OVERLOOKING THE OBVIOUS: CONCEALED BIBLICAL NARRATIVES

IS IT POSSIBLE TO CHANGE THE IMMUTABLE?
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FIRST THOUGHTS

IS IT POSSIBLE TO CHANGE THE IMMUTABLE?

The First Law Jewish Texts: For every text, there exists an equal and opposite text.
The Second Law of Jewish Texts: They're both wrong.

• Contrast “And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks” (Isaiah 2:4) with “Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears” Joel 4:10, 3:10 RSV).

• “Turn it again and again, for everything is in it; contemplate it, grow gray and old over it, and swerve not from it, for there is no greater good” (Pirke Avot 5.22).

THE TENSION BETWEEN STASIS AND CHANGE

• My father was God and didn’t know it. He gave me the Ten Commandments not in thunder and not in anger, not in fire and not in a cloud, but gently and with love. He added caresses and tender words, “would you” and “please.” And chanted “remember” and “keep” with the same tune, and pleaded and wept quietly between one commandment and the next: Thou shalt not take the name of thy Lord in vain, shalt not take, not in vain, please don’t bear false witness against your neighbor. And he hugged me tight and whispered in my ear, Thou shalt not steal, shalt not commit adultery, shalt not kill.
And he lay the palms of his wide-open hands on my head with the Yom Kippur blessing: Honor, love, that thy days may be long upon this earth. And the voice of my father—white as his hair. Then he turned his face to me one last time, as on the day he died in my arms, and said, I would like to add two more commandments: the Eleventh Commandment, “Thou shalt not change,” and the Twelfth Commandment, “Thou shalt change. You will change.”

Thus spoke my father, and he turned and walked away and disappeared into his strange distances—from Open Closed Yehuda Amichai)

“NOTHING THAT DIDN’T HAPPEN BEFORE SHOULDN’T HAPPEN NOW!”

How does a culture/religion respond to changing times when divinely revealed texts instruct that every word must be perfect—nothing old can be taken away and nothing new can be added?

• And now, O Israel, give heed to the laws and rules that I am instructing you to observe…You shall not add anything to what I command you or take anything away from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon you (Deut 4:1-2).

• Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it (Deut 13:1).

• When they have announced to you the verdict in the case, you shall carry out the verdict that is announced…observing scrupulously all their instructions (Deut 17:9-10).

• Gather the people—men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities—that they may hear and so learn to revere the Lord your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching” (Deut 31:12).

• Chadash asoor min haTorah—Anything new is forbidden by the Torah—Hatam Sofer, 1762 – 1839. Hatam Sofer (Seal of the Scribe) is his popular collection of halachic decisions.
• Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:17-20).

PERSONAL OWNERSHIP

Deut 30:11. Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. 30:12 It is not the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" 30:13 Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" 30:14 No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.

•Deut 17:18 focuses on the requirement that a king “shall write for himself a mishneh Torah on a scroll,” translated as “a copy of this teaching. However, the Hebrew, mishneh Torah is also taken to mean “a second Law” or “a second version” (as medieval commentator Ibn Ezra understood the term). Whereas traditional wisdom claims that the king is being instructed to write an exact copy of the Law, it is clear that rabbinic commentators thought otherwise. To their way of thinking, the king must find new wisdom in his reading of the “the second reading.” By extension, if a king is to find new wisdom in his second reading, then students of the Law must find expansive meaning in every word, no matter how straight forward and clear it may seem. Thus, for any change in the Law to be operative, it must have the same full force of legitimacy as the divinely revealed text on which it is based.

This relationship between maintaining the sacredness of the Law and the need to transform it by reading it in a second, newer way in order
to make it fully alive for each generation is not so simple and straightforward. Although Deuteronomy ordains a *mishneh Torah*, elsewhere in the book, this tension is expressed in this antipodal demand, called the *obedience principle*—compliance with command, prohibition, or known law . . . the performance of what is required or enjoined by authority.

