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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The People of the Book before the Book

If the field of biblical studies has a foundation myth, it is the story of the great divide that separates modern critical analysis of the biblical text from the uncritical reading practices of the premodern religious thinkers who embraced the Bible as “an utterly consistent, seamless, perfect book” in which God speaks directly to his readers.¹ Seldom has a scholarly construct so thoroughly captured the public imagination. In debates about the appropriate role of the Bible in contemporary social life, both sides have been quick to embrace the notion that the academy’s scientific analysis is opposed to the premodern reading practices of religious practitioners, who engage with the Bible in the modes of past centuries. In embracing this historicized inflection of contemporary fault lines,² both parties walk away with valuable spoils of war. The academy is assigned the values of innovation, scientific achievement, and intellectual progress. In exchange, certain types of religious Bible readers lay claim to the weight of nearly two thousand years of religious history.


². For more on the construction of these intellectual positions in early modernity, see Michael Legaspi, The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies, OSHT (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), and the literature cited there. On the rise of similar patterns in Jewish communities, see Yaakov Elman, “The Rebirth of Omnisignificant Biblical Exegesis in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” Jewish Studies Internet Journal 2, no. 1 (2002): 1–42.
The early rabbinic relationship with the Bible is often treated as the exemplar par excellence of this faithful reading practice. Yet an expansive survey of classical rabbinic traditions concerning biblical writings compels us to grapple with a much more complex picture of the premodern relationship to the Bible. While the late antique rabbinic authorities theoretically established the newly canonized Hebrew Bible as a central pillar of an emerging rabbinic Judaism, many early rabbinic statements about the nature of the biblical text and its status were ambivalent at best.

As we will see in the coming pages, many early rabbinic traditions did not valorize the Pentateuch as a perfect record of the divine will. Instead, they imagined the biblical text as a makeshift scripture—an echo of greater truths that had been cut off from the divine to be ravaged by history and repeatedly reconstructed by devoted human hands. In many early rabbinic traditions, indeed, the biblical text is identified not only as a dead form of sacred revelation pruned from an inexhaustible living branch of divine truth but also as a potentially deadly form of revelation. Drawing on the allegorical power of early rabbinic anxieties about the spiritual dangers posed by an uncontrolled female body, which was thought to carry immense power over men within a weakened vessel vulnerable to promiscuity and misdirection, classical rabbinic narratives often expressed concern about the tremendous supernatural power that written scripture contains within a limited material and linguistic vessel, which could be all too easily appropriated, misinterpreted, and corrupted.

3. I will use the designation “early rabbinic” and “classical rabbinic” interchangeably in this book to refer to the products of rabbinic Jewish culture from the period between roughly 200 CE and 650 CE. As such, this book cites materials gathered from all six major corpuses of late antique rabbinic literature: (1) the Mishnah, (2) the Tosefta, (3) early Palestinian “legal” midrash, (4) the Palestinian Talmud, (5) the early collections of “homiletic” midrash, (6) the Babylonian Talmud, as well as (7) later Palestinian midrash. Although it has become increasingly uncommon to analyze phenomena across the entire classical rabbinic period, basic practices of reading (particularly those associated with elementary education) are cultural phenomena that have proven slow to change over time and are often studied from a more longue durée perspective. (For a classic study along these lines, see Cavallo Guglielmo and Chartier Roger, *Histoire de la lecture dans le monde occidental* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1997). While I make no claim that early rabbinic practices of Bible reading remained unchanged over the entire course of late antiquity, the broad-strokes argument of this book proceeds on the premise that the classical rabbinic authorities cited here shared certain basic cultural assumptions concerning the nature of written text and its affordances that can be contrasted with the attitudes and practices of other periods.
Nor were these facets of the rabbinic imaginary purely theoretical. In a sacred reading culture in which careful attention to written text was exoticized and even denigrated, liturgical performance of biblical lectionaries might continue unabated but direct informational reading of the biblical text was limited to the point where written scripture was effectively quarantined from communal life and the Hebrew Bible would largely cease to speak as a communicative document.

This does not mean, however, that the classical rabbinic authorities were forerunners of modern higher criticism—nor that the biblical tradition would be eliminated from early rabbinic religious life. Instead, we will explore how it came to be that communal authorities so deeply ambivalent about the biblical text nevertheless established the emerging canon of the Hebrew Bible as a fundamental pillar of late antique Jewish life and thought.

Early rabbinic doubts concerning biblical textuality did not destabilize the emergent rabbinic movement as a biblical religion in part because the recitation-heavy communal reading culture that had grown up around scripture in early rabbinic circles had already rendered the written text a secondary, even superfluous, witness to the biblical revelation in communal thought and practice. As memorized vocal iterations of the biblical tradition circulated independently from the written text in daily practice, this spoken tradition of the biblical revelation had become not only the dominant form of scripture in rabbinic quotidian life but would also come to have a profound impact on how many early rabbinic practitioners imagined the biblical heritage in more abstract terms. Indeed, these memorized spoken formulas of the biblical tradition came to be embraced in many early rabbinic circles as a pivotal third category of Torah, a living Spoken Scripture that linked the silent Written Torah of the parchment scrolls to the growing Oral Torah of the rabbinic legal tradition.

As these recited formulas of the scriptural tradition were increasingly embraced as the authentic soul of the biblical revelation, the written text could retreat into a less threatening role as a communicatively inert parchment

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vessel. This textual body, like its human counterpart, wielded sacred power most potently when it remained closed and covered so that its messy material and textual components were obscured and the physical vessel could become a dignified (and silent) conduit for a more intangible and otherworldly power.

