In this model, the definition of "influence" of one group upon another must be broadened to include borrowing, rejecting, adopting, adapting, subverting, converting, combating and combining. Therefore, at least as important as determining whether a parallel indicates a genealogical or analogical relationship are the roles that a certain idea or method play within the two cultures. Subtle differences between the way a certain rhetorical technique is applied in two cultural contexts can reveal key distinctive features about each group. Even a genealogical connection can serve to highlight uniqueness as much as it indicates acculturation. Consequently, direct influence is just one question in a larger analysis of the comparative role that rhetoric plays within each subgroup as they respond to the same challenges. For example, we saw above that the Second Sophistic promoted Greek cultural dominance, history, and pride in the face of the Roman Empire — even if only in the imaginary world of declamation. Jews unsurprisingly took part in Greek paideia as an integrated subculture within the Greek East sharing the same antipathy to the Romans as their neighbors. At the same time, however, Jews also struggled to maintain their unique identity within the culture of the Greek East and so they rabbinized their imaginary world of declamation and developed their own unique approach to truth, rhetoric, and interpretation.

In a similar vein, the rabbis adopted many Greek techniques of exegesis and inference in their hermeneutical rules of midrash. Yet, they attributed these rules not to foreign origins but rather considered them origins shrank down to irrelevance. Regardless of whether it was done consciously, this move transformed an aspect of acculturation into a mark of rabbinic distinctiveness and independence.

Viewing the rabbis as one of many neighboring provincials within a complex web of hegemonies opens the way to comparing various subcultures within the Empire that responded to the same challenges in different ways. For example, early church fathers explicitly distanced themselves from rhetoric even as they employed much of it in practice in their speeches and letters. Christianity developed a complex relationship with rhetoric and ultimately largely rejected its philosophical underpinnings. The rabbis, on the one hand, shared aspects of this complex relationship but, as we will demonstrate throughout this book, also fundamentally acceded to some of the major foundations of rhetorical thought. Regardless of whether these groups directly influenced each other, their comparison remains significant both because there were areas of overlap and because their convergences help to highlight their important points of contrast. The comparison between rabbis and church fathers defies any simple dichotomy between genealogy or analogy because the two groups worked within a common milieu, shared similar backgrounds and experiences, and had to work though parallel challenges. Both groups confronted the same cultural and political forces and negotiated overlapping but disparate solutions that worked best within their respective worldviews.

As a last point, situating the Jews as Roman provincials not only grants us perspective about the Jews and the writings of the rabbis, but also can mutually contribute to an understanding of the Roman Empire. Few ancient sources provide detailed evidence for the experience of provincial minorities and their relationship with the Empire as do Jewish writings from late antiquity. As long as we take into account the many differences between Jews and their neighbors, the example of the Jews can serve as a useful model for what other provincials experienced as well.

PHILOSOPHY AND RHETORIC, TRUTH AND LANGUAGE

The scholars cited in the previous section have demonstrated that rabbinic literature is embedded within and shares characteristics with...
many aspects of classical rhetoric. While these findings carry wide consensus, there remains the more fundamental question as to the extent to which the rabbis accepted the philosophical underpinnings of classical rhetoric. In order to penetrate into this issue, we must first review in broad strokes the history of the debates between philosophers and sophists on the issues of truth, subjectivity, language, and interpretation. The assessment of how much rhetoric there is in rabbinic literature is not merely a technical measure of how many times a certain Hellenistic genre or theme arises. Rather, as the following review will demonstrate, this analysis reaches into the innermost depths of the rabbinic thought process and thereby sheds light on many aspects of the rabbinic literary output and worldview.

Ancient epistemology offers two basic views about truth. Plato taught that truth is singular, objective and unchanging, while the sophists viewed reality as being multifaceted, relative and in constant flux. These two epistemologies, in turn, dictate two radically different modes of reasoning: the sophists engaged in rhetorical argumentation with the assumption that the most convincing case would establish the best interpretation within a particular interpretive community. Plato and his followers, on the other hand, eschewed rhetoric in favor of logical proofs that reveal the absolute and immutable truth. The tension between the sophists and the philosophers continued for centuries as the schools of philosophy and those of rhetoric competed for students and prestige. Of course, Plato himself was the master rhetorician using the dialogic format to drive his interlocutors into paradoxes and self-contradictions, even as he argued for the dangers of such deceptive modes of argumentation. But Plato is in this sense typical of writers in both the philosophic and Christian traditions who at the same time polemicize against rhetoric even while applying its methodology.

