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The Fluid Bible

The Blurry Line Between Biblical and Nonbiblical Texts

Sidnie White Crawford

When the Dead Sea Scrolls were written, no canonical Bible existed. That is, in the two or three centuries before the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., there was no one list of sacred books that was considered authoritative. At the same time, there was no clear border between biblical books and nonbiblical books. Rather, different groups of Jews considered different books authoritative, even though all Jews accepted the Torah, or Pentateuch—that is, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Torah was, after all, the source of the Law, which provided the underpinning of Jewish ritual and daily life.

But the Dead Sea Scrolls reveal a surprising fact: Even in the case of the Torah, there was no fixed text either of the Torah as a whole, or of any of the individual books. Among the scrolls is a whole group of texts that are related to, but differ from, the present-day books of the canonical Torah. Some of the texts are simply copies of biblical books with variants, the result of centuries of hand copying (scribal error or manipulation) and textual growth. These documents provide critical new material to the text critic who attempts to recover the best text of a biblical book, using all copies available.

Some of these texts, however, differ markedly—at times startlingly—from the standard authoritative Jewish version of the Bible, known as the Masoret-

ic text, or MT for short. Nor do they resemble the two other major biblical textual traditions, the Septuagint (or LXX for short) and the Samaritan Pentateuch. The Septuagint is a Greek translation made for the Jews of Alexandria, Egypt, the first five books of which were translated in the third century B.C. from a Hebrew text that differs somewhat from MT. According to legend, the name Septuagint, which comes from the Latin term for “seventy,” refers to the 72 Jewish translators brought to Egypt by Ptolemy Philadelphus [285–246 B.C.] to translate the Torah.) More about the Samaritan Pentateuch later. Suffice it to say that MT is the authoritative text for Jews and Protestants; LXX, for the Orthodox churches; and the Samaritan Pentateuch, for the small group of Samaritans who still live in Nablus and a few places in Israel. Each of these traditions is represented in various fragmentary manuscripts of the Pentateuch found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

But some of the seemingly biblical manuscripts from Qumran differ considerably from all of these traditions. The question I would raise is, In ancient times, how far could these texts deviate and still be considered biblical? Or authoritative? Scholars themselves are somewhat unsure, calling them “parabiblical” or “quasibiblical.” Those terms, however, describe the texts only from our viewpoint. To us, they are not canonical and therefore cannot be biblical.

But to the people who copied and read them two thousand years ago, they may have been just as authoritative as the texts we consider biblical today.

Let's look at a few parabiblical texts:

Our first example is a Dead Sea Scroll called 4QDeuteronomyⁿ, which was copied in the late first century B.C. and which contains a text of the Ten

Commandments.¹ (The "4Q" that appears so often in Dead Sea Scroll designations stands for Qumran Cave 4, where more than five hundred different manuscripts, all fragmentary, were found.) The Ten Commandments appear in two places in our canonical Torah—in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5, but the two versions are not exactly the same (see

One Commandment, Three Versions

Why should the Israelites observe the Sabbath day? The answer in the Hebrew Bible is not so straightforward. According to the Book of Exodus (quoted in italic type in the left column), it's because after six days of Creation, God rested on the seventh day. But Deuteronomy (center, underlined) offers a somewhat different explanation: The Israelites should rest because they were once slaves in Egypt. Both these documents must have been in circulation at the time the Dead Sea Scrolls were composed: An enterprising scribe tried to straighten out the confusion in a manuscript known today as 4QDeuteronomyⁿ, which combines the message of both Exodus (in italics) and Deuteronomy (underlined), as shown in the right column.

Exodus (20:8–11)

*Remember the Sabbath day,
and keep it holy.*

*Six days you shall labor
and do all your work.*

*But the seventh day is a Sabbath
to the Lord your God;
you shall not do any work—
you, your son or your daughter,
your male or female slave,*

your livestock,

or the alien resident in your towns.

*For in six days the Lord made
heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them,
but rested the seventh day;
therefore, the Lord blessed
the Sabbath day
and consecrated it.*

Deuteronomy (5:12–15)

Observe the Sabbath day
and keep it holy.
as the Lord your God commanded
you.

Six days you shall labor
and do all your work.

