In the introduction to the classic study of *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm defined tradition as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”¹ The definition admits of refinement.² Traditions of thought and belief are no less important than practices in shaping values and norms. Tradition, by its nature, develops, and consequently changes, but it nevertheless presupposes a certain degree of continuity over time. This continuity is essential to the sense of identity that tradition confers. It provides a sense of order and stability, and it also proves a framework within which innovation can occur. In the words of Karl Popper, “traditions have the important double function that they not only create a certain order or something like a social structure, but that they also give us something upon which we can operate: something we can criticize and change.”³

In the case of ancient Judaism, one of the ways in which tradition was articulated was in a corpus of writings that was accorded authoritative status. One of the many ways in which the Dead Sea Scrolls have contributed to our understanding of ancient Judaism is by providing a snapshot of this process, as it developed in the last centuries before

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the turn of the era. It is now generally agreed that it is anachronis-
tic to speak of a canon in this period. But it is also generally agreed
that the Torah of Moses, or the Pentateuch, and also the books of
the prophets, enjoyed a special status, at least by the time the Scrolls
were written in the last two centuries B.C.E. Exactly what that status
entailed, however, is not always clear. In fact, the Scrolls document
several different ways in which these authoritative writings could be
construed. As George Brooke has noted, “It is no longer possible to
argue that tradition is passed from one generation to another along
single trajectories. Intelligent readings of the evidence . . . demand that
the pluralities of early Jewish tradition are taken seriously. No longer
is it possible, even if it ever was, to read back interpretative norms in
a direct way from one age to another.”

The Nature of the Scrolls Collection

At the outset, it may be well to clarify our understanding of the Dead
Sea Scrolls as a collection. It has long been customary to refer to the
corpus as “the Qumran library,” and Hartmut Stegemann, in particu-
lar, has argued that the Scrolls belonged to “the central library of the
Qumran settlement.” Libraries were rare in antiquity, but became
more common in the Hellenistic period. The great palace library of
Asshurbanipal and the famous library of Alexandria were exceptional.
In the Near East, libraries were often associated with temples. These
were usually of modest size. The largest known Mesopotamian temple
library had about 800 tablets. The temple library at Edfu in Egypt
had a catalogue with 35 titles. It is generally assumed that there was

4 George J. Brooke, “The Formation and Renewal of Scriptural Tradition,” in Bibli-
cal Traditions in Transmission: Essays in Honour of Michael A. Knibb (ed. C. Hempel
5 Hartmut Stegemann, The Library of Qumran: On the Essenes, Qumran, John the
Baptist, and Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 80–5.
6 Armin Lange, “2 Maccabees 2:13–15: Library or Canon?” in The Books of the
Maccabees: History, Theology, Ideology (ed. G. G. Xeravits and J. Zsengellér; JSJSup
7 Karel van der Toorn, Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible (Cam-
bridge, Mass.: Harvard, 2007), 240. On Mesopotamian libraries see Olof Pedersén,
Archives and Libraries in the Ancient Near East 1500–300 B.C. (Bethesda, Md.: CDL
8 Van der Toorn, ibid. Vilmos Wessetzky, ”Die Bücherliste des Tempels von Edfu