THE VIRTUOSIC EXEGESIS OF THE BRAHMAVADIN AND THE RABBI

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Summary

Despite the vast spatial and theological gulfs separating the Rabbinic and Brahmanic communities, their respective intellectual projects have a number of analogous features. My discussion will (1) outline for each tradition a set of interpretive strategies, showing how these two sets are strikingly similar in approach and logic. Then I will (2) propose that these resemblances are not entirely coincidental. They largely stem from a similar view of the object of study—Torah and the biblical text for the Rabbis, the sacrifice and its verbal articulation for the Brahmins—as eternal, not of human authorship, perfect in form, rich in hidden meanings, the criterion of right action and true knowledge. The exegete aims to fully internalize the sacred word, to perceive the world through it, and to uncover what is hidden in it. This much of my analysis might also be applicable to other traditions that regard themselves as possessing revelation, but (3) I argue that there are further parallels here in the direction these traditions carried their interpretive enterprise. In each tradition, the interpreters continued to build an edifice of ritual knowledge and interpretation even as the central rites were eclipsed by other forms of piety: whether because the cult became inaccessible (in the Diaspora) or unperformable (when the Temple was destroyed), or because it lost patronage (as appears to have happened in India). In tandem with the shift away from priestly sacrifice, each tradition promotes the ideal of study for its own sake, and the transfer of priestly functions to the learned householder.

I. The Aim and Parameters of the Comparison

This essay attempts a type of comparison which is still considered daring.[1] J.Z. Smith warns us that comparison should address a "total

[1] This despite the precedents lately set by Barbara Holdrege (1996) and the scholarship collected in Goodman 1994. The research for this paper was supported by funds provided by the American Institute of Indian Studies and the National Endowment for the Humanities, for which I am grateful. A brief version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in

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ensemble" and not just "isolated motifs" lest we succumb to "parallelomania." The model he offers for this sort of comparison—namely his own work—is "a comparative enterprise within closely adjacent historical, cultural or linguistics units" (the religions of Late Antiquity).[2] Here, I will compare Rabbinic Judaism and late-Vedic Brahmanism, traditions at great geographic, cultural, and theological distance from each other. Despite this disparity, I would justify the undertaking by noting that it is not just an assortment of contextless phenomena that is being compared, but two instances of a complex hermeneutics viewed as it develops within their respective *historical processes.* Thus, this essay not only outlines two similar approaches to exegesis, but sees them following analogous *trajectories* within their contexts.[3] Thus, although I focus mainly on exegetical approaches, the validity of the comparison depends on a much broader set of similar circumstances. Both traditions (a) are founded on the traditions of ritual sacrifice (b) shaped by a hereditary priestly elite; each (c) possesses a body of texts, composed and compiled over a long period, (d) that come to be regarded as divine in origin, and that (e) are partly concerned with ritual matters (this concern predominates in brahmana and *Talmud,* but midrash literature devotes vast space to the exposition of non-legal scriptural topics as well). In both cases, (f) these texts (or other data treated analogously) are subjected to a complex form of patterned exegesis, (g) much of which comes to be classified as revelation as well (viz., Oral Torah, *śruti*). Finally, (h) the activity of exegesis and text-study becomes in itself an important form of piety (i) with it own ritual formats, and (j) when the centrality of the sacrificial cult is called into question due to social and political changes (as in India during the Ganges urbanization of the 6th–4th c. BCE, and in Hellenistic Judea and Roman Palestine)

November 1999. I have benefited greatly from the comments of the panel organizer, Barbara Holdrege, of other members of the panel, Laurie Patton, Michael Berger, and Francis X. Clooney, S.J., and of my colleague Richard Marks.

[2] In his preface to *Map Is Not Territory* (1978), ix.

[3] Here, with Smith 1978:xi, I use Robinson and Koester's (1971) term.

or is fully destroyed (with the destruction of the second Temple), this interpretive tradition provides a basis for refocusing the tradition.

This abstract set of parallels conceals innumerable differences large and small, but should nevertheless show an adequate basis for making a close comparison of just what sorts of interpretive techniques were developed and the direction in which they were applied. My aim here is to sketch the outlines of a typology of hermeneutic principles, and to observe that they were applied in broadly similar ways under broadly comparable circumstances in the two traditions.[4] Since I do not know Hebrew, I will be relying on published translations and on several excellent analyses of the structure and development of Rabbinic interpretation. My main contribution will be in correlating the Judaic material with the Brahmanical sources, which I have studied in some depth.[5] So after making some preliminary observations about these traditions' attitudes to knowledge and text (part I), I will sketch out a typology of rhetorical devices shared by them (part II), and then

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[4] The comparison is compromised somewhat by the fact that we know very little about how the Ganges valley urbanization directly affected the Vedic cult. On the one hand, it is clear that it emerged in an increasingly sedentary pastoralist society turned farmer-herders, whereas the renunciant movements that arose during the period of urbanization began in the new city-states of Magadha in the east. If, as it seems, political and economic power shifted from the village-based clan warlords to the urban kings, it is likely that the traditional, hereditary relations of patronage and ritual office between the chiefs and brahmin priests were disrupted, and a new set of powers offered patronage to the new charismatic holy men preaching in and around the new trading centers. This is the picture suggested by Erdosy (1988; and Erdosy in Allchin 1995). Yet the Brahmanical sources give no clear indications of such a rivalry, although it appears, for instance, in the early (yet not contemporary) Buddhist sources. So, although some change is likely to have taken place in that period, it is not clear how dramatic or disruptive the decline of patronage for the priestly Vedic cult really was. A greater motivation for change may simply have been a desire to accommodate within Brahmanism a wider range of potential patrons by encouraging participation in Vedic practice through Veda-study and home-based ritual observance.

[5] The Indic sources are less well known, and tend to present greater linguistic problems (or anyway there is less consensus about their meaning), which justifies my including more of the original wording.

identify the parallel vectors along which these strategies came to be deployed as social and political pressures transformed the special role of the priestly cult, which had become a central subject of reflection in the traditions (part III).

To compare exegetical techniques, we must first ascertain what those are in each case. On the Judaic side, I am thinking mainly of the midrash, or "investigation [of scripture]." This in itself is a very broad category; Shaye Cohen has deemed it so "slippery and vague" that he prefers to use English terms to denote particular kinds of interpretation.[6] Yet one of those terms, exegesis, seems hardly less broad. Midrash is exegesis, but it is a very particular sort. Cohen offers an irreverent definition: midrash is intentional misinterpretation. While from the standpoint of literal or "obvious" reading (*peshat*) the midrash often represents a surprising departure, the process is not quite so arbitrary as Cohen makes it sound here. No doubt the rabbi had considerable latitude in his reading; yet the activity of *derash* (the search for the inner meaning of scripture) as practised by the Sages came to follow a discrete set of principles. These have been explained in more than one way.

David Weiss Halivni has argued that *derash* is the earliest and defining form of interpretation in Judaism. For him, it reflects the Judaic preference for "justified law" rather than apodictic law—that is to say, the Jews wanted to know the reasons and motives behind God's commands. This concern he traces back to the Torah itself, where it appears in the frequency of "motive clauses" ("for [*ki*] ...," "that [*lema'an*] ...," "lest [*pen*] ...," "therefore [*al ken*] ..."). Likewise, Michael Fishbane has shown that the roots of Rabbinic interpretation also are found in the Bible.[7] For example, Jacob's name is explained in Gen. 25.26 and 27.36 on the basis of a "lexical affinity" (see below): "And his hand had taken hold of Esau's heel (*ʿaqev*); so they named him Jacob (Yaʿaqov)," and "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me (*wayyaʿqeveni*) these two times."

