

ZAKHOR

Jewish History and Jewish Memory



YOSEF HAYIM YERUSHALMI

Foreword by Harold Bloom

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BIBLICAL AND RABBINIC
FOUNDATIONS

*Meaning in History, Memory, and
the Writing of History*

The Hebrew *Zakhor*—"Remember"—announces my elusive theme. Memory is always problematic, usually deceptive, sometimes treacherous. Proust knew this, and the English reader is deprived of the full force of his title which conveys, not the blandly reassuring "Remembrance of Things Past" of the Moncrieff translation, but an initially darker and more anxious search for a time that has been lost. In the ensorcelled film of Alain Resnais the heroine quickly discovers that she cannot even be certain of what transpired "last year at Marienbad." We ourselves are periodically aware that memory is among the most fragile and capricious of our faculties.

Yet the Hebrew Bible seems to have no hesitations in commanding memory. Its injunctions to remember are unconditional, and even when not commanded, remembrance is always pivotal. Altogether the verb *zakhar* appears in its various declensions in the Bible no less than one hundred and sixty-nine times, usually with either Israel or God as the subject, for memory is incumbent upon both.¹ The verb is complemented by its obverse—forgetting. As Israel is enjoined to remember, so is it adjured not to forget. Both imperatives have resounded with enduring effect among the Jews since biblical times. Indeed, in trying to understand the survival of a people that has spent most of its life in global dispersion, I would submit that the history of its memory, largely neglected and yet to be written, may prove of some consequence.

But what were the Jews to remember, and by what means? What have been the functional dynamics of Jewish memory, and how, if at all, is the command to remember related to the writing of history? For historiography, an actual recording of historical events, is by no means the principal medium through which the collective memory of the Jewish people has been addressed or aroused. The apparent irony is not limited to the Jews alone. It is our common experience that what is remembered is not always

recorded and, alas for the historian, that much of what has been recorded is not necessarily remembered.

In the space of these lectures I shall not venture to treat the relations between Jewish memory and the writing of Jewish history in all their tangled configurations. Nor do I propose to attempt a history of Jewish historiography. For it is not historical writing *per se* that will concern us here, but the relation of Jews to their own past, and the place of the historian within that relationship. What I have to say is ultimately quite personal. It flows out of lingering preoccupations with the nature of my craft, but I do not presume to speak for the guild. I trust that, by the time I have done, the personal will not seem merely arbitrary. I would add only that although, as an historian of the Jews, I am concerned primarily with the Jewish past, I do not think that the issues to be raised are necessarily confined to Jewish history. Still, it may be that this history can sometimes set them into sharper relief than would otherwise be possible. And with that we may begin.

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For those reared and educated in the modern West it is often hard to grasp the fact that a concern with history, let alone the writing of history, is not an innate endowment of human civilization. Many cultures past and present have found no particular virtue in the historical, temporal dimension, of human existence. Out of a mass of ethnographic materials from around the world anthropologists and historians of religion have gradually clarified the extent to which, in primitive societies, only mythic rather than historical time is "real," the time of primeval beginnings and paradigmatic first acts, the dream-time when the world was new, suffering unknown, and men consorted with the gods. Indeed, in such cultures the present historical moment possesses little independent value. It achieves meaning and reality only by subverting itself, when, through the repetition of a ritual or the recitation or re-enactment of a myth, historical time is periodically shattered

and one can experience again, if only briefly, the true time of the origins and archetypes.² Nor are these vital functions of myth and ritual confined to the so-called primitives. Along with the mentality they reflect they are also shared by the great pagan religions of antiquity and beyond. In the metaphysics and epistemology of some of the most sophisticated of Far Eastern civilizations, both time and history are deprecated as illusory, and to be liberated from such illusions is a condition for true knowledge and ultimate salvation. These and similar matters are well documented in an abundant literature and need not be belabored here. Lest our discussion remain too abstract, however, let me cite one striking example in the case of India, of which a noted modern Indian scholar writes:

... the fact remains that except Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, which is merely a local history of Kashmir, there is no other historical text in the whole range of Sanskrit literature which even makes a near approach to it, or may be regarded as history in the proper sense of the term. This is a very strange phenomenon, for there is hardly a branch of human knowledge or any topic of human interest which is not adequately represented in Sanskrit literature. The absence of real historical literature is therefore naturally regarded as so very unusual that even many distinguished Indians cannot bring themselves to recognize the obvious fact, and seriously entertain the belief that there were many such historical texts, but that they have all perished.³

