

## Problematizing the Bible . . . Then and Now

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JAMES L. KUGEL. *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*. New York: Free Press, 2007. Pp. xiv + 819.

I must confess that any publication featuring a phrase like “the Bible” on its title page attracts my attention, and this notice is not due solely to my having a significant professional interest in the literature usually signaled by that label. Over the past decade or so I have made a practice of surprising students with the terse pronouncement that “there is no such thing as ‘the Bible.’” I have never meant anything flippant, perverse, or profound by this remark: it is simply a succinct iteration of an easily observable fact. We spend some time in my Jewish literature courses comparing the editorial structure and contents of such widely used English versions as the NJPS Tanakh, the 1611 Authorized Version, the Jerusalem Bible, and the New Revised Standard Version. I show them images of Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Syriac biblical manuscript leaves or fragments extracted from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Cairo Geniza, Codex Sinaiticus, and Codex Ambrosianus, and we peruse the lists of writings found in manuscripts transmitting the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Ethiopic canons. I also insist (more on this anon) that they carefully study certain passages found in the Qur’an. By the time we finish this taxonomic exercise, the students are largely receptive to the idea that the seemingly solid category of “the Bible” is actually an extremely fluid one which exhibits a multitude of shapes and contents over time, across locales, and along the margins of or even within the boundaries of supposedly rigid ethnic or doctrinal affiliations.

This lesson in conceptual demolition receives further reinforcement when we begin to examine the language of passages found in many versions of this popularly reified work. There was a time (long ago now) when I required students to purchase the same translation so that we

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might utilize a common text for our classroom assignments and discussions. Instead, I now prefer to display parallel English renditions, and I encourage the students to bring to class as many different translations as they can comfortably carry. We focus on an individual text—for example, the one that has been coded in many Bibles as Genesis 1.1—and we read each version’s translation of that passage, eschewing for the moment any critical exposition of the Hebrew (or Greek, Aramaic, etc.) text(s) involving a special philological or exegetical expertise. The point of this exercise is not to endorse or to disparage any one particular rendering in comparison with another but instead to instill in my overwhelmingly monolingual students the underappreciated notion that the activity of “translation” from one language to another is an inherently subjective operation that necessarily distances one from and complicates the base text. Paraphrasing what some Muslim interpreters have traditionally affirmed of non-Arabic Qur’ans, “a translated Bible is not ‘the Bible.’” The students soon learn that there are (seemingly) innumerable English Bibles, each of which intends to provide us with a vernacular reading of source manuscripts, but all of which fall short at various points of imparting that ephemeral “true” or “real” meaning which the majority of them are convinced must be present in allegedly divine writ.

But even at this stage of our joint inquiry the supposedly fixed texts (or so-called final forms) of our variegated biblical canons fail us. The students now learn that there are different textual forms and families whose relative ages are not necessarily secure indicators of their actual value for dating the history of a particular composition or work. Christian biblical manuscripts, for example, are rife with verbal variants and larger so-called omissions, “additions,” and “expansions,” and biblical scholars learned long ago from Harry M. Orlinsky (among others) that appeals to entities like “*the* Masoretic Text” may be disingenuous and invoke a scholarly chimera,<sup>1</sup> since no such thing has ever been extant in any period of Jewish literary history, including our own. And when you add to this situation of uncertainty the recent observation by David Stern that—excepting the Aleppo Codex—the masorahs which are dutifully copied (and then printed) within medieval and early modern codices of the Tanakh do not match the textual substrates to which they are physically

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1. Harry M. Orlinsky, “Prolegomenon: The Masoretic Text, A Critical Evaluation,” in Christian D. Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Masoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (New York, 1966), xxiii–xxiv; see also xxix–xxxi; xxxii; xxxv–xxxvii.

keyed,<sup>2</sup> we begin to realize just how odd it should be for professional scholars or anyone else to talk about or write about a single physical entity bearing the label “the Bible.”

