Heavenly Torah
As Refracted through the Generations

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Edited and Translated from the Hebrew
with Commentary
by
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with
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continuum
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when Rabban Gamaliel received a letter from Rabbi Ishmael: “I see that you, too, have been interpreting a scriptural verse with you and you did not lack the day on which Israel crossed the Red Sea. I had not noticed that, and you did not lack the time. In every day, the soil of Eretz Israel speaks with you and you did not lack the effort to prove to him that I want you to know that in the entire Tannaitic era, only Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva, a contemporary of Rabbi Ishmael, who were ushers in the study of aggadic literature, exceed in number the famous expositions, he would praise Rabbi Eleazar the Moda'i, and he would praise Rabbi Ishmael, the colleague of Rabbi Akiva.

A Profile of Rabbi Ishmael

Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva, the two greatest Tannaim of the third generation, were nicknamed “Fathers of the World.” Each of them founded new approaches to exegesis of the Torah and established in Israel schools that bear their names. From these schools came the great halakhic exegeses of the Torah. The Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael on Exodus, the Sifre on Numbers, and part of the Sifre on Deuteronomy came from the school of Rabbi Ishmael. And the Mekhilta of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai on Exodus, the Sifra on Leviticus, the Sifre Zuta on Numbers, and part of the Sifre on Deuteronomy came from the school of Rabbi Akiva.

The life of Rabbi Akiva and his profile became the subjects of many books and articles, but about the life of Rabbi Ishmael our knowledge is scant. Scholars have tried to reconstruct events and experiences in his life that may have shaped his influence as the master of Aggadah. It is likely that there were two Rabbis named Ishmael ben Elisha. The first was a High Priest who served in the Temple, and the second was his grandson, the colleague of Rabbi Akiva.

Despite these citations concerning Rabbi Ishmael’s prowess and expertise in Aggadah, Heschel does not mean to suggest that the Aggadah is to be identified with his school. On the contrary, Heschel wants to demonstrate that Aggadah’s seriousness already in classical times is signaled by the fact that the two great schools disputed one another on aggadic matters, and that their different approaches to the text showed up in aggadic disputes as well. The praise of Rabbi Ishmael given above is useful to Heschel, however, because (as will be seen) he wishes to rehabilitate the memory and reputation of Rabbi Ishmael, and he will seem to be taking sides with Ishmael often during this long treatment.

Rabbi Akiva’s martyrdom in 135 C.E. at the hands of the Romans is related in Jewish tradition and accepted as historical fact. Although Heschel here in his original text tells us, per tradition, that a similar death befell Rabbi Ishmael, recent scholarship debates whether Rabbi Ishmael also died a martyr’s death in the same conflict or died a natural death somewhat earlier. See Encyclopedia Judaica (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 9:83–86, s.v. “Ishmael ben Elisha.”
bearsome treated it, and for this reason we shall here point out a few details concerning his life.

His family hailed from the “landholders of the Upper Galilee,” and he was a son of the High Priest. He experienced his father’s service in the Temple, and he recalled “the garments that Abba wore, and the diadem that he placed in the middle of his forehead.” Concerning his childhood, it was related:

It happened that Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah went to Rome. There he was told about a child from Jerusalem, with a ruddy complexion, beautiful eyes, handsome face, and curly locks, standing in a pillory. Rabbi Joshua went to investigate. As he reached the entrance to the prison, he recited: “Who was it gave Jacob over to despoilment and Israel to plunderers?” (Isaiah 42:24). And the child responded: “Surely, the Lord against whom they sinned, in whose ways they would not walk, and whose Teaching they would not obey” (ibid.). Immediately, Rabbi Joshua began to weep, and he said: “I am certain that this child would be able to give teaching in Israel. I call heaven and earth to witness that I shall not budge from here until I redeem him at whatever price they shall set.” And it was related that he did not budge until he had redeemed him for a great deal of money. And it was not many days before he was giving instruction in Israel. Who was he? Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha.

Among his early masters was Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah. He also received instruction from Rabbi Eliezer ben Hycanus. Likewise, he was a disciple of Rabbi Nehunia ben Hakkaneh, from whom he learned his approach to exegesis of the Torah (by means of generalization and specification).

Rabbi Ishmael was apparent dation and adaptation and we government. Yet even he was righteous men who were cruel who became known as the “to one and condemned to death, Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Sime: ‘My master, my heart sir Rabbi Ishmael said to Rabbi Sin a judgment or for religious in drinking from your cup, or pu Torah says, ‘if you afflict, afflic a major or a minor affliction.’ My master, you have comforteful sm said to him: “Perhaps yo from sleep when a woman cam whether she was impure or pur husband, for you wished tc Rabbi Ishmael was beloved Azariah and Rabbi Akiva called Ishmael were killed, Rabbi Akiv ing, for had any goodness been and Rabbi Ishmael would have One who spoke and the world ou generation, and these two is written: ‘The righteous man away, and no one gives though

There has long been confusion surrounding the various places in rabbinic literature in which Rabbi Ishmael is described as “the High Priest” (this is also so in the medieval liturgy about the ten martyrs that is recited on the Day of Atonement). Among some, Rabbi Ishmael is understood to be the grandson of a High Priest who was also named Ishmael ben Elisha, whereas others take the title “High Priest” in a nonliteral way (since Rabbi Ishmael lived several decades after the destruction of the Temple). Heschel here adopts the first point of view, adding that he was also the son of a functioning High Priest and thus is called a High Priest himself (as he would have been, had the Temple remained in operation). Separating historical fact from mythic narrative is always tricky in such questions. See Gershom Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1941), 356 n. 3; and Encyclopedia Judaica, s.v. “Ishmael ben Elisha.”

Kedath u-serat (“General and Specific”) is a hermeneutic method associated with Rabbi Ishmael. It makes significant but conservative inferences from the fact that the Scripture sometimes speaks in general categories, sometimes in specifics, and sometimes juxtaposes general and specific descriptions of legal cases side by side. By contrast, Rabbi Akiva is associated with the method ribbu umiut (“Expansion and Exclusion”). This more radical method seizes on a variety of common words and nuances in the Torah’s language as invitations to expand and constrict the categories under discussion in a very free and sweeping fashion. See Glossary, ribbu and miut.
Rabbi Ishmael was apparently among those sages who inclined toward accommodation and adaptation and were opposed to rebellion and revolt against the Roman government. Yet even he was touched by the deadly sword, for he was one of the ten righteous men who were cruelly put to death during the Hadrianic persecutions, and who became known as the “ten martyrs.” When these righteous men were imprisoned and condemned to death, what did they say to one another? “The time came for Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Simeon to be executed, and Rabbi Simeon said to Rabbi Ishmael: ‘My master, my heart sinks, because I know not why I am being put to death!’ Rabbi Ishmael said to Rabbi Simeon: ‘Did it never happen that a man came to you for a judgment or for religious instruction and you put him off until you had finished drinking from your cup, or putting on your shoes, or donning your cloak?’ And the Torah says, ‘if you afflict, afflict them . . . ’ (Exodus 22:22)\[107\]—that is, whether it be a major or a minor affliction. And because of this answer, Rabbi Simeon said to him: My master, you have comforted me!”\[114\] Or, according to another version, Rabbi Ishmael said to him: “Perhaps you were disturbed while eating a meal, or were roused from sleep when a woman came to ask instruction concerning her menstruation, and whether she was impure or pure, and you told her to go and resume relations with her husband,\[108\] for you wished to sleep . . . .”\[115\]

Rabbi Ishmael was beloved and admired among his colleagues. Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah and Rabbi Akiva called him “my brother.”\[116\] “When Rabbi Simeon and Rabbi Ishmael were killed, Rabbi Akiva said to his disciples: brace yourselves for great suffering, for had any goodness been the destiny of our generation, none but Rabbi Simeon and Rabbi Ishmael would have received it first. Rather, it is revealed and known to the One who spoke and the world came into being, that great suffering is the destiny of our generation, and these two were removed from our midst first, so as to fulfill what is written: ‘The righteous man perishes, and no one considers; pious men are taken away, and no one gives thought . . . ’ (Isaiah 57:1).”\[117\]
Two Philosophical Methods

The fact that at a crossroads in Jewish history two "fathers of the world" met, men who were to become trailblazers in religious philosophy, is of major importance. The meeting of intellectual giants of opposing aspirations, who debated on issues of ultimate significance, inevitably laid bare problems in religious faith that the Sages tended to conceal.

Each generation has its exegetes. Each riddle has its solutions; and the deeper the riddle, the more numerous the solutions. The Torah itself can be acquired in two different ways: via the road of reason or the road of vision. Rabbi Ishmael's path was that of the surface, plain meaning of the text. Rabbi Akiva's path was that of the esoteric meaning. And it is clear that they did not construct their methods ex nihilo. Such divergences of paths are the work of generations, and these differences did not suddenly appear in the generation of Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva. Their source lay in diverse approaches to Jewish teachings, as they were handed down by tradition over the course of whole eras. The nation harbored treasures of thought, and Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva served as mouthpieces for voices and echoes of generations that preceded them. Yet it was also in their schools that these ideas crystallized and took on a form that had been unknown to previous generations. For they were able to channel ancient and powerful intellectual flows and, in so doing, nourish generations yet to come.

We shall not be able to reach the foundation stone of this debate merely through a comparative study, but rather through an intense consideration of the essence of each method, at a depth that transcends individual ideas. Such research will lay out before us that deepest level of thought on which both intellectual movements drew and from which also flowed their debates and contradictions.

Intellectual debates and psychological rumblings are the stuff of every generation. Spiritual problems continually shed forms and take on new ones. Before you can understand the intellectual movements of recent times, you must inquire into the chain of tradition that precedes them. The things about which Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael disagreed will be creditable to understanding each other's methods and the contexts in which they were constructed.

We shall consider the two methods and make an effort to comprehend them, always with an eye to their historical context. For without such context, these methods bring nothing but confusion.

**Rabbi Ishmael** disagreed with the methods of the school of Rabbi Akiva. He believed that the Torah is to be understood literally, without any figurative interpretation. He was a scholar of the derosh, the literal meaning of the text.

**Rabbi Akiva**, on the other hand, believed that the Torah is to be understood esoterically, with mystical and allegorical interpretations. He was a scholar of the peshot, the metaphorical and allegorical meaning of the text.

Both methods are necessary and complementary to understanding the Torah. They represent two different approaches to the study of the text, and both have contributed significantly to the development of Jewish thought.

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109] In this section, Heschel, who had a great appreciation of music and musical form, writes a true overture to the chapters that follow. Almost every line is a thematic anticipation of some point that will be developed later in the book. Indeed, there is so much overlap that some parts of this section have been excised in this edition to avoid redundancy. But some foreshadowing is quite useful, and in these editorial notes we point out only the most striking anticipations of later issues and topics. The careful reader will be able to pick up many more.

110] The riddle referred to here is the very nature of Torah, what its essence is and how it communicates to human beings. This is the central issue of chapter 2.

111] Here Heschel is tipping us off to what is, in many ways, his real agenda in this work, that is, contemporary Jewish issues, such as post-Shoah theology, attitudes to prayer, fundamentalisms, etc. These contemporary issues will sometimes be dealt with overtly in subsequent chapters, and sometimes covertly, but they will always be there.

112] Here Heschel is staking identifications of certain points on his school. Such criticisms were, ir not expect major approaches to be made at times we find discrete met notes of understanding to nine measures of profound energy on clarity and precision.

113] This is not to say that Rabbi Akiva was responsible for what is attributed to Akiva or one of his schools. Making this reassessment of how thoroughly laissez-faire and intertwined in contemporary W life, two distinctly identifiable schools' claims should be understood.

114] A reference to Isaiah 6: 9. This division of approaches was changed by seeing the
Here Heschel is staking out a kind of "zone of immunity" from potential criticisms about his identifications of certain points of view and methodologies to Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva and their schools. Such criticisms were, in fact, forthcoming, but Heschel is here making the claim that one cannot expect major approaches like this to be perfectly distinct from one another. Thus, if sometimes appears to be a "crossing of the wires," in which an Ishmaelian view shows up in a statement attributed to Akiva or one of his disciples, this disclaimer covers him. But while there is a tactical reason for Heschel making this remark here, it is also no doubt true to a large extent. One need only think of how thoroughly laissez-faire economics and the workings of the welfare state have become intertwined in contemporary Western democracies. This does not imply that there were not, and are not, two distinctly identifiable streams of thought answering to these descriptions. Heschel's claim should be understood similarly.

This is not to say that Rabbi Ishmael is being identified with a devotion to literal meaning. On the contrary, we are speaking here of "plain" or "surface" meaning (the real denotation of the Hebrew peshot). Literal meaning may be very far from plain meaning. A good example of this would be the well-known commentary of Samuel ben Meir (RaSHBaM) on Exodus 13:9. RaSHBaM, who was noted as a devotee of plain meaning, taught that the plain meaning of "this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder between your eyes" is a metaphorical one. In this case, the literal meaning (adopted by Jewish practice, hence the phylacteries) is not the plain or surface meaning. It will be crucial to keep this distinction between literal and plain meaning in mind during all that follows in this work. These issues will be dealt with in chapter 13, "The Language of Torah," especially the sections on peshot, derosh, and sod, the modalities of interpretation.

