

Oral Transmission of Knowledge as Rabbinic Sacrament: An Overlooked Aspect of Discipleship in Oral Torah

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Introduction: Rabbinic Sacramentalism?

It is no news to announce that in rabbinic Judaism learning and study are holy, even sanctifying activities. But what is gained by asserting, as I do in the title of this essay, that aspects of classical rabbinic learning, particularly its insistence on the oral mastery of textual material, are usefully described as not merely 'sanctifying' but 'sacramental' acts? It would seem that to speak of any aspect of rabbinic Judaism in terms of sacramentalism is to confuse the boundaries between rabbinic/Judaic piety and the rather distinct ritual piety of what ultimately became orthodox Christianity. Yet that is precisely my plan. More than a few scholars in recent years have argued that the clean line distinguishing rabbinic Judaism from the early patristic traditions of Christianity is rather more the making of modern scholarship than it is a fact of life 'on the ground' in late Antiquity.¹ I share their stance.

The point of the present essay, however, is not to sow confusion about the boundaries between Christianity and Judaism in the early centuries of the Common Era. Rather, it is to clarify ways in which rabbinic teachers of Oral Torah and Christian ministers of the Word

1 An increasingly influential body of scholarship has begun to insist that the definitive period of Jewish and Christian self-definition as distinct and competing religious communities is to be located in the fourth and fifth centuries CE rather than the first and the second. Important versions of this argument are: J. Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine*, Chicago and London 1987; D. Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, Stanford 1999; idem., *Border Lines: The Partition of Judea-Christianity*, Philadelphia: 2004; S. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.*, Princeton 2001; A. Yadin, *Scripture as Logos: Rabbi Ishmael and the Origins of Midrash*, Philadelphia 2004, esp. pp. 168-175.

shared strikingly similar ritual sensibilities. I call these sensibilities sacramental and claim that they are illustrated in both rabbinic Judaism and early Christian ritual piety by 'rites of incorporation'.² In particular, I shall compare aspects of the early Christian communion meal, known as the *eucharist*, with the rabbinic enterprise of the study of oral tradition. Despite their obvious differences, the former being the consumption of symbolic foods and the latter an act of learning, each is a ritual of incorporation in two senses: (1) the ritual actors incorporate into their being an element of the redemptive divine Word in a ritual performance that (2) incorporates the actors into a larger community of the redeemed.

It is precisely this dual dimension of incorporation that justifies the use of the term 'sacrament' to create an interpretive rubric for viewing the performance of the *eucharist* and the mediation of Oral Torah as comparable practices. I do not mean by sacrament what the Christian discipline of sacramental theology has historically meant by the term in its reflections upon the matter and form of the symbolic elements of the Church's rites. Precisely because the term is so crucial to later Christian theologies of liturgy, historians of religion have tended to avoid it in their thinking about ritual activity.³ As I use the term here, I mean something quite specific: *a ritual re-presentation of a redemptive moment* in communal life that is administered under the authority of a ceremonial guide on behalf of an individual or a collectivity. The beneficiary of the sacrament is transformed through the ritual, at least momentarily, into a state that recapitulates or anticipates redemptive reality. The means of this transformation is the incorporation within the person, under the mediation of the guide, of a symbolic representation of the redemptive truth.

The value of this conception of sacramentalism for the comparative study of early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism is twofold. First, with regard to Christianity it subsumes a variety of conflicting formulations

2 To my knowledge, this is a term of my own coinage, although it points to a phenomenon well-studied by comparative students of religion in, for example, rituals of communion. On the latter, see C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, New York and London 1997, pp. 108-112 and, with particular reference to the historical development of the *eucharist*, pp. 216-218.

3 See the discussion of T. Jennings, 'Sacrament,' in: M. Eliade ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York 1987, vol. 12, pp. 500-504.

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of the precise character, meaning, and performance of ritual acts that vied for the status of orthodoxy among diverse Christian communions. In this sense, Christian sacramentalism, under a variety of theological interpretations, emerges, at least by the early second century, in widely held beliefs that entry into Christian life requires the help of ritual officiants in administering rites designated as 'mysteries' of the faith. Secondly, the model of sacramentalism sharpens perceptions of key elements of rabbinic discipleship training whose ritualistic aspect is often ignored or under-appreciated. The rabbinization of Judaism, which occurred for the most part in a world already coming under the political domination of Christian Rome, involved a Judaic embrace of the sacramentalism that was so crucial to the liturgical expression of Christian social identity.

