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## Sketches for an Oral Scripture

*Ira F. Stone*

**T**he fundamental faith of the Jewish people and Judaism as we have known it is the belief in the dual Torah. That is, that Israel, through Moses, received God's word in two forms at Mount Sinai—one written, the other oral. The written Torah, the Five Books of Moses of our Bible, is well known beyond the cultural boundaries of Israel.

The premier expression of the oral Torah is contained in the group of writings called the Mishnah. The Mishnah was promulgated under the authority of Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi in Israel around the year 200 CE. Among other purposes, it defines the response of its authors and their followers to the reality of living in a post-Temple world. This world, thought to have been formerly in order and then plunged into chaos, needed a response that could argue for the restoration of order in a new key.

My poems are excerpted from a larger work, *Sketches for an Oral Scripture*, which follows the structure of the Mishnah's "orders" and "tractates." It is composed in an era when the losses sustained by the Jewish people certainly equal and perhaps overshadow those sustained by the generation of the Mishnah. The order which the Mishnah restored may no longer be possible. Yet we look to language to guide us back to what may only be a fractured order. We look to the contours of the Mishnah in an effort to find our way back to the original Scripture, the Torah of Moses, recoverable within its layers, and so try to afford a new voice for that original Scripture in the shadow of our own losses.

*Benedictions*

2

Attend to every letterworld  
 with lips and breathteeth  
 grating out names every  
 muscle attend enwrapped  
 by snake or scorpion deny  
 each threat in turn worldmerged  
 Sway into the song silently

3

Where there is a remembrance well  
 draw from it cleansing  
 Otherwise rub vigorously  
 against the tattered flesh  
 pretend memory and pray

6

How to constitute a crowd  
 How to connect a crowd to a King  
 What to say when the King's deformed  
 or the thunder is too old or the sea  
 skips a beat and becomes a foreign language  
 when the new moon turns out  
 to be frozen and the court's in recess

8

A line of funerals  
 no farther than a  
 month in winter  
 obligates bystanders  
 to form two rows  
 of biblical songs  
 across two valleys  
 and a desert in  
 any language

9

Before the next world  
 this world repeats itself  
 unmindful of any suggestion  
 of surcease and every  
 thirty days the ocean is new  
 each spring flower shyly  
 accepts your benediction again  
 So also with fruit  
 also new clothes  
 and always bad news



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