

Scripture as Inspired, Canonical Tradition

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All distinctively Jewish interpretation of Scripture involves, among other things, serious engagement with traditional Jewish biblical exegesis. The Jewish reader is never alone with the text, but is always surrounded by the great Jewish commentators of the past and present, just as the text itself is surrounded by their words in *Mikraot Gedolot* (the classic Rabbinic study Bible). We sit and listen as they discuss and argue with one another, and then we are obliged and privileged to join the conversation.

If we as Messianic Jews practice an authentic Judaism, then our study of Scripture must bring us into this conversation. As in every discussion among Jews, heated disagreement is permitted and expected. All that is required is that we listen attentively and respectfully before speaking, and show as much willingness to learn as to teach.

Unfortunately, popular evangelical conceptions of the reformation principle of *sola scriptura* have prevented many Messianic Jews from entering this Jewish conversation. Instead, most of us dichotomize Scripture and tradition, revering the former as a heavenly gift and criticizing the latter as the deadening accretion of merely human opinion. The authors of Biblical books are viewed as inspired prophets who towered above their contemporaries in splendid isolation, judging and opposing their fellows just as their written words stand in judgment over later communal tradition. Most Messianic Jews identify more with Elijah and Jeremiah than with Zechariah, Nehemiah, or Ezra.¹

¹ Our suspicion of tradition and our identification with the persecuted prophets also builds upon a genuine Biblical motif (e.g., Matthew 15:1-9; 5:10-12). In addition, it is shaped by our experience of ostracism. My point in this paper is not to deny all tensions between Scripture and post-biblical tradition, or between

Given this Protestant influence, few Messianic Jews will be persuaded of the necessary role of tradition by arguments offered from within the tradition. Ironically, a new set of arguments for tradition has emerged from the most non-traditional of sources – modern historical-critical biblical scholarship. While rejecting post-biblical tradition as a starting point for the interpretation of Scripture, historical-critical scholarship has demonstrated that the biblical text itself arises as the product of a communal tradition. Among those who treat Scripture as an authoritative sacred text, this historical-critical insight has led to a rethinking of the nature of Biblical inspiration: Scripture receives its Divine imprint through the empowering and guiding of historical communities and their traditions and not only through the unmediated revealing of heavenly realities to isolated, gifted individuals. This insight has also encouraged a number of Jewish and Christian scholars to go beyond the standard operating assumptions of historical-critical scholarship and to argue for the importance of post-biblical tradition in establishing a context for the contemporary religious appropriation of the sacred writings.²

In the present article I will summarize the key historical-critical perspectives on the human origins of the biblical text that support the view that Scripture itself is a type of communal tradition. I will show how the biblical authors draw upon communal oral tradition and existing written sources, how the texts which they produce often reach final form only among their followers, how the community's canonical selection and arrangement of biblical books affects our reading of them, and how the ongoing work of

our Messianic convictions and the historical development of Judaism over the past two millennia. Instead, my intention is merely to argue that this is not the whole story, nor even its center.

² The seminal figure in this development among Biblical scholars is Brevard Childs. Though Childs is a Protestant Christian, his thinking was influenced greatly by studies with Jewish scholars in the United States and Israel (see his *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993] xv). In turn, his views have been accepted and defended by many leading Jewish Biblical scholars, including Jon Levenson, Nahum Sarna, and Shalom Carmy.

scribal clarification of the text becomes authoritative for later generations. The purpose of these observations about the communal history of the biblical text is to stimulate among us a deeper recognition of the role of community and tradition in the interpretation of that text. I also hope to expand our notion of inspiration, so as to discourage a stark contrast between Divine activity and the communal human process of transmitting tradition.

Authorship and Oral Tradition

Some views of inspiration imagine the process of biblical authorship as a type of human stenography responding to heavenly dictation.³ However, most Jewish and Christian scholars take seriously the active contribution of the human author. This is in keeping with Rabbi Ishmael's dictum that the Torah speaks in human words, and also corresponds to the model of the Divine enfleshment in Messiah (the Word being fully human and fully Divine).⁴ Only the complete participation of the human authors can account for the striking stylistic variations among the Biblical books, even when describing the same events (as in Chronicles and Kings, or in John and the Synoptics).⁵

The human shaping of the text can be taken back one step by recognizing also the role of the human author's community and tradition. Community influence is evident first of all in its formative role in shaping the author's distinctive perspective, literary

³ For a sympathetic description of this view and its history, emphasizing both its legitimacy and its limits, see J. Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 227-31.

⁴ On the history and significance of this analogy between Scripture and the Incarnation, see Goldingay, 238-41.

⁵ Among more conservative Orthodox Jewish scholars, a distinction is made between human authorship of the Torah (i.e., the Pentateuch) and the rest of Scripture. In their view, the Torah comes to Moses directly from God, and does not reflect the distinctive perspective and style of Moses himself, whereas the rest of Scripture comes through the Prophets, whose words reflect their own personalities as well as the Divine intent. See M. Breuer, "The Study of Bible and the Primacy of the Fear of Heaven: Compatibility or Contradiction?" in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, ed. S. Carmy (Northvale, N. J.: Jason Aronson, 1996) 159-180.

competence, and mode of presentation. While noteworthy, such influence on the composition of the biblical text is indirect. More significant is the fact that some of the substance embodied in the final composition derives from traditions transmitted within the author's community.

