No ancient society was more blatantly dominated by a written text than that of Jews in the Roman period. The most influential text was of course the Hebrew bible, of which many thousands of copies must have existed by the first century AD, scattered throughout the Jewish world. Since such great authority was attributed by Jews to the bible, it is a reasonable hypothesis that the ability to read, write and interpret biblical texts will have brought prestige to those who possessed it within Jewish society.

The survival from antiquity of much evidence about Jews in this period through the continuous Jewish and Christian religious traditions down to modern times, and the discovery of archaeological finds in the Judaean Desert over the last half century, make it possible to test this hypothesis. My suggestion at the end of this essay will be that among Jews reading did not in itself bring power, but that writing—or at least writing of a particular kind—probably did.

The date of the canonisation of the Hebrew bible and its Greek translation, the Septuagint, is much debated, but disagreement revolves primarily around the questions of what books were contained within the canon at which period and what precisely a canon of the bible should be understood to be.\(^1\) No one doubts that, by late Hellenistic times in Judaea, a select core of texts, more or less corresponding to those eventually enshrined within the bible, was recognised by all Jews as the main foundation of their theology and the source of authority for almost all their civil, criminal and religious laws and customs.

These texts were taken so seriously by Jews that everything written in them was assumed to be valid and important in contemporary life. Apparent discrepancies within the texts were regularly explained away by ingenious interpretation. New laws and customs were either

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\(^1\) Contrast Beckwith (1985) to Barr (1983) and Barton (1986).
generated or justified by subtle exegesis of biblical passages. According to the rabbis, an ability to read scripture was thus a prime aim of education (cf. *Mishnah Abot* 5.21). But writing was less common, not because it was thought unimportant but, on the contrary, because the production of religious texts was a specialised task.

When Josephus claimed in the first century AD (*C. Ap.* 1.37–41) that Jews venerated their religious texts with a zeal which far surpassed the nonchalant attitude to their own traditions of other peoples in the ancient world, he may have had partly in mind the serious attention paid by Jews to the contents of these texts: regular reading by Jews of the laws ensured, so he claimed, both accuracy and unanimity in their interpretation (*C. Ap.* 2.175–81). But Josephus’ boast at *C. Ap.* 1.37–41 may also have reflected a different and even more striking peculiarity of Jewish culture, a peculiarity about which he wrote in the immediately following passage in *Contra Apionem*. This was the belief that religious power was enshrined within the physical object on which the divine teachings were inscribed.

Josephus wrote that Jews were prepared to risk their lives to preserve the scrolls of the Law (*C. Ap.* 1.42–4). When a Roman soldier destroyed a text, the result was a riot (*B. J.* 2.229–31; *A. J.* 20.115). Josephus claimed with pride that he had used his privileged position to rescue books from destruction in Jerusalem in AD 70 (*Vita* 418). A scroll of the Law could be a rallying sign for the seditious (*Vita* 134) or, in the eyes of the victorious Romans, a symbol of the defeated nation, paraded at the culmination of the triumphal procession of Titus and Vespasian in Rome (*B. J.* 7.150).

The sacred text *par excellence* was the Pentateuch, properly inscribed in the stipulated Hebrew lettering in ink on parchment, but other books from what was later described as the canon of scripture could, if correctly written, also share in the numinous quality obscurely defined by the rabbis as the ability to ‘defile the hands’. The religious power of such written objects may have been only loosely connected to the meaning of the words they contained, since few of the works now included within the corpus of the prophets and (in particular) the writings were ever subjected in antiquity to the intense

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4 Goodman (1990) [Chapter 6 below].