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Rabbinic language from an integrationist perspective

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ABSTRACT

Students of religion should learn about integrationism for at least two reasons. The first concerns the proper way to understand the relation between orality and literacy, between speaking and writing. The second concerns the proper way to approach religious language. Harris is challenging because his argument has both methodological and theoretical consequences for how we understand religious language and history. I explore possible ways of understanding religion from an integrationist perspective, and Judaism in particular. Harris has argued that we must have a broader view of what constitutes language; for this reason the first part of the essay goes into some detail about the cultural and cognitive context of rabbinic language. I then describe some of the consequences of literacy, incorporating some insights from integrationism and its approach to written language. I conclude the essay with some sections on the consequences of integrationism for the study of religious language.

1. Introduction

> "Before the age of six do not accept pupils; from that age you can accept them; and stuff them with Torah like an ox" *Talmud B BB* 21a; *B Ket* 50a

Roy Harris tells a story about how human beings slowly come to recognize what writing is. He says that societies will go through three stages. The first stage is "crypto-literacy," where writing is regarded as "a form of magic." The second stage he calls "utilitarian literacy;" this is the stage we are at now, where writing is thought of as a "technique for doing what would otherwise have to be done by means of speech." The third stage is more aspirational, and it is what Harris calls "full literacy," where writing will be understood as a "particular mode of operation of the human mind and the key to a new concept of language" (Harris, 2000, p. x). This essay argues, in part, that some clues toward full literacy can be found in the Rabbinical attitude toward language and writing. In other words I would like to take seriously this historical trajectory through the lens of religious history. In the process I am going to try to present what I think the third stage of "full literacy" might look like.

Harris has waged an all-out intellectual war against what he calls "the language myth," which he ties directly to writing and literacy. The myth leads to what he calls "segregationism" which is "any approach which assumes that systems of communication are independent of their potential users or of the contexts in which they can operate." It is called segregationism, as opposed to Harris's antidote "integrationism," because it is assumed language is made up of units which can be segregated and then unambiguously mirror thoughts. By contrast, Harris points to an indeterminacy between language and thought. Furthermore, for Harris writing and literacy contribute strongly to the persistence of this myth because writing is mistakenly taken merely as a visible form of speech. Writing makes possible a certain type of reflection on thought, on what has more

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recently been called the metalinguistic and meta-representational aspects of spoken language. Alphabetic writing, even more than other forms, forces us to think about speech in a different way, to break it up, segregate it, monetize it. But, for Harris, it is a mischaracterization to say that writing simply allows new forms of reflection on language; more accurately, writing and literacy change our very concepts of language and thought.

2. Historical background

Following the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem in 70 c.e., and for a hundred or so years before that, Judaism began to transform from a religion of temple priests to a religion of rabbis. Or rather, since "Judaism" was probably not a term around in circulation at the time, it is more accurate to say that temple priests began to lose religious authority at the same time that rabbis, or teachers, schooled in particular traditions of scriptural interpretation and lecturing styles, began to gain authority. The rabbis were largely an outgrowth of the Pharisaic movement in Palestine and as such were already moving away from the religion of the temple, most notably because they traced at least some lineage to the exilic community in Babylon, which was likely established following the destruction of the *first* temple in 586 b.c.e. Babylon, present-day Baghdad, would in fact become the center of rabbinic Judaism once Christianity became established more firmly in Palestine under the Romans some centuries after Constantine.

With a proliferation of competing Judaic sects, notably the Christians and later the Karaites, the rabbis understandably were on the defensive.[1] They were at pains to trace their authority back to the Biblical prophets and ultimately to their god. Prophecy, or one on one direct oral-aural revelation, they argued, had ceased. For the rabbis, authority was no longer garnered from direct contact with divinity, but rather by learning both the oral commentaries on the Torah along with the rules of interpretation under which those commentaries were transacted. The ancient tractate *Avot* was therefore quite important because it sets out this line of authority from the prophets of old. In a more formal sense, prophecy was replaced by Jewish, or Talmudic, education.

The transformation of Judaism was taking place in the context of other "Axial Age" transformations. Though the term "axial age" has recently and deservingly come under some dispute (Bellah, 2005), this historical period surely marks the beginnings of some type of shift from Harris's first phase to his second. Archaeologist Schloen (2001) has argued that it was not until the 1st millennium BCE that states in the Near East can be regarded as what Max Weber called an "impersonal bureaucratic state." Schloen follows Karl Jaspers use of the term "Axial Age... for the period of the emergence of more rationalized regimes in the first millennium bce" (52). He correlates this change with the shift to "monotheistic faith" as an elective affinity, postulating that the age experienced "a fundamental shift in human conceptions of social order, evident in religious and philosophical literature of the period, especially that of ancient Greece and Israel." The shift was also "reflected in and dialectically influenced by changing material conditions, in the form of new economic relationships (including a monetary economy) and the physical reorganization of social interaction that we can detect archaeologically in changing settlement patterns." The key factor in the shift, according to Weber and Schloen, is the "rationalization" of social life, "a phenomenon that was ultimately rooted in a new awareness of the gulf between the transcendent and mundane spheres of reality" (64).

Literacy perhaps more than any other technology played an important role in the Axial mood. My answer to the question "What is Axial about the Axial Age?" (Bellah, 2005) is therefore that for the first time in human history we get systematic forms of education. Rabbinic literacy represents one particular example of such systems. A great deal of attention has been paid to the origins and effects of Greek literacy, while little has been paid to the particular forms of literacy that emerged in Judaism. In contrast to Greek and Roman literacy, rabbinic literacy was not a fulcrum of citizenship, rather one of devotion. Early Judaism marks perhaps the first time in history that a religious communion gathers around a literary text (Johnson and Parker, 2009).

The Axial age should be understood primarily in light of the formation of a new bureaucratic educated class and the corresponding institutions that supported it (such as libraries, archives, tax offices, and universities; see Pearce, 1995; Brosius, 2003). All religions underwent significant changes in this period. It is due to a series of historical contingencies, most notably that the literature of the Hebrew Bible was taken up by early Christians, that we in the West and now the world, have placed so much interest and reflection in the body of literature of these Judean intellectuals. This is not therefore an evolutionary shift in consciousness nor is it the end of the golden age of archaic myth making. But this era does begin a religious and intellectual preoccupation with written texts. And it is from the standpoint of this preoccupation that most of our understanding of the ancient world is based.

Judaic scriptures are an expression of a form of intellectual homelessness which has come to define the modern condition. It is an example of a group of intellectuals coming to some collective realization of themselves in light of their perceived difference with surrounding people. From the Babylonian (or Egyptian) perspective, these elite Judeans were brought from the barbarian periphery of their empire to be enlightened in their high culture. So it was a combination of an exilic mentality and a secretarial education in the heart of the civilized world – an original divided consciousness – that made the form of literature they produced distinctive.

[1] Early Jewish texts such as the Tosefta refer to such competing sects as *minim*. It is unlikely that the term referred to Christians early on in the rabbinic period. It more likely referred to a variety of non-rabbinic Judaic sects such as those at Qumran, various apostates, traitors to Rome, Sadducees, and Jewish gnostics (Schremer, 2010).