

RETHINKING THE CONCEPT OF ‘BIBLE’: SOME THESES AND PROPOSALS¹

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“Unless and until we are forced by strict philological evidence to regard a certain reading as secondary or corrupt, we have to look upon conflicting readings in our primary sources as alternative readings, none of which must be considered as superior to the other, simply because it is contained in one special tradition (such as the Septuagint).”²

“The whole question of canonicity, and the date of the fixing of the canon, will have to be re-studied.”³

I. Introduction

The justly famous manuscript discoveries of the past century are transforming the scholarly study of the literary history of ancient Judaism. Nowhere is this metamorphosis more evident than in the academic study of the textual integrity of the Hebrew Bible. As we enter the twenty-first century, biblical scholars

¹ Small portions of the following essay have been adapted from the electronically published version of J.C. Reeves, “Toward a Rapprochement of Bible and Qur’ān,” *Religious Studies News—SBL Edition* (December 2001), at http://www.sbl-site.org/Newsletter/12_2001/. The authors are grateful to Karin Rochester for her critical comments on earlier drafts of the essay.

² M.H. Goshen-Gottstein, “The History of the Bible-Text and Comparative Semitics—A Methodological Problem,” *VT* 7 (1957): 198.

are in the process of gauging the significance and assessing the implications of a vast treasure-hoard of primary texts which shed a penetrating light on the very centuries surrounding the emergence and production of what eventually becomes the canonical form of the Hebrew Bible. The evidence supplied from such diverse resources as the Cairo Geniza, the Oxyrhynchus papyri, the Nag Hammadi corpus, major European and Middle Eastern manuscript collections, various rabbinic and post-rabbinic citations, and especially the Dead Sea Scrolls has stimulated a number of intriguing questions regarding the possible relationships of one text or group of texts to another, both within and across the ideological boundaries of the biblically based religious communities.⁴

But perhaps one of the more arresting of these newer queries centers upon the very idea of ‘Bible’ itself. The label ‘Bible’ rarely merits or even requires definition among most social circles in Western culture, whether religiously or secularly based. It is customarily applied by scholars to a collection of Jewish books whose composition and textual content achieved relative stability during the final centuries of the Second Temple period (515 B.C.E-70 C.E.) of Jewish history and which then were transmitted as an integral collection (i.e., as ‘Bible’) to subsequent generations. The scholastic attention devoted to such a bibliographic enterprise suggests that what we eventually inherit as ‘Bible’ acquired and maintained a type of cross-cultural institutional authority lacking in other potentially rival assemblages of texts. The notion of Bible as ‘sacred scripture,’ as ‘written Torah,’ plays a crucial ideological role in the gradual shift in focus within early Judaism from a religion based on the sacrificial service of the deity in the Temple to a religion which centers itself in the study and interpretation of a sacred scripture.

For the typical modern western mind, ‘Bible’ connotes a tangible, definable entity. People carry ‘the Bible’ to a university or religious school class, read from ‘the Bible’ in synagogue or church, see ‘the Bible’ in the hands of television preachers, and place their right hands on ‘the Bible’ to be sworn into public office. Yet however it functions as a cultural icon, one must recall that what we as moderns term ‘the Bible’ in actuality displays a wide variety of formats which feature conflicting tables of contents,

³ J.P. Hyatt, “The Dead Sea Discoveries: Retrospect and Challenge,” *JBL* 76 (1957): 6.

⁴ By ‘biblically based religious communities,’ we have in mind not simply the ‘great traditions’ of Judaism and Christianity, but all those religious movements which endorse aspects of the biblical universe of discourse for their own purposes, such as certain gnostic currents and Islam.

different texts, variant forms of the ‘same’ texts, texts translated from diverse languages, and divergent arrangements of parts or groups of texts. These discrepancies are not minor and they make loose references to ‘*the Bible*’ unfortunate. Instead of ‘the Bible,’ there are ‘Bibles,’ containing particular forms of certain texts in one or more specific arrangements used in individual communities. Nothing of a concrete nature warrants the common use of the singular number and the definite article as if there was an inalterable form and content to ‘the Bible.’ Succinctly stated, ‘the Bible’ is not and furthermore never was.⁵

Sustained reflection upon the implications of the manuscript discoveries and textual analyses mentioned above has prompted us to ‘rethink’ several of the terminological categories and methodological assumptions employed within the modern discipline of biblical studies and to subject the notion of Bible, as it functions within both ancient Judaism and the modern world, to a more critical scrutiny.⁶ We therefore offer the following theses and proposals as a way of encouraging a new discussion of terminology and classificatory tropes.

II. What we can no longer say

1. We can no longer speak of ‘the canon’ without extensive qualifications.

‘Canon’ as a technical term for a ‘list’ of books, one which favors some and excludes others, was not a category employed by ancient Judaism, and it is therefore anachronistic to apply it to collections of scrolls preserved by ancient Jewish groups where the genres of writings are variegated and the issues and motivations surrounding their collection(s) cannot be assumed to be the same as those of later religious communities.⁷ At Qumran there is no evidence for a canon as a definable collection of scrolls which were

⁵ See similar statements in R.P. Carroll, *Wolf in the Sheepfold* (London: SPCK, 1991), 7; S.E. Gillingham, *One Bible, Many Voices* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 46, 66.

⁶ Some trenchant comments and criticisms which presage a number of the issues broached herein, particularly with regard to the text-critical issues surrounding the ‘canonization’ of Hebrew Bible, have been offered over the past fifty years by figures like P. Kahle, M.H. Goshen-Gottstein, H.M. Orlinsky, M. Greenberg, J.A. Sanders, F.M. Cross, S. Talmon, E. Tov, and E. Ulrich. Much of what is expressed in the present essay simply reiterates or builds upon their foundational labors.

