

# The Idea of History in Rabbinic Judaism

## What Kinds of Questions did the Ancient Rabbis Answer?

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“And the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai in the first month of the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, [‘Let the people of Israel keep the Passover at its appointed time. On the fourteenth day of this month, in the evening, you shall keep it at its appointed time; according to all its statutes and all its ordinances you shall keep it.’]” (Num. 9:1–14):

Scripture teaches you that considerations of temporal order do not apply to the sequence of scriptural stories.

For at the beginning of the present book Scripture states, “The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai in the tent of meeting on the first day of the second month in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt” (Num. 1:1).

And here Scripture refers to “the first month,”

so serving to teach you that considerations of temporal order do not apply to the sequence of scriptural stories.

Sifré to Numbers LXIV:I.1

The ancient Israelite Scripture, a.k.a. “the Old Testament,” is classified as historical because it sets forth a temporal order for organizing and explaining events. Scripture portrays linear history, sustains narrative, and registers the sharp differentiation of present from past.<sup>1</sup> In that context, the statement that considerations of temporal order do not apply jars. Yet it represents the normative Rabbinic view of matters. Produced in the first six centuries of the Common Era, Rabbinic writing, responding to Scripture, does not encompass sustained historical narratives or biographies and produces the fusion of times past, present, and future into one time. Rabbinic Judaism therefore contributes to this inquiry into the nature of historical knowledge in Graeco-Roman, Christian, and Judaic antiquity the case of a culture

<sup>1</sup> Here I recast some of the findings of my *The Presence of the Past, the Pastness of the Present. History, Time, and Paradigm in Rabbinic Judaism*. Bethesda, 1996: CDL Press. Second edition, revised and augmented by six new chapters: *The Idea of History in Rabbinic Judaism*. Leiden, 2004: E. J. Brill.

that possessed a rich heritage of historical writing and yet ceased to write history. They substituted paradigmatic for historical thinking. Paradigmatic thinking generalizes and treats the past as undifferentiated from the present. The paradigm consists of generalizations concerning the human situation, patterns of conduct and consequence, and the paradigm governs present and past without distinction. That is why it is the opposite of historical.

To state the case simply: the Rabbinic sages inherited Scripture, with its sustained and continuous historical narrative from Genesis through Kings. They further possessed in Scripture a definition of time that accorded with conceptions of past, present, and future characteristic of historical time. But discerning patterns in Scripture and in nature, they produced a system of patterns or models, but no history-writing comparable to that which they had inherited. They thought like philosophers, not historians. Their canon encompassed fables and biographical snippets formed into general models, exemplary cases divorced from particular times and places — but no linear history and no continuous biography. And their conception of time totally contradicts that of Scripture.

### Rabbinic Judaism of Late antiquity and the Role of Historical Thinking in the Normative Judaism through the Ages

The rabbis of whom I speak, the authors of Rabbinic Judaism, flourished in the first six centuries of the Common Era. The system they constructed and the books they wrote defined the norms of Judaism from then to now. In those centuries they transformed the Hebrew Scriptures of ancient Israel into the religious system of theology and law we know as Judaism. This they did by treating the instances of law and theology of Scripture as exemplary and generalizing on the result; so they produced a coherent system out of episodic cases. That approach to Scripture's narratives and laws has a bearing on the issue of what Judaism wishes to learn from history, but in an unanticipated way.

That is because, until modern times, the Rabbinic religious system we know as Judaism did not produce historical writing at all, however we define history. Episodic chronicles, which did emerge, did not provoke sustained reflection on the meaning and end of the past. The canonical literature of that Judaism in antiquity was comprised by commentaries on Scripture, law codes and commentaries on those codes, legal opinions, some writings of mystic doctrine, philosophy and theology, and the like. Chronicles were local and episodic. No one thought about history theologically, in the manner of Augustine or even Eusebius, for example. Only rarely before modern times did sustained thinking undertake to link events into sequential narratives

and exhibit the patterns of the past, to produce histories. And nothing like critical historical research was even dreamt of.

Not only so, but even when in modern times Jews undertook to write history, the received Rabbinic Judaism was not what motivated them. In modern times, from the nineteenth century forward, histories of the Jews did come to be written. But the modern historians of the Jews and of Judaism to begin with derived their mythopoeic questions from other concerns than those of Rabbinic Judaism. Two examples suffice. One major source of history-writing was Reform Judaism, which asked history to validate change and undertook to prove that Reform was not only legitimate but well-precedented. Another important source of history-writing was Zionism, which required and found in history a compelling narrative account of the Jews as a nation, and through archaeology a deed to the Land buried in the sand. That meant possessing a continuous, coherent, linear history, and Zionist historians narrated the history of the Jewish nation as part of their program of demonstrating that the Jews form a people, one people, and establish a state to realize the nationality attested by their unbroken history. No counterpart historical work came out of the declared heirs of Rabbinic Judaism in the yeshivah-world.

