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Using Ezra’s Time as a Methodological Pivot for Understanding the Rhetoric and Functions of the Pentateuch

JAMES W. WATTS

The transformation of the Pentateuch into scripture around the time of Ezra marks a watershed not only in Jewish religious history but also in the methods and data available to modern historians. Comparing pentateuchal traditions in the Assyrian and Babylonian periods with the Torah in the Hellenistic and Roman periods shows stark changes in their meaning and use. It also points up dramatic differences in the kind of evidence available to us for the shape and contents of pentateuchal texts.

From the Hellenistic and Roman periods, we possess physical evidence in the form of manuscripts, mainly the Dead Sea Scrolls. In this period, we also find literary references to pentateuchal texts in a wide variety of other Jewish literature. We possess a translation of the Torah into Greek created in the third century. In addition, there is evidence from the second century that Torah scrolls were functioning as icons of Jewish identity recognized by both Jews and non-Jews. Starting in the Roman period, we have evidence of practices of public and liturgical reading of Torahs and other scriptures.

By contrast, for pentateuchal traditions in the Assyrian and Babylonian periods we have only inductive literary evidence from the Hebrew Bible itself for their separate sources, redactional development, rhetorical agendas, legal history, and history of traditions. From the Assyrian and Babylonian periods we possess no manuscripts, very few literary references, and no translations. We do find a handful of references to the liturgical display and reading of Torah scrolls, but the suspicion that these may be back-projections of later practices casts doubt on their historical accuracy.

The Persian and early Hellenistic periods are thus pivotal for pentateuchal studies in a number of different ways. They mark the transition from original meaning as encoded by authors and editors and exposed by modern criticism to traditional meaning as preserved more or less in Jewish and Christian interpretation ever since. The period also brought about changes in historical evidence that separate our critical methods into two distinct groups. This is the old “higher criticism vs. lower criticism” distinction with some additions. The
inductive literary analysis necessary for the earlier periods requires the methods of source, form, and redaction criticisms, and tradition history. The very different data available for later periods require methods such as text criticism, the history of interpretation, and historical studies of canonization. Archaeology, of course, is helpful in every period, but in later periods there can be no question that archaeological and literary evidence must be interpreted in mutual dependence on each other. This Persian-period watershed thus marks a major shift in the nature of our historical evidence for the Pentateuch.

All this is old news, especially to pentateuchal scholars who have increasingly focused on the Persian period to understand the form of the Pentateuch. Missing from most of our work, however, is serious consideration of the nature of the change that occurred to the Pentateuch in this period. It was at this time that the Pentateuch began to function as a scripture.

This observation presupposes answers to the questions of how to define the category of scripture and what must happen to a text to turn it into a scripture. Here pentateuchal studies can benefit from attention to the comparative study of religions, especially the comparative study of scriptures. The study of comparative scriptures casts considerable light on the nature of scriptures and on the nature of the religious changes occurring in Persian- and early Hellenistic-period Judaism and, therefore, why they had such consequences for our historical evidence as well as for subsequent Western religious traditions.

The Pentateuch as a Scripture: Engaging Some Old Challenges

Let me begin by placing this discussion of the Torah as scripture within the context of the previous generation’s debates over scripture. The 1970s saw two major challenges posed in North America to the way biblical scholars define their subject matter. Both called on biblical scholars to pay more attention to the Bible’s nature as scripture.

The more prominent of these challenges was raised by Brevard Childs, who tried to refocus research on the Bible’s scriptural status by calling attention to its canonical shape and its history of interpretation. Childs’s proposals failed to sway the majority in the discipline because historical uncertainties undermined his ability to claim that this or that part of the Bible received its decisive canonical shape at any one particular time. The mutability of the shape of the Jewish and Christian canons lasted well into the rabbinic and

Constantinian periods and in some ways even beyond. That fact frustrates any attempt to define scripture on the basis of canonical shaping.2

Less often remembered is another challenge that sounded superficially similar to that of Childs but was programmatically different. The historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, charged that biblical scholars study the Bible only “before it was the Bible.” He called for shifting the emphasis to the history and function of scripture since the time of its elevation to that status, as well as functional comparisons with other religious scriptures. His students continued his work for a time, especially William Graham, who wrote a monumental comparative study of the oral performance of scriptures in various religious traditions.4

Smith’s work, however, exerted little influence on biblical scholars. German scholarship has given some attention to these issues, especially in discussions of whether and when Judaism and Christianity can accurately be described as “book religions.” These discussions often invoke comparative evidence from other religions, especially Islam. The debates about book religions tend, however, to revolve around whether scripturalization characterizes a religion in a fundamental way and how it affects the wider culture. They treat the specific functions of scriptures within religious communities in a more cursory fashion.