Plato’s attack on rhetoric runs throughout his dialogues and is a central theme in the Phaedrus and Gorgias. Socrates equates rhetoric with demagoguery, using verbal tricks to convince the masses of what is beneficial to the speaker without any concern for justice or truth. Rhetoric is not an art but merely a knack for producing pleasure and for imitating the persuasive effects of philosophy but without any substance. Only philosophy, he argues, can rightly be called an art because the philosopher understands the truth about the subject he analyzes in all its particulars and definitions; only he is able to discern the nature of the soul of his audience and how to best form a speech that will lead the soul to attain the truth. Only through philosophy can we rise above the world of illusions and bodies in order that our souls may understand the ideal forms, the realm of unchanging truth.

This debate predates Plato and continues throughout the history of Western thought. Plato’s belief that there exists one objective and unchanging truth follows the view of Parmenides before him. Rhetoric, on the other hand, assumes the worldview of Protagoras that “man is the measure of all things, of the things that are that they are, and of the things that are not that they are not.” Because objective truth does not exist, or at least is inaccessible, truth must be defined subjectively as the common consent reached after both sides have been heard and weighed. This split between philosophy and rhetoric, between idea and word, between truth and trickery served as a foundation for Western metaphysics for centuries to come. Enlightenment thinkers strove to achieve, through human reason, absolute truth in language, logic, mathematics, and physical and social sciences. Modern literary and post-structuralist theory eschews the possibility of objective interpretation and absolute truth that had formed the basis of Western philosophy since Plato. Instead, it embeds meaning in language and considers interpretation as a complex interaction between the reader and the text.

179 Seeop. cit., 277.
180 Phaedrus 260 and 275c-d.
182 Phaedrus 270b-271b, 277b-c.
183 Republic 499d-513e, and Phaedo 66d-e.
which is itself a product of prior intertexts without beginning or end. This instability of meaning does not deny the possibility of interpretation and understanding but rather prompts us to locate meaning in the contextual and persuasive power of language.137

Where do the rabbis fit into this controversy? That is a fundamental question running through this book and it is not easy to answer considering that the Talmud does not address this topic in any explicit and systematic way. However, a broad view of rabbinic literature suggests that the rabbis succeeded in charting a unique and sophisticated approach that denies the very dichotomy between truth and words. Susan Handelman assesses that the rabbis “never suffered this schism; their concepts of language and interpretation not only preserve but exalt the innate logic of language.”138 The rabbis, to some degree, remained on the fringes of the controversies between Platonists and sophists and thereby preserved the more ancient unity of thought and language that has only recently resurfaced in the linguistic turn in Western philosophy. Let us review some manifestations of the rabbinic viewpoint discussed in previous scholarship as a backdrop for the findings of this study.

Scholars have discussed various points of evidence that the rabbinic view of truth and language contrasts with Platonic conceptions. On a linguistic level, rabbinic Hebrew possesses no word for the Greek conception of ἀλήθεια as an absolute, universal and unchangeable


138 Handelman, Slayers of Moses, 11. See similarly Faur, Golden Doves, xxvi, cited p. 37 n. 147. Daniel Boyarin, Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), xii, rightly criticizes these works for making sweeping generalities about Jewish thinking across Jewish writing of all times and places, including medieval Spain and modern France. Nevertheless, Boyarin agrees that contemporary literary theory’s “questioning of the Platonic-Aristotelian (ultimately Enlightenment) understanding of language makes possible a space for a more sympathetic reading of midrash as an interpretive act” (ibid., x). Despite their differences, these three writers agree that the Talmudic rabbis maintained a counter-culture to Platonic ideas and thus prefigured modern theory. See also Sergey Dolgopoški, What Is Talmud! The Art of Disagreement (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 151.

rational order. Hebrew eman refers in legal contexts to procedural validity139 and in other contexts means sincerity and trustworthiness; it rarely if ever means ontological truth.140 José Faur demonstrates the alliance of the rabbis with the rhetorical tradition in this regard when he writes:

The intellectual space of the sages is the realm of the verisimilar. It pertains to rhetoric rather than metaphysics. One will find in the Talmud formal and analytical proofs, proceeding, as with the Scholastics, from syllogisms accompanied by axioms, premises and conclusions. Talmudic “proofs” are not “demonstrative” – structured from formal deductions and inductions. Talmudic dialectics deal with probable and improbable alternatives, inferences and analogue constructs, indeterminate and statistical knowledge, variables and quantitative differences. Let us note that the Talmudic lexicon does not register the words “rational” (מַסֵיקוּנ) or “necessary” (נֶדֶל). Its dialectic is expository: it proposes the “reasonable” (נֶדֶל), not the absolute. The divergent and contradictory opinions of the emoraim are not classified as “true” (מעדים) and “false” (מעדים).141

Faur here distinguishes between metaphysics, which aims at truth through logical proofs, and rhetoric, which debates probabilities through dialectics. He places the rabbis in the latter category and thus explains why Hebrew lacks a word for ontological truth. Throughout this book I will use the word “truth” in both senses to refer to universal ontological

139 See Christine Hayes, What’s Divine about Divine Law? (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 104–245; Christine Hayes, “Legal Truth, Right Answers and Best Answers: Dworkin and the Rabbis,” Dixie Israel 25 (2008): 73–121; and Chaya Halberstam, Law and Truth in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 90. Y. Sanhedrin 1:1, 18a, for example, makes the extraordinary statement that even God must follow procedure in order to achieve truth: “R. Yohanan said, The Holy One, blessed be He, does not do anything in this world without first consulting with the heavenly court. What is the source? ‘The word is truth and a great army’ (Dan 10:1) – when is the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, true? When he consults the heavenly court.”