**OUTMANEUVERING THE DEMAND:**

**NOTHING MAY BE CHANGED**

The birth of the text is seen as resembling that of a human being; the umbilical cord which connected the text with its time and with the people who produced it is severed. Once its existence becomes fact, the text begins to lead a life of its own. And whereas the process of creating the text is finite, its recreation is infinite. It is an open task for each generation, for each new reader, and is never completed. Whenever a reader creates a meaningful interpretation of the biblical text, which helps him in his search for self-definition and spirituality, then the Torah not only is alive, but is operative in his life. The Torah, whether the narratives of Genesis or the poetic statements of the Prophets, says *darsheni* to each of us. It beckons us to immerse ourselves within it, to learn who we are as Jews and as human beings—Norman J. Cohen (“Seal The Torah Among My Disciples,” an address delivered on March 7, 1984 at the NY campus of The Hebrew Union College.)
[The seven letters י, ג, ג, ו, נ, ט, ע, ש have the crowns on the points of the upper horizontal bars. The *tagin* or flourishes are placed on the tops of the letters, and they are found only in the Torah, not in the printed copies of the Pentateuch.]

• The angels asked God when the New Year would occur. God deferred to the rabbinic court that set the date. But the rabbis realized that the new moon was later than anticipated—but still a valid new moon, and they changed the date of the New Year to the following day. The angels complained to God: “How can they change the date of a holiday that is clearly determined by the calendar?” God quoted Ps 81 in response: “Sound the shofar on the new moon...for it is a law for Israel, a ruling of the God of Jacob,” which seems to side with God setting the date. But the rabbis give the words a different meaning by reading the text as: “When it is a law of Israel, then it becomes a ruling of the God of Jacob.” In other words, “Man’s law becomes God’s law” (Mishnah Rosh HaShanah 2.9).

• Viktor Frankl’s thought experiment” (The Will To Meaning. NY World Publishing, 1969) provides a metaphor that illustrates how the Midrash adds a third dimension to the Tanak:

• The shadow of two shapes, not the objects themselves, are shown on a screen. One is a circle and the other a rectangle—but they are both the same object. It is a cylinder lit from the side and then from above. This contradiction is resolved by adding a third dimension. Midrash is that third dimension.
• …religions do not travel through history in pneumatic tubes, unaffected and unchanged by their encounters with other traditions. Religious traditions and the cultures in which they take root are anything but static. They reshape one another, constantly”—Diana Eck of Harvard Divinity School.

• A parable. To what can this be compared? To a lovely princess, beautiful in every way and hidden deeply within her palace. She has one lover, unknown to anyone; he is hidden too. Out of his love for her, this lover passes by her gate constantly, lifting his eyes to every side. She knows that her lover is hovering about her gate constantly. What does she do? She opens a little window in her hidden palace and reveals her face to her lover, then swiftly withdraws, concealing herself. No one near the lover sees or reflects, only the lover, and his heart and his soul and everything within him flow out to her. And he knows that out of love for him she revealed herself for that one moment. So it is with a word of Torah: She reveals herself to no one but her lover (Zohar).

• ”The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”—William Faulkner

• “Always in motion is the past.”—Yoda in “The Empire Strikes Back

• “Nothing that didn’t happen before, shouldn’t happen now!”—Hillel Seidman in the documentary “Image Before My Eyes”

• “When I was young, I had such a good memory that I remembered things that never happened.”—Mark Twain

• Iron Law of Oligarchy: All organizations, including those committed to democratic ideals and practices inevitably succumb to an oligarchy—rule by an elite few. In other words, the chief motive of any organization is to keep itself in power, invariably doing things the way they were always done. — German activist and scholar Robert Michels (1876-1936).

• Talmud speaks of two sets of tablets that were cherished and preserved—one shattered (Exodus 32:19) and one replacement set (Exodus 34:4): “Luchot v’shivray luchot munachot baaron”—Both the whole tablets and the broken tablets were placed in the ark” (Brakhot 8b).

• “God gave The Torah to Moses in a white fire engraved with black fire” (Yer., Sotah 37a).
• Jeremiah states: "Is not My word like a fire and a hammer that shatters the rock into pieces" (Jeremiah 23:29). And the Talmud concludes, "As the hammer splits the rock into many splinters, so will a scriptural verse yield many meanings" (Sanhedrin 34a) as the sparks from struck stone fly off in all directions.

• "One thing God has spoken, two things have we heard" (Ps. 62:12).

• When the text says that Moses received Moshe kibail Torah miSinai—Moses received Law from Sinai, it does not say haTorah—The Torah, to indicate that the Law is not fixed but is fluid and subject to change in every generation.