The broader field of biblical studies has given even less thought to the Bible’s function as a scripture. Nevertheless, we have increasingly studied the history of interpretation and in that process accumulated evidence that can contribute to a functional analysis of scriptures. For example, James Kugel has shown a decisive and wide-ranging shift in the meaning of biblical texts in

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2 That is the case even when canonical analysis emphasizes the text’s changing meaning through inerbiblical as well as postcanonical interpretation (e.g., James Sanders, Torah and Canon [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972]). Here distinguishing “canonical” adaptations from other kinds of interpretive changes becomes problematic.


antiquity. 6  Pointing to exegetical traditions found in later Second Temple and early rabbinc Jewish literature, as well as early Christian literature, he argued that the Bible at this time took on the meanings that it has, for the most part, continued to wield ever since in traditional Jewish and Christian interpretation. Kugel credited this development to the adoption of a common set of exegetical presuppositions, namely that the Bible is of divine origins, that its text is omnisignificant and cryptic, that it is internally harmonious and perfect, and that its meaning is relevant to the current reader. In other words, the Bible became scripture through the adoption of these presuppositions in the late Second Temple period and that status has been more decisive for how it has been read than any of the issues usually of concern to historians and other modern critics. The meaning of the Bible changed when it became scripture.

Kugel identified the period when this change occurred as roughly 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E., but those dates simply mark the period when a sizable body of exegetical literature first came into existence. In fact, this literature is itself one indication that the Torah had already become scripture, because it was considered worthy of this kind of exegetical effort. 7 The time when the Torah changed from meaning more or less what its authors intended it to mean to meaning what later Jewish and Christian traditions have generally taken it to mean then could have come a bit earlier, sometime in the Persian or early Hellenistic periods. The changes wrought by the Torah’s scripturalization, however, went far beyond changing its generally accepted meaning.

The Contribution of Comparative Scriptures Studies

Comparative study requires defining the category of scripture by function, rather than contents. Because the textual contents of scriptures around the world are so varied, because their textual forms and relations to oral traditions are so complicated, and because their status relative to other texts within a tradition is so mutable and, often, contested, the concept only has meaning as a description of the relationship between a particular community and its texts. As William Graham argued, “The ‘scriptural’ characteristics of a text belong not to the text itself but to its role in a community. ‘Scripture’ is not a literary genre but a religio-historical one. 8 “

Scriptural texts are usually cited as authorities, often the most important authorities, for persuasive purposes. I have already mentioned the fact that the scripturalization of Torah led to changes in its meaning due to beliefs in the scripture’s divine origins, relevance, cryptic nature, and omnisignificance. These beliefs and interpretive practices are common to other book-centered religious traditions, such as Islam, Sikhism, and many branches of Buddhism. They therefore tend to be cited in definitions of “scripture” and featured in most discussions of the category. 9

Comparative study of scriptural traditions, however, also draws attention to other ways in which scriptures function that are not simply facets of the interpretation of a text’s semantic meaning. On the one hand, oral performance of the words of scripture tends to play a key role in religious rituals and, often, in more casual contexts as well. Modes of oral performance may be dictated by strict traditions or readers may be assigned casually to broaden participation in religious services. Performative modes are frequently multiplied and translated into sung music or even reenacted as theater. On the other hand, the physical text may be venerated as a religious object in public or private rituals. Its most typical form, whether as scroll, codex, palm-leaf manuscript, or printed book, can become widely recognized as a symbol of the religious tradition, to the point even of substituting or replacing icons or relics in the rituals of the community. 10


9 Thus GRAHAM, “Scripture”: “Every text that achieves scriptural status in a religious community elicits extensive popular and scholarly exegesis and study of its contents. ... All scriptural communities boast impressive formal traditions of scholarly interpretation, many of which form the basis of all learning in their respective traditions” (8202–3). Similarly, VAN VOORST, Anthology, 7–8.

