

Oral Tradition in the Old Testament and Judaism

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1 Introduction

The term ‘*sola scriptura*’ refers to the written text of the Bible. In this article, I treat certain indications that God has revealed more than just what has been written down in the text of the Bible by asking: What is the meaning of the oral tradition in ancient times? Does the oral tradition have significance for our view of *sola scriptura* as principle?

Gaining answers requires considering the following subjects: the Book of Genesis, several laws in Exodus and Deuteronomy, the relationship between oral and written traditions as found in antiquity, in the rabbinic traditions, and in the New Testament. After treating these subjects, I give some general considerations.

2 The Book of Genesis

In the Book of Genesis, our understanding of certain historical events can become difficult without additional information. Three stories are chosen to illustrate this point.

In Genesis 4, Cain and Abel are described as sons of Adam and Eve. In the course of time, Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to Yhwh, and Abel brought some of the firstborn animals of his flock. How could they have known it was good to do that? Was offering a spontaneous action on their part, or did they follow an already established custom? And, why was the offering of Abel received with favor by Yhwh, and the offering of Cain not? Were these unexpected outcomes or did the brothers know beforehand what was acceptable to God?¹ The most likely answers we choose depend heavily

¹ It is possible that the better intention of Abel was expressed in the terms “the firstlings” and “the fat”, while Cain “was content merely to discharge this duty”. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, Part I (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978), 205. Jonathan D. Sarfati mentions the opinion that always an animal sacrifice was necessary and that Cain deviated from this custom. *The Genesis Account: A Theological, Historical, and*

on how we view the origin of the book of Genesis.² The reader assuming a late origin of the book in the times of the kings of Israel may interpret the cultic activity as a retroprojection of later practices. However, he then has to deal with a distinction in the meaning of the word *mincha*. This term is used in Genesis 4 for typifying both offerings, while in Leviticus the usage of the word is restricted to non-bloody offerings.³

Another possibility is a depiction of a spontaneous, internal compulsion of both brothers to give something to God. However, that would make God's negative reaction to Cain's offer difficult to understand. We do better to seek an answer in already existing practices. The Book of Genesis tells us that God spoke many times with Adam and Eve.⁴ Therefore, it is probable that He also gave instructions concerning worship service and related cultic activities to be carried out by humanity. Would the God who gave Noah detailed instructions for building the ark (6: 14–16) have neglected to give Adam, Cain, and Abel any verbal instructions regarding sacrifice? Also we note that the text introduces the episode of the offering rather casually so that one could believe that this depiction might not have been the first time the brothers had brought sacrifices. Another presupposition of the existence of earlier divine communication and an oral tradition is likely with regard to events at the end of the same chapter. We read that Seth had a son and named him Enoch. "At that time

Scientific commentary on Genesis 1–11 (Powder Springs: Creation Ministries International, 2015), 410–3. Cf. Eric Peels, "The World's First Murder: Violence and Justice in Genesis 4:1–16," in: John T. Fitzgerald, Fika J. van Rensburg and H.F. van Rooy (Eds), *Animosity, the Bible, and Us. Some European, North American, and South African Perspectives* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 19–39.

- 2 E.g. C. John Collins writes: "... one purpose of this account is to pave the way for the sacrificial system of Leviticus. In particular, one function of this account would be to establish the antiquity of the practices—so that the detailed description of Leviticus might be seen as protecting the purity of the rites against the deviations brought in by human sin". *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006), 216.
- 3 C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*. Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 109. The term *zebach* or the name of a special type of sacrifice is lacking. Outside Leviticus the word *mincha* can have a broader meaning. More differences between the practices of the patriarchs and the later laws in Exodus—Deuteronomy are mentioned by Bruce K. Waltke (and Cathi J. Fredricks) in *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zonder- van, 2001), 29–30.
- 4 Gen. 1: 28–30; 2: 16–17; 3: 3, 9, 11, 13, 16–19. The reaction to God's walking in the garden (Gen. 3: 8) gives the impression of regular meetings and conversations with the first human beings.

men began to call on the name of the Lord” (4: 26).⁵ This seems the origin of a specific and regular cult practice.⁶

In the New Testament we read that Abel was reckoned amongst the prophets (Luke 11: 50–51). Although this is a later text, it points to the understanding of Abel as a receiver of God’s revelations. In the same way, Enoch being another descendant of Adam (Gen. 5: 19–24) is also considered a prophet (Jude 14–15). Although in the Book of Genesis these titles are lacking, yet it is possible to assume that more traditions about God’s speaking survived, for instance taking into account practices understood in the words: “Enoch walked with God” (5: 22).