The present essay is not a review of the contents of Kugel’s *How to Read the Bible*; instead, I want to use its publication as an opportunity for a series of critical reflections about the author’s basic conceptual presuppositions which are on display both there and within his earlier widely acclaimed *The Bible as It Was*.<sup>3</sup> Kugel’s overarching metanarrative in both works can be crudely articulated as follows: “the Bible” which we read today is essentially identical with “the Bible” in the possession of literate Israelites during the Second Temple period. “The Bible” was a familiar artifact of Israel’s cultural patrimony and enjoyed an unrivaled cultural authority among its promulgators and consumers. Yet “the Bible” also exhibited certain disconcerting flaws: it contained ambiguities, discursive gaps, and even contradictory prescriptions and precepts. In order to address these problems, a set of reading strategies, dubbed by Kugel “the four assumptions,” were adopted and applied to the text of “the Bible” by its devotees. These hermeneutic tools subsequently generate a vast collection of interpretative solutions and discursive expansions which strive to posit plausible historical or social contexts for described actions, resolve narrative conundrums or contradictions, or shed light on the practical implementation of certain recommended behaviors. The results of this exegetical labor are embedded in the huge corpus of extrabiblical materials comprising apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature, Graeco-Judaica (e.g., Philo and Josephus), rabbinic midrash, targumim, liturgical compositions, and medieval *parshanut* that encompass and interact with their putative biblical source. Were one to encapsulate his central theme in the terms of a simple linear progression, first there was “the Bible” and then “interpretations” arose as a product of the exegetical attention and activities of the subsequent generations of its readers.

Most scholars appear to accept Kugel’s formulation of this process as relatively uncontroversial, particularly with regard to his presumed diachronic relationship between “the Bible” and “its interpreters.” Yet several of the preliminary assumptions and procedures embedded in this process require a careful unearthing and critical scrutiny before they can

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2. David Stern, “The First Jewish Books and the Early History of Jewish Reading,” *JQR* 98 (2008): 169–70.

3. James L. Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

be confidently employed to reconstruct the ways in which Israelite and early Jewish literature came into being.

First, Kugel and others are far too complacent about privileging the position of “the Bible” and its masoretically redacted constituents vis-à-vis that same collection’s nonmasoretic versions and congeners. The primacy of “the Bible” is nowhere argued by Kugel; it is simply taken for granted. Yet there are no material reasons why we should operate with a hermeneutical perspective that accords either a chronological or cultural priority to the so-called received text, whereas there are several which warn against adopting such a stance. Jewish compilations of “biblical” books in codex format are not extant prior to the ninth century, and it is surely suggestive that the Hebrew word for “codex” (*mitḥaf*) has been lifted from the Arabic scribal lexicon.<sup>4</sup> It is of course well known that our earliest manuscript fragments of almost all the works which would eventually compose the Jewish biblical canon were recovered at Qumran, but there is no indubitable evidence that their copyists regarded them as conceptually distinct from other thematically affiliated works like Jubilees or the Temple Scroll, or even that the editorial shape and contents of those scrolls from which these fragments derive would necessarily mirror those textual forms which were eventually manipulated and promulgated by the medieval Masoretes. Those relatively few instances where a larger body of material is available for close comparison (e.g., 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>) do not lend unequivocal support to Kugel’s unexamined assumption that “the Bible as it was” and “the Bible as it is” (or, “Scripture, then and now” as his newer book labels it) are substantially identical.