[6] Cohen 1987:205, cf. 204–213.

[7] Fishbane 1985, 1989.

The long period during which interpretation was transmitted orally was, in Halivni's reckoning, a period of halakhic midrash, that is, legal interpretation that appealed explicitly to scripture for support. He sees the *Mishnah,* a compilation by the *tannaim* of legal rulings propounded without reference to scripture and arranged by topic, as an aberration arising from an impulse to codify Jewish ritual practice following the destruction of the second Temple, and the dislocations of the Bar Kochba rebellion and its suppression. Midrashic exegesis returns with arguments of the *amoraim,* embodied in the two *Talmuds,* and the aggadic midrash collections. Thus, Rabbinic interpretation is oriented primarily to the Biblical text. The *Midrash Rabbah* follows the textual order, while the *Talmud,* as a commentary of the *Mishnah,* is organized by subject.

Such a distinction is absent in the earliest Vedic exegesis as represented in the genre designated *brāhmaṇa,* 'that which relates to sacred utterance,' in that the Vedic "scriptures" came into being precisely as liturgical compilations, and, in the case of the Yajur Veda collections in particular, followed the order of rites in the Vedic system of worship (*yajña*). The brahmana genre could thus be defined by a medieval commentator as "an explanation of a ritual act and of the mantras belonging to it."[8] For the *brahmavādin* (expounder of sacred texts), the Vedic mantras were the aural manifestation of the ritual of worship, a point of orientation for pious action. The first principle is *yajña* (ritual worship), the means by which the gods are frequently said to have won their place in heaven, and *yajña* is often the primary object of interpretation: the words of the Veda are a mirror thereof. This is one source of incongruity between the two traditions. Where the rabbis of the *Talmud* always address themselves to a canon of texts (to attain a deeper understanding that can allow the Jew to fulfill his part of the covenant), the early brahmavadins examine the ritual utterances and actions directly, texts being just the audible hypostasis of the enacted primordial mystery. (However, in later centuries, as the practice of most forms of

[8] Bhaṭṭa Bhāskara *ad Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 1.5.1; Gonda 1975:340.

Vedic ritual ceased, and the emphasis fell on recitation and commentary, the Veda was increasing treated primarily as a text.)

Because of this ritual focus, brahmana in effect serves the combined aims of the *Mishnah* with its accompanying gemara: the later codes distinguish two components in brahmana: the ritual injunction (*vidhi* or *karma-vidhāna*) and its exegesis (*arthavāda*, 'discussion of meaning or purpose').[9] The exegesis in fact contains much "aggadic" lore not related directly to the ritual, but the other application of midrash, as commentary to revealed scripture following the textual order, is not preserved in India until a much later period, in the medieval commentaries to the Vedic texts (including the works called *Brāhmaṇas*). This is not to say that such commentary was not made orally at a much earlier time. Indeed, the extant works of Vedic interpretation, as of midrash, are simply preserved examples of the sorts of explications that the sages had long offered orally in their teaching.

Despite these differences, there is a clear analogy between interpretive approaches in Rabbinic and Brahmanic literature. The later course of the traditions offers some interesting parallels as well. Halivni dubs the post-talmudic period (after the 6th c.) a "period of harmonization."[10] By this time *Talmud* had become the primary point of reference and object of interpretation as far as Halakhah was concerned, so the *Talmud* is treated on a par with the (Written) Torah. In India too, a period of "harmonization" begins with the promulgation of the Dharma literature, which in this case means the collapsing of the distinctive opinions of the different Vedic lineages into an eclectic but single prescription.

In later periods, there is also an increasing preference for *peshat* (literal interpretation) in biblical interpretation.[11] In the Brahmanical tradition of interpreting the Vedic ritual, the teachers of the Mīmāṃsā

[9] E.g., *Āpastamba Śrauta Sūtra* 24.1.32ff.

[10] Halivni 1991:39.

[11] Halivni (1991:34) discerns the "period of the awareness of the value of peshat" (10th to 13th centuries) and the "period of the uncompromisability of peshat" (after the 18th century). On the other hand, Kabbalistic exegesis is a revival of derash.

also devalued the *arthavāda* (the discovery of "indirect meanings") in the brahmana literature, insisting on the primacy of the ritual injunction, literally understood. The medieval commentators on the Vedic corpora also tended toward a simple glossing that was meant to show the direct meaning of the text.

II. Basic Techniques

Derash and Arthavāda

The rabbi and the brahmavadin made very similar assumptions about the nature of their tasks. In each case, they presumed that their object of study (respectively, Torah and *yajña* or Veda) was a timeless fact of heavenly origin, pregnant with meanings hidden from view. "The gods love what is hidden," we are repeatedly told.[12] The master exegete has the special capacity to uncover this treasure of wisdom by identifying the clues provided in the outer forms of the revelation. The highest *brahma-vidyā* (divine wisdom) has the meters of the Vedic verses and elements of the ritual as its bodies (*tanū*); the oral Torah (in its broadest sense, the sages' exegeses) is embedded in the written Torah, which needs only to be read in the proper way to sound the vast depths of meaning. But what is the proper way? Clearly, it is not equally accessible to all. Rabbinic and priestly Brahmanical hermeneutics was an enterprise of developing and applying formal techniques for interpreting the Torah and the *yajña*/Veda effectively.

Halivni's periodization of biblical exegesis begins with the "period of reading in" (up to ca. 200 CE), in which the "plain meaning" of the biblical text was "displaced" by a less obvious meaning. "Reading in" is the term Halivni uses for instances in which the base text is actually modified (typical of tannaitic derashah). The second phase is the "period of textual implication" (3rd to 6th c.); over this period, more and more complex readings were put forward, always finding a basis in the scriptural text; any superfluous word or grammatical irregularity could provide the clue. The signals of implied meaning were instances

[12] Gonda (1975:378) cites numerous instances.

of seeming verbal superfluity or peculiarity of form: words in a base text that seemed, according to their literal sense to be redundant or unusually phrased were taken to indicate some further point (typical of amoraic, and especially what Halivni dubs “stammaitic,” derashah).

Brahmanical interpretation begins with the brahmana literature, which combines the *Mishnah*’s focus on ritual with the full-fledged exegetical approach of midrash, including much aggadic material, so to speak. A second phase of interpretation comes in the codification of the rituals in the sutras.

A. Hermeneutic Juxtaposition

i. Juxtaposing Textual Passages

The most common and important exegetical device in the Rabbinic tradition is the technique of juxtaposing biblical passages (and other texts) utterly out of their original context as a means of throwing light on the topic at hand. While these juxtapositions often seem surprising to the newcomer to midrash, the principle is quite sophisticated. The adduced text is deemed relevant usually on account of some detail that rises to importance only in the new, exegetical context. Thus the adduced verse as a whole is not necessarily a gloss of the topic-idea; often it is simply a scriptural vehicle for that portion that is made relevant to the topic, and is used to carry forward the interpretive argument. The *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana*, a fifth-century collection of Sabbath and festival homilies, represents a particularly elegant and elaborate use of this technique.

