8

Rabbinic Literature and the New Testament

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The New Testament is made up of a series of books that are, in many ways, hybrid texts. Like the works of Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BC–AD 50) and Josephus (ca. AD 37–100), early Jewish authors who composed their works in Greek, the New Testament texts are written in Greek but from a Jewish background. They are not translation literature but reflect both Greek and Jewish ideas and vocabulary.[1] Because of this, an attempt to understand these texts in a first-century context often involves an appeal to both Greek or Hebrew/Aramaic lexicography and cultural or legal norms. On the Hebrew side, this appeal is usually to the Old Testament, to texts found at Qumran and around the Judean desert (Dead Sea Scrolls), and to the complex literature of the rabbinic movement, those Jewish teachers who taught and promulgated an oral law after the fall of the Jewish temple. It is this last literature, that of the rabbis, that will be the subject of this chapter. While some Latter-day Saint studies have sought to elucidate the life and teachings of Jesus by reference to either the Old Testament or the Dead Sea Scrolls,[2] none have ever seriously considered rabbinic literature as another lens through which to view his ministry; and even though this literature is later and can be fairly esoteric, it does have the potential to enhance our understanding in certain areas.

Though it probably goes without saying, it is important to remember that Jesus and his earliest followers were Jews who lived in a decidedly Jewish context and that Jesus's mortal ministry was specifically to the house of Israel (Matthew 15:21–28). It is only after the Resurrection that the gospel message was taken in earnest to non-Jews (Acts 10). In fact, many of the ideas in Christianity that seem universal, such as the existence of a messiah, are

Jewish notions that the earliest Christians brought to their non-Jewish converts. The original twelve apostles were all Jews, as were Paul and Barnabas and the vast majority of the earliest Christian leaders. This means that Judaism is the essential matrix that Christianity and the New Testament grew out of; because of this, understanding Judaism can help us better comprehend the background and the activities in the New Testament.

Judaism was not, however, a monolith—either in the ancient world or now. It represented a complex series of interrelated ethnic, religious, ritual, and political ideals that were expressed in various ways. These expressions were so varied that some scholars of ancient Judaism have preferred to talk about "Judaisms" rather than "Judaism."[3] The diversity in ancient Judaism is visible in the New Testament with groups such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees. These ancient Jewish groups had very different approaches to the temple, the law of Moses, and the scriptures. It can, therefore, be helpful when talking about Judaism and its relationship to the New Testament to remember that Judaism, in both its ancient and modern varieties, was a broad spectrum. Thus, a simple comparison between the New Testament and Judaism, however that is understood, is problematic.

Rabbinic Judaism has rich connections to the New Testament: Jesus is called "rabbi" (John 1:38, 49; 3:2; 6:25), Paul claims as a teacher the rabbinic sage Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), and there are even places where the New Testament and rabbinic literature share similar readings of biblical text. What is more, both the New Testament and rabbinic literature arose out of the world of Second Temple Judaism—the Judaism that flourished between the third century BC and the second century AD while the Second Jewish temple stood—and both rabbis and the New Testament are connected to the Pharisees. These connections make comparing the New Testament and rabbinic literature a fruitful exercise.

The present chapter is therefore a brief comparison of the New Testament with what is often called Rabbinic Judaism.[4] It first contains a brief description of this form of Judaism and the texts that expressed it. Rabbinic Judaism serves as the basis for almost all other forms of subsequent Judaism, including even most forms of contemporary Judaism. It is characterized by the literary and legal output of a variety of men known as "sages" and "rabbis." These men were educated, self-aware, and articulate, and so their discussions on the Bible, the law of Moses, and Jewishness serve as some of our best evidence for ancient Judaism broadly. In particular, the sages of Rabbinic Judaism promulgated an oral law, which connects to the New Testament "tradition of the elders" (Matthew 15:2). The rabbinic traditions, however, derive from a later time than the New Testament, and often from a different social context, so that the evidence provided by the ancient rabbis must be used judiciously, especially in connection to the New Testament.

In this chapter, I illustrate the connection between Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament with three worked examples. My first example is the trial of Jesus, where rabbinic literature has been appealed to as a tool against Judaism. My second example shows how the rabbinic notion of messengers and agency can help explain the New Testament idea of apostle. Finally, I discuss how the author of Hebrews shares certain scriptural reading principles

with the rabbinic sages. These examples show that Rabbinic Judaism is best utilized for conceptual comparisons and is less useful for specific historical or legal comparisons.

Rabbinic Literature

To begin,[5] something needs to be said about the terms *rabbi* and *rabbinic*. *Rabbi* is a Hebrew term that means "master" or "teacher." Although "master" is a legitimate translation, it is in the sense of a student/teacher relationship instead of an owner/slave relationship. The ancient rabbis' preferred term for themselves collectively was the *sages*.[6] In contrast to current usage, the rabbis of rabbinic literature were not primarily associated with the synagogue and were not usually leaders in the synagogue. Rather, their primary locale was in the schoolhouse. In this context, rabbinic literature refers to the variety of texts produced by these sages. In addition, *rabbi*, and its variations,[7] seems to have been a common title for Jewish religious leaders in the ancient world and was not limited to the producers of rabbinic literature.[8] In fact, the only two individuals called "rabbi" in first-century-AD documents are John the Baptist (John 3:26) and Jesus Christ.[9]

Rabbinic Term	Definition
Rabbi	teacher, master
Sage (*ḥakham*)	the preferred term of self-identification by the ancient rabbis
Halakhah	Jewish legal discussions; discourse on how to live the law of Moses and the commandments
Aggadah	those parts of rabbinic literature that are not specifically concerned with understanding and interpreting law; not halakhah
Gemara	later rabbinic discussion on the Mishnah; Mishnah plus Gemara equals Talmud
Midrash	Jewish biblical interpretation

In considering what constitutes Rabbinic Judaism, one should note that what we are interacting with in the modern age is largely a product of literature. While there are definitely archaeological remains from the rabbinic period (roughly 200 BC–AD 600), they are next to impossible to pin to any specific rabbinic discussion, and in some cases contradict the rulings found in the sources of rabbinic literature.[10] Any discussion of Rabbinic Judaism is, therefore, ultimately rooted in a discussion of the literature that the sages produced. But this literature is multivaried and complex, containing songs, prayers, homilies, legal rulings, legends, myths, jokes, biblical interpretations, and many other types of writing. Its diversity makes its connection to the New Testament richer but also more difficult to use responsibly.