Ezra’s Time As Methodological Pivot

Turning back to the Pentateuch, such observations about the various functions of scriptures draw attention to the fact that the Torah has, since antiquity, been ritualized in the three dimensions of oral performance, iconic veneration, and semantic interpretation. Already in the Hebrew Bible itself, references to it as a text that is privately recited and memorized emphasize its performative dimension (Deut 6:6–7; 17:19). It is also publicly read and proclaimed in mass assemblies by key biblical figures such as Moses, Joshua, Josiah, and Ezra (Deut 31:9–11; Josh 8:34–35; 2 Kgs 22–23; Neh 8). The Torah’s iconic dimension also receives great attention: as tablets of commandments stored in the ark of the covenant in the heart of the sanctuary (Exod 24:12; 25:16; 31:18; 34:1; 4:40:20), as inscribed on the stones of an altar (Josh 8:32), as written scrolls preserved beside the ark by Levites (Exod 24:7; Deut 31:9) and discovered by Josiah’s priests in the Temple (2 Kgs 22–23). Ritualization of the Torah’s dimension of semantic interpretation is actually less prominent in the Hebrew Bible than the other two dimensions. It is implied in mandates to interpret the exodus story at Passover (Exod 12:26–27, though technically these describe interpreting the seder meal itself rather than texts of Exod). It is most explicit in the interpretation and/or translation work of Ezra’s Levites (Neh 8) and of Jehoshaphat’s bureaucrats (2 Chr 17:7–9).

Nevertheless, ritualizations of all three dimensions—iconic, performative, and semantic—find explicit mandate in the Pentateuch itself, especially in Deuteronomy. And they are highlighted by biblical stories of the Torah’s normative use by important figures (Moses, Joshua, Josiah, Ezra). Modern scholarship has shown considerable interest in the actions of the later two. King Josiah’s prominence as a public reader and promulgator of Torah (2 Kgs 22–23), together with his reform’s evocation of the themes of Deuteronomy, have led historians for two centuries to identify Josiah’s reign as a crucial turning point in the elevation of the Torah to scriptural status. But historical studies have increasingly raised questions about the antiquity and reliability of 2 Kings’ story of Josiah’s reform. Even apart from such historical considerations, 2 Kings depicts Josiah’s reform as short-lived due to his untimely death, which allowed his successors to reverse his policies. Scrolls containing Deuteronomistic ideas seem to have received a poor reception from subsequent

12 Baruch’s reading of Jeremiah’s prophecies in the temple constitutes a ritualization of the performative dimension of this text, the first evidence by many centuries of a prophetic book receiving this kind of treatment. However, it is not clear that Baruch’s actions constitute a new stage in the treatment of prophetic texts as much as an ad hoc substitute for the prophet’s oral performance of his oracles in the temple itself. The book of Jer also anticipates transcending the textuality of Torah by direct revelation to every Israelite (Jer 31:33–34).

13 As CARR observes, “Whatever Josiah’s reform once was, it later became cause to understand the postexilic installation of a broader Torah as a restoration of a former state of things, rather than as an innovation” (“Rise of Torah,” 47).

14 For a similar survey of the evidence for the conclusion that “the increasing centrality of the Torah in Judaism in the post-exilic period, certainly after the reforms by Ezra, led to a heightened awareness of the Torah’s holiness,” see Pieter W. Van der Horst, “Was the Synagogue a Place of Sabbath Worship Before 70 CE?” in Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction during the Greco-Roman Period (ed. S. Fine; New York: Routledge, 1999), 34–37.