• "The Torah has seventy faces" (Num R).

• When Moses received the Law at Mt. Sinai, he was also shown 49 possible ways that each law could be forbidden and 49 possible ways that each law could be permitted (Lev R 26.2; Num R. 19.2; Song of Songs R. 2.15). Thus, a student of the Law must discover the 49 interpretations and 49 opposing interpretations, the 70 faces and the soaring sparks and hidden labyrinths of the sacred word.

• Nevertheless, every word is sacred, even when two opposing arguments are presented. Yehudah Nasi, the great 2nd century sage who codified the Mishnah was questioned about why he would record in the Mishnah the opposing positions of Hillel and Shammai. He pointed out that we all live on both sides of the ledger by saying—ehloo v’ehloo—"These and these are both the word of the living God (Eruvin 13b), a lesson driven home by Naftali, the Rapshtitzer Rebbe taught that we live lives of contradictions. He told his Chasidim that before he was born an angel showed him a two column tablet filled with opposing citations from the sacred writings:

  On the right side of the first line, "The learned man should be a fiery furnace" (Taaneet), and on the left side, "The meek and lowly shall inherit the world to come" (Sanhedrin).

  On the right side of line two, "Man should be wise in his fear of God" (Brachot), and on the left side, "You should be simple-hearted in your love of the Lord" (Mishnah Yalkut).

  On the right side of line three, "Be satisfied with the minimum" (Midrash Tehilim, and on the left side, "He who pledges himself not to drink wine and forswears the pleasures of the body shall be called a sinner" (Mishnah Taaneet).
On the right side of line four, "God wants the heart (Talmud?), and on the left side, "The heart of His people is corrupt and wayward" (Jeremiah VERSE?).

Naftali pondered the contradictions until he heard the voice of the angels announcing, "You are now to be born." From that moment on, he resolved in his heart to follow the rules of both columns no matter how extreme they might be.

Like Rav Naftali,

• A text from Ezekiel (46:9) notes the importance of not doing things in the same manner: “…whosoever enters by the north gate…shall leave by the south gate; and whosoever enters by the south gate shall leave by the north gate. They shall not go back through the gate by which they came in, but shall go out by the opposite one.” I believe that Ezekiel was concerned with what I am concerned with, that worship not become repetitive and therefore routine and stale. Rashi, French medieval commentator, refers to the giving of the Torah on “this day” in Exodus 19:1, he notes that the text says “this day” rather than on “that day,” because he believed that learning should be as fresh each day as if it were new.

• Every letter and jot and tittle counts, all 187 chapters, 5845 verses, 79,976 words, and 304,805 letters contained in our sacred book as the following poem ("Song of Songs") by Julia Watts Belser suggests that a hidden world that runs in the white spaces within a maze among the inky letters of our sacred Torah:

• Between the black fired lines of the ink on sacred scroll, a goat track scrabbles up a desert hillside
to the garden we call home.

There beneath the lattice work of tangled vine, the soft brown body of this land unfolds and ripens. Jasmine blooms below the moon like summer stars and pomegranates split their pearls like secrets, time and time again.

Perhaps you’ll wind your way up that rock trail, or read the path lined by the tracks of your own palm—
and find the place amidst the henna and the hint of myrrh
where this earth’s belly glistens from a sweet drenched spring/
and Torah tastes of sun and saffron and longing.
(Midstream, May/June 2005, LI.3)

THE PHARASIAC REVOLUTION: HOW ORGANIC RELIGION ALLOWS
TRADITION TO HAVE A VOTE BUT NOT A VETO?
Q: According to “tradition,” what does Moses receive at Mt. Sinai?

The development of the two-fold Law.

In a revealed religion like Judaism, creativity must masquerade as
commentary. If everything worth knowing is already in the Torah, then no
one can say anything new of any real value. So if you are a Jew and you
have a creative idea, you must begin by demonstrating how it is already in
scripture (Gershom Scholem).

In establishing the legitimacy of the two-fold law, the rabbis sent into
motion a new form of scholarship that has no precedent in the entire
Hebrew Scriptures.