Rabbinic literature can be divided into two broad categories, even if there is some overlap. These two types are "halakhic," or legal, texts and "aggadic" texts, a term that is difficult to define, since aggadic texts cover everything that is not halakhic. Since the ancient rabbis were primarily concerned with legal notions, legal discussions have a prominent place in rabbinic discourse. Halakhah is basically a series of discussions on *how* to keep the commandments. It might be something akin to what Latter-day Saints call "application." For instance, the scriptures usually outline what the Lord wants done, but not always *how* to do it. An example of this is the command to keep the Sabbath day holy, found in Exodus 20:8–11 (Deuteronomy 5:12–16). While this passage forbids working on the Sabbath, it does not explicitly define what work was, and so it was largely left to the individual living the Sabbath to figure that out.[11] In the Gospels, Jesus and the Pharisees seem to have frequently disagreed on the proper way to observe the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1–13; John 5).[12] These discussions on how to live the commandments are the core of rabbinic legal discussion, which served as the foundation of rabbinic literature.

The rabbinic sages believed that God delivered to Moses *two* laws on Mount Sinai: a written and an oral law.[13] A famous passage in rabbinic literature reads, "Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai, and transmitted it to Joshua. Joshua transmitted to the Elders, who transmitted it to the Prophets. The Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly."[14] Thus, in addition to the written law, which is the five books of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy), the sages believed there was an additional oral law that was transmitted through Joshua and the elders of Israel.[15] This was transmitted to the prophets, which showed that the ancient sages saw themselves in continuity with the writings of the prophets. The bulk of the oral law defines ways to apply the law of Moses. Thus, the written law gave the commandments of God, and the oral law contained discussions and explorations on *how* to live those commandments.[16] The acceptance of the oral law is an integral part of early rabbinic self-understanding.

Rabbinic Text	Date	Brief Description
Mishnah	compiled about AD 200	the earliest compilation of rabbinic halakhah; the base text for Rabbinic Judaism
Tosefta	compiled after the Mishnah, but likely before the two Talmuds	a collection of rabbinic traditions that date from the mishnaic period but were not included in the Mishnah
Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud	compiled about AD 400	Gemara on the Mishnah by Palestinian sages
Babylonian Talmud	compiled about AD 600	Gemara on the Mishnah by the Babylonian sages; contains large amounts of halakhic and aggadic material
Midrashim	dates range from about AD 350 to 1100	collections of Jewish biblical interpretations; these are often arranged by a biblical book and use distinctive interpretive techniques; derives mostly from Palestinian sources

These oral laws were finally collated and edited around AD 200 by a Jewish leader named Judah the Prince. This collection is known as the Mishnah, from a Hebrew word that means "to repeat, or recite."[17] The Mishnah is, therefore, the Recitation of the Law. It is the foundational document of what came to be called Rabbinic Judaism, building on the written Law found in the Bible. The Mishnah is divided into six "orders," called in Hebrew *sedarim*, that are arranged thematically. These orders cover agricultural laws (*Zeraim*), laws about festivals (*Moed*), damage and punitive laws (*Neziqin*), laws about women's issues (*Nashim*), temple laws (*Qodashim*), and laws dealing with impurity (*Toharot*). The various mishnaic orders are then subdivided into various tractates, dealing with a specific aspect of the law. Like the Pauline Epistles in the New Testament, mishnaic tractates are arranged according to length, from longest to shortest. The Mishnah is the closest to the New Testament temporally and geographically and is thus one of the most privileged places for comparing the New Testament and rabbinic literature.

The interpretation of the law and the scriptures is an ongoing process, and so the Mishnah is not the final word on the oral law. After the codification and compilation of the Mishnah in the third century, the ancient Jewish sages began to comment on and clarify the laws recorded in the Mishnah. This commentary was known as *Gemara*, an Aramaic word meaning "study." The Gemara, which was largely composed in Aramaic (as opposed to the Mishnah, which was composed in Hebrew), was (and is) read alongside the original Mishnah. These two elements together—Mishnah plus Gemara—constitute the Talmud.

There are, in fact, two Talmuds, which are distinguished by the location where they were compiled. One Talmud was compiled in the Holy Land and is known as the Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud (ca. fourth century AD). It had much less influence on the development of Jewish thought and practice and is completely preserved in a single manuscript dating to the thirteenth century. The Talmud compiled in the Jewish communities that stayed in Babylon after the Babylonian captivity is known as the Babylonian Talmud (ca. sixth century AD).[18] Of the two Talmuds, the Babylonian Talmud is the more authoritative. When referencing simply the "Talmud," the Babylonian Talmud is generally meant. The two Talmuds are based on the same underlying Mishnah but differ in interpretations and the sages quoted.[19] If the Mishnah is the foundational text of Rabbinic Judaism, then the Talmud is the edifice. The study of Torah, both in the Bible and in the Talmud, is one of the great commandments in Judaism.