The excesses of the form and tradition critics should not lead us to minimize their achievement.⁶ As a result of their efforts, scholars no longer consider biblical authors as individual agents operating in a cultural vacuum, but as participants in a communal process of interpreting and transmitting inherited traditions. Thus, even those who hold to Mosaic authorship of Genesis generally assume that Moses received the stories told there through Israelite tradition.⁷ Many (if not most) of the Psalms must have been known among the people of Israel through their oral performance in the context of Temple worship before they were widely available in written form.⁸ The Divine command to Jeremiah to write down his prophecies comes in the fourth year of Jehoiakim (Jer 36:1), but his prophetic labors began some twenty years before. We can infer from this that till the fourth year of Jehoiakim the prophecies of Jeremiah existed only in oral form, and that this must have been the normal mode of prophetic pronouncement and of its initial transmission and preservation.⁹ Even after receiving the

⁶ As C. L. Blomberg notes in dealing with the Gospels, "The lasting legacy of form criticism has been its concern for studying the period of the oral transmission of the Gospel tradition, even if many of its conclusions about that period should be rejected" ("Form Criticism," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1992] 246-7).

⁷ See C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 30-32.

⁸ See B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 509-10. Commenting on the new perspective on the Psalms introduced by the form-critical studies of H. Gunkel, Childs states that "the breadth of the modern consensus which has formed around the general outlines of Gunkel's programme remains impressive" (510).

⁹ See Childs, 345-46.

command to commit his prophecies to writing, Jeremiah did not himself put stylus to scroll, but instead entrusted the task to Baruch, his disciple and assistant.

The role of oral tradition is just as important in the Apostolic Writings. Like the teaching of the Rabbis, the words of Yeshua now found in the Synoptics betray their original mode of delivery and transmission through their succinct and memorable formulation.¹⁰ At an early (and probably still oral) stage these words of Yeshua were translated from Aramaic or Hebrew into Greek. The initial preservation and translation of Yeshua's teaching thus occurred as part of an anonymous communal process, to which the authors of the Books of Good News were heirs and beneficiaries.

Some of the most enlightening results of form-critical study of the Apostolic Writings have come from research on the Pauline letters. Though we should never minimize the impact of direct revelation on Paul's thinking, nor underestimate his own creative theological genius, it is now evident that he was also a tradent, having received the traditions of the primitive *ekklesia* and passing them on in turn. Joseph Fitzmeyer categorizes the traditional material found in Paul in the following manner:¹¹

- Kerygma (e.g., 1 Cor 15:2-7; Rom 1:2-4; 10:8-9)
- Liturgy
 - Eucharistic Formula (1 Cor 11:23-25)
 - Prayers (e.g., 1 Cor 16:22; Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15)
 - Doxologies (e.g., Gal 1:5; Phil 4:20; Rom 11:36)
 - Hymns (e.g., Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-20; Eph 5:14)
- Confessional Formulas (e.g., 1 Cor 12:13; Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 3:11)
- Catechesis (e.g., 1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:19-21; Eph 5:5-21)¹²
- Theological Terms (e.g., Lord, Son of God, Emissary, *Ekklesia*)
- Sayings of Yeshua (e.g., 1 Cor 7:10; 9:14; Rom 12:14; 13:9)

¹⁰ "Over ninety per cent of Jesus' sayings are couched in quasi-poetic form which would have been easy to remember" (Blomberg, 247).

¹¹ *Pauline Theology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967) 11-13.

¹² On Paul's use of catechetical tradition, the work of W. D. Davies (*Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980] 122-146), published originally in 1948, is of enduring value.

In addition, Fitzmeyer notes Paul's use of the technical vocabulary later found in Rabbinic literature for the receiving and transmitting of oral tradition (1 Cor 11:2, 23; 15:1, 3). This new perspective on Paul as tradent as well as creative theologian has enabled scholars to find in his writings not only the insights of an independent thinker but also the earliest witness to the life and thought of the primitive *ekklesia*.¹³

Biblical authors did not write in a sociological vacuum. They participated in communities, shared in communal practices, and learned from communal instruction. Their inspired writings bear the mark of their own distinctive personalities and perspectives, but also reflect the traditions of the human groupings in which they lived.

Authorship and Written Sources

Biblical authors employ written as well as oral sources. This is another way in which they draw upon the wealth of a communal tradition. The use of written sources in Tanakh is at times explicitly noted – but usually with reference to a work that is no longer extant. According to one reckoning, there are 54 references in Tanakh to as many as 20 lost books, though most scholars think that fewer than 6 lost books are actually involved.¹⁴ More often written sources are used by Biblical authors without explicit reference. When the sources used are available to us, we can detect their use by similarity in content and wording.

The clearest and most extensive case of borrowing and editing in Tanakh is the work of the Chronicler. 1 and 2 Chronicles consist mainly of a selection, revision, and

¹³ Martin Hengel argues that the ecclesial traditions inherited by Paul and reflected in his letters derive from the Jerusalem community and not from Antioch (M. Hengel and A. M. Schwemer, *Paul Between Damascus and Antioch* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997] 286-91). Thus, these traditions are to be traced to the early emissaries and their Jewish milieu; they are not later adaptations developed for a new Gentile setting.

¹⁴ D. Christensen, "The Lost Books of the Bible," *Bible Review* 14:5 (Oct. 1998) 25.

expansion of narratives found in Samuel and Kings. The Chronicler also utilizes material from the Psalms (see 1 Chron 16:8-36 and Psalms 105:1-15; 96:1-13; 106:1, 47-48), and is the main repository of explicit references to lost books. However, the Chronicler is not the only biblical author who works with written sources. The overlap between Isaiah 36-39 and 2 Kings 18:13-20:19, and between Jeremiah 52 and 2 Kings 24:18-25:30, indicate a similar readiness to include external materials in one's own work. Just as the Chronicler includes Psalms in his narrative, so the author of Samuel draws upon a Psalm ascribed to David (2 Sam 22:1-51 and Psalm 18). Occasionally the same oracle is found in two separate prophetic books (e.g., Is 2:2-4 and Mic 4:1-4). The Book of Psalms contains poems whose bodies overlap partially (Psalms 57:7-11 and 108:1-5) or almost completely (Psalms 14 and 53).¹⁵ In these cases, the use of written sources by a Biblical author is undeniable.¹⁶

Dependence upon written sources is no less evident in the Apostolic Writings. Discussion of the Synoptic Problem among scholars continues unabated, with Markan priority and the Two-Source hypothesis still the overwhelmingly dominant position, but with various alternative theories also winning capable adherents. Nevertheless, almost all New Testament scholars acknowledge some form of literary dependence among the Synoptic Books of Good News or their antecedents.¹⁷ Whether Matthew and Luke employed Mark and a lost sayings-source (the current consensus), or Mark had

¹⁵ See Childs, 514-15, for a discussion of "the anthological style" typical of some Psalms.

