

ORAL TRADITION HAS A PLACE IN ZOROASTRIANISM AND JUDAISM

Dr. Kersey Antia, Oct 30, 2017; updated Sep 29,
2019

The unique character of Oral Torah has been well outlined by Martin Jaffee and Elizabeth Alexander Shanks in *The Cambridge Companion The Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, edited by Charlotte E. Fonrobert, Cambridge University Press, 2007, (pp. 17-74). Alexander even notes: "A ban on writing rabbinic teachings is also recorded in the earlier of two Talmuds, the Palestinian Talmud." (p. 47). She adds: There is a certain irony to the fact that the body of literature known as Oral Torah today fills the greater part of a wall of bookshelves." (p. 49). What she further observes is quite relevant for our purposes: Whereas as Epstein argues that the WRITTEN versions were to be accepted as authoritative over the flaws of human memory, (Saul) Lieberman argues that only the ORAL versions performed in the academy had authority." She does not assume "that writing necessarily confers fixity and therefore must be disassociated from the oral life of the Mishna (the earliest collection of Tannitic, meaning orally transmitted teachings) and other rabbinic texts. In the footnote No.10, she quotes the Israel scholar Jacob Zussman as firmly vindicating that "no written copies of the Mishna existed in the rabbinic academies of Late Antiquity," and upholds his work as "the most thorough collection of talmudic citations bearing upon the question of the oral transmission of rabbinic literature." While she does not prelude the use of written text, her concluding remarks have great relevance for the Zoroastrian situation in this regard: "The essence of rabbinic orality shifts to the face-to-face encounter between teacher and student and the active way in which this encounter brings a tradition of teaching to life." (pp. 50-56).

Having undergone such a training for the Magi, I am well aware of its merits. While there are obvious differences in the methods employed for orality in Judaism and Zoroastrianism, its acceptance and reliability for the former, bodes well for the latter too. Indeed, as Yaakov Elman states, "Here, the rabbis and the Zoroastrian magi were on the same side, both privileging oral transmission." (p. 176).

Validity of the Oral Tradition

As Marc Hirshman states, “There is an uncharacteristic unanimity of opinion in rabbinic literature concerning the existence and antiquity of the oral law” and “Rabbinic literature abounds in references to the antique oral law that is the bedrock of its own existence,” which is quite true in the case of Zoroastrianism as well. He adds: “Even the Sages of Tannitic period hold that the oral law was at least as authoritative as the written law” and “it seems clear that the Sages felt fully empowered, heirs to an oral tradition.” (*The Cambridge History of Judaism*, Volume IV, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 899-901).

The struggle with the Christian Church, especially the frontal assault by Origen, over the correct interpretation of Scripture “led the Rabbis to emphasize the status of the oral law.” Hirshman adds: It is quite evident that the sages viewed the oral law as the distinctive and authentic interpretation of Scripture.” (p.906). While Jewish oral laws may not be totally synonymous with oral texts, the importance of oral scriptures and orality vindicated by them may validate Zoroastrian oral texts as well.

CASE FOR ORALITY

In *Theology Comes Home* (Institute of Advance Theology, Bard College, New York, 2000, pp. 12-15), Jacob Neusner considers his reconstruction of the theology of the Oral Torah as animated by wholly cogent, coherent and proportionate principles which he details at length. He finds such a record of Old Torah “remarkably familiar, with its stress on God's justice, man's correspondence with God in his procession of power of will, man's sin and God's response. That, sum and substance, constitutes the coherent statement, the cogent system, that the books of the Oral Torah set forth”. Such a finding is remarkable as it is a result of his quest: “Is there a single principle that governs all of the Judaic writings that enjoy normative standing in the formative age of Rabbinic Judaism? And is there, within that principle, a logic that generates problems and dictates how they are resolved?” And, “What is the single fundamental truth-claim that everywhere pervades the Rabbinic Judaic sources and animates them in ever detail?” In view of the importance of oral tradition in Zoroastrianism also, similar significance for their role is evident, though their tiny numbers have not led to many studies about it.