What makes the neglect of history-writing anomalous for Rabbinic Judaism is that the framers possessed but neglected influential models of historical thinking. For instance, they did not have to invent the drawing of theological lessons from narratives of things that were said and done and experienced in the past. These rabbis inherited in Scripture a massive purposeful account of the past, a continuous historical narrative running from Genesis through Kings of the Hebrew Scriptures. They had only to continue the received tale. Not only so, but they themselves lived in interesting times. That ought to have stimulated their interest in presenting to Scripture questions that the record of the past answered through (hi)story-telling. But it failed to do so. Scripture set forth narrative in the carefully delineated past tense of history. So far as history requires narrative, and so far as that narrative has to record what has taken place in a period that has passed and been marked off from our own, a past distinct from the present — and these are the two requirements of historical writing and historical thinking — Rabbinic Judaism did not possess an idea of history and did not ask historical questions. Why not?

By any criterion of events antiquity produced plenty of history for the Rabbinic Judaic authors to process, to write up and reflect upon. The reason why not is *not* that they did not experience historical events that warranted reflection, study and preservation. The empires that governed them engaged in great wars. They lived on the frontier between the Roman and Iranian empires, which fought for the strategic lands of Mesopotamia and the Holy Land, key to Rome's

breadbasket in Egypt. International historical events did not exhaust the historical repertoire.

Consider axiological events that took place in the first six centuries C.E. and that matched in their historical eventfulness the historical moments highlighted by Scripture. Scripture recorded the possession and the loss of the Land, and current events presented counterparts. Israel had lost the Land of Israel and the Temple had been destroyed. That happened again in the first century C.E., but no one among the Rabbinic sages produced the counterpart of Scripture's narrative from Genesis through Kings. (Josephus did, Yohanan ben Zakkai, his contemporary, did not.) The Temple of Jerusalem, destroyed in 586 B.C.E. and rebuilt three generations later, which embodied the political autonomy and religious center of the Israelite world, suffered another disaster, this one in 70 C.E., when a Jewish rebellion against Roman rule of the Land of Israel led to a siege and the repetition of the event of 586. A Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote massive histories of ancient Israelite antiquities and the war against Rome itself. Some of his stories find their way into the Rabbinic literature. But his sustained explanation of what has happened and its meaning finds no counterpart in Rabbinic literature. Three generations later, in 132, another war, this one led by a Messianic general, Bar Kokhba, yielded a worse calamity. Now Jerusalem was leveled, the Temple mount ploughed over and dedicated to a Roman temple, and Jews were forbidden from entering Jerusalem altogether. But for a few stories about the repression of the rebellion by Rome, we should know nothing of the event so far as the Rabbis were concerned.

And then there was the not unimportant matter of Christianity, born in the heart of the world of Judaism. The advent of a competing reading of the ancient Scriptures, this one deriving from Christianity, challenged the received understanding of Scripture, finding proof in the ancient prophets for the Messiahship of Jesus. That chronic problem turned acute when the Roman emperor in 312 declared Christianity, long persecuted and proscribed, to be a licit religion. Within a generation Christianity became the state religion of Rome. The Christians pointed to the conversion of Rome to Christianity as evidence that Jesus really was Christ, and that Judaism had been superseded. The Church Father Eusebius wrote a history of the world from creation to Constantine to call attention to history's demonstration of the truth of Christianity. No rabbi responded with a contrary historical narrative. Indeed, a generation later, in 361, another emperor, this one a pagan, to humiliate Christianity decreed that the Jews might rebuild the Temple. But nothing came of it. A bit later the Christian theologian, John Chrysostom, called attention to that marvel of history, the ultimate vindication of Christianity. No rabbi responded. History did not form a stage for debate, e.g., in conflicting narratives. Over the next century, now-Christian Rome nullified

the rights of the Jewish community to manage its own affairs and dismantled the ethnic government that the pagan-Roman government had established to administer the ethnic community in the Land of Israel. Surely provoked to reflect on the meaning of events, Rabbinic Judaism registered its response with great power — but not in historical writing.

### Thinking through History versus Thinking through Ahistorical Paradigms

We recall in this context the statement of Jacques LeGoff, “The opposition between past and present is fundamental [to historical thinking], since the activity of memory and history is founded on this distinction.”<sup>2</sup> Israelite Scripture certainly qualifies as historical. It recognizes both the pastness of the past and also invokes the power of the past to explain the present. Time runs one way, differentiated into past, present, and future, and time is linear. The Rabbinic system insists upon the presence of the past and the pastness of the present, instructing the faithful to view themselves, out of the here and now, as living in another time, another place: “Therefore every person must see himself or herself as slave to Pharaoh in Egypt,” as the Passover Haggadah-narrative phrases matters. But the same invocation of the present into the past also serves to convey the past into the here and now. That represents an anti-historical mode of thought.