This book thus demonstrates that even in the early days of the first millennium, when the Hebrew Bible was emerging as a distinct canon, biblical religion did not always work in the way that we have traditionally imagined it. Far from embracing this new textual transcript as a perfect blueprint for the religious life, many classical rabbinic inheritors of this sacred anthology were ambivalent about the very notion that knowledge of the divine will might ever be directly extracted from written text. These early rabbinic authorities thus constructed a scriptural universe in which the written text of the Hebrew Bible was increasingly hemmed in with ritual honorifics that enhanced the normative power of the idea of a singular Sinaitic revelation that adhered to this written object while they simultaneously quarantined and silenced the biblical text as a written communication in practice.

In this system, the emerging textual canon came to function less as a written guide to God’s will than as a ritual conduit for a very different iteration of the biblical tradition—a series of intangible spoken formulas of the scriptural tradition that would be embraced as the living soul to this fixed parchment body. For when these early rabbinic thinkers transferred the glamour of the new biblical canon to these recited biblical formulas passed from parent to child and teacher to student in different modes, the rabbinic Bible came to reside for all intents and purposes in spoken words. And while this Spoken Scripture would be ritually correlated to the biblical scrolls in occasional liturgical performances, it lived a qualitatively different kind of literary life—circulating primarily as decontextualized excerpts embedded in rabbinic teachings, conversation, and liturgy. The late antique traditions explored in this book thus thrived on a mélange of principles that modern thought treats as opposing categories: combining textual criticism of the biblical tradition with ritual perfectionism concerning material copies of the biblical text and uniting avoidance of the biblical text as a source of information with a communal culture thoroughly infused with biblical iterations in a different mode. The model of classical rabbinic biblicism explored in this book thus upends foundational categorizations concerning Bible reading that have structured so much popular thought about biblical religion.

Detailed Discussion for the Specialist

This new portrait of a more complex early rabbinic scriptural universe may disrupt existing scholarly models of what the early rabbinic relationship with the Bible looked like, but, in doing so, it brings the classical rabbinic relationship with scripture into line with broader research trends that have emerged in the fields of biblical studies, comparative religion, and classics in the past twenty years. Building on early scholars such as Susan Niditch, who deconstructed the notion of a “great divide” between periods of orality and textuality in the development of the biblical tradition, experts in Hebrew Bible such as David Carr, Bernard Levinson, and Raymond Person have made great strides in convincing the field of biblical studies that the texts found in the Hebrew Bible emerged in a reading culture distant from contemporary paradigms of “writing, book circulation, and silent reading.” Biblical texts were generated instead in an environment characterized by a more complex interface “between writing, performance, memorization, and the aural dimension of literary texts.” In this complex literary ecology, a prophetic text was not conceptualized as a complete literary work represented by one authentic original but instead each version of a biblical text was “understood by the ancients as one instantiation of a traditional (oral and/or written) text.” Since a skilled scribe was “both thinker and religious visionary” in this system, “revelation is not prior to or external to the text” but rather each text produced was envisioned as an authentic reverberation of revelation.

There has been a tendency among Hebrew Bible scholars to see this complex literary ecology dissolving with the emergence of the proto-Masoretic text into a more clear-cut culture of text and exegesis. But scholars of Second Temple Judaism such as Eva Mroczek, Hindy Najman, Judith Newman, and Molly Zahn have demonstrated that one still cannot “revert notions of a fixed, stable text” onto sacred writing in the Second Temple period, when

written text remained in some sense “secondary to the oral transmission of these discourses as part of a larger and living tradition in the process of continuous renewal,” so that considerable mouvance is still evident in the varied written forms of the biblical tradition from this period. For sacred writing continued to be imagined as the product of an ongoing divine revelation only “partially instantiated in concrete scribal projects.” Thus, reworking an earlier text means updating “the content of that text in a way that one claims to be an authentic expression of the law already accepted as authoritatively Mosaic.” So long as any given copy of a text represented “only an incomplete (and potentially inaccurate) extract of the sum total of divine knowledge,” scribes could envision the work of rewriting “as bringing the tradition more fully into conformity with the divine exemplar, or as reformulating or expanding it to include more of the divine knowledge believed to be accessible to humans”—so that they were “continuing to unfold a practically inexhaustible store of divine wisdom.”

This more open and participatory model of written revelation is generally imagined by all parties to have come to an end with the early rabbinic “embodiment of revelation in a limited written text, the Bible, once revealed to inspired prophets, but now completed and given into the hands of the sages.” Within the fields of Jewish studies and religious studies more broadly, the idea that the rise of rabbinic Judaism marks the natural end of previous scriptural models is intimately tied to the sense that 70 CE marks an evolutionary watershed in Jewish history. As Jonas Leipziger recently pointed out, our understandings of late antique Jewish reading practices are still inflected by a widely accepted narrative that “the 'old' sacrificial cult of the temple was substituted after 70


CE by a ‘literary cult’ with the rabbincic emphasis on prayer and especially studying and reading Hebrew Scripture.”

In recent years, of course, this model has been heavily nuanced by scholars such as Konrad Schmid, who argues that the “cult replacing functions of scripture and canon” did not take place in a single moment in 70 CE but instead represented a gradual sublimation taking place over the course of many centuries, and Guy Stroumsa, who has framed the rabbincic turn to text as part of a broader Mediterranean movement from sacrifice to sacred textuality. Yet we may need to further denaturalize the conceptual link that has been implicitly established between the fall of the cult and the rise of a particular attitude toward canonical reading.

