Many scholars of the Second Temple period have replaced the concept of canonization with that of a canonical process. The study of the Dead Sea Scrolls has been crucial for this new direction. Biblical, rewritten biblical and parabiblical manuscripts from Qumran have made us realize that their formation and production was a dynamic process. What is more, this new evidence has led many scholars to consider taxonomic terms such as biblical, nonbiblical or parabiblical anachronistic for the period before 70 C.E., since they impose later canonical categories on texts that predate fixed canons. In addition, some nonbiblical texts were apparently as authoritative as the biblical texts, even though they did not end up in the Jewish or Christian canons. The notion of authoritative Scriptures plays an important part in the new paradigm, but it has not yet been sufficiently reflected upon and is in need of clarification. In this volume, the issue of authoritative Scriptures is addressed by focusing on specific texts or corpora of texts.

The issue raises many different questions and they can be approached from sociological, cultural and literary perspectives. There is the question of which specific texts were authoritative and in which respect: for example, regarding halakah or because they address the present and the future. Other aspects relate to how the number of manuscripts found at Qumran is indicative of a text’s authoritativeness, or whether specific scribal practices reflect different levels of authority. Why were some texts more authoritative than others? For whom and in what contexts were texts authoritative? And what are our criteria for determining the extent to which a text was authoritative? In short, what do we mean by “authoritative”?

In addition, the issues of tradition and revelation should be raised. First, there is a tension between texts and traditions. There seems to have been no problem with rearranging, adding to, deleting from or rewriting texts. Texts such as Jubilees or the Genesis Apocryphon combine biblical and nonbiblical traditions. How do these different elements relate to each other? What is authoritative: the text itself or the
tradition of which it is a part? Second, there may also be a tension between authoritative Scriptures and new revelations. To what extent did the notion of authoritative Scriptures leave room for or exclude new revelations? According to the position exemplified by Josephus, prophecy and revelation after the time of Ezra were not trustworthy. At Qumran, new revelations were not only possible but could even be ascribed to contemporary figures such as the Teacher of Righteousness and not to some important figure such as Enoch or Ezra from the distant past. Writing new revelatory texts in the name of ancient figures or attributing them to contemporary individuals who unlock the correct understanding of authoritative Scriptures suggest different strategies for dealing with the tension between authoritative Scriptures and new revelations.

In answering the question of what is meant by “authoritative” we must also ask what made Scriptures authoritative? As many contributions in this volume show, Scriptures are not the only source of authority or authoritativeness. Indeed, Scriptures are not simply in and of themselves authoritative. An important aspect that contributes to the authoritativeness of Scriptures in the late Second Temple period is the presumed antiquity of those Scriptures or of the traditions they contain, in other words, the fact that they are ancient and represent ancestral tradition. Divine inspiration or authorship may be attributed to the Scriptures, but these often seem less important as a source of the authoritative character of these Scriptures than their presumed antiquity.

In addition to this aspect of antiquity or ancestral tradition, the authoritativeness of Scriptures must be understood in relation to those responsible for transmitting, studying and interpreting them. These were the scribes, who presumably had some sort of authority. One might think of Ben Sira, for example. In addition to scribal authority or sapiential authority, there was also royal and priestly authority. This illustrates the obvious fact that the social position of the people behind the Scriptures had a bearing upon the authoritative status that was attributed to them. Being associated with a temple library or archive, for example, would have given books authoritative status. Such a social body of authority presumably transferred some of its authoritative status to the Scriptures it possessed and transmitted. However, what can we say about books that were not directly related to a central social body of power such as a palace, temple or school?