

**HOW TO UNDERSTAND
THE JEWISH QUADRILATERAL**
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The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is a methodology for theological reflection credited to the Anglican priest Rev. John Wesley (1703–1791), who was leader of the Methodist movement in the late 18th century. The term is used to describe the principal factors that Wesley believed illuminated the core of the Christian faith. Wesley himself never used the phrase, which was a term coined by the 20th century American Methodist scholar, Rev. Albert C. Outler, Ph.D. (1908–1989). Outler was a Georgia-born American Methodist theologian who is generally considered to be the first United Methodist theologian and one of the most important Wesleyan scholars in the history of the church. He was a key figure in the 20th-century ecumenical movement. Outler is widely credited with being the first to recognize Wesley’s method for theologizing—by using what Outler referred to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Holy Scripture, Church tradition, Reason, and Experience. For Outler (1985), interpretation of Scripture is shaped by our Tradition, our Reasoning, and our Experiences.

The quadrilateral model can also be applied not only to other Christian denominations, but also to other religions as well. Within a particular religion, denominations or sects can be characterized by an emphasis on one of the quadrants. There is also a danger of a sect focusing too narrowly on any one of the quadrants to the exclusion of the others.

The Jewish Quadrilateral

As with other quadrilateral models, interpretation of Sacred Text and Scripture in Judaism is shaped by Tradition, Reason, and Experience. Each of these perspectives can be viewed as a lens that informs and affects each of the others.

Scripture is considered to be the primary source and summit for most religious Jews. The Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) is the criterion standard against which all else is measured. The word “Tanakh” is an acronym made from the first Hebrew letter of each of the Masoretic Text’s three traditional divisions: Torah (literally “Instruction” or “Teaching”), Nevi’im (Prophets), and Ketivim (Writings)—hence TaNaKh).¹ Of these three divisions of sacred text, the foundation of Judaism is grounded in the Torah.² The word “Torah” in Hebrew is derived from a Hebrew root (יָרָה), which in the hif’il conjugation means “to guide” or “to teach.” The common translation of “Law” may actually give the wrong impression.³ Christians sometimes refer to the Torah as the Pentateuch (Greek), which simply means “five books.”

Bereshit (“In the beginning”) or Genesis
Shemot (“The names of”) or Exodus
Vayikra (“And he called”) or Leviticus
Bamidbar (“In the desert of”) or Numbers
Davarim (“Things,” “Words,” “Discourses”)
or Deuteronomy

Tradition is reflected in the development and growth of Judaism through the past centuries and across cultures and countries. This lens includes history, cultural influences, and religious practices. Because Judaism is so much a religion of belonging—being in relation—then holy days of communal connection are crucial for the cohesion of the Jewish people.⁴ Further, because Jews may be bound together more by unity of belonging rather than unity of belief (see Levine & Brettler, 2021), holy days (i.e., holidays) take on a special significance.

Jewish holidays, or *Yamim Tovim* (literally, “good days” or festival days), are observed throughout the Hebrew calendar. They are comprised of religious, cultural, and national elements derived from three sources: biblical mitzvot, rabbinic mandates, and the history of Judaism and the State of Israel. A *Yom Tov* (“festival day”) usually refers to one of the six biblically-mandated festival dates on which all activities prohibited on Shabbat are prohibited, except for some related to food preparation. This list is neither exclusive nor exhaustive:

Shabbat, also known as the Jewish Sabbath (*Shabbos* in Yiddish), is as important as any other holy day. It is regarded by some as Judaism’s most important contribution to humanity.⁵

Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is the beginning of 10 days of penitence that culminates on Yom Kippur—“the Day of Atonement.”

Yom Kippur (from *kippurim*, literally, “cleansing” in Veviticus 23:27) is a very solemn day devoted to fasting, prayer, and repentance (making amends).

Sukkot, the week-long harvest festival, is also known as the “Feast of Tabernacles,” which commemorates the dwelling of the Israelites in temporary booths (*sukkot* in Hebrew) during their 40-year sojourn in the Sinai desert.