Nor should the rising tide of scripturalism in this period be taken as the necessary death knoll of older attitudes toward revelation and authority. As Hindy Najman has observed, “within a family of approaches to the question of authorization, there could be both continuity and variation” so that more open Second Temple revelatory modes continued to thrive in communities such as Hellenistic Jewish Alexandria well into the new millennium. Anne Kreps has similarly documented the ways in which late antique gnostic works such as the Gospel of Truth “endorsed a mode of open authority, recognizing ongoing oral and written revelation, instead of a closed canon of sacred books.” New Testament researchers such as Matthew Larsen and Yael Fisch have likewise argued that “discourses on textuality fluidity and growth” continued alongside the process of gospel textualization and proliferation in ongoing oral metaprocesses of “intertextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization.” If such echoes of Second Temple revelatory tropes did


indeed continue to permeate other Jewish and Jewish-adjacent corners of the changing scriptural landscape of late antiquity, then the claim that early rabbinic thinkers valorized a closed and all-containing written canon stands out against the streams of cognate religious movements of the era.

More importantly, perhaps, our understanding of how written canon functioned within the reading cultures of the Hellenistic and Roman Mediterranean more broadly has changed radically in recent years. As recently as the groundbreaking multi-author volume *Homer and the Bible in the Eyes of Ancient Interpreters*, one might still say that late antique Jewish readers of the Bible and Greco-Roman readers of Homer shared a common scholarly language of reading that “clearly distinguished between the canonical text and their own interpretation or commentary, taking seriously the author’s intention and thus the literal meaning of the text.”

While there is no question that many biblical reading cultures of the era would adapt scholarly apparatus and techne innovated by Greek- and Roman-speaking grammarians and rhetors, even as the aforementioned volume was being published, changes were already afoot in the scholarly world that would subtly upend fundamental facets of this academic vision of how the relationship between canonical text and reader was conceived and practiced in the late antique Mediterranean milieu.

Drawing connections with biblical scholarship cited above, for instance, classicist Jonathan Ready has argued that the Homeric wild papyri represent a scribal ethos not unlike that attributed to biblical scribes, in which each “scribe produces a text that cleaves to his vision of what the traditional text should be . . . informed both by the text in front of him and by his previous encounters with written and oral texts.”

This tendency toward textual *mouvement*, Ready thus demonstrates, had certainly not disappeared by the Ptolemaic period, even as the Homeric tradition was increasingly embraced as something approaching a canonical work.

Even as the formulas of the textual tradition congealed, scholars have demonstrated that late antique Mediterranean modes of reading these texts continued to generate other forms of wildness and multiplicity. C. M. Chin has

pointed out, for instance, the ways in which the expansive late antique discipline of grammar rendered texts “susceptible to linguistic expansion via translation, transliteration, and etymologizing” so that “Augustine’s scripture is not strictly coterminous with the biblical canon” and “intertexts from Virgil and Greek myth transforms the concrete Latin Heptateuch into a point of entry for a larger textual universe.” As Blossom Stefaniw portrays late antique Christian Bible reading: “The substructure is found in the Bible, and the object of study is the knowledge of the world inherited through it, an object tacitly elided with the world itself.” In such a context, the rise of fixed canon cannot be imagined to usher in an era of faithful reading so much as a period of intellectual exploration rooted in the expansive embrace of a canonical text. Thus, even if we imagine early rabbinic thinkers more as Roman provincials than as the inheritors of Second Temple Judaism, it remains difficult to maintain a historically informed vision of rabbinic reading in which a reader would approach the text of the Hebrew Bible as a closed and complete transcript of a divine monologue.

Nor did this state of affairs change radically after closed and canonized scriptural texts had become a mainstay of many religious communities across the globe. Religious studies scholars have increasingly come to understand typical modes of engaging with written scriptures across diverse communities in ways that are subtly at odds with the valorization of sacred informational reading that is ascribed to classical rabbinic authorities. While some historical reading cultures have certainly approached written scripture in scholastic modes similar to those that are ascribed to early rabbinic thinkers, many more have not. In the past thirty years, religious studies scholars have documented a widespread tendency across diverse communities to eschew the potential of written scriptures as communicative documents in their own right in favor of a bifurcation in which the social life of scriptures is lived out, on the one hand, as sounded, recited formulas and performances that function in many ways quite independently of the written text and, on the other hand, in literally or metaphorically closed texts qua cultic objects that serve as silent referents to the capacity of scripture as a conduit of sacred power.

26. Ibid., 17.
27. Ibid., 107.
Since William Graham first gathered examples of oralized scripture from a wide swath of global religious communities in *Beyond the Written Word*, researchers have analyzed the practical prominence of spoken scripture in virtually every type of religious community—from late antique Christians and medieval Buddhists to modern Korean musogin and contemporary Christian communities.

The function of oralized scriptures has sparked something approaching a subfield of its own, however, particularly in Qur’anic studies and in research on scriptural performance cultures in South Asia. Studies of variant traditions of the Ramayana, *katha* retellings of the Puranas and other sacred traditions from South Asia have copiously documented the ways in which these performed scriptural traditions do not capture folk orality in the imagined purity of a great divide narrative but emerge in creative spaces (much like the late antique parallels described above) in which oral performance and manuscript material have remained subtly, and apparently permanently, imbricated. As McComas Taylor has described this dynamic in his ethnographic study of how Sanskrit verses are used in oral performance during Bhagavata Purana recita-

29. By which I mean to evoke not only scriptures that are preserved primarily in oral form but also “the specifically oral dimension of the written scriptural text”—that is, “the important, often primary, ways in which scripture has been a significantly vocal as well as visual fact: how individuals and groups have understood and dealt with their sacred scriptures not only as holy books to be calligraphed and illuminated, preserved and revered, paraded and displayed, but also as texts to be memorized, sung and chanted, read aloud, recited, retold and woven into the texture of their language, thought, and being as auditory facts.” William Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7.