To state my point as boldly as possible: *the rabbinization of Palestinian Judaism in the Byzantine period included, among other things, the affirmation of teaching as a sacramental, transformative rite, administered by a sage on behalf of a disciple or initiate.* Rabbinic sages, in other words, constructed teaching as a priestly rite and, as trainers of disciples, took upon themselves a priestly role. But, and here is the crucial point, this priestly role was *not* continuous with that of ancient Israel's Temple sacrificer, even though rabbinic intellectuals adduced sacrificial metaphors in explaining the sacrament of learning no less than Christian intellectuals drew upon sacrificial themes to understand the *eucharist*.⁴ Rather the priestly role embraced by sages from the mid-third century and onward owed far more to the sacramental sensibilities of liturgical life emerging in contemporaneous Christian ritual practice than it did to the sacrificial ethos of an increasingly distant Temple community of priests.

It is quite true that well into the sixth century the descendants of Temple priests continued to play important ceremonial roles in Byzantine synagogues.⁵ But these roles, such as the public utterances

4 In Christian usage, the term *hierous* ('priest') is normally applied to those who offer blood sacrifices, in either pagan or Jewish settings. By contrast, the sacramental performance is more commonly allocated to the *diakonos* or *presbyter*.

5 See L. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, New Haven and London 2000, pp. 491-500.

of communal benedictions (the *dukhan*), were formally honorary and commemorative rather than sacramentally effective. The rabbinizing Judaism of late Byzantium found little sacramental use for the hereditary priesthood in the synagogue precisely because that role was being filled by rabbinic sages in their training of students in the discipleship circle of the *bet midrash*. The rabbinic ministration of the word of God as Oral Torah bore little outward resemblance to or continuity with cultic aspects of Temple sacrifice; rather, it was structurally more analogous to the actions of Christian deacons and elders, who administered the word of God as bread and wine. As we shall see by the end of this essay, when rabbinic thought does draw connections between words of Torah and the Temple's sacrificial foods, it does so in a thoroughgoing sacramental spirit of ritual incorporation.

Nascent Christian Sacramentalism: A Thumbnail Sketch

Of all the diverse Judaic sects that flourished during Second Temple times, it is only within emergent Christianity that one eventually finds a fully developed sacramentalism grounded in sacrificial metaphors. The Judaic background of such metaphors are amply attested in such canonical works as the Epistle to the Hebrews, whose author persistently stresses the symbolic assimilation of Christ, as victim and sacrificer, to the Temple model of sacrificial lamb and High Priest (e.g. Heb. 9:1 ff.). However, more was at work in the creation of Christian sacramentalism than interpretation of the Temple rites as anticipations of the Messiah's self-sacrifice. Drawing upon traditional models of Roman religion as well as upon diverse traditions derived from the ancient Mysteries, liturgical officiants of the Church - *diakonoï* (ministers) and *presbyteroi* (elders) - mediated redemptive healing in rituals designated as 'mysteries' (Greek: *mysterion*; Latin: *sacramentum*) that re-presented and made present the redeeming power manifested in the world through the self-sacrifice of the Son of God.⁶ The meal of

6 For a discussion of the Greek and Latin equivalents and their role in early Christian liturgical thought, see G. Bornkamm, 'Mysterion', in: G. Kittel and G. Friedrich eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids 1964-1976, vol. 4, pp. 826-827.

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communion known as the *eucharist* (thanksgiving) is among the earliest of these mysteries.