Rabbinic authorities themselves regarded this as the definitive approach of midrash, and identified a number of different principles governing the use of one passage to illumine another: a list of seven is attributed to Hillel (ca. 1st c. BCE); R. Ishmael’s authoritative list has thirteen; and R. Eliezer, son of Yose the Galilean identifies thirty-two different rules. Thus, for instance, adduced texts were deemed relevant to the text in question because they allowed an a fortiori inference, an inference by analogy (*gezerah shawah*, ‘equal decision’), a specification of a general idea, or the provision of a broader scriptural context for the text in question. An example:

> Then the LORD said to Moses, *Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward* (Ex. 14:15 [through the Red Sea]) . . . R. Meir says, “[Said the Holy One,] ‘If I created dry land for the sake of primal Adam, who was only one man, as it is said “God said, Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear” [Gen. 1:9], will I not make the sea into dry land for the sake of this holy congregation?!’ ” (*Mekhilta Beshallah* 4, I 216)

The adducing of passages from other parts of the canon is much less common in the earlier brahmana-literature, or at least in that part directly devoted to expounding individual rites. In the latter works, the mantras of the rite in question are explained without connecting them with others. In the Āraṇyakas and early Upaniṣads, which are a later development of the brahmana genre, and which address esoteric themes, Vedic verses begin to be introduced in this fashion, although much less systematically than in midrash. *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, for instance, does this frequently. In a discussion of the mysterious powers of the meters in the Mahaduktha litany, the brahmavadin states:

> This [Mahaduktha litany] is produced as a thousand *bṛhatī*-verses. Some recognize a thousand of various meters . . ., some say a thousand *triṣṭubhs*, some a thousand *jagatī*s, some a thousand *anuṣṭubh*s. A Sage says, *Sages in their wisdom discovered Indra dancing to an* anuṣṭubh (*Ṛg Veda* 10.124.9). That means that they discovered in speech the breath of Indra. . . . A Sage says (*ṚV* 8.76.12): *A speech of eight feet*—for [the *anuṣṭubh* meter has] eight feet of four syllables—*of nine corners*—for the *bṛhatī* meter becomes nine-cornered [by adding a ninth foot]—*touching the truth*—for speech united with verse is truth—*I have made as a body, out of Indra*, for from these thousand *bṛhatī*s made into *anuṣṭubh*s, which is Indra’s breath, he makes speech . . . as a body. (*Aitareya Āraṇyaka* 2.3.5-6; adapted from Keith’s translation)

The adduced verses, drawn from disparate parts of the canon, are employed to show how Indra’s vital energy is present in certain meters, and how these are used by the worshiper to make a body of divine speech for himself. I shall give another excellent example of this technique below (*Āśvalāyana Gṛhya Sūtra* 1.1.4–5).

ii. Juxtaposing Ritual and Cosmic Elements to Identify 'Linkages' (*bandhu*)

There is another type of hermeneutic juxtaposition that is distinctive of the Brahmanical tradition: declaring hidden linkages (*bandhu*). Given the Rabbinic tradition's unwavering focus on the text of the written Torah, and the presumption that Torah is a map of the universe,[13] it is natural that hermeneutic juxtaposition should involve text-places on that map. Midrash identifies the criss-crossing highways (and back roads) between them. In the brahmana form of exegesis, the Vedic texts are only occasionally juxtaposed; it is rather the diverse loci of ritual universe itself that are to be associated. I think it is justified to consider this a form of interpretation, because, as I pointed out earlier, the ritual itself *is* the primary text for the brahmavadins; the words, which we consider the text, are simply a verbal shadow of the ideal worship-ritual. The web of associations that the brahmavadin weaves—at first glance chaotic and arbitrary, but when viewed as a gestalt remarkably consistent—reflects the divine order of the universe, as mapped in the ritual system.[14]

In form, these juxtapositions are simply identifications of one thing (the subject of discussion) with another (its mystical equivalent on another plane). These statements usually take the form "Y *vaí* X" ("X indeed is Y") in which X is the subject and Y is the predicate,[15] or "X [*hí*] Y" ("[For] X is Y"):

> The sacrificial post is yonder sun, the altar the earth, the grass-seat the plants, the kindling wood the trees, the aspersing-waters the water, the enclosing sticks the [four] directions. (*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 5.28)

But the correlations can be extended until they become an extended metaphor. Thus, the ubiquitous observation, "Prajāpati is the year,"

[13] Recall *Genesis Rabbah* 1.1, quoted above.

[14] Brian K. Smith 1994 presents a thorough discussion of these patterns.

[15] Note the inverted order; the emphatic particle *vaí* in such nominal sentences generally follows the fronted predicate. This pattern has not been noted, and translators have often misrepresented such sentences by taking the predicate as the subject.

eventually may be seen to assert that Prajāpati's world-creating dismemberment gave rise to the divisions of the year, and that the regular round of worship rites knits together the "joints of the year," and thus puts Humpty-Dumpty together again. Likewise, the vessel of the *pravargya* offering *is* the "head of the worship-rite," which can be expanded to mean: "When one places the *pravargya*-vessel on the fire, one puts back the head of the worship-rite" (*yát pravargyàṃ pravṛṇákti | yajñásyaivá tác chíraḥ práti dadhāti*, *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* 5.1.7).

These linkages may also be presented in the language of analogy. Thus, when the worshiper sits on two antelope skins that have been stitched together back to back around the edges, he presides over heaven and earth, for "these two worlds are joined at the edges, so to speak (*iva*)." By stitching them together, heaven and earth are made to couple. Even if there is only one skin, it represents the whole universe: the white hairs are heaven, the black are earth (or vice versa!), and the brown are the midspace (*Śathapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.2.1.1-4). The identifications may overlap, but they are not mutually exclusive.[16]

It should be noted that a similar assertion of linkages can be found in the Rabbinic tradition, especially in later mystical texts:

> The commandments of the whole Torah are joints and limbs in the celestial mystery. And when they are all joined together they all . . . reflect the mystery of man, male and female. (*Zohar* 2.162b; cf. *Leviticus Rabbah* 1.8, §D below)

B. Non-literal Gloss

Most of the techniques I describe below must be included as forms of paraphrase. In its simplest form, a topic—whether a piece of text, an act, or an idea—is restated in different terms so as to bring out a meaning that was not evident in its original form. This restatement may involve changing one word, or simply adding words, or introducing a completely different statement that is equated with the original one.

> *And he shall then remain his slave for life* (Ex. 21:6). [That is,] Until the Jubilee year. . . . [If] money, which has the power to acquire anything, can acquire a slave for no more than six years, then piercing, which acquires nothing but slaves,

[16] On *bandhu*, see Oldenberg 1919, Gonda 1965, Oguibénine 1983 = 1998.

> should not have the power to acquire the slave for more than six years! What then is the meaning of *for life*? Until the Jubilee year. (*Mekhilta Nizikin* 2, III 17; Hammer 1995:404)

This technique occurs also in brahmana. During the consecration for worship, the sacrificer squats behind the skins, and touches them where the white and black hairs meet, addressing them with mantras, which the brahmana here explains (the mantras themselves are in italics):

> *You* [the skins] *are ornaments* (*śílpa*). An ornament is a counterpart, so he really says: You are the counterparts (*prátirūpa*) of the *ṛc*s and the *sāman*s. . . . When he says: *I grasp you*, he really says: I enter into you [since the *dīkṣita* enters as an embryo into the sacrifice]. He says: *May they protect me up to the outcome of this worship*, by which he really says: Let them care of me (*gopāya-*) up to the end of this worship. (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.2.1.5, 7)[17]

Here we see one of the *Śatapatha*'s characteristic exegetical techniques: the translation of "obscure" mantras into unambiguous, plain language, so as to reveal the actual intentions of the participants.