34. For a selection of now-classic work on this topic see Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger and Laurie J. Sears, eds., *Boundaries of the Text: Epic Performances in South and Southeast Asia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) and the works cited there.
tions, verses are entextualized “in the sense that the exponent draws on the authority of the Bhagavata Purana in the use of verses extracted from the text” while they are simultaneously contextualized “in the sense that the exponent adjusts or adapts his spoken discourse to a particular audience in a particular time and place.”

Such bidirectionality is possible Ilona Wilczewska argues, because “internalizing the scripture can go to such a level that the text is not only memorized, but its language, themes, and images come to permeate the mental processes in various ways” with the aim that “a qualified katha speaker is able to tell a story with passion and extract a moral from the story in a way that is applicable to anyone in the audience.”

In studies of South Asian spoken scripture, we thus encounter a rich body of documentation on the ways in which spoken scripture continues to live out subtly different “textual lives” alongside written transcripts of those same tradition.

Research on Qur’anic recitation has brought a yet more subtle lesson to the table, demonstrating the ways in which even a spoken scripture that represents a word-for-word match for a written transcript may still take on a qualitatively different social life of its own in sounded and embodied circulation. Drawing on classic work, including Kristina Nelson’s *The Art of Reciting the Qur’an* and Navid Kermani’s *Gott ist schön*, researchers such as Anna M. Gade have revealed the ways in which even textually fixed recitation traditions may convey diverse “affective norms of beauty (including the use of melody), improvisation, and feeling” while Michael Frishkopf has pointed to the ways in which these “sonic contrasts” between different styles of Qur’anic recitation “directly support theological interpretations.”

Scholars such as Lauren Osborne, moreover, draw our attention to the ways in which recitation performances are contextually situated and multidimensional, so that these aural experiences of scripture include “the listener and listening cultures, rather than focusing


37. Ibid., 212.


solely on the reciter and the moment of the recitation.”

Rudolph Ware has advocated that we also take seriously the notion that one who has memorized the Qur’an is hafiz (in the sense that they embody scripture) since “this kind of embodiment goes beyond the metaphorical meanings of the term in English—as exemplar or practical application—and encompasses meanings closer to incarnation, instantiation, and manifestation.”

Qur’anic studies has thus richly documented myriad ways in which a spoken scripture might technically duplicate its written transcript and yet simultaneously circulate in radically different exegetical and experiential modes.

Nor is the type of written text paired with these spoken scriptures most often a form of written communication that is read for information. Instead, these written texts are engaged not so much as a direct source of knowledge but as ritual artifacts—symbolic representations of revelation. As the classic work of Philip Lutgendorf on the interplay between spoken scripture and written scripture has captured the profound ritual silence of written scripture in such cases: a reader might recite from memory in front of a largely illegible manuscript because “if they glance at the text it is only to note the first word of a line or an approaching break for a dialogue” not to derive specific textual information or a reader might even recite formulas from a closed book set before him without ever opening its petal-strewn cover.

The ritual status of scriptural books as simultaneously relic and reliquary is beautifully captured in Jinah Kim’s work on medieval Buddhist practices of ritual text in which a book might be opened to offer a simplified visual image of text at the conclusion of a ritual or rest closed on a stele for worship, so that the same book “is itself a relic as a sacred text and, at the same time it encases a true relic of the Buddha, his teachings written in beautiful letters.”


icons and relics, rather than sources of communication, these silent holy books thus manifest the powers ascribed to scriptures above and beyond their persuasive message.

Rabbinic studies has been largely inoculated against these trends in the study of how scriptures function, however, by a widespread tendency to attribute all *mouvance* in early rabbinic thought and practice to the development of the rabbinic tradition itself. When these broader trends in religious studies came to be applied within the field of rabbinics, therefore, they were directed toward studying the growth of the rabbinic tradition rather than scripture. As Steven Fraade has put it, scholars have almost universally seen midrash “an appropriate place to begin an examination of the complex interplay of oral and textual registers of tradition and its transmission, so much the focus of recent study of other traditional cultures and so much the character of Rabbinic culture from antiquity to the present.”45 In the wake of the association developed between trends in the study of scriptural practices and the growth of the rabbinic oral tradition, scholars such as Fraade, Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, Yaakov Elman, Richard Hidary, Catherine Hezser, Martin Jaffee, Shlomo Naeh, David Nelson, and Yaacov Sussmann,46 fundamentally redefined our...
understanding of the way in which “rabbinic disciples encountered as oral tradition the performative embodiment of memorized rabbinic manuscripts”—by pushing us to recognize that (like scriptural traditions in other cultures) the rabbinic oral tradition functioned in a “continuous loop of manuscript and performance that had no ‘ground zero.’”47 It is thus the study of rabbinic tradition that has moved along with advancements in our understanding of how scripture and canon work within religious studies and cognate fields.