¹⁶ The use of early biblical texts by later biblical authors within Tanakh is treated in great detail by Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985). He employs the term "Inner Biblical Exegesis" (drawn from his teacher, Nahum Sarna) to characterize this process.

¹⁷ John Wenham (*Redating Matthew, Mark & Luke* [Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1992] 6) knows of only four reputable scholars (J. M. Rist, B. Reicke, J. W. Scott, and B. Chilton) who have argued for the complete independence of two or more of the gospels. In keeping with the modern consensus, Wenham does not find their case convincing. However, he tries to incorporate their genuine insights into his own theory, which combines the hypothesis of a common oral tradition with some measure of successive literary dependence.

access to Matthew and Luke had access to them both (the position of Augustine), or Luke drew upon Matthew and Mark drew upon them both (the Griesbach hypothesis), or Matthew used Mark and then Luke used them both (the view of Michael Goulder), or some other order of dependence and redaction, we find in at least two of these authors a readiness to build upon the written work of another. Given the similarities in wording and arrangement that led to the labeling of these three books as Synoptic, the consensus concerning some form of literary dependence seems justified.

In the case of Luke, we also have the author's own words to support such a conclusion.

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down (*paredosan*) to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4, NIV)

Luke displays here the basis of his narrative. He is describing events – “things that have been fulfilled among us” – that were passed on as oral tradition (*paradosis*) by eyewitnesses and then framed as a written “account” by others who heard those witnesses. Luke himself writes with knowledge of both the oral and written materials that are available within his community, and he bases his own account on a faithful investigation of those materials.¹⁸ Here we have explicit acknowledgement of the dependence of a biblical author on both the oral tradition and written sources produced and transmitted within the community of faith. What Luke states openly applies also to other biblical books whose anonymous authors avoid personal prologues and reveal less

¹⁸ This reading of Luke 1 is questioned by J. W. Scott, who argues that Luke is claiming that his work is based (almost) entirely on oral traditions. Wenham (7-10) presents some of the reasons why Scott's position requires modification.

of their methods of composition.

In a book devoted entirely to the question of Biblical authorship, Richard Elliot Friedman explores the relationship between the authors of written sources incorporated in Scripture and the redactors who employed those sources:

He [i.e., the redactor] assembled the final form of the stories and laws that, in thousands of ways, have influenced millions. Is that *his* influence? Or is it the influence of the authors of the sources? Or would it be better to speak of a literary partnership of all these contributors, a partnership that most of them never even knew would take place? How many ironies are contained in this partnership that was spread over centuries? How many new developments and ideas resulted from the combination of all their contributions?¹⁹

This notion of a “literary partnership” between redactors and the authors of their source documents captures well the corporate nature of biblical authorship. As we will see, the partnership does not end here.

Authorship as Corporate and Developmental

It is clear that biblical authors draw upon the oral and written traditions of their communities in the process of composition. However, in many cases it is also evident that more than one individual has been involved in the creation of the final version of the text. In other words, we are dealing both with individual authors who are themselves communal tradents, and with later editors within the same community who carry the work to completion.

One finds a striking example of this compositional process in the Book of Jeremiah. We already noted the role of Baruch, Jeremiah’s assistant and scribe, in the reduction to writing of prophetic oracles originally delivered and transmitted in oral form. These oracles often are introduced with the sentence, “The word of HaShem came to me”

¹⁹ R. E. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987) 232-33.

(Jer 1:4, 13; 2:1; 16:1; etc.), or with a similar first-person reference (Jer 3:6; 13:1; etc.). However, there are also numerous occasions where oracles are introduced with a third-person reference (Jer 7:1; 11:1; 14:1; 18:1; 21:1; etc.). By saying, “This is the word which came to Jeremiah” rather than “This is the word which came to me,” the text makes the reader conscious of the presence and activity of a narrator other than the prophet.²⁰ This consciousness is heightened when the text expands beyond oracles and includes third-person narratives (Jer 20:1-6; 26:1-24; 28:5-17; 36:1-32; etc.), usually as a way of providing a context for an oracle. These narrative frames appear to be composed by someone other than Jeremiah -- either Baruch or a later unnamed tradent.

The corporate nature of the compositional process in Jeremiah is further demonstrated by the addition of Jeremiah 52.²¹ As noted above, this chapter is nearly identical to 2 Kings 24:18-25:30. It tells the story of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, the deportation of large numbers of Judeans to Babylon, and the release of King Jehoiachin from a Babylonian prison in 560 B.C. Given the stylistic similarities between this chapter and 1-2 Kings, it probably originated as the conclusion of that book, and then was copied by an editor of the Book of Jeremiah and added as a fitting ending to this book as well. Thus, it is not only an example of the use by biblical authors of written sources (as seen above); it also illustrates the participation of a number of anonymous hands over an extended period of time in the production of a Biblical book.

Further witness from Jeremiah to what James Sanders has called “the anonymous community dimension of biblical literature” derives from a comparison of the Masoretic edition of the book with the Septuagint and its antecedent Hebrew text as found at

²⁰ S. Delamarter, “Thus Far the Words of Jeremiah,” *Bible Review* 15:5 (Oct 1999) 36.