What were Rabbi Ishmael's personal characteristics? Delicacy, intellectual reserve, clear thinking, and sobriety. He sought the middle way, and his words were carefully measured. His emotional equilibrium and his intellectual sobriety did not allow his feelings to sweep him off into extremism. He preferred one small, immaculate measure of understanding to nine measures of extremism; one small measure of lucidity to nine measures of profundity. Paradox was anathema to him, and he expended his energy on clarity and precision, on that which was given to understanding and cognition.

Rabbi Akiva could be credited with seeking out the wondrous; Rabbi Ishmael could be credited with shunning the wondrous. He shook no structural beams; neither Rabbi Akiva nor Rabbi Ishmael disagreed were still the subjects of debates and triumphant disputations among medieval scholars, and they are still on the agenda today.

Everything cycles in the world; and just as the intellectual problems remain with us, so does the tension. The divergences and dissensions between the two "fathers of the world" continued on their way throughout the generations. It is just that sometimes we find discrete methodologies, each internally consistent, and sometimes we find the two intellectual subsets included side by side, or intertwined, within a single method. Sometimes one approach appears to have been subsumed by the other, and sometimes they have been synthesized, so that it seems that two rival ways of grasping the world can somehow coexist within the same mind.

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ther did he impose his authority on the text. Among his good qualities was a level-headed caution. Better in his eyes was a single measure of reflection on what is written and given than massive speculation above and beyond to the very limits of apprehension. One who sees Rabbi Ishmael in a dream should “anticipate wisdom.”

Rabbi Ishmael’s teachings contained straightforward logic, and with it lucidity, simplicity of language, and an aversion to intellectual games. Attributions to him have no superfluity of language or florid expressions. He sought to strip Scripture of anthropomorphisms and to excise unnecessary metaphor and imagery.[116]

But Rabbi Akiva’s teachings sought to penetrate to inner depths, with profundity and potency of language. He did not shrink from anthropomorphism, but rather he preserved the concrete in Scripture,[117] cherished imaginative meanings, added metaphorical embellishments, and created images of the supernal world. Instead of a logic that was subservient to surface meaning, he championed free exegesis and intellectual flights.

A poet at heart, and at the same time a razor-sharp genius, Rabbi Akiva was special in that two fundamental qualities were combined in him: poetry and acuity, the esoteric and the analytic. This rugged man wanted to stand in the Divine Assembly, to roll away the veil from the Torah’s secrets. He was caught up in matters that mortal reason cannot apprehend, and his words were sung by the torch of desire to discern the uppermost realms.[118]

Rabbi Akiva articulated his thoughts in order to rouse the public, to demand action from them, to be their guide; and he was the first among the heroes in the wars of Torah. He was a man of action, a spokesman for his people, a public servant, and a traveler to lands beyond the sea. At the same time he was a man in whose soul a poetic spirit moved. His heart and mind sang out to the living God, and in his very language he decoded some of the riddles of life and sought out the secret of Israel’s existence in the world.[119]

Rabbi Akiva amazed those of his generation with his heroic actions. He did not fear bringing down the wrath of Israel’s enemies. He was not wary of danger, and he taught many how to revolt and fight, and how, if necessary, to give their lives for the commandments. A triumphant tune sounded in the sanctuary of Rabbi Akiva.

In the sanctuary of Rabbi Ishmael there was a still small voice.[120] He was moderate in all things, be they heavenly or terrestrial. Just as he guarded against excess in demanding martyrdom, he too, taught many, and the teachings of Rabbi Akiva, w. Pardes, inclined toward a sense of heroism.

The theme of divine participation in all things, be they heavenly or terrestrial, just as he guarded against excess in demanding martyrdom, severely Israel’s chances of heroism. He, too, taught many, and

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[116] That is, the Ishmaelian approach sees words as primarily denoting things rather than serving as symbols for many layers of meaning. The fundamental Ishmaelian and Akivan approaches to language will be discussed in chapter 2. Their approaches to anthropomorphisms in Scripture will be treated in chapter 12.

[117] For example, Akiva would accept and preserve anthropomorphisms that were the literal (but not plain) meaning of Scripture.

[118] This describes the compassionate One—was Simeon bar Yohai. This nickname w. for his sayings.

[119] The theme of divine participation in the next section of this chapter of Rabbi Ishmael.

[120] As a reference to Elijah’s epiphany at Mount Horeb given in 1 Kings 19, this is meant to suggest that Ishmael was not given to zealotry (just as Elijah’s zealotry was the subject of God’s lesson to him in that revelation).
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ate in all things, be they heavenly matters or mundane matters concerning his peo-
ple. Just as he guarded against extremism in exegesis, so did he criticize those who
went to excess in demanding martyrdom, for too much victimization was likely to
hamper severely Israel’s chances of survival. The world is built on compassion, not on
heroism. He, too, taught many, and his lesson was: this is not the way. [1121]
The teachings of Rabbi Akiva, who dealt with metaphysics and who entered the
Pardes, inclined toward a sense of mutual empathy with God. It was not just Israel
whom God redeemed from Egypt. “As it were, You redeemed Yourself.” [1122] He taught
that the participation of the Holy and Blessed One in the life of Israel is not merely a
mental nod, a measure of compassion born of relationship to God’s people. The pain
of compassion amounts to pain at a distance; it is the pain of the onlooker. But the
participation of the Holy and Blessed One is that of total identification, something
that touches God’s very essence, God’s majestic being. As it were, the afflictions of
the nation inflict wounds on God. “Wherever Israel was exiled, the Shekhinah
accompanied them . . . and in the future, when they will return from exile, the
Shekhinah will, as it were, accompany them as well.” The Holy and Blessed One is a
partner in the suffering of His creatures; He is involved in the lot of His people,
wounded by their sufferings and redeemed by their liberation.
In the wake of this reversal there was effected a veritable revolution in religious
thought, one that exerted a profound influence through the course of the genera-
tions. From time immemorial the people had perceived the salvation of Israel as a
human need, a national need, through which, to be sure, God’s name would be mag-
nified in the world. But now Rabbi Akiva taught that Israel’s salvation is a divine
need. From this circle of thought emerged language such as: “The Holy and Blessed
One yearns for the prayers of the righteous”; “one whose toil is Torah brings satisfac-
tion to his Creator”; “for God’s sake”; “we need each other”; “you should have
assisted Me”; “redemption is Mine and yours”; and “Israel’s salvation is the salvation
of the Holy and Blessed One.” Mundane matters have their parallels above. They
dared to look, and in so doing, they found that the pains of the nation were indeed
paralleled by the pains of the Creator. And thus, instead of bearing their own afflic-
tions, the people began instead to share in the afflictions of Heaven.
Tannaitic literature contains many appellations for the Holy and Blessed One, and
they are all in Hebrew. Note that the only such appellation in Aramaic—rahamana,
the compassionate One—[123]—was used by Rabbi Akiva and by his disciple Rabbi
Simeon bar Yoḥai. This nickname was cherished by the Amoraim and is ubiquitous in
their sayings.
Foreign to the teachings of Rabbi Ishmael were Rabbi Akiva’s ideas that the Holy
and Blessed One participated in the pain of His creatures, in the sufferings of individ-

[111] This description of Rabbi Ishmael as “countercultural” sets us up for Heschel’s description in
the next section of this chapter of Rabbi Akiva’s victory in the nation’s hearts and minds.
[122] The theme of divine participation in human suffering will be expanded on in chapter 6.
[123] Here used in the sense of “empathetic One.”
ual Jews and of the nation. Such an idea is not befitting God's dignity and could lead to a denial of the power of the Holy and Blessed One. In Rabbi Ishmael's teachings, it is God's measure of judgment and God's power that are primary, not the measure of compassion.[124]

Rabbi Akiva justified God's ways, the sufferings that God brings on the righteous, and the tranquility in which the wicked dwell. It is an act of kindness that the Creator does for the righteous when God brings upon them injuries and calamities; and it is just that God lets tranquility flow over the wicked in this world. On the contrary, when afflictions did not come [to the righteous], he would say in astonishment: "Could it be that the Master has already enjoyed his reward?" You may say, "there is a righteous person suffering," but in reality, "one cannot argue with the judgments of the One who spoke and the world came into being, because all is truthful and just!" The world is judged for the good!" A righteous person who suffers from affliction should not say, "it is bad for me." Afflictions are precious, and a truly righteous person does not rebel against them. Instead of saying "a righteous person is suffering," rather say, "in the case of a righteous person, whatever the Compassionate One does is valuable and precious." Why was Moses our Master punished, so that he would not enter the Land? Because he challenged the Most High.[125] The divine pathos was the lens through which Rabbi Akiva saw the world and all that is in it. That which happens in nature is merely an expression of the sufferings on high.

This teaching discomfited Rabbi Ishmael, and he saw in it no adequate answer to the plaintive question: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are there righteous people who suffer? In his school it was taught that Moses, the chief of all the prophets, himself struggled with this problem, demanded an answer from the Holy and Blessed One, but was not granted it. From his school came forth the anguished cry: "Who is like You, God, among the mighty (Exodus 15:11)—who is like You in how you see the humiliation of Your children and remain silent?"[126]

An affinity for afflictions, which was for Rabbi Akiva a major life principle, demands analysis and investigation. Such an affinity is a matter that relates not only to the domain of humans' relationship to God but also to the value that human beings assign to the world itself. In that era a certain outlook gained prominence, an outlook that denigrated this world and emphasized the tension that exists between the transient and the eternal.[127] This world was seen as a place of impurity, and the world to come was the place of purity. Do these two worlds complement each other, or are they antagonists? Many Sages to labor in this world, for the pursuit of which a person shall keep My laws and my rules, (Exodus 18:5) to mean "in the world "by the pursuit of which a person those Sages who were prepared to study Torah, Rabbi Ishmael e prosperity, death and adversity. life' means learn a trade."[128]

Rabbi Akiva, who was not inclined terms, and who taught that the Sinai, also taught that the Shekhinah the indwelling of the Shekh subject to degrees. That is, the presence anywhere else. Rabbi Akiva and about whom the Talmud sa out, when the Holy and Blessed C thy to look at My Presence," had Divine Image. He was, after all, human beings would have per spoke the words of Torah he was onto Mount Sinai. Standing at & see our Sovereign!" and some face."[130]

Rabbi Ishmael, the one who a give pleasure to the Creator?, "ti before them" (Exodus 13:21) as all of heaven and earth?," reject. Instead, he offered the intellect somewhere." This principle rem tion and establishes instead that

[124] This anticipates the first section of chapter 11, "Judgment or Mercy?"
[125] That is, he doubted God's compassion.
[126] This is a play on the similarity of the words elum ("the mighty"), and limim ("the mute"). More on this in chapters 6 and 7.
[127] Thus, the first and second centuries were marked by many messianic movements, as well as by Gnosticism, which also denigrated the sensual world of creation. The relationship of rabbinic theology to dualistic currents in Hellenistic thought will find treatment in chapter 14.
[128] The this-worldly emphasis in R.
[129] The Temple in Jerusalem (like
[130] See the description in Exodus :
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God's dignity and could lead to the denigration of the here and now and the contempt for worldly affairs. In Rabbi Akiva's school, they had interpreted "You shall keep My laws and my rules, by the pursuit of which a person shall live" (Leviticus 18:5) to mean "in the world to come." Against this, Rabbi Ishmael expounded, "by the pursuit of which a person shall live—and not die." And in contradistinction to those Sages who were prepared to neglect the transient, and shun worldly trades so as to study Torah, Rabbi Ishmael expounded: "See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity . . . choose life' (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19)—'choose life' means learn a trade."

Rabbi Akiva, who was not inhibited about speaking of heavenly matters in physical terms, and who taught that the Divine Presence literally descended onto Mount Sinai, also taught that the Shekhinah dwells in the west. This point of view apprehends the indwelling of the Shekhinah as a physical habitation and therefore as being subject to degrees. That is, the presence of the Shekhinah in the west is unlike its presence anywhere else. Rabbi Akiva, who entered the Pardes and dealt in metaphysics, and about whom the Talmud says: "The ministering angels attempted to throw him out, when the Holy and Blessed One said to them: Leave this sage alone, for he is worthy to look at My Presence," had not a shred of doubt that Moses our Master saw the Divine Image. He was, after all, the one who taught that but for the effects of sin, human beings would have perceived the Divine Image directly, that when Moses spoke the words of Torah he was literally in heaven, and that the Presence descended onto Mount Sinai. Standing at Mount Sinai, the Israelites said to Moses: "We wish to see our Sovereign!" and some say that at Mount Sinai "they saw God face to face."[130]

Rabbi Ishmael, the one who asked: "Is it then possible for mere flesh and blood to give pleasure to the Creator?," the one who, in reaction to the phrase "And God went before them" (Exodus 13:21) asked, "Is it possible to say thus of the one who fills up all of heaven and earth?," rejected the idea that the Shekhinah is limited in space. Instead, he offered the intellectual and spiritual apprehension that "the Shekhinah is everywhere." This principle removes the idea of indwelling from the universe of location and establishes instead that the Shekhinah transcends space.[131]
Rabbi Ishmael also found that the very word Presence bears several meanings, and that the verse “Oh, let me behold Your Presence” (Exodus 33:18) should not be interpreted as referring to something that can be located in space, something that can be apprehended with the sense of sight, but rather as referring to that which is revealed in time. “Presence” means justice and righteousness, which are revealed in history. That is: Moses did not at all wish to see the Shekhinah, but rather yearned to understand the secret of the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked.

