Creative reappropriation of what we now call authoritative religious traditions was widespread in Second Temple Judaism and left a wealth of evidence in a large number of Hellenistic Jewish works, both canonical and noncanonical texts (Weissenberg, Pakkala, and Marttila 2011). Although determining how self-conscious the various authors were of the fact that they were actually rewriting Scripture is no easy task, the phenomenon appears in various manifestations. It may be seen, for example, in the rewriting of salvation history or of some of its key episodes, in the actualization of prophecies in the pesharim of Qumran, and in the writings of the early followers of Jesus.¹ Halachic exegesis of biblical passages as well as the explicit correction, or even denial, of older traditions (especially prophetic or apocalyptic ones) also comprise a part of this phenomenon.²

In the general process of reappropriation of authoritative traditions, the (golden) calf incident was an object of attention for Second Temple Jewish thinkers because it offered an answer to the question: what was the sin that the Jews committed to deserve God’s punishment(s)?³ After 70 CE, this question

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¹ Examples of the first of these range from the Enochic literature and Jubilees to Pseudo-Philo’s Liber Antiquitatum Bibliarum. Entire books of the Bible are “actualized” in Qumran (e.g., the whole text of Habakkuk in 1QpHab). Among the early followers of Jesus a similar technique is quite common, though we can find it usually restricted to single verses or short passages (e.g., the adaptation of Joel 3:1–5 in Acts 2:16–21).

² “Halachic exegesis” is a subtle way of adapting old ideas or texts, and especially old rules, to new situations on the basis of shared keywords found in diverse contexts. These are sufficient, in rabbinic and subsequent literature, to work as a conceptually meaningful string (e.g., the apparently simple words, “you will not carry”). When one finds similar strings of words, one can expect an exegetical reformulation of an older rule. See Jassen 2011 and Lupieri 2011. For an example of exegetical correction, see, e.g., the sentence containing “your brother Daniel” in 4 Ezra 12:11–12. See also how the author of Dan 9 moves from the seventy years of Jeremiah, explicitly quoted, to develop his own seventy weeks of years (Grabbe 1987). For an example of exegetical denial, see, e.g., “not as Moses said” in Ap. John 13:18–20; 22:22–24; 23:1–3; 29:7. Apparently this was a literary device to strengthen group identity (see Creech 2017).

³ Psalm 106 (LXX 105) lists seven sins committed by the Jews before entering the land, the (golden) calf incident being the fourth and central one. The sin of Judah and his brothers,
became a sort of Jewish obsession because it was tightly connected to the personal identity of whomever wanted to consider himself or herself a Jew.\footnote{See how post-70 “Ezra” discusses with the angel of God during practically the whole of 4 Ezra.} Some even found the narrative of the (golden) calf to be a particularly suitable answer because one of the results of the idolatry committed by the people and Aaron in the desert, the breaking of the tablets of the law by Moses, dramatically disrupted their covenant with God. In their writing, the rabbis show an awareness of this disruption, as do the church fathers.\footnote{That this was a key issue in anti-Jewish Christian polemics is apparent at least since the Didascalia Apostolorum. See the contributions by Pregill, Sterling, and Dingman in this volume.} The tradition is lively and well attested for centuries. For example, in his commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, Aquinas quotes Jerome’s statement that the Jews used to fast in sad memory of the sinful behavior of their ancestors in the desert.\footnote{Commentary on the Sentences, Book IV, Dist. 15, Quaestio 3 (Concerning Fasting), Art. 3, Response to the fourth objection: “To the fourth point we must say that according to Jerome, the Jews had special reasons to observe those fasting days. Indeed, in July, which is the fourth month from April (and April is first in their calendar), they used to fast because in that month, on the seventh day of the month, Moses, coming down from the mountain, smashed the tablets of the law on account of the sin of the molten calf and [because] in that same month the walls of Jerusalem were destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar” (author’s translation; for the Latin, see the 1947 Moos edition, 4.718). Jerome writes, “The fast of the fourth month, which is called ‘Julius’ [July] by the Latins, on the seventeenth day of that month, [the Jews] believe [to be the day] when Moses, coming down from Mount Sinai, threw down and smashed the tablets of the law; and also according to Jeremiah the walls of the city were destroyed for the first time [on that day]” (Comm. Zach. 2.8.18–19, 530–534 [author’s translation; for the Latin, see the 1964 Adriaen edition, 820]).} As usual, Jerome is correct—fasting and sadness on the presumed anniversary of the breaking of the tablets are present both in the Mishnah and in the Talmud.\footnote{m. Ta’an. 4, 6; b. Ta’an. 28b. For Jewish and particularly rabbinic reflections on the (golden) calf incident, see Schoenfeld in this volume, who shows that while Christian authors stress their opinion that God did not pardon the sin of the Jews, Jewish interpreters stress the mercy of God and his willingness to pardon his people.}

In post-talmudic traditions (which probably date from the eighth century CE) we also find that observant Jews were expected to fast in sad memory of the writing of the Septuagint. Interestingly, the act of translating the Bible into Greek is compared to the idolatrous making of the calf: “It happened once that when they sold Joseph (see esp. Gen 37:26–27), was an important, different option. According to Jub. 34:18–19, the ritual of Yom Kippur was established to counter the negative effects of that unpardoned patriarchal sin. Pseudo-Philo’s L.A.B. connects the two sins literally and compares Moses and Joseph. See Endres in this volume, and, in general, Smolar and Aberbach 1968.