Many modern biblical scholars need to be reminded (or taught, as the case might be) that the Masoretes were not xerographic drudges engaged in the dutiful and mechanical reproduction of an unalterable text that a hoary and unanimously endorsed tradition had bequeathed to them. Their scribal and curatorial labors were performed against the backdrop of an intense textual warfare that was being waged with other prophetically inspired, scripturally fixated religions like Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam. The Judaism of the Islamicate world was itself riven by fierce factionalism among Rabbanites, Karaites, and other sects whose disputes basically centered on the scope and authority of various “scriptural” collections, both oral and written. The Danish scholar Frants Buhl

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4. Nahum M. Sarna, “Ancient Libraries and the Ordering of the Biblical Books,” in idem, *Studies in Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia, 2000), 57–58; Stefan C. Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: The History of Cambridge University’s Genizah Collection* (Richmond, Surrey, 2000), 126–27.

wrote long ago: “The apprehension of the text which has been stereotyped by the Massorettes [*sic*] is historically mediated, and is inseparably connected with the history of Jewish exegesis, and hence the possibility that it may reproduce in one passage or another a later conception should never be lost sight of.”<sup>5</sup> Instances of patently ideological interventions by the Masorettes into what seem to be earlier forms of the “biblical” texts have sometimes been noted.<sup>6</sup> An excellent example presents itself in Is 21.6–7, where the Masorettes cleverly undermine an influential and indeed compelling Muslim reading of this prophetic oracle by reinscribing and vocalizing the demonstrably older Hebrew grapheme *rokhev* as *rekhev* in its final two occurrences in verse 7.<sup>7</sup> Why then must we assume that the masoretic recension(s) of what we term the Book of Isaiah merits precedence over those of Qumran or the Old Greek or any other pre-ninth-century versions or purported citations?<sup>8</sup> When the manuscript evidence clearly points to the masoretic registrations of “the Bible” as being among our latest redacted versions of the biblical corpus, why do we persist in pretending that they are the most ancient? And is there a philosophically meaningful sense in which any of these renditions can be awarded a theologically charged label like “the right text”?<sup>9</sup>

If we should not consider later masoretic recensions to be direct witnesses of what “the Bible” must have looked like in the early Christian centuries, the next logical step might be to canvass our earliest surviving manuscript evidence and discern whether it might shed any light on this problem. What, for example, can we say about the status of “the Bible” at Qumran? While it is evident that some “authors” (e.g., Moses) and genres of writing (e.g., those associated with “His servants the prophets”) enjoy a kind of public authority that can be tentatively classified as “scriptural,”<sup>10</sup> there is no clear indication that the qumranic referents of these

5. Frants Buhl, *Canon and Text of the Old Testament*, trans. J. Macpherson (Edinburgh, 1892), 237; my emphasis.

6. See, e.g., Bernard Barc, “Le texte de la Torah: A-t-il été réécrit?” in *Les règles de l'interprétation*, ed. M. Tardieu (Paris, 1987), 69–88.

7. I have discussed this specific example in some detail in my *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalypse Reader* (Atlanta, 2005), 7–12.

8. Or even post-ninth century, for that matter. It should be noted that Rashi *ad* Lev 26.6 quotes a nonmasoretic rendition of Is 45.7 as if it were “biblical.”

9. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 597. Phraseology like “the right text” raises the question: Right for whom?

10. I use the term “Scripture” to connote a written work that has won a measurable level of communal authority and status. Appeals to its dictates are often used to support or criticize certain decisions or activities. For further discussion, see John C. Reeves, “Scriptural Authority in Early Judaism,” in *Living Traditions*

labels were necessarily identical with similarly ascribed literary works found in “the Bible.” We simply do not possess enough manuscript evidence to allow such facile equations, and the evidence we do possess inexorably points to the multiform textual character at Qumran (and by extension elsewhere)<sup>11</sup> of those works that will eventually compose “the Bible.” We cannot be certain that familiar terminology like *ba-torab*, *torat Mosheh*, *sefer/sifre (ba-)torab*, or the like encode the same referent to which rabbinic Judaism applies them, or even whether scrolls containing the traditional Mosaic Pentateuch were copied or stored at Qumran. It should be noted that the five qumranic “biblical” scrolls which scholars aver might have contained more than one of the Mosaic “books” found in a traditional *sefer torab*<sup>12</sup> do not in fact supply unimpeachable testimony for this very questionable claim. Only one of these manuscripts (4Q11 paleoGen-Exod<sup>d</sup>) preserves the narrative point of transition between one textual block and another (identifiably an early version of Exodus), and in this single case only the bottom strokes of two (?) markings survive from whatever the writing or catch-line was that once preceded the opening words of Exodus. In spite of our fondest wishes, there is no way we can convincingly identify that preceding pair of marks as the final lines of “biblical” Genesis,<sup>13</sup> and even if we could, there is still absolutely no evidence (apart from sheer speculation) that this scroll would have contained the remainder of the “biblical” book of Exodus as well as Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.<sup>14</sup> The other four qumranic scrolls usually cited in this connection consist of groups of dismembered fragments, which modern scholars suggest (based on perceived similarities in the mediums’ orthography and physical appearance) may have originally been part of a larger whole.