C. Lexical Affinity

In both midrash and brahmana, the interpreter frequently explains a datum by pointing out a "lexical affinity," that is, a significant similarity between a word in the datum and some other term or phrase drawn often from a completely different context.

In the Judaic context, Kugel (1986) describes how midrash follows the pattern of a joke in its form. The rabbis assumed that scripture contains, besides the plain sense of the words, innumerable hidden meanings that are true in the sense of being set there intentionally by God and that must be "sought out" or "discovered" by means of particular techniques. These techniques include word-plays, etymologies, and variant readings, and the adducing of anecdotes and legends. The force

[17] *śílpe stha íti yád vaí prátirūpaṃ tác chílpam ṛcā́ṃ ca sā́mnāṃ ca prátirūpe stha íty evètád āha . . . sá yád ā́ha té vām ā́rabha íti té vām právišāmī́ty evètád āha té mā pātam ā̀syá yajñásyodṛ́ca íti té mā gopāyatam ā̀sya yajñásya saṃsthā́yā íty evètád āha.*

of the midrash depends on the explicative "punch line." For the Jewish authors, the "joke is the dissonance between the religion of the Rabbis and the Book from which it is supposed to be derived—and ... more precisely the dissonance between that book's supposedly unitary and harmonious message and its actually fragmentary and inconsistent components."[18] In response to the troubling particularity of scriptural passages, the midrash addresses the single verse with no reference to the context of the passage or book. This "principle of insularity" is scarcely ever violated, for it provides the opportunity to uncover obscure meaning and connections with other pieces of scripture far removed from the one at hand. For example:

> R. Hoshaiah opened: *Then I was beside Him as an* ʾāmôn [nursling], *and I was His delight day after day* [Prov. 8:30]. ... [An] ʾ*āmôn* is an artisan (ʾ*ûmôn*). The Torah declares, I was the working instrument (*kelî*) of the Holy One, blessed be He. In the normal course of affairs, when a mortal king builds a palace he does not build it by his own skill but by the skill of an architect. Moreover, he does not build it out of his own head but makes use of plans and tablets in order to know how to make the rooms and the doors. Thus, the Holy One, blessed be He, looked into the Torah and created the world.[19] (*Genesis Rabbah* 1.1; cf. *Zohar* 2.161a)

A similar principle appears in brahmana: a key word in the datum is simply juxtaposed with another word. Thus, during the rite of consecrating a soma-sacrificer, the worshiper places his right knee on the deerskin, saying, "You are a refuge, give me refuge." The *Śatapatha* explains: "The hide (*cárman*) of the black deer—that is its human (aspect); among the gods it is a refuge (*śárman*)" (3.2.1.8). Here again the dichotomy between the divine and the human results in a hidden nature being attributed to a seemingly ordinary object. A skin becomes a means of protection once its divine significance is recognized. The purpose of the brahmana is to bring about this recognition.

[18] Kugel 1986:80.

[19] As quoted in Holdrege 1996:164.

Similarly, a verbal affinity (in this case, between etymologically related words) provides the justification for fasting before offering worship to the gods:

> Now then of eating and not eating. Āṣāḍha Sāvayasa was of the opinion that the regimen consists in not eating. For the gods see right through the mind of a man; they know that he enters on this regimen. Thinking, "he will sacrifice to us in the morning," all the gods come to his house. They visit (*upa-vas-*) in his house; this is the fasting-day (*upavasathá*). (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.1.1.7-8)

The technical term *upa-vas-* ('to fast') literally means 'to dwell with; visit'. When the gods perceive the sacrificer's *vratá*—the intention to worship, manifest in the rule he undertakes to follow—they come to stay with him in his home, knowing they will be fed as guests. On account of this, the sacrificer should forebear to eat before his divine guests have been offered their meal, lest he violate the code of ritual hospitality. Here the play is simply on two meanings of the same prefixed verbal root, whereas in the previous example, the juxtaposed words were phonologically similar, but unrelated linguistically.

D. Hermeneutic Etymology

These examples suggest that the exegetes see an implicit connection between similar words that indicates the significant relationship between the ideas or things denoted by the words. This can take a more explicit form that may be called "hermeneutic etymology,"[20] by which the origin (and not just the deeper meaning) of the word in question is explained. This technique is pervasive in midrash, and begins to appear even in the Bible. Thus Gen. 25.26: "And his hand had taken hold of Esau's heel (*ʿaqev*); so they named him Jacob (Yaʿaqov)"; and

[20] These etymologies have been the subject of considerable discussion among participants in the Indology internet discussion group, where Jan Houben (citing P. Verhagen and Teun Goudriaan) has employed this apt label, distinguishing them from "linguistic etymologies" and noting that the Sanskrit tradition itself distinguishes between them (i.e., Yāska's *Nirukta* vs. Pāṇinian analysis); see Houben in the Indology list archives (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~ucgadkw/indology.html), 21 May 1996. For more discussion: Deeg 1995, Houben 1997. Patton 1996:137–144, surveys scholarly views of *nirukti* (etymology) in the Indic context.

Gen. 27.36: "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me (*wayyaʿqeveni*) these two times."

In the Brahmanical literature too this technique is used quite frequently:

> By means of the sacrifice, the gods won this conquest which is the conquest they possess. They said, "Now how may this be inaccessible to men?" They sucked the sap of the sacrifice, as bees would suck out honey. Having drained the sacrifice and effaced it with the sacrificial stake, they disappeared. Then, because they effaced (*yup-*) with it, it is called *yūpa* (sacrificial stake). (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.1.4.3)

In an earlier era, such explanations were dismissed as "folk etymologies" (or simply "false etymologies") on the assumption that the exegetes were linguistically naïve, or anyway were citing linguistically naïve popular etymologies. In fact, the Brahmanical tradition produced, not very long after the age of brahmana-composition, the most sophisticated linguistic science of the ancient world, one which excelled in accurately deriving words from verbal roots. The brahmavadins themselves were very sophisticated (indeed, they have tended to be faulted rather for sophistry). Rather, these etymologies operate on the assumption that grammatical derivation is not the only basis for semantic relationship. Phonological similarity is no accident, but reveals a "deep structure" of heavenly origin, in accordance with which invisibly related facts in the universe literally resonate with one another. In this sense, the audible form of the words provide a key to "reading" the world itself.

E. Numerical Affinity

Just as lexical affinities may be taken as indices of a linkage that provides access to deeper meanings, so too numerical affinities:

> Eighteen times is *[As the Lord did] command* written in the section of the Tabernacle, corresponding to the eighteen vertebræ of the spinal column. Likewise the Sages instituted Eighteen Benedictions of the Prayer, corresponding to the Eighteen mentions [of the divine Name] in the reading of the *shema*, and also of [Psalm 29]. (*Leviticus Rabbah* 1.8)

This correlation of the arrangement of the human body with the arrangement of texts in liturgy appears also in a brahmana:

> He offers this one with an *anuṣṭubh* verse, [which] consists of thirty-one syllables. Now there are ten fingers, ten toes, ten "breaths," and the thirty-first is the body which contains those breaths. For this constitutes a man, and a man is worship; so the worship service is of the same proportion as a man. (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.1.4.23)

The various meters, which are called the "bodies" of the Vedic mantras, frequently serve as the measure both of elements in the ritual and aspects of the world.

