

The Signifying Creator

*Nontextual Sources of Meaning
in Ancient Judaism*

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Introduction

Outside the Text

Jews have been known for centuries as a “people of the book.” This designation was first applied to Jews in Islam, which they have happily adopted as a description of themselves since the tenth century.¹ It is common to think of classical Judaism as the text-centered civilization par excellence, based on the Torah and its interpretation. But the culture of Jews living in Palestine and Babylonia in late antiquity, from the first century CE to the early Middle Ages, also carried with it a profound tendency to derive meaning from sources outside the text.

How and where people derive meaning is one of the most prominent questions in the humanities—indeed, some would say that it is the most important question in the academy. Much of what historians of religion do, however, is understanding the things that language does other than generate meaning. Current research on ritual language aims to find out not only what prayers, sacred poetry, and incantations say but also what they do. According to the classic formulation of philosopher J. L. Austin, we must understand both the informative function of language and its performative properties.² For example, the study of ancient magic and esoteric traditions, which has burgeoned in recent decades, analyzes language that most people think is meaningless. The student of magical texts must determine whether a given string of letters was a magical name composed of the initial letters of biblical verses, the mangled names of foreign deities, a phrase in an unfamiliar language, or perhaps just the language of the text spelled badly by an incompetent scribe.³ When a solution does emerge—which is not always the case—the result is not always easily identifiable as the meaning of the passage. A particular phrase or combination of letters can be one of many ingredients in a recipe for getting something specific done, such as healing a headache, luring back an estranged wife, or expelling a neighbor from his house.

The argument of this book is that ancient Judaism encompassed the idea that God embedded signs in the world that could be read by human beings with the proper knowledge and consciousness and that this idea constitutes a kind of semiotics of the nontextual—that is, a form of discourse about the diverse functions of signs outside the realm of the written word. The next chapter discusses alternative creation myths, in which God is said to have implanted sources of signification in the Torah, the natural world, and the ritual system. The third chapter shows how rabbis and poets derived meaning from details in this ritual system such as the dazzling vestments worn by the high priest in the ancient Temple. The fourth chapter examines how ancient Jews developed systems of interpretation that read the divine will into everyday events and the intentional acts of animals and inanimate objects. The fifth chapter describes one of the ramifications of this latter idea, a conception of the world in which animals and elements of nature sometimes exercise agency in enacting the divine will in history. This book, therefore, is about how ancient people found meaning in unexpected ways.

The Significance of Meaning

The subject of this book, the significance of meaning, may be of interest to those who study language and culture for reasons other than the pursuit of meaning for its own sake. One reason is that some of the phenomena described in these pages, such as alternative creation myths and interpretations of the priestly vestments and divination traditions, take place in a ritual context. The first two themes are prominent in the poetry of the ancient synagogue, and divination traditions are complex ritual systems. Examining these themes thus opens the way to understanding their ritual function and their content.

Another reason is that these phenomena bear on how ancient societies formed theories and systematic conceptions of ritual and how that ritual is used to derive meaning. Ritual is an object of study and contemplation for modern students of religion, as well a subject of discourse for premodern cultures.⁴ In the case of the alternative creation stories and interpretations of the priestly vestments, ritual is the main subject of interpretation, and divination is a ritual strategy for deriving signification. Thus understanding these topics can help us uncover indigenous ways of understanding ritual, culture, and signification: not only our own, modern theories, but also the theories that premodern societies themselves developed.

This inclusion of the study of how societies themselves speak about rituals and interpret them is indicative of a larger interest in what our informants

and texts have to say about the nature of ritual action, hermeneutics, and historiography. The study of indigenous folklore theory and ancient ritual theory accordingly has become a growing field among anthropologists and historians of religion. For example, by studying the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, the ancient school of the philosophical interpretation of Vedic ritual, Francis X. Clooney was able to develop a theory of how early Hinduism engaged in “thinking ritually” and to set Jaimini’s commentaries into a conceptual framework comparing its insights with theories of sacrifice forged in the social sciences and cultural studies.⁵

A similar development took place in the field of semiotics, the study of communication focusing on the diverse functions of signs and their relationship to the signifier and interpretant. While anthropologists and linguists have long been engaged in applying semiotic analysis to the speech acts and material culture of non-Western and nonindustrial societies, only recently have they attempted to locate theories of signs, discourse, and historical events in those societies. E. Valentine Daniel’s *Fluid Signs* does so from the perspective of the semiotic theories of philosopher Charles S. Peirce.⁶ Richard Parmentier’s *Sacred Remains* uses speech-act theory, which focuses on the active or performative properties of language, to locate indigenous historiography in Belau.⁷ Such studies are not concerned with applying semiotic analysis from the outside to ancient documents or modern non-Western cultures but with exploring semiotic theories inherent in those sources and societies themselves.