Once a religious obligation imposes the past upon present, shifting the present into a fully realized, contemporary-past, rites of commemoration give way to the reformulation of the ages into a governing paradigm that obliterates barriers of time. Rules of structure and order apply without the differentiation by criteria of time. These rules comprise a paradigm, a pattern of conduct — do this, that will happen — *without regard to temporal circumstance*. An excess of demand over supply will as a rule cause inflation — without regard to time, place, or circumstance. So too mathematically described data register without regard to context or venue, and the episodic order in which facts make their appearance need not explain the facts and rarely does, in economics, for example. Independent of temporal circumstance, the paradigm thus not only imparts sense and order to what happens but also selects out of what happens what counts — and is to be counted. That brings us to the fundamental question: how does Rabbinic Judaism tell time?

<sup>2</sup> Jacques LeGoff, *History and Memory* (N.Y., 1992: Columbia University Press). Translated by Steven Randall and Elizabeth Claman, p. xii.

### From Historical Time to Cyclical Time and Paradigmatic Time

Let me start with simple definition. Paradigmatic time organizes events in patterns, invokes a model that everywhere pertains. Nature divides time by appeal to not unique events but common ones. Nature marks the aggregates of time by reference to indicators that are reversible, recurrent, and not restricted by considerations of past, present, and future. Is there a way of dividing time in accord with dimensions humanity can accommodate, yet also congruent to nature's divisions. That is, are there media for the division of time that humanity may adopt and that are reversible, recurrent, and unrestricted by lines of division between past and present, present and future? The answer is, there are two such ways, one familiar, the other represented here by the Rabbinic literature and at the same time unfamiliar *and* absolutely routine in the history of Scripture's reception in Western civilization, Judaic and Christian alike.

History is not the only way of thinking about natural time. History solves the existential problem posed by the enormous disproportion between humanity's experience of time, which is by definition brief (a life-span or five successive life-spans) and ephemeral (here now, gone tomorrow), and natural time, from the perspective of mortal man and transitory society, endless in its farthest limits. But that same problem may be worked out in another way of thinking about time altogether. Time is to be differentiated not only by events, unique, linear, irreversible, deemed to differentiate units of time by imposing their definitive character upon said units. Another way of measuring time within the human ambience, besides nature's way, may be formulated, in which humanly-sensible aggregates of time may be formulated in their own terms but not made to intersect with natural time at all.

Defining this other way is made easy by finding the answer to a simple question. Can we differentiate nature's time for humanity's purposes not by appeal to indicators that contrast with nature's indicators for dividing time but that cohere in character with them? Can we find indicators of the division of time that are human but also comparable to the natural ones? If we can find a way of thinking about time that both remains well within the dimensions of humanity's sensibility and intellect (ephemeral, brief, yet encompassing) and also retains the character of consubstantiality with nature's time, then we can answer the question in an affirmative way.

**CYCLICAL TIME:** One such way, entirely familiar in our context, is the cyclical one. That is the view of time that notes recurrent patterns, or cycles, repeated sequences of specific events that conform to a general pattern. Cyclical time differentiates natural time by marking of sequences of years or months or days marked by a given pattern of events, then further sequences of years or months or days that

recapitulate that very same pattern of events. So time is viewed as forming not only natural but also social or historical aggregates, distinct from one another as much as one year is distinct from another, and yet repetitive of a single pattern throughout. The conception of cyclical time takes over from nature that uniformity of day, month, or year, but recasts the terms of uniformity to encompass humanity's, not only nature's, repetitions.

Then history is the discovery of the cycles in an endless sequence. And profound historical thought will require the close study of cycles, with the interest in differentiating cycle from cycle, the discovery, for example, of when the cycles run their course (if they do). All of this intellectual labor is carried on well within the framework of natural differentiation of time. Nature's time and history's time then correspond in that both are differentiated by the appeal to the same recurrent indicators, though the indicators for natural time and those for historical time will differ. So the mode of differentiation is the same, but each said of differentiating indicators conforms to its setting, the human then corresponding to the natural one.

Whence the sense of the cyclicity of time, such as Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) expresses in saying what has been is what will be? An answer drawn from human existence serves. Cyclical time extends to the human condition the observed character of natural time — or reverses the process, assigning to nature the orderly character of human life; the correspondence is what counts. Just as natural time runs through cycles, so humanity marks time through corresponding cycles. For instance, in the aggregates of humanity formed by family, village, or territorial unit ("kingdom," "nation" for example), just as the seasons run from spring through summer to fall to winter, and the human life from youth to middle age to old age to death, so social aggregates prove cyclical.

