

"SCRIPTURE" AS PROPHETICALLY REVEALED WRITINGS

James R. Davila

I have been asked to reflect on the state of the question concerning terminology such as "Bible," "Rewritten Bible," and "canonical." These are vast issues and I am taking this opportunity to treat them selectively.¹ My focus is on the viewpoint of Jews and Christians in the Hellenistic-Roman period and perhaps a little later, so I will speak of "scripture" -- the term they consistently used -- rather than the later term "Bible." My tentative understanding is that the concept of a scriptural "canon" is an anachronism for this period, although such an idea was beginning to gel and there was a large body of widely accepted, perhaps even uncontested, scriptures of Israel; a smaller body of texts considered scriptures by some groups but not others; and somewhere between a trickle and a stream of new candidates for scripture being produced in the names of ancient scriptural characters. This paper presents some reflections on how ancient Jews and early Christians spoke of the scriptures and scriptural authority and some speculations on what might have led them to continue writing scriptures pseudonymously in the names of earlier prophets.

I begin with the question, *What made something scripture?* and I offer you the following thesis: *A scripture was a writing delivered long ago by prophecy inspired by God.* There is good evidence that this perspective was widely shared by Jews in the Hellenistic-Roman period. A key reference is Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 1.37. Just before his widely-discussed account of the canon of scripture, he tells us that not everyone wrote the scriptures, but rather only the prophets, and they did so only by inspiration from God. Likewise, Luke portrays Jesus on the road to Emmaus as castigating his companions for not believing "all that the prophets spoke," defined as "Moses and all the prophets" and "in all the scriptures" and later as "Moses, all the prophets, and the psalms" (Luke 16:25-27, 44). The scriptures as a whole are clearly taken to be prophetically inspired by Josephus and probably also by Luke.²

If we look at what is said about the various component corpora that were explicitly treated as scripture in this period, this generalization holds true as well. (I use the following categories as convenient groupings for the moment, not as an emic reconstruction.) I begin with the Pentateuch. Moses, its traditional author, is explicitly called a prophet therein (Deut 18:15) and Hellenistic-Roman

¹ A few recent important discussions of these broad issues are James C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1994), 142-58; Peter Flint, "Scriptures in the Dead Sea Scrolls: The Evidence from Qumran," in *Emanuel: Studies in Hebrew Bible, Septuagint, and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honor of Emanuel Tov* (ed. Shalom M. Paul et al.; VTSup 94; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 269-304; Jonathan G. Campbell, "'Rewritten Bible' and 'Parabiblical Texts': A Terminological and Ideological Critique," in *New Directions in Qumran Studies: Proceedings of a Bristol Colloquium on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Jonathan G. Campbell et al.; Library of Second Temple Studies 52; London: T&T Clark, 2005), 43-68.

² Cf. Matt 26:56; Rom 1:2; 16:26; 2 Tim 3:15-16; 2 Pet 1:20-21.

writers mention his prophetic status frequently.³ Abraham is also called a prophet in Gen 20:7 and Philo assures us that Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses were all prophets.⁴ The Pentateuch can thus be regarded as both pertaining to prophets and their oracles and written by a prophet and thus prophetically inspired. This is taken for granted in the period. For example, in the context of discussing the oracles in the sacred books, Philo refers to Moses as "a divinely-prompted lawgiver possessed by divine inspiration" and Matthew tells us that the Law and the prophets prophesied until John the Baptist.⁵

The writing prophets, of course, were prophets and wrote with prophetic inspiration. The Deuteronomistic History (Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings) deals throughout with prophets and their oracles and is cited as scripture (e.g., Rom 11:2-4). I have not yet found specific claims that these books were written under prophetic inspiration, although Ben Sira does say in 46:1 that Joshua "was successor to Moses in prophecy." If he regarding Joshua as the author of the book bearing his name, Ben Sira evidently regarded it as prophecy. It may be that the books of the Deuteronomistic History were thought to have been written by some of the prophets who are actors in it.

The Psalms were clearly understood to have been composed under prophetic inspiration. David is not called a prophet in scripture, but his "last words" in 2 Samuel 23 do claim in v. 2 that the spirit of the Lord spoke by him. The Psalms Scroll from Qumran Cave 11 informs us that David spoke all his songs "by means of prophecy that was given to him from before the Most High."⁶ Josephus refers to David's prophecies in *Ant.* 8.110 and David is called a prophet in Acts 2:30, with specific reference to Psalm 16.⁷ Likewise, Asaph is called "the seer" in 2 Chr 29:30. Matthew 13:35 cites Psalm 78:2, a psalm of Asaph, as "spoken by the prophet."

Much of the wisdom literature is ascribed to King Solomon, who is not explicitly called a prophet either within or outside the scriptures as far as I can tell. But he is clearly regarded as a mantic sage who receives divine revelations, such as the dreams granted him in 1 Kings 3 and 9. According to 1 Kings 6:11 the "word of the Lord came to Solomon, saying" -- a prophetic idiom.⁸ These hints could well have led later authors to conclude that Solomon was divinely inspired and perhaps even a prophet, and we find evidence for this in the literature of the late Second Temple period and later. The Wisdom of Solomon 7:7-14 and 17-22 describes the coming of the spirit of wisdom to Solomon and the esoteric knowledge about the future and past and the natural world which God revealed to him. And v. 27 even says that wisdom makes "holy souls" into both "friends of God" and "prophets." Likewise *4 Maccabees* 18:10-19 reviews the law and the

³ E.g., Sir 46:1; Wis 11:1; *TMos* 1:5; Philo, *Contempl. Life* 64.