15 Jacob WRIGHT comments on both the “cognitive” and “cultic” consequences of Ezra’s reading, observing for the latter that “the Torah is treated as an iconic book” (“Writing the Restoration: Compositional Agenda and the Role of Ezra in Nehemiah 8,” in JHebS 7 [2007]: art. 10. Online: http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/jhs/article/viewFile/5648/4701 [cited 13 July 2010]; also, in more detail, IDEM, “Seeking, Finding and Writing in Ezra-Nehemiah,” in Unity and Disunity in Ezra-Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric, Reader [ed. M. J. Boda and P. L. Redditt; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008], 294–304). He notes, by contrast, that Neh 8 shows little to no interest in temple and altar, and so finds here the beginnings of a tension between Torah and temple. Lee I. LEVINE identifies the city gate as the functional forerunner of the synagogue as community center for a variety of activities, including ritual ones (The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years [2nd ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005], 28–34). However, though the urge to find synagogue and/or
scribal interpretation challenging priestly cult has played a prominent role in histories of the Second Temple period, there is scant evidence that serious attacks on the priests' cultic role emerged until the end of the period, though the priests were frequently criticized for corruption as in Neh 13. Neh 8 even highlights cultic personnel: a priest reads the Torah, which is then interpreted by Levites. Wright therefore finds that various editions and retellings of Ezra and Nehemiah try to mitigate the Nehemiah memoir's anti-priestly bias as in Neh 12. Neh 8 even highlights cultic personnel: a priest reads the Torah, which is then interpreted by Levites. Wright therefore finds that various editions and retellings of Ezra and Nehemiah try to mitigate the Nehemiah memoir's anti-priestly bias as in Neh 12.

16 For a recent discussion of the Bible's place among ancient traditions of heavenly books, see Parmenter, "Bible as Icon," 298–309.


18 Ant. 16.164; in 20.115, he reports that a soldier who stole and publicly destroyed a Torah scroll was executed by the Roman governor of Judea to quiet a public uproar over the incident.

(4) Tefillin housings and the slips of parchment that were in them appear among the finds from Qumran and are the earliest physical evidence for the iconic use of Torah. They show that amulets incorporating pentateuchal texts were already in common use by the second or at least the first century B.C.E. Some of the slips seem to have actually come from mezuzot and so are evidence for this material textual practice as well.19


21 So Levine, Ancient Synagogue, 352; see b. Szabb. 125b. Historians and archaeologists debate the degree to which the biblical ark of the covenant was conceptually and/or functionally related to the Torah ark of ancient synagogues: Hachlili denies any continuity of iconography and meaning between them (Ancient Jewish Art, 279–80), but Meyers defends the connection ("Torah Shrine," 221 n. 36). The linguistic and conceptual link between them was explicitly presupposed in the fourth century C.E. anti-Jewish polemic of John Chrysostom (Adv. Jud. 6.7 [PG 48:913]).

22 E.g. Chrysostom (see previous note).
story in Neh 8 was written, is likely when these practices and their associated beliefs originated.

As one would expect, ritualization of the performative dimension of scriptures leaves even fewer traces in the physical record than the iconic dimension does. We have very little specific information from the Second Temple period as to how Torah and other scriptures were read or recited.

(1) Again, our first description can be found in Neh 8:4–12: Ezra stood on a wooden platform surrounded by the community’s leaders, he accompanied the reading with a blessing that elicited verbal responses (“Amen”) and obeisances from the crowd, and he declared the day to be holy.

(2) At Qumran, second- or first-century-B.C.E. texts show that the sectarians not only heard law read aloud regularly (perhaps their own laws as well as the Torah: Community Rule 1QS VI 7–8, Zadokite/Damascus Document 4Q266 5 II 1–3 and parallels) and specifically on the Sabbath (4Q251 I 5), they also expected public readings to feature prominently in the eschaton (1QS I 4–5). Because the Damascus Document assigns the role of reader to priests, Lawrence Schiffman observes that “it may, therefore, refer to a practice which took place in the Jerusalem Temple, or to one which the sectarians thought should take place there.”

(3) Second Maccabees in the first century B.C.E. claims that the armies of Judas Maccabee marched into battle to the sound of Torah being read aloud (2 Macc 8:23).

(4) First-century-C.E. references to public readings of Torah and other scriptures appear in Philo, Josephus, and the NT, as well as the dedicatory inscription of Theodotus from Jerusalem that states the new synagogue’s purpose is “for the reading of Law and teaching the commandments.” The Mishnah reports that Torah portions were read aloud in the Second Temple by priests at Yom Kippur (m. Yoma 7:1; m. Soṭah 7:7) and by kings such as Agrippa at Sukkot (m. Soṭah 7:8).

(5) Rabbinic literature, of course, devotes considerable attention to scripture-reading practices in ancient synagogues (e.g., m. Meg. 3–4), including in a variety of languages. That literary evidence has been confirmed by archeological evidence for reading platforms (cf. Neh 8) in synagogues of the second century C.E. and later.