To be sure, the discipline of semiotics has a long premodern history, going back at least to ancient Greece.⁸ Likewise, the notion that there are indigenous semiotic systems in ancient Judaism is not new, as it can be traced to the nineteenth century. But the idea that semiotic systems in ancient Judaism embraced the physical world and active events is one that deserves greater consideration.

An interesting precedent to this argument can be found in a remarkable book, entitled *Doresh le-Šiyon*, or *Die Memnotechnik des Talmuds*.⁹ The author, a nineteenth-century Moravian scholar named Jacob Brüll, describes how the rabbis tried to make the memorization of Talmudic traditions easier by means of phrases, acronyms, and word associations. This work is significant for the study of memory in rabbinic civilization, a subject that pertains to current debates about the oral basis of rabbinic literature and how it is used by historians.¹⁰ But it is the introduction to Brüll’s book that is most relevant to the subject of ancient Jewish concepts of signification.

Brüll introduces the topic by discussing the range of meanings of the Hebrew word *šiman*, which means “sign” in its many varieties. This word appears first in rabbinic literature and stems from the Greek *semeion*, which also means sign.

The sign (*siman*) is unique in distinguishing between things that are similar, such as signs of cattle, wild animals, fowl, fish, and locusts, fowl eggs and fish eggs;¹¹ in distinguishing what is ritually pure from the impure; signs of a boy or girl who has reached the age of majority, a eunuch, or a barren woman.¹²

He begins his list of uses of the sign with anatomical features of animals or physiological features of the body, which are used to determine categories of ritual purity or dietary permissibility. Brüll continues: “People use them to make something known, such as a marking on a grave [which may be done on the intermediate days of a festival],¹³ a vineyard in its fourth year, a fruit tree that is forbidden,¹⁴ and a grave [the marking of which is specified in] M. Ma’aser Sheni 5:12.” This next category of signs concerns the ways in which human beings place signs on objects or places in order to designate them as impure, forbidden, or permitted.

Brüll then discusses indicators of ritual time, such as when the stars come out, which indicates when evening prayers may be recited. Since this is a celestial indicator, he eventually moves to another category of sign making: the designation of certain events as omens, such as in 1 Samuel 14:9–10, when Jonathan, at war with the Philistines, waits for them to approach:

If they say to us, “Wait until we get to you,” then we’ll stay where we are, and not go up to them. But if they say, “Come up to us,” then we will go up, for the Lord is delivering them into our hands. That shall be our sign.¹⁵

The idea here is that this event is a message from God about whether the battle will be successful. At this point Brüll turns to other examples of signs that God himself embeds in creation and in events. This category was crucial to the ancient rabbis, for they used it to distinguish permissible augury from forbidden acts of divination. Brüll thus moves from anatomical signs naturally embedded in animals and human beings, which are read and interpreted by people for ritual purposes, to signs that people themselves make to designate the legal status of a place or object, to signs placed in the cosmos, to those signs that God himself uses to send a message to humanity.

Brüll makes these observations in his introduction to a technical work about what were also called *simanim*, the mnemonic phrases and acronyms that Talmudic culture created to help in memorizing their complex scholastic traditions. That he places all these in this single category is worth noting.

In fact, his exercise in conceptualizing these categories as the term *siman* is not simply one of finding occurrences of this term, for some of the texts he cites employ the verb *syn*, “to point or indicate.”¹⁶ What is remarkable, then, about this work is that in describing the diverse functions of signs and their relationship to the signifier and interpretant, this very traditional Moravian rabbi had stumbled on a kind of indigenous semiotics. Yet this book was published when Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, was only seven years old.