²¹ The significance of Chapter 52 for understanding the composition of the book of Jeremiah is a major concern of Delamarter (36-41).

Qumran.²² The differences between the two texts are substantial. The Septuagint of Jeremiah is one-seventh shorter than the Masoretic edition of the book, and materials are arranged differently. The nature of these differences has led most scholars to conclude that the Hebrew text underlying the Septuagint version of Jeremiah is earlier than that now found in the Masoretic Text.²³ Steve Delamarter summarizes the results of a comparison of the two editions:

The Second Edition [i.e., that found in the Masoretic Text]...is significantly longer than the first [i.e., that reflected in the Septuagint]. Much of the supplementary material comes in the form of brief explanatory insertions, of which there are dozens and dozens. The single most frequent insertion is the inclusion of more complete and specific personal names, titles (“king” or “prophet”) and the like. Pronouns are replaced with full names. In addition, the Second Edition reiterates in the same context information given earlier in the episode so that details in the story are perfectly clear. Formulas used in the First Edition are repeated many additional times in the Second Edition. For instance, the First Edition employs the phrase “oracle of the Lord” 109 times; the Second Edition includes all of these occurrences plus 65 more. Several prophetic episodes are given narrative introductions (Jeremiah 2:1-2, 7:1-2, 16:1, 27:1) that were not present in the First Edition. Further, the Second Edition has completely new passages, as well as many facts, that are lacking in the First Edition (for instance, Jeremiah 33:14-26, 39:4-13).²⁴

The Second Edition of Jeremiah 52 also appears to edit the First Edition in light of the parallel passage in 2 Kings. This can be seen by comparing a phrase found in Jeremiah 52:34 in the two editions and in 2 Kings 25:30:

MT 2 Kings 25:30 כָּל יְמֵי חַיָּו

²² E. Tov makes a strong case for the reliability of retroversion in determining the Hebrew text underlying the Septuagint version of Jeremiah: “Retroversion is usually a very difficult undertaking, fraught with uncertainty and dependent on vast experience and intuition. In the case of Jeremiah, however, we can claim considerable success because, as we know from the instances where the two versions do overlap, the Greek translation was made with relative fidelity. The Greek text is, in fact, a near literal translation of the Hebrew. From these overlaps we can also identify fixed Hebrew-Greek equivalents that provide considerable help in re-creating the Hebrew parent text of the LXX” (“The Book of Jeremiah: A Work in Progress,” *Bible Review* 16:3 [June 2000] 32, 34). For the phrase from Sanders, see “*The Hebrew University Bible and Biblia Hebraica Quinta*,” *JBL* 118:3 (Fall 1999) 522.

²³ E. Tov, 32, 34; J. R. Lundbom, “The Book of Jeremiah,” *ABD* 3:707-9; J. C. Vanderkam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 128-29.

²⁴ Delamarter, 44.

LXX Jer 52:34

MT Jer 52:34

עֲדֵי־יָוִם מוֹתָוֹ

עֲדֵי־יָוִם מוֹתָוֹ כֹּל יְמֵי חַיָּו

As Raymond Person notes, “The formulae in MT Kings and LXX Jeremiah are synonymous. MT Jeremiah conflates the readings.”²⁵ Thus, in the case of the Book of Jeremiah the editorial process did not end after the publication of its first edition. The Masoretic Text of Jeremiah, authoritative for all religious Jews of the past thousand years, results from further redactional activity among anonymous scholars who must have seen themselves as the faithful disciples of the great prophet.²⁶

Another clear example of corporate authorship is found in the Good News According to John. This book contains a number of structural seams that point to a complex compositional process. For example, Yeshua’s instruction of his disciples at table before his death appears to conclude at the end of Chapter 14 with these words:

I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go hence. (14:30-31)

However, contrary to the reader’s expectation, the discourse continues, covering some of the same topics found in Chapters 13-14 in an expanded form.²⁷ Examining this seam in the text, and the parallels between Chapters 13-14 and 15-16, Beasley-Murray draws the following conclusion:

²⁵ “The Ancient Israelite Scribe as Performer,” *JBL* 117:4 (Winter 1998) 605.

²⁶ Tov argues that the differences in wording and structure between the two versions are too great to have been produced by scribal error or correction. “Rather, they must be attributed to different authors or editors who worked on the text at a very early stage. Mere scribes are not in the habit of inserting such major changes. These changes must somehow have occurred at the stage when the Book of Jeremiah was still being composed or edited” (37).

²⁷ The parallels between Jn 13-14 and 15-17 are presented by Raymond Brown in a helpful chart (*The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI* [Anchor Bible 29a; New York: Doubleday, 1970] 589-593).

It would appear, then, that chaps. 13-14 form a self-contained portrayal of the events in the Upper Room and Jesus' Farewell Discourse, and that chaps. 15-17 give a further representation of the Lord's instruction on that occasion.

The question arises how it came about that *two* Farewell Discourses are set side by side in the Gospel instead of being integrated as one discourse... The main alternative suggestions are that the Evangelist so arranged previously existing materials that were before him, or that a later editor added chaps. 15-17 to an original farewell discourse consisting of chaps. 13-14. It is difficult to believe that the Evangelist himself, who composed with meticulous care the earlier discourses in the Gospel, left the last discourses in their present order; it is altogether more comprehensible that a later editor left undisturbed the discourse that came from the Evangelist (in 13-14), and then added the rest of his material as a self-contained whole. Such is the conclusion of most recent exegetes, and it is confirmed by the reappearance in chaps. 15-16 of a number of elements within the first discourse.²⁸

A similar seam is found at the end of Chapter 20. After describing Yeshua's resurrection appearance to Thomas in Jerusalem, Thomas' confession of Yeshua as "my Lord and my God," and Yeshua's *ashrey* (beatitude) on the one who has not seen and yet believes, the chapter concludes with a finality that signals the end of the book as a whole:

Now Yeshua did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Yeshua is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name. (20:30-31).

