

The
Boothe Prize Essays

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Instructor's Foreword

In "Breaking the Watch..." Sarah Johnson takes a fairly straight-ahead essay prompt regarding the dynamic between continuity and change in Judaism and turns it into a vehicle for arguing that the early rabbis complicated the linearity of biblical chronology in order to establish the irrelevance of time in the face of God's everlasting truth – great consolation, indeed, for Jews living in the despair and confusion of a post-Temple world. Beyond having the basic characteristics that make IHUM TFs happy – clear organization and tight writing that smoothly integrates analysis and text – this essay is artful. Sarah portrays rabbinic scholars picking loose the knots that have marked time for the Chosen People for centuries in order to let time's (and God's) energies flow freely, a philosophical and literary massage of sorts that offers Jews a power boost strong enough to carry them safely through millennia of pain and persecution. This is not, of course, the first time an IHUM paper's concluding paragraph has moved me to the verge of tears. But, rather than being the tears of despair or frustration that cause teachers to consider mid-life career changes, I was moved this time by the perfect marriage of text, analysis and writing style (not to mention the possibility of perpetual springtime) that Sarah's prose offers the reader. I may never look at spring blossoms in quite the same way again.

Keila Diehl

Breaking the Watch with the Wedding Glass: Conceptions of Time in the Transition from Biblical to Rabbinic Judaism

Sarah Johnson

In the beginning, according to the Bible, God created the heavens and the earth. Before this monumental act, in the lonely void inhabited only by darkness and God, one other thing existed: in the beginning, there was a schedule. God's plan for the creation of the world was carefully segmented into a timetable, a six-day strategy with a seventh day for reflection. Thus, with days and nights, organization and structure, and linear movement from nothing to everything, was the world created and the Torah opened, setting the biblical narrative against the backdrop of ever-flowing time. Yet, while the awing story of creation heightens the sense of God's power with its austere delineation of time, time also allows the strength of God's authority to ebb and flow from low points such as Adam and Eve's disobedience in Eden to high points such as the reception of the covenant at Sinai. To counteract this fluctuation, the *Mekilta de Rabbi-Ishmael*, a text from the third century C.E., presents a rabbinic interpretation of selected biblical passages that emphasizes the irrelevance of time in the face of God's everlasting truth. The *Mekilta* reconceives time by complicating the linearity of biblical chronology through accentuation of biblical repetition, time conflation, and anachronism. While preserving the eternity of God, this conception of time allows Judaism to maintain its strength in the era of change following the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by establishing a reality that cannot be measured by humankind's calendar.

The *Mekilta's* discussion of the creation narrative, particularly regarding God's rest on the seventh day, employs the first of the three aforementioned aspects of time magnified in the text's rabbinic thought: repetition. Certainly, the Bible, too, employs repetition as a rhetorical tool; the phrase "and there was evening and there was morning" is repeated five times in the first chapter of Genesis. Following this repeated phrase, however, is the day of the week. Thus, although repetition is used from the beginning of biblical religion, it does not stray from the demarcated passage of time. Use of repetition is less apparent in the description of the seventh day, which states, "On the seventh day God finished the work that He had been doing, and He ceased on the seventh day from all the work that He had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy" (Genesis 2.2-3). Instead, these verses could be interpreted as focusing on the linearity of time. The seventh day marks the end of the days of creation and the beginning of the world as we recognize it, a distinct point of time in infinity.

Yet, the *Mekilta* takes this passage as the establishment of a repetitive Sabbath: "if He, for whom there is no weariness, allowed it to be written that He created His world in six days and rested on the seventh, how much more should man . . . rest on the seventh day" (256). While in the biblical narrative as it is redacted there is no demand from God for a weekly Sabbath until the Ten Commandments, the *Mekilta's* early establishment of the Sabbath emphasizes not development but what will forever be the same: celebration of God on the Sabbath. This connects all Sabbaths forever, suspending time. Every Sabbath is

like the one that preceded it, all the way back to the beginning of time, making the flow of time circular (always coming back to the Sabbath) instead of linear. From this conception of time, one is never further from the Sabbath than six days, so the distance between us and the moment of creation grows shorter with each passing day of the week.