Herodotus, we are told, was the "father of history" (a phrase that needs to be qualified, but I shall not pause to do so here), and until fairly recently every educated person knew that the Greeks had produced a line of great historians who could still be read with pleasure and empathy. Yet neither the Greek historians nor the civilization that nurtured them saw any ultimate or transcendent meaning to history as a whole; indeed, they never quite arrived at a concept of universal history, of history "as a whole." Herodotus wrote with the very human aspiration of—in his own words—"preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done,

and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the barbarians from losing their due meed of glory." For Herodotus the writing of history was first and foremost a bulwark against the inexorable erosion of memory engendered by the passage of time. In general, the historiography of the Greeks was an expression of that splendid Hellenic curiosity to know and to explore which can still draw us close to them, or else it sought from the past moral examples or political insights. Beyond that, history had no truths to offer, and thus it had no place in Greek religion or philosophy. If Herodotus was the father of history, the fathers of meaning in history were the Jews.⁴

It was ancient Israel that first assigned a decisive significance to history and thus forged a new world-view whose essential premises were eventually appropriated by Christianity and Islam as well. "The heavens," in the words of the psalmist, might still "declare the glory of the Lord," but it was human history that revealed his will and purpose. This novel perception was not the result of philosophical speculation, but of the peculiar nature of Israelite faith. It emerged out of an intuitive and revolutionary understanding of God, and was refined through profoundly felt historical experiences. However it came about, in retrospect the consequences are manifest. Suddenly, as it were, the crucial encounter between man and the divine shifted away from the realm of nature and the cosmos to the plane of history, conceived now in terms of divine challenge and human response. The pagan conflict of the gods with the forces of chaos, or with one another, was replaced by a drama of a different and more poignant order: the paradoxical struggle between the divine will of an omnipotent Creator and the free will of his creature, man, in the course of history; a tense dialectic of obedience and rebellion. The primeval dream-time world of the archetypes, represented in the Bible only by the Paradise story in Genesis, was abandoned irrevocably.⁵ With the departure of Adam and Eve from Eden, history begins, historical time becomes real, and the way back is closed forever. East of Eden hangs "the fiery ever-turning sword" to bar re-entry. Thrust reluc-

tantly into history, man in Hebrew thought comes to affirm his historical existence despite the suffering it entails, and gradually, ploddingly, he discovers that God reveals himself in the course of it. Rituals and festivals in ancient Israel are themselves no longer primarily repetitions of mythic archetypes meant to annihilate historical time. Where they evoke the past, it is not the primeval but the historical past, in which the great and critical moments of Israel's history were fulfilled. Far from attempting a flight from history, biblical religion allows itself to be saturated by it and is inconceivable apart from it.

No more dramatic evidence is needed for the dominant place of history in ancient Israel than the overriding fact that even God is known only insofar as he reveals himself "historically." Sent to bring the tidings of deliverance to the Hebrew slaves, Moses does not come in the name of the Creator of Heaven and Earth, but of the "God of the fathers," that is to say, of the God of history: "Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them: The Lord the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has appeared to me and said: I have surely remembered you . . ." (Exod. 3:16). When God introduces himself directly to the entire people at Sinai, nothing is heard of his essence or attributes, but only: "I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, the house of bondage" (Exod. 20:2). That is sufficient. For here as elsewhere, ancient Israel knows what God is from what he has done in history.⁶ And if that is so, then memory has become crucial to its faith and, ultimately, to its very existence.

Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people. Its reverberations are everywhere, but they reach a crescendo in the Deuteronomic history and in the prophets. "Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past" (Deut. 32:7). "Remember these things, O Jacob, for you, O Israel, are My servant; I have fashioned you, you are My servant; O Israel, never forget Me" (Is. 44:21). "Remember what Amalek did to you" (Deut. 25:17). "O My people, remember now what Balak king of Moab plotted against you"

(Micah 6:5). And, with a hammering insistence: "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt. . ."

If the command to remember is absolute, there is, nonetheless, an almost desperate pathos about the biblical concern with memory, and a shrewd wisdom that knows how short and fickle human memory can be. Not history, as is commonly supposed, but only mythic time repeats itself. If history is real, then the Red Sea can be crossed only once, and Israel cannot stand twice at Sinai, a Hebrew counterpart, if you wish, to the wisdom of Heraclitus.⁷ Yet the covenant is to endure forever. "I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also with those who are not with us here this day" (Deut. 29:13-14). It is an outrageous claim. Surely there comes a day "when your children will ask you in time to come, saying: What mean you by these stones? Then you shall say to them: Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord when it passed through the Jordan" (Josh. 4:6-7). Not the stone, but the memory transmitted by the fathers, is decisive if the memory embedded in the stone is to be conjured out of it to live again for subsequent generations. If there can be no return to Sinai, then what took place at Sinai must be borne along the conduits of memory to those who were not there that day.