Shemini Atzeret, the “Eighth Day of Assembly,” is technically a separate holiday that is in effect the final day of Sukkot. The last portion of the Torah is read on this day.

Simchat Torah (“Rejoicing of the Law”) is the joyous holiday that immediately follows *Shemini Atzeret*. It is traditionally celebrated by dancing with Torah scrolls and singing *hakafot* (songs of praise and gratitude).

Hanukkah is the eight-day “Festival of Lights” that commemorates the miraculous victory of the Maccabees and rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem at the beginning of the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Empire in the 2nd century BCE. It is not the Jewish equivalent of Christmas. It does not come with any of the corresponding obligations of other Jewish holidays, and therefore is a relatively minor holiday in strictly religious terms. Hanukkah has attained major cultural significance in the U.S. and elsewhere—especially among secular Jews—because it occurs around the same time of year as secularized holiday of Christmas on the Gregorian calendar.

Purim is a carnival-like holiday that celebrates the defeat of a plot to destroy the Jews. The Book of Esther contains the story of a Hebrew woman, born as Hadassah but known as Esther, who becomes the queen of Persia and thwarts a plan of genocide of her people. On this holiday, it is customary to dress in costumes (similar to Halloween or Mardi Gras), and to give gifts of food to friends and the needy.

Pesach (“Passover”) is the week-long spring festival that commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people from bondage in ancient Egypt. The Passover Seder on the first two nights recounts the story of Exodus using ritual foods, prayers, stories, and songs.

Shavuot, the “Feast of Weeks” marks the giving of the Law (Torah) at Mt. Sinai. It occurs on the 50th day after the sheaf offering of the harvest celebrated during Passover.

Reason allows the individual to use discerning thought. This lens includes scholarly articles related to the study of archeological findings, historical artifacts, and manuscript fragments (see Friedman, 1987, 2003, 2017). Reason includes *exegesis*, which is the discipline of extracting—grammatically and contextually—what a text says. Exegesis involves discerning, drawing out, or extracting a text’s meaning in accordance with the author’s historical context and discoverable meaning.⁶

Debate is a central component of Judaism. In his essay titled “Two Jews, Three Opinions,” Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles makes this observation: “In the Bible, Abraham argues with God and the people argue with Moses. The Talmud is one formidable catalogue of argumentation. As for us—well, we all argue with one other” (2018, para. 2). The arguments and debates are not only with each other, but also with God. “The great Jewish argument,” observes Wolpe, “goes on with God and also inside ourselves, trying to reconcile ourselves to the mystery of God’s world, trying to understand our place in it” (2018, para. 3). A subsequent article by the Rabbi Wolpe (2020) is titled appropriately: “Debate is a Jewish sacrament.”

Experience refers to one’s personal understanding of faith in the light of one’s own life. An experience can also be part of a ritual or tradition. Jacob’s first encounter with God was experiential (Genesis 28:10–22). It was not a matter of scripture, tradition, or reason. When he wrestled with God (Genesis 32:22–32), Jacob’s *experience* gave him a changed understanding of God, a changed understanding of himself, and a new identity and name (Israel). Moses’ encounter with the burning bush (Exodus 3:1–17) was experiential.⁷

The Jewish Quadrilateral

<p>Scripture</p> <p>Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) Torah (Instruction) Nevi'im (Prophets) Ketuvim (Writings) Mishnah Talmud</p>	<p>Tradition</p> <p>Cultural influences Communal mores Holy days (holidays) Religious history Religious practices Oral traditions</p>
<p>Reason</p> <p>Archeological data Historical artifacts Scientific evidence Scholarly articles Exegetic interpretation Collegial debates</p>	<p>Experience</p> <p>Personal stories Bar/Bat Mitzvah Sayings of sages Experiential events Religious conversion Eisegetic interpretation</p>

Figure 1. The Jewish Quadrilateral.