• The relation between a normal people and its literature is one of parallel
development and mutual interaction. Literature responds to the demands
of life, and life reacts to the guidance of literature. The function of
literature is to plant the seed of new ideas and new desires; the seed once
planted, life does the rest…(Ahad Ha-Am -- Asher Zvi Ginzberg, 1856-1927,
The People of the Book (1894).

Accompanying the new expansive way of interpreting the fixed Law were a
number on innovative advances that also had no precedent in the Hebrew
Scriptures:

--Development of the rabbi, a new form of leader driven by a new form of
interpretation and scholarship—The two-fold law superseded the
Pentateuch—a novel way of viewing Scriptures that was nowhere
articulated in the Bible. Now, rather than fixed law, debate, discussion &
the protection of minority opinions is championed; the understanding of
the Oral Law was enhanced by a new set of interpretative rules that were
alien to the Pentateuch. Resurrection became the reward for adherence to
the two-fold law. In addition to setting into motion a rubric for seamlessly
transforming the unchangeable Law, the pharisaic period reinvented the
holy writ with the movement from priesthood & primogeniture to new
leader—the rabbi—not inherited but based on scholarship and not on a
book, a land, a people, or a Temple. It is important to emphasize that no
biblical book records a scholar class participating in the process of
revelation. The rabbis brilliantly utilized Two-fold Law to underwrite their
authority and co-opt the priesthood. Scriptures became the handmaiden of
the Oral Law and like the Written Law, was held to be the word of God.

Now, being born into Israel became an opportunity, not a fulfillment. The
bankrupt priestly cultic functionaries (that echo in Christian Scriptures)
were overtaken by a scholar class who became the sole interpreters of the
two-fold law, in much the same vein that early Christians saw themselves as
the inheritors of the biblical/Israelite tradition. The Pharisees did not view
themselves as “usurpers” or “revolutionaries” but rather “inheritors.” As
proof that the rabbis bypassed the priesthood, the line of transmission of
the Law noted in the opening passage of Pirke (Avot 1:1) clearly omits the
priests: “Moses received the Law from Sinai and delivered it to Joshua, and
Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets
delivered it to the Men of the Great Synagogue”. Inherited succession was
abandoned in favor of proven competency in the mastery of the two-fold
law in order to insulate against obsolesce and ensure that authority would
always provide authentic, fresh, dynamic leadership. Thus God was
continually making known the Divine Will because birth became an
opportunity rather than a prerogative. Although co opted, the rabbis
preserved and even paid homage to cultic functionaries who had become
less relevant because of the destruction of the Temple, an event that
enabled the rabbis to focus on the individual and individual salvation. What
gave them power is that violation of rabbinic enactments endangered
personal salvation.
Proof that the two-fold law had overtaken the cult practices of the Temple that were spelled out in Scriptures is demonstrated in an incident in which Roman Procurator of Ancient Israel, Vespasian, granted one wish to Yohanan b. Zakki as a reward for Yohanan’s prediction that Vespasian would become emperor, which occurred in 69 of the Common Era. Yohanan did not ask for an end to the siege of Jerusalem or the restoration of the Temple and its cultic priesthood, instead he asked for an academy to study the two-fold law, especially since the Pharisees had no interest in political power. And so his wish was granted.

A simple parable illustrates the relationship between the oral and written Law in order to address new individual and communal issues:

A king presented gifts, a measure of wheat and a bundle of flax, to two faithful servants—one wise and one foolish. The foolish one put them away in a chest where they remained forever unchanged; the wise servant spun the flax into cloth and made bread out of the wheat. Placing the bread on the cloth, he invited the king to be his honored guest (Seder Eliyahu Sutra 82).

--Development of eschatology: The reward for loyalty to the two-fold law was the promise of personal salvation, resurrection and eternal life, qualities more important than a people, land, or Temple; priestly intermediaries were no longer necessary because it was now possible to have an intimate one-on-one relationship with God. For early Christians, salvation was the reward for obedience to the always available Christ, rather than the more difficult pharisaic obedience to the two-fold Law—it was just too high a price for pagan converts to Christianity to pay for salvation when faith alone would be sufficient. Whereas the rabbis gave up the sacrifice, Christians kept the notion that Jesus is the pascal lamb that was sacrificed as they retained certain cultic priestly genres in their worship. Evidence of the pharisaic belief in resurrection:

- Egg on seder plate & egg at house of mourning
- An only kid, an only kid
My father bought for two zuzim, an only kid and only kid.
There came a cat and ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. *Chad gadya, chad gadya.*

Then came a dog and bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. *Chad gadya, chad gadya.*

Then came a stick and beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. *Chad gadya, chad gadya.*

Then came a fire and burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. *Chad gadya, chad gadya.*

Then came water and quenched the fire that burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. *Chad gadya, chad gadya.*

Then came an ox and drank the water that quenched the fire that burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. *Chad gadya, chad gadya.*

Then came a slaughterer and killed the ox that drank the water that quenched the fire that burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. *Chad gadya, chad gadya.*

Then came the angel of death who killed the shohet who killed the ox that drank the water that quenched the fire that burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. *Chad gadya, chad gadya.*

Then came the Holy One and killed the angel of death who killed the shohet who killed the ox that drank the water that quenched the fire that burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. *Chad gadya, chad gadya.*

• The role of Elijah, another central figure in the Haggadah, is poorly understood. To many Jews, Elijah sips from his cup during the course of the Seder, a patently false notion. In truth, the cup named for Elijah is on the
Seder table because of an unresolved dispute. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Pesachim 10a) teaches that each of the four cups of wine is consumed at the Seder because of four different expressions for redemption that are found in Exodus (6:6-8): I will *hotzeti*— *bring* you out from under the burdens of Egypt, and I will *hitzalti*— *save* you from their bondage, and I will *gaalti*— *redeem* you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. And I will *laqachtii*— *take* you to Me as a people. These promises are followed by a fifth expression of redemption in the next verse, *hayvaytee*— I will *carry* you up to the land (Ex 6:9). The rabbis debated whether or not a fifth cup for this last redemptive word should be consumed at the Seder. The majority argued that it should not be consumed until true redemption actually took place. Elijah, believed to be the herald of the Messiah, would have the responsibility to solve all outstanding disputes, including this one. If Elijah says we should only have consumed four cups, we are on firm ground. If Elijah says we should have had five cups, we respond, “We drank four, poured the fifth, and were ready to drink it.” Hence this disputed cup was named for the prophet. As an aside, Rav Menachem Kasher, modern commentator, unsuccessfully tried to convince the Israeli rabbinate that a fifth cup at the Seder should be consumed after the establishment of the State of Israel (*Torah Sheleymah*); Rav Soloveitchik concurred, suggesting that after the establishment of the State of Israel, the missing verse, number nine, at the conclusion of “A wandering Aramean” [Deut. 26:5ff] would now be read and would justify the drinking of the fifth cup).

• The rabbis’ interest in personal redemption is further evidenced in the biblical reference from the Book of Daniel that contains a fleeting allusion to life after death: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life (Daniel 12:2).” It was this line, *mechaye ha-maytim*— “God revives the dead,” that later was incorporated into the liturgy in the *Amidah*, and was utilized by the rabbis of the talmudic era to develop the refined notion that death is not a permanent state. It provided the Jews who lived under the harsh Roman rule with the hope that they would not always have to suffer personal oppression.

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--*Development of the concept of the Messiah.* Although Christians read the Messiah into Hebrew Scriptures, most notably Isa 7:14, there is no biblical precedent for this notion.

--*Portability of the shrine/homeless God:* The Two-Fold Law fostered the opportunity for change and growth, including the concept of God. God became *HaMakom*—Everyplace—accessible to and within everyone, everywhere, the God who could be called upon for innovation and creative problem solving. God also was called the Shekinah (a feminine and nurturing aspect of God). Rabbinic Judaism thrived on societal breakdown by shifting focus from the external to internal worlds and from the nation to the individual. Early Christianity also thrived on breakdown for the same reasons.

--*Making prayer mandatory and regular:* Nowhere in the Bible are recurrent fixed daily prayer and weekly Torah and Prophetic readings to be found.

--*Bet-Din Hagadol established*

--*View of history:* Linear history narrative was unimportant since they forbade the writing down of the Oral Law, thereby rejecting historical narrative, which makes it difficult to reconstruct this revolution.