Rather than ending, however, the book continues to narrate another resurrection appearance in Galilee. As with the Farewell Discourse, this unexpected continuation leads most exegetes to see the final chapter as the work of an editor.²⁹

When we come to the end of Chapter 21, we need no longer merely infer the editorial activity of a group of followers of the Beloved Disciple (who is the primary author of the book). The destiny and authority of the Beloved Disciple stand as the center of attention, but a chorus of voices, speaking in the first person plural, affirms the truth of his testimony:

²⁸ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Word Biblical Commentary 36; Waco: Word, 1987) 223-24.

²⁹ Brown, 1055-82; Beasley-Murray, 395-96.

The saying spread abroad among the brethren that this disciple was not to die; yet Yeshua did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know (*oidamen*) that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things which Yeshua did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose (*oimai*) that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. (21:23-25)

What do these verses reveal about the compositional process underlying the Book of John? It is worth listening here to Martin Hengel, a sober, conservative historian who has little patience for the excesses of source critics:

The special “key verses” 21.24 and 25 show that the author who is manifested at the end like a *deus ex machina*, the anonymous beloved disciple, cannot be the author of the whole work from A to Z. At least in v. 24 the plural *oidamen* is no longer the statement by one author but is made by his pupils (or by one of these pupils) as a plurality of witnesses who guarantee the truth of the work attributed to the beloved disciple; given vv. 20-23, we are to suppose that he has died.

It follows from this that the Gospel was first edited and put into circulation by a group of disciples, though given the concluding *oimai* in v. 25, an individual may have written on their behalf. The title of the work is to be attributed to this group. In contrast to the letters, which come directly from the elder, the Gospel took on the ultimate form in which we have it only after his death, as a result of this group of pupils.³⁰

Hengel insists that the Beloved Disciple himself authored the essential contents of the book. However, he also recognizes that the final form of the book must be attributed to the “pupils” of the Beloved Disciple, who completed the task after his death.

In regards to compositional process, the Books of Jeremiah and John represent the biblical rule rather than the exception. Even when a single central figure towers behind a biblical book as its primary author and authority, the text usually receives its final form from anonymous editors whose contribution to the work should not be minimized.

Canonical Selection and Arrangement of Books

As we have seen, individual books of the Bible developed within the context of a

³⁰ M. Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1989) 84.

communal tradition. Primary authors drew upon that tradition, and subsequent editors carried it forward. At times the role of the editors was as significant as that of the primary authors. Since meaning derives in large part from context, those who select and organize materials play a major role in determining how those materials will be understood. Just as this is true on the micro level of individual books, so it is also true on the macro level of the Bible as a whole. This is why the issue of the biblical canon is of such vital importance. Just as the overall design of a particular literary work shapes the way its parts are interpreted, so the overall content and arrangement of the biblical canon exerts a powerful force on the interpretation of the individual books which are its component parts.

In the world of biblical scholarship Brevard Childs and James Sanders deserve special credit for underlining the importance of the canon for our interpretation of Scripture. Childs advocates a “canonical approach” to Scripture that takes account of the impact of the canon on the way we read individual biblical books:

Of particular interest to the method being proposed is the concern to deal seriously with the effect which the shape of the canonical collection has on the individual parts. At times the larger corpus exerts a major influence by establishing a different context from that of a single composition.³¹

Just as awareness of extensive editorial activity raises serious questions about the notion of authorial intention as the exclusive key to textual interpretation, so does consciousness of the role of the canon in the reading process.

At times the canonical text receives a meaning which is derivative of its function within the larger corpus, but which cannot be directly linked to the intention of an original author.³²

In this way canonical intentionality (i.e., the Divine intention inherent in a text but

³¹ *The New Testament as Canon* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1984) 52.

³² *Ibid.*, 49.

brought out only through its relationship with other authoritative texts) becomes as significant as authorial intentionality in determining meaning.³³

Building on the work of Childs, Jon Levenson underlines the importance of context in the interpretation of Scripture, and the variety of contexts in which the same unit can be examined:

The context in terms of which a unit of literature is to be interpreted is never self-evident. In the case of the Hebrew Bible, the candidates are legion. They include the work of the author who composed the unit, the redacted pericope in which it is now embedded, the biblical book in which it appears, the subsection of the Jewish canon that contains this book (Pentateuch, Prophets, or Writings), the entire Hebrew Bible treated as a synchronic reality, the Christian Bible (Old Testament and New Testament), and the exegetical traditions of the church or the rabbis. Each of these locations – and there are more – defines a context; it is disingenuous and shortsighted to accuse proponents of any one of them of “taking the passage out of context.”³⁴

The form critics focus on the original communal purpose of oral traditions that are later embodied in a unit of Scripture. The source critics attend to the original purpose of written sources that are later employed by a biblical author or redactor. The redaction critics seek the mind of the author-editors of biblical books by looking at how they treat the traditional materials they employ. The canonical approach advocated by Childs pays special attention to the role individual books play within the canon as a whole, and the way canonical context affects the reading of those books. Levenson accepts the validity and usefulness of all of these contexts of interpretation, and adds to them the contexts of post-biblical Jewish and Christian exegetical tradition.³⁵

³³ On this notion of “canonical intentionality,” see C. J. Scalise, *From Scripture to Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1996) 62-64.

³⁴ J. D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 56.