Taken together, the four elements of the quadrilateral bring the individual to a mature and fulfilling understanding of the Jewish religion and the response of worship of God and service to others.

All Models Are Wrong

When discussing conceptual models, it is always helpful to remember the words of the renowned British statistician George P. Box, Ph.D. (1919–2013): “Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful.”⁸ Quadrilaterals, circles, bins, and lenses are simply alternative perspectives for understanding the religion of Judaism.

The author makes no claims that his opinions are valid or that his statements expressed herein are free of doctrinal, moral, or theological error. The author welcomes any additions, deletions, or edits that may correct any empirical or factual inaccuracies.

Summary

Scripture (i.e., codified texts)

- Tanakh (Hebrew Bible)
- Torah (Instruction)
- Nevi'im (Prophets)
- Ketuvim (Writings)
- Mishnah
- Talmud

Tradition (i.e., across centuries and cultures)

- Cultural influences
- Communal mores
- Holy days (holidays)
- Religious history
- Religious practices
- Oral traditions

Reason (i.e., reasoning)

- Archeological data
- Historical artifacts
- Scientific evidence
- Scholarly articles
- Exegetic interpretation
- Collegial debates

Experience

- Personal stories
- Bar/Bat Mitzvah
- Sayings of sages
- Experiential events
- Religious conversion
- Eisegetic interpretation

Class Diagram

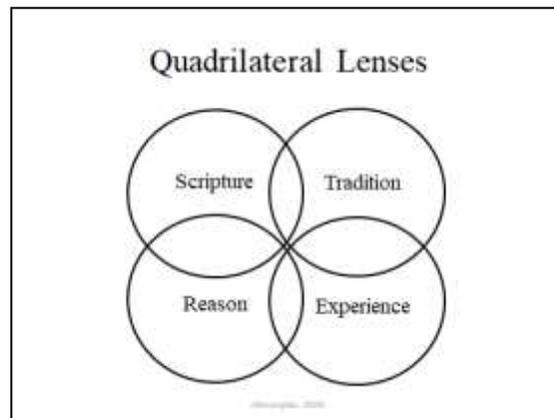


Figure 2. Quadrilateral Lenses

Note: Class diagram inserted from a PowerPoint® slide used in class.

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Richard Elliot Friedman attended the University of Miami (BA, 1968), the Jewish Theological Seminary (MHL, 1971), and Harvard University (Th.M. in Hebrew Bible, 1974; Th.D. in Hebrew Bible and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 1978). Dr. Friedman explains the *documentary hypothesis* by joining a host of modern scholars who show that the Pentateuch was written by at least four distinct voices—separated by borders, political alliances, and particular moments in history—then connected by brilliant editors.
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George Edward Pelham Box (1919–2013) earned a doctorate in Mathematics at the University of London in 1953. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS) and a British statistician who worked in the areas of quality control, time-series analysis, design of experiments, and Bayesian inference. He has been called one of the great statistical minds of the 20th century.
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Elie Wiesel (1928-2016) was born in the town of Sighet in Transylvania. At the age of 15, he and his entire family were sent to Auschwitz as part of the Holocaust, which took the lives of more than 6 million Jews. At age 17, Elie was freed from Buchenwald in 1945. After the war, he was brought to Paris, where he studied at the Sorbonne. He was an American citizen for many years. He lived with his wife and family lived in New York City. He taught at City College, holding the position of Distinguished Professor of Jewish studies. *Messengers of God* is Wiesel's classic look at Job and seven other Biblical characters as they grapple with their

relationship with God and the question of his justice.

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Notes

1. The Masoretic Text refers to the authoritative Aramaic and Hebrew text of the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) in Rabbinic Judaism. It defines the Jewish canon and its precise letter-text, with its vocalization and accentuation known as *mas'ora*.