The biblical appeal to remember thus has little to do with curiosity about the past. Israel is told only that it must be a kingdom of priests and a holy people; nowhere is it suggested that it become a nation of historians. Memory is, by its nature, selective, and the demand that Israel remember is no exception. Burckhardt's dictum that all ages are equally close to God may please us, but such a notion remains alien to biblical thought. There the fact that history has meaning does not mean that everything that happened in history is meaningful or worthy of recollection. Of Manasseh of Judah, a powerful king who reigned for fifty-five years in Jerusalem, we hear only that "he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" (II Kings 21:2), and only the details of that evil are

conveyed to us. Not only is Israel under no obligation whatever to remember the entire past, but its principle of selection is unique unto itself. It is above all God's acts of intervention in history, and man's responses to them, be they positive or negative, that must be recalled. Nor is the invocation of memory actuated by the normal and praiseworthy desire to preserve heroic national deeds from oblivion. Ironically, many of the biblical narratives seem almost calculated to deflate the national pride. For the real danger is not so much that what happened in the past will be forgotten, as the more crucial aspect of *how* it happened. "And it shall be, when the Lord your God shall bring you into the land which he swore unto your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you great and goodly cities, which you did not build, and houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, and cisterns hewn out, which you did not hew, vineyards and olive-trees which you did not plant, and you shall eat and be satisfied—*then beware lest you forget the Lord who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage*" (Deut. 6:10-12; cf. 8:11-18).

Memory flowed, above all, through two channels: ritual and recital. Even while fully preserving their organic links to the natural cycles of the agricultural year (spring and first fruits), the great pilgrimage festivals of Passover and Tabernacles were transformed into commemorations of the Exodus from Egypt and the sojourn in the wilderness. (Similarly, the biblical Feast of Weeks would become, sometime in the period of the Second Temple, a commemoration of the giving of the Law at Sinai.) Oral poetry preceded and sometimes accompanied the prose of the chroniclers. For the Hebrew reader even now such survivals as the Song of the Sea (Exod. 15:1-18) or the Song of Deborah (Judges 5) seem possessed of a curious power to evoke, through the sheer force of their archaic rhythms and images, distant but strangely moving intimations of an experience of primal events whose factual details are perhaps irrevocably lost.

A superlative example of the interplay of ritual and recital in the service of memory is the ceremony of the first fruits ordained

in Deuteronomy 26, where the celebrant, an ordinary Israelite bringing his fruits to the sanctuary, must make the following declaration:

A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there, few in number; and he became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians dealt ill with us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. And we cried unto the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, and our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders. And He has brought us into this place, and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . . (Deut. 25:5-9).⁸

This is capsule history at its best. The essentials to be remembered are all here, in a ritualized formula. Compressed within it are what we might paraphrase as the patriarchal origins in Mesopotamia, the emergence of the Hebrew nation in the midst of history rather than in mythic pre-history, slavery in Egypt and liberation therefrom, the climactic acquisition of the Land of Israel, and throughout—the acknowledgment of God as lord of history.

Yet although the continuity of memory could be sustained by such means, and while fundamental biblical conceptions of history were forged, not by historians, but by priests and prophets, the need to remember overflowed inevitably into actual historical narrative as well. In the process, and within that varied Hebrew literature spanning a millennium which we laconically call "the Bible," a succession of anonymous authors created the most distinguished corpus of historical writing in the ancient Near East.

It was an astonishing achievement by any standard applicable to ancient historiography, all the more so when we bear in mind some of its own presuppositions. With God as the true hero of history one wonders at the very human scale of the historical narratives themselves. Long familiarity should not make us indifferent to such qualities. There was no compelling *a priori* reason why the

biblical historians should not have been content to produce an episodic account of divine miracles and little else. Yet if biblical history has, at its core, a recital of the acts of God, its accounts are filled predominantly with the actions of men and women and the deeds of Israel and the nations. Granted that historical writing in ancient Israel had its roots in the belief that history was a theophany and that events were ultimately to be interpreted in light of this faith. The result was, not theology, but history on an unprecedented scale.