³⁵ “All religious use of past literature is, to some extent, at cross-purposes with historical criticism, if only because the world of the contemporary religious person is not the world of the author. It is a world into which the author’s work arrives only after it has been recontextualized through redaction, canonization, and other forms of tradition. Without these recontextualizations it is unavailable. The matrix in which the

One of the best ways of grasping the notion of canonical intentionality is by imagining how we might understand various biblical books if we did not possess other biblical books.³⁶ Thus, if we had the Torah (i.e., the Pentateuch) but not the Prophets and Psalms, would we find the Messiah and the Eschaton there as we do when we read Torah in light of those other books? Yeshua and the Rabbis are able to argue from the Torah for the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, but would they have done so without the explicit witness of another canonical book (i.e., Daniel), and without the further support of prophetic texts (e.g., Isaiah, Ezekiel)? When we read Deuteronomy's references to "the place where God will cause His Name to dwell" (e.g., 12:5, 11, 21), we immediately understand the text as speaking of Jerusalem. However, without the Prophets and Psalms it would be possible to conclude otherwise, as do the Samaritans, who see these references as pointing to Shechem.

We need not illustrate the extent to which accepting the Apostolic Writings as canonical affects our reading of Tanakh. As Messianic Jews, in living encounter with the wider Jewish community and its tradition of biblical interpretation, this truth stares us in the face daily. However, we may be less conscious of the impact that accepting the entire New Testament canon has on the interpretation of its own individual books. As an example, consider the question of Yeshua's preexistence and deity. If we only had the Good News according to Mark, it would be possible to conclude that Yeshua first became the Son of God at his immersion (as was held by the adoptionists of the early centuries of the Church). When we read Mark in light of the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives,

ancient text speaks to the contemporary community is this larger, anachronizing context. To be sure, historical-critical and traditional religious study are not always mutually exclusive. They may, in fact, cross-fertilize or check each other... Both sacred and profane modes of study have value and meaning, but they must not be collapsed one into the other" (Levenson, 30).

³⁶ "...just as each piece on a chessboard changes the meaning and value of every other piece, so does each text in the Bible change our reading of all the others" (Levenson, 104).

this possibility is excluded. However, it would still be possible to conclude that his existence and Divine Sonship began with his human conception. Only a reading of the Synoptics in light of John rules out such an interpretation. Thus, when we (as those who accept the entire New Testament canon) now read Mark and its portrayal of Yeshua as the Son of God, we invariably import Matthean, Lukan, and Johannine perspectives and bring them to bear on our interpretation of the text. Mark's intent here as a human author, determined exclusively by historical and literary methods, may remain obscure, but the canonical intent cannot be denied.

Of even greater relevance to us as Messianic Jews is the interpretation of the letters of Paul. If we had to build our vision of Messiah, Torah, and Israel on Paul's letter to the Galatians alone, then an antinomian, supercessionist theology would likely result. With the addition of his letter to the Romans, the situation changes dramatically, and Galatians itself is read differently. When the Pauline letters are attached to the General epistles – in particular, that of James – a new dialectic emerges, and our interpretation of the Pauline faith-works dichotomy is modified accordingly.³⁷ When the context for both Paul and James is provided by the Lukan narrative of the Book of Acts, we understand the relationship between Paul and James in a new way, and see more clearly Paul's Jewish identity and ongoing commitment to Torah and to Israel.³⁸ Finally, when the Apostolic Writings begin with the Good News according to Matthew, and Yeshua's ringing endorsement of the Torah, it becomes clear that an antinomian reading of Paul is incompatible with a canonical reading of Paul.³⁹

³⁷ On the canonical significance of James in relation to the Pauline letters, see Childs, *New Testament*, 433-45.

³⁸ Childs, *New Testament*, 232-40.

The biblical canon is important not only for its selection of books, but also for its arrangement of those books. Nahum Sarna points to the differing arrangements of books in Jewish Scripture (Tanakh) and Christian Scripture (Old Testament), and sees in them the “result of exegetical activity”:

The conclusion of the Hebrew Scriptures with Chronicles makes a statement that the consummation of history involves the ideal of the return of the Jewish people to its land, of the restoration of Jewish sovereignty and of spiritual renewal. The arrangement of what Christians call the “Old Testament” so that it closes with the words of the prophet Malachi interprets the coming of Elijah and the “great and awesome day of the Lord” in 3:23 as proleptic of the New Testament in which the role of John the Baptist and the advent of the Christian Messiah is pivotal.⁴⁰

In similar way the ordering of the books of the Apostolic Writings shape the way those writings are understood.⁴¹ The Pauline letters are generally considered the earliest extant writings of the Yeshua movement. Yet, their placement in the canon subordinates them to the four narratives of Yeshua’s teaching and work, and, as noted above, makes the Lukan post-resurrection history their prologue. This arrangement affects how the reader interprets Paul. Similarly, the ancient order of the canon, found in most of the earliest biblical codices, and still used in the Eastern Churches, which places the General Epistles (including that of James) before the Pauline writings, gives precedence to Peter and James, and confirms the picture provided by Acts.⁴²

³⁹ For a variety of reasons this has not always been the conclusion reached by Christians in their reading of Paul, Luke-Acts, and Matthew. However, John Miller makes a good case for the view that this was the original intention of those who shaped the canon. See J. W. Miller, *Reading Israel’s Story* (Kitchener, ON: Blenheim, 2000).

⁴⁰ N. M. Sarna, “The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture in Jewish Tradition,” in *Understanding Scripture*, eds. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist, 1986) 11-12. See also see J. A. Sanders, “Spinning the Bible,” *Bible Review* 14:3 (June 1998) 23-29, 44-45.

⁴¹ Regarding the arrangement of the books of the Apostolic Writings, see Miller, 49-61.

⁴² On this ancient ordering of the epistles, see R. Baukham, *James* (London: Routledge, 1999) 116, and Miller, 4-5.