When the transformative force of these emerging insights was directed toward the study of the rabbinic tradition, however, they were simultaneously channeled away from the study of how biblical text functioned within the rabbinic community. I would argue that the tendency to bypass the rabbinic relationship with the Hebrew Bible in these investigations has its roots in foundational presuppositions regarding the forms of religious tradition available to early rabbinic communities. The diversion of emerging trends in scriptural studies away from the rabbinic relationship with the Hebrew Bible appears to derive ultimately from what Martin Jaffee has dubbed the “ontological” distinction ascribed to the fixed textuality of written scripture and the fluidity of the oral tradition in the early rabbinic system.48 The fact that the classical rabbinic authorities primarily engaged with the Hebrew Bible as a series of memorized formulas in quotidian practice is one of those odd historical realities that is widely accepted on a nominal level and yet continues to go unacknowledged in the larger structures of scholarship49—a technical detail mentioned in foot-

47. Jaffee, Torah in the Mouth, 124.
48. See Martin Jaffee’s extended treatment of the “ontologically” textual nature of the Pentateuch even as it was orally incorporated in the rabbinic Oral Torah: “A Rabbinic Ontology of the Written and Spoken Word: On Discipleship, Transformative Knowledge, and Living Texts of Oral Torah,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 65, no. 3 (1997): especially 536 and 540–43. Indeed, Moshe Halbertal has argued that “[in rabbinic Judaism,] text is more than a shared matrix for a diverse tradition—it is one of the tradition’s central operative concepts, like ‘God’ or ‘Israel.’” Moshe Halbertal, People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.
49. For a rich account of the practical circumstances that favored biblical memorization in early rabbinic circles, see Catherine Hezser, “Bookish Circles? The Use of Written Texts in Rab-
notes or brief asides that has yet to significantly influence our account of the
way that early rabbinic culture engaged with its sacred scriptures.50

In some cases, this scholarly dichotomy is rooted in a binary reading of the
emic rabbinic categories of Written and Oral Torah. In this imaginary, “the
former consists of a fixed, closed text, the latter of a fluid oral transmission and
expansion.”51 In other cases, this framing reflects deeply rooted narratives
about the cessation of prophecy and the resulting calcification of revelation
that took place in its wake. For with the cessation of prophecy, “the interpreter
of scripture, not the prophet, would reveal God’s will, and would do so not
through inspiration or God’s direct revelation but instead through the mastery
of a skill.”52 With such accounts of the canonization and transmission process
on the tips of so many tongues, it is not surprising that scholarly theories of
scriptural *mouvance* were applied first to the fecund multiformity of rabbinic

50. It is not uncommon in recent studies, for instance, to see qualifying statements such as
this one: “By arguing that the rabbis acquired their knowledge of the Bible from hearing it read
aloud . . . I am not suggesting that the rabbis knew the text of the Torah solely as a heard docu-
ment, or that the rabbis were in any way oblivious to the fact that the Torah was a written text.
As I have explained, they were familiar with every detail in the Written Torah, and part of the
rabbinic educational curriculum was learning to read and chant the Torah aloud from a scroll.
Rabbis certainly consulted written texts of the Torah, some studied from written texts, and there
are rabbinic stories that pivot on written copies of Scripture.” David Stern, *Jewish Literary Cul-

51. Steven Fraade, “Concepts of Scripture in Rabbinic: Oral and Written Torah,” in *Jewish

52. Michael L. Satlow, *How the Bible Became Holy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press,
2014), 267. For surveys of the classic scholarly literature on this question, as well qualifications
to this account, see the classic surveys of Fredrick Greenspahn, “Why Prophecy Ceased,” *Journal
Literature* 115, no. 1 (1996): 31–47. On the extent to which this developmental vision of Jewish
textuality is reflected in the modern period, see S. Guzmen-Carmeli, “Texts as Places, Texts as
92 and the literature cited there.
tradition and exegesis while the biblical text continues to be broadly portrayed as embodying all the limits and stability of textual fixity.

The scholarly vision of the rabbinic relationship with scripture has not remained static, however, as researchers in the parallel field of rabbinic exegesis have increasingly sought to define more precisely the hermeneutic modes of engaging with written scripture that held sway in different rabbinic schools and genres. The results have done much to nuance and complicate our vision of how early rabbinic authorities conceptualized and related to written scripture as researchers look beyond explicit rabbinic statements about nature of Torah and instead “make a conscious effort to reconstruct the implicit fore-understandings of Torah that determine the ancient readings.”53 As scholars such as Jonathan Kaplan, Tzvi Novick, Alexander Samely, and Azzan Yadin-Israel took these concerns to the study of the hermeneutic modes adopted in particular rabbinic corpora, novel facets of the rabbinic conceptualization of scripture emerged in stark relief.54 While scholars such as Benjamin Sommer and Christine Hayes have recently begun to ask if we could use this research to paint a more explicit and abstract portrait of early rabbinic “conceptions of scripture” and revelation.55

These advances in the field of Jewish biblical interpretation have done little as yet, however, to shift the traditional academic portrayal of the role played by the Hebrew Bible in the rabbinic imagination and practice, which continues to hold sway within much of religious studies, rabbinic studies, and Jewish studies more broadly. This monograph seeks to work toward the goal of destabilizing this widely accepted portrait by uncovering the alternate structures that undergird broad swaths of early rabbinic thought and practice. Whether one understands the counter traditions analyzed in these pages to represent the dominant rabbinic stance toward written scripture or one underappreci-


ated thread of early rabbinic tradition among many, these traditions call us to reconsider widely held presuppositions about the ways in which written scriptures were encountered and conceptualized in early rabbinic communities.

