

*Revelation and Tradition  
as Religious Categories  
in Judaism*

JUDAISM, AS IT HAS constituted itself in distinct historical forms over the last two thousand years, is properly recognized in the history of religions as a classical example of religious traditionalism. For present purposes it is of no consequence whether this is an advantage or a disadvantage; our intent is not to evaluate, but to understand. Moreover, what tradition has meant in the household of Judaism—and to a high degree still continues to mean—eminently merits our attention, especially where we intend to discuss in general, human terms the function of creativity and spontaneity in relation to that which is given. What directs a man or what can enable him to direct his life's work is, after all, manifestly dependent on his ideas about his place in the world or his total orientation to life. Thus a discussion of the meaning of tradition is one of the most enlightening aspects under which the theme of our conference can be regarded. For within all human groups tradition demands an absolutely central position, even as the creative impulse, which insinuates itself into every tradition, calls our attention to the living relationship of giving and receiving. We desire to understand how the given and the spontaneous—that which newly flows into the stream of tradition—are combined in passing on the patrimony of each generation to the next.

It may be in order if at the beginning of this discussion—to indicate its climate, as it were—I tell you a little story which the Talmud, not entirely without tongue in cheek, relates of Moses and Rabbi Akiba. In this connection you must know that Akiba developed from an illiterate shepherd into the greatest scholar of his generation who died as a martyr during the Hadrianic persecutions. In the history of Judaism he is one of the most significant representatives of that conception of tradition whose

spiritual foundations and implications we shall here try to explicate. It was he, more than any other single great teacher in Judaism, who helped to crystallize rabbinic Judaism as a religious system of sheer indestructible vitality. A hundred years after his death the following was told:

When Moses ascended onto the heights [to receive the Torah], he found the Holy One, blessed be He, sitting there tying wreaths [or crowns] to the letters. He said to Him: "Master of the Universe, who is holding You back?" [That is, why are You not satisfied with the letters as they are, so that You add crowns to them, i.e., the little flourishes which occur on certain letters of the Torah scrolls?] He answered him: "There is a man who will arise after many generations by the name of Akiba ben Joseph; he will expound heaps and heaps of laws upon every tittle." Then he said to Him: "Master of the Universe, show him to me." He replied: "Turn around." Then Moses went and sat down behind eight rows [of the students of Akiba]. But he did not understand what they were talking about. Thereupon his strength left him [i.e., he was perplexed because he was unable to follow discourses concerning the Torah which he himself had written]. When Akiba came to a certain matter where his students asked him how he knew it, he said to them: "It is a teaching given to Moses at Sinai." Then he [Moses] was comforted and returned to the Holy One, blessed be He. He said to Him: "Master of the Universe, You have a man like that and You give the Torah by me?!" He replied: "Be silent, for this is the way I have determined it." Then Moses said: "Master of the Universe, You have shown me his knowledge of the Torah, show me also his reward." He answered: "Turn around." He turned around and saw that Akiba's flesh was being weighed at the market stalls [his flesh was torn by the tortures of the executioners]. Then he said to Him: "Master of the Universe, this is the Torah and this is its reward?" He replied: "Be silent, for this is the way I have determined it." <sup>1</sup>

This story, in its own way magnificent, contains *in nuce* many of the questions which will concern us here.

In considering the problem of tradition, we must distinguish between two questions. The first is historical: How did a tradition endowed with religious dignity come to be formed? The other question is: How was this tradition understood once it had been accepted as a religious phenomenon? For the faithful promptly discard the historical question once they have accepted a tradition; this is the usual process in the establishment of religious systems. Yet for the historian the historical question remains fundamental: In order to understand the meaning of what

the faithful simply accept, the historian is not bound to accept fictions that veil more than they reveal concerning the origins of the accepted faith. Thus, tradition as a special aspect of revelation is historically a product of the process that formed rabbinic Judaism between the fourth or third pre-Christian centuries and the second century of the Common Era.

In all religions, the acceptance of a divine revelation originally referred to the concrete communication of positive, substantive, and expressible content. It never occurred to the bearers of such a revelation to question or to limit the specific quality and closely delineated content of the communication they had received. Where, as in Judaism, such revelation is set down in holy writings and is accepted in that form, it initially constitutes concrete communication, factual content, and nothing else. But inasmuch as such revelation, once set down in Holy Scriptures, takes on authoritative character, an essential change takes place. For one thing, new historical circumstances require that the communication, whose authoritativeness has been granted, be applied to ever changing conditions. Furthermore, the spontaneous force of human productivity seizes this communication and expands it beyond its original scope. "Tradition" thus comes into being. It embodies the realization of the effectiveness of the Word in every concrete state and relationship entered into by a society.

At this point begins the process in which two questions gain importance: How can revelation be preserved as a concrete communication, i.e., how can it be passed on from generation to generation? (This is a virtually impossible undertaking by itself.) And, with ever greater urgency: Can this revelation be applied at all, and if so, how? With this second question, spontaneity has burst into the nascent tradition. In the process of this renewed productivity, Holy Scriptures themselves are sometimes enlarged; new written communications take their place alongside the old ones. A sort of no-man's-land is created between the original revelation and the tradition. Precisely this happened in Judaism, for example, as the Torah, to which the quality of revelation was originally confined, was "expanded" to include other writings of the biblical canon that had at first been subsumed, completely and emphatically, under the heading of tradition and considered merely repositories of this. Later, the boundaries often shifted: the canon, as Holy Writ, confronted tradition, and within the tradition itself similar processes of differentiation between written and oral elements were repeated.

J. F. Molitor has excellently presented these problems of the written and oral tradition:

Scripture crystallizes incessantly flowing time and sets forth the evanescent word as a perpetual present with firm and lasting features. In this respect it is the best and surest medium of all tradition. To be sure, Scripture, on account of its faithfulness and greater reliability (since in its case falsification is less possible), deserves preference over oral tradition. But every written formulation is only an abstracted general picture of reality which totally lacks all the concreteness and individual dimension of real life and therefore is subject to every kind of misinterpretation. The spoken word, as well as life and practice, must therefore be the constant companions and interpreters of the written word, which otherwise remains a dead, abstract concept in the mind, lacking all vitality and tangible content.