> He . . . fetches the utensils, taking two at a time, viz. the winnowing basket and the Agnihotra ladle, the wooden sword and the potsherds, the wedge and the black antelope skin, the mortar and the pestle, the large and the small mill-stones. These are ten in number; for the *virāj* meter has ten syllables and worship is radiant (*virāj*). The reason why he takes two at a time is because a pair means strength; for when two people undertake anything, there is strength in it. Moreover, a pair represents a copulation, so that a copulation [i.e., a productive joining of those paired elements] is thereby effected. (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.1.1.22)

F. Appeal to Convention or Natural Patterns

"The way things are"—in both the natural and social realms—may be cited as probative evidence supporting an interpretation. This includes references to common activities, common verbal expressions, and even the natural order of things. Thus *Genesis Rabbah* 1.1 (quoted above in section C) explains Prov. 8.30 first by means of a lexical affinity and then an appeal to human convention, to interpret it as meaning that the Torah was both plan and architect of the universe: "In the normal course of affairs, when a mortal king builds a palace he does not build it by his own skill but by the skill of an architect. Moreover, he does not build it out of his own head but makes use of plans and tablets in order to know how to makes the rooms and the doors. Thus, the Holy One, blessed be He, looked into the Torah and created the world."

This approach—here combining appeals to the natural order and to convention—appears also in a brahmana explaining why the sacrificer puts on a new garment during the rite of self-consecration for worship:

> That skin which the cow has was originally on man. The gods said, "The cow bears all this (world). Come, let us put on the cow that skin which is on man. With that she will be able to endure the rain, the cold, and the heat." Having flayed man, they put this skin on the cow. . . . For man is indeed flayed. Consequently, wherever a blade of grass or something cuts him, blood spurts out. So they put on him this skin—the garment, that is. Therefore, no one but man wears a garment. (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.1.2.13-16)

On this topic we find an extended set of ritual practices that are mirrored in the natural world:

> The priests make him whom they consecrate an embryo again. . . . They lead him to the hut of the consecrated. The hut of the consecrated is the womb of the consecrated, so they lead him to his own womb. Therefore he sits and walks in a secure womb. Therefore embryos are set in and are born in a secure womb [lest they miscarry]. . . . They cover him with the garment. The garment is the amnion of the consecrated, so they cover him with the amnion. The black-antelope hide goes over it. The chorion is over the amnion, so they cover him with the chorion. He makes fists. The embryo lies inside making fists; the child is born making fists. . . . Taking off the black-antelope hide, he goes down to the final bath. Therefore embryos are born free of the chorion. He goes down with the garment on. Therefore a child is born with the caul. (*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 1.3)

In all these cases the implication is that things happen today in the world on account of how it was "in the beginning" or how it is in the timeless rites of worship. What people witness around them are the enduring traces of those primordial facts.

Another typical variant of this approach is to refer to some supposedly common idiom which is presented as evidence to support an exegesis of a mantra used in worship:

> *May we rejoice in increase of wealth and in nectar!* (*VS* 4.1). Increase of wealth means abundance, and abundance means prosperity; he thereby invokes a blessing. *May we rejoice in nectar* (*iṣ*)—for people say of one who attains prosperity and high distinction: "He enjoys the nectar!" That is why he says, *May we rejoice in nectar!* (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.1.1.12)

In other words, the words "increase of wealth" and "nectar" both signify prosperity, and the meaning of *iṣ* is further clarified by noting its role in conventional speech.

G. Rhetorical Narrative

The techniques considered so far are conceptual devices that may be applied in a variety of textual settings. There are also exegetical ways of using entire narratives, apart from any use of gloss, paraphrase, or explanatory remarks: we may call these rhetorical narratives. The Rabbinic tradition has been somewhat more self-conscious about the different ways stories can be used exegetically, but the later Brahmanical tradition also made some basic distinctions. Below, I have adopted the primary Judaic categories, with examples, and shown how the Brahmanical literature exhibits quite similar types of story, for similar purposes. In this I am relying heavily of the analysis of Stern (1991).

i. Parable (*mashal*)

David Stern quotes W.J. Verdenius's definition of the Greek *ainos* as "an allusive narrative told for an ulterior purpose" (1991:24). The parable is more precisely an account told to elicit in the audience a recognition that the case at hand is parallel in multiple respects. The narrator's view is implicit in the story itself. The parable may be presented with little comment, or its implied message, the moral of the fable, may be stated explicitly. Rabbinic *mashal*s usually come with an explanation (the *nimshal*), which shows how to apply the story to the subject at hand, the "exegetical occasion."

> It is written: *A song of Asaph. O God, heathens have entered Your domain* [Ps. 79:1]. A song! It should have said, "A weeping"! R. Eleazar [ben Pedat] said: **It is like** a king who made a bridal-chamber, and decorated it. One time his son angered him, and the king destroyed the bridal-chamber. The pedagogue sat down and began to sing. [People] said to him: The king has destroyed his son's bridal-chamber, and you sit and sing! He said to them: For this reason I sing: For I said, Better that he poured out his anger upon his son's bridal-chamber, and not upon his son. (*Eikhah Rabbah* 4.11A; Stern 1991:24)

The *nimshal* that follows this *mashal* proper points out: "Similarly, people said to Asaph: The Holy One, blessed be He, has destroyed His temple, and you sit and sing! He said to them: For this reason I sing:

For I said: Better that the Holy One, blessed be He, poured out His anger upon wood, stones, and dirt and not upon Israel [itself].”

Rabbinic *meshalim* are usually narrated in the past tense, but the point is to propose a situation that is analogous in some sense. The language of comparison is usually present in an introductory phrase of the type “It is like. . .” Something similar occurs in Brahmanic texts:

> “Breath is *brahman* [spiritual essence],” so Kauṣītaki used to say. . . . And to this breath, *brahman*, all these deities [the faculties of thought, sight, hearing, speech] bring offerings without its having to ask. All beings likewise bring offerings to a man who knows this, without his ever having to ask. That is his secret (*upaniṣad*): He should not ask. **It is like** (*tad yathā*) a man who begs in a village and receives nothing. He should sit down, vowing: “I’ll never eat anything given from here.” Thereupon, the very same people who may have previously spurned him offer him invitations. (*Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* 2.1; adapted from Olivelle 1996:206)

In this case, the *mashal*-like narrative is very brief, and is not followed by anything like a *nimshal*, or rather, in this case, it precedes: The insight of one who knows the mystical divinity of the breath among the human sense faculties confers special power and compels recognition from others just as does the oath of a virtuous man who has been denied alms.

ii. Paradeigma (*maʾaseh, purākalpa*)

While Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 2.20) would regard the parable as a variety of paradeigma (i.e., one invented by the speaker), the typical paradeigma per se is presented as something that once happened that exemplifies a situation under discussion when it is introduced. While still serving a rhetorical purpose, the paradeigma is more direct. Its force depends upon the assumption that what was the case in the past will hold true in future as well. A well-known example recounts the conduct of two students who omitted a postprandial prayer; one follows the rule of Shammai and returns to the spot to recite it; the other, who knowingly omitted the prayer, hypocritically invokes the rule of Hillel that one need not if the omission was unintentional:

> Once there were two students. One forgot [to say grace] and acted in accordance with the House of Shammai, [and when he went back. . .] he found a purse of gold. The other disciple willfully [neglected to say grace], acted in accordance

> with the House of Hillel [and did not return,] and a lion ate him. (*Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot* 53b; Stern 1991:14)

The purpose of the *maʾaseh* is to illustrate the results of their conduct, as an indication of what would result from the same actions today.