It is not, however, the sum total of Jewish thought or practice. The other type of rabbinic literature is aggadah. This broad category covers everything the sages write and speak about that does *not* cover application of the laws and commandments found in the scriptures. It comes from an Aramaic word that means "tellings." A key part of aggadah is midrash, which is Jewish biblical interpretation. Midrash is a complex literature that is rooted in the biblical text but encourages expansion and interpretation where the Bible is sparse.[20] Although the ancient sages were deeply entrenched in the biblical text, they were not promulgators of a kind of *sola scriptura*. It would be a mistake to understand the Talmud as being primarily biblical interpretation, although the Bible is never far from the thoughts of the sages. The

sages did engage in biblical interpretation in both literary and legal ways and collected these interpretations. The earliest midrashic texts deal with legal matters and the application of the law, while later midrashic collections are concerned with answering questions raised by the biblical narratives. All the midrashic collections are later than the codification of the Mishnah, and most of them are contemporaneous with the traditions in the Talmud. This places them many hundreds of years later than the New Testament. Although this limits their usefulness in *directly* understanding the New Testament, these traditions can still provide insight, especially into the methods and ways in which ancient Jews understood and interpreted the Bible.

The midrashic form of biblical interpretation involves a very close reading of the biblical text but does so in ways and following a logic that can sometimes be different from traditional post-Enlightenment modes of thinking.[21] In order to be midrash, a story or legal interpretation must be connected to the biblical text that provides the basic parameters for a given rabbinic interpretation.[22] This is one of the clear ways in which midrash differs from the Mishnah and Talmud, which are not based on the biblical text. Midrashic interpretation is driven by what may be termed "rough places" in the text. The midrashic exercise is extremely attuned to questions such as repetitions and apparent omissions. Midrash serves as a way of filling in those blanks.

The sages themselves spoke about various interpretive principles that guided the formation of midrash.[23] It seems that in many cases these principles were after-the-fact rationalizations of already-extant midrashic exegesis.[24] A few broad principles stand out. The first is the "omnisignificance" of the biblical text—every portion of the text has meaning for every other part.[25] The next is that every word has meaning, and even when words are repeated by the biblical text, the rabbis will derive meaning out of the repetition.[26] Thus, in Genesis 22:11, when the angel says "Abraham, Abraham," the rabbinic sages must address why the name is said twice. Although these assumptions seem illogical to us in our present interpretive world, the New Testament authors' assumptions about the Bible more closely resemble the rabbinic perspective than they do modern notions.

Rabbinic Literature and the New Testament

With this brief background of the texts that comprise Rabbinic Judaism, we turn to how Rabbinic Judaism intersects with the New Testament. Composed by an erudite and self-reflective class of ancient Jews, rabbinic literature represents one of the best windows into the world of thought and practice of the Jews of the New Testament era. This portion of the chapter first looks broadly at the connections between rabbinic literature and the New Testament, as well as some of the pitfalls to be aware of in using the two literatures to understand one another.

The New Testament Gospels present Jesus in ways that connect him and his ministry to the sages and the literature they produced. In fact, the Gospels show Jesus involved in legal and halakhic discussions with other Jews in Jerusalem and the Galilee.[27] These discussions are places where Jesus's teachings and style find parallels in rabbinic literature, but some-

times these parallels can be overstated.[28] Nonetheless, there are fruitful places for comparison. An example is in the parables that Jesus employs. Although many of them are unique to Jesus, employing parables is not unique to Jesus's teaching style. In fact, there is a parable in the Babylonian Talmud that closely accords to one of Jesus's parables:

> R. Yohanan b. Zakkai said: This may be compared to a king who summoned his servants to a banquet without appointing a time. The wise ones adorned themselves and sat at the door of the palace. ["For,"] said they, "is anything lacking in a royal palace?" The fools went about their work, saying, "can there be a banquet without preparations?" Suddenly the king desired [the presence of] his servants: the wise entered adorned, while the fools entered soiled. The king rejoiced at the wise but was angry with the fools. "Those who adorned themselves for the banquet," ordered he, "let them sit, eat and drink. But those who did not adorn themselves for the banquet, let them stand and watch." R. Meir's son-in-law said in R. Meir's name: Then they too would [merely] look as being in attendance. But both sit, the former eating and the latter hungering, the former drinking and the latter thirsting, for it is said, Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, my servants shall eat, but ye shall be hungry: behold, my servants shall drink, but ye shall be thirsty: [behold, my servants shall rejoice, but ye shall be ashamed:] behold, my servants shall sing for joy of heart, but ye shall cry for sorrow of heart. (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 153b)[29]

This parable shares parallels with the parable of the wedding banquet in Matthew 22:1–13—especially with the notion of wearing proper clothing for the feast. The sage telling this parable, Yohanan b. Zakkai, dates to around the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70, making him a little later than Jesus but roughly contemporaneous. This does not mean, of course, that Jesus and Yohanan b. Zakkai are using the same parable or that one is dependent on the other. Rather, it suggests that the parables of Jesus were part and parcel of the broader Jewish world from which rabbinic literature emanated.

In addition, the Mishnah represents itself as containing materials that derive from the Second Temple period. Thus, the Mishnah quotes traditions and legal opinions from sages who lived during the New Testament period. The authors of the New Testament mention at least one of these sages (Gamaliel)[30] by name. According to Acts, Paul claims to have been a disciple of this sage: "I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day" (Acts 22:3). Gamaliel is also mentioned earlier in Acts, where Luke mentions him approvingly.[31] According to traditional Jewish understanding, Gamaliel was a grandson of Hillel, one of the earliest and greatest of mishnaic teachers.[32] This gives Paul, in his own way, a rabbinic pedigree. This allows scholars, with some caution, to posit similar, if not identical, legal positions underlying some of the questions and discussion taken up by the New Testament authors and editors.