Rabbi Ishmael grasped the meaning of the verse “for man may not see Me and live” (Exodus 33:20) in its plain meaning, and thus held that Moses our Master did not see the Presence. When the Torah says of Moses, “he beholds the likeness of the Lord” (Numbers 12:8), “likeness” means that God sees; that is, Moses saw what the Holy and Blessed One sees. Moses was given to “see” God’s words but was not given a view of the Shekhinah. According to this approach, Israel said to Moses while standing at Mount Sinai: “We wish to hear directly from the mouth of our Sovereign!”[132] for the Holy and Blessed One sees but cannot be seen.

Rationalism and lucidity of thought characterized the teachings of Rabbi Ishmael. His greatness lay in a congenial straightforwardness amenable to all. Soaring visions marked the teachings of Rabbi Akiva; his language was a ladder planted on earth, ending in heaven. In one system of thought, there was clarity; in the other, profundity. Here, a shunning of the wondrous; there, a thirst to apprehend the hidden and the wondrous.

Here is an example of Rabbi Ishmael’s talent for revealing a verse’s intent from the surface meaning of a word. It is written: “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, in a human court he shall have his blood shed” (Genesis 9:6).[133] Why were the words “in a human . . . ” necessary? Along came Rabbi Ishmael and suggested, that even in the case of fetuses in their mothers’ wombs, one is liable for shedding their blood, for it is written: ‘Whoever sheds the blood of a human, in a human . . . ’ “What sort of a human is in a human? You must say it is a fetus in its mother’s womb.”[118]

[118] BT Sanhedrin 57b.

Contrast this with Rabbi Akiva’s image, for it is said: “Whoever shall shed blood, let it be shed.”[119]

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119 BT Sanhedrin 57b.

[132] The inversion of seeing and hearing here has its antecedent in the text itself, for Exodus 20:15 reports that the people "saw the thunder." In chapters 15 through 18, Heschel examines the influence of apocalyptic thought on the Akivan school and on early rabbinic mysticism. He considers "hearing" to be the central perceptual modality of the biblical prophets and of the Ishmaelian school, while "seeing" is characteristic of the apocalypticists and Rabbi Akiva's school.

[133] The translation given here is intended to make clear the basis of the exegesis in the possibility of re-parsing the sentence so as to read "the blood of a human in a human." Even in this form, it is inexact, because the word "court" must be added to give the sentence sense. In Hebrew, the ambiguity is much more apparent, because the prepositional letter bet can have a locational sense ("a human in a human, he shall have his blood shed"), or an instrumental sense ("a human, by means of a human he shall have his blood shed").
INTRODUCTION

*bears several meanings, and Exodus 33:18) should not be stated in space, something that as referring to that which is busines, which are revealed in akhinah, but rather yearned to us and the prosperity of the

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Contrast this with Rabbi Akiva’s exegesis: “Whoever sheds blood expunges the Image, for it is said: “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, in a human . . . shall his blood be shed.”

That is, the first occurrence of “human” (adam) is interpreted by him as the “heavenly adam,” and thus the one who kills it expunges the Image.

There are before us two methods for understanding the essence of Torah and prophecy. Often, in halakhic exegesis, Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva followed their methods for aggadic exegesis. Rabbi Akiva often departed widely from the plain meaning of the text, because he viewed the text through an esoteric lens. One who locates the Torah in heaven must believe that it has an existence distinct and apart, transcendent; and the Torah that we discourse over on earth is the same Torah that they discourse over in heaven. This point of view sees the Torah as infinite at its core. Its content—that is, that which is visible within the narrow confines of surface meaning—is like a mere drop in the sea. Rabbi Akiva believed that every detail and every stylistic form has a deep significance and a hidden intent.

To Rabbi Akiva, textual teachings were given in order to be expanded upon. One who interprets via the surface meaning alone is like a poor man looking for gleanings. To Rabbi Ishmael, textual teachings were given in order to be understood and to establish traditions, not to be expanded upon. Each verse’s plain teaching, which emerges from our rules of logic, is firm and steady, and whoever expands such teachings seeks to restamp the Torah with a die that is foreign to it.

Rabbi Akiva, a man drawn to the esoteric, who was not satisfied with the path of plain reason, felt that the covert in the Torah is far greater than the overt. Thus, he

**[134] This is to take the notion of Divine Image (in Genesis 1) very literally indeed. This contrasts, for example, with Philo of Alexandria, a bit more than a century before Akiva, for whom the Divine Image meant rationality. Heschel expands more on the notion of Divine Image in Rabbi Akiva’s thought in chapter 14 and sees it as a key instance of the “correspondence of the heavenly and terrestrial.”

**[116] Extreme caution is called for in interpreting Heschel’s language here. In a previous note in this section, we remarked that Ishmael had a transcendent view of the Divine Presence, and Akiva an immanent view. Here Heschel is focusing not on the Divine Image but on the nature of Torah. If the Torah is God’s book, and although it is on earth, it is still the book of the immanent God, then the words of the Torah must have qualities that transcend the normal canons of language. It is in this sense only that Akiva is here, and in other parts of this work, described as representing transcendence. It is critical that the reader keep this Heschelian ambiguity in mind and the senses straight.

**[137] That is, to be uncovered, layers of existing meaning discovered.

**[136] That is, seeking a minimal, subsistence level of nourishment.

**[135] That is, the text was given for a specific purpose—to communicate instruction to human beings. It is not beckoning to us to discover layers of existing meaning that are not already visible. However, the text does invite us, as does any straightforward set of instructions, to deduce new directives and truths from it, by the use of logic and reason. But that is construction, not discovery; and this summarizes the Ishmaelian view.
pursued the mysteries of Torah and found that the letters yield wisdom and reveal matters that reason could never imagine. According to his approach, human knowledge is unlike the knowledge contained in Torah, just as human language is unlike the language of Torah. From every jot and tittle, he would extract mounds and mounds of Halakhot.

Rabbi Ishmael, a man devoted to cool analysis, who had no concern for hidden things and who did not see the Torah as a transcendent existence, walked a straight, direct path. He tested and balanced verses against one another with the scales of logic, with no gimmicks, and explained them straightforwardly. “The Torah speaks in human language” was his guiding principle. The Torah was not given to the ministering angels, and a person can only judge what the eyes of reason see. According to his approach, plain reason is Torah’s faithful companion, and the more Torah is brought into harmony with plain reason, the better.

Rabbi Ishmael did not shrink from saying that there are things in the Torah that Moses said on his own authority, and that in many of the instances in which Moses heard things from on high, he transmitted the general meaning and not necessarily the actual words. And just as the Holy and Blessed One left prophets some degree of freedom, in order that they could be partners in prophecy, so did God leave the Sages some degree of freedom, that they might interpret via the thirteen logical rules. It is thus unnecessary for everything to be written in the Torah. Even that which is not explicitly there can be brought to light and derived by logical reason. When they do so, they are parcelling out the divine intent.

Over and against this, Rabbi Akiva believed that the expansion of Torah cannot be dependent on the powers of human reason. There is nothing that is not hinted at in the Torah, and there is no Halakhah that has no foundation in the text. All laws are embedded in the Torah and are hinted at by its letters.

On the rabbinic text that says, “When Rabbi Akiva died, the arms of the Torah were no more, and the fountains of wisdom were stopped up,” Rashi explains: “This refers to the depth of insight, and the ability to give support to every nuance of the Oral Torah by the exegesis of texts, and the study of additional letters and language changes in scripture” (BT Sotah 49b).

Rabbi Ishmael was prone to extreme views. According to him, commandments, statutes, a code of religion. The Torah does not reveal anything beyond human life. Rabbi Ishmael’s genre. There are words that do not belong to the habits of life. There are things that are optional, even, on obligation. In contrast, Rabbi commanding and imposing.

When Rabbi Akiva found widen, for in his view to the Torah’s secrets. Rabbi Ishmael speaks in human language. It is a mistake to take it at face value.

Occasionally, when Rabbi Ishmael would announce: “had it not been for Scripture wrote it, expressed astonishment on the face of the Sages, for he would then demonstrate the truth. Rabbi Ishmael would teach zar [Hebrew: “bizarre”], for in his view to the Torah’s secrets. The anagram does not quite make sense.

Rabbi Akiva would explain: “Torah’s secrets. Secret teachings, hidden things in the Torah. Secret meanings are not like everyday events.

[139] Heschel’s phrase here, which literally means “from the tail of every letter,” comes from BT Menahot 29b. The translation here is both (a) more in keeping with normal English usage, and (b) in keeping with the talmudic passage cited, since that story makes reference to the crowns (or “tittles”) that God was affixing to the letters so that Rabbi Akiva would someday discover their hidden meanings.

[140] Again, because in the Ishmaelian view, the words themselves are not important but only the instructions that they convey. Here Heschel anticipates issues that will be discussed below, particularly chapters 22–24.

[141] This is the central issue of chapter 26.

[142] See chapter 27, sections “Prophecy of the Sages” and “The Power of the Court.”

[143] Another explication of the central idea here, which is derivation vs. discovery.

[144] This is the “maximalist” view of “Torah from Heaven,” which will be articulated in chapter 31.
The Hebrew here is *apharkeset,* which means a funnel; the reference is to the Aggadah in BT Hagigah 3b. The theme will be developed in chapter 12, pp. 231–35.

This is the first section of chapter 12.

Rabbi Ishmael was focused and level-headed, weighing his words carefully and not prone to extreme views. According to him, the Torah sometimes teaches us not only commandments, statutes, and rules but also matters not confined to the boundaries of religion. The Torah does not hesitate to teach things pertaining to culture in general, such as good manners, accepted customs, and social mores that facilitate human life. Rabbi Ishmael’s view was that not all the words of Torah are of a single genre. There are words that convey the divine will, and there are words that relate the habits of life. There are things in the Torah that are obligatory, and there are those that are optional, even, on occasion, when they are formulated in the language of obligation. In contrast, Rabbi Akiva considered every single word of the Torah to be commanding and imposing obligation.

When Rabbi Akiva found difficult or strange language in the Torah, his ears would widen, for in his view strangeness in the text was a gateway to the discovery of the Torah’s secrets. Rabbi Ishmael’s goal was the integrity of the text. The Torah speaks in human language. If there is difficult or strange language in the Torah, then it is a mistake to take it at face value.

Occasionally, when Rabbi Akiva and his disciples came across a difficult text, they would announce: “had it not been written in Scripture, we could not have said it!” but since Scripture wrote it, it could then be said. Rabbi Ishmael, on the other hand, expressed astonishment on such occasions: “Can one really say such a thing?!” and he would then demonstrate that one could not take at face value verses that are not befitting the divine dignity.

Rabbi Ishmael would teach that *raz* [Hebrew: “secret meaning”] is an anagram for *zar* [Hebrew: “bizarre”], for a text should be interpreted according to its plain meaning. But Rabbi Akiva would teach that *peshat* [Hebrew: “plain meaning”] is an anagram for *tippesh* [Hebrew: “foolish”], for the truth cannot be grasped with nothing but the tongs of plain reason. The surface meaning is but one dimension of an esoteric meaning whose full dimensions have been lost, and the plain sense is a veil that eclipses language. In order to remove the veil, you must activate and stimulate the text, and exegete “every jot and tittle.”

In Rabbi Akiva’s view, human language is insignificant compared to the language of Torah. Secret meanings lurk in the Torah’s language, and the events narrated in it are not like everyday events. What does it mean to say that wonders do not conform
It is precisely contradictions that make truth emerge out of the constricted sheath of language.

There were thus two points of view among the Sages: (1) a transcendent point of view, comprising a method of thought always open to the higher realms, striving to understand matters of Torah through a supernal lens; and (2) an immanent point of view, comprising a method of thought modest and confined, satisfied to understand matters of Torah through an earthly lens defined by human experience. These points of view are foundational and paradigmatic, and from them are derived differing conceptions and analyses, rivals to one another. Thus were crystallized two differing methods of understanding the commandments and their underlying purposes. One says: if you sin, what do you do to Him; if your transgressions are many, how do you affect Him? If you are righteous, what do you give Him; what does He receive from your hand? Mortals need God, but surely God does not need the service of mortals! The other says: the Holy and Blessed One needs our service. One says: the commandments were given in order to provide justification to Israel; they were given only in order to refine God's creatures. And the other says: the commandments were given in order to bring pleasure to the Holy and Blessed One. Again, one says: a person makes a pilgrimage three times a year in order to be seen in the Presence of the Lord God; and the other says that just as one comes to see, so does one come to see, as a Master anticipates his servant coming to see him.