As early as the career of the apostle, Paul of Tarsus (e.g. 1 Cor. 11:19-32), this communal meal functioned, next to baptism, as a key rite of incorporation into the community of the Messiah. Within a half century of Paul's death, Ignatius of Antioch testified to a growing sense of the numinous, transformative nature of the wine and bread used in the Eucharistic meal. Writing in his *Letter to the Romans*, par. 7, Ignatius asserts, 'I have no pleasure in the food that perishes nor in the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, from the seed of David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is imperishable love'.⁷

By the middle of the second century CE, Ignatius's incipient sacramentalism was more amply developed by the Christian polemicist, Justin Martyr. Of the eucharistic celebration he wrote (*First Apology*, chapters 65-66):⁸

And when the Ruler has given thanks and all the people have assented, those who are called by us deacons give to each of those present a portion of the eucharistized [viz.: 'consecrated': MJ] bread and wine and water, and they carry it away to those who are absent. And this food is called among us *eucharist*, [viz. 'thanksgiving': MJ], of which no one is allowed to partake except one who believes that the things which we teach are true, and has received the washing that is for the remission of sins and rebirth, and who so lives as Christ handed down. For we do not receive these things as common bread or common drink; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior having been incarnate by God's logos took both flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food eucharistized through the word of prayer that is from Him, from which our blood and flesh are nourished by transformation, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who became incarnate.

7 Quoted from B. Ehrman ed. and tr., *The Apostolic Fathers*, Cambridge, MA and London 2003, p. 279.

8 I quote the translation of L. Barnard., *St. Justin Martyr: The First and Second Apologies*, New York and Mahwah 1997, p. 70.

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Here Justin expounds the core of the sacramental conception of the eucharist - the elements of bread and wine, administered by an appropriate authority, work in the body of the faithful to achieve a redemptive transformation. The Christian *diakonos*, in his priestly function, serves the elements of the eucharist to worshippers, mediating thereby a redemptive relationship to God through the incorporation into the human body of the divine Word. Nothing quite this dramatic, we usually assume, occurred in the form of Judaism surviving after the destruction of the Temple and the disruption of traditional priestly functions. I would like to suggest otherwise.

Oral Torah as Rabbinic Mystery

While Christian *diakono*i or *presbyteroi* might mediate the salvation of Christ to Christians through the bread and wine of the eucharistic table, rabbinic masters of the third century and later also mediated a redemptive relationship to God that re-presented and actualized a redemptive moment through incorporation of the divine Word. The event was the revelation at Sinai; the Word, in the rabbinic case, took the form of orally-transmitted traditions of Torah, which the Sage alone could place into the mouth of the eager disciple in the setting of the discipleship circle, the *bet midrash*. Just as no baptized person could, in emerging Orthodox Christianity, enjoy full communion with the body of Christ save through the mediation of the eucharist, no rabbinic disciple could approach the redeeming condition of covenantal love of God for Israel save through the mediation of Oral Torah, as dispensed by the Sage.

By illustration, consider a well-known midrashic text. While recorded in a rather late compilation, the *Pesiqta Rabbati* (14b), it echoes themes which reverberate in Palestinian rabbinic literary culture from at least the third century. Revealing a social matrix in theological polemic regarding the transfer of divine covenantal love from Israel to the Church, the passage celebrates the covenantal significance of rabbinic tradition, the so-called Oral Torah, in cementing the eternal relationship between the Creator and the Jewish people. I translate the passage as follows:⁹

9 Ed. M. Friedmann, Vienna 1880 [repr. Tel Aviv 1963].

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The Blessed Holy One knew that the Nations would translate the Written Torah and read it in Greek. And they would say: 'The Jews are not Israel!' Said the Blessed Holy One to Moses: 'O, Moses! The Nations will say, We are Israel! We are the children of the Omnipresent! And Israel, too, will say, We are the children of the Omnipresent! And the scales are in balance!' Said the Blessed Holy One to the Nations: 'You claim to be my children, but I recognize only the one who holds my mystery in his hands! He alone is my son!' They said to Him: 'What is this mystery?' He said to them: 'It is the Mishnah!'

At its obvious level of meaning, our passage celebrates the Mishnah as the textual symbol of the abiding presence of divine covenantal love in Israel. I assume, moreover, that the term Mishnah here is not meant strictly as a reference to the particular compilation of rabbinic law sponsored by Rabbi Judah the Patriarch. More likely it metonymically refers to the entire body of post-biblical rabbinic oral tradition, the 'Repeated Tradition', which by definition is known only to Israel among the other competitors for the claim to exclusive divine love.