In modern times, where reflection threatens to swallow up all of life, where everything has been reduced to dead, abstract concepts, and it has been thought possible to educate men by theory alone, that old inherent reciprocal relationship between the written and spoken word, between theory and practice, has been totally displaced. When everything practical is incorporated into theory, when everything transmitted orally is put into writing and nothing left over for life, true theory along with genuine practice in life are lost. In the ancient world, however, where men still related to each other in much simpler, more natural ways, this natural relationship of the written to the spoken word, of theory to practice, was likewise much more properly observed.<sup>2</sup>

The process which is considered here occurred in Judaism at the time of the Second Temple. For our purposes, it does not matter whether the Torah as revealed law was promulgated in the earliest period or only later. But changed circumstances, especially the impact of the Hellenic world, produced a vigorous ferment which seized the theocratic community acknowledging the Torah; it created a Judaism which as a historical phenomenon differentiated itself from a number of other, in part very vibrant, groups within the Jewish people. Tradition now asserted itself ever more emphatically as a new religious value and as a category of religious thought. It becomes the medium through which creative forces express themselves. By the side of the Written Torah tradition arraigns itself, and it is called Oral Torah from approximately the first Christian century on. Tradition is not simply the totality of that which the community possesses as its cultural patrimony and which it bequeathes to its posterity; it is a specific selection from this patrimony, which is elevated and

garbed with religious authority. It proclaims certain things, sentences, or insights to be Torah, and thus connects them with the revelation. In the process, the original meaning of revelation as a unique, positively established, and clearly delineated realm of propositions is put in doubt—and thus a development as fruitful as it is unpredictable begins which is highly instructive for the religious problematic of the concept of tradition.

At first it seems as if the Written and Oral Torah stand side by side, as if two different sources of authority were both given in revelation: one which could be written down, and one which could be, or was allowed to be, transmitted only orally by the living word. But that was not the end of the matter, as we shall see shortly. It is this Oral Torah of which is written at the beginning of the *Ethics of the Fathers* in the Mishnah: "Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets transmitted it to the men of the Great Synagogue." This Great Synagogue was a group which for a long period, under Persian rule, presumably conducted the affairs of the community which had returned from exile. In fact, this nebulous group may well have been a historical construction, invented by much later generations on the basis of the last biblical reports regarding arrangements in Judea which are found in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. We do not know whether the dogmatic concept of the Oral Law goes back to the period which is assumed for this group, even if the concept of a "fence around the Torah" (preventive measures intended to assure observance of the Torah) is ascribed to it. In any event, reference to the Oral Law is already common in the first century before the Common Era.

The content and range of this most important concept fluctuated, and with the advancing consolidation of rabbinic Judaism it underwent an expansion. At first this tradition, appearing as Torah, was limited to statutes or ordinances not contained in the Torah available to everyone. It made no difference whether Moses himself had received this Torah—which was now in written form—orally, and later had written it down or whether he had it dictated to him, so to speak, from the pre-existing heavenly master copy—both conceptions are attested in the rabbinic and apocryphal literature. Thus, in the course of generations, many statutes circulated which were designated as "*Halakhab* to Moses from Sinai."<sup>3</sup> Soon, however, the scope of the concept's application

was enlarged. Everything that was discussed by the scribes and transmitted in the academies—whether legal, historical, ethical, or homiletical—was implanted into the fruitful realm of tradition, which now became an extraordinarily lively spiritual phenomenon.

I spoke a moment ago of the "scribes"—and this brings us to the salient point for an understanding of the relationship of the new, Oral Torah to the received, Written one. Efforts are begun to understand Scripture ever more exactly, making it the object of research, of exegetical probing into its implications (in Hebrew: *Midrash*). The Oral Torah no longer simply runs parallel to the Written; the task now is to derive it and deduce it from Scripture.

The unfolding of the truths, statements, and circumstances that are given in or accompany revelation becomes the function of the Oral Torah, which creates in the process a new type of religious person. In the history of religion, this type has evoked admiration as much as rejection and derision, and not without reason. The biblical scholar perceives revelation not as a unique and clearly delineated occurrence, but rather as a phenomenon of eternal fruitfulness to be unearthed and examined: "Turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it." Thus the achievement of these scholars, who established a tradition rooted in the Torah and growing out of it, is a prime example of spontaneity in receptivity. They are leaders because they know themselves to be led. Out of the religious tradition they bring forth something entirely new, something that itself commands religious dignity: commentary. Revelation needs commentary in order to be rightly understood and applied—this is the far from self-evident religious doctrine out of which grew both the phenomenon of biblical exegesis and the Jewish tradition which it created.

This inner law of development of the concept of revelation is also traceable in other religions which accept the authority of revelation. The process under discussion here is therefore of general significance for the phenomenology of religion. Judaism experienced this process in a peculiarly vigorous and consequential form, and its agents examined it with great thoroughness. This will make our consideration of the present complex of problems especially illuminating and far-reaching.

A creative process begins to operate which will permeate and alter tradition—the *Midrash*: the more regulated *halakhic* and the somewhat freer aggadic exegesis of Scriptures, and the views of the biblical scholars in their various schools, are regarded

as implicitly contained in the Written Torah. No longer only old and carefully guarded sentences but now also analyses of Scriptures by the scholars themselves lay claim to being tradition. The desire for historical continuity which is of the very essence of tradition is translated into a historical construction whose fictitious character cannot be doubted but which serves the believing mind as a crutch of external authentication. Especially peculiar in this historical construction is the metamorphosis of the prophets into bearers of tradition—a very characteristic, albeit to our minds a very paradoxical, transformation. Originally only the last of the prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, had been meant by this proposition, for they possess special importance in the doctrine of the uninterrupted chain of tradition<sup>4</sup>: the last of the prophets are, not without all justification, regarded as the first of the scribes and "men of the Great Assembly." Subsequently, also the older prophets are designated as links in the chain, which would otherwise have had to be invisible.

This leads to the viewpoint expressed daringly in talmudic writings, namely, that the total substance of the Oral Torah, which had in fact been the achievement of the scholars, comes from the same source as the Written Torah, and that it was therefore basically always known. The saying "turn it . . ." reflects this viewpoint. But underneath this fiction, the details of which do not concern us here, there lies a religious attitude which is interesting and which had significant results. I refer to the distinctive notion of revelation including within itself as sacred tradition the later commentary concerning its own meaning. This was the beginning of a road which, with a full measure of inherent logic, was to lead to the establishment of mystical theses concerning the character of revelation as well as the character of tradition.