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*of the Bible: Scripture in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Practice*, ed. J. E. Bowley (St. Louis, Mo., 1999), 63–84.

11. One of course could argue that the Qumran case is an anomaly and should not be taken as indicative of the scriptural allegiances and stabilities in Judaea as a whole, but there is nothing in the nonqumranic record that indicates the opposite.

12. These are 4Q1 Gen-Exod<sup>a</sup>; 4Q11 paleoGen-Exod<sup>d</sup>; 4Q17 Exod-Lev<sup>f</sup>; 4Q23 Lev-Num<sup>g</sup>; and Mur 1.

13. Jubilees 45–46 demonstrate that the perceived fault line between Genesis 50 and Exodus 1 is a purely artificial one.

14. According to Menahem Haran, the manufacture of Torah scrolls “encompassing the entire Pentateuch” finds its first mention in talmudic literature. See his “Book-Size and the Device of Catch-Lines in the Biblical Canon,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 36 (1985): 2.

A question worth posing but which in fact has rarely been asked<sup>15</sup> is just how ancient is the common association between the name “Moses” and the *five* (hence *pentateuchal*) works that are traditionally ascribed to this culture-hero? After all, “the Bible” itself identifies only one “book”—what we term Deuteronomy—as coming from his hand. Second Temple sources are almost unanimous in their silence regarding the fivefold character of the written Torah, expressing themselves instead in terms of singularity (“book,” “law,” “teaching”) or unmodified plurality (“books,” etc.). Unsurprisingly, the Dead Sea corpus conforms to this same pattern of expression.<sup>16</sup> It also attests to the publication and a possibly wider circulation of an indeterminate number of “nonbiblical” compositions associated with Moses—works like Jubilees and 11Q Temple, the former of which enjoyed an authority among some circles at least equal to and perhaps even superior to that of the so-called Law of Moses (see CD 16.2–3). The lone pre-70 reference to a Mosaic Pentateuch is in Philo (*De aeternitate mundi* 19), where the “holy books” (*heiraîs bibloîs*) produced by Moses are delimited as “five in number” (*eîni de pente*). Otherwise, we must wait for the evidence provided by Josephus (*Contra Apionem* 1.39) at the end of the first century and subsequent patristic and rabbinic pronouncements before we can confidently speak of the widespread existence of this particular concept.

Since it seems unlikely that the taxon “Mosaic Pentateuch” enjoyed much currency prior to its popularization in the first century C.E., the seemingly ubiquitous modern scholarly assumptions about its undoubted equivalence with that “[book of] the Law of your God” (Ezra 7.12, 14) imposed by Ezra and his associates upon the populace of Persian Yehud become very dubious. Similarly facile equations of legal anthologies signaled by labels like “the Torah of Moses” or “the Torah of the Lord” with the Pentateuch are also specious: while some biblical citations appear to reference written traditions that are linguistically or thematically similar to those now embedded in the Pentateuch (e.g., Neh 8.14), others certainly do not (e.g., Neh 10.35). Appeals to the Samaritan or Old Greek versions as providing circumstantial evidence for the Pentateuch’s antiquity do not resolve this problem. The Samaritan schism is the product of

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15. One scholar who does is Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York, 1992), 43–47.