Rabbi Akiva, who viewed humanity through a heavenly lens, taught that "owing to our sins, people do not have the wherewithal to know the heavenly Image." He was among those Sages who entered the Pardes; that is: "they ascended to the firmament." By contrast, Rabbi Ishmael, who viewed humanity through an earthly lens, was not prone to those things that are beyond the ken of human reason; he had no concern for hidden things. The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He gave over to humans. The main worry should be about justice and righteousness in this world.

Rabbi Akiva’s Victory

At first not all the Sages were pleased with Rabbi Akiva’s method, and they criticized his exegeses. Rabbi Tarfon, for example, complained to him with impatience: “Akiva, how long will you keep gabbing?” Rabbi Yose the Galilean reproached him day long, we would not listen to matters of Aggada of the mighty" (Psalm 78:25). Ishmael, he said to them: Go an mentioned above, Rabbi Ishmael ments and move instead to matt similar things were said to him by Beteira once said to him: “You w Yet their opposition did not defeated his colleagues and his di “Happy are you, Father Abraham whoever disengages from you dis Rabbi Tarfon also gave us the: northward, and southward. No deliver from his power. He did ; Akiva.” The generation that s these principles: “Rabbi Ishmael: “The Halakhah agrees with Rabbi was even one view that “the t teacher.” From the days of Moses, the chent person in Israel. His teach became a dominant system of th influence, Rabbi Ishmael’s appr preserved in the Mekhilta of Rab Sifre to Deuteronomy, and in sca and Sifra follow the teachings o

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[149] And are therefore to be discounted.

[150] Here Heschel is using the words transcendent and immanent (or better: terrestrial) in the senses that will be elaborated in chapter 14. For the other use, see especially the editorial notes to chapter 2, section “The Exoteric and Esoteric Personalities.”

[151] Based on Job 35:6–7. The question whether worship is for human or divine “need” is the focus of chapter 4, especially the final sections.

[152] This is consistent with the idea that Judaism is primarily concerned with the here and now. But despite that common idea about Judaism, Heschel will claim in the next section that the visionary quality of Rabbi Akiva’s thought, not the down-to-earth quality of Rabbi Ishmael’s, tended to carry the day.

[153] As noted above, Akiva’s exegesis is based on the basis of the slightest textual pretexts and conjunctions in order to expand it have to be brought. To this exegesis his.

[154] Akiva interpreted “bread of the common idea about Judaism, Heschel will claim in the next section that the visionary quality of Rabbi Akiva’s thought, not the down-to-earth quality of Rabbi Ishmael’s, tended to carry the day.

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INTRODUCTION

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 how long will you keep gabbing with your exegeses?” (121) Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah and
 Rabbi Yose the Galilean reproached him: “Even if you were to expand the category all
day long, (153) we would not listen to you!” (122) The Sages especially faulted him for his
statements on matters of Aggadah. A case in point is his exegesis of the words “bread
of the mighty” (Psalm 78:25): (154) “When these words were recited before Rabbi
Ishmael, he said to them: Go and tell Akiva, ‘Akiva, you have erred!’” (123) As already
mentioned above, Rabbi Ishmael once said to Rabbi Akiva: “Desist from your state­
ments and move instead to matters concerning plagues and tent-impurities.” (124) Sim­
ilar things were said to him by Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, (125) and Rabbi Judah ben
Beteira once said to him: “You will one day have to give an accounting!” (126)

Yet their opposition did not avail them; Rabbi Akiva gained the upper hand. He
defeated his colleagues and his detractors, and Rabbi Tarfon eventually said of him:
“Happy are you, Father Abraham, that Akiva came from your loins,” (127) and “Akiva,
whoever disengages from you disengages from life!” (128)

Rabbi Tarfon also gave us this image of him: “I saw the ram butting westward,
northward, and southward. No beast could withstand him, and there was none to
deliver from his power. He did as he pleased and grew great” (Daniel 8:4)—that is
Akiva.” (129) The generation that succeeded him accepted his ideas. They established
these principles: “Rabbi Ishmael vs. Rabbi Akiva—the Halakhah follows Rabbi Akiva”;
“The Halakhah agrees with Rabbi Akiva over any one of his colleagues.” (130) And there
was even one view that “the Halakhah agrees with Rabbi Akiva even over his
teacher.” (131)

From the days of Moses, the chief of all prophets, there did not arise such an influ­
ential person in Israel. His teachings struck roots in the Babylonian academies and
became a dominant system of thought in Jewish teaching to this day. Because of its
influence, Rabbi Ishmael’s approach was pushed aside, and only remnants of it are
preserved in the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, in the Sifre to Numbers, in parts of the
Sifre to Deuteronomy, and in scattered parts of rabbinic literature. Mishnah, Tosefta,
and Sifra follow the teachings of Rabbi Akiva. (132) The Mishnah, compiled by Rabbi

121 Tosefta Zevahim 1:6.
122 BT Zevahim 82a; BT Menahot 89a; BT Niddah 72b; Sifra Tzav 33a.
126 BT Shabbat 96b-97a. 127 Sifre Beha'alotekha 75.
128 Tosefta Mikva'ot, end of chapter 1; BT Kiddushin 66b. 129 Sifre Hukkat 124.
130 See BT Zevahim 57a; BT Yoma 75b; Alfasi Gittin chapter 4 and Bava Kamma 7a. However, if the
majority differs with him, the Halakhah does not follow him; see BT Eruvin 46b.
131 BT Ketubot 84b. 132 BT Sanhedrin 86a.

(151) As noted above, Akiva’s exegesis often proceeded from a tendency to expand categories on
the basis of the slightest textual pretext. In this case, Akiva had been expounding on definite articles
and conjunctions in order to expand the number of occasions on which purification offerings would
have to be brought. To this exegesis his colleagues objected.

(152) Akiva interpreted “bread of the mighty” to mean that the manna was the food actually con­
sumed by the ministering angels in heaven, a sort of ambrosia.
Judah the Patriarch, was founded on the teachings of Rabbi Meir, who followed in the wake of Rabbi Akiva, whose teachings he embedded in his.[155] The Men of the Great Assembly said: “Raise up many disciples.”[133] But the schools of Shammai and Hillel disagreed over this. The school of Shammai said: “One should teach only someone who is smart, unassuming, of good lineage, and wealthy.”[136] But the school of Hillel said: “One should teach anyone, for there were many sinners in Israel who were brought close to the study of Torah, and whose children became righteous, pious, and good people.”[134]

Rabbi Akiva, too, opened his school door wide. It was characteristic of him to encourage and to influence many. He would expound and sermonize in public and would also teach Torah to individuals. And as soon as his reputation spread abroad—according to the evidence of his contemporary, Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinas,[135] his fame traveled “from one end of the world to the other”—many disciples flocked to him. Just as his desire to study Torah knew no bounds, so did his desire to teach Torah know no bounds. When he was imprisoned, and Rabbi Simeon came to him, saying, “Teach me Torah,” he said to him, “My son, more than the calf desires to suck, the cow desires to give suck.”[136] And when the evil empire[157] decreed that Israel could no longer busy itself with Torah, Rabbi Akiva did not hesitate to violate the decree in public, and he would assemble great crowds and teach Torah.[137] His exertions were rewarded.[158] According to tradition, “Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of disciples ... all of whom died in a single period of time ... and he subsequently raised up seven more ... and these arose and filled all of the Land of Israel with Torah.”

These virtues—unbounded strength that overflowed its banks, courage, and the desire and effort to raise up many disciples—were not the primary virtues of Rabbi Ishmael. From the exegeses of these two men offered for the same verse, you can learn about the difference between the attitude of soul of Rabbi Ishmael, the analytic scholar, and the attitude of soul of Rabbi Akiva, the man of vision. Rabbi Ishmael approached teaching warily and made determinations uneasily. His chief concern was to learn Torah in an enduring way, as if he were never certain that his teachings were firm or that his learning was secure. Such doubts were far from Rabbi Akiva’s heart. His chief concern was to raise up as many disciples as possible by minimizing failures and dropouts. The school of Hillel did not smile on Rabbi Ishmael. His approach of Rabbi Akiva that closely resembles his—his fame shines as the sun rising in the morning—his views are more mercurial, even to the extent that his teachings were not always the same.

The teachings of Rabbi Ishmael, ancient literature, did not penetr indirectly and unconsciously through the hints of this are found in the Yerushalmi and in the rabbis. The teachings of Rabbi Ishmael, in all chapters of this work, as published in the Guide of the Perplexed...[159]
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heart. His chief concern was to raise up disciples. "Rabbi Ishmael said: Although you
have learned Torah in your youth, keep learning it in your advanced age, for you do
not know which will endure: the former, the latter, or perhaps both. Rabbi Akiva said:
Although you have raised up disciples in your youth, keep raising them in your
advanced age, for you do not know which the Holy and Blessed One will account to
you: the former, the latter, or perhaps both." And indeed, it was the later disciples
of Rabbi Akiva—Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Judah, and Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai—who disseminated
his teachings in the generation following the persecutions.

"All depends on luck, even the Torah scroll in the Sanctuary." And lady luck did
not smile on Rabbi Ishmael. His hammer reached the anvil all right, but the sound
somehow did not reach the ears. He and Rabbi Akiva came along at the same time,
but one soon began to gain in power at the expense of the other. In the end, it was the
approach of Rabbi Akiva that conquered the hearts of Israel and was absorbed into its
heritage. It is so woven and intermeshed in the lexicon of Jewish thought that one
hardly perceives it as a distinct force. Rabbi Ishmael was made to defer to Rabbi Akiva.
Even Rabbi Ishmael's disciples did not always follow in their master's footsteps and
differed with him in several places. It was occasionally said: "Rabbi Simeon's disciples
influenced Rabbi Ishmael's disciples to hold their views." Two sovereigns cannot
share a single crown. Rabbi Akiva illumined the world, and in every generation his
fame shines as the sun rising in might. Rabbi Ishmael's fame has been fleeting and
mercurial, even to the extent that Maimonides considered him to be one of Rabbi
Akiva's disciples

The teachings of Rabbi Ishmael, an original creation without parallel in our
ancient literature, did not penetrate into the consciousness of the generations. Only
indirectly and unconsciously were many Sages influenced by his mode of thought.
Hints of this are found in the work of champions of plain-meaning exegesis in the
Middle Ages, and in the rationalist approach of some medieval thinkers. He is like
those "whose waters we drink but whose names we do not remember." Yet his prin­
ciple, "the Torah speaks in human language," became a cornerstone of scriptural
understanding, and his views concerning the sacrifices appear again in Maimonides' 
Guide of the Perplexed . . .
TWO APPROACHES TO TORAH EXEGESIS

Translator’s Introduction

Why is this treatment of rabbinic theology different from all others? Others proceed, as one would expect, through the various topics that must be covered in any conspectus of religious thought. Solomon Schechter’s Aspects of Rabbinic Theology, for example, begins with “God” (“God and the World” and “God and Israel”), then proceeds to the “Election of Israel,” the “Kingdom of God,” and then to “The Law.” Ephraim Urbach’s The Sages is similarly organized. These and other modern synthesizers of rabbinic theology followed not only common sense but good medieval precedent as well, for Saadia Gaon began the Book of Beliefs and Opinions with a discussion of God as Creator and then proceeded to discuss commandment and law, obedience, disobedience, repentance, and so on. Maimonides, for his part, began The Guide of the Perplexed with long discussions of the nature of God and its resistance to depiction in language, with proofs of God’s existence and unity, with analyses of revelation, prophecy, and similar themes. It is, in fact, wholly natural that a theological treatise would begin with God and then go on to analyze various ways in which God relates to or is made manifest in the world. Heschel, however, begins Torah min Hashamonayim with a very different issue.