Here we immediately encounter a significant tension in the religious consciousness of the scholars themselves, between the process by which the tradition actually developed and the interpretation of that process. On the one hand, there was the blossoming productivity of the academies where the Scriptures were explored and examined in ever greater detail—the spontaneous achievement of the generations upon whom, in turn, was bestowed such authority as was transmitted by the great teachers and the tradition. On the other hand, there arose the claim apparently flowing from the dogma of the revealed nature of the Oral Law. What this claim amounted to was that all this was somehow part of revelation itself—and more: not only was it given along with

revelation, but it was given in a special, timeless sphere of revelation in which all generations were gathered together; everything really had been made explicit to Moses, the first and most comprehensive recipient of Torah. The achievement of every generation, its contribution to tradition, was projected back into the eternal present of the revelation at Sinai. This, of course, is something which no longer has anything in common with the notion of revelation with which we began, namely, revelation as unequivocal, clear, and understandable communication. According to this new doctrine, revelation comprises everything that will ever be legitimately offered to interpret its meaning.

The patent absurdity of this claim reveals a religious assumption that must be taken all the more seriously. The rabbis did not hesitate to express this assumption in rather extravagant formulations. In the forty days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai (Exod. 34:28), he learned the Torah with all its implications.<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Joshua ben Levi (a third-century Palestinian teacher) said: "Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, and Aggadah—indeed even the comments some bright student will one day make to his teacher—were already given to Moses on Mount Sinai"—and even the questions that such a bright student will some day ask his teacher!<sup>6</sup> In our context, statements such as these are highly suggestive. They make absolute the concept of tradition in which the meaning of revelation unfolds in the course of historical time—but only because everything that can come to be known has already been deposited in a timeless substratum. In other words, we have arrived at an assumption concerning the nature of truth which is characteristic of rabbinic Judaism (and probably of traditional religious establishment): Truth is given once and for all, and it is laid down with precision. Fundamentally, truth merely needs to be transmitted. The originality of the exploring scholar has two aspects. In his spontaneity, he develops and explains that which was transmitted at Sinai, no matter whether it was always known or whether it was forgotten and had to be rediscovered. The effort of the seeker after truth consists not in having new ideas but rather in subordinating himself to the continuity of the tradition of the divine word and in laying open what he receives from it in the context of his own time. In other words: Not system but *commentary* is the legitimate form through which truth is approached.

This is a most important principle indeed for the kind of productivity we encounter in Jewish literature. Truth must be

laid bare in a text in which it already pre-exists. We shall deal later with the nature of this pre-existent givenness. In any case, truth must be brought forth from the text. Commentary thus became the characteristic expression of Jewish thinking about truth, which is another way of describing the rabbinic genius. Under the influence of Greek thought, there were also explications and attempts at system-construction within Judaism. But its innermost life is to be found where holy texts received commentary, no matter how remote from the text itself these commentaries and their ideas may appear to the present-day critical reader. There is, of course, a striking contrast between the awe of the text, founded on the assumption that everything already exists in it, and the presumptuousness of imposing the truth upon ancient texts. The commentator, who is truly the biblical scholar, always combines both attitudes.

Tradition as a living force produces in its unfolding another problem. What had originally been believed to be consistent, unified and self-enclosed now becomes diversified, multifold, and full of contradictions. It is precisely the wealth of contradictions, of differing views, which is encompassed and unqualifiedly affirmed by tradition. There were many possibilities of interpreting the Torah, and tradition claimed to comprise them all.<sup>7</sup> It maintains the contradictory views with astounding seriousness and intrepidity, as if to say that one can never know whether a view at one time rejected may not one day become the cornerstone of an entirely new edifice. In Jewish tradition the views of the schools of Hillel and Shammai, two teachers who lived shortly before Jesus, play an important part. Their mutually contradictory attitudes toward theoretical and practical problems are codified by the Talmud with great thoroughness, although the rule is that in the application of the law the views of Hillel's school are decisive. But the rejected views are stated no less carefully than the accepted ones. The Talmudists formulated no ultimate thesis concerning the unity of these contradictions, concerning dialectical relationships within the tradition. It was only one of the latest Kabbalists who formulated the daring and, at first blush, surprising thesis, which has since been often reiterated, that the *Halakhab* would be decided according to the now rejected view of the school of Shammai in the Messianic era. That is to say, the conception of the meaning and of the applicability of the Torah which is unacceptable at any given time within history in reality anticipates a Messianic condition in which it

will have its legitimate function—and thereby the unity of the Torah, which embraces all of this, is fully sealed.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, tradition is concerned with the realization, the enactment of the divine task which is set in the revelation. It demands application, execution, and decision, and at the same time it is, indeed, "true growth and unfolding from within." It constitutes a living organism, whose religious authority was asserted with as much emphasis as is at all possible within this system of thought.

Nothing demonstrates this authority, the authority of commentary over author, more triumphantly than the story of the oven of Akhnai which is told in the Talmud. Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanos and the sages disputed about whether or not this oven, which had a particular type of construction, was subject to impurity in the sense of the Torah. Finally, against the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer, a majority declared it subject to impurification. On this matter the talmudic account, which represents one of the most famous passages in Jewish literature, then continues:

On that day Rabbi Eliezer brought forward all the arguments in the world, but they were not accepted. He said to them: "If the *Halakhab* [the proper decision] agrees with me, let this carob tree prove it." Thereupon the carob tree was uprooted a hundred cubits from its place; some say, four hundred cubits. They replied: "No proof may be brought from a carob tree." Then he said: "If the *Halakhab* agrees with me, let this stream of water prove it." Thereupon the stream of water flowed backwards. They replied: "No proof may be brought from a stream of water." Then he said: "If the *Halakhab* agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it." Thereupon the walls of the schoolhouse began to totter. But Rabbi Joshua rebuked them and said: "When scholars are engaged in *halakbic* dispute, what concern is it of yours?" Thus the walls did not topple, in honor of Rabbi Joshua, but neither did they return to their upright position, in honor of Rabbi Eliezer; still today they stand inclined. Then he said: "If the *Halakhab* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven." Thereupon a heavenly voice was heard saying: "Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer? The *Halakhab* always agrees with him." But Rabbi Joshua arose and said (Deut. 30:12): "It is not in heaven." What did he mean by that? Rabbi Jeremiah replied: "The Torah has already been given at Mount Sinai [and is thus no longer in Heaven]. We pay no heed to any heavenly voice, because already at Mount Sinai You wrote in the Torah (Exod. 23:2): 'One must incline after the majority.'" Rabbi Nathan met the prophet Elijah and asked him: "What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do in that hour?" He replied: "God smiled

and said: My children have defeated Me, My children have defeated Me."<sup>9</sup>

The question remains: Does tradition keep its freshness in such a view, or does it freeze into Alexandrianism and lose its organic ability to grow when too much is demanded of it? At what point does deadly decay lurk? The question is as important as it is hard to answer. As long as there is a living relationship between religious consciousness and revelation there is no danger to the tradition from within. But when this relationship dies tradition ceases to be a living force. To be sure, this looks very different to an outside observer. Everyone who studies the tradition of any religious community is aware of this antinomy. For example: For the Church Fathers the rabbinical students of Scripture were still guardians of a valuable tradition; to later Christendom, they appeared incomprehensible and rather terrifying—and this at a time when the tradition enjoyed a very active inner life. For tradition omnipotence and impotence dwell closely together; all is in the eye of the beholder.

In Judaism, tradition becomes the reflective impulse that intervenes between the absoluteness of the divine word—revelation—and its receiver. Tradition thus raises a question about the possibility of immediacy in man's relationship to the divine, even though it has been incorporated in revelation. To put it another way: Can the divine word confront us without mediation? And, can it be fulfilled without mediation? Or, given the assumption of the Jewish tradition which we have formulated, does the divine word rather not require just such mediation by tradition in order to be apprehensible and therefore fulfillable? For rabbinic Judaism, the answer is in the affirmative. Every religious experience after revelation is a mediated one. It is the experience of the voice of God rather than the experience of God. But all reference to the "voice of God" is highly anthropomorphic—a fact from which theologians have always carefully tried to escape. And here we face questions which, in Judaism, have been thought through only in the mystic doctrines of the Kabbalists.

## II

The Kabbalists were in no sense of the word heretics. Rather they strove to penetrate, more deeply than their predecessors, into the meaning of Jewish concepts. They took the step from the tradition of the Talmudists to mystical tradition. In order to understand the mystical concept of tradition, we must take a

step backward and try to visualize the Kabbalists' concept of Torah as revelation and as the word of God. The Kabbalists sought to unlock the innermost core of the Torah, to decode the text, so to speak. (Here we have a new concept of tradition: after all, the Hebrew word *kabbalah* means "the receiving of the tradition.") This goes far beyond what had been thought about these questions in exoteric Judaism, and yet the Kabbalists' thinking remains specifically Jewish. In a way, they have merely drawn the final consequence from the assumption of the Talmudists concerning revelation and tradition as religious categories.

The first question which presented itself to the Kabbalists in this connection concerned the nature of that Torah which is known as the Written Torah. What is it that God can actually reveal, and of what does the so-called word of God consist that is given to the recipients of revelation? The answer is: God reveals nothing but Himself as He becomes speech and voice. The expression through which the divine power presents itself to man in manifestation, no matter how concealed and how inward, is the name of God. It is this that is expressed and given voice in Scripture and revelation, no matter how hieroglyphically. It is encoded in every so-called communication that revelation makes to man. "For the Holy Scriptures, the great mystery of the revelation of God, containing all within all, is a hieroglyph of unending hieroglyphs, an eternal spring of mysteries, inexhaustible, pouring forth without end, ever new and glorious."<sup>10</sup> To be sure, those secret signatures (*reshumim*) that God had placed upon things are as much concealments of His revelation as revelation of His concealment. The script of these signatures differs from what we view as Torah, as revealed Scripture, only in the unconditional, undistracted concentration in which these are here collected. The language, which lives in things as their creative principle, is the same; but here, concentrated upon its own essence, it is not (or at most thinly) concealed by the creaturely existence in which it appears. Thus, revelation is revelation of the name or names of God, which are perhaps the different modes of His active being. God's language has no grammar; it consists only of names. The oldest Kabbalists—Nahmanides, for example—profess to have received as tradition this understanding of the structure of the Torah. It is clear, however, that this was originally a tradition of magical character, now transposed into a mystical tradition.

The creative force thus concentrated in the name of God, which is the essential word that God sends forth from Himself,

is far greater than any human expression, than any creaturely word can grasp. It is never exhausted by the finite, human word. It represents an absolute which, resting in itself—one might as well say: self-moved—sends its rays through everything that seeks expression and form in all worlds and through all languages. Thus, the Torah is a texture (Hebrew: *arigah*) fashioned out of the names of God and, as the earliest Spanish Kabbalists already put it, out of the great, absolute name of God, which is the final signature of all things. It constitutes a mysterious whole, whose primary purpose is not to transmit a specific sense, to "mean" something, but rather to express the force of the divinity itself which is concentrated in this "name." This conception has nothing to do with any rational understanding of the possible social function of a name; this Name cannot, after all, even be pronounced. The Torah is built up out of this Name, just as a tree grows out of its root, or, to use another favorite image of the Kabbalists, just as a building is erected out of an artistic interweaving of bricks that ultimately also consist of one basic material. This is the thesis repeated in every possible form in the classical writings of the Kabbalah: "The whole Torah is nothing but the great name of God." As Joseph Gikatilla has set forth in great detail, in the Torah the living texture constructed out of the tetragrammaton is seen as an infinitely subtle braiding of the permutations and combinations of its consonants; these in turn were subjected to more such processes of combination, and so on *ad infinitum*, until they finally appear to us in the form of the Hebrew sentences of the Torah. Thus, the very words that we read in the Written Torah and that constitute the audible "word of God" and communicate a comprehensible message, are in reality mediations through which the absolute word, incomprehensible to us, is offered. This absolute word is originally communicated in its limitless fullness, but—and that is the key point—this communication is incomprehensible! It is not a communication which provides comprehension; being basically nothing but the expression of essence, it becomes a comprehensible communication only when it is mediated.