2. In its broadest meaning, Torah is used to include Judaism's teachings or Written Law, as found in the five books of Moses, and its Oral Law, which encompasses the entire spectrum of authoritative Jewish religious teachings throughout history. The basis of the oral tradition comes from the rabbinic teaching that Moses passed down to subsequent generations. The oral tradition includes guidance and numerous instructions that were not written down in the text of the five books. Codified in writing, these religious subsequent teachings include the Mishnah, the Talmud, the Midrash, and other texts. In the centuries after its initial redaction, commentaries on the Mishnah known as the Gemara (Aramaic: "Tradition") were compiled together with the Mishnah into the work known as the Talmud. The core of the Talmud is the Mishnah. In contrast, Midrashim (plural form of Midrash) include explanatory comments, illustrative anecdotes, legendary stories, and perplexing parables. The late professor Elie Wiesel (1976) provides insight into the function of Midrash:

Sensitive to the complexities and inner tensions of the Biblical narrative, the Midrash, as usual, tries to adorn it with details and commentaries, the Midrash being to the Bible what imagination is to knowledge. (Wiesel, 1976, p. 41)

3. Christians who are dismissive of the Torah reveal their ignorance of the primary teachings of Jesus, who regarded the Torah as authoritative. His Great Commandment (Matthew 22:36–40), which is a summary of the duties of humans before God, is based on two commandments from the Torah:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” [Deuteronomy 6:5]. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself” [Leviticus 19:18]. All the Law [Torah] and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:36–40)

The Second Epistle to Timothy, traditionally attributed to Paul the Apostle and considered to be the last letter written before his death, contains a reference to the Torah.

¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (English Standard Version Bible, 2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Although some Christians interpret “Scripture” to refer to the Gospels, they were not even written until after Paul's death (c. 62–64 CE). Most scholars agree that the earliest Gospel was Mark, probably written c. 66–74 CE, either shortly before or after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. For this reason, Paul's reference to Scripture cannot refer to a Gospel but rather to the Torah, which Paul would have known well given that he is described as a “Pharisee descended from Pharisees” (Acts 23:6) and a student of the great legal teacher, Gamaliel (d. 52 CE).

4. In a brief comparative commentary on a major difference between the three Abrahamic religions, the late Rabbi Harold Kushner (1935–2023) always emphasized the importance of belonging—being in relationship—in Judaism. Kushner provides insight into the Akedah (English: “binding”) referring to the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22:

For Jews, Abraham is first and foremost an ancestor, the progenitor of a people living in the service of God. Theology is a distant second to peoplehood in the biblical account—believing is secondary to belonging. This perspective continues to this day. (Kushner, 2015, p. 157)

5. According to the late Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein (1951–2019), “Of all the holidays in the Jewish year, the weekly Sabbath is the most cherished and beloved” (1984, p. 81). It was not only to Judaism but through Judaism that God gave Shabbat to the entire world. As Eckstein observes, “Of the many contributions Judaism has made to humanity through its two great daughter religions, Christianity and Islam, the Shabbat is perhaps the most important” (Eckstein, 1984, p. 81).

6. To some degree, a conservative-liberal polarity—or dichotomy as it has become—can be understood with this model. Tradition is often associated with theological orthodoxy and conservatism, whereas liberalism is often associated with objective reasoning or subjective experiences—both of which may challenge traditional orthodoxy. *Academic liberalism* is associated with a more cognitive perspective, whereas *experiential liberalism* is often associated with a more affective form of experience. Tradition is also usually associated more with the so-called political right (power),

whereas reason is usually associated with the political left (subversion).

7. Reason is not a source of theology but rather a method of studying theology (Cooper, 2018, p. 175). Theologian James McClendon notes that reason is not an authority, but rather “a name for the thought processes by which we seek to maintain order in any sphere of conversation” (1994, pp. 458-459).

8. The adage is usually attributed to the British statistician George Box, Ph.D., who has been called one of the great statistical minds of the 20th century. The actual quote is as follows: “Remember that all models are wrong; the practical question is how wrong do they have to be to not be useful” (Box & Draper, 1987, p. 74).

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