Heschel’s question is, What is the nature of Torah? The first chapter of this long inquiry into the religion of the Rabbis is on the subject of philosophy of language—not as in Maimonides’ reflection on language, in the context of the essential nature of God but rather as a way of understanding the choices with which we are confronted in deciding how we will treat and read this foundational religious text that we call the Torah. Understanding the reason for this departure from standard practice is critical to appreciating what Heschel is aiming at in this work. The essence of rabbinic Judaism is the location of religious authority in a text, and the concomitant elevation of the practice of interpreting that text to as lofty and central a position in the religious life of Israel as prophecy had enjoyed in the biblical age. But whereas the theory of prophecy was one that allowed no choice—the true prophet spoke, of necessity, what God impelled him or her to speak—in the case of scriptural interpretation (midrash), the reader and explicator had some degrees of freedom. And thus there were different approaches to just what this foundational text was, how it came to be our Torah, and how it was to be expounded. Heschel wants us in this book to be drawn into the rabbinic mind and worldview. Cataloguing for us the various rabbinic ideas on the nature of God would hardly allow us to do the debates, but give us no inciting the reader to consider the Torah’s sanctity and debates. The very languages to biblical and rabbinic Judaism that Heschel is after, into that culture’s heart, be not so much a cognitive

So Heschel schematizes and its language as classic matic schools of thought Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael those who have accepted based religion, where text the dichotomy that Heschel of “eternal paradigms,” a finally come to the many

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hardly allow us to do that; it would at best give us the conclusions of some rabbinic
debates, but give us no insight as to why the diversities of opinion exist. It is only by get-
ting the reader to consider the most basic of all issues in rabbinic Judaism, the source of
the Torah's sanctity and centrality, that Heschel can give us a vicarious part in the grand
debates. The very language of the original, a Hebrew thick with rabbinic idioms and allu-
sions to biblical and rabbinic texts, intensifies the empathic identification with the early
Rabbis that Heschel is after. A culture's language is the only sure way, if a way exists at
all, into that culture's heart and mind. And reading Torah min Hashamayim is intended to
be not so much a cognitive experience as an empathic one.

So Heschel schematizes the many complex issues surrounding the nature of Torah
and its language as classical rabbinic literature often did: as a duality. Here the paradigm-
matic schools of thought are those of two of the greatest giants of the second century,
Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael. We are presented at the outset with "Two Approaches
to Torah Exegesis." We are not to read this material as a textual historian would, ana-
lyzing the factual accuracy of the attributions of statements in the classical texts to the
historical Akiva or Ishmael or their disciples. Rather, we are to read as theologians, as
those who have accepted the invitation to explore the phenomenology of a scripturally
based religion, where text has become oracle, and to consider the explanatory power of
the dichotomy that Heschel offers us. Akiva and Ishmael are avot ha-olam, in the sense
of "eternal paradigms," and the choices they represent have vast ramifications when we
finally come to the many subjects that make up any comprehensive theology.

In this chapter, Heschel lays this groundwork patiently but forcefully.

The Torah Speaks in Human Language

Rabbi Akiva, who extracted from every jot and tittle in the text piles and piles
of halakhot, 1 believed it impossible that there be in the Torah a single super-
fluous word or letter. Each word, each letter issues the invitation: "Interpret
me!" Even if the rules and conventions of language require that a certain word or let-
ter complete the syntax, it is nevertheless fair game for exegesis. Thus, he interpreted
every seeming redundancy, and even the coupling of a verb to its infinitive:

1 BT Menahot 29b. See also BT Eruvin 21b.

[1] A typical construction in biblical Hebrew is the conjoining of a conjugated verb to its infinitive.
The grammatical form is generally used to create emphasis in the verb (often rendered into English by
expressions such as "I surely did X" or "He will surely be Y"). Akivan exegesis, as depicted here by
Heschel, would treat this construction not as an inseparable grammatical unit created for emphasis, but
man, any-man [of the seed of Aaron ... of the holy-donations he is not to eat, until he is pure][2] (Leviticus 22:4)—this is meant to include the uncircumcised;[3] “Cut off, cut off shall that person be”[3] (Numbers 15:31)—“cut off” in this world, “[again] cut off” in the future world. He even interpreted the word “saying” (in “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying”),[4] the letter vav[4] in the word ve-ratzat’ (“he shall pierce”) (in “His master shall pierce his ear” [Exodus 21:6]),[5] and in the word u-vat (“when”) (in “when the daughter” [Leviticus 21:9]).[6] Even particles and prepositions such as et [accusative case particle], gam [“also”], aka [“yet”], and rak [“only”] served as grist for his exegetical mill. By contrast, Rabbi Ishmael would interpret scriptural verses in a straightforward and rational way, or through the use of the thirteen logical rules of exegesis, which also reveal what is hidden in the text by rational means. In his view, the seeming redundancies in Scripture do not imply anything substantive, for the Torah uses a style that is in keeping with the conventions of human language; for example, “you had to go, yes, go” (Genesis 31:30); “you longed, longed” (ibid.); “I was stolen, yes, stolen” (Genesis 40:15).[7]

2 PT Yeynamot, beginning of chapter 8, 8c. 3 Sifre Shelah 112. 4 Sifre Nasa 2. 5 PT Kiddushin 1:4 (59d). 6 BT Sanhedrin 51b.
7 PT Shabbat 19 (17a); PT Nedarim 1 (36c). In line with the Ishmaelian approach, many medieval sages taught that it was merely scriptural style to rephrase the same matter in different words. See Abraham ibn Ezra, Yesod Mora, section 1, and the commentary of David Kimhi to Isaiah 5:9.

as two separate verbs, each with its own substantive meaning to contribute to the sense of the verse. Needless to say, this violates a straightforward understanding of the grammatical rules, but that is precisely the point here: that Akivan exegesis proceeds notwithstanding straightforward rules of logic and interpretation. For a good sense of how this infinitive/finite verb construction sounds in the Hebrew, see Everett Fox’s translation of the Torah (The Five Books of Moses: A New English Rendition with Introduction, Commentary and Notes [New York: Schocken, 1995]), in which he preserves the redundant sound to which this style of exegesis was sensitive. We adopt Fox’s translation in exegeses of this variety, so that Heschel’s point is more easily apparent to the English reader.

[8] Everett Fox’s duplication (“any-man, any-man”) captures the force of the Hebrew ish ish. Other, less literal translations include “No man of Aaron’s offspring . . . shall eat” (NIV), “What man soever of the seed of Aaron . . . shall not eat” (AV, OJv). This verse is employed by the rabbis as the scriptural source for adding the uncircumcised to the list of those priests disqualified from eating priestly gifts.

[9] Here, too, Fox’s translation captures the redundancy of the Hebrew hikkaret tikkaret. More idiomatic English translations are, “That person shall be cut off” (NIV); “that soul shall utterly be cut off” (AV, OJv).

[10] Normally the conjunction and in Hebrew, vocalized either as ve- or vav. Another function of the vav in biblical Hebrew is to signal a reversal of verb tense from perfect to imperfect or vice versa. That is the case in the example immediately following, in which “he shall pierce” results from a combination of vav and the verb “he pierced.” This is another example of how what is known to be a mere conventional of grammar is nevertheless treated as an opportunity for more expansive exegesis, as if the vav were a conjunction intended to add something of substance—in this case, that the slave’s ear might be pierced not just with an awl, but with a prick, a thorn, or a shard of glass.

[11] Here the vav, vocalized as vav, has yet another function, which is to express conditionality.

Even in places where synonyms substantive addition, or for any specific wine and any other intoxicant” (can’t one and the same? Yes, the short: the Torah speaks in human

For Rabbi Ishmael, this principle appears in one place and is repeated immediately following. In his view, the seeming redundancies in Scripture do not imply anything substantive, for the Torah uses a style that is in keeping with the conventions of human language; for example, “you had to go, yes, go” (Genesis 31:30); “you longed, longed” (ibid.); “I was stolen, yes, stolen” (Genesis 40:15).
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Even in places where synonyms appear in the Torah, it is not intended as a sub-
stantive addition, or for any specific purpose. For example: "He shall abstain from
wine and any other intoxicant" (Numbers 6:3)—"Now are not 'wine' and 'intoxi-
cant' one and the same? Yes, the Torah simply uses two synonymous terms."8 In
short: the Torah speaks in human language.9

For Rabbi Ishmael, this principle governs the text of the Torah: when any passage
appears in one place and is repeated in another [with some changes], the purpose of
the repetition is simply to introduce those changes, and thus it is unnecessary to rein-
terpret that which is identical to the original. Rabbi Akiva, by contrast, believed that
one must reinterpret the entire passage, not simply the new material.10 "Exegeses
emanating from the school of Rabbi Ishmael are marked by their simplicity. They do
not approach the text in a roundabout way, in order to extract laws by whatever
means possible; they rather attempt to keep exegesis in line with the surface meaning,
and do not interpret mere superfluities and redundancies."11

Rabbi Ishmael protested Rabbi Akiva's mode of exegesis. When Rabbi Akiva
inferred an important law from the letter vav in the phrase u-vat ish kohen ["When
the daughter of a priest"] ("Brother Ishmael, my exegesis is of the difference between
bat and u-vat"), Rabbi Ishmael said to him: "Shall we condemn this woman to be
burnt just because you wish to interpret the letter vav?"12 On the other hand, Rabbi
Ishmael's method of letting the surface meaning suffice and to identify the "natural
setting of the text" seemed to some of his colleagues a mark of incapacity and intel-
lectual weakness. Once he argued with Rabbi Akiva (who, as noted above, interpreted
the particle et to signify some substantive addition) as follows: "The text does not
read 'When God began to create the heaven [hashamayim] and the earth [ha-aretz],'
but rather 'the heaven [et hashamayim] and the earth [ve-et ha-aretz]'-but this is
simply the natural style of the text." Rabbi Akiva responded: "This is not a trifling
thing for you"16 (Deuteronomy 32:47)—and if it is trifling, it is so from you, i.e.,
from your inability to interpret it. Et hashamayim is meant to add the sun, moon,
stars, and constellations, and et ha-aretz is meant to add the trees, grasses, and the
Garden of Eden."17

8 Sifre Nasa 23. 9 Sifre Shelah 112.
10 Sifre Nasa 2; BT Sotah 3a, cited in the name of the school of Rabbi Ishmael.
11 J. N. Epstein, Mevo'ot le-sfrut ha-tannaim [Introduction to Tannaitic Literature] (Jerusalem: Magnes,
1957), 536.
12 Rabbi Ishmael held that a priest's daughter who engaged in harlotry was subject to death by [the
more severe method of] burning if she were betrothed, but by [the less severe method of] strangulation if
she were fully married. For Rabbi Akiva, the allegedly extra vow implied that in either case, she would be
subject to death by burning. See BT Sanhedrin 51a.
13 Genesis Rabbah 1:14. The saying "and if it is trifling, it is so from you" was frequently used by Rabbi

14 The text, if taken literally, reads "from you," and that is the basis of the exegesis to be cited.
15 This is a very interesting and instructive example of how Akiva's method of reading Scripture is
a part of a consistent worldview. For the form taken by this exegesis on Genesis 1:1 reflects the con-
Things Not Revealed to Moses Were Revealed to Rabbi Akiva

The minority of the Torah is written; the majority is oral. Many norms were accepted in Israel even though they do not appear in writing in the Torah, and sectarians would vex Israel by denying the authority of such norms. Israel held steadfastly to its ancient traditions, but there arose the necessity to clarify the connection between the Oral Torah and the Written Torah. Do the numerous norms and rules accepted in Israel have any support in the written Torah? According to one point of view, there are a good number of halakhot that “have no support.” For example: “The release of oaths fly free in the air, and have no support; rather, a sage releases as his wisdom directs.” The laws of Shabbat, festive offerings, and Temple trespasses are poor in text but rich in halakhot, like mountains suspended by a thread, and they have no support. But this idea threatened to bifurcate Israel’s Torah into two separate Torahs.

Akiva. In keeping with his method, it was said: “There is nothing in the Torah, not even a single letter or word (not to mention a whole verse), which does not have multiple meanings, as it is written, ‘For this not a trifling thing for you’ (Deuteronomy 32:47), and if it is trifling, it is so from you, for you have insufficiently contemplated it and argued over its meaning” (MTD, p. 205).

From the appearance of things in the world, it may perhaps have been familiar from ancient sects as the Sadducees, who by evidence of the ancients did not accept some of the expansions of the meaning of the biblical text ascribed to oral tradition. Yet in rabbinic times there arose the institution of having a vow nullified by a Sage if it could be argued that the vow itself was the result of an error of judgment. Where did such an institution come from, seeing that it contradicts the clear intent of the biblical text? That is the subject of the text Heschel cites here.
Moses

Akiva

Many norms were accepted in the Torah, and sectarians ranted. Israel held steadfastly to clarify the connection between norms and rules accepted in one point of view, there.

For example: "The release of a thread releases as his wisdom Temple trespasses are poor in a thread, and they have no Messiah's Torah into two separate

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s as the Sadducees, who by evidence meaning of the biblical text ascribed to polemics in the ancient world. In the debates with adherents of rabbinic tra-

more than once biblical books stress sick on it. Yet in rabbinic times there ld be argued that the vow itself was come from, seeing that it contradicts

Heschel cites here.