A Brief Outline of the Project

This book is divided into two parts. The chapters that make up part 1 argue that, rather than valorizing the Pentateuch and its prophetic echoes as perfect transcripts of the divine will, many early rabbinic practitioners experienced the Bible as a problem. In the first chapter, “A Makeshift Scripture,” the reader is asked to reconsider the tenor of early rabbinic comments about the writteness of scripture. The traditions analyzed in chapter 1 represent a stream of rabbinic thought in which the biblical text is theorized not as a perfect record of divine knowledge but as a treacherously limited and changeable vessel for preserving the divine will. The chapter begins by analyzing early rabbinic traditions about Ezra the Scribe and other scribal heroes who narrowly saved the biblical text from oblivion at repeated junctures in the history of Israel—even, at times, reconstructing the lost text from memory. In these narratives, the vulnerable material nature of each instantiation of the Bible text has rendered the biblical tradition susceptible to repeated erosion, loss, and change. The chapter continues by investigating early rabbinic traditions that contrast the first tablets of the law destroyed by Moses with the second tablets of the law ultimately bequeathed to the people of Israel. These two tablet traditions are treated as a form of narrative theorizing about the nature of written text and its limits as a vehicle for divine revelation. In such stories, the first (lost) tablets of the law come to represent the impossibility of authentically capturing the divine will in a material written text. While the second (received) tablets of the law become a locus for reflection on the inherently brittle and imperfect nature of the written revelation that was bequeathed to history.

In the second chapter, “A Book That Kills,” the reader is asked to question the widespread presupposition that rabbinic practitioners embraced the biblical text as “a tree of life to all who grasp it” (Prov 3:18). In the early rabbinic traditions collected in chapter 2, the biblical text is imagined as a mortally dangerous artifact that can leave death and destruction in its wake. Unlike the first chapter, chapter 2 is not organized thematically but is instead divided into a rough chronology to highlight distinct developmental stages in rabbinic thinking about the perils of biblical texts and its affordances. The chapter opens by analyzing tannaitic traditions in which the mortal dangers of the
biblical text emerge when it is read by minim (sectarians, heretics, or early Jesus followers). These traditions often use images of an adulterous wife to capture a notion that the biblical text was hazardous because the lures of its lyrical beauty and spiritual pleasures remained intact even as the text was corrupted and put into the service of the enemies of Israel—transforming the biblical text into a Trojan horse for heresy and spiritual poison. Later Palestinian sources transfigure the motif of textual promiscuity so that the danger posed by the biblical text lies not in its potential to be shared between communities but instead in the way the written text makes its unbounded spiritual forces available to anyone who approaches it. In these early amoraic sources, the tannaitic triangulation between biblical textuality, heresy, and physical death was now applied to actors within Israel. As a hypostasized font of divine power, the biblical text portrayed in these narratives produces a proliferation of uncontrollable spiritual modes, many of them deadly. In later Babylonian traditions, the imagery that emerged in previous traditions is further concretized and expanded until simple proximity with the biblical text can wipe out both individuals and populations without any transparent spiritual mechanism at work. In such traditions, the very existence of a material written revelation had become a source of a multiform and inchoate terror.56

Chapter 3, “Neglect of Text,” argues that the dangers attributed to the biblical text in these mythologizing narratives were also reflected in more quotidian practical measures that restricted use of the biblical text as a source of religious information in many late antique rabbinic circles. Adopting a more expansive and nuanced definition of restriction and censorship, chapter 3 explores different modes through which late antique rabbinic authorities sidelined and restricted the written text of the Hebrew Bible as a source of communal information. The chapter opens by analyzing how practices of inaccurate citation both reflected and cultivated neglect of the written text of the Hebrew Bible by trivializing textual engagement as a potential source of knowledge. The chapter then looks at how diverse rabbinic injunctions deterred practitioners from deriving information directly from the written text of the Bible by discouraging informational reading in general, by placing restrictions on reading the Bible at certain times and on certain days, and by proscribing the circulation of vernacular copies of biblical texts. The third chapter thus completes

part 1 of the book, which explores different ways in which early rabbinic thinkers approached the biblical text as a problem. Part 2 asks how a community so deeply ambivalent about the biblical text nevertheless elevated the Hebrew Bible as a central pillar of communal thought. The chapters in the second half of the book argue that this apparent paradox was possible because early rabbinic practitioners approached the practices of reading and engaging with written text very differently from modern informational readers. It argues that the memorization-heavy reading practices described in early rabbinic literature had already rendered the written text of the Hebrew Bible a secondary, even superfluous, witness to the biblical tradition in daily practice. So much so, in fact, that early rabbinic thinkers came to think of these recited oral formulas of the biblical traditions as a distinct revelation in their own right. Until Spoken Scripture came to be theorized as a third type of Torah that flourished in the liminal space between the consonantal transcripts of the Written Torah and the emerging rabbinic traditions of the Oral Torah—a more authentic echo of the scriptural revelation at Sinai than could be contained in a scroll’s limited parchment.

Chapter 4, “Rabbinic Practices of (Bible) Reading,” demonstrates that common early rabbinic modes of Bible reading bypassed the written text as a source of information—treating written words as nothing more than a ritual corollary to spoken language, in whose spoken formulas true meaning and communication were thought to reside. The chapter opens by exploring a widespread early rabbinic commitment to memorized ritual recitation as the primary mode of engaging with biblical text and argues that these practices of ritual reading served to marginalize written texts of the Hebrew Bible as a source of cultural transmission and knowledge. Since this mode of early rabbinic liturgical reading was rooted in recitation formulas passed directly from teacher to student and did not derive meaning directly from written words, both transmission and meaning in this reading practice were thought to reside primarily in the spoken words. The rest of the chapter seeks to illuminate this conceptual inversion of text and meaning by looking at early rabbinic literacy pedagogies as both representative and formative of a reading practice that treated written texts as secondary—and often temporary—props in the transmission of recited formulas from teacher to student.