But the seventh day is a Sabbath
to the Lord your God;
you shall not do any work—
you, or your son or your daughter,
or your male or female slave,
or your ox or your donkey,
or any of your livestock,

or the resident alien in your towns,
so that your male and
female slave may rest as well as you.
Remember that you were a slave
in the land of Egypt,
and the Lord your God brought you
out from there
with a mighty hand
and an outstretched arm;
therefore the Lord your God
commanded you
to keep the Sabbath day.

4QDeuteronomyⁿ

Observe the Sabbath day,
to sanctify it,
according as the Lord your God has
commanded you.

*Six days you shall labor
and do all your work,*

*but on the seventh day is a Sabbath
to the Lord your God;
you shall not do in it any work,
you, your son, your daughter,
your male servant or your female servant,
your ox or your ass
or your beast,*

*your sojourner who is in your gates;
in order that your male servant and
your female servant might rest like you.
And remember that you were a servant
in the land of Egypt,
and the Lord your God brought you
forth from there
with a mighty hand
and an outstretched arm;
therefore the Lord your God
has commanded you
to observe the Sabbath day
to sanctify it.*

*For six days the Lord made
the heavens and the earth,
the sea and all which is in them,
and he rested on the seventh day;
therefore the Lord blessed
the Sabbath day*

to sanctify it.

box). The fourth commandment in Exodus (20:8–11) bids the Israelites to “remember” the Sabbath day. In Deuteronomy (5:12–15), however, the Israelites are commanded to “observe” the Sabbath day. And that’s not all: The rationales differ in Exodus and Deuteronomy. In Exodus, the Israelites must remember the Sabbath because the Lord rested on the seventh day after creating the universe in six days. In Deuteronomy, the reason given is that they were slaves in Egypt.

The two different versions were already well established by the time the Dead Sea Scrolls were copied. How do we know this? Because both are referred to in 4QDeuteronomyⁿ. As shown in the box (below), 4QDeuteronomyⁿ presents yet another version of this commandment. Here the scribe begins with the Deuteronomy version (“Observe the Sabbath day”) and gives Deuteronomy’s reasoning: “And remember that you were a servant in the Land of Egypt ... therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day to sanctify it.” But the text doesn’t stop there. Rather, it picks up with the justification given in Exodus: “For six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea ... and he rested on the seventh day, therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day to sanctify it.” The scribe has smoothed out, or harmonized, the two texts by combining both justifications into one (very long!) Sabbath commandment.²

What did first-century readers think when encountering this text? We can only speculate, but probably they would have recognized it as a harmonization of the other two existing versions. After all, at the time there probably were other manuscripts of Exodus and Deuteronomy that contained the Ten Commandments in the versions with which we are familiar today.* So a careful reader would have recognized that a change had been made. But would that have made any difference to the authority of the text? Probably not. This seems to be a major difference between Second Temple period Jews (living before the Roman destruction of 70 A.D.) and the modern Jewish or Christian reader.

*I say “probably” because, unfortunately, the Sabbath commandment has not been preserved in any other Qumran manuscript of Exodus or Deuteronomy, although it does appear in the phylactery (*tephillin*) texts.

For Second Temple period Jews, the authority of these books lay in each book’s general message rather than in its precise words or their order.³ The words of the biblical text could be manipulated—moved around, updated, added to—without detracting from the authoritative status of the book. This may not have been true for all Jews in the Second Temple period, but it certainly seems to have been true for the Jews of Palestine

Thus, in 4QDeuteronomyⁿ the important point is the command to observe the Sabbath, which is unchanging; importing text from Exodus into the passage in Deuteronomy simply adds weight to the commandment.

How far could this process of manipulation go before a biblical book was so modified that it became another edition of the same book, or an entirely different book? Did books lose authority in the process?