Another surprising feature in most of biblical historiography is its concreteness. Where we might have expected a re-telling of Israel's past that would continually sacrifice fact to legend and specific detail to preconceived patterns, we find instead a firm anchorage in historical realities. The events and characteristics of one age are seldom blurred with those of another. Discrepancies between the hopes of an early generation and the situation encountered by a later one are not erased. (Compare, for example, the promised boundaries of the Land of Israel with those of the territories actually conquered in Canaan.)⁹ Historical figures emerge not merely as types, but as full-fledged individuals. Chronology, by and large, is respected. There is a genuine sense of the flow of historical time and of the changes that occur within it. Abraham is not represented as observing the laws of Moses. The editors who periodically redacted the sources at their disposal did not level them out completely. Two essentially conflicting accounts of the origins of Israelite monarchy lie side by side to this day in the Book of Samuel.

That biblical historiography is not "factual" in the modern sense is too self-evident to require extensive comment. By the same token, however, its poetic or legendary elements are not "fictions" in the modern sense either. For a people in ancient times these were legitimate and sometimes inevitable modes of historical perception and interpretation.¹⁰ But biblical historiography is hardly uniform in these respects. The historical narratives that span the ages from the beginnings of mankind to the conquest of

Canaan are necessarily more legendary, the accounts of the monarchy much less so, and even within each segment there are marked variations of degree. This is only to be expected. The historical texts of the Bible, written by different authors at different times, were often also the end products of a long process of transmission of earlier documents and traditions.

I cannot pause here to discuss the stages by which either biblical interpretations of history or the actual writing of history evolved. In terms of our larger concerns, such an atomistic discussion might even prove misleading. By the second century B.C.E. the corpus of biblical writings was already complete, and its subsequent impact upon Jewry was in its totality. Post-biblical Judaism did not inherit a series of separate historical sources and documents, but what it regarded as a sacred and organic whole. Read through from Genesis through Chronicles it offered not only a repository of law, wisdom, and faith, but a coherent narrative that claimed to embrace the whole of history from the creation of the world to the fifth century B.C.E., and, in the prophetic books, a profound interpretation of that history as well. With the Book of Daniel, the last of the biblical books in point of actual composition, an apocalyptic exposition of world history was incorporated as well, which would exercise its own particular fascination in ages to come.

Obviously much more could still be said about the place and function of history in ancient Israel that I have chosen to ignore. But if we really seek to understand what happened later, then we may already have touched on something that can prove of considerable help, and should therefore be reformulated explicitly. We have learned, in effect, that meaning in history, memory of the past, and the writing of history are by no means to be equated. In the Bible, to be sure, the three elements are linked, they overlap at critical points, and, in general, they are held together in a web of delicate and reciprocal relationships. In post-biblical Judaism, as we shall see, they pull asunder. Even in the Bible, however, historiography is but one expression of the awareness that history is meaningful and of the need to remember, and

neither meaning nor memory ultimately depends upon it. The meaning of history is explored more directly and more deeply in the prophets than in the actual historical narratives;¹¹ the collective memory is transmitted more actively through ritual than through chronicle. Conversely, in Israel as in Greece, historiography could be propelled by other needs and considerations. There were other, more mundane, genres of historical writing, apparently quite unrelated to the quest for transcendent meanings.¹² Of the same Manasseh who did evil in the sight of the Lord we read, as we do of other monarchs, that the rest of his acts are written "in the books of the chronicles of the kings of Judah." Significantly perhaps, those royal chronicles are long lost to us.

If Joshua, Samuel, Kings, and the other historical books of the Bible were destined to survive, that is because something quite extraordinary happened to them. They had become part of an authoritative anthology of sacred writings whose final canonization took place at Yabneh in Palestine around the year 100 C.E., some thirty years after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans. With the sealing of the biblical canon by the rabbis at Yabneh, the biblical historical books and narratives were endowed with an immortality to which no subsequent historian could ever aspire and that was denied to certain historical works that already existed. The Jewish historiography of the Hellenistic period, even such works as the first three books of Maccabees, fell by the wayside, some of it to be preserved by the Christian church, but unavailable to the Jews themselves until modern times.¹³

That which was included in the biblical canon had, so to speak, a constantly renewable lease on life, and we must try to savor some of what this has meant. For the first time the history of a people became part of its sacred scripture. The Pentateuchal narratives, which brought the historical record up to the eve of the conquest of Canaan, together with the weekly lesson from the prophets, were read aloud in the synagogue from beginning to end. The public reading was completed triennially in Palestine, annually in Babylonia (as is the custom today), and immediately the reading

would begin again.¹⁴ Every generation of scribes would copy and transmit the historical texts with the reverent care that only the sacred can command. An unbroken chain of scholars would arise later to explicate what had been recorded long ago in a constantly receding past. With the gradual democratization of Jewish learning, both the recitals of ancient chroniclers and the interpretations of prophets long dead would become the patrimony, not of a minority, but of the people at large.

