form the structure of a variety of authoritative documents. That is to say, we cannot show that a canon of writings - all of which, all together, comprise »Judaism« - takes shape around a coherent body of premises. When we »press behind the contents of the Mishnah and attempt to discover what the contents of the Mishnah presuppose,« we find the presuppositions of the Mishnah. And those presuppositions form the basis for the very particular conceptions of the Mishnah. On what basis, then, we link the Mishnah to Leviticus Rabbah and allege that at their foundations, both documents lay out the same -ism, that is, the same systematic and cogent set of ideas and attitudes that form a coherent and entire account of the social order of holy Israel - way of life, world view, theory of the social entity - I cannot say. There is no substantive basis at the level of premises and presuppositions that run from here to there and play a provocative role throughout for the conception of the canon of the dual Torah.

Where then are we to turn for the cogent, authoritative, and coherent statement that our sages proposed to set forth? The answer, obviously, is the Talmud of Babylonia, on the one side, and its rationality, on the other. In that writing, which stands at the end and absorbs and recasts whatever of the prior heritage the Talmud's framers - the authors of its compositions, the compilers of its composites, but particularly the later - deemed consequential, we may expect to find that answer. For that is the final document of the Judaism of the dual Torah in its formative age, the piece of writing that, from its closure to this very morning, has been identified by Judaism as authoritative, normative, and ultimately, compendious and comprehensive. To state the matter somewhat loosely, the tradition is not only its own best historian, it is also its own authoritative theologian.

The Bavli comes at the end of the formation of the Rabbinic canon in late antiquity, but it also stands at the beginning of all that was to follow, which would take the form of commentary upon the Bavli or which would refer to the Bavli as the court of final appeal. So for perfectly simple, formal reasons, we are on firm ground in asking the Bavli to make a coherent statement. But there is a substantive basis as well. The Bavli for its part takes the form of a systematic search for cogent and harmonious statements, everywhere pursuing inconsistency and proposing to iron out disharmony. The Bavli's hermeneutics begins with the very criterion I have set forth for distinguishing religious ideas from theological systems: its close and careful attention to what is implicit, its search beneath the surface of things for ultimate unity, rigorous coherence, balance, order, proportion. Not only so, but as a matter of fact, the Bavli is the sole document of Rabbinic Judaism that holds together the two principal literary categories of that Judaism, halakhah, law, and aggadah, lore, inclusive of exegetical tradition. Other documents contain

mostly the one or mostly the other; this one incorporates a large component of both. So the Bavli stands at the apex for formal, substantive, and literary reasons.

This leads me to address two questions, one of method, the other of substance. Where do we commence our inquiry into Rabbinic theology? The theology of Rabbinic Judaism must find its definition in what is prior to proposition and takes precedence over premises of thought. Our sages' »Judaism« must commence in the ways in which we make connections and draw conclusions. That is where all thought begins, and that is the point at which the social order dictates the wherewithal of rationality. If we know how people connect one thing to something else, making connections that yield a »therefore,« we can follow onward and upward to the surface of the social order the processes that yield premises and define presuppositions, and so onward into the here and now of cows that gore and empires that reign but for a moment. So while we cannot set forth a theology of Rabbinic Judaism, we can and should now undertake to set forth a theology of the Talmud of Babylonia. And that will constitute the authoritative theology of Judaism - as faithful Jews have affirmed from the time of the closure of the Talmud to our own day. The one whole Torah of Moses our Rabbi, oral and written, reaches us in the pages of The Talmud, as generations of sages have expounded it, onward to this morning.

But what of the substance? Earlier I argued that we cannot impose our category-formation upon the ancient documents. Doing so violates the simplest rules of historical inquiry, because it forms an act of brutal anachronism. We cannot say, what mattered most to them is what concerns us most of all, for we have no way of determining out of the sources whether or not our judgment conforms to theirs. But what categories of their must define our inquiry? In my view the answer is dictated by those matters upon which our sages lavished their best energies, their most sustained critical capacities. If we ask at what point harmony is besought, coherence pursued, disharmony and inconsistency rigorously investigated and disposed of, the answer is clear to all familiar with the document. It is at the statement of the law, whether practiced or theoretical, that our sages insist upon exposing cogency and resisting inconsistency. When they investigate the premise of a rule and compare said premise with that of another rule, that is the point at which they penetrate into the depths of the structure of the law of the Torah. There they insist they will find the solid granite on which they will construct their system.