⁷ We would object to the loose use of the term ‘canon’ to designate almost any use of previous literature as in some sense religiously authoritative. Under such usage dozens, if not hundreds, of texts (extant or non-extant) used authoritatively in ancient Jewish writings would need to be classified as ‘canonical.’ B.S.

demarcated as distinct, much less support for ‘the canon’ (however one defines *that*).⁸ There is no list. There is no codex which assembled copies of authoritative writings. There is no discussion weighing the relative value or authority of different ‘writings.’⁹ Some scrolls were clearly used more than others, and some of these scrolls correspond to (but are not identical to) books printed in modern Bibles.¹⁰ Some Qumran writings were associated with the speech of God, and some writings are quoted as being in some sense authoritative.¹¹ Divine inspiration is claimed for the *pesharim*, surely enough to qualify them for favored status.¹² But these practices and rhetorical markers, supplying as they do some evidence for the community’s reading habits and some of the relevant mental categories they employed in thinking about certain texts, also illustrate the conceptual complexity of the problem and should caution us about attempting to impose upon the texts’ authors and/or readers alien categories which were operative in later religious communities. Given that there could be no one centralized ‘canon-making’ authority for the

Childs (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979], 57-60) attempts to distinguish between authoritative writings and canon but ultimately reverts to an essential identification (p. 60). It seems to us that the use of the terms ‘canon’ or ‘canonical process’ or ‘process of canonization’ too easily falls prey to the teleological fallacy by which the end result (for this or that community) is thought to stand as the inevitable outcome of decisions or as the goal or as the implicit ideals of persons in much earlier times. By way of analogy, in the history of book production the codex format, with its several connections with the roll format, eventually came to dominate. But surely it would obscure matters to refer to the ‘process of codexization’ at Qumran or in Judaism of the Second Temple period. Discussion of wider cultural canons and ‘classical literature’ may have merit but one must fastidiously avoid reading later ideas into ancient minds. See P.R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); J. Gorak, *The Making of the Modern Canon* (London: Athlone, 1991).

⁸ See already J.C. Reeves, “Scriptural Authority in Early Judaism,” in *Living Traditions of the Bible: Scripture in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Practice* (ed. J.E. Bowley; St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 63-84.

⁹ Such as we find, e.g., in *m. Yad.* 3:5; *b. Meg.* 7a.

¹⁰ J.C. VanderKam concludes that the Qumran community likely ‘accepted 1 Enoch and Jubilees as divine, authoritative revelations,’ and probably ‘many’ others as well (“Authoritative Literature in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *DSD* 5 [1998]: 400-2). P. Flint identifies some of those ‘many,’ concluding that the following works ‘enjoyed scriptural status’: Psalm 151A, Psalm 151 B, Psalm 154, Psalm 155, the canticle of 11QPs^a (= Ben Sira 51:13-30), *1 Enoch*, *Jubilees*; possibly also Tobit and the Letter of Jeremiah (“‘Apocrypha,’ Other Previously-Known Writings, and ‘Pseudepigrapha’ in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls After Fifty Years* (ed. P. Flint and J.C. VanderKam; 2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 2:66.

¹¹ J. A. Sanders, “Canon as Dialogue,” in *The Bible at Qumran* (ed. P. Flint; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 23. These are not always ‘biblical’ texts that are so quoted. See, e.g., J.M. Baumgarten, “A ‘Scriptural’ Citation in 4Q Fragments of the Damascus Document,” *JJS* 43 (1992): 95-8.

¹² See, e.g., 1QpHab 7:1-6 and the cogent observations of VanderKam, “Authoritative Literature,” 386-7. On the relative claims of the interpretive and prophetic modes at Qumran, see J.E. Bowley, “Prophets and Prophecy at Qumran,” in *Dead Sea Scrolls After Fifty Years* (ed. Flint and VanderKam), 2:354-78.

pluriform Judaism of the Second Temple period,¹³ we can also make no canonical claims for Judaism at large during this same era.¹⁴

While it is true that we now possess some textual evidence for the existence of almost every ‘biblical’ book by the time of the First Jewish Revolt, it is by no means certain that what later generations conceptualize as ‘Bible,’ or that even the notion of a ‘canonical form’ for any ‘biblical book,’ was analogously operative during this period. Citation formulas and the number of times a particular ‘book’ is physically instanced or was copied supply some clues for assessing relative religious importance, or at least popularity, among literary texts. Yet the same criteria also raise problematic questions. Just how should we understand the scope of common referential designations like *torat Mosheh* (‘law of Moses’; cf. 1QS 5:8, 8:22; CD 15-16 *passim*) or *ha-nevi'im* (‘the prophets’; cf. 1QS 1:3, 8:17; CD 7:17) when the usual referents of those labels are simultaneously exemplified in a variety of formats among their users, as for example, at Qumran? Is *torat Mosheh* to be limited to what we recognize as a forerunner of the later Masoretic text of the Pentateuch?¹⁵ What about the Samaritan or Septuagintal prototypes of the Pentateuch, both of which were also archived at Qumran? Or what about the various so-called pentateuchal ‘paraphrases’ or ‘parabiblical’ texts which combine and weave elements from different parts of the Pentateuch into new textual complexes?¹⁶ Or what about other parallel works ascribed to the authorial or editorial activity of Moses, such as the *Book of Jubilees* or the Temple Scroll (note 11QT 44:5) or the so-

¹³ The infamous ‘council of Yavneh’ that supposedly determined the boundaries of the Tanakh two decades after the First Jewish Revolt has long been discredited as an imaginative construct. See J.P. Lewis, “Jamnia (Jabneh), Council of,” *ABD* 3:634-7; idem, “Jamnia After Forty Years,” *HUCA* 70-71 (1999-2000): 233-59.

¹⁴ A number of works repeatedly make such claims; e.g., R.T. Beckwith, “Formation of the Hebrew Bible,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. M.J. Mulder; CRINT 2.1; Assen/Maastricht and Philadelphia: Van Gorcum and Fortress, 1988), 39-86. Rather, in the words of Sanders, ‘there were as many canons as there were communities’ (“Scripture as Canon for Post Modern Times,” *BTB* 25 [1985]: 58). J. Barton argues at length that ‘The word “canon” itself is a most inappropriate term to describe the Scriptures of Jews and Christians in the first few centuries of our era’ (*Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel After the Exile* [London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1986], 44; see also 55-75).