Consider another example. I have already mentioned three different versions of the Pentateuch: the Masoretic text, the Septuagint and the Samaritan Pentateuch. The Masoretic text is actually a medieval text, but it is based on manuscripts at least as old as the Dead Sea Scrolls; prototypes of the Masoretic text (so-called proto-Masoretic or proto-Rabbinic texts) have been found at Qumran. So have parts of various Hebrew base texts from which the Septuagint was translated. These are sometimes called “proto-Septuagintal.” The Samaritan Pentateuch is a harmonized text like 4QDeuteronomyⁿ, as illustrated by the following example:

In the standard biblical text of Genesis 31:4–13, Jacob, who is still living with his father-in-law, Laban, tells his wives, Rachel and Leah, about a dream he had long before, in which God commanded him to leave Aram and return to Canaan. “During the mating of the flocks,” Jacob rather abruptly recalls, “I once had a dream,” in which a messenger of God told him “to arise, go forth from this land and return to the land of your fathers.” This is the first we’ve heard of this dream. Did Jacob simply make it up to justify the pending departure to his wives? The Samaritan Pentateuch provides the answer. Jacob’s dream is first described in detail when he dreams it (after Genesis 30:36) and then later is repeated to his wives. The insertion reads as follows:

And the messenger of God spoke to Jacob in a dream, and he said “Jacob!” And he said “Here I

am." And he said, "Raise your eyes and see all the he-goats climbing upon the flock, striped, speckled, tan and spotted. For I have seen everything which Laban has done to you. I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and vowed a vow to me. And now, arise, go forth from this land and return to the land of your fathers and I will deal well with you."

The language of the dream is exactly the same as Jacob's later report to his wives. Any doubts about Jacob's veracity in recounting the dream are laid to rest by including it in the biblical text.

This type of harmonization was used not just once but systematically throughout the entire Samaritan Pentateuch. When the Samaritan community adopted this edition as their canonical Torah, they also made certain sectarian changes. Instead of including the veiled references to Jerusalem and Mt. Zion that appear in MT, the Samaritan Pentateuch refers to Shechem and Mt. Gerizim, the Samaritan holy mountain. These are the places that God "has chosen," the Samaritan Pentateuch says. In MT, the parallel passages refer (obliquely) to Jerusalem and Mt. Zion as the places that God "will choose." But before these sectarian changes were made and this edition was adopted by the Samaritan community, the harmonized Samaritan Pentateuch, was in general circulation in Palestine. This is obvious from the fact that several copies of "proto-Samaritan" texts have been found at Qumran (for example, 4QNum^b and 4QpaleoExod^m). At this time, and at least for some groups of Jews, there was simply no distinction between proto-Samaritan texts and proto-Masoretic texts; they were just different copies of the same authoritative book.

For the Sabbath commandment and the story of Jacob's dream, the scribal manipulations were extensive, but the passages are still recognizable as constituting the same biblical text. These are true harmonizations, which smooth over bumps in the text but do not add anything new. This kind of change does not seem to have altered the book's authority in any way. What would happen, though, if something brand new was added to the text?

This is just what occurs in several other Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts that are referred to as parabiblical or quasibiblical. Let us look at an example from one of these parabiblical texts, called 4QReworked Pentateuch. The complete document probably included the entire Pentateuch on one large scroll. Five manuscripts of the Reworked Pentateuch have been pre-

served, only one of which—designated 4Q365—we will look at here.⁴ From the shape and form of the letters, 4Q365 can be dated to about 75 B.C.

As the title suggests, the scribe has reworked or changed the biblical text to a greater extent than we have seen with the Sabbath commandment or Jacob's dream. One type of change is the addition of brand new material. In 4Q365, a substantial addition was made to the Song of Miriam. In the standard biblical text, the Song of Miriam appears immediately following Moses' victory song at the Reed Sea (Exodus 15:1–18) and consists of just one sentence. Exodus 15:20–21 states: "Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously, horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.'" Not only is it short, it is simply a repetition of the first line of Moses' song in 15:1* But is that all that Miriam sang? The answer in the Reworked Pentateuch is a resounding "No!" The additional text is fragmentary, but there is no doubt that it belongs here. After what we know as Exodus 15:21 and before 15:22, 4Q365 inserts seven additional lines to Miriam's song. The fragmentary addition goes like this:

1. You despised[**
2. for the majesty of[
3. You are great, a deliverer[
4. The hope of the enemy has perished, and he is for[gotten (or: has cea[sed)
5. they perished in the mighty waters, the enemy[
6. Extol the one who raises up, [a r]ansom ... you gave[
7. [the one who do]es gloriously[

Miriam's song is addressed to God and celebrates his victory over his enemies at the sea.† The addi-

*For this reason, some scholars believe Moses' song was originally Miriam's song. See Phyllis Trible, "Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows," *BR*, February 1989.