--*Pharasiac revolution served early Christians* and laid the groundwork for the triumph of Christianity. Adherents to the two-fold Law were promised resurrection and eternal life. Thus the newly minted Oral Tradition was invested with ongoing authority that could be called upon for innovation and creative problem solving through power and attributes not yet revealed. Although an unintended consequence of use of the biblical proof text that I will discuss shortly, this model for transformation of the Law to achieve salvation became the foundation for the Christian belief in resurrection by substituting faith in Jesus for adherence to the Law.

**TWO-FOLD LAW EXCEEDS PENTATUCH LAW: PHARASCIAC TRANSFORMATION OF THE LAW CREATED NORMATIVE JUDAISM**
When I pray I speak to God; When I study the texts (Torah) God speaks to Me (Louis Finkelstein). This is the outlook of the Pharisees read expansive transformation into God-given texts. 

The proof text demonstrated how God speaks to faith communities because the utilization of the proof text is an ingenious innovation that made the Written Law the servant of the Oral Law and made it possible to seamlessly slip in new interpretations under the guise of being as legitimate as the original law, even if at times, the reinterpretation was contrary to Torah Law. In so doing, the Pharisees took control of the Holy Writ. Here is an example of the way a proof text was utilized to change the Law:

Deut 30:11 instructs: Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. 30:12 It is not the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" 30:13 Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" 30:14 No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.

Look at how the rabbis will lean on the verse, “It is not in the heavens” not merely to change the law but overturn it!

The rabbis argued whether or not the oven of Akhnai is kosher for Passover. Rabbi Eliezer argued against the majority who would not agree with him. In rebuttal, Eliezer said:

--“If the Halacha/Law agrees with me, let this carob tree prove it.” The tree moved. The Rabbis retort: “No proof can be brought from a Carob tree.”
--“Then, let this stream prove it.” The stream flowed backward. The Rabbis retort: “No proof can be brought from a stream.”
--“Then the walls of the academy prove it. The walls crumbled and the same dismissive response was offered.

Finally out of frustration, Eliezer demanded, “Let heaven prove it.” And the voice from Heaven agreed with Eliezer. The rabbis dismissed the voice quoting two biblical texts “It is not in heaven” (see below: Deut 30:12), and “After the majority one must incline” (Ex 23:2). (Baba Metzia 59a)
II—•When Moses ascended to Heaven, he inquired of God why there were crowns on the calligraphic letters of the Torah. [The seven letters צ, ג, ו, נ, ט, ע, and ש have the crowns on the points of the upper horizontal bars. The flourishes are placed on the tops of the letters, and they are found only in Torah, not in the printed copies of the Pentateuch. The tagin are a part of the Masorah.]

The Holy One replied: “In many generations, a man named Akiva will arise who will hang laws and interpretations on each crown. Moses asked permission to see Akiva. God said, “Turn around.” Moses found himself in the Academy and took a seat in the back row. Although he listened, he had no idea what the rabbis were discussing (so changed had the Law become). Finally, one of Akiba’s disciples asked for proof of how he could be certain that the argument was valid and Akiva answered, “This is the law given to Moses at Sinai.” Moses was stunned that the law attributed to him now was incomprehensible to him. Moses returned and said to God, “You have such a remarkable man as this Akiba, give the law to him instead of me.” God’s terse response: “Be silent, thus have I decreed it” (Menahot 29b).

III—•Twenty centuries before Washington Irving wrote The Legend of Sleepy Hollow in which a henpecked man escaped his nagging wife by going to sleep for twenty years, there was a Jewish Rip Van Winkle—Honi haMa’agel—Honi the Circle Maker. This talmudic account focuses on looking forward to the future rather than escaping the present by living in the past. All his life, Honi ha-M'aggel was bothered by this verse, "When God returns us to Zion, we will have been as dreamers" (Ps 126:1). Choni thought about the Babylonian exile of 70 years, how could it have passed as a dream? "Could it be," he asked, "that a person can sleep continuously for 70 years?"

One day, as he was walking, he saw a man planting a carob tree. "How long will it be," he asked the man, "before this tree produces fruits?"

"Seventy years," the man answered.

"And are you certain you will still be alive then?" Honi ha-Ma’agel asked.

"I was born into a world with carob trees," the man answered "Just as my fathers planted trees for me to enjoy, so I plant trees for my children."
Honi ha-Ma'agel then sat down a little distance away, dozed off, and slept for 70 years. When he awoke from his sleep, he saw what he thought was the same man picking carobs from the tree he had seen him plant.