In this connection, Rabbi Joshua said: "Tongs are made with tongs. What, then, was the nature of the first pair of tongs? It must have been created."[10] That is, the laws of Shabbat are poor in text, "for the Torah merely stated 'you shall not do work,' and 'you shall cease.' From this simple reference to cessation many forms of cessation were derived, just as many secondary categories of labor were derived from the category of "removal from domain to domain."[11] And the Sages created many additional safeguards as well. There were also the laws of Eruv[12] (attributed to Solomon), as well as all the other categories of labor and their derivatives, and rabbinic injunctions. These have no text on which to rely but are rather oral traditions. Indeed, even the thirty-nine primary categories of labor have no text (apart from the account of the Tabernacle) on which to rely. All is learned from "You shall cease from labor."[15]

Rabbi Akiva, with whom the idea that there are norms that are like mountains suspended by threads did not sit well, "made all of Torah into rings,"[16] that is, into a continuous chain.[13] The Written Torah and the Oral Torah are one. All norms are embedded in the Torah; all rules are to be found there. "Turn it over and turn it over

15 Mara De-matnita, which interprets Tosefta Eruvin 8:23 according to the view of PT Eruvin 26d. Another explanation of Rabbi Joshua's statement is found in Hasdei David on Tosefta Hagigah 1:9 (= 1:11 in the Hasdel David edition).
16 ARN A 18.

[10] From the appearance of this idea of the first pair of tongs in Mishnah Avot 5:6, it seems that this was a saying of much more general scope than its application by the Tosefta to the laws of Shabbat. It may perhaps have been a version of a cosmological argument for the existence of a First Cause, already familiar from Aristotle. In any event, it certainly constitutes an argument against the plausibility of an infinitely regressing chain of causes, and the ultimate anchor of all the many and variegated laws of Shabbat is one simple verse that is God-given and is the starting point beyond which no regress is possible or necessary. Although in the sequel Heschel will suggest that Rabbi Akiva would not have taken well to this description of the laws of Shabbat (because, presumably, it detaches them from the text), that may be an overstatement. It is likely that this anchoring of Hilkhah Shabbat in the text through the "tongs" argument would have at least minimally satisfied the Akiva program of rooting all halakhah in the text.

[11] As will be noted in the sequel, the rabbinic construction of Shabbat provided for thirty-nine primary categories of activity that are prohibited on the Sabbath, and each primary category gave rise to countless secondary categories derived from the primary ones. "Removal from domain to domain" refers to the rabbinic prohibition on transporting objects from a private domain to a public one, and vice versa.

[12] These rules, also not found in the Torah, provide for the extension of the limits on foot travel on Shabbat and for the blending of several private domains into one, both through legal fictions created for these purposes.

[13] Heschel's understanding of "made all of Torah into rings" is not the apparent meaning of the text in ARN that he cites. The context there makes clear the intent that, based on scriptural exegesis, Rabbi Akiva categorized the growing body of Jewish law based on scriptural exegesis into systematic domains, thus making possible the thematic structure of the Mishnah. Here Heschel takes some literary license in understanding "rings" not as "thematic realms" but rather as "links in a chain."
again, for all is within it,"[17] said ben Bag Bag.[14] According to this point of view, the majority of the Torah is written, and its minority is oral!8 In Rabbi Akiva’s eyes, the Torah was not a lexicon of inert words. The Sages had expounded: "‘There is the sea, vast and wide’ (Psalm 104:25)—this is the Torah, of which it is said ‘its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea’ (Job 11:9)."[19] Rabbi Akiva took the metaphor to its limits and discovered that just as in the case of the sea the depths greatly exceed the surface, so in the Torah, the latent and the esoteric greatly exceed what is apparent and on the surface. . . .

Rabbi Elezer and Rabbi Joshua, the teachers of Rabbi Akiva, also busied themselves with exegesis of the Torah and thereby made the Torah more accessible. But Rabbi Akiva surpassed them all with the vigor of his method and the skill with which he revealed hidden meanings in the texts. Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar compared Rabbi Akiva’s work to that of a stonecutter who was chipping away in a mountain range. He took his pickax and sat on a mountainside and chipped out from it small pebbles. People came by and asked him: “What are you doing?” He answered: “I am going to uproot the mountain and fling it into the Jordan.” They said to him: “You will not be able to uproot the entire mountain.” But he continued to chip away until he reached a very large boulder; he got under it, pried it loose, uprooted it, and flung it into the Jordan, saying: “This is now your place.”[15][20]

17 Mishnah Avot 5:22. The same statement is attributed to Hillel in ARN B 27.
18 In line with Rabbi Akiva’s approach, Rabbi Eleazar said: “The majority of the Torah is written, and its minority is oral”; that is, all that is learned by exegesis is included in the written Torah. Contradicting this, Rabbi Johanan said: “The majority is oral, and the minority written” (BT Gittin 60b).
19 Midrash on Psalms 104:22. Ishmaelian exegeses would typically say, "the text says" or "it tells us that . . ."; that is, the text intends to convey a particular meaning. By contrast, in the Sifra, the language "it tells us that . . ." gives way to "it gives us to learn that . . .". That language may perhaps underscore the idea that the teaching under consideration is embedded in the text’s deep structure. See Wilhelm Bacher, Eski Midrash Hatannaim [Lexicon of Rabbinic Exegetical Terminology] (Tel Aviv: Rabinowitz, 5683/1923; translated from the German Die exegetische Terminologie der jüdischen Traditionsliteratur [Leipzig 1899/1905; repr., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1965]), s.v. higgid, p. 23.
20 ARN A 6.

[14] A Tanna of the very early period, of whom we have few attributed statements and of whom little is known.
[15] The sense of this image of Rabbi Akiva is unclear. One possible reading, consistent with what is being developed here, is this: Rabbi Akiva’s enterprise is depicted as one of reconfiguring the elements of a tradition that are already in place. He is attempting to move the mountain, not to level it. And in moving it, a boulder once embedded in the middle of the mountain may, in the reconfiguration, become the base of the mountain. Indeed, on this reading, it is plausible that the mountain should be understood to be Sinai, where the original configuration was set. The Jordan then represents the entry into a new phase, that is, the transition from the desert to a new political reality in the Land, a reality that may require new insights to be drawn out from the Sinaitic tradition, but not entirely new teachings. This image, then, reinforces both the idea that all that may ever be needed was put into God’s original teaching at Sinai, and that the rabbi’s role is not to innovate but rather to know how to discover within the body of tradition those ideas which have not previously been noted but which now need to be activated. Each tradition brings about and stabilizes, visibly developed tradition.

22 See David Zevi Hoffma Midrashim, in Mesillot le-Torat Sifre Beha’alotekha 75; BT Zevai
23 See Epstein, Mevo’ot le-sifra
24 Sifre Re’eh 122 (compare
25 PT Kiddushin 59d. See Ep

His contemporaries mar exegeses brought to light or revealed to Moses were rarely Tannaim could not or Akiva. Of the many halakha that the words of the S: ancient traditions find scriptu find that the result c
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Of the thanksgiving sac sacrifice of thanksgiving u spread with oil" (Leviticus Akiva: “Had ‘with oil’ bec requires the one log of oil ‘with oil’ creates a limi­limitation—and thus this ben Azariah retorted: “Eve­itation or that ‘with oil’ s
His contemporaries marveled at his wisdom and powers of interpretation, for his exegeses brought to light countless matters out of the text of the Torah. "Things not revealed to Moses were revealed to Rabbi Akiva." Many scriptural verses that the early Tannaim could not expound found their interpretations in the hands of Rabbi Akiva. Of the many halakhot that had been denigrated, Rabbi Akiva said, "I will see to it that the words of the Sages stand firm." Thus did many enigmatic usages and ancient traditions find scriptural support. Sometimes, he would even expound a verse and find that the result conformed to the received halakhah.

With respect to verses from which Rabbi Ishmael could infer nothing, Rabbi Akiva was able to plumb their depths and thus to find bases and justifications for halakhot of the Oral Torah. As already noted, such exegesis was not unknown prior to him, but he went far beyond his predecessors and developed this procedure into a comprehensive system. He interpreted every unusual part of speech, all redundancies, and each conjunction and preposition and extracted from all of them new laws.

Rabbi Ishmael observed that not only are there many norms that "have no support" but also norms that contradict the plain meaning of the text ("Halakhah circumvents the text"), and even some that cannot claim textual support even with the use of the exegetical rules ("Halakhah circumvents midrash").

Of the thanksgiving sacrifice we read in Scripture: "he shall offer together with the sacrifice of thanksgiving unleavened cakes with oil mixed in, and unleavened wafers spread with oil" (Leviticus 7:12)—Why is the phrase "with oil" repeated? Said Rabbi Akiva: "Had 'with oil' been mentioned only once, we would have assumed that this requires the one log of oil customary with all other meal-offerings. The repetition of 'with oil' creates a limitation—for an expansion followed by an expansion creates a limitation—and thus this offering is limited to a half log of oil." To this Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah retorted: "Even if you proclaim all day long that 'with oil' suggests a limitation, I shall not listen to you! The require-

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22 Mishnah Oholot 16:1.
23 See David Zvi Hoffmann, "Le-heker Midreshei ha-Tannaim" (On the Study of Tannaitic Midrashim), in Mezillot le-Torat ha-Tannaim [Paths through Tannaitic Thought] (Tel Aviv, 1928), 11; Sifre Beha'alotecha 75; BT Zevahim 13a. See chapter 27 below, pp. 512-14.
24 See Epstein, Mavo'ot le-sifrut ha-tannaim, 533.
25 Sifre Re'eh 122 (compare MI Neziqin 2); PT Kiddushin 59d.
26 PT Kiddushin 59d. See Epstein, Mavo'ot le-sifrut ha-tannaim, 535.

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need to be activated. Each transition in Jewish life, such as the one Akiva's generation was concerned to bring about and stabilize, would then be a "Jordan River" vis-à-vis the established mountain of previously developed tradition.

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In BT Hagigah 10a, several authorities maintain that the laws of annulment of vows indeed have scriptural support, using Akivan-style exegesis. Whose opinion, then, is represented in the Mishnah, that they are without scriptural support? Probably Rabbi Ishmael's, whose opinion informed that of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch on many aggadic matters (see chapter 14 below).
ment of half a log of oil for the thanksgiving sacrifice is simply a halakhah that was given to Moses on Mount Sinai.”

Rabbit Ishmael adopted a similar approach. Rather than force-fit a halakhah to the text in a manner far from the surface meaning, he would say that the halakhah comes to us through oral tradition, and we accept it without textual proof.

When Rabbi Eliezer ben Hycanus, a teacher of Rabbi Akiva, expounded a verse in a nonstandard way, Rabbi Ishmael said to him: “Why, you are saying to Scripture: ‘Be silent until I expound your meaning’!” And Rabbi Eliezer replied, “Ishmael, you are a mountain palm” (which, because of its altitude, bears few and inferior fruits; similarly, you seem unable to bear fruitful exegesis).

One may well wonder at Rabbi Akiva’s departure from a literal approach to scriptural exegesis. His method is most commonly explained on psychological grounds, that is, that its basis lies in his temperament and intellectual characteristics. He was acute and sharp, and thus loved that which was complex and keen-edged. “It was as if he had an innate compulsion to search for textual justifications for halakhot in far-fetched, dialectical ways, even when he could achieve the same result in ways far less tortured and forced.”

This description, however, conceals more than it reveals. Shall we say that just because Rabbi Akiva was exceedingly sharp he would suspend mountains by a thread? That because he had a keen intellect he would interpret the Torah illogically? Or that because he was such a brilliant dialectician, he did not set the plain truth as his standard? The fact is that Rabbi Akiva’s ideas about legal exegesis are part and parcel of a unique and comprehensive worldview. So we must ask: What were its underpinnings?

Two Approaches to the Essence of Torah

Judaic scholars, primarily David Zevi Hoffmann, identified well the characteristics that distinguish the teachings of Rabbi Ishmael from those of Rabbi Akiva. But they defined the differences as certain they found “few differences.” (They exhibited differences only in ha minor differences.” But an abu diverged as well on the most lofty biblical narratives as they did wit every text and investigated theo halakhah. And the differences bet are weighty indeed. One could halakhic exegesis that we have points of departure concerning have before us two approaches to In many instances of halakhic ex their methods in aggadic exegesing of the text, because he view mines the existence of Torah to transcendent existence of the te debated in heaven. Such a view is perceived in the narrow confi ocean. Rabbi Akiva held that even and an esoteric intent. We shall In Rabbi Akiva’s approach to realm of the universe from the 1 supernatural, and Moses asc earth. The Torah, God’s instrum arms embrace both worlds. Is it, guage of human beings?

What is the distinction between Human beings distinguish nothing to the substance of a t rules of language so dictate; th God’s ways, however, are not h

and H. S. Horowitz, in Mesillot le-Torat the bibliography in L. Finkelstein, Men Treatises Apat and Abot of Rabbi Natha Seminary, 1950), 57 n. 96. Compare Halakhic Midrash Sina 22 (Fall 1947) ha-Talmud ha-Bavli [Halakhic Midrashin Etz Midrash Hatannaim].

See D. Z. Hoffmann's preface to I also Mesillot le-Torat ha-Tannaim, 46-4.