A second example is a precept about the animals in the ark. Noah received the command to take pairs of animals with him, as depicted by seven pairs of the clean and one pair of the unclean animals (7: 2). The distinction between clean and unclean animals is an issue here. The Jewish exegete Umberto Cassuto asks the question how it is possible to speak of animals that are clean and not clean at a time when the Torah laws distinguishing between these categories had not yet been formulated? He suggests that the concepts of clean and unclean animals would already have been in existence prior to the Torah, even among the Gentiles, particularly in relation to sacrifices.⁷ Also, Bruce Waltke suggests that Noah may have known of the distinction through his walks with God, whereby this author argues that the fundamental institutions of the ‘ceremonial laws’ reach back to the original creation.⁸ Both Cassuto and Waltke assume a revelation that as such is not mentioned in Genesis.

A third example concerns Abraham and obedience of practice. His son Isaac had received the promise that he and his descendants will be blessed, “because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my degrees and my laws” (26: 5). Here legal language of later books, especially Exodus and Deuteronomy, is used. We do not know exactly which instructions are supposed in the cited passage.⁹ Somewhat earlier in the book, God declares

5 The quotations of Bible texts are from the NIV.

6 Cf. the same descriptive phrase when Abram built an altar (Gen. 12:8). Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*. The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1996), 292–3.

7 Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, Part II (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1974), 75.

8 Waltke, *Genesis*, 138.

9 Waltke writes: “The narrator means either the teachings of piety and ethics known by the patriarchs prior to Moses or more probably the whole law of Moses. Genesis is part of the Pentateuch and should be interpreted within that context. In Deut. 11:1 the same list of terms refer to the whole law of Moses.” *Genesis*, 368.

that He had chosen Abraham “so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just” (18: 19).¹⁰ The terms ‘right’ and ‘just’ are not explained. However, the reader may gain a general impression from the later descriptions. For instance, Genesis 18 clearly shows that the attitude of Abraham is in stark contrast to the attitude of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, thereby suggesting an attitude of obedience to what Yhwh had previously revealed.

My point is that an earlier revelation can be presupposed in several instances of the Book of Genesis, while the content of that revelation has not been written down in this book.¹¹ Seemingly, the Book of Genesis requires reading together with the other Books of the Pentateuch, although a difference in historical periods remains. Genesis describes a period preceding the time in which Israel and Moses received special commandments.

Such a way of reading takes into account the continuing history and differs from the Jewish approach to conceive the Torah as a coherent whole without a historical development. In this Jewish approach, later regulations (for example about clean and unclean) can be used directly to understand the book of Genesis.¹² Contrarily, my approach is that whereas themes are sometimes similar, yet engaging in a historical reading presupposes an earlier revelation, even a revelation that at certain points may deviate from the message to the people of Israel.

The term *sola scriptura* points to the written character of God’s word. The question is whether traditions of revelation have been preserved outside known scripture. Knowledge of such traditions aids the interpretation of the Bible, although they are of a different status. Several scholars use in this respect the designation ‘unwritten revelation’ or ‘oral revelation’.¹³ Their use of these

10 Cf. the expression “righteous” in Gen. 6: 9.

11 In the Protestant tradition several authors have equated the ‘primeval revelation’ (*Uroffenbarung*) with the later writings of Moses. That being so, it could not extend beyond the writings of Moses and thus become what medieval (roman-catholic) scholars saw as oral tradition accompanying written scripture. Cf. John H. Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition and Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 137, 184–97. See further William D. Barrick, “Conscience, Oral Tradition, Natural Religion, or Later Insertion?: Unwritten Revelation in Genesis 1–11,” ETS Annual Meeting—November 2011, accessed August 29, 2017, https://www.academia.edu/1368769/Conscience_Oral_Tradition_Natural_Religion_or_Later_Insertion_Unwritten_Revelation_in_Genesis_1-11.

12 Rashi explains Gen. 7:2 with “We learn that Noah studied the Torah [before revealed to Israel]”. Cf. Talmud, Zevachim 116a.