¹⁵ This is the typical understanding of the designation by most modern researchers.

¹⁶ For a discussion of these texts, see E. Tov, “Biblical Texts as Reworked in Some Qumran Manuscripts with Special Attention to 4QRP and 4QparaGen-Exod,” in *The Community of the Renewed Covenant: The Notre Dame Symposium on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. E. Ulrich and J.C. VanderKam; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 111-34; S. White Crawford, “Reworked Pentateuch,” in

called Apocryphons of Moses (4Q375-376)?¹⁷ Might not the label *torat Mosheh* cover some or all of this material as well? When we similarly scrutinize the employment of the label *ha-nevi'im*, we fare no better, given that Qumran literature bestows the epithet 'prophet' and presumably its concomitant aura of authority on more characters than does canonical biblical literature. David and Daniel undergo a 'prophetization' at Qumran.¹⁸ Was Enoch or Noah also numbered among 'the prophets'? How about Joshua, whose 'psalms' (4Q378-379) are quoted in the so-called Testimonia (4Q175)?¹⁹ Summarily dividing the Qumran literature between 'canonical' and 'non-canonical' (or 'biblical' and 'non-biblical') based upon the later restrictive definitions of these terms is unnecessarily obfuscating, for it imposes foreign and indeed obstructive categories upon these literary texts. The conceptual problem for modern researchers is further aggravated by a largely unreflective use of other popular classificatory terminology like that of 'rewritten Bible' for works like *Jubilees* or *I Enoch*.²⁰ Surely one must first have 'Bible' before one can 'rewrite' it: the taxonomic category presupposes and subtly endorses both a chronological sequence and an intertextual relationship, neither of which is demonstrably the case.

Finally—and this has been known for a long time—it is not even accurate to speak of 'the modern canon' of biblical books, for in fact there are many diverse 'canons' endorsed by contemporary faith

Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls (ed. L.H. Schiffman and J.C. VanderKam; 2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2:775-7.

¹⁷ For the two fragments labeled 'Apocryphon of Moses' by J. Strugnell, see M. Broshi, et al., eds., *Qumran Cave 4 XIV: Parabiblical Texts, Part 2* (DJD XIX; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 111-36.

¹⁸ For the phenomenon of 'prophetization,' see Reeves, "Scriptural Tradition," 72-7, where it is defined as 'the seemingly arbitrary bestowal of prophetic rank upon a number of literary or even historical figures who do not normally enjoy such status within the traditional scriptures' (pp. 72-3).

¹⁹ C.A. Newsom, "The 'Psalms of Joshua' from Qumran Cave 4," *JJS* 39 (1988): 56-73; A. Steudel, "Testimonia," in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Schiffman and VanderKam), 2:936-8.

²⁰ For a valiant yet ultimately futile attempt to reify this questionable construct, see G.J. Brooke, "Rewritten Bible," in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Schiffman and VanderKam), 2:777-81.

communities (ranging from five to eighty or more books) from a variety of textual families.²¹ Just as there are only Bibles, so also there are only canons.²²

2. Under these circumstances we can no longer rely upon certain longstanding and usually unquestioned assumptions about the editorial structure, the contents, the date of final formulation, and the textual integrity of those literary works presently collected together under the rubric of 'Bible.'

We would suggest that the notion of 'Bible' as a privileged category functioning as the fixed point of reference and discussion for the labeling, analysis, and evaluation of 'non-canonical'; i.e., non-biblical works, requires a radical revision and reformulation. Our descriptive language must be altered in order to express this revision; instead of biblical 'expansions' or 'rewritings,' we should perhaps speak of 'biblically allied,' 'biblically affiliated,' or 'biblically related' literatures in order to avoid imposing uncritical notions of priority. Moreover, our accustomed way of perceiving and categorizing how 'Bible' interacted with these 'parallel' literary corpora will require a serious overhaul. Instead of measuring all biblically allied or affiliated literatures against 'the Bible' and then assigning labels like 'expanded Bible,' 'rewritten Bible,' 'paraphrased Bible,' 'distorted Bible,' and the like to those renditions which depart textually and/or thematically from 'the Bible' of the Masoretes, we should rather consider the bulk of this material, both biblical and non-biblical, as a single culturally variegated literary continuum which juxtaposes a number of alternative or parallel ways of recounting a particular story or tradition.²³

²¹ In addition, in both Judaism and Christianity, the issue of canon is complicated by actual usage, or what has been termed 'functional canon.' Note, for example, what is included and excluded when L.B. Wolfenson writes, 'The term *Jewish Canon*, properly understood, means those writings which were adopted as legally and morally binding. Such writings are the Pentateuch, or "Law," the Mishna and Gemara; and since the Pentateuch is properly the Hebrew Canon, the Jewish Canon is really the Mishna and Gemara' ("Implications of the Place of the Book of Ruth in Editions, Manuscripts, and Canon of the Old Testament," *HUCA* 1 [1924]: 177-8.

²² The Christian 'canonical approach' advocated by B.S. Childs has long been rightly criticized for designating as 'the canon' for the Christian community a form of canon which does not even exist in any Christian manuscripts until well after the rise of Protestant churches and has never existed as 'the canon' of Christianity; certainly not for all Christian communities, nor even for a simple majority of them.