140 See, for example, Avot d’Rabbi Nathan A 34, 35, Gen Rabbah 96, Y. Sanhedrin 115, 30f.; 11; and 85b. There are some instances where eman may mean essence or absolute truth such as in Avot d’Rabbi Nathan A 34, 36, and B. Megillah 14b. See further at Anthony C. Thiselson, “Truth,” in The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, ed. Brown Colin (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 584–902.

purely conceptual ideas and instead insists that ideas are integrally
now revived the ancient rhetorical view that rejects the possibility of
the meani
is to understand reality and vice versa.
lexical word using the terms
a unity between the word and the world such that to interpret the word
Faur contends that in primeval mythical times,
ducreek philosophy more or less began with the insight that a word is
plex web of meanings in various centuries. Citing Giambattista Vico,
interpretation even as it ultimately derives from divine prophecy.
The rationalists of Western thought demote words to a mere vehicle to
convoy meaning, rendering them dispensable once the idea is under­
stood. Organic thinking, on the other hand, denies that words are mere
vessels for logos but rather imbues words with independent significance.
Processing language requires the reader to enter a vicious hermeneutic
circle of turning particular signs into a larger idea and at the same time
using the larger context to interpret and negate the meanings of those
signs. Since the production of meaning from words is in all cases sub­
jective and uncertain, we should acknowledge the legitimacy of explor­
ing alternate and even radical ways of reading. According to Heinemann,
midrash does just that by performing a close and careful reading of the
letters and words but still allowing for creativity in framing the context,
multiplying possibilities in making connections, and freeing each word
to act as an independent entity.
The logosocentrism of Plato engenders a focus on ideal unchanging
truths and relieves language to a mere image of reality. That is why
Plato can accuse the sophists of misusing language in a way that
 divorces it from truth. For the rabbis, however, truth and meaning are
integrally bound up with the words themselves. Words can be mis­
understood but they cannot be dispensed with nor confined to just
one correct interpretation. A word is an active dynamic force, especially
like a hammer that shatters rock (Jer 23:29). The rabbis derive from
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understood but they cannot be dispensed with nor confined to just
one correct interpretation. A word is an active dynamic force, especially
when it is the word of God: "My word is like fire, declares the Lord, and
like a hammer that shatters rock" (Jer 23:29). The rabbis derive from

73 Jose Faur, "The Splitting of the Logos: Some Remarks on Vico and the Rabbinic
Tradition," Poetics: New Vico Studies 3 (1985): 57; and see Giambattista Vico,
University Press, 1968), 401; and Sandra Rudnick Luft, Vico's Uncanny Humanism: Reading the
New Science between Modern and Postmodern (Ithaca: Cornell University
original.
75 See also Thorleif Bomans, Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek (New York:
W. W. Norton, 1960), 67-9 and 184; Handelman, Slayers of Moses, 3-9, 32-3; and
Daniel Boyarin, "Mesle, Christian, and Jewish Cultural Interaction in Sefardic
76 Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, 111-12 writes:
Psychologically our thought – apart from its expression in words – is only a
shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in
recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear­
out, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a
vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct
before the appearance of language.

137 Isaak Heinemann, Dorkhe ha-'aggada (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1970), 102. See also
Daniel Boyarin, Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity (Philadelphia:
138 Plato, Cratylus, 439a-b; and see Viktor Ihekw, "Language and Knowledge in Plato’s
139 Rachel Barney, Names and Nature in Plato’s Cratylus (New York: Routledge, 2001),
161, writes that for Plato, "names are ontologically degenerate and therefore poten­
tially deceptive."
The rabbis form their conception of the world primarily through the text of the Torah and for that reason can state that the Torah existed prior to the universe. This midrash has a likely ancestor in Plato’s *Timaeus*, which explains that the Creator gazed at the eternal forms as a model for constructing the world.  