13 See Barrick, “Conscience, Oral Tradition, Natural Religion, or Later Insertion?”.

terms is justifiable when we take into account that not all the revelations are described in Genesis. Historical events too can have been told in the course of the generations. We do well not to exclude the possibility that oral and written traditions preceded the composition of the book of Genesis. An indication for this position is the expression “This is the book of the *toledot* of Adam” (5: 1). Also, in Genesis 14, regarding the account of Abram’s defeat of Kedorlaomer, several explanations point to the use of an older written source.¹⁴

As regards revelation or historical descriptions, the conclusion can be that Genesis presupposes much historical information and knowledge of practices.¹⁵ This situation is understandable for a book that includes a lengthy period, going from the first human beings to the origin of the twelve tribes of Israel. We do not know the content of the lost knowledge, although in the Hellenistic period several pseudepigraphic books tried to fill in the gaps of lost knowledge, in order to enhance our understanding of the book of Genesis.¹⁶ Referencing the undisclosed previous traditions apparently was not essential for the purpose of the author or compiler of the book of Genesis.

The Letter to the Hebrews opens with the assumption that “God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways” (Heb. 1: 1). This text and the considerations already mentioned point to a more comprehensive revelation than provided in the scriptures,¹⁷ even though knowledge of these traditions is not necessary for us.

3 The Legislation for Israel and the Concretization of the Laws

In the book of Exodus, laws are received by Moses on the Sinai. However, some regulations were necessary in the time between the departure from Egypt and

14 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*. Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1987), 307.

15 When information is omitted in Genesis because the content is treated more extensively in other parts of the Pentateuch, then this fact has consequences for our view on the origin of the books. See Hendrik Koorevaar and Mart-Jan Paul (Eds), *Theologie van het Oude Testament: De blijvende boodschap van het Oude Testament* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2013), 186–7.

16 See the examples in James H. Charlesworth (Ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 Volumes (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983–1985).

17 It is clear that several written documents were lost in the course of history. E.g., the Book of Wars (Num. 21: 14), the Book of Jashar (Josh. 10: 13; 2 Sam. 1: 19–27), and the chronicles or annals of the kings (2 Kings 15:31; 16:19). See Th.C. Vriezen and A.S. van der Woude, *Oudisraëlitische en vroegjoodse literatuur* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 2000), 15–8.

the arrival at Mount Sinai. A few times we read of a reference to this. After the description of the events at Mara it is written: “There the Lord made a decree and a law for them” (Ex. 15: 25). This expression can point to the recent event, but it is also possible that a more general activity is meant. A few chapters later Moses made it clear to his father-in-law that he informed his people concerning “God’s decrees and laws” (18: 16; cf. vs. 20). It can be assumed that the precept concerning the Sabbath belonged to these decrees, as it is presupposed in the gathering of the Manna (16: 22–23).

Following up the advice of his father-in-law, Moses appointed officials to take over a great part of the juridical decision making (18:17–26). We read several times about seventy men being appointed with special leadership tasks and being selected from a greater number of elders (24: 1,9; Num. 11: 16–25). The tasks and the number of members of the Sanhedrin, mentioned in the New Testament, is a later development of this early practice.

How was it possible for the first judges to carry out their tasks? The legislation in the Pentateuch gives clarity regarding the main positions, but the text is more ‘illustrative’ than ‘complete’.¹⁸ The laws give concrete examples and instructions what has to be done in sensitive situations, but their coverage is not complete. This becomes clear from the manner in which new situations are described. The focus and aim of the general law is apparently clear, but—as in the issue of the daughters of Zelophehad—it also did not provide a direct answer. In this event, a new legal provision is drawn up: if a man dies and leaves no son, his inheritance will then be turned over to his daughter (Num. 27: 1–11 and 36: 1–12).

Also, the Ten Commandments are formulated as short instructions and in the course of history different explanations about their implementation have been provided, while the general direction of the Decalogue had been clear. It is interesting that in the Book of Deuteronomy an elaboration and explanation of it are given, being focused on the new situation of Israel living in the land of Canaan. Especially Deuteronomy 12–26 gives us much insight in the meaning of the Ten Commandments.¹⁹

18 Raymond Westbrook writes: “Just as a law code could never be exhaustive, so no particular text could ever be an exhaustive statement of a rule, even when it took the form of a peremptory order, because the mode of thinking was in examples, not principles. And without definition of its terms, application of a rule could only be approximate—by analogy, inference, or even looser associations.” *A History of Ancient Near Eastern Law*, Volume 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 20.