The territorial unit may be accorded a cycle of time, from birth through maturity, old age, and death, and its "history" may form a chapter in the cyclical patterns of human time, corresponding to natural time. Humanity's mode of differentiating the time marked off by nature, then, accords with the natural indicators of differentiation: the life of the human being forming a metaphor for the life of the social unit. Then humanity's indicators correspond in character to nature's — the cyclicity of the one matching the character of cyclicity revealed by the other. Yet humanity's indicators also prove natural to the human condition, with the life-cycle forming one (among a variety to be sure) means of differentiating humanly among the divisions of nature's time.

**HISTORICAL TIME:** If we revert to the characterization of historical time offered just now, how shall we read the cyclical, as distinct from the historical, mode of formulating a human counterpart to nature's time? Here are the point by point correspondences:

- [1] human events form givens, as much as natural events form givens, in the measurement of time; but these events correspond in character to those of nature, because, like those in nature, they recur in a fixed and predictable pattern, just as nature's events do; human events, like natural divisions of aggregates of time, are not unique, not particular, not one-time only; they are recurrent and mark of an eternal return of the pattern set forth *ab initio* (whether from creation, whether from the formation of the social order);
- [2] but the problem of a human formulation of the nature of time is solved as much as it is by history, though in a different way; specifically, nature's time is cut down to human size by cyclical time, but this is done in nature's way. Cyclical time recasts nature's time. As the latter finds points of differentiation in cyclical events (lunar months, solar seasons), so the former — historical time viewed cyclically — is marked off recurrent points of differentiation, but these are, in the nature of things, measured in the dimensions of the human life.
- [3] consequently, nature's time does not subordinate itself to history's time; time is itself not linear, not marked off by unique events, reversible in direction from past to future, and not at all clearly differentiated (for the same reason) into past, present, and future.

It follows that nature provides the metaphor for cyclical time. That explains why cyclical time is coherent with nature in a way in which historical time is not. Specifically, nature in humanity is expressed through a cycle of birth, youth, maturity, old age, death. The next step, for cyclical time given the form of historical narrative (for example) is then readily to be predicted. How nature divides the time of a human life then is translated into, or raised to the level of, the social order. Then society (e.g., the territorial unit, the city, the community, the kingdom, the empire) is born, matures, grows old, dies, with a further cycle to follow, onward into time. That is how human time, like nature's time, is deemed to conform to a cycle corresponding to the natural and the individual. The events of the social order viewed as comparable to the natural one are not unique, irreversible, irrecoverable, and linear, but common, recurrent, recoverable, and cyclical;

We see, therefore, two media for the taxonomy of humanity's time, in response to the classification of nature's time, the historical and the cyclical. But there is a third, which I call, the paradigmatic classification of humanity's time; it is not historical, and it also is not cyclical. That is what has now to be defined. Paradigmatic time refers to a pattern, or a model, or a paradigm (the words are interchangeable here) that provides yet another way of defining time in human terms,



which is to say, of taking the natural divisions of time and correlating with them aggregates of time that express time in human terms. But paradigmatic time takes a different measure altogether from historical, including cyclical time; and it deems nature's time merely integral to its own. What, precisely, do I mean by "paradigmatic time"?

### Paradigmatic Time

What is at stake in the conception of time within paradigmatic thinking? By a paradigm time is marked off by indicators that are utterly free-standing, in no way correlated with natural time at all; a paradigm's time is time defined in units that are framed quite independent of the epiphenomena of time and change as we know it in this life, on the one side or the cycle of natural events that define and also delineate nature's time, on the other.

Like fractals (in mathematical language) paradigms describe how things are, capturing the shape of time whether large or small, whether here or there, whether today or in a distant past or an unimaginable future. The paradigm identifies the sense and order of things, their sameness, without regard to scale; a few specific patterns, revealed in this and that, hither and yon, isolate points of regularity or recurrence. We know those "fractals" or paradigms because, in Scripture, God has told us what they are; our task is so to receive and study Scripture as to find the paradigms; so to examine and study events as to discern the paradigms; so to correlate Scripture and time — whether present time or past time then matters not at all — as to identify the indicators of order, the patterns that occur and recur and (from God's perspective) impose sense on the nonsense of human events.

In the biblical religions, Judaism and Christianity, it is God who in creation has defined the paradigms — patterns, models — of time, Scripture that conveys those paradigms, and humanity that discovers, in things large and small, those paradigms that inhere in the very nature of creation itself. A paradigm forms a way of keeping time that invokes its own differentiating indicators, its own counterparts to the indicators of nature's time. Nature defines time as that span that is marked off by one spell of night and day; or by one sequence of positions and phases of the moon; or by one cycle of the sun around the earth (in the pre-Copernican paradigm). History further defines nature's time by marking of a solar year by reference to an important human event, e.g., a reign, a battle, a building. So history's time intersects with, and is superimposed upon, nature's time. And cyclical time forms a modification of history's time, appealing for its divisions of the aggregates of time to the analogy, in human life, to nature's time: the natural sequence of events in a human life viewed

as counterpart to the natural sequence of events in solar and lunar time.