This evidence for ritualizing the performative dimension of the Torah, though limited, does at a minimum validate Schiffman’s conclusion that “the reading of the Torah and most of its procedures ... [were] practiced in the synagogues in the early first century, even before the destruction.” Lee Levine observes from rabbinic literature that “[the Torah-reading component of synagogue liturgy seems to have been the least susceptible to rabbinic influence] because its practices were already widely established.” Schiffman, however, distinguishes strictly between didactic reading in Second Temple synagogues and the liturgical readings that developed in the rabbinic period. He therefore denies any historical connection between Ezra’s reading of Torah and later practices.

There is, however, more overlap between religious/liturgical reading and didactic reading than Schiffman allows. Books may be ritualized through both instruction and worship and the two quickly become indistinguishable in religious communities. Van der Horst cited 1QS VI 6–8, “reading the book, studying the commandment, and praising together,” to observe that “if the cult focuses on the reading, explanation, and study of the Holy Book present there, because this is the place where God reveals himself, study has become a form of worship.”

His point is supported by the evidence for ritualizing the teaching of Torah, that is, the semantic dimension of the scripture.

(1) During Ezra’s reading of the Torah, Levites interpreted or translated the reading so people could understand it (Neh 8:7–8). Though the story’s emphasis on the physical scroll and the public reading, that is, the iconic and performative dimensions, reflects the tradition of public law readings already found in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Kings, Neh 8 introduces a new element: ritualized interpretation of the semantic meaning of the Torah. This becomes a

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28 Schiffman, “Early History,” 54.
standard element in later descriptions of the public reading of Torah and other scriptures listed above. 34

(2) Chronicles, in the fourth century B.C.E., contributes a story about a royal commission traveling around to teach the Torah in Judah under King Jehoshaphat (2 Chr 17:7–9).

(3) References to the Torah in general or to specific pentateuchal laws also appear frequently in Ezra, 1 Esdras, 2 Chronicles, and Malachi. 35 Other books from roughly the same period, such as Ruth and Ecclesiastes, reveal knowledge of Torah but seem to issue with its authority or some of its specific rules. 36

(4) Outside the Hebrew Bible, the first evidence for the ritualization of the semantic dimension of Torah appears in its translation into Greek in the third century B.C.E. The Septuagint is thus a material manifestation of these rituals of textual interpretation. It was probably also intended for use in public readings.

(5) By the second century B.C.E., Torah scrolls were being consulted to determine courses of public action according to 1 Mac 3:48, which draws an explicit analogy to the way “the Gentiles consult images of their gods.” This points out a close relationship between ritualized interpretation and the iconic dimension surveyed above.

(6) The phenomenon of “rewritten Bibles” in late Second Temple Jewish literature (e.g. Jubilees, Testament of Levi, the Temple Scroll, Josephus’ Antiquities) presents ambiguous evidence for ritualization of the semantic dimension of Torah and other scriptures. On the one hand, they attest to very strong interests in interpreting the religious significance of these texts. On the other hand, their freedom to rewrite and expand the stories has raised doubts as to how seriously they took the canonical text. Comparison with later scriptural traditions shows, however, that free adaptation of scriptural materials in sermons, songs, and narrative literature, among other genres, coexists very frequently in communities with a high regard for canonical texts and their accurate preservation.

(7) The Dead Sea Scrolls provide our earliest evidence for systematic textual interpretation of Torah and prophetic texts, whether by a string of citations as in 4QMMT or a commentary format such as 1QpHab (the Habakkuk Pesher). The former method appears also in New Testament citations of the Septuagint from the first century C.E.

(8) The concern for ritualized interpretation of Torah and other scriptures is also reflected in the sheer number of copies in the library at Qumran. Though the fragmentary nature of most of the manuscripts makes an exact count difficult, four books of Torah and two other biblical books appear in more than ten copies each among the scrolls, by Tov’s count: thirty-six copies of Psalms, thirty of Deuteronomy, twenty-one of Isaiah, nineteen or twenty of Genesis, fifteen of Exodus, and twelve of Leviticus (Flint counts seventeen). 37 The only noncanonical historical memory according to which the heroes of the restoration did long ago what they are doing now” (303).