After and Before Modernity

More recently, scholars of rabbinic literature and literary theory detected semiotic tendencies in rabbinic thought. One of the most prominent of these considerations is José Faur’s *Golden Doves with Silver Dots*. Faur, who studies the Talmud and the medieval Sephardic commentarial tradition, sees in traditional rabbinic hermeneutics a semiotic approach to language and epistemology. He argues that the Greeks held a “metaphysical” view of the world in which the world is eternal and therefore “cannot signify,” and he contrasts that worldview with what he characterizes as the “Hebrew,” semiological view of the world: “The semiological view of the universe conceives of physical phenomena (and historical and personal events) as significant indexes that are to be interpreted and decoded as speech and writing. Therefore, the Hebrews reject the rigid ‘nature/history’ opposition. . . . Divine providence is to creation what *derasha* is to the Book.”¹⁷

Faur further contends that this conception is not limited to how human beings read the divine word but to how God constructed the world from the beginning: “Through God the whole Universe is semiologically connected. God maintains a semiological relationship not only with man, but with all of Creation.”¹⁸

Faur argues that in the first chapter of Genesis, God “calls” the things he creates in the first three days. But “within the cosmic semiological system, man stands alone not only in his power to refuse to respond to God’s call, but also in his faculty to ‘call upon the name of God,’ that is, to initiate a dialogue with God.” This, the semiological framing of the universe, makes for the mediation of communication between the divine and human realms. More than this, for Faur, this view of the world is inherently and entirely textual: “For the Hebrews meaning, signification, etc. are inseparable from text. Judaism does not recognize an a-textual problem: meaning is a function of text.”¹⁹

Faur then seems to attribute to rabbinic thought a conception of pantextuality, the idea that all discourse exists within the realm of the textual. Faur was one of several scholars of rabbinic literature and literary critics who, in the 1970s and 1980s, saw in midrash and other rabbinic genres a kind of precursor to postmodern critical theories, from semiotics to deconstruction.²⁰ The idea of pantextuality is most commonly associated with the literary theorist Jacques Derrida, who famously declared that there was “nothing outside the text,” according to his critique of logocentrism, the idea that truth resides beyond language.²¹ Although Faur does not explicitly identify with Derrida’s overall program,²² other critics, such as Susan Handelman, sought to include Derrida and other poststructuralist critics in a stream that begins with the rabbinic hermeneutical tradition.²³ But as midrash scholar David Stern argued in 1996, some of those concepts, such as indeterminacy, have proved resistant to such identification.²⁴

Faur’s notion that the rabbinic conception of interpretation is a semiotic one is highly suggestive. It emphasizes the consciousness that the rabbis brought to their complex methods of interpretation. Especially valuable is his observation that in ancient Judaism, God relates through signs to humanity and all of creation. This argument will be borne out in this book.

At the same time, as critics have pointed out, Faur’s argument assumes an overall opposition between Hebraic and Hellenic thought. Such a typology overlooks important historical nuances, not the least of which is the influence of Hellenism on rabbinic thought itself.²⁵ The rabbis first developed their religion, hermeneutics, and theology in a world dominated by Greek and Roman statecraft and culture, which abounded in institutions and practices based on the reading of signs in nature and biology, such as augury, haruspicy, and mantic professionals. These arts presupposed a world embedded with meaning. While skeptics like Cicero doubted the philosophical basis for these practices,²⁶ they were accepted by political leaders and the common people and also by Stoics and other philosophical schools. The highly developed semiotic theories of Greek and Roman philosophers and rhetoricians presupposed that textual and nontextual forms of signification were intertwined.²⁷

As will be seen in chapter 4, Saul Lieberman, Michael Fishbane, and others have tracked the influence of ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman divinatory hermeneutics on the rabbis’ textual hermeneutics. So too, philosophers, priests, and theurgists like Iamblichus saw in ritual and sacrificial procedures methods by which the gods revealed the ways in which the soul could commune with higher powers.²⁸ Even with the dominance of Chris-

tianity in the fourth century and after, Mediterranean culture and thought seems to have taken what Patricia Cox Miller calls a “material turn,” in which objects, body parts, and images were seen to speak to the deepest needs of communities and individuals.²⁹ It will be shown here that this view of the world did indeed characterize sectors of Judaism in late antiquity. There is thus every reason to believe that these developments did not occur in Judaism in isolation from its cultural environment.

Moreover, the identification of semiological reading with pantextuality does not take into account the possibility that some semiological activities lay outside the realm of the text in the cultural and social environment inhabited by the rabbis. In other words, textuality may be a theoretical model that these critics subsequently attributed to all forms of interpretation, both textual and nontextual. To be sure, for the poststructural theorists who argue for pantextuality as an overall critical approach, this idea is inherent in all forms of interpretation; that is, the closed hermeneutical circle presumably would be operable at all times in all readings, including ancient ones. This argument, however, must be distinguished from the historical argument that this model of pantextuality was anticipated in Judaism of the rabbinic age. This book is not a refutation of the epistemological or philosophical basis of this argument; if it is relevant to this controversy, it bears on the historical argument that ancient Judaism constitutes an alternative to Western logocentrism in part because the entirety of its discourse takes place within the written text and its interpretation.