16. 1Q30 frg. 1 l.4 is occasionally trumpeted as a Qumran reference to “the Pentateuchal books.” But the sole whole word on this line is “fifths” (*humashim*), a term that is not limited to booklore. There are also other numerals in the immediate vicinity whose relevance to “books” is even more problematic; cf. Blenkinsopp, *Pentateuch*, 52, n. 5.

a much more complex set of cultural issues than that of a disagreement over “canon,” and there remains no consensus among scholars about the dating of this communal fissure. Stories about the genealogy of “the Septuagint” are overlaid with legendary accretions and anachronistic formulations;<sup>17</sup> moreover, our extant early “biblical” manuscripts in Greek are actually fewer in number than what has been recovered of comparable age in other languages.<sup>18</sup> We just have no material or literary evidence that will permit us to say that the “Mosaic Pentateuch” was an operable entity as a literary collection of authoritative scriptures with a stable textual base prior to the first century of the Common Era. Separate writings, even a Torah, are ascribed to “Moses” in “the Bible” and at Qumran, but there is no guarantee that these works are to be identified with the later canonical ones. But we can in fact go much further. There is actually no material justification for positing the existence in writing of *any* biblical book in the form that it would exhibit in the Jewish canon prior to the time when the Qumran manuscript finds are customarily dated. It is therefore very puzzling to me how Kugel can produce statements like “the most skeptical modern scholar would not deny that the oldest parts of the Bible go way back”<sup>19</sup> or “[by 300 B.C.E.] most of the texts that make up our Bible had been around for quite a while—many hundreds and hundreds of years, in fact.”<sup>20</sup> Rather, “the Bible” is a *demonstrably late* category as well as collection of texts, and assertions to the contrary will need in the future to furnish the requisite material data that would refute the evidence pointing to its relative novelty.

This leads me to my second broad criticism of the web of underlying assumptions on display in Kugel’s new book. As the late British literary critic Raymond Williams wrote, “When the most basic concepts . . . from which we begin are suddenly seen to be not concepts but problems . . . there is no sense in listening to their sonorous summons or their resound-

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17. For the latest study of this material, see Moshe Simon-Shoshan, “The Tasks of the Translators: The Rabbis, the Septuagint, and the Cultural Politics of Translation,” *Prooftexts* 27 (2007): 1–39.

18. Only two Greek “biblical” papyri have been recovered which date from the Ptolemaic period: (1) P. Rylands iii. 458 (second century B.C.E.; Deuteronomy), and (2) P. Fouad Inv. 266 (first century B.C.E.; 115 fragments of which three are from Genesis and the remainder from Deuteronomy). The latter distribution is admittedly intriguing, but it nevertheless poses a very weak reed on which to lean an otherwise unsupported theory of an early Second Temple Mosaic Pentateuch.

19. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 7.

20. *Ibid.*, xii.

ing clashes.”<sup>21</sup> Lulled by this noise, Kugel fails to perceive that his uncomplicated concept of “the Bible” actually distorts and inhibits a truly responsible historical investigation of the documents which compose it. But he is hardly alone in his failure to perceive this flaw. Modern biblical scholarship as a whole has been complicit in subscribing to and perpetuating a scholarly myth whose dominance in academe has gone unquestioned for far too long and whose effects are detrimental to sober historical inquiry. This myth of Israel’s cultural singularity elevates the position of biblical Israel above those of its geographical and ethnic neighbors, accords a unique valence to its religious literature and institutions, and accepts without demur the uncritical projection of what are palpably modern modes of authorship, textual production, and reading practices onto those more likely to be found in premodern and largely illiterate societies. Unsupported assertions and romantically colored descriptions perpetuate the illusion that “the Bible” in more or less its masoretic form played a constitutive role in the cultural life of “biblical” Israel and early Judaism. Later efforts to adapt the strictures and recommended behaviors of “the Bible” to the changing circumstances of the people are supplied by the “interpreters”—a situation which confirms the culturally hegemonic status of “the Bible” and its pronouncements for both Israel and early Judaism.