There are also connections between nonlegal rabbinic material and the New Testament, especially in the Epistles. In many ways the Epistle to the Hebrews represents a clear example

of something like midrashic material in the New Testament. Hebrews shares a number of assumptions with the sages who produced rabbinic literature and the biblical midrashim. The most important assumption is what is often called the "omnisignificance" of the biblical text. This is the notion that the scriptures are all interconnected, and that it is, therefore, possible to use scriptures from one place in order to explain a usage in another place. Where this differs most strongly from modern conceptions is how these connections are brought about. For ancient readers, a single word can signal a connection that is to be made between two verses in disparate scriptural places, because the notion of omnisignificance ignores book and chapter boundaries. This process of bringing two verses together is known as "verbal analogy." The ancient rabbinic sages called this principle *gezera shawa* (see chapter 6 herein).[33] The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews uses a number of verbal analogies to make its point. Words such as *son*, *today*, and *swear an oath* are found in numerous passages in Hebrews, such as Hebrews 1:2 and 1:5, and are brought together to illustrate several points, such as the superiority of the Son of God over everything else, including the law of Moses and the immediacy of God's salvation.

Example 1: Difficulties with the trial of Jesus

One instance where rabbinic literature has been used to further understand the New Testament, but where there are very real difficulties in how that literature was deployed, is the trial of Jesus. The notion that the trial of Jesus was illegal is something that has pervaded Latter-day Saint thinking since at least James E. Talmage's *Jesus the Christ*. Latter-day Saints, building from Talmage, found support in a book by Walter M. Chandler, an American lawyer and politician.[34] The evidence mustered for the illegality of the trial of Jesus comes from various parts of rabbinic literature, without any real regard for questions of when and where the various laws and quotations are coming from. Because the trial of Jesus has been used so much for anti-Semitic purposes, it is especially important to handle the rabbinic sources judiciously.[35]

The Mishnah represents, in many ways, a utopian law code—in other words, the Mishnah represents the way that the sages understood the law of Moses and how they wanted it interpreted but not necessarily how it was actually lived. The most obvious example of this is the large amount of space dedicated to the administration and regulation of the Jerusalem temple.[36] The temple had been destroyed for over 130 years by the time the Mishnah was collated, but it still contained regulations on how to administer the sacrifices and what the proper rules for vows and other temple-focused laws from the law of Moses were.

The regulation of capital punishment is a crucial example of probable utopian laws that has direct bearing on the trial of Jesus. It is unclear from our sources whether the Jews living under Roman control had the power to execute capital punishments. Mishnah Sanhedrin, the mishnaic tractate on legal judgments and courts, presumes that the rabbis retain the biblical power to enact punishment for capital crimes. The mishnaic tractate of Sanhedrin covers many issues of rabbinic jurisprudence, including the sentencing of crime according to the biblical mandate. Mishnah Sanhedrin 7:6 states, "Four forms of execution were

transmitted to the [rabbinic] court: stoning, burning, decapitation, and strangulation."[37] The Mishnah then lists various ways in which these executions were to be performed. The Mishnah, drawing on biblical laws, presumes that it has the power to perform executions. The New Testament, however, makes an opposite claim. The contradiction is likely because of the utopian nature of much of the Mishnah's laws—they are describing the world as they wished it to be. In John 18:31 the leaders of the Jews tell Pilate, "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death."[38] This passage is useful precisely because it lays out what appears to be a direct contradiction between a rabbinic source on the one hand and the New Testament on the other. Because of this, it shows the danger in using the Mishnah to explore the illegality of the trial of Jesus. Thus, the connection between the legal world described by the sages and the legal situation of Jesus's trial is tenuous at best.

This has been recognized by Latter-day Saint scholars in recent years. Dana M. Pike notes, "Claims that Jesus' 'trial' was illegal because it violated Mishnaic regulations have no historical basis and are best avoided."[39] Likewise, in their study companion to Talmage's *Jesus the Christ*, Thomas Wayment and Richard Holzapfel state, "Scholars today realize that the Jewish sources used by earlier scholars to identify the illegalities of the trial come from a later period than the New Testament and, therefore, likely do not give an accurate portrayal of first-century Jewish practice. The Gospels do not accuse the Jewish council of illegalities, so we assume there are none to report."[40] This acknowledgment is an important step in helping us better understand how to use the New Testament and rabbinic literature in making comparisons. If rabbinic literature is read *only* for its connection to the New Testament, it is possible to make grave mistakes and overstatements.

Example 2: The Jewish understanding of apostles as agents

Once again, this is not to say that there is no place for exploring connections between rabbinic literature and the New Testament. There are, in fact, a number of instances where concepts from both literatures meet and allow for a better understanding. One place where rabbinic literature seems to have explanatory power is in examining the New Testament notion of apostles and apostleship. The Greek word *apostolos* is a nominative form deriving from the verb *apostellein*, which means "to send out." According to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, its classical reference is to naval expeditions.[41] The Hebrew word with the most obvious corollary to the Greek *apostolos* is *šeliaḥ*. This word is the passive participle of the Hebrew root *š/l/ḥ*, which means "to send." This word, therefore, like the Greek, has the meaning of "sent one" or "messenger." We shall see, however, that in a rabbinic context, including in a community or synagogal context, the word usually means "agent."