²³ S. Talmon has eloquently endorsed just such an interpretive position: 'The new evidence proves convincingly that not all variants in Hebrew non-masoretic and translational witnesses resulted from scribal mistakes or the deliberate interference of emendators, revisers and copyists. Rather, variants in an ancient

The inadequacy of the currently fashionable terminology becomes immediately clear when one considers that Chronicles, by any descriptive standard, is unmistakably ‘rewritten Bible’ (being a temporally subsequent rewriting of Samuel and Kings²⁴), just as *Jubilees* is characteristically described as a ‘rewriting’ of Genesis and Exodus.²⁵ But while Chronicles is represented by only one scroll at Qumran (4Q118 Chr)²⁶ and is never quoted in the other scrolls, *Jubilees* is extant in fourteen or fifteen manuscripts,²⁷ claims to be a divine revelation to Moses (prologue; 1:26-28; 2:1), is quoted and/or referenced by name in other texts,²⁸ and clearly exerted a marked influence on the sectarian community.²⁹ It does no justice to the historical reality to impose arbitrarily demonstrably later theological judgments and

version preserve at times pristine readings which were accidentally lost in the course of time or were designedly suppressed by later tradents. Accordingly, in tracing the transmission history of the biblical books and submitting them to critical analysis, the evidence of the ancient versions must be carefully weighed.’ He states further: ‘... it is my thesis that the presumably ‘re-told,’ re-read,’ ‘re-written,’ etc. Bible-related works should mostly be viewed as crystallizations of ‘living’ literary traditions, which parallel presentations of these same traditions in the books of the Hebrew Bible, but do not necessarily spring from them.’ These quotations are taken from his “Textual Criticism: The Ancient Versions,” in *Text in Context: Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study* (ed. A.D.H. Mayes; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 141-70, at pp. 149-50 and 157 respectively.

²⁴ The recent arguments of A.G. Auld (*Kings without Privilege* [Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1994]) that Samuel/Kings and Chronicles are revisions of an older document would not significantly alter the conclusion here. Chronicles is clearly ‘rewriting’ something considered in some sense authoritative.

²⁵ ‘As the Chronicler had rewritten the history of Israel and Judah from the basis of the Priests’ Code, so our author [i.e., of *Jubilees*] re-edited from the Pharisaic standpoint of his time the history of events from the creation to the publication, or, according to the author’s view, the republication of the law on Sinai ... his work constitutes an enlarged Targum on Genesis and Exodus ...’ So R.H. Charles, “The Book of Jubilees,” *APOT* 2:1.

²⁶ PAM 43.089. See J. Treballe Barrera, “118. 4QChr,” in *Qumran Cave 4 XI: Psalms to Chronicles* (ed. E. Ulrich, et al.; DJD XVI; Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 295-7.

²⁷ J.C. VanderKam, “Jubilees, Book of,” in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Schiffman and VanderKam), 1:435. This impressive total does not take into account the three or four examples of so-called ‘Pseudo-Jubilees’ (4Q225, 226, 227, 228[?]) which for consistency’s sake should perhaps be termed ‘parajubilean texts’ (!), nor does it include the various calendrical fragments which often share an affinity with *Jubilees*.

²⁸ See CD 16:2-4. Note that 4Q228 1 I 9 uses the same formula for referencing *Jubilees* that is often employed for citing ‘scriptural’ proof-texts. Some have also noted that CD 10:7-10 may reference *Jub.* 23:11.

²⁹ See, e.g., B. Noack, “Qumran and the Book of Jubilees,” *SEÅ* 22-23 (1957-58): 191-207; M. Testuz, *Les idées religieuses du Livre des Jubilés* (Genève: Librairie E. Droz, 1960), 179-95; K. Berger, *Das Buch der Jubiläen* (JSHRZ II.3; Gütersloh: G. Mohn, 1981), 295-8; M.A. Knibb, *Jubilees and the Origin of the Qumran Community: An Inaugural Lecture in the Department of Biblical Studies* (London: King’s College, 1989); J.C. VanderKam, “The Jubilees Fragments from Qumran Cave 4,” in *The Madrid Qumran Congress: Proceedings of the International Congress on the Dead Sea Scrolls, Madrid 18-21 March, 1991* (ed. J. Treballe Barrera and L. Vegas Montaner; 2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1992), 2:635-48, esp. p. 648.

terminology by classifying Chronicles as ‘Bible’ and relegating *Jubilees* to the category of ‘rewritten Bible.’³⁰

It follows that if we wish to remain faithful to our physical evidence, we should cease distinguishing between ‘biblical’ and ‘non-biblical’ scrolls both at Qumran³¹ and even for the Second Temple period in general. These labels are anachronistic, serving only to confuse and distort our understanding of this literature. There is no unambiguous evidence among the Dead Sea Scrolls that the book of Genesis was any more (or any less) ‘Bible’ than was the *Book of Jubilees* or portions of *1 Enoch* or even 1Q Genesis Apocryphon. ‘Bible’ is not a category invoked by the writings at Qumran. There would appear to be no equivalent term within the Scrolls for what is later identifiable (from parochial perspectives) as ‘the Bible.’

3. We can no longer speak of the ‘final form’ of any particular text.

No such entity exists for any particular text in Jewish or Christian antiquity. The Dead Sea Scrolls have provided scores of authentic manuscripts which are a thousand years older than almost all the other Hebrew manuscripts underlying modern printed editions of the Bible. If we had not already learned from our comparative study of the Septuagint and Samaritan Pentateuch manuscripts, we have certainly now been taught that each ‘book’ currently represented in modern Bibles possesses a complex and distinct textual history. Each of the ancient forms of a text found in any single manuscript of a competing linguistic tradition (MT, LXX, etc.) represents only one peculiar ‘shape’ at a certain point in time and can make no claim to being ‘the final form.’³² Any particular text one might use is one exemplar from one stage (‘generation’) in a long and complicated genealogy. Branches may have completely separated from others belonging to the same stem for centuries (what we term ‘Jeremiah,’ ‘Psalms,’ ‘Exodus,’ etc.) or may have ‘intertwined’ at other times. It is simply wrong to declare or to assume the Masoretic Text to be ‘the final

³⁰ See the relevant DJD volumes where Chronicles is ranged with the ‘biblical’ texts while the Cave 4 fragments of *Jubilees* are consigned to the first volume of so-called ‘parabiblical texts’ (H. Attridge, et al., eds., *Qumran Cave 4, VIII: Parabiblical Texts, Part 1* [DJD XIII; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994], 1-185).