**The open bracket indicates that the end of the line of text is missing in the fragmentary stroll. Reconstructed text also appears in brackets.

†For further discussion of the contents of the song, see George Brooke. "A Long-Lost Song of Miriam." *Biblical Archaeology Review*, May/June 1994.

tional text closes a perceived gap in the text and adds to the drama of the narrative, extending the theological message: God is the victor at the Reed Sea—not Moses or the Israelites. It interprets the text from within the text, making sure the reader understands the meaning of the story.⁵ Thus the scribe was doing his job as the keeper of the tradition, making sure that the message was heard and properly understood by each new generation. This was not meant to be blasphemous or false. In fact, it was in the very act of reworking the text that the scribe indicated just how sacred or important the text actually was. An unimportant text would be discarded or forgotten; a sacred text like the Pentateuch, however, was constantly shaped and reshaped by generations of scribes and interpreters.

Would the first-century reader have recognized that this was an altered text of Exodus? Probably. Would that have affected the authority of this Exodus text? We simply don't know. If it was considered acceptable to manipulate words in a text, as in the treatment of the Sabbath commandment in 4QDeuteronomyⁿ or the addition to Jacob's dream in the Samaritan Pentateuch, why wouldn't the type of change in 4Q365—the addition to Miriam's song—be equally acceptable? If it were, 4Q365 would be just another manuscript of the Torah, equal in authority to any other manuscript.⁶

But I am not so sure. Two pieces of circumstantial evidence give me pause. First, this addition to Miriam's song did not continue to be copied in the late Second Temple period. Eventually it fell out of general circulation (at least we have no evidence of its continued use). Second, the unique passages in 4Q365 are not quoted elsewhere in Second Temple literature, with one exception.⁷ Further, the vast body of rabbinic literature, for example, knows nothing of it. Clearly, 4Q365 was not widely known, certainly not beyond its own life as a manuscript. For that reason, I am inclined to think that while 4Q365 may have had authority for a limited audience around the time of its production, it was never generally accepted as authoritative.

By the end of the first century A.D., we begin to see some changes in the notion of both a canon, or list of sacred books, and an authoritative, unchangeable text. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, mentions a list of 22 sacred books (*Contra Apion* 1:37–43). His list implies that whatever is not included is not sacred. Similarly, 4 Ezra 14:45 talks

about 24 "public" books that were written by divine inspiration (in addition to 70 "hidden" books known only to the wise).

With regard to fixation of the text: A number of fragmentary biblical scrolls dating to the second century A.D., discovered in caves south of the Wadi Qumran, suggest that at about the time a canon was developing, so too was the notion of a fixed authoritative text. All of the second-century A.D. biblical manuscripts from the caves south of Qumran are proto-Masoretic texts: by this period, other text types seem to have fallen out of circulation. Thus, after the fall of the Temple in 70 A.D., the canonical list becomes fixed in Palestinian Judaism, as does the text of those canonical books.⁸ No deliberate changes would henceforth be made. A great tradition of innerbiblical exegesis—so clearly reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls—had come to an end.



¹ Sidnie White Crawford. "4QDeutⁿ," in *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert XIV*, ed. Eugene Ulrich et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 117–128. pls. 28–29.

² Emanuel Tov, "The Nature and Background of Harmonizations in Biblical Manuscripts," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31 (1985), pp. 3–29.

³ Ulrich, "The Bible in the Making: The Scriptures at Qumran," in *The Community of the Renewed Covenant*, ed. Ulrich and James VanderKam (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1996), p. 84.

⁴ Tov and Sidnie White (Crawford) "Reworked Pentateuch," in *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert XIII*, ed. VanderKam et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 187–332, plates 13–36. Tov and I have argued that these five manuscripts—4Q158, 4Q364, 4Q365, 4Q366 and 4Q967—were all copies of a single composition. Recently, Michael Segal has argued that these are separate compositions. See his forthcoming paper, "4QReworked Pentateuch or 4QPentateuch?," in *The Dead Sea Scrolls—Fifty Years After Their Discovery—Proceedings of the Jerusalem Congress, July 10–25, 1997*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman, Tov and VanderKam (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, forthcoming). The resolution of this question is not important for our purposes here.