The Hebrew word *šeliaḥ* has already been examined in connection with *apostolos* by previous scholars.[42] As part of his discussion of the relationship between Hebrew *šeliaḥ* and Greek *apostolos*, K. H. Rengstorf observes, "It must be emphasized most strongly that Jewish missionaries, of whom there were quite a number in the time of Jesus,[43] are never called *šeliaḥ*."[44] He also notes, however, that "the Gk. gives us . . . the form of the NT concept; the

šeliaḥ of later Judaism provides the content."[45] The emphasis of the section in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* remains primarily on traveling and preaching the word.[46] The difficulty here is that although this scholar acknowledges the existence and importance of a Jewish notion of *šeliaḥ*, the emphasis remains on how the apostleship came to be understood in later Christianity. Thus, the apostles are viewed primarily in their missionary aspect. This is even maintained while quoting halakhic positions presupposing that a given *šeliaḥ* is not traveling. If we are to compare the rabbinic notion of *šeliaḥ* to our understanding of *apostle*, then it is necessary to get beyond the etymology of the word to its actual legal and cultural referent in a Jewish context. This involves looking beyond assumptions of what *apostle* already means in a Christian context.

Rabbinic sources emphasize the agency and authority of the *šeliaḥ*. In fact, the standard dictionary for rabbinic literature gives the definition of this word as "deputy, agent."[47] An examination of the uses of this word in mishnaic sources illustrates this. In Mishnah Gittin 4:1, which discusses the serving of a divorce decree to a woman, we read, "If a man sends[48] a divorce decree to his wife, and he reaches the agent (*šeliaḥ*) [before it gets to the woman], he may annul it." The legal idea here is not specifically in the sending of the message but in the authority of the sending.[49] The core legal idea here is that the agent has the full authority of the man who sent him.

The mishnaic reference that is, in many ways, paradigmatic for a discussion on how rabbinic literature can help explain some of the ideas behind the office of apostle is Mishnah Berakhot 5:5. Berakhot is the tractate on prayers and benedictions, and this particular passage refers to the "messenger or agent of the congregation" using the term *šeliaḥ*. This "messenger of the congregation" is someone who is deputized by the congregation in order to say prayers on behalf of the congregation. The paragraph states: "As for the one who prays and errs, it is a bad omen for him, and if he were the 'agent (*šeliaḥ*) of the congregation,' it is a bad omen for them, since 'A person's agent is as himself'" (Berakhot 5:5). As noted, the context of this paragraph in the Mishnah makes it clear that this is not referring even to someone who has been sent away on behalf of the congregation. This is someone who has been authorized to act on behalf of the community to say their prayers. This simple fact illustrates the danger of a simple etymological explanation of words. Although it is true that the word *šeliaḥ* derives from the Hebrew root meaning "to send," it is clear in this passage that actual traveling is not necessary for them to exercise their functions. In this rabbinic context, the important aspect is the notion of agency and authorized representation. This becomes especially apparent when the anonymous Mishnah quotes from what was apparently a proverb about the connection between a person and their agent.

This sense is also visible behind the concept of "apostle" in Christianity of the first century. This is not to suggest that the notion of travel and sending of messages is not present in New Testament usage, but to show that rabbinic literature gives another perspective on the evidence and assumptions about what is behind some of the vocabulary in the New Testament.

The Gospel of Matthew, traditionally considered to be the most Jewish of the New Testament Gospels, has this to say: "And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them

authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity" (Matthew 10:1–2). The Gospel then lists the names of the twelve disciples. Following this, they are sent out (the Greek here comes from the same root as *apostle*) on a preaching mission (Matthew 10:7). The aspect that qualifies the twelve disciples to be apostles, however, is not their being sent out, but their being given authority over unclean spirits and the attendant power to heal. The emphasis in Matthew is not on their traveling but on their power. They are certainly sent out from Jesus, but their function seems to have been more than messengers of Jesus. This suggests that a Hebrew/Jewish notion of *šeliaḥ*, and the concept of "authorized representative," is behind part of the conception of apostles in Matthew.

The Acts of the Apostles, generally understood as a sequel to the Gospel of Luke, often refers to apostles. In Acts 8, Philip (not the apostle) teaches and converts a number of people in Samaria (8:4–13). After this, Acts records: "Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John" (8:14). The implication of this verse is that the apostles, as a body, are staying in Jerusalem and that they send out Peter and John. For the purposes of the present argument, what is important is that Peter and John are not sent to preach or proselytize in Samaria. That work had already been done by Philip. According to Acts, upon arriving in Samaria, Peter and John "prayed for them [Philip's converts] that they might receive the Holy Spirit" (8:15). In other words, Peter and John's purpose in this passage is not to act as preachers in a foreign area. On the contrary, their purpose is to bestow the Holy Spirit. As soon as this is accomplished, they return to Jerusalem, although they do preach on the way back (8:25).

It is thus clear that, as with Hebrew *šeliaḥ*, the Greek *apostolos*, although coming from a word that clearly means the "sent one," does not *necessarily* have primary reference to traveling missionary work. This is further illustrated by the recording in Acts of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. According to this chapter, the admission of non-Jewish converts to the Christian community had raised certain questions about the relations of these converts to the Jewish practice of the law, circumcision in particular.[50] The halakhic question was strenuous enough that a delegation was sent from Antioch, including Paul and Barnabas (who had been identified as apostles in Acts 14:14). According to Acts 15:4: "When they [the delegation] came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them." In this section, as in other places in Acts, *apostles* seems to indicate a body that is centered in Jerusalem and is not traveling, as there is no sense in this passage in Acts that the apostles need to be summoned back to Jerusalem for this conference.

Example 3: Using Midrash to understand Hebrews

Of all of the New Testament authors, the author of Hebrews is the most likely to use methods of biblical interpretation that are similar to those used by the sages in creating midrash. Techniques like verbal analogy (the rabbinic *gezera shawa*) are deployed by the author of Hebrews in various ways and places within the text of the letter to the Hebrews. It should

be noted, however, that many of these principles also appear in the Greek world, and so we do not need to look specifically to the rabbinic sages for these types of interpretation.[51] The sages are using Jewish-Greek methods of interpretation that would later be codified by the rabbinic sages producing midrash.