Of interest here is not merely that the text invests the Repeated Tradition with the status of a covenantal medium that links Israel to its Father in Heaven. What we cannot help noticing is the way in which the Mishnah's covenantal function is defined. The Aramaic loan-word *mysteryn*,¹⁰ appearing occasionally in Palestinian rabbinic literature, is borrowed from the Greek *mysterion*. While in its other rabbinic contexts it seems to bear the meaning of a hidden or secret message, its usage in the present polemical context suggests another dimension of its meaning. Here Mishnah, rabbinic oral tradition, is raised to the theological level of a ritual *mysterion*, a sacramental medium the incorporation of which secures a participation of the believer in the life of the divine.¹¹ Like the mysteries celebrated in the sacramental

10 Here I follow the vocalization attested by M. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature*, New York 1982, p. 806, and M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, Ramat Gan 1990, p. 306.

11 For the semantic range of *mysterion* in Patristic usage, see the article by Bornkamm cited in n. 6 above. In taking this line of approach to the term *mysteryn*, I depart

life of the Church, the Mishnah has the power to convey transformative blessing to the individual.

This ascription to rabbinic oral tradition of the status of a mystery is no mere accident of usage, but rather is employed deliberately, with polemical intent. It therefore casts interesting light upon the entire rabbinic oral traditional enterprise. In order to flesh out my thought, it will first be necessary to describe in some detail the role played by oral performative traditions¹² in the rabbinic discipleship communities of the Galilee from the third through fifth centuries.

The Sacramental Meaning of Oral Torah

The rabbinic privileging of oral media for the transmission of the extra-biblical traditions of Torah is well-known and requires no documentation here. What may be worthwhile is a consideration of the broader cultural setting of the rabbinic insistence that knowledge transmitted in rabbinic tradition be possessed in the memory and be recited publicly without reference to written copies. I have argued in a number of places¹³ that the rabbinic insistence upon oral, memorized mastery of learned tradition is part of a larger cultural discourse about the nature of books and learning that occupied both pagan and Christian intellectuals of the late Roman and early Byzantine East.¹⁴ All granted that books contained important knowledge. At issue was whether the book was the essential vessel of knowledge or, to the contrary, the book's knowledge was most authoritatively represented in the person of the teacher of the book.

from the excellent contextual interpretation offered by M. Bregman, 'Mishnah and LXX as Mystery: An Example of Jewish-Christian Polemic in the Byzantine Period,' in: L. Levine ed., *Continuity and Renewal: Jews and Judaism in Byzantine-Christian Palestine*, Jerusalem 2004), pp. 333-342. My position is that Bregman's understanding of *mystery* as a reference to oral tradition is not replaced but augmented by my own contribution.

12 In *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE - 400 CE*, New York and Oxford, 2001, p. 8, I describe 'oral performative tradition' as follows: 'the sum of performative strategies through which oral-literary tradition is summoned from memory and delivered in diverse public settings'.

13 Most recently in M. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, pp. 126-152.

14 See the essential study of H. G. Snyder, *Teachers, Texts, and Students: Textual Performance and Patterns of Authority in Greco-Roman Schools*, New Haven 1998.

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As the work of Richard Valantasis on the role of pagan and Christian spiritual guides in the third century has shown, there was a wide range of opinion on this matter.¹⁵ In some settings, the book was clearly the key and the teacher merely the occasion for opening the mind of the student to the venerable words of the author. In others, the book was but a stepping stone to the living teacher, who authoritatively embodied the teaching of the book. In the former setting, the student was the disciple of the book's (often long-dead) author, and only through convenience associated with the living teacher who taught the book. In the latter, the student was the disciple of the living teacher; the author of the book effectively effaced by the authoritative embodiment of the book in the Master.

Rabbinic discipleship in Roman and Byzantine Palestine, as it is reflected repeatedly in texts generated from Galilean discipleship circles, is clearly at home in the latter camp. Torah was certainly found in the Book authored by Moses. And all rabbinic Sages and their disciples were, in this sense, disciples of Moses who knew him through his book. But mastery of Moses' written Torah was preliminary to the mastery of an unwritten Torah, knowledge of which was possible only by immersing oneself in a web of human relationships constituted by the discipleship circle of a particular living Torah Master.¹⁶ The traditional embodiment of Torah was not found in a written collection of wise teachings offered by Sages, although there is growing reason to suspect that such written collections existed at an early stage. Rather, real Torah was found in the mouth of the Teacher, the Sage whose own discipleship to a previous master now entitled him to represent himself as an authoritative teacher.