There are however, as we have seen, no probative arguments for prioritizing “the Bible” either conceptually or chronologically within the history of Jewish literature. The dichotomy that Kugel constructs between “the Bible” and “its interpreters” is thus an artificial one that need not be construed as in any way natural or self-evident. In light of this clouded polarity, I would suggest that the more responsible hermeneutic stance would be to position the codified traditions now found within “the Bible” *horizontally* alongside “its interpreters” (as opposed to constructing a *vertical*—and hence *hierarchical*—genealogical chain) and to view each of these written streams of tradition as formally parallel currents of narrative expression. Making a synoptic or synchronic perspective our default position for exegetical assessment offers a very different vantage point for observing the distribution, thematic dimensions, and ideological affiliations of the common characters, motifs, and story cycles found in most of our texts. It also allows us to pose questions or to consider possibilities that are automatically precluded when we uncritically privilege “the Bible” as the exegetical fountainhead for all of its allied discourse.

For example, there is no truly compelling reason why Jubilees or the

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21. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), 11.

Enochic Book of Watchers or the so-called Genesis Apocryphon or any other precanonical rendition of the ancestral “epic” traditions of Israel should be considered secondary or subsidiary to their masoretic formulations. Surviving manuscript evidence indicates that the former compositions are of a comparable antiquity and distribution to those works which we know from “the Bible,” so that conceptually speaking, “the Bible” might just as easily be viewed as providing a particular interpretative reaction to what is present in these (and other) parabiblical materials.<sup>22</sup> Similarly we should not automatically assume that the well known “pluses” in the Samaritan version of the Pentateuch are tendentious alterations of a pristine premasoretic prototype, especially given the likely originally regional (i.e., northern) provenance of the Moses-Joshua heroic cycle of legends and cultic foundations. Each difference must be carefully assessed in the light of the overarching editorial trajectories visible in a wide variety of Second Temple and Roman-era sources, not all of which exhibit an unwavering Jerusalem fixation. We must likewise carefully parse the allegedly “expansive” traditions embedded in Jewish apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, rabbinic aggadah, Christian lore, gnostic works, and Islamic sources—in short, all those premasoretic compositions which use a vocabulary and operate with characters and themes that stem from a demonstrably Abrahamic lexicon—to determine the possibility of whether genuinely “primitive” mythemes and motifs are preserved, fossil-like, in “later” textual forms. The extremely popular notion that the murder of Abel by Cain (Gen 4.1–16) was precipitated by their jealous dispute over a woman is a very good candidate for such a “survival.”<sup>23</sup> The Enochic myth of the Watchers offers another example of how some versions of “the Bible” have almost certainly abbreviated and transvalued fuller narratives of a much older tale.<sup>24</sup>

We should therefore take pains to avoid operating with those simplistic sequences of literary relationship which mechanically presume a deriva-

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22. Or alternatively, “the Bible” and works like Jubilees et al. independently draw upon and adapt for their own purposes an older common reservoir of tribal and ethnic lore.

23. See my detailed discussion in “Some Explorations of the Intertwining of Bible and Qur’an,” in *Bible and Qur’an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, ed. J. C. Reeves (Atlanta, 2003), 43–60, esp. 52–58.