Like much of the New Testament, the Epistle to the Hebrews is heavily based in the scriptures of the Old Testament. Unlike those books, however, the author of Hebrews often builds scripture into fairly complex interpretive schemes that can be characterized as something like early midrashim. They lack some of the characteristics of later midrashim—such as the presence of multiple interpretations to a single verse—and, of course, the substance of the interpretations has a decidedly Christian bent, but they do provide unique and interesting perspectives on ancient scripture. Hebrews 3:1–8 presents one such interpretive strand, building on Numbers 12:6–8, in which the greatness of Moses among prophets is discussed. The context in Numbers is of a disagreement in precedence from Miriam and Aaron against Moses. God chastises them and says, "And he said, Hear now my words: If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so, who is faithful in all mine house. With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches." The author of Hebrews uses this verse as part of his larger point on the superiority of Jesus over all the other prophets.

He does so by emphasizing notion of the "house," referring here to the household. The word *house*, Greek *oikos*, appears six times in Hebrews 3:2–6. It forms the backbone for the point that the author of Hebrews is trying to make. The point here is that Moses is part of the household but is, as the verse quoted indicates, a member of the household as a faithful servant or slave. According to Hebrews 3:2, Jesus is also faithful, like Moses, but 3:6 indicates that he is, as the son, not just faithful in the house, but actually over the house. Moses was a faithful slave to God *in* the household, but Jesus is a faithful son *over* the household. Even though they are described in similar fashions, the passage actually serves to highlight their different roles rather than elide them. This is reinforced by Hebrews 3:3, where the author appears to mix his metaphors a little bit and moves from a household metaphor to an architectural one. The point remains, however, that Moses must be inferior to Jesus because Jesus built the house, while Moses is only a member of it, no matter how faithful.

One of the most important things to recognize when working through midrash and midrashic-type interpretation is how the interpreted verse interacts with the surrounding verses. This is one of the places where the interpretation in this passage of Hebrews has some of the greatest affinity with the rabbinic art of midrash. On the one hand, from a modern perspective, like the rabbis the author of Hebrews is much concerned with context. On the other hand, they would often bring ideas from verses surrounding the quoted verse. That seems to be the case here. The whole point of identifying Moses as faithful in God's household is to make a comparison with him to Miriam and Aaron and, by extension, to all other Israelite prophets. Moses was superior to those prophets because, even though a slave, he was a member of the household. The implication here is that other prophets, including

Aaron and Miriam, although important servants of God, do not share the same status as Moses. The midrashic logic extends this even further by bringing in notions of sonship and households. Just as Moses is superior in the house (i.e., over the other prophets), so, as son over the house, is Jesus superior to Moses. The midrashic logic defines the whole argument.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ and his immediate followers were Jews who initially lived and preached in a largely Jewish world. The New Testament is, therefore, in many ways a product of Judaism and Jewish thinking. In order to better understand the New Testament, it is useful to have some understanding of ancient Judaism; rabbinic literature, in all its varieties, represents one of the richest bodies of literature for enhancing that understanding. The rabbinic sages were articulate thinkers about the scriptures and what it meant to be Jewish, and their comments, thoughts, and interpretations produced an abundant treasure of material on an enormous variety of texts. Much of their teachings are rooted in their desire for halakhah and application, for understanding *how* to live the commandments of God, but because of their belief that all things could be found in Torah, their commentary on Torah contains all kinds of material.

The ink that has been spilled over the trial of Jesus and the illegality of it shows the importance of not pushing the connection between the New Testament and rabbinic literature. The whole point of using rabbinic literature to show illegality was to drive home notions of the perfidy of the Jews. Using the Mishnah and the Talmud in this way ignores the historical realities of both the earliest Christians and the rabbis. It represents the dangers in viewing Rabbinic Judaism as a kind of magic bag for Christian interpreters to take out whatever they like and make it fit into their preconceived mold.

On the other hand, the notion of apostles as agents provides a place where rabbinic literature points to an ancient understanding that might otherwise have been lost. Christian interpretation of apostles and the apostleship has highlighted their missionary and traveling functions and the fact that they were “sent out.” Although this is understandable, especially in the Greek linguistic context that the New Testament is situated in, it leaves open certain questions, such as why Acts presents the apostles as staying primarily in Jerusalem, if they are predominantly to be understood as traveling missionaries. The rabbinic equivalent to apostle, *šeliaḥ*, which carries notions of agency, without specifically requiring travel, provides evidence that something similar could be behind the New Testament apostleship. In this case, rabbinic literature does not provide direct evidence, but instead provides another avenue of understanding.

This is even more the case with midrash and midrash-type interpretations in the Epistle to the Hebrews and other places in the New Testament. The midrashim date to centuries after the composition of the New Testament. In this case, it is not the actual midrashic collections that prove helpful in understanding the New Testament. Instead, it is seeing the ways in which the New Testament authors and editors and the producers of rabbinic literature, including midrash, shared similar assumptions and interpretive tools. There is no

specific midrash comparing what the author of Hebrews does with Jesus, Moses, and their position in God's household. But the type of comparison and the assumptions that underlie it are a well-established part of rabbinic thinking. Learning how the sages thought about the scriptures and their methods of interpretation provides insight into how the New Testament authors and editors are interacting with the scriptures.

While there are other places and categories where rabbinic literature relates to the New Testament, such as in Paul's discussion of idolatry in Romans (2:27–28) and comparisons of identity and Israel (9:3–14), these examples show both the advantages of using rabbinic literature for comparison as well as the care that should be taken when working with that literature. As with the worked examples presented in this chapter, it is important to take rabbinic literature on its own terms. Rabbinic literature is not simply a source to mine for information about Jesus and the apostles but is a real and complex literature with its own rules and traditions. Even with that being said, it still represents one of the best sources for understanding how ancient Judaism thought on its own terms. Because Jesus and his followers were Jews, this provides a valuable window of understanding into the ancient worldview that produced the New Testament.