To many, therefore, it has seemed all the more remarkable that after the close of the biblical canon the Jews virtually stopped writing history. Josephus Flavius marks the watershed. Writing in a not-uncomfortable Roman exile after the destruction of the Second Temple, sometime between 75 and 79 C.E. Josephus published his account of the *Jewish War* against Rome and then went on to an elaborate summation of the history of his people in the *Jewish Antiquities*. The latter work was published in 93/94, that is, less than a decade before the rabbis held their council at Yabneh. By coincidence the two events were almost contemporaneous. Yet in retrospect we know that within Jewry the future belonged to the rabbis, not to Josephus. Not only did his works not survive among the Jews, it would be almost fifteen centuries before another Jew would actually call himself an historian.¹⁵ It is as though, abruptly, the impulse to historiography had ceased.

Certainly, when we turn from the Bible to classical rabbinic literature, be it Talmud or Midrash, we seem to find ourselves on different and unfamiliar terrain as far as history is concerned. Where the Bible, with austere restraint, had said little or nothing of God prior to the creation of the world we know, here we encounter the periodic creation and destruction of worlds before our own.¹⁶ Ancient Near Eastern mythological motifs of divine victories over primeval monsters, of which only faint and vestigial traces are preserved in the Bible, suddenly reassert themselves more vividly and elaborately than before.¹⁷ To be sure, all the historical events and personalities of the Bible are present in rabbinic aggadah; indeed, much more is told about them by the rabbis

than in the Bible itself. Guided often by an uncanny eye for gaps, problems, and nuances, the rabbis amplified the biblical narratives with remarkable sensitivity. The wide range of biblically based rabbinic aggadah has enchanted poets and intrigued anthropologists and folklorists, theologians and philosophers. Even a modern critical scholar of the Bible will often find that behind a particular midrash there lies a genuine issue in the biblical text, whether linguistic or substantive, of which he was himself previously unaware. But the fascination and importance of rabbinic literature are not at issue here. It is the historian within all of us that balks, and we recognize some of the reasons for our frustration. Unlike the biblical writers the rabbis seem to play with Time as though with an accordion, expanding and collapsing it at will. Where historical specificity is a hallmark of the biblical narratives, here that acute biblical sense of time and place often gives way to rampant and seemingly unselfconscious anachronism. In the world of aggadah Adam can instruct his son Seth in the Torah, Shem and Eber establish a house of study, the patriarchs institute the three daily prayer-services of the normative Jewish liturgy, Og King of Bashan is present at Isaac's circumcision, and Noah prophesies the translation of the Bible into Greek.

Of course there is something rather compelling about that large portion of the rabbinic universe in which ordinary barriers of time can be ignored and all the ages placed in an ever-fluid dialogue with one another. Clearly, however, something else that we would consider vital has also been lost in the course of this metamorphosis, and we need not look far to know what it is. The history of the biblical period is present in the Bible itself. Admittedly, the reconstruction of that history through modern critical scholarship, buttressed by archaeology and the recovery of ancient Near Eastern languages and literatures, now offers a more contextual understanding than was ever possible before, and can sometimes diverge sharply from the accounts and interpretations of the biblical writers themselves. But at least the biblical record is sufficiently historical to serve the modern scholar as a constant point of depar-

ture and reference for his researches. By contrast, no such reconstruction would be possible if it had to depend, not on the Bible, but on the rabbinic sources that "retell" biblical history. This would be so even if everything the rabbis told were linked together and arranged into one continuous narrative parallel to the biblical sequence, as in Ginzberg's prodigious *Legends of the Jews*.¹⁸

More sobering and important is the fact that the history of the Talmudic period itself cannot be elicited from its own vast literature. Historical events of the first order are either not recorded at all, or else they are mentioned in so legendary or fragmentary a way as often to preclude even an elementary retrieval of what occurred.¹⁹

All this raises two distinct issues. One concerns what the rabbis actually accomplished, the other, what they did not undertake to do.

It is both unfair and misleading to burden the transmutations of biblical personalities and events in rabbinic aggadah with a demand for historicity irrelevant to their nature and purpose. Classical rabbinic literature was never intended as historiography, even in the biblical, let alone the modern, sense, and it cannot be understood through canons of criticism appropriate to history alone. Anachronism, for example, may be a serious flaw in historical writing; it is a legitimate feature of other, non-historical genres. There is no more point in asking of rabbinic aggadah that it hew closely to the biblical historical record than to try to divest the biblical figures in Renaissance paintings of their Florentine costumes, or to carp at MacLeish for presenting Job as "J. B." to a twentieth-century audience. The rabbis did not set out to write a history of the biblical period; they already possessed that. Instead, they were engrossed in an ongoing exploration of the meaning of the history bequeathed to them, striving to interpret it in living terms for their own and later generations.²⁰ Just as, in their exposition of biblical law, they explained the *lex talionis* as a principle of monetary compensation rather than a more "historical" eye-for-an-eye, so they were not content with merely historical patriarchs