This strictly mystical view of the nature of revelation is basic to any analysis of tradition. It has significant consequences. One of them is so radical that it was taught only in veiled, symbolical terminology. It amounted to the assertion that there was no such thing as a Written Torah in the sense of an immediate revelation of the divine word. For such a revelation is contained in the Wisdom of God, where it forms an "Ur-Torah"

in which the "word" rests as yet completely undeveloped in a mode of being in which no differentiation of the individual elements into sounds and letters takes place. The sphere in which this "Ur-Torah" (*torah kelulah*) comes to articulate itself into the so-called Written Torah, where signs (the forms of the consonants) or sounds and expressions exist—that sphere itself is already interpretation. An old dictum of the Midrash, according to which the pre-existent Torah was written before God with black fire upon white fire, was given the esoteric interpretation that the white fire is the Written Torah in which the letters are not yet formed; only by means of the black fire, which is the Oral Torah, do the letters acquire form. The black fire is likened to the ink on the parchment of the Torah scroll. This would imply that what we on earth call the Written Torah has already gone through the medium of the Oral Torah and has taken on a perceptible form in that process. The Written Torah is not really the blackness of the inked writing (already a specification), but the mystic whiteness of the letters on the parchment of the scroll on which we see nothing at all. According to this, the Written Torah is a purely mystical concept, understood only by prophets who can penetrate to this level. As for us, we can perceive revelation only as unfolding oral tradition.

While this notion was only rarely hinted at, there was general acceptance of another conclusion drawn from the principle of the Torah as the name of God, and this one is central to our discussion. It is the thesis that the word of God carries infinite meaning, however it may be defined. Even that which has already become a sign in the strict sense, and is already a mediated word, retains the character of the absolute. But if there is such a thing as God's word, it must, of course, be totally different from the human word. It is far-reaching, all-embracing, and, unlike a human word, cannot be applied to a specific context of meaning. In other words: God's word is infinitely interpretable; indeed, it is *the* object of interpretation par excellence. Saying that, we have indeed moved far away from the origin of our consideration, i.e., from the original historical notions of revelation as a specific and positive communication. In this new perspective, the old notions are but the exoteric garments of an insight that probes far deeper. Here revelation, which has yet no specific meaning, is that in the word which gives an infinite wealth of meaning. Itself without meaning, it is the very essence of interpretability. For mystical theology, this is a decisive criterion of revelation. In every word there now shines an infinite multitude of lights. The

primeval light of the Torah that shines in the holy letters refracts on the unending facets of "meaning." In this connection, the Kabbalists always speak of the "seventy faces of the Torah"; the number seventy simply represents the inexhaustible totality and meaning of the divine word.

We now face the problem of tradition as it presented itself to the Kabbalists. If the conception of revelation as absolute and meaning-giving but in itself meaningless is correct, then it must also be true that revelation will come to unfold its infinite meaning (which cannot be confined to the unique event of revelation) only in its constant relationship to history, the arena in which tradition unfolds. Theologians have described the word of God as the "absolutely concrete." But the absolutely concrete is, at the same time, the simply unfulfillable—it is that which in no way can be put into practice. The Kabbalistic idea of tradition is founded upon the dialectic tension of precisely this paradox: it is precisely the absoluteness that effects the unending reflections in the contingencies of fulfillment. Only in the mirrorings in which it reflects itself does revelation become practicable and accessible to human action as something concrete. There is no immediate, undialectic application of the divine word. If there were, it would be destructive. From this point of view, so-called concreteness—which has so many admirers these days and whose glorification is the labor of a whole philosophical school—is something mediated and reflected, something that has gone through many refractions. It is the tradition of the word of God—for the Kabbalists the basis of any possible action that deserves the name of action—that permits its application in history. Tradition undergoes changes with the times, new facets of its meaning shining forth and lighting its way. Tradition, according to its mystical sense, is Oral Torah, precisely because every stabilization in the text would hinder and destroy the infinitely moving, the constantly progressing and unfolding element within it, which would otherwise become petrified. The writing down and codification of the Oral Torah, undertaken in order to save it from being forgotten, was therefore as much a protective as (in the deeper sense) a pernicious act. Demanded by the historical circumstance of exile, it was profoundly problematic for the living growth and continuance of the tradition in its original sense. It is therefore not surprising that, according to talmudic report,<sup>11</sup> it was originally prohibited to write down the Oral Torah; and it is not surprising that great Kabbalists (Nathan Adler in Frankfurt, for

example) are said not to have committed their learning to writing because, since he and his students were keeping tradition from being forgotten, the prohibition against writing it down continued to be valid for him.

The understanding of tradition as a process that creates productivity through receptivity can now be seen clearly. Talmudic literature recognizes two types of men who preserve the tradition. One is the man who was useful in the Houses of Study, who could recite from memory the texts of all the old traditions of the schools—mere receptacles who preserved tradition without augmenting it in the slightest by their own inquiry. But this man, a conduit for tradition, is at best an expedient, virtually an oral book. The truly learned man is the one who is bound to tradition through his inquiries. So far as the consciousness of future generations is concerned, only the men of the second type are the true carriers of tradition, for tradition is living creativity in the context of revelation. Precisely because tradition perceives, receives, and unfolds that which lives in the word, it is the force within which contradictions and tensions are not destructive but rather stimulating and creative. For those who stand within the tradition it is easy to see the organic unity of these contradictions, precisely because it presents a dialectic relationship in which the word of revelation is developed. Without contradictions it would not perform this function.

The scholar and commentator, therefore, fulfills a set task: to make the Torah concrete at the point where he stands, to make it applicable *hic at nunc*, and, moreover, to fashion his specific form of concretization in such a manner that it may be transmitted. The later Kabbalah formulated a widely accepted dictum: that the Torah turns a special face to every single Jew, meant only for him and apprehensible only by him, and that a Jew therefore fulfills his true purpose only when he comes to see this face and is able to incorporate it into the tradition. The "chain of tradition" is never broken; it is the translation of the inexhaustible word of God into the human and attainable sphere; it is the transcription of the voice sounding from Sinai in an unending richness of sound. The musician who plays a symphony has not composed it; still, he participates in significant measure in its production. This, of course, is valid only for those who assume a metaphysical contemporaneity for all tradition. For those, on the other hand, who see tradition as the creature of history, in whose course revelation is reflected, tradition legitimately represents the greatest



creation of Judaism, which when properly understood is constituted only within this tradition.