³¹ Some scholars are beginning to recognize that terms like ‘canon’ and ‘scripture’ are meaningless at Qumran; see, e.g., S. White Crawford, “Reworked Pentateuch,” 2:777.

³² Much less subjected to such claims by modern scholars.

form³³ when in fact its various components ('books' in modern terms) represent ancient scrolls selected at varying stages of their individual redactional history. Taken as a whole, the Masoretic Text has not served in any universal sense at any time in Christian history as the final (read 'authoritative') form, and a unilateral claiming of such status by uninformed Christian exegetes is arbitrary at best and arrogant at worst. Multiple textual and reading traditions survived in various Jewish communities for centuries after the alleged 'fixing' of the biblical text.³⁴ Even those texts associated with the scribal acumen of the Ben Asher family of Tiberias, such as the invaluable Aleppo Codex (915 CE) which was praised by Maimonides as a '*sefer* upon which all other *sefer torahs* may rely for correction,'³⁵ represent only a small portion of the vast spectrum of Masoretic tradition and activity.³⁶

'The final form' as a historical phenomenon is a chimera. If one community at a particular time and place adopts a certain form of a book or group of books, that choice may be arbitrary or reasoned, socially modulated or voluntarily imposed, but it cannot be claimed that the choice is 'the final form' of the text, for such a description implies that particular form possesses some *inherent* finality that extends beyond the borders of that community at that time.³⁷ 'Our chosen form' or 'my chosen form' (or even 'a final form')

³³ Or, as M.S. Jaffee has recently expressed it, 'accepting as a fact of nature the textual fixity of the printed Bible' (*Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE-400 CE* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], 19).

³⁴ One thinks of the notorious 'book(s)' of R. Meir (see S. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* [2d ed.; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962], 24-7) as well as the so-called Severus Scroll which reportedly featured numerous variant readings (see H. Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabbati* [Jerusalem: Mekitze Nirdamim, 1940], 209-12). According to *Sifre* Deut §356 (ed. Finkelstein, 423; also *y. Ta'an.* 4.2, 68a; *Soferim* 6.4), there were three slightly divergent Torah scrolls archived within the Temple precincts which were used for corrections; it is unclear whether the 'courtyard scroll' of *m. Mo'ed Qat* 3:4 represents an additional archetype. Note too the variants recorded in the seventeenth-century *Minḥat Shay* of Yediyah Shlomo Raphael ben Abraham of Norzi and the well known eighteenth-century collections of variants by Kennicott and de Rossi. Finally, it has long been observed that classical rabbinic literature displays a number of discrepancies when citing biblical sources; for the latest discussion of this phenomenon, see B. Barry Levy, *Fixing God's Torah: The Accuracy of the Hebrew Bible Text in Jewish Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³⁵ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book II, *Sefer Torah* 8.4. For a full translation, see I. Twersky, ed., *A Maimonides Reader* (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1972), 96.

³⁶ A good summary of these issues can be found in S.W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (2d ed.; 18 vols.; New York/Philadelphia: Columbia University Press/The Jewish Publication Society, 1952-83), 6:235-55 and the relevant notes.

³⁷ Jaffee again: 'the "correct" text of a book was linked to the social boundaries of the community that preserved it' (*Torah in the Mouth*, 19).

should replace the currently popular ‘the final form’ or ‘the canonical form’ for the sake of accuracy and the avoidance of hegemonic exaggerations.

4. We can no longer speak of ‘the Masoretic Text’ as the benchmark of Hebrew texts which best represents a pristine original form.

There are several issues which are too often overlooked here.

First, within the Masoretic tradition itself, there is no such thing as ‘the Masoretic Text.’³⁸ This lesson was repeatedly stressed long ago (1966) by H.M. Orlinsky:

There never was, and there never can be, ‘*the* masoretic text’ or ‘*the* text of the Masoretes.’ All that, at best, we might hope to achieve, in theory, is ‘*a* masoretic text,’ or ‘*a* text of the Masoretes,’ that is to say, *a* text worked up by Ben Asher, or by Ben Naftali, or by someone in the Babylonian tradition, or a text worked up with the aid of the masoretic notes of an individual scribe or of a school of scribes. But as matters stand, we cannot even achieve a clear-cut text of the Ben Asher school, or of the Ben Naftali school, or of a Babylonian school, or a text based on a single masoretic list; indeed, it is not at all certain that any such ever existed. All that an editor can claim with justification is that he has reproduced the text of a single manuscript, be it Aleppo (Hebrew University Bible Project), or Leningrad B 19a (BH³), or British Museum Or 2626-27-28 (Snaith), and the like ... at the same time, it cannot be emphasized too strongly that none of these manuscripts or of the printed editions based on them has any greater merit or ‘masoretic’ authority than most of the many other editions of the Bible, than, say, the van der Hooght, Hahn, Letteris, Baer, Rabbinic and Ginsburg Bibles.³⁹

³⁸ E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (2d ed.; Minneapolis/Assen: Fortress/Van Gorcum, 2001), 22-3.

³⁹ H.M. Orlinsky, “Prolegomenon: The Masoretic Text, A Critical Evaluation,” in C.D. Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (repr., New York: Ktav Publishing

Second, the celebrated precision and accuracy of the Masoretic copyists is frequently exaggerated, and/or is conveniently but illegitimately retrojected to earlier (but poorly documented) periods. This fosters the illusion that Masoretic scribes invariably produced xerographic-quality copies of the manuscripts which they handled and that a similar meticulousness was true in the centuries before them.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the textual choices of rabbinic Judaism during the early Christian centuries were not motivated by the modern critical concerns for the ‘oldest’ or ‘best’ or ‘most pristine’ texts. Their selections for textual standardization were sometimes of relatively late, longer, and conflated texts, but sometimes of relatively early, briefer, and non-repetitive texts.⁴¹

Third, given what has been concretely demonstrated about the organic (as opposed to mechanical) growth of ancient Israelite ‘biblical’ literature,⁴² is it even a meaningful enterprise to seek after the ‘original’ form?⁴³ Which of the variously attested written forms of Daniel or Esther is its ‘original?’ What represents the ‘original form’ of the book of Isaiah: its Masoretic version, as most interpreters uncritically assume, or the ‘older’ 1QIsa^a scroll?⁴⁴ What is the ‘original’ Psalter? The Septuagint and the Syriac versions of the book of Psalms bear witness to a longer work than that currently reproduced in Protestant

House, 1966), xxiii-xxiv; see also xxix-xxxi; xxxii (‘there never was any such thing as “the masoretic text” in existence’); xxxv-xxxvii.