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Further Reading

Holtz, Barry W., ed. *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986. This very useful volume has a chapter introducing nonspecialists and nonacademics to the various original sources within Judaism. It contains chapters on the Talmud, on Midrash, and even on Jewish readings of the Bible. It is written by specialists in a very engaging and down-to-earth style. Each of the chapters has further reading as well.

Strack, H. L., and Günther Stemberger. *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash.* Translated and edited by Markus Bockmuehl. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996. This is the best single volume on rabbinic literature. It has a somewhat scholarly tone but includes discussions of all the major sources and manuscripts for rabbinic literature. It is especially useful when dealing with some of the more obscure aspects of rabbinic literature, like the various midrashic collections.

Danby, Herbert, trans. *The Mishnah.* Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012. Originally published by Oxford University Press in 1935, this single-volume translation of the Mishnah is an indispensable resource for reading rabbinic literature in its original context. The mishnaic traditions are closer to the time period of the New Testament than other rabbinic sources; therefore, the Mishnah is one of the most useful of the rabbinic sources to study on its own. Danby provides numerous notes and explanations for nonspecialists.

Notes

1. Some scholars have suggested Aramaic or Hebrew originals for at least some of the Gospels, Matthew in particular. See James R. Edwards, *The Hebrew Gospel and the Development of the Synoptic Tradition* (Grand

Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009). Although this tradition is persistent, and a Semitic background has been suggested for all four of the Gospels, it remains a minority view in current New Testament scholarship.

2. See especially Donald W. Parry and Dana M. Pike, *LDS Perspectives on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1997). For specific examples, see Edward J. Brandt, "The Law of Moses and the Law of Christ," in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 133–53; Andrew C. Skinner, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and Latter-day Truth," *Ensign*, February 2006, https://www.lds.org/ensign/2006/02/the-dead-sea-scrolls-and-latter-day-truth; James H. Charlesworth, "Messianism in the Pseudepigrapha and the Book of Mormon," in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 99–137; and Ann N. Madsen, "Melchizedek at Qumran and Nag Hammadi," in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 285–95.
3. See, for example, Jacob Neusner, "Messianic Themes in Formative Judaism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52 (1984): 357–74. Neusner was one of the great promulgators of this approach, since it fits his "documentary" approach where every ancient Jewish text represented an independent philosophical worldview. For a critique of this approach that still allows for the diversity of belief and practice in ancient Judaism, see Daniel Boyarin, "Beyond Judaisms: Meṭaṭron and the Divine Polymorphy of Ancient Judaism," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 41 (2010): 323–65.
4. The best overall scholarly discussion of rabbinic literature remains H. L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996). An extremely accessible introduction to the various genres in Jewish literature is Barry W. Holtz, ed., *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (New York: Touchstone, 1984; repr., Simon and Schuster, 1986).
5. The overview in this chapter must be brief, and so only the barest sketch of rabbinic literature may be given. The reader interested in more in-depth discussion is directed to the further reading selections at the end of this chapter.
6. Hebrew *ḥakhamim*, sing. *ḥakham*.
7. Rabbinic literature gives us *rab* and *rabban* as alternatives, although these are usually reserved for specific individuals or families.
8. Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Epigraphical Rabbis," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 72 (1981): 1–17; and Hayim Lapin, "Epigraphical Rabbis: A Reconsideration," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101 (2011): 311–46.
9. Matthew 26:25, 49; Mark 9:5; 11:21; 14:45; John 1:38, 49; 3:2; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8. These are the references in Greek. In English the term appears only in John. This is a choice on the part of the KJV translators and probably represents a slight anti-Semitic bias.
10. Stuart S. Miller, "'Epigraphical' Rabbis, Helios, and Psalm 19: Were the Synagogues of Archaeology and the Synagogues of the Sages One and the Same?," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 94 (2004): 27–76; Miller, "The Rabbis and the Non-existent Monolithic Synagogue," in *Jews, Christians and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction during the Graeco-Roman Period*, ed. Steven Fine (London: Routledge, 1999), 57–70; and Jodi Magness, "Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues," in *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palaestina*, ed. W. G. Dever and Seymour Gitin (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 363–89.
11. There are specific precedents given in other parts of the law, such as the specific command to not light fire in Exodus 35:3 and the story of the man stoned for gathering wood on the Sabbath in Numbers 15:32–36. These (relatively few) examples aid in the halakhic process but do not give definite solutions to most of the legal discussions.
12. These ideas are not unique to ancient Judaism. The debate surrounding the proper way to keep the Sabbath day continues in Latter-day Saint discourse to this day.