I cannot overstress the fictive, predetermined character of time as measured in the paradigmatic manner, that is, time as formulated by a free-standing model, not appealing to the course of sun and moon, not concerned with the metaphor of human life and its cyclicity either. Paradigms are set forth by neither nature (by definition) nor natural history (what happens on its own here on earth); by neither the cosmos (sun and moon) or the natural history of humanity (the life cycle and analogies drawn therefrom). In the setting of Judaism and Christianity, paradigms are set forth in revelation; they explain the Creator's sense of order and regularity, which is neither imposed upon, nor derived from, nature's time, nor to be discovered through history's time. And that is why to paradigmatic time, history is wildly incongruous, and considerations of linearity, temporality, and historical order beyond all comprehension. God has set forth the paradigms that measure time by indicators of an other-than natural character: supernatural time, which of course is beyond all conception of time.

So much for a theological formulation of matters. What, in this-worldly language, is to be said about the same conception? Paradigms derive from human invention and human imagination, and are imposed on nature and on history alike. Nature is absorbed, history recast, through paradigmatic time; that is, time invented, not time discovered; time defined for a purpose determined by humanity (the social order, the faithful, for instance), time not discovered by determined and predetermined, time that is not natural or formed in correspondence to nature, or imposed upon nature at specified intersections; but time that is defined completely in terms of the prior pattern or the determined paradigm or fabricated model itself: time wholly invented for the purposes of the social order that invents and recognizes time.

Let me make these abstractions concrete, since I refer, for paradigmatic time, to perfectly familiar ways of thinking about the passage of time, besides the natural (cyclical) and historical ways of thinking. Once I define paradigmatic time *as time invented by humanity for humanity's own purposes*, time framed by a system set forth to make sense of a social order, for example, the examples multiply. The use of B.C. and A.D. forms one obvious paradigm: all time is divided into two parts by reference to the advent of Jesus Christ. Islam presents a comparable example in telling time from the moment of the Hegira in 621 C.E., when Muhammad made the passage from Mecca to Medina. Another paradigm is marked by the history of humanity set forth in Scripture: Eden, then after Eden; or (as Rabbinic paradigms define matters), Adam vs. Israel, Eden vs. the Land; Adam's fall vs. Israel's loss of the Land. The sages will impose a further, critical variable on the pattern of Eden vs. Land of Israel, Adam vs. Israel,

and that is, Sinai. A pattern then will recognize the divisions of time between before Sinai and afterward.

### Paradigmatic Thinking about Past and Future in a Single Tense: The Presence of the Past, the Pastness of the Present

If I maintain that Rabbinic Judaism possessed no idea of history because it pursued instead paradigms of human conduct without regard to time, what was the source of those paradigms? Scripture not merely supplied the facts but read in the rabbis' manner laid the foundations for paradigmatic thinking. Before proceeding, let me give a single important case of paradigmatic reading of Scripture: the comparison of Adam and Israel, the loss of Eden and the loss of the Land. For the creation-narrative formed the primary, generative paradigm of the Rabbinic theological system. In this paradigmatic reading of Scripture Israel is like Adam, but Israel is the Other, the Last Adam, the opposite of Adam. We shall now systematically compare Adam and Israel, the first man and the last, and show how the story of Adam matches the story of Israel — but with a difference:

#### Genesis Rabbah XIX:IX.1-2

2. A. R. Abbahu in the name of R. Yosé bar Haninah: "It is written, 'But they are like a man [Adam], they have transgressed the covenant' (Hos. 6:7).

B. "'They are like a man,' specifically, like the first man. [We shall now compare the story of the first man in Eden with the story of Israel in its land.]

Now the composer identifies an action in regard to Adam with a counterpart Action in regard to Israel, in each case matching verse for verse, beginning with Eden and Adam:

C. "'In the case of the first man, I brought him into the garden of Eden, I commanded him, he violated my commandment, I judged him to be sent away and driven out, but I mourned for him, saying 'How...'" [which begins the book of Lamentations, hence stands for a lament, but which, as we just saw, also is written with the consonants that also yield, 'Where are you'].

D. "'I brought him into the garden of Eden,' as it is written, 'And the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden' (Gen. 2:15).

E. "'I commanded him,' as it is written, 'And the Lord God commanded...'" (Gen. 2:16).

F. "'And he violated my commandment,' as it is written, 'Did you eat from the tree concerning which I commanded you' (Gen. 3:11).

G. "'I judged him to be sent away,' as it is written, 'And the Lord God sent him from the garden of Eden' (Gen. 3:23).

H. “‘And I judged him to be driven out.’ ‘And he drove out the man’ (Gen. 3:24).

I. “‘But I mourned for him, saying, “How...”’ ‘And he said to him, “Where are you”’ (Gen. 3:9), and the word for ‘where are you’ is written, ‘How...’