Samuel Poznanski, Ma’asei ha-T aggadic material in the MSY is “subst. (Meva'ot le-sifrut ha-tannaim, 736; com
TWO APPROACHES TO TORAH EXEGESIS

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and Rabbi Akiva, see D. Z. Hoffmann

ben Azariah could be paraphrased as the standard of religious authority (e.g., the violating the standard logic of tex-

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defined the differences as pertaining only to legal matters. In matters of Aggadah, they found "few differences." Conventional wisdom was that "Tannaitic exegeses exhibited differences only in halakhic matters, but in Aggadah, there were at best minor differences." But an abundance of evidence is at hand that the two schools diverged as well on the most lofty philosophical matters. They dealt as intensely with biblical narratives as they did with passages of legal import. They dwelt on each and every text and investigated theological issues just as they did matters of practical halakhah. And the differences between these two schools in matters of faith and belief are weighty indeed. One could almost say that the methodological divergences in halakhic exegesis that we have already mentioned have their basis in two distinct points of departure concerning the very principles of religious thought. Indeed, we have before us two approaches to understanding the essence of Torah and prophecy. In many instances of halakhic exegesis, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael simply follow their methods in aggadic exegesis. Rabbi Akiva often took flight from the plain meaning of the text, because he viewed scripture through an esoteric lens. One who determines the existence of Torah to be a heavenly one believes, ipso facto, in a separate, transcendent existence of the text. The Torah over which we debate on earth is also debated in heaven. Such a view sees the Torah as essentially infinite. Its content, as it is perceived in the narrow confines of the text's plain meaning, is but a drop in the ocean. Rabbi Akiva held that every detail, and every stylistic form, has a deep meaning and an esoteric intent. We shall return to this presently.

In Rabbi Akiva's approach to Torah, there is a vast expanse separating the upper realm of the universe from the lower realm. The Torah was written and abides in the supernal world, and Moses ascended to the upper realm and brought it down to earth. The Torah, God's instrument in creating the world, unifies the two realms. Its arms embrace both worlds. Is it, then, conceivable that this Torah speaks in the language of human beings?

What is the distinction between the language of Torah and human language? Human beings distinguish between form and content. There are words that add nothing to the substance of a thought but are uttered because the conventions and rules of language so dictate; their contribution is aesthetic rather than instructive. God's ways, however, are not human ways. With God, form is nonexistent; there is

and H. S. Horowitz, in Mesillot le-Torat ha-Tannaim; Epstein, Mevo'ot le-sifrut ha-tannaim, 521ff.; see also the bibliography in L. Finkelstein, Mavo le-masekhitot Avot ve-Avot de-Rabbi Natan [Introduction to the Treatises Abot and Abot of Rabbi Nathan] (Hebrew with English summary; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950), 57 n. 96. Compare Y. Neubauer, "Halakhah u-midrash halakhah" [Halakhic and Halakhic Midrash] Sinai 22 (Fall 1947): 49-80; and E. Z. Melamed, Midreshei Halakhah shel Ha-Tannaim ba-Talmud ha-Bavli [Halakhic Midrashim of the Tannaim in the Talmud Bavli] (Jerusalem, 1943); Bacher, Erkel Midrash Hatannaim.

33 See D. Z. Hoffmann's preface to his edition of MSY (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai), p. xi; see also Mesillot le-Torat ha-Tannaim, 46-47.

34 Samuel Poznanski, Ma'asei ha-Tannaim (Warsaw: Ha-Tzeftira, 1913). Epstein also believes that aggadic material in the MSY is "substantially identical to that in the MI (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael)" (Mevo'ot le-sifrut ha-tannaim, 738; compare what he says on p. 565).
The Exoteric and Esoteric Personalities

Rabbi Akiva's entire temperament was upward-directed, and as between heaven and earth, heaven always took precedence. He did not shrink from concrete descriptions only content. Every letter, every word, whether expanding or limiting a subject, is intended to teach a lesson. Each idiom instructs and clarifies. There is no form here; all is content, all is instruction. Just as heaven is loftier than earth, so the language of Torah is loftier than the language of human beings. And our rational powers are insufficient to grasp the esoterics of Torah; they cannot be handled with the tongs of logic alone.

In Rabbi Akiva's view, textual teaching exists for expansion. One who confines exegesis to the surface meaning is like a poor man looking for gleanings. Torah must not be fixed. The text should be treated as is any living organism that will not remain inert and that has multiple facets. For there is life in the text, and it can grow and bear fruit. The Torah exists both in heaven and on earth, and in Rabbi Akiva's own words: "Just as halakhah is debated on earth, so is Halakhah debated in heaven." And according to Rav Yehudah ben Yehezkel, "Not a day goes by in which the Holy and Blessed One does not innovate some halakhah in the heavenly court." New understandings continually break forth and ascend out of the hidden depths of the Torah.

In the view of Rabbi Ishmael, textual teaching exists to establish tradition and to facilitate understanding; it is not for expansion. The plain meaning, which arises out of the standard rules of interpretation, has a fixity; and one who engages in expansive exegesis distorts the Torah and ascribes to it alien intents. Just as one receives reward for expounding, so is there reward for desisting. The text's existence depends on fixity. Thus, Rabbi Ishmael's way is that of apprehension, not expansion.

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TWO AI' of the divine realm: "Moses w' Halakhah ben Yehezkel to rebuke him. By contrast, Rabbi Ishmael, who was possessed of a rationality, was possessed of a mentality that Moses achieved only through the glory of the Torah. Rabbi Akiva, the esoteric personality, was possessed of a rationality, was possessed of a mentality that Moses achieved only through the glory of the Torah. Rabbi Ishmael, who was possessed of a mentality that Moses achieved only through the glory of the Torah.

The reference is to BT Pesahim 22b, in which the rhyming relationship of the Hebrew derishah/perishah (here translated "expounding/desisting") is exploited in order to suggest that there are limits to how far one may read esoteric meanings out of texts without treading on theologically thin ice. Tellingly, it is Rabbi Akiva who appears there to argue that no such limit need be reached.

[19] This thought, as expressed by Heschel, has a distinctly medieval flavor. See, e.g., Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed, I:68ff., in which it is argued that God is prior to, and transcends, the normal distinctions between subject and object, between form and substance. Here the notion is that divine language does not exhibit the usual form-content distinction of human language, and though it may be expressed here in a somewhat anachronistic, overly systematic way, Heschel seems to have captured an important aspect of the basis of this Akivan style of exegesis.

[20] The use of the word tongs recalls the text from Tosefta (Hagigah and Eruvin) cited at the beginning of the previous section.

[21] The reference is to BT Pesahim 22b, in which the rhyming relationship of the Hebrew derishah/perishah (here translated "expounding/desisting") is exploited in order to suggest that there are limits to how far one may read esoteric meanings out of texts without treading on theologically thin ice. Tellingly, it is Rabbi Akiva who appears there to argue that no such limit need be reached.

[22] Heschel introduces here another extremely important idea in the medieval, that is, that the divine is immanent, that is, that the divine is present in the midst of the world of human action, sharp and impermeable boundary—idea that the Torah, which may lie in God's language, as it were. The and thus on the impermeability of the infinite divine realm (not be, the entire truth about God our powers of reasoning and derive from on high, he transmits.
TWO APPROACHES TO TORAH EXEGESIS

1. Clarifies that there is no form here; there is no territory, so the language of the heavenly court must remain the text, and it can grow and develop. And our rational powers are to be handled with the tongs. One who confines Torah to gleaning. Torah must be handled with the tongs. You cannot be so limited.

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The list of thirteen exegetical principles associated with the school of Rabbi Ishmael appears in the so-called Baraita of Rabbi Ishmael, which comprises the introductory chapter of the Sifra (the Tannaitic Midrash on Leviticus). A concise version of this passage (without the accompanying case examples) appears in the preliminary daily service in most traditional Jewish prayer books.37

In the School of Rabbi Ishmael, it was frequently asked: “Since I can infer this by logic, why was it written?”37 That is, if something can be derived via the exegetical rules, why was it necessary to make it explicit in the text? An alternative formulation was: “The text made this explicit because one could not otherwise infer it.”38 Of particular importance was the principle of kal va homer (a fortiori reasoning), which heads the list of the thirteen exegetical principles, just as it had Hillel’s list of seven principles. Rabbi Ishmael enumerated those scriptural verses that themselves include such reasoning,39 and even taught that Moses our Master broke the tablets because of a kal va homer inference.40 In sum, human reason is a worthy and reliable tool.

By contrast, Rabbi Akiva believed that the unfolding of Torah is not dependent on the powers of human reason. There is nothing that is not already latent in Torah; there is no halakhah that lacks a basis in the text. All laws are embedded in the Torah and are encoded into its letters. Indeed, a demonstration based on revealing that which is latent in the text has greater value and potency than one based on a logical inference such as kal va homer.41

In connection with the Paschal sacrifice, we are forbidden to “cook it with water” (Exodus 12:9). Water is thus forbidden; can one infer a prohibition to cook it in other liquids? Rabbi Ishmael said: “By kal va homer: If water, which does not dilute the meat’s taste, is forbidden, how much more so other liquids, which do dilute the meat’s taste.” But Rabbi Akiva sought to extract from the text itself even a matter that could be derived by kal va homer. He extracted this law from the doubling of the language in the phrase “boiled, boiled in water” (ibid.).42

As we shall see presently, transmitted the divine revelation to our Master Moses did the law elude him. Rabbi Ishmael, in contrast, was not transmitting God’s word in two distinct conceptions: the essential nature of heavenly Torah was the Ten Commandments as we shall see presently, but it expanded the term to include the very heavens” (Exod 34:5). And: “When and to dispute this view, received by Moses from the source of the law concerning the Passover Week. We will also demonstrate that Torah teaching was simply reorganized and to dispute this view, received by Moses from the source of the law concerning the Passover Week. We will also demonstrate this by kal vahomer inference.43

"Moses was in heaven..." 43 See chapter 23.

As we saw above, this is the source of the law concerning the Passover Week. We will also demonstrate this by kal vahomer inference.43 See chapter 23.

125) As we saw above, this is the source of the law concerning the Passover Week. We will also demonstrate this by kal vahomer inference.43 See chapter 23.

124 The list of thirteen exegetical principles associated with the school of Rabbi Ishmael appears in the so-called Baraita of Rabbi Ishmael, which comprises the introductory chapter of the Sifra (the Tannaitic Midrash on Leviticus). A concise version of this passage (without the accompanying case examples) appears in the preliminary daily service in most traditional Jewish prayer books.
TWO APPROACHES TO TORAH EXEGESIS

A Restrained Faith—
And a Gaze through the Heavenly Lens

As we shall see presently, Rabbi Akiva was of the opinion that our Master Moses transmitted the divine words to Israel in the exact form in which he heard them. By contrast, Rabbi Ishmael taught that even when Moses said, “Thus says the Lord,” he was not transmitting God’s words with exactitude. Does this difference not reflect two distinct conceptions of the fundamentals of the faith?

Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael disputed each other on the questions of whether our Master Moses did things on his own authority and whether certain matters of law eluded him. Rabbi Ishmael is supported by the surface meaning of the text, and, as we shall see presently, the substance of his view was already known before him to Philo of Alexandria. What compelled Rabbi Akiva to depart from the plain meaning and to dispute this view, that is, to maintain that every single word in the Torah was received by Moses from on high and that Moses said nothing on his own authority? Undoubtedly, he felt that intertwined with this issue is a matter of supreme importance: the essential nature of the Torah.

We will also demonstrate below that the original denotation of the term the heavenly Torah was the Ten Utterances heard at Mount Sinai, but that Rabbi Akiva expanded the term to include all of the words of the Pentateuch. “I spoke to you from the very heavens” (Exodus 20:22) referred, on this view, to the entire Torah. Every passage in the Torah is from heaven. The Torah was given in its entirety, in one fell swoop: its generalities and its particularities all were given at Sinai, and subsequent teachings were simply reiterations. The Akivan teaching on the giving of the Torah makes no distinctions based in history; it cannot differentiate between earlier and later strata. The giving of Torah is beyond time and perhaps even transcends human space: “Moses was in heaven when he promulgated the Torah.”

Away from him, he is to pay it back to its owner’ (Exodus 22:11)—What of the case of loss? ‘But if...’ (ibid.) ‘but’ is the rendition of the allegedly superfluous letter vav] comes to include the case in which the bailee lost the object. Such is the argument of Rabbi Akiva. What about Rabbi Ishmael? So it was taught in the school of Rabbi Ishmael: If in the case of theft, which is close to an act of God, we are told that the bailee must pay, how much more so in the case of loss, which is not very close to an act of God [i.e., seems to be closer to negligence]]” Rabbi Akiva, who expounds apparent superfluities of language, uses the vav as the source of the law concerning loss; Rabbi Ishmael, who does not expound such small points of language, derives it instead by kal vehomer. See PT Shevu’ot 38b–c.

As we saw above, this language serves to underscore the permeability, on the Akivan view, of the supposed boundary between heaven and earth, and that permeability is consistent with the immensity of the divine. Here the language that places Moses in heaven at the time of giving the Torah serves to underscore the related idea that the Torah is not primarily a human document, but is rather divine through and through and thus of infinite dimension.
By contrast, Rabbi Ishmael strove to grasp Torah with the tongs of logic. According to his view, Moses was not given the Torah in one fell swoop: generalities were given at Sinai, but the particulars were transmitted in the Tent of Meeting. Unencumbered by excessive passion, Rabbi Ishmael rooted himself in the meanings of words and answered only to lucid reason. The plain meaning was his medium, and he especially undertook to give a naturalistic reading to much that appeared miraculous.