19 M.J. Paul, G. van den Brink, J.C. Bette (Eds), *Bijbelcommentaar Leviticus—Deuteronomium*. Studiebijbel Oude Testament, Volume 2 (Veenendaal: Centrum voor Bijbelonderzoek, 2005), “De opbouw, boodschap en het auteurschap van het boek Deuteronomium,” 765–70.

The judges and officials were expected to give guidance in the application of the laws in the concrete situations (16: 18). Yet, many situations remained too difficult for the local authorities to decide on. Therefore, a central address is given where to turn for redress. Let the conflicting parties go to “the place the Lord your God will choose”, to lay down their case for the priests and the judge who is in office at that time (17: 8–13). It is clear that the central position of Moses as judge could be taken over by a central court of justice in the Promised Land.

How this institution has functioned in later centuries we do not know, but we read that after a period of decline that king Jehoshaphat did make new regulations about the administration of justice, both in the cities and for a central court in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 19: 4–11).

4 Oral and Written Traditions in the Ancient Near East

While many scholars have made a clear difference between an earlier phase of oral tradition and a later written phase of tradition found in antiquity, a growing number of recent studies show that both traditions could have existed simultaneously. Interaction between both systems was possible and a clear diachronic development from an earlier to a later phase was not necessary. Susan Niditch shows in her book *Oral World and Written Word* that the exclusive diachronic approach is unable to do justice to the characteristics of orally composed works in antiquity.

The literacy in antique cultures functioned in a different way than in our modern world. There were no clear distinctions, chronologically and culturally, between oral and written literature. Also, oral and written presentations intermingled. Books were not written for the purpose of delivering them solely to the eyes of readers, but to read them aloud for the ears of the hearers. In many cultures no arguments for a separate period of oral tradition are available.²⁰

A comparable approach can be seen taken by David Carr. He investigated Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Greek texts to determine how traditions were handed down during the generations. Usually, the written version functioned as a support for the oral tradition and as a help to impress the message on the hearer. The Book of Proverbs used the expression to “write them on the tablet of your heart” (Prov. 3: 3; 7: 3). Carr explains the importance of transmitting

20 Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 3, 78, 134.

the original texts in a very accurate way. Literary technique supported this transmission and many hearers could control what happened. The text was property of the community, and that made it possible to detect changes in the content.²¹

A further point about the communication is the very compact writing of the scriptural text. In the oldest manuscripts no spaces are found between the words, no vowels are expressed in the Hebrew script, no punctuation marks are placed, and the formatting of the pages is very limited. In such texts, the intonation is lost, while perhaps the intonation was important for the correct understanding of the sentence. From the written text of Psalm 121: 1 it is not clear whether or not the sentence is a question or a statement: “Where does my help come from?” or “From where comes my help”.

In the course of time, several grammatical forms went out of date. In many cases it is not clear whether or not influences of dialects or international usage have been influenced the texts.

Already in the Septuagint (3rd and 2nd century B.C.) one can observe that several expressions in the Hebrew text had not been not clear for the translators. Sometimes they guessed certain meanings in order to make the Greek text understandable. For the exegete many uncertainties could arise in the study of poetical texts and the prophecies.

As long as the texts functioned in a community whereby the meaning was orally transmitted and explained, we may expect fewer problems with interpretation. However, when the oral tradition is no longer available, it becomes more difficult to understand the texts. As the extant texts are the only source for our understanding, we lack the accompanying, interpretative context. In contrast to our culture, where writing and reading are independent forms of transfer, in the ancient cultures these activities were interdependent within a broader practice of transfer and memorization.