The rabbinic Sage imparted not merely wisdom. He transmitted a body of knowledge that had to be memorized through repetition and

15 R. Valantasis, *Spiritual Guides of the Third Century: A Semiotic Study of the Guide-Disciple Relationship in Christianity, Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, and Gnosticism*, Minneapolis 1991.

16 The social structure of the Galilean discipleship communities of the third century and later has recently become the subject of intensive research. See the comprehensive study of C. Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Palestine*, Tuebingen 1997, and S. Miller, *Sages and Commoners in Late Antique Erez Israel*, Tuebingen 2004.

reiterated in oral performance. Specific oral texts had to be made second nature, available on the fingertips under the pressure of oral disquisition. To be sure, especially gifted memorizers committed to memory various compilations of oral tradition - the various collections referred to generically as *matnyta* or *mishnah* - and served as authoritative textual sources. But in fact any disciple would eventually have to master enormous bodies of memorized text in order to be regarded as a Master in his own right.

Clearly, one social function of this emphasis upon memorization is to close the circle of rabbinic knowledge to a self-selecting elite. If Torah knowledge was exclusively oral and procured in face-to-face settings of instruction, only those who survived the initiatory life of discipleship could gain access to the rabbinic tradition. Even if one should chance upon a written copy of the tradition, its arcana and idiom would be virtually unintelligible without the oral instruction offered by the Master.

A by-product of this self-selecting function of the unwritten text tradition is to enhance the necessity and the authority of the Teacher. If the real Torah cannot be found in any written source, not even the written Torah of Moses, then the living teacher is the only effective source of the covenant knowledge upon which Israel depends for its connection to God's blessing in this world and for its ultimate redemption in the messianic future.

At this point we can begin to appreciate the sacramental, priestly dimension of the imparting of oral tradition in the settings of rabbinic discipleship. Consider, for example, this early text from the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael (*mishpatim* 1), which surely stands somewhere behind the far more famous *baraita* of B. 'Eruvin 54b that describes Moses' laborious repetition of Torah knowledge to Aaron and his other disciples:¹⁷

Rabbi Aqiva says: *And these are the statutes* (Ex. 21:1), why is this stated? For it also states: *Speak to the children of Israel and say to them*. From this I only infer one time. How do we know to repeat twice, three times, and four times until they learn?

17 Ed. Horovitz-Rabin, p. 246.

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Scripture says: *And teach it to the children of Israel* (Dt. 31:19). Can this mean to teach but not to repeat? Scripture says: *Place it in their mouths* (Dt. 31:19). Can this mean to repeat it but not that they grasp the meaning? Scripture says: *These are the statutes* - arrange it before them like a set table, in the sense of what is said: *You have been shown in order to know* (Dt. 4:35).

At the simplest level, this text is merely technological in focus: if students are to memorize their Torah, they must do so through repetition. And if they are to understand what they have labored to memorize, they must have mastered its proper interpretation. Let me point out, however, that elements of this texts suggest that such memorization was not merely a mnemonic technique, but in a sense a spiritual technology that had as its goal the transmission to the student of life-giving, life-transforming blessing.

Note, first of all, the proof text that anchors the requirement to repeat traditions four times in order to enable the student's memorization: Torah must be 'placed in the mouths' of the disciples by the Sage. This verse brings into the depiction of textual memorization a digestive metaphor that has some antecedents in the Jewish prophetic tradition (e.g. Ezek. 3:1-3),¹⁸ was quite common in the larger world of Greco-Roman intellectual life,¹⁹ and which, as described so richly in the work of Mary Carruthers,²⁰ had enormous impact on medieval Latin Christian literary culture. Sacred texts are to be ingested so that their contents become part of the substance of the student. And from what does the sage select his menu of Torah? From the 'set table' of texts and teachings that have been arranged by God himself for the spiritual nourishment of his people.

In a rabbinic culture that was well aware of the potential of the common table for transformation into an homology of the Temple

18 On the transformative character of Ezekiel's ingestion of the word of God, see S. Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature*, Louisville 1996, pp. 82-83.