In the Brāhmaṇas, there is a somewhat similar genre that is almost always used to provide an etiology for a particular practice. The protagonists are either "the gods" (*deva*s) just before or just after they overcame their opponents the Asuras, to win their immortality and their place in heaven; or else the story tells of various sages of old. The events recounted are meant to indicate the course of action to be followed or avoided, based on the consequences of similar actions on the earlier occasion. Thus:

> [King] Divodāsa, whose chief priest was Bharadvāja, was once beset by various enemies. He went to [his priest], saying: "Sage, find me a refuge." [Bharadvāja] found a refuge for him by means of this *sāman* (the Adārasṛt chant) ... "By means of this [chant], we have not fallen into a pit" (*dāre nāsṛṇma*)!" Hence it has its name: Adārasṛt. He who in praising practices the Adārasṛt finds a way out of his difficulties and does not run into a pit. (*Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* 25.3.7)

Here, the paradeigma, applying a hermeneutic etymology, asserts that just as the Adārasṛt chant saved the fortunes of King Divodāsa (and acquired its name), so it benefits all who use it. A longer paradeigma (*ŚB* 12.9.3) illustrates how a banished king and a banished priest teamed up to regain their positions by performing the Sautrāmaṇī rite in an ingenious fashion. Another king confronts the priest, Cākra Sthapati, with a seemingly insoluble dilemma: "Sthapati Cākra, they say that *surā*-liquor must not be offered in the Offering Fire, nor anywhere else but the Offering Fire..." In spite of this, Cākra manages to find a way to perform the offerings: he pours the libations into special fires taken from the Offering Fire, so that one can say that the libations are made neither in the Offering Fire (directly), or in a fire that is not (indirectly) the Offering Fire. This precedent is thus advanced to explain the accepted practice in this rite.

iii. Allegory

Allegory as a narrative device may be found in parables and paradeigmata, but there are occasions on which the entire narrative has an extended allegory as its basic structure. In this respect, I am using the term not in the broad sense of using narrative elements to refer to something beyond itself, but in the narrower sense of personifying or reifying abstract ideas in unified narrative in order to make a statement about those ideas. Allegory of this sort is so common and well recognized in midrash that I need not supply an example; it is less so in brahmana, so I will provide a couple of instances. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (11.6.1) tells how Bhṛgu travels in the four directions and witnesses horrifying sights of dismemberment and cannibalism, and a black man with yellow eyes standing between two beautiful women. His father explains that the sights represent trees, cattle, plants, and water, which may be appeased by using them properly in worship; the three figures depicted Wrath, with Belief and Unbelief, who are appeased with an offering during worship. *ŚB* 3.2.1.18–28 explains why the consecrated Soma-offerer wears a deer's horn on his belt by recounting how the gods send Yajña (Worship personified) to seduce Vāc (Speech), so that they could usurp her god-begetting capacity. They tear out her womb and compress it into the shape of the horn, so that the consecrated may use it to secure new birth in the womb of Speech.

The Exegete as Virtuoso

What makes such interpretation persuasive is not simply the persuasiveness of the techniques per se but the special qualities of the exegete himself. The rabbinic or brahmanic sage might well be considered a virtuoso in his domain, both in the archaic sense of "a learned or ingenious person, or one that is well qualified" on account of his investigations in his field,[21] and in the modern sense of someone extraordinarily skilled in the techniques of his art. Midrash or brahmana is assumed to demonstrate total mastery of the subject, an ability to encompass

[21] Thomas Blount, *Glossographia* (1656), s.v.

the entire scope of all divine knowledge as it is manifested in the sacred canon (or in the ritual of worship), and a creative curiosity that leads the exegete to experiment with novel applications of the principles of exegesis, and even to develop new techniques. There is even something of the performer in the oratorical flair of a Rav Kahana or a Yājñavalkya. The authority of the sage is such that his explanations are endowed with the status of divine wisdom (Oral Torah as an extension of Written Torah; brahmana alongside mantra as *śruti*). It is suggestive that in both traditions, the interpretive enterprise begins by codifying and explaining correct practice; this is the context in which the basic techniques start to be applied. Only gradually does reflection on the deeper significance of the sacred texts themselves become detached from ceremonial concerns as a genre to be treated in its own right (as *Midrash Rabbah*, etc., and as Āraṇyaka and Upaniṣad, to some extent, and much later as commentary).

The virtuosic exegete is a different kind of religious authority than the priest, although, in India at least, the categories overlapped to a large extent. In both traditions there was a move away from the classical priestly cult (albeit for different reasons): whereas the professional priest has a natural interest in maintaining the primacy of the cult, the exegete, despite his reverence for the cult, lists toward an elevation of the tools and materials of his craft: the words, the ideas, and the mystical dimensions of the process of study. In India, where the priestly tradition never ceased, the ritual office has continued (if only fragmentarily, and usually on a very modest scale) for two-and-a-half millennia since the brahmanas were composed, but most priests are completely ignorant of the precise meanings of the texts they recite, while those few inheritors of the exegetical tradition are scholars, *paṇḍita*s, rather than priests.

III. Interpretive Agendas

> Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee,
> and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice!
>
> Psalm 141.2

From Priestly Cult to Personal Piety

The decline in importance of the Temple cult among the Jews really began with the destruction of the first Temple and the Babylonian exile, and continued with the proliferation of sects in the second Temple period, although the Rabbinic literature does not take shape until after the destruction of the second Temple.[22] But the biblical centrality of the Temple persists as a ideal locus of power and divine mystery, and in the absence of the Temple and the priestly routine, a compact codification of the Temple cult (comprising about half of the *Mishnah*) comes to be deemed necessary.

On the other hand, we know little about the circumstances that led to the production of similar treatments of the Vedic priestly ritual, the *śrauta sūtra*s. These works, just like the *Mishnah*, are concise, aphoristic codifications of the priestly cult—so concise as to require oral expansion.[23] They likewise include little or no explanation of the reasons for or significance of the words and actions in the rites, although some of the earlier ones (e.g., *Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra*) lack the radical compression of the more refined representatives of this genre, and bits of true brahmana appear here too. Unlike the *Mishnah*, the *śrauta sūtra*s depend on and refer to an earlier canonized body of exegesis of the Vedic liturgy. The cult no doubt was still being practiced, but its complex rules, so lovingly ramified by the various lineages of priests in an earlier era, now had come to seem unwieldy in its scope and variety. The production of the *sūtra*s filled the need for an easily memorized conspectus and systematization of the cult, and one that was more complete than the description embedded in the

[22] Nickelsburg and Stone (1983) offer a collection of post-Exilic sources that illustrate this point.