⁵ This is called "innerbiblical exegesis." See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

⁶ This is the position of Ulrich ("The Qumran Scrolls and the Biblical Text," in Schiffman, Tov and VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*).

⁷ The Temple Scroll from Qumran may quote a passage in Leviticus from 4Q365. See Tov and White, "4Q365," in VanderKam et al., *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* XIII, pp. 290–296.

⁸ Debates about which books belonged in the can-

on went on for some time. Esther did not gain universal acceptance until the third century A.D. There are also different canons for different groups: The Hebrew Bible, Septuagint and Old Testament are all different, although with much overlap.

Permission to reproduce this essay did not include the illustrations originally accompanying it. Following are the captions that appeared, along with links to Internet sites where the artworks may be seen.

HEAVENLY HANDS pass Moses the Decalogue, in Marc Chagall's "Moses Receives the Tablets of the Law" (1950–1952). The Ten Commandments appear in two different versions in the Hebrew Bible. In Exodus 20, the Israelites are enjoined to "remember" the Sabbath day because it is the day God rested upon completing his creation. In Deuteronomy 5, the Israelites are commanded to "observe" the Sabbath because they were once "slaves in Egypt." A first-century B.C. Dead Sea Scroll (4QDeuteronomyⁿ) harmonizes both variants into one long Sabbath commandment—but not at the expense of the text's authority. To the contrary: As author Sidnie White Crawford demonstrates, variants in a sacred text may have enhanced, rather than reduced, its sacred status. For Second Temple Jews, the authority of a text lay in its general message rather than in its precise words. [*Chagall made numerous etchings and paintings of this scene; the one illustrating this essay can be seen online (in black-and-white) at* <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/ytro/deutsch.html>]

"JACOB GREETES LABAN," by French artist Jean Restout (1692-1768). Having fled his home and the wrath of his brother Esau, the youthful Jacob is welcomed into his uncle Laban's home, where he agrees to work as a shepherd for seven years in exchange for the hand of his younger cousin, Rebecca (at right). Years later, however, Jacob remains in his uncle's debt, having been tricked into first marrying his elder cousin, Leah (at left), and then working an additional seven years for Rebecca. When at last Jacob has fulfilled his obligations, and has acquired a flock of his own, he tells his wives that he has had a dream in which an angel told him "to arise, go forth from this land and return to the land of [his] fathers" (Genesis 31:4-13).

The question of whether Jacob fabricated this dream to justify his imminent departure is put to rest by the Samaritan Pentateuch, where we are twice told the story of the dream—once when Jacob actually dreams it and again when he recounts it to his wives. This type of clarification, found throughout the Samaritan Pentateuch, in no way diminished the authority of the text, which became canonical for the Samaritan community.

<http://www.art-prints-on-demand.com/a/restout-jean/jacob-and-laban.html>

http://www.art.com/asp/display_artist-asp/ /crid--52394/Jean_Restout_II.htm

http://www.allposters.com/-sp/Jacob-and-Laban-Before-1737-Posters_i1739831_.htm

<http://www.repro-tableaux.com/a/restout-jean/jacob-and-laban.html>

<http://www.kunstkopie.de/a/restout-jean/jacob-and-laban.html>

<http://en.easyart.com/scripts/pod/pod.pl?pid=305779>

THE EGYPTIANS MEET THEIR FATE as Miriam (far right, with tambourine) sings on, as depicted in this Armenian manuscript known as the Ritual Book, illustrated by Thoros Roslin in 1266. In the standard biblical text, Miriam's hymn at the Red Sea is but one sentence long: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" (Exodus 13:21). But the Dead Sea Scroll manuscript known as 4QRe-worked Pentateuch adds seven lines to Miriam's song. Whether this addition would have affected the authority of the text, scholars cannot say; it apparently did not continue to be copied in the late Second Temple period, which suggests that it was never fully accepted as authoritative. But what seems certain is that the scribe's reworking of the text attested to its sacred importance—an unimportant text would not enjoy the attention of generations of scribes and interpreters.

http://armenianstudies.csufresno.edu/ArmeniaDigitalProject/img/iconog/m/95_1.jpg

<http://armenianstudies.csufresno.edu/ArmeniaDigitalProject/iconography/passage/Passage.html#>