13. For further discussion on the written law of Moses and its relationship to the New Testament, see chapter 2 herein.
14. Mishnah Avot 1:1. Available in English translation in Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 446.
15. This is a reference to the seventy elders who went up to the mountain with Moses and Aaron in Exodus 24:1.
16. For further discussion on the oral law of Judaism, see Avram R. Shannon, "Torah in the Mouth: An Introduction to Jewish Oral Law," *Religious Educator* 19, no. 1 (2018): 139–59.
17. Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 124 (see note 4). Strack and Stemberger point out here that basically everything we know about the compilation of the Mishnah derives from a letter from AD 987, written by Sherira Gaon.
18. It is often referred to as the *Bavli*, after the Hebrew word for "Babylonian."
19. Christine Elizabeth Hayes, *Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds: Accounting for the Halakhic Difference in Selected Sugyot from Tractate Avodah Zarah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
20. For more information on the processes of midrash, including discussion of how it relates to Latter-day Saint modes of thinking, see Avram R. Shannon, "Mormons and Midrash: On the Composition of Expansive Interpretation in Genesis Rabbah and the Book of Moses," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (2015): 15–34.
21. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "Myth, Inference, and the Relativism of Reason: An Argument from the History of Judaism," in *Myth and Philosophy,* ed. Frank Reynolds and David Tracy (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), 247–85; and Naomi Janowitz and Andrew J. Lazarus, "Rabbinic Methods of Inference and the Rationality Debate," *Journal of Religion* 72, no. 4 (1992): 491–511.
22. According to Irving Jacobs, the rabbinic sages "acknowledged plain meaning—*as they perceived it*—to be the boundary within which the midrashic process was obliged to function." Irving Jacobs, *The Midrashic Process* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3; emphasis in original.
23. Menahem I. Kahana, "The Halakhic Midrashim," in *The Literature of the Sages*, vol. 2, ed. Shmuel Safrai, et al. (Assen, Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2006), 3–107, esp. 13–15.
24. For an accessible English discussion of Midrash and its workings, see Barry W. Holtz, "Midrash," in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Touchstone, 1984), 177–211.
25. James Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 131–55, esp. 144.
26. James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 96–134.
27. This has led many authors to write numerous chapters on Jesus's perspective on the law of Moses. See E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah* (Minneapolis: Ausburg Fortress, 2016), 1–134; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 4 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), esp. 26–73; and Chaim Saiman, "Jesus' Legal Theory: A Rabbinic Reading," *Journal of Law and Religion* 23 (2007/2008): 97–130. These citations merely scratch the surface on what is something of a cottage industry in New Testament studies. It should be noted that many studies of Jesus's relationship to the law are written from a perspective of Paul's statements in Galatians 3.
28. For example, one biblical scholar has connected the boats in Mark 4:36 to the Jonah story and a tradition that there were many boats with Jonah. The problem with connecting this particular Jonah tradition with the New Testament is that it comes from Yalkut Shimoni, a midrashic compilation from the Middle Ages. It *may* reflect earlier traditions, but it is essentially impossible to say. See Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 333.
29. Soncino Translation. This is available online at http://halakhah.com/shabbath/shabbath_153.html.
30. Called Gamliel in rabbinic literature.
31. This is likely out of cognizance of his position as Paul's teacher. Since Luke was probably Paul's student, this would make him part of Gamaliel's line of tradition. On this point, see Jacob Neusner and Bruce D. Chilton, "Paul and Gamliel," in *In Quest of the Historical Pharisees*, ed. Neusner and Chilton (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 175–223.

32. This tradition is historically unreliable. See Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 67.
33. See the discussion in Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950; repr. in combined edition in 1994), 58–61.
34. Walter M. Chandler, *The Trial of Jesus from a Lawyer's Standpoint* (New York City: Federal Book Company, 1925). Steven W. Allen's *The Illegal Trial of Jesus* (Mesa, AZ: Legal Awareness Series, Inc, 2005) is essentially a recapitulation of Chandler's arguments.
35. See John W. Welch, "Latter-day Saint Reflections on the Trial and Death of Jesus," *Clark Memorandum* (Fall 2000): 2–14.
36. The relationship between the temple laws and the Mishnah is explored in Jacob Neusner, "Map without Territory: Mishnah's Laws of Sacrifice and Sanctuary," *History of Religions* 19 (1979): 103–27. The use that the sages of the Mishnah turn the temple narratives to is examined in Naftali Cohn, *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2012).
37. Author's translation, with a Hebrew text taken from Sefaria.org.
38. Although it should, of course, be further noted that Stephen is stoned for blasphemy at Acts 7:57–58.
39. Dana M. Pike, "Before the Jewish Authorities," in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ: From the Last Supper to the Resurrection*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 210–68, 225.
40. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment, *Jesus the Christ Study Guide* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 164.
41. Rengstorf, "απόστολος," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 407–45, esp. 407. See also Hermann Vogelstein, "The Development of the Apostalate in Judaism and Its Transformation in Christianity," *HUCA* 2 (1925): 99–123. Vogelstein sees the notion of "apostle" reaching back into biblical times at least as far back as the Chronicler.
42. "απόστολος," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 407–45; and Francis H. Agnew, "The Origin of the NT Apostle-Concept: A Review of Research," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 (1986): 75–96, esp. 79–82. Agnew outlines the various objections to the association of *šeliaḥ* with *apostle* but notes that the one term is legal, while the other is religious, in a rabbinic context. This is not a reasonable distinction from an ancient perspective.
43. This is according to Matthew.
44. "απόστολος," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 418.
45. "απόστολος," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 421.
46. "απόστολος," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 429,
47. Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud and Midrashic Literature*, 1583.
48. Hebrew: *š/l/ḥ*
49. It should perhaps be noted that the verb *šalaḥ* has a reference to divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1. It may be coincidence, but in the interest of bringing these two literatures together, Rabban Gamaliel I is the named sage quoted in Gittin 4:2.
50. Circumcision was seen as the distinctive mark of Judaism in this period, although other ancient peoples practiced circumcision. The ancient Greeks believed the foreskin to be one of the most attractive parts of the male body, and so in the Hellenistic/Roman world, the Jewish lack of a foreskin marked them as barbarous. See Frederick Mansfield Hodges, "The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greek and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and Their Relation to Lipodermos, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration and Kynodesme," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 75 (2001): 375–405. The circumcision of non-Jewish converts was, therefore, a major question in how nascent Christianity was placing itself vis-à-vis its Jewish and Roman environment. This is not simply an ancient phenomenon. See Sander L. Gilman, "Decircumcision: The First Aesthetic Surgery," *Modern Judaism* 17 (1997): 201–10.
51. This may be seen in the discussion in Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950; reprinted in combined edition with *Greek in Jewish Palestine* in 1994), 58–61.