40 Stefan SCHORCH has shown that reading practices shaped the textual tradition of biblical books (“Die Rolle des Lesens für die Konstituierung alttestamentlicher Texte,” in Morenz and Schorck, Was ist ein Text, 108–22). My suggestion here is that ritual display of the physical scroll did so as well. A study that illustrates this phenomenon in twentieth-century religious developments can be found in Shawn KRAUSE-LONER, “Be-Witching Scripture: The Book of Shadows as Scripture within Wicca/Neopagan Witchcraft,” Postscripts 2, no. 2–3 (2006): 273–92. Thus Childs correctly linked scriptural status and the “shape” of the text, but against both Childs and Hobson, that is because scriptural status generates heightened concern and attention to standardization of the shape of the text, both on large and small scales, not the other way around. Nor is it the case that standardization of form and content is uniquely the product of scriptural concerns; other motives may also lead to the same result (e.g., the concern for ritual standardization illustrated by Hobson, or the concern for standardized commercial products evidenced in the modern publishing business).

Aristeas' composition from three centuries later. As with Aristeas, the histori­
dent in the story of Ezra's reading of Torah, though not as elaborately as in
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(312-16).

That same close interaction between the three dimensions is also evi­
mony in Alexandria and guaranteed by reciting curses on anyone who might
tamper with its text
312). But the Letter of Aristeas lavishes the most attention on the semantic
contents of Torah (139-69), and devotes most of its space to celebrating the
312). The accuracy of their translation was affirmed by the Jewish commu­
(121-27, 187-294, 305-6). The accuracy of their translation was affirmed by the Jewish commu­

The Greek translation was also received with obeisances (Let. Aris. 317). Its
accuracy had to be confirmed by a complete public reading (performative dimen­sion), both to the Jewish community in Alexandria and to the king (308, 312). But the Letter of Aristeas lavishes the most attention on the semantic
tive, and wisdom of the seventy translators (121-27, 187-294, 305-6). The accuracy of their translation was affirmed by the Jewish community in Alexandria and guaranteed by reciting curses on anyone who might tamper with its text (310-11), a fate that Aristeas assures us had already been met by writers who adapted Jewish scriptures for their own compositions (312-16).

This analysis of Aristeas artificially distinguishes ritualizations of the three
dimensions, which the document in fact interweaves tightly. Each dimension
supports the others to emphasize the sanctity of the Torah and its Greek transla­tion. That same close interaction between the three dimensions is also evi­
dent in the story of Ezra's reading of Torah, though not as elaborately as in
Aristeas' composition from three centuries later. As with Aristeas, the histori­

41 See Sylvie Honigman, The Septuagint and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria: A
Study in the Narrative of the Letter of Aristeas (London: Routledge, 2003); Dries De Crom,

Torah Ritualization and Historical Criticism

Nehemiah 8 presents strong evidence for the ritualization of Torah in all three
dimensions already in the mid- to late Persian or early Hellenistic periods.
From this time on, Torah became more and more widely recognized as scripture
through the increasingly common ritualization of all three of its dimen­sions, not just interpretation of its semantic meaning or form alone. The nature and extent of ritualization, of course, evolved over time: the Persian period public readings were not the same as late-ancient synagogue reading, as Schiffman and others note.

However, it is also this regular ritualization that changed the nature of the evidence for the Pentateuch from this period on, as the enumeration above demonstrates. Elevation of the Torah to scriptural status by ritualizing its three dimensions changed the evidentiary basis for historical research on the Torah from inductive analysis of the pentateuchal texts themselves to include empirical arguments based on comparative evidence from other texts, translations, manuscripts and artifacts. This is the methodological point that comparative scriptures studies allows us to see. Recognition of the Torah's enscrip­turalization in the Persian/early Hellenistic period thus permits the historical correlation of the methods of historical research with the changes in religious ritualization of scriptures. It also shows the methodological dependence of historical research on these scripturalizing changes. Engaging the problem of scripturalization from a comparative perspective is therefore a desideratum for understanding our own critical methods.

Recognition of the role of ritualization in shaping the Torah as scripture
may also suggest some new solutions to old problems. For example, critical
scholars have long debated what could have motivated Persian-period editors
to juxtapose obviously contradictory narrative and legal materials in the Pentateuch.44 Perhaps the iconic veneration and performance given one set of To­
Ritualization of the Torah scrolls in the temple motivated various groups to want their legal and narrative traditions to be included in them. Since oral performance and, especially, iconic veneration do not require the literary consistency that semantic interpretation often does, perhaps the three-dimensional ritualization of Torah permitted those who combined the Pentateuch’s component parts to be less concerned with consistency than were the scribes who wrote those sources in the first place. This suggestion does not necessarily conflict with other theories of possible motivations for editing the Pentateuch together. Ritualizing Torah may have reinforced other motives for doing the same thing.