Rabbi Ishmael—who had said to Rabbi Akiva, “Desist from your statements, and move instead to matters concerning plagues and tent-impurities!”—was the author of the proverb “Whoever wishes to acquire wisdom should busy himself with monetary laws; there is no greater specialty in Torah, for they are like an ever-flowing fountain.”

What did Rabbi Ishmael intend in likening monetary laws to an “ever-flowing fountain”? As we shall see presently, there are two approaches to the study of Torah. According to one approach, all was given to Moses, and there is no room for innovation; ours is only to transmit what has already been given. To what can a Sage be compared? To a limed pit, which does not lose a drop of water. According to the other approach, however, not all was given to Moses, and we are given to extract more than what was spoken to Moses at Sinai. To what, then, does the Sage compare? To an ever-flowing fountain, or perhaps to a well, which can bring forth more water than is put into it. Perhaps intimacy with monetary laws, that is, the order of Nezikin (Damages), seemed to Rabbi Ishmael to be like the pouring forth of water from a powerful fountain.

Rabbi Zevi Hirsch Chajes described the study of monetary laws similarly. In the entire Order of Damages, it is very uncommon for laws to be related directly to scriptural verses:

* BT Berakhot 63b; BT Bava Batra 175b.*

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\[BT Berakhot 63b; BT Bava Batra 175b.\]

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The Tent of Meeting is the enclosure in which Moses received continuing communication from God in the wilderness after the revelation on Mount Sinai. It is generally (but not always) identified with the Tabernacle.

In BT Hagigah 14a and BT Sanhedrin 67b, this advice to Rabbi Akiva (that he confine his expansive exegeses to areas of mundane Halakah and not to theologically laden topics) is attributed to Eleazar ben Azariah, not Rabbi Ishmael. See beginning of next chapter.

This description is the one given in Mishnah Avot 2:11 of Rabbi Eliezer, one of Rabbi Akiva’s teachers. As applied to Rabbi Eliezer, it apparently referred to both a prodigious memory, an abiding respect for tradition, and the need to pass it on intact. In the present context, it is meant to connote not just a respect for tradition but also a rejection of the legitimacy of interpreting it creatively, with one’s rational powers.

This is the description, in the same passage of Mishnah Avot, of Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakah. In each case, it seems to be used to connote an impressive measure of creativity.

Nezikin [Damages], the fourth of the six orders of the Mishnah.

Prominent Talmudist, nineteenth-century Galicia.
TWO APPROACHES TO TORAH EXEGESIS

Scour all of tractate Bava Batra, the largest of all tractates, and you will not find many laws associated with scripture or even with long-standing tradition. All of the laws and rules given there are what the Sages constructed via logical reasoning and from established practice, i.e. what was accepted procedure in, for example, sales and acquisitions, or damages to abutting properties. They are commentaries on the primary mitzvah of the Torah, to wit that the court should adjudicate fairly with respect to damages and claims. Thus it is written: “Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 6:18) . . . . The majority of the legal presumptions created by the Sages, which served as their foundation for all teaching in this area, all revolve around their familiarity with human nature and social mores, their understanding of social relations, and their realism.45

Rabbi Akiva saw this world through a heavenly lens. He saw before him “the ledger open, and the hand recording.”46 The revealed and the hidden were for him one. But Rabbi Ishmael’s way was more modest: his straight reason did not depart from plain meanings. He spoke in human conceptual categories and kept cosmic secrets under wraps. What business has anyone with the secrets of the Holy and Blessed One?

Could There Be Anything That Is Not Hinted At in the Torah?

In Rabbi Akiva’s style, Rabbi Johanan asked in astonishment: “Could there be anything in the Hagiographa that is not hinted at in the Torah?” (Rashi comments: “The Pentateuch is the foundation of the Prophets and the Hagiographa, and the latter must thus always be dependent on the Torah.”47) Consistent with this point of view, he taught: “The Prophets and Hagiographa will eventually become null, but the Five Books of the Torah will never be nullified.”48 It is frequently asked in the Baby-

46 Mishnah Avot 3:17.
47 BT Ta’anit 9a (Rashi ad loc). See also Numbers Rabbah 10:6.
48 PT Megillah 70d.

[33] Hagiographa is the third part of the Hebrew Bible, which is conventionally divided into Torah (Pentateuch), Nevi’im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Hagiographa). The initial letters of the Hebrew words form the acronym TaNaKh, often used to refer to the entirety of the Hebrew Bible. But there is a clear hierarchy here: the Torah, which in the rabbinic view is of direct divine origin, is the preeminently authoritative part of the Tanakh.
49 The context here is a talmudic discussion of a verse in Proverbs that is understood as describing how people typically blame their just deserts on God. The surprise that only the Hagiographa contain such a fundamental lesson is answered by the observation that the Pentateuch does indeed hint at this when it notes that Joseph’s brothers blame their troubles in Egypt, obviously brought on by their guilt for the sale of Joseph, on God (Genesis 42:28).
lonian Talmud: “What source is there for this matter in the Torah? What is the source of this rabbinic saying?” Indeed, even of folk proverbs it was asked: “What is the source for this popular saying?” The Zohar expanded this principle explicitly: “There is not the slightest word which cannot be found in the Torah.”

By contrast, Rav Hisda said: “This matter [that an uncircumcised priest may not serve in the Temple] is not derivable from the Torah of Moses, and is learned only from the Prophet Ezekiel.” Rav Ashi dissented from this view and insisted that Ezekiel created no innovation: this law was received orally at Mount Sinai, and Ezekiel merely wrote it down. Yet Ravina, Rav Ashi’s colleague, said: “This matter was not derived from the Torah of Moses but is known from tradition.” Note also that laws of acquisition, rules concerning proselytes, and the wedding liturgy are all said to be learned from the Scroll of Ruth.

This entire issue is derivative of the problem that exercised Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael—that is, whether or not all of the halakhot and legal procedures accepted as authoritative oral teaching are rooted in the text of the Torah and thus “have support.” It was raised anew in connection with those exegeses that were known by the name asmakhta.

On occasion, the Sages expounded a verse in the Torah and said that the exegesis was not a conclusive proof of the legal point at hand but merely a support; that is, the matter at hand is not latently embedded in the deep meaning of the text. The prevalent language in such cases is: “it is a rabbinic enactment, and the text is a mere support [asmakhta].” According to Maimonides, such matters “have no hint at all in the Torah, but the law is: being known and remembered, this that the phrase ‘the exegeses were essential before the Torah was revealed to Moses’ is clearly true of every scriptural voucher for a rabbinic enactment.”

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|48| BT Bava Kamma 92a-93a lists thirteen proverbs, each with this formula.
|49| Zohar, Pinehas, 221a. See Nitzotzei Zohar, ad lac.
|50| BT Sanhedrin 22b.
|51| BT Rosh Hashanah 7a.
|52| BT Bava Metzi’a 47a; BT Yevamot 47b; BT Ketubot 7b.

[35] A Babylonian Amora of the latter part of the third century.
[36] That a priest who had so violated the fundamental norm of circumcision could even be considered as a Temple officiant may seem impossible. But the Rabbis had in mind a case where circumcision was medically contraindicated, as when two older brothers had already died as a result of circumcision. In rabbinic law, such situations exempted one from circumcision, but the question remained: Is the presence of a foreskin nevertheless such a physical stigma that it would disqualify such a priest from the privilege of serving in the Temple?
[37] A Babylonian Amora of the fourth to fifth centuries.
[38] The Scroll of Ruth is contained in the Hagigah. The point being made is that some very basic monetary, religious, and liturgical standards do not have their source in the Pentateuch.
[39] The word asmakhta comes from the root meaning “support” and apparently means to suggest that the textual basis for the exegesis gives support to the norm or rule at hand. In the sequel, the question will be raised: How literally should this notion of support be taken? Is the text in such cases merely an associational hook, or can it be considered the derivational source of the law?
Torah, but the law is associated with the text as a mnemonic sign, to facilitate its being known and remembered. But it is not the true meaning of the verse, and it is this that the phrase 'the text is a mere support' always means."\(^{54}\) This view, that such exegeses were essentially mnemonic devices, was stated prior to Maimonides by Judah Halevi, who said the following concerning the exegesis of the verse "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying" (Genesis 2:16):

It is an indicator of the seven Noahide commandments.\(^{40}\) "Lord" refers to the prohibition on blasphemy; "God" refers to the prohibition on idol worship; "commanded" refers to the maintenance of a legal system; "the man" refers to the prohibition on murder; "saying" refers to the prohibition on incest and adultery... \(^{35}\) \(^{41}\) This verse is very far from all of these matters. But it is popularly accepted that these seven commandments are associated with this verse, which serves as an aide-memoire.\(^{56}\)

The following bold opinion was reported in the name of the Maharil:\(^{42}\)

Whenever it is said, "it is a rabbinic enactment, and the text is a mere support," this is what it means: it is certainly a construction of the Rabbis, who then sought out and found a scriptural support. They then associated their enactment with the text in order to strengthen it, so that people would believe it was biblically ordained, and would thus give it weight, and not come to disdain and treat lightly enactments of the Sages.\(^{37}\)

Against those who claimed that supports [asmakhtot] were mere indicators, the Ritba\(^{43}\) held that

whatever has support from a verse thereby has the approval of the Holy and Blessed One... this is clearly true. It is not so that such textual support is a mere indicator given by the Sages, and is not the intent of the text. God forbid! Let such opinions be forgotten and never expressed, for they are heretical. Rather, the Torah makes its views known and empowers the Sages to enact certain things should they see fit... therefore, you will

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\(^{34}\) Introduction to the Mishnah, ed. Mosad Ha-Rav Kuk, Ramban La-Am XVIII, 34. See also a similar assertion in Guide of the Perplexed, III:43.

\(^{35}\) See BT Sanhedrin 56b.

\(^{36}\) The Kuzari, 3:73.


\(^{40}\) The Seven Noahide Commandments are a rabbinic construct according to which all human beings (or, in some views, all who reside in the Land of Israel), Jew or Gentile, are held responsible for certain basic rules of civilized living. The usual number of these is seven, but there are alternative lists and numbers.

\(^{41}\) The list continues with the sixth and seventh commandments, that is, the prohibitions against theft and against eating limbs torn from a live animal. The prohibition of theft is derived from the permission "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat" (hence, whatever I do not grant you, you may not take, for that is theft). The seventh commandment is alternately derived from this same verse, or from Genesis 9:4: "You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it."

\(^{42}\) Rabbi Jacob ben Moses Moellin, leading authority of fourteenth- to fifteenth-century Germany.

\(^{43}\) Rabbi Yom Tov ben Abraham Ishbili, a major legalist of thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Spain.
always find the Sages providing some evidence, or hint, or support for their statements in the Torah, so as to demonstrate that they do not innovate of their own accord. All of the Oral Torah is at least hinted at in the Written Torah, which is perfect, and not, God forbid, lacking anything. 58

In general, the Sages followed Rabbi Akiva’s view that all halakhot are at least hinted at in Torah. “Study it and review it; you will find everything in it.” This viewpoint was expanded to the point that even secular wisdom, such as natural science, was deemed to have been revealed to Moses and hinted at in the Torah. It was taught in the school of Rabbi Akiva: “he is trusted throughout My household” (Numbers 12:7)—“I revealed to him[44] all that is above and below, all that is in the waters or on dry land.” 59 One who is busied with the wisdom of Torah gains much, including access to all other wisdoms. “There is nothing that is not hinted at in the Torah.”

58 Ritba, Novellae to BT Rosh Hashanah 16a. The MaHaRAl, Rabbi Yehuda Loew of Prague (sixteenth century), expressed a similar point of view about the reality of the biblical sources and derivations of laws stated by the Rabbis. See Be’er Hagolah, 1.

59 Sifre Zuta, p. 276.

[44] The subject here, as in the verse in Numbers 12, is Moses.

Having described Rabbi Ishmael’s approach to the Torah, Heschel now turns to an examination of the world, particularly with reference to the Torah and the world. Just as the supernatural, so can the events of the world, particularly with reference to the direct flow of divine self-expression of God. The style and manner of understanding it (the meneutic for understanding it) work together.

In Rabbi Ishmael’s view, God reveals with its own autonomous nature course; the world follows its natural course; the world follows its natural reason. The events of the world for the most part and are possible if the Torah says explicitly that God fed them with manna, this cannot be compatible as possible with the natural reason.

Where Rabbi Ishmael sees order as a divine utterance containing unified world is similarly a unique disclosure immediately apparent to reason. Its heaps and heaps of laws through intimates miracles upon miracles be the same approach to daily life in the world autonomous, following the course would experience every day, every evidence of the direct flow of divine