Now comes the systematic comparison of Adam and Eden with Israel and the Land of Israel:

J. “‘So too in the case of his descendants, [God continues to speak,] I brought them into the Land of Israel, I commanded them, they violated my commandment, I judged them to be sent out and driven away but I mourned for them, saying, “How...”’

K. “‘I brought them into the Land of Israel.’ ‘And I brought you into the land of Carmel’ (Jer. 2:7).

L. “‘I commanded them.’ ‘And you, command the children of Israel’ (Ex. 27:20). ‘Command the children of Israel’ (Lev. 24:2).

M. “‘They violated my commandment.’ ‘And all Israel have violated your Torah’ (Dan. 9:11).

N. “‘I judged them to be sent out.’ ‘Send them away, out of my sight and let them go forth’ (Jer 15:1).

O. “‘...and driven away.’ ‘From my house I shall drive them’ (Hos. 9:15).

P. “‘But I mourned for them, saying, “How...”’ ‘How has the city sat solitary, that was full of people’ (Lam. 1:1).”

Here we end where we began, Israel in exile from the Land, like Adam in exile from Eden.

The case illustrates the mode of thought. The Rabbinic sages identified in the written part of the Torah the governing models of Israel’s enduring existence, whether past, whether future. And that is precisely why they formed the conception of paradigm, and whence they drew the specificities of theirs. They knew precisely what paradigms imparted order and meaning to everyday events, and their models, equivalent in mathematics to the “philosophy,” then selected and explained data and also allowed prognosis to take place. In place of a past that explained the present and predicted the future, sages invoked a paradigm that imposed structure on past and future alike — a very different thing.

### Concrete Results of the Move From Historical to Paradigmatic Conceptions of Time

The Rabbinic sages recognized no barrier between present and past. To them, the present and past formed a single unit of time, encompassing a single span of experience. Why was that so? It is because, to them, times past took place in the present too, on which account, the present not only encompassed the past (which historical thinking

concedes) but took place in the same plane of time as the past (which, to repeat, historical thinking rejects). How come? It is because the Rabbinic sages experienced the past in the present. What happened that mattered had already happened; an event then was transformed into a series; events themselves defined paradigms, yielded rules. A simple formulation of this mode of thought is as follows:

#### Mishnah-tractate Taanit 4:6

- A. Five events took place for our fathers on the seventeenth of Tammuz, and five on the ninth of Ab.
- B. On the seventeenth of Tammuz
  - (1) the tablets [of the Torah] were broken,
  - (2) the daily whole offering was cancelled,
  - (3) the city wall was breached,
  - (4) Apostemos burned the Torah, and
  - (5) he set up an idol in the Temple.
- C. On the ninth of Ab
  - (1) the decree was made against our forefathers that they should not enter the land,
  - (2) the first Temple and
  - (3) the second [Temple] were destroyed,
  - (4) Betar was taken, and
  - (5) the city was ploughed up [after the war of Hadrian].
- D. When Ab comes, rejoicing diminishes.

We mark time by appeal to the phases of the moon; these then may be characterized by traits shared in common — and so the paradigm, from marking time, moves outward to the formation of rules concerning the regularity and order of events.

In the formulation just now given, we see the movement from event to rule. What is important about events is not their singularity but their capacity to generate a pattern, a concrete rule for the here and now. That is the conclusion drawn from the very passage at hand:

#### Mishnah-tractate Taanit 4:7

- A. In the week in which the ninth of Ab occurs it is prohibited to get a haircut and to wash one's clothes.
- B. But on Thursday of that week these are permitted,
- C. because of the honor owing to the Sabbath.
- D. On the eve of the ninth of Ab a person should not eat two prepared dishes, nor should one eat meat or drink wine.
- E. Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel says, "He should make some change from ordinary procedures."
- F. R. Judah declares people liable to turn over beds.
- G. But sages did not concur with him.

Events serve to define paradigms and therefore, also, to yield rules governing the here and now: what we do to recapitulate.

This brings us back to our question: how an event is turned into a series, what has changed what happened once into something that happens. The answer lies in the correspondence (real or imagined) of the two generative events sages found definitive: the destruction of the Temple, the destruction of the Temple. The singular event that framed their consciousness recapitulated what had already occurred. For they confronted a Temple in ruins, and, in the defining event of the age just preceding the composition of most of the documents surveyed here, they found quite plausible the notion that the past was a formidable presence in the contemporary world. And having lived through events that they could plausibly discover in Scripture — Lamentations for one example, Jeremiah another — they also found entirely natural the notion that the past took place in, was recapitulated by, the present as well.

When we speak of the presence of the past, therefore, we raise not generalities or possibilities but the concrete experience that generations actively mourning the Temple endured. When we speak of the pastness of the present, we enter into the consciousness, the dream-world, of people who could open Scripture and find themselves right there, in its record. And that was in not only Lamentations, but also prophecy, and, especially, the books of the Torah, for reasons already instantiated in the parallel of Adam and Israel cited earlier. Here we deal with not the spiritualization of Scripture, but with the acutely contemporary and immediate realization of Scripture: once again, as then; Scripture in the present day, the present day in Scripture. That is why it was possible for sages to formulate out of Scripture a paradigm that imposed structure and order upon the world that they themselves encountered.