Rhetoric on Both Sides of the Pivot

Attention to scripturalization can therefore make an important methodological contribution to pentateuchal studies. This is especially the case since the methods employed in biblical studies continue to multiply and diverge. The more-than-thirty-year-old divide between historical (“diachronic”) and literary (“synchronic”) approaches has only been exacerbated by increasing methodological pluralism within both camps (from source criticism to supplementary, redactional, even author-centered theories in the former, and from formalist to structuralist, poststructuralist, feminist, and postcolonial approaches in the latter). But other polarizations continue unabated as well: between archaeology-based and text-based history writing, between text criticism and redactional analysis, between investigations of original meaning and descriptions of the history of interpretation. It is not easy to make sense of all this to students, or even to ourselves, except in a piecemeal fashion.

I am suggesting that greater attention to the Bible’s ritual function as a scripture and to the time periods in which it first gained those functions can provide a pivot around which to arrange both our data and our methods of study. I also suggest that rhetorical analysis can provide a metamethod for organizing, if not resolving, our chronic methodological controversies. I focus here on the Pentateuch, though analogous claims can be made for other portions of the various biblical canons as well.

How can the various relationships between the Pentateuch’s (or the whole Bible’s) pre-scriptural forms and post-scriptural functions be expressed coherently? When that question is ignored, the various historical-critical interpretations of the composition of the Pentateuch have often produced only impasse or even disciplinary incoherence. Identifying the Persian/early Hellenistic era as the watershed when pentateuchal literature changed from being just important national literature to also being ritualized as scripture provides a starting point for addressing this issue.

It is possible to address this question in various ways, but I will suggest just one. Rhetorical analysis can provide a capacious framework for describing both sides of this watershed and for investigating their relationship to each other.

At its most basic, rhetorical analysis of texts asks: who was/is trying to persuade whom of what by using this text? The focus on persuasion brings into sharp relief the way scriptural texts mediate social relationships between writers or public readers or sponsoring authorities on the one hand, and readers or hearers on the other. Rhetoric readily admits that persuasion can be as much a function of the identity of the (presumed) speaker and also of the presuppositions of the audience as it is of the semantic meaning of the text. It can therefore accommodate uses of texts that exceed any clear connection to their semantic meaning due to attitudes produced by ritualizing their iconic and/or performative dimensions instead. The focus on social relationships also means that rhetoric readily accommodates changing practices and meanings over time: the text’s meaning changes with every change of presumed author and audience throughout the text’s history of use (as the history of biblical interpretation amply attests). However, historical interpretation need not fall into complete methodological relativism, because the form of the text was determined by the rhetorical intentions of all those who had a hand in shaping it. We can therefore place the rhetoric of authors and editors, and even oral tracts, alongside the rhetoric of readers and interpreters of various kinds and study the continuities and discontinuities between them.

The Persian/early Hellenistic-period watershed when the Pentateuch became scripture then also marks the methodological transition from rhetorical analysis of the persuasive intentions behind pentateuchal sources and traditions to rhetorical analysis of the persuasive intentions behind the ritualization of the Torah/Pentateuch in all three dimensions. Rhetorical analysis can thus

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45 For a survey and discussion of the history of rhetoric in terms of persuasion, see Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 49–55, 61–62; for studies of the rhetorical practices of non-Greco-Roman cultures, see the essays in Roberta Binkley and Carol Lipson, eds., Rhetoric Before and Beyond the Greeks (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), and IDEM, Ancient Non-Greek Rhetorics (West Lafayette, Ind.: Parlor Press, 2009); for persuasive rhetoric in the Pentateuch, see Dale Patrick and Allen Scult, Rhetoric and Biblical Interpretation (JSOTSup 82; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), and James W. Watts, Reading Law: The Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

46 Aristotle already emphasized this point by distinguishing logos, the verbal argument, from ethos, the credibility of the speaker, and pathos, the feelings and biases of the audience. He insisted that successful persuasion depends on using all three effectively (Rhet. 2.1356a).
provide an overarching methodological umbrella under which to arrange the results of other methods of interpretation coherently.