⁴⁰ For a more balanced assessment, see the discussions of Baron and Orlinsky cited above, as well as Tov, *Textual Criticism*², 21-79. See also F.M. Cross, “The Fixation of the Text of the Hebrew Bible,” in his *From Epic to Canon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 205-18. He states therein (p. 207) ‘... the history of the text of the Hebrew Bible has been obscured by an assumption or dogma on the part of the ancients, rabbis and church fathers alike, that the Hebrew text was unchanged and unchanging, unaltered by the usual scribal realities that produce families and recensions over long periods of transmission.’

⁴¹ See the still important study of M. Greenberg, “The Stabilization of the Text of the Hebrew Bible, Reviewed in the Light of the Biblical Materials from the Judean Desert,” *JAOS* 76 (1956): 157-67; reprinted in his *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 191-208. Note also Cross, “Fixation,” 214.

⁴² See especially Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*², 20-46; Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 15-27.

⁴³ In speaking of texts which originated centuries before the turn of the era, it seems an invalid and equivocal use of the word ‘original’ to mean texts ‘of the first century,’ as does Childs, *Introduction*, 101.

⁴⁴ Most critics simply presume without argument the archetypal status of the received text of Isaiah, but are there any empirical grounds buttressing such a presumption? For a valuable corrective, note now E. Ulrich, “The Developmental Composition of the Book of Isaiah: Light from 1QIsa^a on Additions in the MT,” *DSD* 8 (2001): 288-305.

Christian translations of that work. What about the shorter Psalters found at Qumran,⁴⁵ or the fact that some early Psalms collections certainly ended at what is now Ps 72:20? The ‘modern’ 150-psalm Psalter is demonstrably neither the ‘original’ nor the ‘final form’ of that anthology of hymns.⁴⁶

But the issue reaches probably every ‘book’ of a modern Bible. In what sense does the book of Chronicles have an ‘original’ form, given that so much of its material is demonstrably ‘unoriginal,’ being derivative from Samuel and Kings? What would be the ‘original’ form of the text of Jeremiah? Its first oral performance(s) in a public setting?⁴⁷ One of Baruch’s reconstructive drafts? One of the shorter and older Hebrew versions found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, or the apparently similar Hebrew *Vorlage* reflected in the Septuagint translation preserved by fifth century Greek codices? Or the substantially longer and later Hebrew rendition represented in the Masoretic codices of the tenth and eleventh centuries? And what is the ‘original’ Torah? Is it a successfully reconstructed hypothetical Pentateuchal source (*à la* JEDP), or what Nehemiah references as ‘found written in the torah which God commanded by the hand of Moses,’ but which is not found in a Masoretic Text of the Pentateuch or in any other extant document (Neh 8.14; cf. Lev 23:39-43)?⁴⁸

III. What we *can* say

⁴⁵ For a recent discussion of these issues, see P.W. Flint, “Psalms, Book of,” in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Schiffman and VanderKam), 2:702-10.

⁴⁶ To B. Waltke’s (“How We Got the Hebrew Bible: The Text and Canon of the Old Testament,” in *The Bible at Qumran* [ed. Flint], 43) contention that ‘both theology and history demand that the critic decide upon an original text,’ we simply say that what theologians or historians demand does not determine what the evidence gives. Modern theologians and historians are not in a position to make demands of ancient writers, nor should textual critics succumb to the illegitimate command for dogmatic certainty. Honest historians and theologians frequently learn to live with ambiguities and unanswered questions rather than inventing facts. As J. Barton puts it in an even broader context, ‘Biblical critics’ obligations are to the text, not to the Church or to theology, and they have the duty of reporting what the text says, not what the theologian wants to hear.’ Quoted from the latter’s “Canon and Old Testament Interpretation,” in *In Search of True Wisdom* (ed. E. Ball; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 37-52; quotation is taken from p. 52.

⁴⁷ See Jer 36:2-18, 21-23, 27-32.

⁴⁸ Compare M. Greenberg: ‘The notion of “the hypothetical textual form” (in the singular) that existed at the time of canonization posits an identity between canonization and text standardization that is flatly contradicted by all the evidence we have.’ Quotation taken from his “The Use of the Ancient Versions for Interpreting the Hebrew Text: A Sampling from Ezekiel 2:1-3:11,” reprinted in his *Studies in the Bible*, 209-25. The quote is taken from p. 218. W.P. Brown has recently argued that the LXX *Vorlage* to Genesis

1. While the term ‘the Bible’ without qualifiers may be confusing and clumsy, the adjective ‘biblical’ still proves useful as a classificatory tool. The field of ‘biblical studies’ as understood and used today comprises more than the examination of the textual expression of those works featured in a ‘biblical canon.’ It also includes the study of those works’ historical, literary, and cultural backgrounds as illuminated by archaeology, social science models, and the scholarly reconstruction of the contours of the transmission history of the work(s) in question. The various linguistic versions, the so-called apocrypha and pseudepigrapha (both Jewish and Christian), rabbinic midrash, compilations of narratological folklore by Christian⁴⁹ and Muslim⁵⁰ antiquarians, and the classic medieval commentaries form legitimate facets of ‘biblical studies’ as it has been and is currently practiced. If anything, a responsible pursuit of the discipline of ‘biblical studies’ should produce the removal of the artificial boundaries drawn among some of these facets of professional activity by many modern researchers.