Since, then, sages did not see themselves as removed in time and space from the generative events to which they referred the experience of the here and now, they also had no need to make the past contemporary. If the Exodus was irreversible, once for all time event, then, as we see, the Rabbinic sages saw matters in a different way altogether. They neither relived nor transformed one-time historical events, for they found another way to overcome the barrier of chronological separation.

Specifically, if history began when the gap between present and past shaped consciousness, then we naturally ask ourselves whether the point at which historical modes of thought concluded and a different mode of thought took over produced an opposite consciousness from the historical one: not cycle but paradigm. For, it seems to me clear, the premise that time and space separated the Rabbinic sages from the great events of the past simply did not win attention. The opposite premise defined matters: barriers of space and time in

no way separated sages from great events, the great events of the past enduring for all time. How then are we to account for this remarkably different way of encounter, experience, and, consequently, explanation? The answer has already been adumbrated.

Sages assembled in the documents of Rabbinic Judaism, from the Mishnah forward, all recognized the destruction of the Second Temple and all took for granted that that event was to be understood by reference to the model of the destruction of the first. A variety of sources reviewed here maintain precisely that position and express it in so many words, e.g., the colloquy between Aqiba and sages about the comfort to be derived from the ephemeral glory of Rome and the temporary ruin of Jerusalem.

### Sifré to Deuteronomy XLIII.III.7.

A. Rabban Gamaliel, R. Joshua, R. Eleazar b. Azariah, and R. Aqiba were going toward Rome. They heard the sound of the city's traffic from as far away as Puteoli, a hundred and twenty *mil* away. They began to cry, while R. Aqiba laughed.

B. They said to him, "Aqiba, why are we crying while you are laughing?"

C. He said to them, "Why are you crying?"

D. They said to him, "Should we not cry, since gentiles, idolators, sacrifice to their idols and bow down to icons, but dwell securely in prosperity, serenely, while the house of the footstool of our God has been put to the torch and left a lair for beasts of the field?"

E. He said to them, "That is precisely why I was laughing. If this is how he has rewarded those who anger; him, all the more so [will he reward] those who do his will."

8.A. Another time they went up to Jerusalem and go to Mount Scopus. They tore their garments.

B. They came to the mountain of the house [of the temple] and saw a fox go forth from the house of the holy of holies. They began to cry, while R. Aqiba laughed.

C. They said to him, "You are always giving surprises. We are crying when you laugh!"

D. He said to them, "But why are you crying?"

E. They said to him, "Should we not cry over the place concerning which it is written, 'And the common person who draws near shall be put to death' (Num. 1:51)? Now lo, a fox comes out of it.

F. "In our connection the following verse of Scripture has been carried out: 'For this our heart is faint, for these things our eyes are dim, for the mountain of Zion which is desolate, the foxes walk upon it' (Lam. 5:17-18)."

G. He said to them, "That is the very reason I have laughed. For lo, it is written, 'And I will take for me faithful witnesses to record, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah' (Is. 8:2).

H. "And what has Uriah got to do with Zechariah? What is it that Uriah said? 'Zion shall be plowed as a field and Jerusalem shall become heaps and the mountain of the Lord's house as the high places of a forest' (Jer. 26:18).

I. "What is it that Zechariah said? 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, "Old men and women shall yet sit in the broad places of Jerusalem"' (Zech. 8:4).

J. "Said the Omnipresent, 'Lo, I have these two witnesses. If the words of Uriah have been carried out, then the words of Zechariah will be carried out. If the words of Uriah are nullified, then the words of Zechariah will be nullified.

K. "Therefore I was happy that the words of Uriah have been carried out, so that in the end the words of Zechariah will come about."

L. In this language they replied to him: "Aqiba, you have given us comfort."

It follows that for the Rabbinic sages, the destruction of the Temple in 70 did not mark a break with the past, such as it had for their predecessors some five hundred years earlier, *but rather a recapitulation of the past*. Paradigmatic thinking then began in response to the year 70, in that very event that precipitated thought about history to begin with, the end of the old order. To state the upshot of the matter with heavy emphasis:

*But paradigm replaced history because what had taken place the first time as unique and unprecedented took place the second time in precisely the same pattern and therefore formed of an episode a series. Paradigmatic thinking replaced historical when history as an account of one-time, irreversible, unique events, arranged in linear sequence and pointing toward a teleological conclusion, lost all plausibility. If the first time around, history — with the past marked off from the present, events arranged in linear sequence, narrative of a sustained character serving as the medium of thought — provided the medium for making sense of matters, then the second time around, history lost all currency. And what was left but cyclical or paradigmatic thinking. The sages chose the paradigm and defined its structure.*

The real choice facing the Rabbinic sages was not linear history as against paradigmatic thinking, but rather, paradigm as against cycle. For the conclusion to be drawn from the destruction of the Temple once again, once history, its premises disallowed, yielded no explanation, can have taken the form of a theory of the cyclicity of events. As nature yielded its spring, summer, fall and winter, so the events of humanity or of Israel in particular can have been asked to conform to a cyclical pattern, in line, for example, with Qohelet's view that what has been is what will be. But the Rabbinic sages obviously did not take that position at all.