and kings endowed with the obsolete traits of a dead past. This does not mean necessarily that they were bereft of all sense of historical perspective. They were certainly not naive. Without having a term for it they occasionally showed themselves quite capable of recognizing an anachronism for what it was,²¹ but they were also able somehow to sustain and reconcile historical contradictions that we, for that very reason, would find intolerable. I know of no more telling instance of the fusion of both tendencies than what is revealed in this remarkable Talmudic aggadah:

Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rab: When Moses ascended on high [to receive the Torah] he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing *taggin* [crown-like flourishes] to the letters. Moses said: "Lord of the Universe, who stays Thy hand?" [i.e., is there anything lacking in the Torah so that these ornaments are necessary?] He replied: "There will arise a man at the end of many generations, Akiba ben Joseph by name, who will expound, upon each tittle, heaps and heaps of laws." "Lord of the Universe," said Moses, "permit me to see him." He replied: "Turn thee round."

Moses went [into the academy of Rabbi Akiba] and sat down behind eight rows [of Akiba's disciples]. *Not being able to follow their arguments he was ill at ease*, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master "Whence do you know it?" and the latter replied, "*It is a law given to Moses at Sinai*," he was comforted.²²

That the whole of the Law, not only the written (*torah she-biketab*), but also the "oral" (*torah she-be'al peh*), had already been revealed to Moses at Sinai, was an axiom of rabbinic belief;²³ nevertheless, were Moses transported to a second-century classroom, he would hardly understand the legal discussions. In the world of aggadah both propositions can coexist in a meaningful equilibrium without appearing anomalous or illogical. Similarly, elements of biblical history can be telescoped into legendary dimensions with no intimation that either the past or the Bible has been compromised thereby. The historical record remains intact within an inviolate biblical text to which, in a perpetual oscillation,

the aggadic imagination must always return before its next flight. Meanwhile, however, any event can be retold and reinterpreted, sometimes simultaneously, in several different ways. Patently, by that very token the assumptions and hermeneutics of the rabbis were often antithetical to those of the historian, and generally remote from ours even when we are not historians.²⁴ But they were appropriate to their particular quest, which was equally far removed from our own.

A problem of a very different sort is posed by the meager attention accorded in rabbinic literature to post-biblical events. While we can accept the aggadic transfigurations of biblical history as forms of commentary and interpretation, we may still ask, tentatively at least, why the rabbis did not see fit to take up where biblical history broke off.

For the fact is that the rabbis neither wrote post-biblical history nor made any special effort to preserve what they may have known of the course of historical events in the ages immediately preceding them or in their own time. The two solitary works frequently trotted out to demonstrate the contrary need not detain us long. *Megillat Ta'anit*, the so-called "Scroll of Fasting," is not an attempt at historiography but a terse calendar of thirty-five half-holidays originating in the Hasmonean period and commemorating various historical events, most of them connected with the Maccabean wars.²⁵ Such a calendar was preserved purely for its practical ritual consequences, since on the days it enumerates one was not to declare a public fast (hence the curious title) nor mourn the dead. Significantly, it notes the day of the month on which the events occurred, but not the year. At best only the other work, the *Seder 'Olam* ("Order of the World")²⁶ attributed to the second-century Palestinian rabbi Jose ben Halaftha, may qualify as a rudimentary sort of historical recording, but even then it remains the exception that confirms the rule. It is, in essence, a dry chronology of persons and events from Adam until Alexander the Great that hardly pauses for breath while relentlessly listing its succession of names and years. Apart from this, the attempts by some modern scholars

to find traces of historiography in the Talmudic period merely reflect a misplaced projection of their own concerns upon a reluctant past.²⁷

Does this signify, as is so often alleged, that the rabbis were no longer interested in history? Surely not. Prophecy had ceased, but the rabbis regarded themselves as heirs to the prophets, and this was proper, for they had thoroughly assimilated the prophetic world-view and made it their own.²⁸ For them history was no less meaningful, their God no less the ultimate arbiter of historical destinies, their messianic hope no less fervent and absolute. But where the prophets themselves had been attuned to the interpretation of contemporary historical events, the rabbis are relatively silent about the events of their own time. In Talmudic and mid-rashic literature there are many interpretations of the meaning of history, but little desire to record current events. It is this characteristic concern for the larger configurations of history, coupled with indifference to its concrete particulars, that deserves some explanation.