2. The history of ‘books’ in the Second Temple period in their diverse textual forms⁵¹ is qualitatively similar to the hypothesized earlier developments in the composition of biblical texts by classical source criticism. The changes witnessed in the textual remains of works like Jeremiah, Psalms, and Samuel have been profitably and instructively compared with the editorial developments exhibited between Chronicles and Samuel-Kings and also between Deuteronomy and Exodus-Numbers.⁵² The empirical evidence for many books (including that contributed by so-called ‘non-biblical’ or ‘parabiblical’ scrolls) provides ample testimony for the compositional evolution of texts in Jewish antiquity, confirms many of the guiding assumptions of modern source criticism, and suggests plausible models for conceiving the growth of other ‘books’ whose tradition and transmission history is less well known, such as that of

is older than our MT traditions (*Structure, Role and Ideology in the Hebrew and Greek Texts of Genesis 1:1-2:3* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993]).

⁴⁹ Such as the Syriac *Cave of Treasures* cycle.

⁵⁰ Such as the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā* (‘tales of the prophets’) collections.

⁵¹ Proto-LXX, proto-MT, proto-Samaritan, and others. These categories come from E. Tov, *Textual Criticism*², 114-6.

Genesis or Deuteronomy. The sociological and cultural forces which apparently supported and nourished a great diversity of Jewish literature and a pluriformity of textual traditions in the late monarchic, exilic, and early postexilic periods were still at work in the late Second Temple period.⁵³ Were it not for the monumental historical accident of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls by a Bedouin shepherd in 1947, we would likely still be ignorant of the plethora of ‘authoritative and sacred’ Jewish texts which were read as ‘words of God’ or ‘revelations to Moses’ (or other prophets) by at least one Jewish community during the latter centuries of the Second Temple era. However, for the earlier period, we are still waiting for the archaeological spade to unearth the written exemplars for ‘God’s commands through his prophets,’ ‘the law which the Lord commanded through Moses,’ and the ‘book of the law of God,’ one or more works which a group of Jewish returnees from Babylon in the fifth century undoubtedly viewed as peculiarly authoritative (cf. Ezra 9:10-11; Neh 8:14, 18). Had history been merciful and seen to the survival of the Qumranic *Yahad* as an influential textual community, perhaps our Bibles would now contain some of these less familiar ‘words of Moses’ (cf. 1Q22) in lieu of other books. Or, alternatively, perhaps there would be more than one dominant textual and/or ‘canonical’ tradition even within Judaism.

One implication of recognizing the organic similarity between the compositional habits of the scribes at Qumran and those of earlier ‘biblical’ writers is a blurring of distinctions among what are for us the formally separate processes of authoring, redacting, reading/reciting, *and* copying,⁵⁴ all of which blend into a unified enterprise which in turn erases for modern scholarship the traditional boundaries erected between literary criticism and textual criticism as usually conceived.⁵⁵ Consequently the literary

⁵² See J.H. Tigay, ed., *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), an extraordinarily important group of essays whose full implications have yet to be appreciated by many scholars.

⁵³ According to E. Tov, ‘the textual diversity visible in the Qumran evidence from the third pre-Christian century onwards is probably not representative of the textual situation in the earlier periods, at which time the text must have been much more fluid’ (*Textual Criticism*², 169). But certainly the Qumran diversity is closer to that of these ‘earlier periods’ than it is to later conceptions of canonical and textual uniformity. According to Cross, ‘In no case, however, do the Hebrew manuscripts from Qumran exhibit the developed and fixed form of the text that emerged in the Rabbinic Recension, nor can we detect any clear drift toward or narrowing down to, that recension’ (‘Fixation,’ 211).

⁵⁴ See S. Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996); Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, passim.

⁵⁵ See especially Tov, *Textual Criticism*², 313-50.

categories, rubrics, and distinctions presumed by a later age may be of little value for gaining a proper understanding of the production and circulation of early Jewish literature.

3. There is an urgent need for a thoroughgoing reassessment and revision of the current terminology used in the study of early Judaism's rich literary traditions. Labels like 'canonical' and 'non-canonical' are meaningless categories for Second Temple Judaism. An analogous bifurcation between the 'biblical' and 'non-biblical' or 'parabiblical' Dead Sea Scrolls is likewise unwarranted for that collection of texts. Some intellectual circles, it is true, were moving in the direction of demarcating certain writings as 'sacred' and others as 'profane,' but this development (at least within classical Judaism) postdates by a century or more the latest Dead Sea Scrolls.⁵⁶ Eventually a 'list' of 'scriptures' does appear within Jewish literature (*b. B. Bat.* 13b-15b), but the purpose of that roster of titles is not so much to provide the identities of the biblical books as it is to guarantee their antiquity and cultural authority.⁵⁷ A label like 'apocrypha' or 'apocryphal' retains utility only in contexts where a scriptural canon has been clearly defined, and even then care must be exercised in its application.⁵⁸ The notion of 'pseudepigrapha' (and allied formations) becomes problematic only when its reference is tacitly restricted (as it normally is) to 'non-canonical' works, since practically the whole of the Hebrew Bible in all of its extant forms, strictly speaking, is either 'pseudepigraphic' or 'anonymous.' As previously articulated above, the loose usage of

⁵⁶ Note *m. Sanh.* 10:1; *t. Yad.* 2.13; *y. Sanh.* 10.1, 28a; *b. Sanh.* 100b. As an example of a 'profane' book, the latter three sources offer Ben Sira. On the other hand, it is well known that the book of Ben Sira is cited as 'scripture' numerous times by the rabbinic Sages (for the location of these citations, see L. Zunz-Ḥ. Albeck, *Ha-derashot be-Yisrael* [2d ed.; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1954], 49-50, 280-4; also M.Z. Segal, *Sefer Ben Sira ha-shalem* [2d ed.; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1958], 37-42). In the tenth century, Saadia Gaon describes in the preface to his *Sefer ha-galuy* how he was in possession of a copy of the 'book which Ben Sira authored' which displayed *parashiyyot*, verse divisions, and vocalization and accentual markings. Saadia also supplies a small number of quotations from this work. See Segal, *Sefer Ben Sira*², 43.