They rejected cyclicity in favor of a different ordering of events altogether. That is because they did not believe the Temple would be rebuilt and destroyed again, rebuilt and destroyed, rebuilt and destroyed, and so on into endless time. That is what is explicit in Aqiba's colloquy of Rome and Jerusalem. The sages stated the very opposite: the Temple would be rebuilt but never again destroyed. And that represented a view of the second destruction that rejected cyclicity altogether. Sages instead opted for patterns of history and against cycles because they retained that notion for the specific and concrete meaning of events that characterized Scripture's history, even while rejecting the historicism of Scripture. What they maintained, as we have seen, is that a pattern governed, and the pattern was not a cyclical one. Here, Scripture itself imposed its structures, its order, its system — its paradigm. And the Official History left no room for the conception of cyclicity. If matters do not repeat themselves but do conform to a pattern, then the pattern itself must be identified. And it was — by Rabbinic Judaism.

### What Kinds of Questions did the Ancient Rabbis Answer?

Paradigmatic thinking formed the alternative to cyclical thinking because Scripture, its history subverted, nonetheless defined how matters were to be understood. Viewed whole, the Official History indeed defined the paradigm of Israel's existence, formed out of the components of Eden and the Land, Adam and Israel, Sinai, then given movement through Israel's responsibility to the covenant and Israel's adherence to, or violation, of God's will, fully exposed in the Torah that marked the covenant of Sinai. Scripture laid matters out, and the Rabbinic sages then drew conclusions from that lay-out that conformed to their experience. So the second destruction precipitated thinking about paradigms of Israel's life. And these came to full exposure in the thinking behind the passages that we have surveyed.

The episode made into a series, sages' paradigmatic thinking asked of Scripture different questions from the historical ones of 586 because the Rabbinic sages brought to Scripture different premises; drew from Scripture different conclusions. But in point of fact, not a single paradigm set forth by sages can be distinguished in any important detail from the counterpart in Scripture, not Eden and Adam in comparison to the land of Israel and Israel, and not the tale of Israel's experience in the spinning out of the tension between the word of God and the will of Israel.

The contrast between history's time and nature's time shows that history recognizes natural time and imposes its points of differentiation, upon it. History knows days, months, years, but proposes to

differentiate among them, treating this day as different from that because on this day, such and such happened, but on that day, it did not. History's time takes over nature's time and imposes upon it a second set of indicators or points of differentiation. History therefore defines and measures time through two intersecting indicators, the meeting of [1] the natural and [2] the human. As is clear in the foregoing remarks, the context in which "time" is now defined is [1] the passage of days, weeks, months, and years, as marked by the movement of the sun and the stars in the heavens and [2] the recognition of noteworthy events that have taken place in specific occasions during the passage of those days and months and years. By contrast, paradigmatic time in the context of Judaism tells time through the events of nature, to which are correlated the events of Israel's life: its social structure, its reckoning of time, its disposition of its natural resources, and its history too. That is, through the point at which nature is celebrated, the Temple, there Israel tells time. The upshot is the conception of astral Israel, which comes to its full climax in *Pesiqta deRab Kahana*.

Predictably, therefore, the only history the Rabbinic sages deem worth narrating — and not in sustained narrative even then — is the story of the Temple cult through days and months and years, and the history of the Temple and its priesthood and administration through time and into eternity. We now fully understand that fact. It is because, to begin with, the very conception of paradigmatic thinking as against the historical kind took shape in deep reflection on the meaning of events: what happened before has happened again — to the Temple. Ways of telling time before give way, history's premises having lost plausibility here as much as elsewhere. Now Israel will tell time in nature's way, shaping history solely in response to what happens in the cult and to the Temple. There is no other history, because, to begin with, there is no history.

Nature's time is the sole way of marking time, and Israel's paradigm conforms to nature's time and proves enduringly congruent with it. Israel conforming to nature yields not cyclical history but a reality formed by appeal to the paradigm of cult and Temple, just as God had defined that pattern and paradigm to Moses in the Torah. Genesis begins with nature's time and systematically explains how the resources of nature came to Israel's service to God. History's time yielded an Israel against and despite history, nature's time, as the Torah tells it, an Israel fully harmonious with nature — from Eden to the world to come, Eden restored.

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