We will state it as simply as possible. If the rabbis, wise men who had inherited a powerful historical tradition, were no longer interested in mundane history, this indicates nothing more than that they felt no need to cultivate it. Perhaps they already knew of history what they needed to know. Perhaps they were even wary of it.

For the rabbis the Bible was not only a repository of past history, but a revealed pattern of the whole of history, and they had learned their scriptures well. They knew that history has a purpose, the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth, and that the Jewish people has a central role to play in the process. They were convinced that the covenant between God and Israel was eternal, though the Jews had often rebelled and suffered the consequences. Above all, they had learned from the Bible that the true pulse of history often beat beneath its manifest surfaces, an invisible history that was more real than what the world, deceived by the more strident outward rhythms of power, could recognize. Assyria had

been the instrument of divine wrath against Israel, even though Assyria had not realized it at the time. Jerusalem had fallen to Nebuchadnezzar, not because of Babylonian might, but because of Jerusalem's transgressions, and because God had allowed it to fall. Over against the triumphalism which was the conventional historical wisdom of the nations there loomed, as though in silent rebuke, the figure of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53.

Ironically, the very absence of historical writing among the rabbis may itself have been due in good measure to their total and unqualified absorption of the biblical interpretation of history. In its ensemble the biblical record seemed capable of illuminating every further historical contingency. No fundamentally new conception of history had to be forged in order to accommodate Rome, nor, for that matter, any of the other world empires that would arise subsequently. The catastrophe of the year 70 C.E. was due, like that of 586 B.C.E., to sin, although the rabbis were well aware that the nature of the sin had changed and was no longer one of idolatry.²⁹ The Roman triumph, like that of the earlier empires, would not endure forever:

Rabbi Nahman opened his discourse with the text, *Therefore fear thou not, O Jacob My servant* (Jer. 30:10). This speaks of Jacob himself, of whom it is written, *And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder set up on the earth . . . and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it* (Gen. 28:12). These angels, explained Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman, were the guardian Princes of the nations of the world. For Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman said: This verse teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed our father Jacob the Prince of Babylon ascending seventy rungs of the ladder, the Prince of Media fifty-two rungs, the Prince of Greece one hundred and eighty, while the Prince of Edom [i.e., Rome] ascended till Jacob did not know how many rungs. Thereupon our father Jacob was afraid. He thought: Is it possible that this one will never be brought down? Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: "*Fear thou not, O Jacob My servant. Even if he ascend and sit down by Me, I will bring him down from there.*"

Hence it is written, *Though thou make thy nest as high as the eagle, and though thou set it among the stars, I will bring thee down from thence* (Obad. 1:4).³⁰

Destruction and redemption were dialectically linked. We are told: "On the day the Temple was destroyed the Messiah was born." Should you then, want to know where he is, here is one version:

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi met Elijah standing by the entrance to the cave of Rabbi Simon bar Yohai . . . He asked him: "When will the Messiah come?"—He replied: "Go and ask him."—"And where is he sitting?"—"At the entrance to the city of Rome."—"And by what sign may he be recognized?"—"He is sitting among the poor lepers. But whereas they untie their bandages all at once and tie them back together, he unties and ties each separately, thinking: 'Perhaps I will be summoned. Let me not be delayed.'"

Rabbi Joshua went to the Messiah and said to him: "Peace upon you, my master and teacher."—"Peace upon you, son of Levi," he replied.—He asked: "When will you come, master?"—He answered: "Today!"

Rabbi Joshua returned to Elijah. The latter asked him: "What did he say to you?" . . . He replied: "He lied to me, for he said that he would come today, yet he has not come."—Elijah answered: "This is what he said to you—*Today, if ye would but hearken to His voice* (Ps. 95:7)."³¹

If, in these potent images, the history of the world empires is a Jacob's Ladder and the messiah sits unnoticed at the gates of Rome ready, sooner or later, to bring about her downfall, then the affairs of Rome may well appear inconsequential and ordinary historical knowledge superfluous. Whether, as R. Joshua found, the messianic advent is contingent upon Jewish repentance and obedience to God, or even if, as others claimed, it will take place independently, at the inscrutable initiative of the divine will, the question of what to do in the interim remained. Here the rabbis were

ous. In the interval between destruction and redemption the Jewish task was to respond finally and fully to the challenge of becoming a holy people. And for them that the study and fulfillment of the written and oral law, the maintenance of a Jewish society based fully on its precepts and commandments, where the future was concerned, trust, patience, and