The canon shapes interpretation not only through selection and arrangement, but also through the establishment of sub-units and their hierarchical ranking. This point is emphasized by Jon Levenson:

It is hard to see how a biblical theology that did not respect the doctrine of the priority and normativity of the Pentateuch could be authentic to the Jewish tradition. The ubiquitous assumption of the [Christian] biblical theologians that one might learn the biblical message better from a book in another section of the canon and then utilize that book to correct or counterbalance the Torah (e.g., Jeremiah against Leviticus) derives from the modern Christian idea that the unit to be interpreted is the *testament*, an idea foreign to Judaism and in contradiction to the Jewish prioritization of the Torah over the rest of the Tanakh.⁴³

Levenson notes further that the Torah as a unit is itself a post-biblical (i.e., post-Tanakh) tradition:

The Pentateuch, on which Maimonides and his talmudic antecedents rest so much weight, is itself a postbiblical construct, despite the biblical attribution of the highest prophetic gifts to Moses alone. The idea of five books is unknown in the Hebrew Bible itself, and deference to Moses is not widespread therein and did not prevent the school of Ezekiel, for example, from propounding a law code in blatant contradiction to those in the Pentateuch. Chronologically and literarily, the analysis of biblical texts through the lenses of these larger units, the canon, the Torah of Moses, or whatever, is no longer biblical studies proper but the study of postbiblical Judaism.⁴⁴

Levenson's argument, like that of the present article, is that religious people who see the Bible as a sacred text must interpret it in the light of post-biblical tradition.

It is possible to consider particular books of the Bible as the literary production of inspired individuals. When it comes to the selection and the arrangement of the books that make up the Bible, and the ordering of its sub-units, such a view cannot even be considered. No individual ever prophesied regarding the canon of Scripture, or issued a decree that settled the matter once and for all. The canon of Scripture emerged over time within the Jewish and Christian communities. The communities gradually discerned

⁴³ Levenson, 55.

⁴⁴ Levenson, 81.

which books spoke with unique and unquestionable authority, and ordered them in a way that expressed best the message on which the communities' life was founded. In this sense, the establishment of the canon occurred within the framework of a Divinely guided communal tradition. The community did not create the canon on its own, any more than the authors and editors of the biblical books composed their works independent of Divine activity. However, neither did the community passively receive the canon. The human members of the faith community participated in the process of canon formation as fully engaged human agents, just as the biblical authors participated in the composition of their books.⁴⁵

Scribal Transmission and Clarification

The role of the community and its tradition in establishing the Biblical text did not end with the closing of the biblical canon. As illustrated above in our examination of the Book of Jeremiah, a variety of text types existed for all the biblical books in the first century. One particular text type was favored by the nascent Rabbinic movement, and as this movement gained momentum in the centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple, manuscripts of other text types were either destroyed or left uncopied.⁴⁶ Thus, the Hebrew text that became authoritative for all later generations of Jews was the product of a communal process that involved deliberate elimination as well as reverent transmission.

Then the work of the Masoretes began.⁴⁷ Building upon an existing oral tradition,

⁴⁵ "The process through which the canon came into being was as situational as the process by which the individual books came into being or that by which any word comes from God" (Goldingay, 171).

⁴⁶ On this process, see M. Cohen, "The Idea of the Sanctity of the Biblical Text and the Science of Textual Criticism," *HaMikrah V'anachnu* (Tel-Aviv: HaMachon L'Yahadut U'Machshava Bat-Z'manenu and Dvir, 1979) [English translation retrieved July 25, 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://cs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/dilugim/CohenArt/>].

these scholars developed a written system of vocalization and applied it to the entire biblical corpus, thereby standardizing the reading of the consonantal text and removing innumerable ambiguities. In the process, they also noted small textual errors (though they did not call them such), and corrected them without changing them by distinguishing between *ketiv* and *keri*.⁴⁸ In addition, the Masoretes fashioned an elaborate system of punctuation, and assigned to every word in Tanach its own marker that indicated its place and function within the overall structure of a verse. They also divided the text into paragraphs, an act that, like vocalization and punctuation, presumes and carries forward a tradition of interpretation.

Therefore, when we read the Torah or Haftorah on Shabbat in our synagogues, we are not reading the text as it was read everywhere and always in the time of Yeshua. If the text critics are given any credence, we are also not reading a text identical to the earliest critically ascertainable form of any given passage.⁴⁹ We are, however, reading the text as it has been clarified, standardized, and transmitted within the Jewish communal tradition. Thus, even apart from the logically subsequent stage of authoritative translation (as represented, for example, by Targum Onkelos), the Masoretic text itself as read within the Jewish community throughout the world is the product and embodiment of an interpretive tradition.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ On the role of the Masoretes in stabilizing the received text of the Hebrew Bible, and on textual criticism in general, see E. Tov, "Textual Criticism," *ABD* 6:393-412. In classical Jewish sources, the authority of the Masoretes exceeds even that of the Talmud when dealing with textual matters. See Rabbi Gedaliah Zlotowitz, *Tractate Berachos, Volume 1* (Brooklyn: Mesorah, 1997), 9a Footnote 62.

⁴⁸ David Weiss Halivni notes that the precise origins and significance of Masoretic *ketiv/keri* are unclear. Rather than being corrections, the *keri* may instead be variant readings that are in this way preserved alongside the *ketiv*. Early Rabbinic authorities disagreed on the relative authority of the *ketiv* and the *keri*. See D. W. Halivni, *Revelation Restored* (Boulder: Westview, 1997) 42-44.

⁴⁹ General agreement on this fact, at least in the Christian world, is reflected in most English translations of Tanakh, which begin with the Masoretic text, but then occasionally correct it based on textual witnesses from Qumran or the ancient versions (such as the Septuagint).