For the Kabbalists the voice from Sinai was the constant medium, the foundation for the continuing existence of tradition. The unique event called revelation—in just the sense analyzed here—is juxtaposed to the continuity of the voice. Every carrier of tradition refers back to it, as is emphasized by the texts I shall now examine. These texts attempt to unify the exoteric concept of tradition as developed by the Talmudists with the mystical concept that was conditioned by the assumptions of the Kabbalists concerning the nature of revelation. They are extracts from two of the most important works of later Kabbalistic literature and to me seem highly important for our considerations.

In this literature, the most extensive discussion concerning the nature of tradition is found in the work *Avodat ha-Kodesh*, written in 1531 in Turkey by Meir ben Gabbai.<sup>12</sup> He set out to prove that tradition is not a profane achievement of human thought and deliberation, but that it is precisely "Oral Torah" and a re-sounding of the voice (in the sense adduced earlier). At the same time, Meir ben Gabbai tried to answer the question of how it was possible, even necessary, for the tradition to offer such differing conceptions concerning the observance of the Torah, since the Torah, perfect within itself, is after all the revelation of the divine will. I quote here one of his very detailed explanations:

The highest wisdom [the *sophia* of God, which is the second *sefirah*] contains as the foundation of all emanations pouring forth out of the hidden Eden the true fountain from which the Written and the Oral Torah emanate and are impressed [upon the forms of the celestial letters and signatures]. This fountain is never interrupted; it gushes forth in constant production. Were it to be interrupted for even a moment, all creatures would sink back into their non-being; for the gushing forth is the cause of God's great name appearing in its oneness and in its glory [as depicted by this emanation]. On this fountain rests the continued existence of all creatures; it is said of it (Ps. 36:10): "For with Thee is the fountain of life." And this is a life that has no measure and no end, no death or dissolution. Now, since the nature of the original source is also preserved in what was formed from it, it necessarily follows that the Torah, arising out of this source, also never has an interruption within itself. Rather, its fountain always gushes forth, to indicate the source whence it was formed [literally: "hewed out"]. We learn this from the prayer which designates God as The One Who "gives the Torah" [present tense]. For that great

voice with which He gave it has not ceased. After He gave us His holy words and caused us to hear them as the very essence of the whole Torah, He did not cease to let us hear its details through His prophet, the trusted one of His house [i.e., Moses]. This is what Onkelos meant when he interpreted the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 5:19 on the voice of God at the revelation [which, if taken literally, can more readily have the opposite interpretation] as "a great voice that did not cease speaking." That great voice sounds forth without interruption; it calls with that eternal duration that is its nature; whatever the prophets and scholars of all generations have taught, proclaimed, and produced, they have received precisely out of that voice which never ceases, in which all regulations, determinations, and decisions are implicitly contained, as well as everything new that may ever be said in any future. In all generations, these men stand in the same relationship to that voice as the trumpet to the mouth of a man who blows into it and brings forth a sound. In that process, there is no production from their own sense and understanding. Instead, they bring out of potentiality into actuality that which they received from that voice when they stood at Sinai. And when the Scriptures say: All these words God spoke to your congregation, a great voice that does not cease speaking, everything is thus contained in it. . . . Not only did all the prophets receive their prophecy [out of this voice] at Sinai, but also all the sages who arose in every generation. Everyone received that which is his from Sinai, from that continuous voice, and certainly not according to his human understanding and reckoning. And this is so because the completion of the unity has been entrusted into the hands of man, as the Scriptural verse says (Isa. 43:10): "If ye are my witnesses, says the Eternal One, I am God." All words that can ever be said in a new way have thus been placed into this fundament which is the divine voice; the Master of the world desired that they receive actuality through men of this earth who form and fulfill God's name. That great voice is the gate and the portal for all other voices, and that is [the meaning of] "fence of unity," and the reference of the verse in the Psalms: "This is the gate of the Lord," the gate representing the Oral Law which leads to God, Who is the Written Torah, guarded by the Oral Torah. This is the reason for the fences and limitations with which the scholars enclose the Torah. But since that voice is never interrupted and that fountain always gushes forth, the deliberations of the scholars in the Talmud were necessary; Rabina and Rab Ashi, its redactors, refrained from interrupting that stream [which flows and becomes visible in those deliberations]. And this is also the path walked by scholars of all generations, and there is no fulfillment of the Torah except on that path. If new teachings [regarding the understanding of the Torah] are produced daily, this proves that the fountain ever gushes and that the great voice sounds forth without interruption. For that reason, the deliberations upon the Torah may not suffer any interruptions, nor the

production of new teachings and laws and incisive discussion. But the authority of the prophets and scholars who know the secret is nothing but the authority of that voice from which they have received all they have produced and taught, which in no way arose out of their own mind and out of their rational investigations (III, ch. 23).

Later on in this disquisition, we discover how Meir ben Gabbai explains the conflicts of opinion that appear in the tradition from this Kabbalistic point of view. He holds them to be facets of revelation:

That ever-flowing fountain [of emanation from which the Torah originates] has different sides, a front and a back; from this stem the differences and the conflicts and the varying conceptions regarding the clean and the unclean, the prohibited and the permitted, the usable and the unusable, as it is known to the mystics. The great, continuing voice contains all these diverse ways of interpretation, for in that voice there can be nothing missing. According to the size and strength of that voice the opposing interpretations appear within it and confront one another. For the one has seen the face of that voice as it was turned toward him and made his decision for purity, the other one for impurity, each according to the place where he stood and where he received it. But all originates from one place and goes [despite all apparent contradictions] to the one place, as is explained in the *Zohar* (III, 6b). For the differences and contradictions do not originate out of different realms, but out of the one place in which no difference and no contradiction is possible. The implicit meaning of this secret is that it lets every scholar insist on his own opinion and cite proofs for it from the Torah; for only in this manner and in no other way is the unity [of the various aspects of the one stream of revelation] achieved. Therefore it is incumbent upon us to hear the different opinions, and this is the sense of "these and those are the words of the living God." For all depend ultimately upon the divine wisdom that unites them in their origin, even though this is incomprehensible for us and the last portal remained closed to Moses. For that reason, these things appear contradictory and different to us, but only as seen from our own standpoint—for we are unable to penetrate to those points where the contradictions are resolved. And it is only because we are unable to maintain two contradictory teachings at the same time that the *Halakhab* is established according to one of these two teachings; for all is one from the side of the Giver. But from our side it appears as manifold and different opinions, and the *Halakhab* is established according to the teaching of the school of Hillel.