5 Oral Tradition in the Rabbinic Tradition

Rabbinic Judaism attaches great importance to the oral tradition. This tradition concerns the interpretation and facilitates the application of the laws in

21 David Carr, “Torah on the Heart: Literary Jewish Textuality Within Its Ancient Near Eastern Context,” *Oral Tradition* 25 (2010), 17–40. Cf. M.J. Paul, G. van den Brink, J.C. Bette (Eds), *Bijbelcommentaar Hosea—Maleachi*. Studiebijbel Oude Testament, Volume 12 (Doorn: Centrum voor Bijbelonderzoek, 2015), “Het ontstaan van de profetische boeken,” 836–48.

later situations. The oral Torah had been transferred from one generation to another and ultimately recorded in the Mishna (2nd century), the Talmud (6th century) and other writings (e.g. the midrashim).

According to one tradition, Moses received on the Sinai two Torahs: one written Torah and one oral Torah.²² The First is the Pentateuch and the second was the explanation orally transmitted and written down in a later time. Another rabbinic view is that not only the Pentateuch, but also the later messages of the prophets and wise men had been revealed to Moses. God revealed these in a later time again to the prophets and wise men; we know of its content from their writings.

In Pirkei Avot, a part of the Mishna, the transfer of the tradition is explained: “Moses received the Torah from Sinai and gave it over to Joshua. Joshua gave it over to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets gave it over to the Men of the Great Assembly. They [the Men of the Great Assembly] would always say these three things: Be cautious in judgement. Establish many pupils. And make a safety fence around the Torah.”²³ The expression ‘Torah’ here is not only the written revelation, the five books of Moses, but also the oral revelation. The rabbis ascribe divine origin and authority to this oral tradition. Because God gave her to Moses, and via Joshua and the elders (the successors of Joshua; Josh. 24: 31), and the prophets (from Samuel tot Malachi), she has been handed down to the Great Synagogue. This expression pertains to the council of elders from the time of Ezra and onwards dealing with the explanation of the law.

The Talmud refers a few times to rules that are not written in the Torah as *halakhot le-Moshe mi-Sinai* (oral laws of Moses, received on the Sinai), but this expression is never applied to the Mishna or to the rules in the Talmud. The reader of the Talmud finds it nearly impossible to antedate all the discussions between the rabbis to the time of Moses, and this is also not done in the Talmud itself. The wise men in the Talmud distinguish between two types of laws: *de-’oraita* (written laws) en *de-rabbanan* (oral laws).²⁴ Usually the authority of the written laws is greater than those of the oral laws and rabbinic decrees.²⁵ Rabbinical applications presuppose God’s covenant with Israel and are

22 Hermann L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), “Oral and Written Tradition,” 31–44.

23 Pirkei Avot 1:1.

24 In Aramaic, *de-’oraita* means “from the Torah” and *de-rabbanan* means “from our Rabbis”. Cf. Mark Kinzer, “Messianic Judaism and Jewish Tradition in the Twenty-First Century. A Biblical Defense of Oral Torah,” in Kinzer, *Israel’s Messiah and the People of God: A Vision for Messianic Jewish Covenant Fidelity* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 29–61.

25 Cf. David Novak, *The Election of Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 172–3.

intended to protect the written laws. The oral Torah is dynamic and flexible, and is important for actualizing the ancient precepts in the course of history.

6 Josephus and the New Testament

Flavius Josephus depicts the Pharisees issuing laws on the basis of the tradition of the elders, although these had not been written down in the books of Moses. He referred also to the Sadducees as only respecting the written records.²⁶ It is well known that the rabbinic tradition stands in the line of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees are mentioned many times in the New Testament. In Matthew 23:1–2 Jesus speaks of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees as sitting in the seat of Moses. Very likely this expression does not refer to the actual seats in the synagogues but to the central legislative authority. This pertains to the succession of the position of Moses and the juridical authority “in the place the Lord shall choose” and the central legal institution in the days of king Jehoshaphat.²⁷ The normal name of it was ‘High Court’ of ‘Great Court’, but in that Roman time the designation ‘Sanhedrin’ was usual, taken from the Greek word *synedrion*. In the time of Jesus, the Sanhedrin resided in Jerusalem. After the destruction of Jerusalem it moved to Tiberias.

The Sanhedrin was a Jewish agency with juridical authority; it was made up of seventy members in accordance with Numbers 11:16, with the high priest serving as chair.