24. J. T. Milik, *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumrân Cave 4* (Oxford, 1976), 30–32; Philip R. Davies, “Sons of Cain,” in *A Word in Season: Essays in Honour of William McKane*, ed. J. D. Martin and P. R. Davies (Sheffield, 1986), 46–50; Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford, 2003), 76, 95.

tive relationship between “the Bible” and all “its interpreters.” This entails abandoning the use of cherished yet oxymoronic terminology like “rewritten Bible” or “reworked Pentateuch” and generating new language or experimenting with alternate models that more accurately depict the multiform and regionally diversified character of Israel’s scriptural heritage.<sup>25</sup> Literary registrations and archaeological remains bear witness to the presence of a wide variety of intertextually linked lore transmitted among those religious communities in Palestine, Egypt, Asia Minor, Syria, Mesopotamia, and the Arabian peninsula who chose to ally themselves ethnically and/or culturally with the once “local” figures of Abraham and his heirs. To dismiss summarily and apodictically all but one of these variegated collections of traditions as “interpretations” serves to enshrine a type of scriptural chauvinism which impedes and distorts our reconstructive efforts at understanding how and why writings employing an Abrahamic form of discourse (as opposed to, say, a Sibylline one) achieved such widespread cultural hegemony in the Near Eastern world of Late Antiquity.

Crucial to the enterprise of re-embedding “the Bible” *among*, as opposed to *prior to*, its alleged derivatives is the recognition of the catalytic impact of the broader cultural and imperial contexts within which such signal literary efforts are produced and disseminated during antiquity. These would include not only the wider Canaanite and ancient Near Eastern worlds within which those who served and wielded power initially imposed and institutionalized their peculiar allegiances upon local, regional, and eventually “national” societies. As comparative study informs us, the canonization of “the Bible” must be situated within the wider movement in Late Antiquity toward a textualization of authority in both the Roman and Sasanian cultural spheres during (broadly speaking) the fourth through the sixth centuries. While moments of canonization occur and recur at different times in different regions among what are gradually becoming different religious communities and are affected by a variety of historical, literary, and social forces, it should be noted that a number of efforts to assemble and authorize “scriptural” corpora are roughly synchronous and should perhaps be viewed as mutually reinforcing.<sup>26</sup> The end result is that material writings and the religions which

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25. Some initial suggestions for revamping vapid paradigms and obsolete terminology were offered in James E. Bowley and John C. Reeves, “Rethinking the Concept of ‘Bible’: Some Theses and Proposals,” *Henoch* 25 (2003): 3–18.

26. Think, for example, of the festal letter of Athanasius in mid-fourth century Alexandria, the production of the large Greek “biblical” codices, the legends about the early (and late) Sasanian imperial “recovery” of the Avesta, the widespread dissemination across imperial borders of a canon of Manichaean scrip-

promote them become interchangeable visual and semantic markers: this trend reaches its logical extreme in the Mandaean figure of the sacred scribe Dinanukht, whose physical appearance is that of an animate anthropoid scroll of writing.<sup>27</sup> Viewing “the Bible” and its formation as being isolated from this powerful constellation of social forces illegitimately lifts “the Bible” above the plane of history and misconstrues the predominantly ideological character of canonization in determining where the fault lines would be drawn among a number of distinct yet interrelated textual communities.<sup>28</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that the late antique and early medieval users of a biblically based discourse sometimes remark on the variable character of shared scriptural characters, stories, or citations, and openly speculate about the likelihood of the accidental or even deliberate modification of pertinent texts. Christians accuse Jews of erasing or suppressing unambiguous christological references, Muslims accuse both Jews and Christians of changing or altering the wording of their scriptures (*tahrif*) and effacing predictions about the advent of Muhammad, and the Babylonian prophet Mani claims that he is restoring an earlier, more pristine form of the revelatory records than those which were held and promulgated by contemporary eastern tradents of biblically allied religiosities. Modern scholarship is no doubt largely correct when it characterizes accusations of this sort as a “widespread polemical motif,”<sup>29</sup> but given the multiplicity of textual exemplars and rich diversity of traditions which

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tures, the movement from a predominantly “oral” to a predominantly “written” registration of the classical rabbinic corpora, the imperial patronage for the codification of Roman law, and the construction of a hermetic library of Graeco-Egyptian and eventually “Babylonian” (i.e., Ḥarranian) esoterica. In fact, the eventual realization of distinctive written “scripts” (all arguably from Aramaic prototypes) and “scriptures” seems to be intertwined with the coagulation of distinct “religions” like Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism, and Islam, or of sub-groupings like Samaritans, Mandaeans, and Nestorians.