[23] See Halivni's remarks (1986:93–94) on the brevity of the *Mishnah*.

brahmanas—for in those texs ritual injunctions (*vidhi*) were included primarily to introduce an explanation. The *sūtra*s maintain the habit of preserving divergent opinions, but these opinions are not debated. At most, the *sūtra* may pass final judgment by supporting one of the views.

Concomitant with the promulgation of authoritative ritual codes in each tradition was the beginning of a process of transferring ritual responsibility from the priesthood to the learned individual. The ancient rabbis saw themselves as carrying forward the project of the Pharisees: "the extension of holiness from the limits of the Jerusalem Temple to a wider range of everyday life."[24] It is important to note that the proto-Rabbinic circles were sharply distinct from the priestly community, and the Rabbinic genre does not come into its own until the Temple period had ended.

These Judaic developments are well known and have been thoroughly discussed, while the Brahmanical case is less clear. The most important differences from the Judaic case are the fact that the Brahmanical exegetes were drawn directly from the priestly castes, and the fact there was no sudden interruption of the Vedic cult, which was not tied to any particular site and was thus not as vulnerable to political interference or destruction, nor was it geographically inaccessible to a large part of its clientele. But there are other factors that likely posed a challenge to the Vedic priestly system. The time when the ritual *sūtra* literature was being composed (ca. 7th–5th c. BCE) appears to have coincided with the sudden growth of urban centers in the Ganges-Yamuna valley, which no doubt had repercussions on the village-based clan-dominated caste society in which the Vedic religion was rooted. With this urbanization came a new form of political power: the old tribal oligarchies began to be replaced by hereditary kings who presided not over a social unit but over a region (*janapada*), leading to an ever greater consolidation of power in dominant kingdoms, and culminating in the creation of the Mauryan empire in 321 BCE, just six years after Alexander of Macedon's victories in the northwest.

[24] Goldenberg 1984:130.

We have no direct evidence of the effects of these social and political changes on the Vedic priesthood, but one likely effect was the loss of much of the traditional patronage of the Arya chieftains as power and wealth accumulated in the new cities. It has been observed many times that the word *nagara*, 'city,' makes a very late and rare appearance in the Vedic literature; the Vedic idea of civilization is the *grāma*, the village or "settlement." There is also the welter of new religious movements, some anti-Vedic and anti-brahmin (the early Jains and Buddhists among them) and others Brahmanical, that seem to have sprung up in and about the new cities. The earliest Buddhists texts (although not contemporary in the form in which we have them) contain an evident polemical streak in their references to brahmins, and are oriented to the public life of the new states.

Besides this presumable Jain-Buddhist threat to the socio-economic basis of the Vedic cult, another explanation (perhaps adequate in itself) is the mere fact of the spread of Brahmanical cult outside its core area (where the *śrauta* system acquired its fullest form), which entailed a more self-conscious standardization, and eventually called for simplified versions of the tradition that could be recognized and applied by a wider range of people over a wider area.

On the basis of this admittedly circumstantial evidence I propose that the brahmin priesthood sought to consolidate and extend its support among the middle rungs of rural society by encouraging the study of Vedic texts by a wider range of classes, and by remodeling and standardizing household ritual in imitation of the *śrauta* priestly cult through the promulgation of codes of household ritual, the *gṛhya sūtras*. The *gṛhya sūtras* were intended to apply a standard of consistency similar to that achieved in the *śrauta sūtra*s to the other spheres of Vedic ritual, a diverse amalgam of services for the gods, life-cycle rites (*saṃskāra*s), agricultural and hospitality rites, rites for practical ends, expiations and exorcisms.[25] Household rites akin to those in the

[25] The classic survey of these topics is Gonda 1980.

gṛhya sūtras appear to be ancient,[26] but it is noteworthy that they were not deemed worthy of priestly textual treatment until the *sūtra*-making enterprise was well under way. For the most part, the *gṛhya sūtras* make explicit reference to their corresponding *śrauta sūtra*s of the same Veda, and are often seen as continuations of them.[27] Although they are not necessarily from a much later period (in their core, at least), the *gṛhya sūtras* as a class clearly imitate the *śrauta sūtra*s in the ways they organize and present their material.

The apparent intention in formally canonizing the domestic ritual on the analogy of the *śrauta* system was fourfold:

a. to provide greater consistency of practice within a school; or rather, the school defined itself by it distinctive practices, which were set out in a standardized fashion;
b. to present the domestic rites as equivalent to the prestigious *śrauta* rites by increasing the parallelism between them, and (perhaps) by importing more *śrauta* mantras for use in the domestic rites;
c. to make the householder-ritualist conform to *śrauta* priestly standards of performance (while still encouraging the participation of actual priests in the household rites);
d. to encourage Veda-study by non-brahmins as prerequisite to proper ritual performance and, thus, to expand the duties of brahmins as teachers.

The attempt to encourage the study of Veda appealed to the idea that even simple rites performed with the correct knowledge were as effective as the elaborate multi-fire rites offered with lavish oblations by the prosperous warrior-chiefs of old, assisted by teams of up to

[26] Allusions to wedding and funeral rites are made in some late additions to the *Ṛg Veda* corpus in the form of hymns (10.85 and 10.12–18) that were probably even then used liturgically.

[27] The only exception to this rule is the *Kauśika Sūtra* of the *Atharva Veda*, which deals with *gṛhya* rites (in a manner very different from manuals of the other Vedas). It has long been recognized that the *Vaitāna* [i.e., *śrauta*] *Sūtra* of this tradition is a later creation—hardly surprising, since the *Atharva Veda* has no place in the *śrauta* ritual.

seventeen well-paid priests. Such spectacular rites did continue to be put on by kings who wished to appeal to the traditional Vedic world view, but much of this patronage was now going to the monastic institutions of the ascetic sects. But the theory had been put forward in the more mystical works of the brahmana genre—those that have been transmitted under the title of "*āraṇyaka*," "*rahasya*," or "*upaniṣad*" (all signifying "esoteric doctrine")—that all the power of the Veda could reside in the mere act of laying a piece of wood on the fire, or of feeding a brahmin, or simply of eating, or, most importantly, of reciting Vedic texts. Indeed, such forms of worship were actually superior, but they only worked for those initiated into the highest mysteries of the Veda; the esoteric brahmanas always end with the promise that the benefits will surely accrue to "him who knows this" (*ya evaṃ veda, evaṃvid*). Moreover, for brahmins, private recitation purges one of the taint of having "milked the meters dry" by serving as a paid priest in someone else's worship rite (*Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* 2). The virtue of this ideal was that the learned householder could become his own Vedic priest. Yet he could not do so without studying the Veda. Thus, the brahmin community may have compensated for any loss of patronage for the high-cult rites by extending its influence in the low-cult, and by simultaneously generating wider demand for instruction. This development also ensured that mantra-recitation became a central form of personal piety, along with the special rules of ritualized behavior meant to accompany private recitation. Recitation also becomes an important form of expiatory rite. The special virtue of recitation was usually explained by declaring that it constitutes the essence of worship. The basis for this claim lies in the exegesis of the brahmavadins.