Chapter 5, “The Third Torah,” argues that this bifurcation of the biblical tradition into oral and written iterations was not merely an incidental development in rabbinic practice but was theorized by many early rabbinic thinkers as reflecting a more fundamental bifurcation of the scriptural revelation at
Sinai into two distinct historical echoes: a limited consonantal transcript preserved in the biblical text that was bequeathed to history and a more authentic spoken iteration of the biblical revelation transmitted through the living recitation of the tradition by human mouths. These traditions characterized the memorized spoken formulas of the biblical tradition as a discrete, qualitatively different, and ultimately superior witness to the biblical revelation—a distinct third form of Torah preserved at the interstices between the Oral and Written Torah. Chapter 5 opens by exploring how early rabbinic thinkers could conceive of two largely parallel formulas of the biblical tradition as distinct forms of revelation. This section first explores early rabbinic traditions in which the small divergences that foreshadowed the Masoretic qere and ketiv (“read thus, though it is written thus” traditions) were taken as signs of deeper metaphysical divergences between the spoken formulas of the biblical tradition and the consonantal transcript. The discussion then moves on to consider Babylonian rabbinic traditions in which mikra (the spoken formulas of the biblical tradition) and masoret (the written transcript of the biblical tradition) were imagined as distinct revelatory works, configured in a hierarchy of authenticity in which the spoken version of the biblical tradition was embraced as the primary witnesses to the biblical revelation. The chapter then examines in more detail the ways in which these memorized oral formulas of the biblical tradition were envisioned as a qualitatively superior echo of the biblical revelation that passed down almost material traces of a living revelatory divine speech through the corporeal mechanisms of breath, scent, and taste. The chapter closes by tracing traditions in which this third Torah of Spoken Scripture was imagined as the survival of its own distinct moment of biblical revelation: the first, more authentic, biblical revelation that was temporarily inscribed on the first tablets of the law and then released into its natural form as speech and sound with the smashing of the tablets.

Chapter 6, “The Closed Book,” asks how practitioners imagined the status and character of the written consonantal transcript passed down on parchment scrolls once they no longer functioned as communicative witnesses to the biblical revelation. While many researchers have suggested that Torah scrolls functioned primarily as ritual objects, this chapter argues that we should go further and take seriously the many early rabbinic traditions in which the Torah scroll was envisioned as a form of corporeal avatar—an almost-living biological body that could act as an intermediary between the divine and the human. The chapter opens by analyzing the ways early rabbinic traditions treat the Torah scroll like the human body, as an entity that manifests sacred powers
most strongly when it is closed, covered, and whole—so that the scroll’s all-too-material textual facets are exposed to view only during the carefully regulated moments of intimacy allowed for liturgical recitation-reading. The chapter then explores the very biological bodily imagery utilized in traditions that imagine the Torah scroll being touched, moved, or physically manipulated in liturgical contexts—particularly in rituals in which the Torah scroll is treated as a member of the human community. The chapter closes by considering how the Torah scroll came to be imagined as a personified avatar of sacrality—a conduit between heaven and earth—in the absence of a sacrificial priesthood acting within the Temple cult. The chapters that make up the second part of the book thus argue that early rabbinic authorities were able to maintain the Pentateuch’s central status in rabbinic thought and practice while retreating from the biblical text as a communicative document because the biblical text had come to be treated not as a written communication so much as a personification of revelation that housed a living recited soul within a powerful (if dangerous) parchment body.

The concluding chapter of the monograph asks how this portrait of the early rabbinic relationship with biblical text changes our perception of subsequent developments in the Jewish relationship with Bible. Contemporary Jewish approaches to the Bible are deeply rooted in the medieval tradition of systematic biblical commentary. Yet it has proven challenging to explain the sudden global rise of these new forms of commentary in the Middle Ages so long as medieval Jewish approaches to biblical textuality were projected back into the classical rabbinic period. With this new portrait of classical rabbinic approaches to the biblical text, stark contrasts begin to emerge between medieval Jewish conceptions of biblical textuality and those of the early rabbinic period. The conclusion thus suggests that the far-reaching transformations in Jewish modes of engaging with the biblical text that arose with the Middle Ages were not spurred by particular cultural or technological developments so as much as a sea change in Jewish conceptions of what kind of book the Bible was. That is, the conclusion theorizes that the all-important medieval shift in Jewish modes of engaging with the biblical text derived from a global transformation in the Jewish vision of the Bible’s genre and affordances.

What This Book Is Not: Some Notes on Method

There are fields of research that intersect with various topics in this book that will not be extensively addressed as part of this work’s scholarly genealogy.
Many of the themes analyzed in the first half of the book, for instance, also appear threaded through a series of groundbreaking contributions to academic theology generated on the Upper West Side of Manhattan over the course of the last fifty years by Abraham Joshua Heschel, David Weiss Halivni, and Benjamin Sommer.\(^{57}\) However, this book is intended as a descriptive account of a particular reception history rather than a constructive project and it remains unclear to me, and others, how these two very different approaches might productively intersect.\(^{58}\)