⁵⁷ R. Kasher, "The Interpretation of Scripture in Rabbinic Literature," in *Mikra* (ed. Mulder), 549. The famous discussion by Josephus of Jewish sacred texts (*C. Ap.* 1.37-43) does not match later lists and it cannot be said to represent a unified (or official) Jewish viewpoint; it does represent one post-Second Temple explanation for a Greco-Roman audience. Cf. Barton, *Oracles of God*, 26-7, 48, 58-60.

⁵⁸ The 'canon lists' supplied by such sources as the Muratorian Canon, Origen (*apud* Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25), or the thirty-ninth festal epistle of Athanasius provide information which is relevant only to their local sectarian orientation and circumstances, as a comparative examination of early manuscript codices and testimonia from other locales in Christendom proves.

presumptuous descriptive labels like ‘rewritten Bible’ or ‘paraphrased Bible’ should be immediately discarded.

A number of interesting implications emerge from the adoption of this drastic recasting of vocabulary and theoretical framework. The most intriguing one for our present purposes pertains to the analysis of so-called narrative ‘gaps.’ Under the old scheme of analyzing ‘gaps’ in biblical narrative, one almost invariably viewed so-called ‘expansions’ or ‘embellishments’—gap-fillers, if you will—such as are found in rabbinic midrash or the works belonging to the pseudo-genre of ‘rewritten Bible’ as post-textual responses to the interpretive problems posed by puzzling features of the biblical text. Under the new perspective we are advocating, we are no longer obligated to view these ‘gap-fillers’ as interpretive responses to a base text.⁵⁹ We can instead entertain the distinct possibility that midrash, so-called ‘rewritten Bible,’ and other biblically allied collections of traditions may preserve certain features or motifs or even in some cases provide more cohesive and thematically consistent presentations of stories than those eventually attested in what became Bible.⁶⁰

4. Reading any biblical book involves a choice of reading not ‘the text,’ but one particular form of the text, one which is merely a stage in the developmental history of an ancient scroll. Since all the books now represented in modern Bibles passed through much of their textual history as individual scrolls, each book within the large codicial traditions (MT, LXX) has its own unique textual history. In some cases, of course, the differences among the extant ancient textual witnesses are minimal, but in other cases they are enormously significant. Translators have constantly been forced to make choices among these manuscripts, all of which can be situated in a textual history. These choices may be felicitous or disastrous, governed by the dictates of religious authorities or not, but (as we have seen) they certainly have not been enjoined by ‘the final form.’ Eclectic methodologies also involve choices based on the goal of creating a new textual form which best represents an imagined ancient form, usually thought of as the

⁵⁹ Please note that we are not saying it is *never* the case that ‘expansions’ or ‘embellishments’ occur, but only that the scholar is not obligated to limit his or her exegetical studies to this scenario. Each instance requires close analysis and study on an individual basis.

‘original form.’⁶¹ It is our contention that modern Bible readers and modern religious communities need to be better informed about the textual choices which have been made for them in the current Western translations. Readers should be apprised as to which manuscripts (with dates) are being represented and where those manuscripts figure in the genealogy of the text. Without such clarifications and caveats, ignorance continues to reign in the blithe popular assumption that, for all practical purposes, a modern translation directly renders a text inscribed by the pen of Moses, David, or another ancient prophet.

IV. Conclusion

The discipline of biblical studies lives and thrives today as never before. That is so even though ‘the Bible’ does not exist, if by that we mean a canonically and textually defined entity held in common by all interpreters throughout the ages. There are only Bibles, and they all include texts which exhibit a great deal of diversity in their family history.

During the era of the Second Temple, a remarkable variety of Israelite literature flourished. Ancient scrolls were simultaneously being generated, recited, studied, supplemented, quoted, adapted, edited, critiqued, copied, abridged, expanded, or discarded, both in Eretz Israel and in the diaspora. But there was no ‘Bible’ yet, at least in the sense that most moderns wield that term. There were instead local specimens and collections of scrolls—an indeterminate number of traditional myths and tales, songs and hymns, rituals, oracular pronouncements and visions, royal annals and tax-rolls, epigrams, legal compilations, and genealogical records—none of which bore any inherent authoritative status as ‘canonical scripture’ for *all* Jews, dispersed as they were over a vast geographic and cultural expanse since the age of Sargon.

Within this rich literary environment which spanned centuries and outlived the empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and (later) Rome, writings which enjoyed some measure of authority for at least one social group or locale were invariably updated or ‘replaced’ by other scrolls better suited to new and ever-

⁶⁰ E.g., the widespread tradition that the fatal dispute between Cain and Abel involved their rivalry for the affections of one or more women.

changing cultural concerns and issues. Just as the bulk of the Chronicler's carefully documented 'references' no longer exist as separate sources (with the prominent exception, of course, of Samuel and Kings),⁶² the archival sources undoubtedly exploited by most authors in ancient Israel to produce the 'books' which survive in modern Bibles have also perished. Yet thanks to the remarkable modern-day retrieval of a representative assemblage of Second Temple writings that had been concealed within some caves near the Dead Sea, we now have a much more nuanced grasp of the intellectual and literary environments amidst which our earliest exemplars of texts, later to be called 'Bible,' were emerging.

⁶¹ The manifold difficulties of this methodology should seem obvious based on the above discussion. See however, F.M. Cross, "Problems of Method in the Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible" in *The Critical Study of Sacred Texts* (ed. W.D. O'Flaherty; New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979) 31-54 .

⁶² A still useful discussion of the sources used by the Chronicler is that of S.R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (repr., New York: Meridian Books, 1956) 527-35.