Study as Sacrificial Offering

The idea is established early on in the brahmanas that the mantras recited during the worship service are an "invisible" or "cryptic" (*parokṣa*) form of worship, corresponding to the concrete, "visible" (*pratyakṣa*) form embodied in the ritual gestures: "For these (formulas)

are libations, and the libation is worship. The muttering of a formula[28] is (worship) invisibly (done), while the libation is worship (done) visibly" (*ā́hutayo hy ètā́ ā́hutir hí yajñā́ḥ paró 'kṣaṃ vaí yájur japaty áthaiṣá pratyákṣaṃ yajñó yád ā́hutis*, *ŚB* 3.1.4.1). This gave rise to the idea that worship could be performed without recourse to (other forms of) ritual action; the mere recitation of mantras in study could count as a rite of offering.

The connection between the brahmavadin's doctrine of the recitation-offering and the domestic ritual codes is perfectly illustrated by *Āśvalāyana Gṛhya Sūtra*, which begins with a passage of brahmana that uses the techniques of textual juxtaposition, paraphrase, and (at the end) the declaring of a mystical "linkage" to prove that the recitation of the Vedic word (the mantra), while placing a stick of wood on the fire, counts as even the finest oblation duly offered.

> Furthermore, they quote the Ṛg Veda: *The mortal who, with a fuel-stick, with an oblation, with knowledge (véda), worships the fire, / who makes good sacrifices with obeisance...* [*ṚV* 8.19.5].[29] When one who has faith (*śraddadhānaḥ*)[30] places even just a stick of firewood on (the fire), he should think: I am sacrificing here; obeisance to that (god). "Who, with an oblation . . ., who, with knowledge..." means that (the gods) are satisfied with knowledge alone. So seeing this, the sage said:
>
> *To him who does not shun the cows, who seeks the cows, who dwells in the sky, / speak a wonderful word, sweeter than ghee and honey* (*ṚV* 8.24.20).[31] By this he means: This word of mine, sweeter than ghee and honey, gives satisfaction (to the god); may it be sweeter.

[28] *Yajus*-formulae are muttered (*jap-*) quietly (*upāṃṣu*) in the sacrifice (*KŚS* 1.3.10; *ĀpYPS* 9–10), unless they are meant as an address, a reply, a selection of a priest, a part of a dialogue, or a command; *ṛc* and *sāman* texts are recited aloud (*uccaiḥ*) (*ĀpYPS* 8).

[29] *yáḥ samídhā yá ā́hutī yó védena dadā́śa márto agnáye / yó námasā svadhvaráḥ //*

[30] That is, a sincere will to worship, and confidence in the power of *brahman*, Vedic speech.

[31] *ágorudhāya gavíṣe dyukṣā́ya dásmyaṃ vácaṃ / ghṛtā́t svā́dīyo mádhunaś ca vocata //*

> *With a Ṛg-verse, we bring to you, O Agni, an oblation fashioned by the heart. / May they be oxen, bulls, and cows for you* (*ṚV* 6.16.47).[32] By this (he means): These (verses) become my oxen, bulls, and cows—(I) who recite the private recitation (*svādhyāya*).[33] And "who makes good sacrifices with obeisance" (in the earlier verse) means: even with the exclamation of obeisance alone (*namaskāreṇa vai khalv api*).[34] For a Brāhmaṇa states, "The gods are not beyond the exclamation of obeisance (*namaskāram ati*). Obeisance is worship." (*Āśvalāyana Gṛhya Sūtra* 1.1.4-5)

This replacement of actual, material sacrifices with sacrifices consisting only of recited verses and formulas has its parallels in the Judaic literature. The idea is already available as a poetic or rhetorical metaphor in biblical passages such as Psalm 141.2 (quoted as the epigraph to part III, above). Later, rabbinic authors use very Brahmanical-sounding arguments to show how, for instance, the study of the rules of Temple ritual can effectively replace the performance of the rituals themselves:

> Resh Lakish said, What is the significance of the verse, *This is the law for the burnt-offering, for the meal-offering, for the sin-offering, and for the guilt-offering* [Lev. 7:37]? It teaches that whosoever occupies himself with the study of the Torah is as though he were offering a burnt-offering, a meal-offering, a sin-offering, and a guilt-offering. Raba [said,] it means that whosoever occupies himself with the study of the Torah needs neither burnt-offering, nor meal-offering, nor sin-offering, nor guilt-offering. R. Isaac said, What is the significance of the verses, *This is the law of the sin-offering* [Lev. 6:18]; and *This is the law of the guilt-offering* [Lev. 7:1]? They teach that whosoever occupies himself with the study of the laws of the sin-offering is as though he were offering a sin-offering, and whosoever occupies himself with the study of the laws of the guilt-offering is as though he were offering a guilt-offering. (*Babylonian Talmud, Menaḥoth* 110a)

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[32] *ā́ te agna ṛcā́ havír hṛdā́ taṣṭám bharāmasi / té te bhavantūkṣáṇa ṛṣabhā́so vaśā́ utá //*

[33] That is, "may they be my offerings to you."

[34] *Namaskāra* indicates the word "*namas*" itself, used as an exclamation of honor directed toward the deity. The implication is that the mere utterance of the word "obeisance!" constitutes a sacrifice.

All these surmises are based on the circumstance that the passages cited announce the laws of the offerings, rather than just announcing the offerings themselves. This, they argue, means that studying the law is equivalent to making the actual offerings themselves.

These two examples could be supplemented with many others if space permitted. It might be argued that equating recitation of liturgy with ritual performance is not quite the same as equating study of the rules of liturgy with actual performance. But this seeming difference is minimal. Private recitation (*svādhyāya*) is the preeminent form of study in Vedism, and the recitations may include both ritual utterances (mantra) and brahmana-analysis. What is basic to both cases is the idea that benefits of the priestly offerings can be accrued by any learned individual, and is not left in the hands of priests themselves. In India, this meant that members of other Arya castes, as well as brahmins without priestly training, could participate directly in the highest form of worship. Moreover, this study-qua-sacrifice is presented as a duty, an obligation for every capable member of the community. The pious individual thus is provided with the means, and the responsibility, to perform himself the signal acts of piety of the tradition.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that the marked similarities in the hermeneutical principles developed in the Rabbinic and Brahmanical interpretive traditions go beyond the rhetorical techniques themselves. In fact they are part of largely parallel trajectory of exegesis devoted to explaining an elite priestly cult to the communities that define themselves by reference to that cult, and the texts that enshrine it. In both cases the tradition views the central divine revelation as the repository of infinite knowledge, and the aim of traditional scholarship is (in part) to establish the perfect form of ritual practice, and to engage in an exegetical method designed to uncover hidden meaning without infringing on the authority of the divine word. In the course of events, these virtuoso exegetes, endowed with the authority of revelation, provide a basis for transferring the sanctity and power of the priestly office—when changing circumstances affect the support or continuance of that office—to

the wider community by making textual study or recitation, as well as other forms of household ceremonial, equivalent to the priestly high cult. The comparison of religious forms thus is not divorced from the contextual factors governing the emergence and change of those forms. I have tried to make a comparison of historical processes, rather than a simple matching up of structural forms. In so doing, important differences have also come to light: the rise of rabbinics created an alternative source of authority to that of the hereditary priestly families. Although more work needs to be done on the social dimensions of priestly vs. scholarly work among Vedic brahmins, there is no clear sign of such a redistribution of authority in the Brahmanical case; the exegetic innovations came very much from within the priestly community, and seemed aimed at its own preservation.

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