This interpretation achieved its widest dissemination above all through the authority of Isaiah Horovitz (ca. 1565-1630),

who presented an unexcelled synopsis of rabbinic and Kabbalistic Judaism in his great work *The Two Tables of the Covenant*. Drawing upon the disquisition just quoted, he develops the religious dignity of the creative tradition by proceeding from the explanation of a particularly pointed talmudic saying which states: "The Holy One, blessed be He, speaks Torah out of the mouths of all rabbis."<sup>13</sup> Horovitz comments:

Some interpret this saying in reference to the petition which we express in the prayer "Give us our share in Thy Torah," which is taken to mean: Give us a share in the Torah which God Himself studies; or else: May we become worthy of having Him say a teaching in our name. And this is the situation: the scholars produce new words [in the understanding of the Torah] or derive them through the power of their insight. But all of it was contained in the power of that voice that was heard at the revelation; and now the time has come for them to bring it from potentiality into actuality through the efforts of their meditation. But God is great and mighty in power, and there is no limit to His understanding. His potentiality permits no interruption [in this voice]; rather, it is boundless and endless, and all this [that the sages hear in the voice] is guided by the measure of renewal and the origin of souls in every generation as well as the ability of man to arouse the higher power. It thus follows that while we say of God that "He has given the Torah" [in the past], He can also be designated at the same time [in every present time] as "the One Who gives the Torah." At every hour and time the fountain gushes forth without interruption, and what He gives at any time was potentially contained in what He gave [at Sinai]. Let me explain the essence of this matter further. We know that the domain of what is made more stringent [in the law by the rabbis] becomes enlarged in every generation. In the days of our teacher Moses the only prohibitions were those which he had expressly received at Sinai. Nevertheless, he added ordinances here and there for special purposes as they arose; and so did the prophets after him, and the scribes, and every generation with its scholars. For the more the snake's poison spreads, the more is the protecting fence needed, as is said (Eccles. 10:8): "He who breaks the fence is bitten by the snake." The Holy One, blessed be He, gave us 365 prohibitions [in the Torah] in order to prevent the snake's poison from taking effect. The more this poison spreads within a generation, the larger must the realm of prohibition become. If this had been so at the time when the Torah was given, then all these prohibitions would have been written into the Torah. As it is, all this is contained by implication in the Torah's prohibitions; for in all this, there is only one point [namely, fighting the snake's poison]. Therefore God commanded: Set a watch upon the watch,<sup>14</sup> which means: act according to the prevailing conditions. Thus, all the additional stringencies [in fulfilling the

Torah] that had to be added in every generation derive from the authority of the Torah. As the snake's poison spreads, and more of its potential becomes actual, the statement<sup>15</sup> that God created the evil inclination as well as the antidote to it becomes valid. Then we need stimulation from above in order to translate the [additional] prohibitions from potentiality into actuality as well, until [at the time of redemption] we shall again be reunited with the highest fountain of all fountains [which will then nullify the prohibitions].

I must reveal further secrets which are related to this matter in order to make plain that all the words of the wise men are words of the living God [and thus have religious dignity]. The words of the Talmud in Tractate Erubin (13b) will thereby become understandable: "Rabbi Akiba said in the name of Rabbi Samuel: For three years the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel engaged in argument. The one said the *Halakhah* is according to us, and the other one said the *Halakhah* is according to us. A divine voice then sounded forth and said: Both these and those are the words of the living God, but the *Halakhah* is to be decided according to the school of Hillel." Rabbi Yomtov ben Abraham of Seville reported in his commentary that the rabbis of France had raised the question: How is it possible that both are the words of the living God when one prohibits what the other one permits? Their answer was that when Moses ascended the heights in order to receive the Torah he was shown forty-nine reasons for a prohibition and forty-nine reasons for a permission for every problem. He asked God about this and was told that this would be left to the sages of Israel of every generation, and that the decision was theirs to make. And this—so says the scholar from Seville—is correct according to the Talmud; but according to the Kabbalah there is a special reason for this. It appears to me that the expression of the Talmud "These and those are the words of the living God" is justified *prima facie* only where it is possible to hold that the words of both parties are valid at the same time. This applies, for example, to the place in the Talmud (Gittin, 6b) which refers to the unfaithfulness of the concubine in Gibeon (Judg. 19:2): "Once when Rabbi Ebiathar met the prophet Elijah and asked him what the Holy One, blessed be He, was thinking about, Elijah answered: "About the story of the concubine in Gibeon" [about which Ebiathar and his colleague Jonathan had expressed different opinions]. "What did he say about it?" [asked the rabbi]. "My son Ebiathar says thus, and my son Jonathan says thus." The rabbi said: "Is it possible for God to have doubt?" Elijah answered: "These and those are the words of the living God." For it is possible to consider the sayings of both valid. But in a situation where one prohibits something which the other permits, it is clearly impossible to consider both of their sayings valid. For the decision supports the one, and we do not accept the validity of the words of the other. But if these words are also considered words of the living God, how can one word of His

be invalid? The full import, therefore, cannot rest with the words of the French rabbis, since they are insufficient in this case. But it can rest with the reason and the secret that apply here according to the Kabbalistic tradition, as indicated by the rabbi from Seville. The verse in Ecclesiastes 12:11: "The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails well fastened are those that are composed in collections, they are given from one shepherd" is interpreted in the Tractate Hagigah (3b) as follows: "Composed in collections," this refers to the biblical scholars who sit in assemblies and occupy themselves with the Torah; some declare a matter unclean, and others declare it clean; some prohibit, others permit; some declare it unusable, and others declare it usable. Someone might say: If this is so, how can I study the Law? Therefore Scripture continues: "They are given by *one* shepherd; One God gave them, one spokesman [Moses] said them out of the mouth of the Lord of all actions, praised be He, as is said (Exod. 20:1): 'And God spoke all these words.'" You, too, turn your ear into a funnel and fashion for yourself an understanding heart in order to understand the words of those who declare as unclean and the words of those who declare as clean, the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit, the words of those who declare as unusable and the words of those who declare as usable. We have here the affirmation that all differences of opinion and viewpoint that contradict one another were given by one God and said by one spokesman. This seems to be very alien to human understanding, and man's nature would be unable to grasp it were it not for the help given to him by the prepared way of God, the pathway upon which dwells the light of the Kabbalah.<sup>16</sup>