Another complicating aspect of time incorporated in the rabbinic *Mekilta* is God's power to conflate time. In the Bible, the Ten Commandments are introduced by the phrase "God spoke all these words, saying . . ." (Exodus 20.1). This passage does not explicitly indicate that God spoke all these words at once, and much of the remaining chapter focuses on the detailed list of commandments. Indeed, the list of commandments highlights a central biblical theme of order and separation, particularly in the path to holiness. Yet instead of pointing out the theme of order, the *Mekilta* extracts this small phrase and interprets it as follows: "Scripture hereby teaches that God spoke the Ten Commandments with one utterance – something impossible for creatures of flesh and blood . . . he, after having said all the Ten Commandments at one utterance, repeated them, saying each commandment separately" (228). Although the implication of "all" in the scriptural passage is unclear, the *Mekilta* claims it as proof that God conflated the commandments into one utterance at one moment in time, and then subsequently repeated them individually. This claim links the nature of time in the Torah and the nature of time in God's presence: like the Torah, everything is there, existing at once, but people operate within a system of time that forces them to view things chronologically, starting with the first commandment and ending with the last. As shown in His ability to conflate, God is not restrained by this system of time and can say everything in one instant, and by extension make that instant last for eternity. Similarly, God's word, once inscribed on the pages of the Bible, exists all at once but cannot be read by human beings all at once, again underscoring that while the truth can be outside the borders of time, humans cannot perceive it as so. By finding temporal conflation in the line of Scripture "God spoke all these words," the *Mekilta's* authors bind God and the Torah's authority together with their similar timelessness and again deemphasize the chronology of the Bible.

The final knot in time pulled out of the Torah and intensified in the *Mekilta* is historical anachronism stressing God's simultaneous existence not simply in all places, but in all time. In the Bible, a hint of this anachronism can be found in God's speech comparing Himself with Babylonian gods who do not support their followers. God implores, "Listen to Me, O House of Jacob, all that are left of the House of Israel, who have been carried since birth, supported since leaving the womb: till you grow old, I will still be the same; when you turn gray, it is I who will carry; I was the Maker, and I will be the Bearer; and I will carry and rescue you" (Isaiah 46.3-4). Through removing Himself from the stream of time, God can jump around the human chain of existence, agelessly playing the part of first the birthing mother and later the supportive child.

Reflection on the Ten Commandments in the *Mekilta* broadens the reach of anachronism. The *Mekilta* explains why the commandments occur so late in the biblical text by comparing God to a king who must gain favor with the people through the early events of the Torah before they will accept him as ruler. According to the *Mekilta*, this acceptance "proclaims the excellence of Israel" because "when they all stood before mount Sinai to receive the Torah they all made up their mind alike to accept the reign of God joyfully" (230). Such logic anachronistically confuses readers of the Bible with the Israelites; the question asked pertains to the impact of the Covenant's position in the

Bible on the reader's acceptance of God's authority, while the answer given pertains to why the Israelites delayed their acceptance of God. This places Bible readers in the shoes of the Israelites present at Sinai when accepting the reign of God, again accentuating not merely timelessness but a sense of one instant in time that has lasted forever: the moment at Sinai when the people accepted God as ruler, a moment stretched over all of history before and since through the timeless Torah. If, as the *Mekilta* states, the revelation of the Covenant at Mount Sinai is the moment of excellence for Israel, subjecting it to the ebb and flow of time could only lessen this perfection. Thus, while the previously cited passage from Isaiah establishes God as an ageless and omnipresent protector, this rabbinic interpretation establishes not only God but also the Jews as timeless and enduring in order to ensure that God's authority at Sinai lasts forever. Another rabbinic text, Lamentations Rabbah, states, "the Holy One lamented as He said: Woe to the king who prospered in his youth but did not prosper in his old age" (Book of Legends 146). Within this context, the power of discarding time becomes immediately apparent: God is ever-prosperous in a world without time, but in the mortal world where age is a concept taken for granted, God cannot thrive, for He too must grow old. If man can overcome the trap of time, God can be restored to His glory.

The complication of time in the *Mekilta* adds more than mere rhetorical complexity. By underscoring repetition and the cyclical nature of time through the Sabbath, this rabbinic interpretation draws the Jewish people closer to God, a crucial effect for the era of transition to rabbinic Judaism as the days of Moses grew ever more distant. By adopting temporal conflation, rabbinic interpretation allows the Torah and God's word to be paralleled and equated. This equation may have been crucial in the wake of the Second Temple's destruction, for if the Torah conflates all of God's truth into one text, a physical space in which God himself can abide is less important. Lastly, by anachronistically depicting the Jewish people as being present at Mount Sinai, rabbinic interpretation in the *Mekilta* twists time enough to abolish it completely. In the sorrowful period following the destruction of the Second Temple, the concept that real time is but an illusion and that the time of the Covenant at Mount Sinai lasts forever could have soothed the suffering; the emphasis on what is permanent and rejection as false of what is transient allows God's greatness to stand undiminished.

To further examine the implications of these effects, consider this passage from the Song of Songs: "Let us go early to the vineyards; Let us see if the vine has flowered, If its blossoms have opened, If the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give my love to you" (Song of Songs 7.13). Although the erotic love depicted in the Song of Songs is often taken as a metaphor for the relationship between man and God, application of this metaphor in conjunction with the frequent reference to season evidenced in the passage might lead to the unhappy notion that God's love is ephemeral. However, once time is forgotten, the metaphor can instead indicate that when one loves God, one lives in a world of perpetual springtime, a world where the Temple stands, where Moses is forever atop Mount Sinai, where thousands of years of pain and persecution can almost be put into perspective by the eternal truth.

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