Theories of the Sign

In contrast, Jacob Brüll’s earlier characterization of the role of signs in rabbinic thought is more inclusive. His introduction to *Doresh le-Şiyyon* invites us to see how the ancient Jews themselves saw the process of the creation of signs that in a religious conception allows human and God to communicate, both explicitly and obliquely. His essay unites the verbal semiotics of the oral Torah with the nontextual messages embedded, according to classical Jewish worldviews, in the earth, the stars, human actions, and such phenomena as the flight patterns of birds and the swaying of palm trees. Brüll’s observations were originally meant to introduce the reader to Talmudic mnemonics, the techniques that the ancient rabbis used for memorizing their texts. His reason was that he distinguished among the sign vehicle, the object signified, and the interpretant³⁰ and thus placed in the same category the divinely created indicators of significance and human attempts to negotiate the text.

In doing so, he linked the physical designation of signs—such as the marking of graves and the creation of cloven hooves—with the mental exercise of imprinting and recalling information.

Brüll's insights into the nature of signifying come into relief when we look at phenomena like ideas of sacrifice in postbiblical Judaism. Recent research on this subject shows that several poetic and rabbinic sources sustain a motif according to which God actively implanted sources of meaning in the world when he first created it. This idea appears in the legends of creation and redemption in Midrash, the classic rabbinic texts that interpret the Bible, and in the Avodah *piyyutim*, the elaborate synagogue poems that describe the sacrifice for Yom Kippur.³¹ This motif is part of a larger worldview in which every thing created by God has a larger purpose in history. In fact, the idea that the things God created are not simply inert objects or dumb animals but actors in a drama of Israel's destiny extends to legends in which such substances and creatures as earth, blood, birds, and clothes have a will of their own. At the same time, according to this worldview, we humans have developed systems of interpretation and discipline in which we can uncover the hidden signifiers embedded in the physical world.

These sources are evidence that concrete objects, garments, and everyday events spoke to Jews in the ancient world no less eloquently and meaningfully than the Torah itself. The purpose of this book is to explore myths, systems of interpretation, and ritual strategies reflecting the idea that the physical world is embedded with meaning. Its argument proceeds in four stages. The first stage explores the idea that before God created the world, he created both the Torah and the Jewish ritual system and, furthermore, intended to signify to human beings by embedding meaning in animals, objects, and events. The second stage considers how one set of objects, the sacred vestments of the high priest commanded by God in the book of Exodus, served as the source of a large and complex system of interpretation in ancient Judaism, in which each detail in the high priest's garments is laden with meaning and at the same time serves as a ritual actor in the sacrificial system. The third stage examines the ways in which ancient and medieval people developed systems for deciphering what they perceived to be hidden messages about human destiny embedded in everyday events and natural objects: techniques we call divination. The fourth and final stage brings the topic back to creation and carries it forward to teleology by exploring legends in which elements of nature and created beings act out the divine will through their own agency.

This progression—from myths of creation, to interpretations of the priestly vestments, to divination traditions, to the actions of the signifiers

themselves—also is a progression through the channels of communication between the divine and the human as perceived by ancient Jews. The myths of creation and destiny concern God’s communication to humanity. In the priestly vestments, the communication runs both ways: God commands Israel to place signs of its identity and moral character on the clothing of the high priest, who then uses them as signifiers in his effort to secure atonement for his people. In divination traditions, human beings actively invent strategies for finding out the divine will. In stories of the agency of natural beings, the world itself not only communicates but also participates in history.