What they deemed subject to the most rigorous standards of coherence, when they resisted easy answers and facile harmonizations, there we must follow in our search for the propositions that must dictate the category-formation of Rabbinic theology. To know what categories engaged our sages, we have to define the law behind the laws, the one statement the sages wished to make through diverse cases. Let me give a single concrete example of what I mean. When I examined the Talmud's elaborate and protracted reading of Mishnah-tractate Zebahim 5:3ff. to the end, I find that nearly the entire chapter addresses the question of the connection between rules recorded in the Mishnah and rules presented in Scripture. The metaproposition that encompasses the numerous specific propositions is simple: how do we make connections between rules and their point of origin. Every time we ask, »what is the source [in Scripture] for this statement,« we find an answer that is left to stand. So one fundamental and ubiquitous metaproposition of the Bavli may be set forth in this language:

1. it is important to link laws that occur in one source to those that occur in another;
2. among the compilations [components of »the one whole Torah of Moses, our rabbi,« in later mythic language] that enjoy canonical status [in our language], the premier is Scripture;
3. so whenever we find a statement of a rule in the Mishnah and ask for its source, the implicit criterion of success will be, »the rule is founded on language of Scripture, properly construed;«
4. so, consequently, the proposition implicit in numerous propositions, common to them all and holding them all together, is this: all rules cohere, and the point of origin of nearly all of them is the written part of the Torah revealed by God to Moses at Sinai.

The metapropositional program contributed by the Bavli's framers concerns how series are made, which is to say, whether connections yield static or dynamic results, which is to say, at the deepest layers of intellect, how thought happens. Now, at the end, we ask the framers of the Mishnah to address the question before us. And in answer, they give us silence. So we know that here we hear what is distinctive to, and the remarkable discovery of, the authorship of the Bavli. Since, it is clear, that discovery has taken place within the words of the written Torah, and, since their deepest metaproposition maintained that the words of the written Torah are the words of God to Moses, our rabbi, at Sinai, - the words, not just the gist - we have to conclude with what I conceive to be the bed-rock of the metapropositional program before us: the Torah teaches us not only what God said, but how God thinks. When we understand the Torah rightly, we engage in thinking about thought. And that is how we know God: through thought. So Spinoza was not so heretical after all.

Now, one may wonder, have we crossed the boundary from theology to philosophy, allowing the hermeneutics of the law to divert us from our original destination altogether? The answer is, we have to allow the philosopher-theologians of the Bavli to lead us where they will - if we propose to set forth what we conceive to be their theology. Once we affirm the priority of the Bavli, then the Bavli's hermeneutics dictates the direction in which we are to venture. But we need not conclude our inquiry with their definition of matters. I argued that in its quest for coherence of diverse matters the Bavli insists upon the priority of law, halakhah; that is where inconsistency attracts attention. Then, it must follow, a sustained effort to investigate the theology of the Bavli will direct itself toward the way in which the law contains and conveys theological judgments.

Some excellent beginnings of inquiry provide guidance even now, for example, Ephraim Urbach's correlation of the laws of inheritance and the conviction of eternal life and his essay on law and prophecy.⁷ These papers point the way to the concrete and detailed research on the theological premises of the law of the Talmud that, in the end, will make possible a valid category-formation, on the one side, and well-criticized theological propositions, displayed in all their coherence and encompassing conviction, on the other. But if I had to select the model of the work of theological inquiry, I could do no better than turn to Maimonides, who insisted to begin with that law and philosophy cohere, the one making its statement in its way, the other in its manner, and both of them saying the same thing.

We have then to shift our theological inquiry in three ways. First, we must allow Rabbinic Judaism to define its own theological source, and, for reasons I have now spelled out, I regard the Talmud of Babylonia as the designated statement of all that is coherent and compelling.

Second, we have to permit the category-formation to emerge from the selected source, paying close attention to its points of recurrent concern and emphasis, its foci, its principal concerns, and its generative principles. Where the document exposes its premises, we have the beginnings of the category-formation we seek.

Third, since the document makes its statement mainly through law, we have to learn to listen to that statement when it is made through the laws. There, I maintain, we shall uncover a rich and remarkably purposive theological system, one that contains within itself all that matters in religion: what it means to be humanity, »in our image, after our likeness,« and what God has in mind when he speaks of holy Israel as »the kingdom of priests and the holy people.« That is to say, out of theological anthropology, on the one side, and theological politics and sociology, on the other, we shall find ourselves contemplating that system and structure that, in its own terms, sets forth the theology of Rabbinic Judaism: our sages' conception of God with us.

⁷ »Hilkhot Yerushah vehayye olam,« *Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies Papers* (Jerusalem, 1967) 1:133-141; »Law and Prophecy,« *Tarbis* 1958, 23:1-25.