The Greek text of the Apostolic Writings did not receive quite the same scrupulous treatment in the Christian Church.⁵¹ There are many reasons for this. The Church did not treat the Greek language as a sacred tongue. Unlike the Synagogue, it also did not actively practice or promote a hermeneutical approach that drew substantive conclusions from linguistic minutiae. In most sectors of the Church official translations, such as the Vulgate in the Latin West, became more authoritative than the underlying Greek text, and were used in liturgical settings. Nevertheless, the transmission of the text, the separation of continuous script into distinct words, the addition of punctuation, and the division into chapters and verses were also part of a scribal process that constituted a form of Christian communal tradition, and that laid the basis for all later translation, reading, and interpretation of the text.⁵²

Conclusion

For those nourished on the strict evangelical dichotomy of Scripture and tradition, the conclusion of this study presents an unsettling challenge: Scripture itself must be seen as a species of communal tradition.⁵³ Of course, it is not just one tradition among many.

⁵⁰ Menachem Cohen seeks to integrate an openness to the results of scientific textual criticism with the orthodox commitment to the authority of the received text: "It therefore appears to me that the notion of a sanctified text in our era must be based on an halakhic interpretation alone, i.e., it must derive its power not from a determination that people managed to preserve the text exactly as it was throughout the entire transmission, but from the faith that man was given authority to determine, using halakhic methods of decision, the image of the sanctified consonantal text. The model which was decided upon would then be obligatory from a halakhic standpoint, even if it is found not to be historically 'correct' in every detail" (18).

⁵¹ "The striking difference in the process of stabilization between the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Greek text of the New Testament should not be overlooked" (Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 97).

⁵² See R. L. Omanson, "PUNCTUATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT," *Bible Review* 14:6 (December 1998) 40-43.

⁵³ "Although some Christians try to maintain a complete separation between the Bible and tradition, many see the Bible as made up of truth contained in living, God-breathed tradition" (Scalise, 61). Also, see Goldingay, 183-4, and D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

Instead, Scripture is the canonical tradition received and recognized by the community of faith as uniquely inspired, authoritative, and normative for all subsequent generations.⁵⁴

As inspired tradition Scripture cannot be separated from the community that gave it birth, has carried it through history, and continues to seek a life shaped by its guidance. The concept of inspiration itself must be understood in a way that takes account of the Bible's identity as communal tradition. Paul Achtemeier attempts to do just that:

The close tie between community and Scripture has a most important consequence for our thinking about the inspiration of that Scripture. It is this: if Scripture is to be understood as inspired, then that inspiration will have to be understood equally in terms of the community that produced those Scriptures. Inspiration, in short, occurs within the community of faith and must be located at least as much within that community as with an individual author.

Rather than being inspired only at the final stage of transmission, when they were written down in the biblical books we now have, those traditions, shaped by the community which existed for God's purposes and by his providence, shared in Divine inspiration from their inception. Inspiration is therefore to be located as much in the community of faith, out of whose experience traditions were formulated and reformulated, as in the process of giving final shape to the biblical books.⁵⁵

In a similar way, hermeneutics must also take account of the inescapable bond between Scripture and community. Proper interpretation of Scripture is not just a matter of adhering to a particular method consisting of hermeneutical rules. It involves above all adhesion to the community that has carried and interpreted that Scripture, and serious engagement with that tradition of interpretation.

If, as Paul affirms, the Spirit is given to the community for its common good..., and if it is the Spirit who gives to Scripture such inspiration as it has, then one cannot dispense with the community and still hope to understand the witness of the Bible. To be sure, individuals may learn much about the faith by reading Scripture, but in the end such a person must become related to the community or

⁵⁴ Oscar Cullman succeeded in combining a view of Scripture as tradition with a conviction regarding its unique and critical function in relationship to all other tradition. See "Scripture and Tradition," in *Christianity Divided*, ed. D. J. Callahan et. al. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 7-33.

⁵⁵ *Inspiration and Authority* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999) 102.

such learning can only be understood as distorted. Bible and community belong together, and to ignore the one is to distort the other.⁵⁶ (104)

Rabbinic tradition expresses this notion by warning of the dangers of studying alone (*Taanit 7a*).

For us as Messianic Jews the communal hermeneutical imperative raises complex questions, since we lack our own continuous communal tradition, and share in two broader communities that possess a tangled, joint history of mutual antagonism and denunciation. I have addressed, at least in part, this question of Messianic Jewish communal identification elsewhere.⁵⁷ The conclusion of that argument implies that we must maintain a primary engagement with the wider Jewish community and its theological tradition if our claim to being a form of Judaism is to carry any weight. At the same time, our bond with the *ekklesia* must also be acknowledged and honored. In the present context, it is sufficient to note that one cannot separate hermeneutics from ecclesiology (understood as including the role and significance of Israel).

The Bible did not drop from heaven. Nor was it composed by individual authors who served as secretaries for God or for a mediating angel. Instead, the Bible developed in the heart of what became two inspired communities – the people of Israel and its multinational Messianic offshoot. If we are to interpret it properly for our life as Jews, we must be rooted in the Jewish community and participate actively in that Jewish conversation about the text that spans the centuries and the continents. However, as Jews who believe that Yeshua is Israel's Messiah we must also give ear to the discussion about the text that our Gentile Christian partners in Messiah have been holding for two thousand years, and add our voice to their conversation as well. This is what is

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵⁷ M. Kinzer, *The Nature of Messianic Judaism* (W. Hartford: Hashivenu Archives, 2000).

distinctive about Messianic Jewish hermeneutics. It is not that we follow a unique method of interpretation, but that our life seeks to bridge a vast and daunting sociological gulf. The success of our hermeneutical enterprise depends upon the authenticity and durability of that communal life.