The title of this book is inspired by Henry Louis Gates’s masterwork *The Signifying Monkey*, his exploration of types of subversive signification in African and African American cultures carried out by trickster figures and others. In one way, the sort of signification described here, in which God is seen to implant signs in the world that can be read in a variety of ways, could be seen as a hegemonic form of signification and therefore quite the opposite of Gates’s subject. In another way, Gates does not exclude forms of authority in his study. He devotes an important section to how the gods in West African religions convey messages to humankind through the mediation of the trickster god (Esu), who in turn designates the linguist Legba to serve as interpreter.³² Although Legba’s methods are mercurial and can even be perverse, his function is pivotal in the institutional frameworks of divination, interpretation, and social structure.³³ In other words, to use Gates’s terminology, this study concerns the act of “signifying”—conveying ranges of meaning and linguistic function from their divine sources through duly appointed forms of mediation—rather than “signifyin(g)” —subverting the conventional social order through misdirection.³⁴ Moreover, the system of semiotic mediation in ancient Judaism that is the subject of this book is itself an alternative to, if not a subversion of, the myth of centrality of the text of the Torah and its authoritative interpreters (sages or rabbis) that ostensibly lies at the heart of rabbinic Judaism.

The myths and methods of nontextual systems of meaning presented in this study may also turn out to represent social or cultural circles lying at the margins of rabbinic authority. Much of the evidence discussed here comes from rabbinic literature, especially Midrash, or rabbinic exegesis of scripture. The compilations of Midrash undertaken between the third and eighth centuries most likely represent diverse groups of rabbis and their colleagues, from the legal authorities that stand behind the early texts of *midrash halakhah* to the homilists and synagogue preachers that seem to have influenced and contributed to later midrashim. At the same time, this book draws

on bodies of ancient Jewish literature, such as magical and divination texts and liturgical poetry or *piyyut*, that are not included in the rabbinic canon. While there is still debate about whether these forms of expression should be included in the category of “rabbinic” Judaism, it is clear that these literatures were not produced by the central shapers of the Talmuds.

This project has one more peculiarity. Although the subject is why nontextual sources were important to ancient Jews, the sources themselves are texts. That is, this book draws from the established texts of the rabbinic canon, such as the major midrashim and the compilations of biblical interpretation written in the fourth through eighth centuries, from synagogue poems written down in Palestine in the fourth through seventh centuries and available to us in manuscripts from the early Middle Ages and from manuals of divination from the Genizah and other manuscript collections, as well as the Talmuds. For the most part, this book does not encompass art history, even though the study of ancient Jewish art is currently undergoing an unprecedented revival.³⁵ Although a great deal can be learned from subjects like the function of art in the ancient synagogue, the use of drawings and physical objects in Jewish magic, and whether the Mishnah and synagogue poetry engage in the literary description of the visual, the main sources are texts describing the location of meaning in the physical world. The reason is that this book is concerned primarily with this idea rather than visual cultural expression per se. Thus, the very modest iconographic evidence for depictions of the priestly vestments from ancient synagogues is discussed in chapter 3, but only because they add to our other textual sources on interpretations of those vestments. In a similar way, Kalman Bland’s book *The Artless Jew* argues that the stereotype of the Jews as a people devoid of artistic sensibilities is a modern invention. But because Bland’s book studies the idea of the role of the visual in Jewish thought and not Jewish art itself, it does not include illustrations.³⁶

Notwithstanding the irony of deriving the concept of nontextual sources of meaning from written texts, we must be aware that historians of religion often try to reconstruct rituals, social patterns, and worldviews from written documents. In the case of ancient Judaism, we are at least fortunate to have medieval and even ancient documents at our disposal, documents that tell us by their material context how they were used by the communities that preserved, buried, or discarded them. More to the point, the sources that explored here bear a complex relationship between textual and nontextual ways of knowing. Interpretations of the priestly vestments rely on scripture for their vivid imaginings of their physical beauty and meaning. Divination

traditions often derive verbal messages from animals, events, and visual data and then write down their findings in manuals. Nonetheless, all these systems of signification see themselves as reaching outside the text and going directly to the world of objects and images for meaning.

This book is not the first attempt to challenge the notion that Judaism is exclusively a religion of the book. Not long ago, the Assyriologist Zvi Abusch detected a linguistic and conceptual relationship between the ancient Near Eastern process of oracular decision (Akkadian: *alaktu*) and the rabbinic legal process known as *halakhah*.³⁷ Several scholars have sought to locate the origins of ancient Jewish hermeneutics in Near Eastern divination and dream interpretation.³⁸ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, a historian of Jewish ritual, entitled his collection of essays *People of the Body*, in which he argued that Judaic civilization is concerned no less with the human body than with the book.³⁹ This book builds on these and other explorations into the diversity of conceptions of signification among Jews in late antiquity. We begin by reexamining the theological underpinnings of these conceptions, found in ancient myths of creation.