compared to these firm foundations contemporary history must have seemed a realm of shifting sands. The biblical past was the messianic future assured; the in-between-time was uncertain. Then as now, history did not validate itself and reveal its meaning imminently. In the biblical period the meaning of historical events had been laid bare by the inner eye of the prophet, but that was no longer possible. If the rabbis were faithful to the prophets they did not themselves lay claim to prophecy. The comings and goings of Roman procurators, the affairs of Roman emperors, the wars and conquests of Romans and Sassanians, seemed to yield no new or useful insights beyond what was already known. Even the convolutions of the Hasmonean dynasty or the intrigues of Herodians—Jewish history—revealed nothing relevant and were largely ignored.³² Jewish messianic activism still had the capacity to revive and rivet attention on current historical events and even lead to direct action on the historical plane, but attempts to "hasten the end" became discouraged out of bitter experience. Three tremendous uprisings in Rome, all with eschatological overtones, had ended in defeat and disillusion. In the second century, no less an authority as Rabbi Akiba could hail Bar Kochba, the military leader of the revolt of 132, as the Messiah. Thereafter the tendency to discontinue and combat messianic activism in any form, already evident, became a dominant characteristic of responsible rabbinic leadership for ages to come.³³ The faith of rabbinic Judaism in the coming of the Messiah remained unshaken; the time of his coming was left to heaven alone. R. Samuel bar Nahmani declared: "Blasted be those who calculate the end, for they say that

since the time has arrived and he has not come, he will never come. Rather—wait for him, as it is written: Though he tarry, wait for him. . . ."³⁴ The scrutiny of outward historical events for signs that the end of time was approaching remained largely the province of apocalyptic visionaries who continued to surface periodically throughout the centuries.

As for the sages themselves—they salvaged what they felt to be relevant to them, and that meant, in effect, what was relevant to the ongoing religious and communal (hence also the "national") life of the Jewish people. They did not preserve the political history of the Hasmoneans, but took note of the conflict between the Pharisees and Alexander Jannaeus.³⁵ They did not incorporate a consecutive history of the period of the Second Temple or its destruction, but they carefully wrote down the details of the Temple service, convinced of its eventual restoration.³⁶ They betrayed scant interest in the history of Rome, but they would not forget the persecution under the emperor Hadrian and the martyrdom of the scholars.³⁷ True, they also ignored the battles of the Maccabees in favor of the cruse of oil that burned for eight days, but their recognition of this particular miracle should not be passed over lightly. Hanukkah alone, be it noted, was a post-biblical Jewish holiday, and the miracle, unlike others, did not have behind it the weight of biblical authority. The very acceptance of such a miracle was therefore a reaffirmation of faith in the continuing intervention of God in history. Indeed, we may well ponder the audacity with which the rabbis fixed the formal Hanukkah benediction as: "Blessed be Thou O Lord our God . . . who has commanded us to kindle the Hanukkah light."³⁸

I suspect, of course, that many moderns would rather have the Maccabees than the miracle. If so, that is assuredly a modern problem, and not that of the rabbis. They obviously felt they had all the history they required, and it will help us neither to applaud nor to deplore this. To continue to ask why they did not write post-biblical history or, as we shall yet see, why medieval Jews wrote so little, is somewhat reminiscent of those "educated" Indians who,

westernized under the benevolent auspices of the British Raj, are embarrassed by the absence of historiography in their own tradition and cannot reconcile themselves to it.

We, I think, can afford to be less troubled. We can acknowledge serenely that in rabbinic Judaism, which was to permeate Jewish life the world over, historiography came to a long halt even while belief in the meaning of history remained. We can freely concede, moreover, that much in the rabbinic (and even the biblical) heritage inculcated patterns and habits of thought in later generations that were, from a modern point of view, if not anti-historical, then at least ahistorical. Yet these factors did not inhibit the transmission of a vital Jewish past from one generation to the next, and Judaism neither lost its link to history nor its fundamentally historical orientation. The difficulty in grasping this apparent incongruity lies in a poverty of language that forces us, *faute de mieux*, to apply the term "history" both to the sort of past with which we are concerned, and to that of Jewish tradition.

Some of the differences have already surfaced, others will become clearer as we go along, for what we have discussed thus far is only preparatory to what remains to be unravelled of our larger theme. The next lecture will focus on specific instances of how Jewish memory functioned in the Middle Ages. We will go on from there to examine the brief but significant renaissance of Jewish historical writing in the sixteenth century. Finally, we will marshal our accumulated resources to probe a phenomenon that is still very much with us—the unprecedented explosion of Jewish historiography in modern times.

2

THE MIDDLE AGES

Vessels and Vehicles of Jewish Memory