Were Early Hebrew Scripture Texts Authoritative?

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1 Background

It is well known that early Scripture scrolls, such as those found in the Judean Desert, differ greatly from one another, as do the MT, SP, and LXX texts known from later periods. Textual critics deal with these differences and in so doing advance our knowledge on the textual condition of Scripture in ancient times. This multiplicity of information from antiquity almost requires us to investigate whether all these texts were authoritative, and if so, for whom.

This study discusses the authoritative status of these ancient scrolls and sources. Were some or all of them authoritative, if we take into consideration the fact that the scrolls differ from one another? And if all or some of them were authoritative, did they have the same level of authority, and for which communities? Likewise, did individual scrolls have authority before Scripture as a whole became authoritative? These are just some of the questions surrounding the authoritative status of ancient texts. There are no quick answers to these questions, as it is not easy to define authority.

Our study pertains to the authority of witnesses of Scripture books and, as a precondition, the content of the Scripture books first needed to have obtained canonical status.

Different forms of Scripture were granted an authoritative status by religious communities. The status of the scrolls and the communities using them are closely connected since without such communities, no authority was granted. This status was intended to be valid permanently, but history has taught us that the authority of texts changed over the course of generations.

2 Authority of Hebrew Scripture in Antiquity

In the period preceding the first century CE, it is very difficult to define authority because Scripture was still in the making. Initially, the individual biblical books obtained authoritative status in an abstract way, and that authority was transferred to individual scrolls and manuscripts.

The oldest part of Hebrew Scripture, the Torah, perceived as God’s word, carried authority for all later generations, as is evident in the later Scripture books. The books of the Torah influenced the prophets, exemplified by the influence of
Leviticus on Ezekiel and that of Deuteronomy on Jeremiah. Likewise, the early historical books carried weight in the eyes of the Chronicler, who reworked them.

Before the time of the earliest textual witnesses from Qumran—that is, before the middle of the third century BCE, authoritative scrolls were circulating that contained different textual forms. It is necessary to make this assumption if the LXX translation of the Torah was indeed prepared in approximately 285 BCE, since its Vorlage differed from MT, which probably already existed at that time. However, we have no further tangible evidence for textual plurality in earlier periods, although it must have existed.

3 Different Types of Scripture Scrolls in Ancient Israel

In our discussion of the status of Scripture scrolls before the first century CE, we limit ourselves to the known evidence, thus necessarily focusing on the Judean Desert scrolls. The main question is, were all the copies of Scripture scrolls found there considered authoritative? There is no unequivocal answer to this question, since there is no consensus among scholars regarding the nature of many scrolls considered Scripture by some and non-Scriptural by others.

In my definition, authoritative scrolls are scrolls that were considered to contain “Scripture,” which one would study, from which one could quote, which one could read in religious gatherings or in one’s personal meditation, and which formed the basis for religious practice, especially halakhah. I distinguish between such authoritative Scripture scrolls and scrolls with scriptural content, that is, Scripture-like scrolls, that were not authoritative as Scripture, such as partial Scripture scrolls and liturgical scrolls. The latter pertain only to the Torah and Psalms. However, for many scholars, these liturgical and partial scrolls are also considered Scripture, and this view complicates the analysis.

In my view, three types of scrolls have been found at Qumran.

1. Authoritative Scripture scrolls. In the Qumran corpus, scholars count some 240 fragmentary Scripture scrolls found in eleven Qumran caves, including the fragments that have surfaced in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Most of the fragments are small, and the larger ones among them contain no more

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1 For details, see my Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible, 3rd ed., revised and expanded (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 96. Henceforth: TCHB.