Scattered throughout this monograph, the reader will also find copious references to sectarians, Christians, and Romans of all walks of life—both within the primary source material produced by early rabbinic thinkers and in my own analysis of those late ancient materials. In order to maintain focus on rabbinic scriptural reading cultures, this book will not be theorized as an intervention in the field of Jewish-Christian relations or the study of late antique intercommunity relations more broadly. Instead, this project should be understood as loosely grounded in the following principles regarding intercommunity relations: First, this project is premised on the assumption that one can sometimes identify broader “antipodal” tendencies, as Shaye Cohen has put it, between certain early rabbinic and emerging Christian attitudes regarding the nature of scripture and its affordances—even if a direct textual genealogy between particular sources cannot be traced.\(^{59}\) Yet the materials analyzed in the project are not limited to antipodal relations in which rival claims are configured as opposing positions. Instead, many of the materials cited here participated in similar, though not identical, ways in a broader Mediterranean vernacular emerging around the nature of canonical text and its function. When it came to reading, early rabbinic practices might be best categorized as what Seth Schwartz has called “accommodative”—in the sense that at the very “moment that the rabbis were striving to extricate themselves from the Roman


system . . . they were also demonstrating their commitments to some of its core values."\textsuperscript{60}

The final way in which this book may deviate from expectations is one of bibliographic method. Both biblical studies and rabbinic studies participate with unusual robustness in a bibliographic practice that Anthony Grafton has famously attributed to the influence of German philology, whereby "footnotes often serve to prove the author's membership in a guild rather than to illuminate or support a particular point" as "citations are heaped up, without much regard to their origins or compatibility in order to make the text above them seem to rest on solid pilings."\textsuperscript{61} Indeed, Anne Stevens and Jay Williams have argued that such notes are aimed less at "the traditional recognition of the work of like-minded scholars" than at establishing that the author possesses a proper "consciousness of their place in the field."\textsuperscript{62} This is where the "Germanic footnote" becomes a problem, it seems to me. In the fields treated in this book, we do not currently have adequate bibliographic and technical apparatus available to comprehensively survey work on a particular passage or topic. Without a comprehensive apparatus in place, what we miss in our citations tends to systematically reproduce structures of inequity along networks of gender, ethnicity, class, geography, employment status, and institutional prestige. I am therefore wary of approaching footnotes as a ticket of admission to the guild when that technique has functioned so inefficiently to include and has proven so effective at excluding.

Within rabbinic studies, there is a particular manifestation of this practice about which I have strong reservations: the practice of citing and arguing against every previous author who has offered an analysis of a topic or passage that deviates from one's own. While makhloket leshem shamayim (dispute for the sake of heaven) may have sharpened the minds of the rabbinic thinkers we study, Jeffery Rubenstein has also painted a sobering picture of the social costs of such an intellectual milieu\textsuperscript{63}—which we might do well to consider before adapting the discourse for modern studies of the subject. But the more


\textsuperscript{63} Jeffery Rubenstein, \textit{The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 54–79.
pressing reason to eschew this practice, it seems to me, is that it tends to privilege those scholars who have had the most experience with this particular rhetoric from their time in elite, Ashkenazic, masculine yeshiva contexts. Those who trained exclusively in secular institutions and in women's, egalitarian, and non-Ashkenazic schools of advanced Talmud study were taught different modes of interacting with these texts, and with each other. This particular mode of relating to disagreement is only one of many native idioms.

The reader may take it as a given that this work is respectfully founded on the widely acknowledged pillars of the field. Although these works hover in the background, I have not attempted to cite each scholar's entire oeuvre to prove my familiarity with highly cited works in the field. Nor have I provided a bibliography, which would serve a similar purpose. Instead, I have tried to argue constructively in this book by citing primarily those authors whose thinking on a particular subject helped give shape to my argument. I will not as a rule include long lists of other readings of a passage, nor argue against other readings of a given text. Instead, I hold that alternate readings may successfully bring out different facets of these multivocal texts, without necessarily being in opposition to one another.

In the additional space created by abstaining from these widely embraced bibliographic practices, I have often sought out less acknowledged scholars and scholarly sources. I do this not in any attempt to diversify by checklist. (In fields that are so imbalanced ab initio, this seems an impossible and misguided task. 64) Rather, I have often found the greatest delight and stimulation in works that seem to have fallen slightly by the wayside in the networks of convention—work by international academics, women and nonbinary scholars, researchers of color, and those working at less prestigious institutions. Those who have been marginalized by the field are also free of it in many ways. As a result, their work more often takes unexpected and winding paths of their own devising. As Sara Ahmed has put it in another context, “Work that has been too quickly . . . cast aside or left behind, work . . . created by not following the official paths laid out by disciplines” generates for us other paths which Ahmed

64. For the past decade, the Society of Biblical Literature membership has remained around or above 75 percent members who identify as men. According to the most recent Society of Biblical Literature's Member Data Survey, 24.22 percent of responders in the 2018 survey selected the identification “female,” 75.68 percent selected the identification “male,” and 0.10 percent selected the identification “transgender,” Society of Biblical Literature, Member Data Report, January 2019, 8: https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/sblMemberProfile2019.pdf.
has named “desire lines.” I hope that the resulting arguments of this book will, in turn, provide new food for thought to this alternate network—whether they make it at the center or not.

In a similar effort to put the thoughts of others before the task of garnering scholarly authority, I have done my best to seek out authorized English translations of modern quotations whenever I cite at any length from the foreign-language work of a contemporary scholar. All translations of premodern works from Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin are, of course, my own—except in the rare cases where I have indicated. However, when a living author has authorized a particular translation into English, I am uncomfortable substituting my own linguistic judgment for theirs, in a misguided attempt to demonstrate that my many years in Israel were not wasted. So, while the translation of any passages quoted from modern works in Hebrew, German, French, or Italian are my own unless otherwise indicated, I will quote from English versions of each author’s arguments wherever that is possible.

With all of this said, this book was completed amid a global pandemic. There were works which I wished to consult that I was not able to acquire for practical or budgetary reasons. I regret the insufficiencies this leaves in the final product. Nevertheless, as we so often say in acknowledgements, all errors and omissions are entirely my own.

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