27. Described by Mark Lidzbarski as “ein Mittelding zwischen Mensch und Buch.” See his *Ginza: Der Schatz, oder Das grosse Buch der Mandäer* (Göttingen, 1925), 205.

28. These points are largely uncontroversial to historians of Late Antiquity whose agendas—unlike those of many biblical scholars—are not controlled or determined by apologetic. See, e.g., Fergus Millar, “Author’s Epilogue: Redrawing the Map?” in idem, *Rome, the Greek World, and the East, Volume 5: The Greek World, the Jews, and the East*, ed. H. M. Cotton and G. M. Rogers (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006), 487–509, esp. 502–9; James J. O’Donnell, *The Ruin of the Roman Empire: A New History* (New York, 2008), 319–41.

29. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, “Tahrif,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (new ed.; Leiden, 1954–2002), 10:111.

were circulating and percolating throughout the eastern Mediterranean world over the first half of the first millennium C.E., consideration should be given to the possibility that certain Jewish, Christian, “gnostic,” and Muslim circles knew earlier, more “primitive” forms of the biblical corpus than those editions of books which would eventually be enshrined in “the Bible.” This is in fact one of the main reasons why I think that Qur’an (and *its* associated interpretative matrix) should be included in university “biblical studies” courses.<sup>30</sup> Qur’an does not “borrow” from or “misconstrue” stories and teachings which were independently situated in what moderns mistakenly term “the Bible.” Rather, Qur’an represents an alternate literary crystallization of what constituted “the Bible” for that particular time and cultural space, and when read through this lens, it can actually supply valuable clues about the precanonical shapes and meanings of certain stories and thematic complexes.<sup>31</sup>

Kugel’s *How to Read the Bible* is an eloquent edifice of discursive exposition and personal reflection which will surely win accolades within those institutional settings that are nominally married to conventional historical-critical explanations and sympathetic to faith-based reasoning and discourse. It is a monumental digest of what the most influential exegetes have been thinking and writing about “the Bible” and its interpretation since the Middle Ages. I am confident that the general reader and many experts will find much in Kugel’s presentation of both traditional and modern interpretations that excites the intellect and comforts the spirit. But I am convinced that the linear paradigm of exegetical momentum promoted by Kugel and uncritically endorsed by most leading biblical scholars is one that is hopelessly and fatally flawed. Scholars in the secular academy who are seriously committed to the pursuit of conceptual clarity and methodological rigor in their study of “the Bible” and its associated literatures will encounter little in this book that addresses their

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30. Inasmuch as that scripture is our most important testimony to what functioned as “the Bible” among the biblically affiliated communities of the Arabian peninsula during the late sixth and early seventh centuries. Older models of investigation often charge the Qur’an (or Muhammad) with a well intentioned but incompetent “borrowing” or “appropriation” of biblical and/or parascriptural traditions. Unfortunately this widely repeated characterization actually perpetuates an apologetic stereotype in place of a responsible historiography. The ultimately pejorative language of “appropriation” and “borrowing” was effectively demolished by Rina Drory, “Literary Contacts and Where to Find Them: On Arabic Literary Models in Medieval Jewish Literature,” *Poetics Today* 14 (1993): 277–302, esp. 277–79.

31. Reeves, “Some Explorations,” 43–60, offers several examples and wider bibliography.

concerns or that builds upon the wider-ranging theoretical discussions about authorship, readership, orality/literacy, semiotics, ideological criticism, and cultural materialism taking place in departments of history, comparative literature, classics, and anthropology during the past four decades. The modern practice of biblical studies must renounce its intellectual isolationism and enthusiastically embrace and learn from its disciplinary brethren. Only after biblical scholars have cleaned their methodological house will we truly witness progress and originality in the study of “the Bible” and its interpretative penumbra.

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