"Are you the man that planted this tree?" he asked him.

"No," answered the man, "I am his grandson."

"I see," said Honi, "that I must have slept for 70 years."

He went to his home. "Is the son of Honi the Circle-Maker still alive?" he asked.

"No," they answered, "but his grandson is alive.

"I am Honi the Circle-Maker," he told them, but they would not believe him.

He went to the House of Study. There he overheard the rabbis saying, this teaching shines as brightly as in the days of Honi the Circle-Maker. For when Honi would come to the House of Study, he would solve any difficulties they had.

"I am Honi" he told them, but they would not believe him, and did not honor him as a scholar of his stature needs to be honored. This hurt him deeply.

He prayed to God [to end his life] and he died (Ta'anit 23a).

TRANSFORMATIVE TEXTS FROM CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES

• Galatians 3:6— Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." (Genesis 15:6) 7: So you see that there are those who whose identity is derived from faith – these are the children of Abraham. 8: And the scripture, foreseeing that God would bring the Gentiles close by means of faith, preached this truth ahead of time to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." (Genesis 12:3) 9: So then, those whose identity rests on faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith. 10: Now those whose identity rests on the observance of law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them." (Deuteronomy 27:6) 11: It is clear that no one is made right before God by observing the law; for "He who through faith is righteous shall live" (Habakuk 2:4); 12: Moreover, the law does not rest on faith, for "He who does them shall live by them." (Leviticus 18:5)

21: Is the law then opposed the promises of God [to Abraham]? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that was strong enough to make people
alive, then things would have been made right by the law. 22: But in actuality, the scripture imprisoned everything under the power of sin, in order that the promise might be given through faith in Jesus Christ. 23: Before faith came, we were confined under the law’s power; we were imprisoned during the time that lasted until faith arrived. 24: So that the law was our confining warden until Christ came, that we might be made right by faith. 25: But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a confining warden. 26: for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. 27: For when you were baptized into Christ, you put on Christ as though he were your clothing. 28: There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for all are one in Christ Jesus. 29: And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise.

•Galatians 4:21—Tell me, you who desire to be under law, do you not hear the law? 22: For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman. 23: But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, the son of the free woman through promise. 24: Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. 25: Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. 26: But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. 27: For it is written, "Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and shout, you who are not in travail; for the children of the desolate one are many more than the children of her that is married." (Isa 54:1) 28: Now we, brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29: But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now. 30: But what does the scripture say? "Cast out the slave and her son; for the son of the slave shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." 31: So, brethren, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. 1: For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.

•Romans 4:1—What then shall we say about Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? 2: For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3: For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." 4: Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a
gift but as his due. 5: And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness. 6: So also David {the book of Psalms} pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: 7: "Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; 8: blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin." (Ps 32:1-2) 9: Is this blessing pronounced only upon the circumcised, or also upon the uncircumcised? We say that faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. 10: How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. 11: He received circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, 12: and likewise the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but also follow the example of the faith which our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. 13: The promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14: If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15: For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. 16: That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants -- not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham, for he is the father of us all, 17: as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations" -- in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 18: In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, "So shall your descendants be." 19: He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. 20: No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21: fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22: That is why his faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness." 23: But the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, 24: but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us
who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, 25: who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

• Romans 4:11—What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”... 9 Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. 10 How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. 11 He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, 12 and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

• Romans 9:1—I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit, 2: that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3: For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race. 4: They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; 5: to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed forever. Amen. 6: But it is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, 7: and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants; but "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." 8: This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants. ... 16: So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy. (Also see: Gal. 5:2; 6:11-15)

Clearly, early Christianity took seriously the Pauline concept that “the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of
sin and of death” (Romans 8:2), and undertook the task of creating a people who had been “discharged from the law” (Romans 7:6)

The interpretations offered by Paul regarding kashrut (1 Cor. 8:8) or circumcision (Gal. 5:2; 6:11-15), and shatters completely in light of the stunning conclusion that Jews and their “law” (now totally passé) were the slave offspring of Ishmael, while Christians were the true descendants of Isaac, who, like his father Abraham, had nothing at all to do with the Torah (Gal. 4:28-31)