19 See, for example, P. Hadot, 'Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy,' *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990), pp. 494-500.

20 M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge 1990, especially pp. 164-169.

altar, the sacramental implications of this passage would have been clear. The words placed in the disciple's mouth by his teacher come from the altar itself; the disciple ingests them and, in so doing, shares in the sacrificial meal that links him to the redemptive community of Israel through the ministrations of the Sage.

Have we, conceivably, read too much into a few rabbinic lines that seem to link Torah to metaphors of nourishment and sacrifice? Perhaps a look at a rather more explicit text, also from the earlier strata of rabbinic textual compositions might be helpful. Observe what we find in Sifre Devarim 317 with regard to Moses' final song to the children of Israel (Dt. 32:13-14). Within a larger sequence of decodings of the terms of the scriptural verse, the midrash offers the following:²¹

Another interpretation: He set him atop the highlands - this refers to the Temple, which is higher than the entire world, for it is said: *And you shall arise and go up to that place* (Dt. 17:8)...

That he might feast on the yield of my fields - this refers to the baskets of first fruits.

He fed him honey from the rock, and oil from flinty stone - this refers to the oil pourings.

The butter of cattle and the milk of flocks, with the best of lambs - this refers to the sin offering, and the whole offering, and the communion offering, and the thanksgiving offering, and the guilt offering, and the minor sacrifices.

With the finest of wheat - this is the meal offering.

And with blood of the grape shall you drink as wine - this is the wine offering.

Clearly the midrashist has seen the various foodstuffs from which Israel is destined to nourish itself in the land of Palestine as anticipations of the sacrificial offerings that fertilize the land and ensure the availability of such products for human use. Note how he follows this exegesis with yet 'another interpretation':

He set him atop the highlands - this refers to Torah, for it is said: *God acquired me at the beginning of his path* (Prov. 8:22).

21 Ed. L. Finkelstein, p. 359.

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That he might feast on the yield of my fields - this refers to Scripture.

And he fed him oil from the rock - this is Repeated Tradition (*mishnah*).

And oil from flinty stone - this is dialectical interpretation (*talmud*).
The butter of cattle with the milk of flocks, and the best of lambs - these are logical inferences, exegetical deductions, rulings, and responses.

With the finest of wheat - these are the *halakhot*, which are the essence of Torah.

And the blood of grape shall you drink as wine - these are the *aggadot* which draw out a person's heart like wine.

Here there is no doubt that the nourishment which Israel is to draw from the land is nothing less than Torah, in particular, the elements of Oral Torah mediated through rabbinic teaching. In the associative logic of *midrash*, moreover, these are placed in juxtaposition with the sacrificial service. We find here, of course, the assumption, quite explicit throughout the rabbinic corpus, that the study of Torah is equivalent to the sacrificial rite of the Temple.²²

What I would add is that this is more than metaphor. The transmission of words of Torah from Sage to disciple, and the disciple's active appropriation of those words through memorization, is the very procedure in which the life-giving divine word is internalized in the substance of the disciple. The Sage gives of his own life-substance, his own Torah, to the disciple, who then is enlivened by the Sage's Torah, and gains his life through it.

There is a text from the Talmud Yerushalmi which beautifully illustrates the rabbinic sense that words of Torah are not merely instructive, but in fact constitute a life-giving medium that binds Sage and disciple. It concerns the well-known rabbinic protocol of citing words of Torah in the name of the teacher from whom one first heard them. According to P. Sheqalim 2:7, 47a (cf. B. Bekhorot 31b), this is

²² For example, B. Meg. 16b, B. Qid. 40b, B. San. 44b and numerous other sources.

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more than a rabbinic form of copyright or a way of preserving the memory of teachers in the imaginations of later disciples:

Shimon b. Nezira in the name of Rabbi Yitzhak: When a Sage's traditions are recited in this world, his lips move simultaneously in the grave, for it is said: *Your palate is like fine wine moving the lips of those who sleep* (Song of Songs 7:10).