In the Jewish conception, therefore, genuine tradition, like everything that is creative, is not the achievement of human productivity alone. It derives from a bedrock foundation. Max Scheler is reported to have said: "The artist is merely the mother of the work of art; God is the father." The tradition is one of the great achievements in which relationship of human life to its foundation is realized. It is the living contact in which man takes hold of ancient truth and is bound to it, across all generations, in the dialogue of giving and taking. Goethe's word applies to it:

The truth that long ago was found,  
Has all noble spirits bound,  
The ancient truth, take hold of it.

(Das Wahre war schon längst gefunden,  
Hat edle Geisterschaft verbunden,  
Das alte Wahre, fass es an.)

composed of the two sayings of the Baal Shem in *Toledot*, ff. 27b and 35b.

32. *Toledot* ff. 79a and 67b.

33. *Toledot* f. 198a.

34. *Teshuot Hen*, f. 43b.

35. When I first took up the question of specific points in which Hasidism was influenced by Sabbatian groups, I was the target of a poisonous attack by Eliezer Steinmann, a Hebrew writer who has published several volumes glorifying Hasidism, who accused me of "looking for *hametz* in Hasidism," cf. his article "*Bedikat Hametz be-Mishnat ha-Hasidim*," in *Molad*, XI (1951), 259-67.

36. Cf. my essay in *Bet Yisrael be-Polin* (ed. Israel Halpern), Vol. II (Jerusalem, 1949), p. 64, and p. 59 on the common emotional background of the Russian Khlysti and the Sabbatians.

37. This holds true for such customs as dancing, violent gestures during prayer, and probably also for the Sabbath meal. The extraordinary statements of Yafa Eliach in this connection, maintaining that these things, as well as the substance of Hasidic teaching, came originally from the Russian sect of the Khlysti, are entirely without foundation. Cf. *Proceedings, American Academy for Jewish Research*, XXXVI (1968), 53-83. This paper and all its hypotheses are a deplorable example of scholarly irresponsibility, leaving the reader wondering about the state of Jewish studies.

38. Cf. Scholem, *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit*, pp. 110-34.

39. Cf. *Likkutim Yekarim* (Lvov, 1864), ff. 14a/b, and *Or Torab* (Koretz, 1804), f. 146b (without pagination). The same Sabbatian paradox referring to Moses' stay at Pharaoh's court as a necessary step of dissimulation and outwitting the power of evil in its own realm, which is so frequently mentioned in apologies for Sabbatai Zevi, was taken up by the Rabbi of Polnoye and given a Hasidic twist. Cf. *Teshuot Hen* f. 6a (in the name of the Rabbi of Polnoye).

40. *Toledot* f. 145b (section *hukkat*).

41. On this point cf. G. Nigal, *Manhig va-Edab* (1962), pp. 96-109, and S. H. Dresner, *The Zaddik . . . according to the writings of Rabbi Jaakov Yosef of Polnoye* (London and New York, 1960), pp. 148-221, who deals with the whole problem of the descent of the Zaddik and its dangers at length.

42. All the statements about the Zaddik in Psalms are explained as statements on Sabbatai Zevi in Israel Hazan's commentary on a large part of the Book of Psalms, composed 1679.

43. *Toledot*, ff. 16a and 17a.

44. *Shivhe ha-Besht* (Kopys, 1815), f. 28a.

45. E.g., MS. Guenzburg 517, f. 79b.

46. *Meor Enayim* (Slavita, 1798), f. 91b; cf. also Tishby, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

47. Such writers are, e.g., Gedalya of Linietz, Benjamin of Zal-óscie, and Ephraim of Sedytkov.

48. *Degel Mahane Efrayim* (Koretz, 1810), f. 17a.

49. *Maggid Devarav le-Yaakov* (Koretz, 1781), f. 9b.

#### REVELATION AND TRADITION AS RELIGIOUS CATEGORIES IN JUDAISM

1. Menahoth 29b.

2. J. F. Molitor, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder Ueber die Tradition*, I (1857), p. 4.

3. Cf. the compilation of these statutes in Wilhelm Bacher, *Tradition und Tradenten* (Leipzig, 1914), pp. 33-46.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-31.

5. *Midrash Tanbuma*, ed. Solomon Buber, II, 60a.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 58b.

7. Of Rabbi Meir it is said in Erubin 13b: "He pronounces the impure pure and proves it and the pure impure and proves this" (in order to force the scholars to think through the problems most conscientiously before arriving at a decision). Of his disciple Symmachos it is there reported that he adduced 48 reasons for the impurity of each impure object and 48 reasons for the purity of each pure object. In the same place the Talmud reports very soberly the tradition, which must be particularly disquieting to a pious mind, that in Jabneh there was even an acute student who was able to adduce 150 reasons why a crawling animal is pure—whereas in fact the Torah explicitly and unambiguously prohibits it.

8. This thesis seems first to have been stated by Moses Graf of Prague; see his *Vayakhel Moshe* (Dessau, 1699), pp. 45b and 54a.

9. Baba Metzia 59b.

10. Molitor, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

11. Gittin 60b.

12. *Avodat ha-Kodesh* (Lvov, 1857), I, chs. 21 and 22; also III, chs. 20-24.

13. Hagigah 15b.

14. Yebamot 21a, as an interpretation of Leviticus 18:30.

15. Baba Batra 16a.

16. Cf. Isaiah Horowitz, *Shene Lubot ha-Berit* (Amsterdam, 1689), pp. 25b-26a.