The dynamic power of language also manifests itself in the role of speech in creation. As the Psalmist writes: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made” (33:6). God forms each part of the cosmos with speech and provides them a name (Gen 1:5, 8, 10) just as humans can conceive of the world only through language (Gen 2:19–20). The words that God used to create the world, the rabbis explain, are none other than the Torah itself. The Torah preceded creation as a blueprint for the universe:

In the usual way of the world, a king of flesh and blood does not build a palace with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. And the architect does not build it in his mind but he uses a record book or a pinax to know how to make rooms and mosaics. So too the Holy One, blessed be He, looks at the Torah and creates the world.

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The rabbis form their conception of the world primarily through the text of the Torah and for that reason can state that the Torah existed prior to

144 *Timaeus*, 37–9.


146 Fau, *Golden Doves*, xxv.


Handelman of "falling into disingenious generalizations."  

retained elements of a primeval organic system of thought. At the same time, a stark opposition between the West and the rabbis cannot be made for the pursuit of philosophy in classical Greece.  

Stem takes Handelman to task for dismissing the relevance of Lieberman’s *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* and similar scholarship with the justification that she focuses on "structural differences between Rabbinic and Greek thought" rather than historical influence. Handelman counters that Lieberman herself only claims that the terminology of the thirteen hermeneutical principles are borrowed from the Greek rhetors, but not the forms of reasoning themselves. She does admit that there exist "real influences of Hellenistic culture on the rabbis" but she chooses to emphasize the differences between them that are manifest in "specific attitudes towards language." In the end both agree that there are similarities and differences between the two traditions, but neither ventures to carefully delineate what they are.

I agree to a large extent with Faur and Handelman that the rabbis retained elements of a primeval organic system of thought. At the same time, a stark opposition between the West and the rabbis cannot accurately capture the nuance and complexity of each group and of their interactions. Indeed, “the West” includes many and varied voices (including those of the rabbis). Plato himself is inconsistent in his description of the *logos* and the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy. Aristotle certainly did not denigrate rhetoric but rather considered it to be a counterpart or outgrowth of dialectic and consequently closely related to philosophical proof. In contrast to Plato who describes rhetoric as a counterpart to cookery, Aristotle sees a proper place for rhetoric in the pursuit of truth as a form of persuasion that is weaker than demonstration but still appropriate for given audiences and subjects. Rhetoric does assist in achieving justice because “the true and the just are by nature stronger than their opposites” and will prevail through debate. Furthermore, he writes, “one should be able to argue persuasively on either side of a question, just as in the use of syllogisms, not that we may actually do both (for one should not persuade what is debased) but in order that it may not escape our notice what the real state of the case is and that we ourselves may be able to refute if another person uses speech unjustly.”  

Students in the Roman Empire would typically study first in a rhetorical school and then some would continue to a philosophical school without needing to take sides regarding their epistemological assumptions but would instead be engaged in both. The two disciplines were deeply intertwined and mutually reliant to the extent that “the philosophers looked upon the art [of rhetoric] as a practical technique that was quite legitimate in its own way and had a perfectly proper place in culture as a preliminary study, like grammar or mathematics; and they had no compunction about teaching it.”  

We therefore find approaches to truth that depend on both sophistic and philosophic assumptions side by side within Greco-Roman intellectual discourse.

On the rabbinic front, we must acknowledge that the rabbis were embedded in a deeply Hellenistic world, not isolated from it. In some cases, the rabbis recognized a Hellenistic idea as external to themselves...
rhetorical argumentation may not be counter-cultural so much as siding with one or another Greco-Roman school. At the same time, we must also explore the prospect that the rabbis maintained their own distinctive voice that combined elements of various aspects of their surrounding popular and intellectual culture and integrated them within their own textual, social and legal world.

The goal of this book is to analyze how the rabbis fused together the various elements of the biblical organic tradition with the ambient culture of rhetorical training and their own focus on the transmission of oral law. As we will see in the Conclusion, assessing questions of truth and argumentation through the lens of prophetic Scripture necessarily prompted the rabbis to create their own unique and instructive contribution to these enduring issues. The sages of the Talmud adopt neither a Platonistic monistic truth, nor a skeptical view that rejects any objective truth as the sophists do. We will demonstrate that, instead, they conceive of a model of multiple truths embedded within the words of the prophets than can be accessed through human interpretation.

ON RHETORICAL ARRANGEMENT

Several chapters of this book will analyze the structure of rabbinic sermons and sugyot in relation to the arrangement of sections taught in Greco-Roman handbooks, the most important being those of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, the anonymous Ad Herennium, and On Invention attributed to Hermogenes of Tarsus (flourished second century CE).

This section will summarize the basics of rhetorical arrangement and thereby serve as a background for the upcoming analyses.

Cicero describes five stages in the study of rhetoric:

Invention (inventio) is the discovery of valid or seemingly valid arguments to render one’s case plausible. Arrangement (dispositio) is the distribution of arguments thus discovered in the proper order. Expression (elocutio) is the fitting of the proper language to the

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