Here we see the sacramental, transformative quality of Torah operative in an utterly unanticipated way. The Sage's teaching once gave life to the disciple by incorporating him into the communion of Torah. In return, the disciple has now the power to restore a kind of life - the only kind that matters - to the Sage; the life found in Torah which not even death has the power to destroy entirely. The Sage, dispensing the sanctified element of Torah into the mouth of the disciple, has created the disciple as a well of Torah himself; and by so doing he ensures that his own death will be overcome by the disciple's restoration of the Sage's Torah to speech.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me clarify what I am trying to argue by distinguishing it from what I am *not* trying to say. I intend here no facile interpretive *legerdemain* that imposes upon the materials of rabbinic religion entirely foreign models and paradigms. Rabbinic Torah was not the consecrated bread and wine of the *eucharist*; nor was the Sage's role as teacher in rabbinic society identical in many respects to the increasingly liturgical role of priests in the formative Church. Yet rabbinic instruction in Oral Torah in the *bet midrash* did for their disciples precisely what the distribution of bread and wine achieved for throngs of Christian communicants - these rites of incorporation brought the participants into a redemptive communion that transcended death. They brought into the body something that came from outside; something that had to be mediated by a person already sanctified to his task. And the mediated thing was the life giving Word of God - among the Sages, in the form of language that was incorporated into the body through memorization

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of its diction; among the Christians, in the form of bread and wine that united the communicant with the body of redemption.²³

23 As I was correcting proofs for this essay, I received from Prof. Yaakov Sussmann of Hebrew University an offprint of his recent essay, 'Oral Torah Means Just That' (Hebrew), in: Y. Sussmann and D. Rosenthal, eds., *Meḥqerei Talmud*, Jerusalem 2005, pp. 209-384. There he restates with great vigor his view that no written copies of the Mishnah in its entirety existed in the Talmudic period. He is certainly correct that up to now there is little evidence for the existence of a complete written copy of the Mishnah in the 3rd-7th century rabbinic communities. Historians, however, must use caution in 'proving' the non-existence of entities! As Sussmann himself recognizes, ample evidence points to the use of writing on surfaces such as wax tablets, walls, and synagogue mosaic floors, at least on occasion, for mnemonic or other instrumental purposes. Thus, while it may be true that written copies of the Mishnah in its entirety post-date the 'Talmudic period', it is quite wrong to conclude that writing played no role in the composition and transmission of material included in extant recensions of the Mishnah. There is no doubt, however, that such writings, whatever their documentary range or character, were not permitted any place in the ritual performance of oral texts that constituted the training of disciples. On this question I agree entirely with Prof. Sussmann.

Oral Transmission of Knowledge as Rabbinic Sacrament: An Overlooked Aspect of Discipleship in Oral Torah Martin S. Jaffee

Introduction: Rabbinic Sacramentalism? It is no news to announce that in rabbinic Judaism learning and study are holy, even sanctifying activities. But what is gained by asserting, as I do in the title of this essay, that aspects of classical rabbinic learning, particularly its insistence on the oral mastery of textual material, are usefully described as not merely 'sanctifying' but 'sacramental' acts?Â Tel Aviv 1963]. 70 Oral Transmission of Knowledge as Rabbinic Sacrament The Blessed Holy One knew that the Nations would translate the Written Torah and read it in Greek. And they would say: 'The Jews are not Israel!' A common rabbinic strategy when dealing with the problem of biblical heroes, whose conduct neither shares the same ethical values nor the normative command structure of the mitzvot that is the bread and butter of rabbinic concern, is to recast them in rabbinic mold. What has often been overlooked in classical rabbinic literature is the conscious use of irony and satire that can transform an apparent approbation into its opposite. Paradigmatic of this literary strategy is the case of aggadot regarding David. This article focuses on such passages in the Bavli normally understood as laudatory of The Oral Torah was transmitted from father to son and from teacher to discipleOriginally the Oral Law was not transcribed. Instead it was transmitted from father to son and from teacher to disciple (thus the name "Oral" Law). Approximately 1800 years ago, Rabbi Judah the Prince concluded that because of all the travails of Exile, the Oral Law would be forgotten if it would not be recorded on paper.Â Although the Torah commands us to follow these gezayrot, there are distinctions between a rabbinic decree and a Torah law. One of the distinctions is that when there is a doubt concerning a Torah law one must be stringent, whereas if there is a doubt in a rabbinic decree one may be lenient.Â A timeline of the transmission of the Oral Law. 2 Comments. What Is Torah?