In Matthew 23:3 Jesus gave the surprising encouragement referencing the leaders sitting in the chair of Moses: “You must obey them and do everything they tell you”. This concurs with the words by Moses in relation to the central juridical office: “You must act according to the decisions they give you” (Deut. 17:10). However, Jesus also adduced the reproach that these leaders do not practice their own rules. Also, he signaled that many rules were misused and

26 Josephus, *Ancient History*, XIII: 297.

27 Barney Kasdan thinks that by the seats of Moses in the synagogues are meant those located there. *Matthew Presents Yeshua, King Messiah: A Messianic Commentary* (Clarksville: Lederer Books, 2011), 261. In that case, the name of the seats is derived from the function of Moses in the past. However, the word is in singular in verse 3, while in verse 6 the plural (“most important seats in the synagogues”) is used. It seems better to interpret the singular as the central legislative office in Jerusalem. Jakob van Bruggen, *Matteüs: Het evangelie voor Israël*. Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1990), 398 and Kinzer, *Israel's Messiah*, 54–6.

that important principles of the written Torah had been neglected (Matt. 23: 4–33).

We receive the impression that Jesus accepted the principle of a central authority with continuing legislation as such, but that he rejected several forms of oral tradition and human rules.

7 Messianic Jews

While many Messianic Jews reject the rabbinical traditions, yet the influential Mark Kinzer follows another approach. He advocates accepting the good elements of these traditions. For him, the *sola scriptura* is a good soteriological norm, but with regard to the ethical questions (*halacha*) it is in his view important to join the oral Torah in Judaism. His claim is that over the course of the centuries this tradition served as a protective force. Nonetheless, by starting with the confession that Yeshua is Messiah, not all the aspects of this oral tradition can be accepted. Also, one must take into account that significant differences exist between groups of Messianic Jews. Yet, in the manner suggested by Kinzer, a part of the oral tradition remains important for life today.²⁸

8 Some Considerations

1. The Hebrew Bible has a canonical status, but sometimes in it other traditions are presupposed. As far as such traditions are known for us out of other sources, these can be a help for the exegesis. The value of these traditions has to be assessed carefully, because not all the traditions are old. Many traditions in the pseudepigraphic literature seems to have a speculative character.
2. It is important for us to use the formula *sola scriptura* in accordance with the character of the scriptures in the context of the cultures in which they arose. It is not necessary to exclude the usefulness of oral and written traditions.

In the Protestant tradition we do fully accept the legitimacy of doing historical research on scripture, about the context in which the scripture is written, about the people who handed down the manuscripts and the traditions, about apocryphal texts and, finally, about the history of interpretation in different denominations.

28 Kinzer, *Israel's Messiah*, 59–61.

3. The Reformers have stressed the value of the holy scriptures. Reformed systematic theology assumes that old oral traditions and several writings of prophets and apostles have been lost for us. The Reformed emphasis on the exclusive nature of the Bible opposes those traditions that continually expand, overgrow the Bible and receive an independent authority in doctrinal matters (especially as in Roman Catholic and Jewish circles). Protestants continue to have problems with the Roman-Catholic papal authority as stipulated in special dogmas and with the rabbinical *halachic* decisions that go much further than the Old Testament or seem to be in contradiction with the Christian belief. Of course, explanatory traditions can be useful, but should always be tested from the books of the canon.
4. The Bible itself provides the most important message, necessary for our salvation and serving God. However practical translation of biblical truth to our time always raises questions. Someone like Herman Bavinck emphasized that an “explanation tradition” is needed in order to ensure consistency between scripture and the religious life of this time.²⁹ A careful hermeneutical approach can help and provide insight into the nature of our own explanation traditions.
5. The oral tradition determines part of the identity of the Jewish people. Some rabbis complain that because the oral traditions are written down, the consequence is that these become static, while the original intent had been to make it possible in later times to have new applications of the old Torah.

Who as a Christian considers this point of view, may think about the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised “the Spirit of the truth” (Joh. 14: 17), with the goal that He “will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (14: 26).

An example of this can be seen in the New Testament discussions in Jerusalem about the position of the new believers having a heathen origin. The conclusion of the Apostle convent was: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements” (Acts 15:28). Apparently, a new application was possible through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In a letter, the apostle Paul emphasizes how important it is to be led by the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5: 18).

²⁹ H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 481–94.

The principle of *sola scriptura* is, of course, never meant to exclude the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to the contrary, in relation to the actualizing of the message of the scriptures the role of the Holy Spirit is an important aspect.

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