⁴ *Heir* 260-63. Cf. *Barn.* 13:4 regarding Jacob.

⁵ *Moses* 2.188-89 (cf. *Contempl. Life* 25); Matt 11:13. Dan 9:10-11 also seems to include the Mosaic Law with the prophets. Cf. also Sir 39:1.

⁶ 11QPsa^a xxvii 11.

⁷ Cf. Acts 1:16.

⁸ E.g., Jer 2:1; 16:1; 32:26; Ezek 6:1; 7:1; 12:1; Jonah 1:1; 3:1; Hag 2:20; Zech 8:18.

prophets and seems to include both David's psalms and Solomon's proverbs among them. Solomon is clearly inspired by divine wisdom in a sense that at least at times seems to cross into the realm of the prophetic.

Another element in the book of Proverbs is worth noting in this context. The words of Agur in chapter 30 and the words of Lemuel in chapter 31 are both introduced with the Hebrew word *Massa* (מַסָּא). Its meaning is uncertain, but elsewhere it is used in the sense of "prophetic oracle."⁹ Later readers could have taken this to signal prophetic inspiration, and the fact that the word is translated in LXX Prov 31:1 with a Greek word meaning "an oracular response" (χρηματισμός) indicates that some did.

To my knowledge, Job is never called a prophet in the Hellenistic period or earlier. But the words of God spoken to him out of the whirlwind in Job 38-41 and Job's successful intercession for his friends in 42:8-9 certainly open the possibility of considering him one, should an ancient exegete be so inclined. And the *Testament of Job* (which I take to be a late-antique Christian composition) portrays Job as receiving a divine revelation in chapters 3-4 and giving his daughters mantic sashes in chapter 48, so the implications of these passages in the book of Job were not entirely ignored. Given Job's apparent setting in the Patriarchal period, it is also possible that Second Temple-era readers believed the book to have been written by Moses, as asserted much later in rabbinic tradition (*b. B. Bat.* 14b)

As for the rest of the Writings, Daniel is called a prophet in Matt 24:15 and by Josephus in *Ant.* 10.246, 249. Ezra received numerous divine revelations in the book of *4 Ezra* (2 Esdras 3-14). He is explicitly called a prophet in *5 Ezra* (2 Esdras 1-2) 1:1 and the revelations of *6 Ezra* (2 Esdras 15-16) are called a "prophecy" in 15:1. I am aware of nothing associating Nehemiah with prophecy, but if Ezra-Nehemiah were considered one book, Ezra's authorship would have established its prophetic credentials. The addition of Mordechai's dream in Esther 10:4-5 and 11:1-12 may have been an effort to hint at prophetic authority for the book of Esther. Lamentations was written by the prophet Jeremiah according to the LXX version of its opening verse. I know of no prophetic connection with Ruth, but allusions to it are few and it may have been regarded as part of the Deuteronomistic History or some portion thereof (Judges). Chronicles, like the Deuteronomistic History, deals extensively with the activities and oracles of prophets, but makes no claims about its own authorship. Again, outside references to it are rare, but if Ezra was taken as its author in the Second Temple period (as he was later according to the Babylonian Talmud, *b. B. Bat.* 15a), it too would be prophetically inspired.

We have evidence for other writings having prophetic authority in the late Second Temple period and later as well. Notably, there is the famous quotation of the Book of the Watchers (*1 Enoch* 1:9) in Jude 14-15, in which we are told that Enoch prophesied. The book of *Jubilees* portrays itself as a revelation to Moses and it is quoted as authoritative in the Damascus Document (CD A xvi 2-3) and perhaps in 4Q228. Joshua's curse oracle from the Qumran *Apocryphon of Joshua*

⁹ E.g., Isa 13:1; 14:28; Ezek 12:10; Nah 1:1; Zech 12:1; Mal 1:1.

(4Q378-79) is quoted alongside other scriptures in 4QTestimonia (4Q175 21-30).¹⁰ And the Shepherd of Hermas quotes a book of Eldad and Modat (cf. Num 11:26-30) in which the two biblical figures "prophesied" (7.4).

In short, the claim of Josephus and perhaps Luke that all the scriptures were written by prophets under divine inspiration receives much confirmation in Hellenistic Jewish and the earliest Christian literature. The Pentateuch, the Psalms, and some of the other Writings are explicitly taken to be prophetic, and indirect evidence points to a prophetic status for much of the rest. Indeed, all the Jewish scriptures, including material outside the traditional canon, could reasonably have been understood as such in this period. It is a plausible and well-supported working hypothesis that in this period "scripture" meant a writing delivered long ago by prophecy inspired by God. Many of these books seem to have been widely or universally accepted as scripture, although a formal canon had not solidified at this point and the status (and authenticity?) of some potentially scriptural books, such as Esther, the Song of Songs, the Enochic books, *Jubilees*, the *Apocryphon of Joshua*, and the *Book of Eldad and Modat*, seems still to have been open to debate. I offer this working hypothesis as a potential launching ground for further research.

One notable change in the Hellenistic period and perhaps even somewhat earlier, is that books presented as prophetically inspired, and therefore potentially scriptural, were almost always written in the name of prophetic figures from earlier scriptures. Apart from the book of Revelation and perhaps the Shepherd of Hermas, I can think of no book of prophecy that was published as a contemporary work under the author's actual name.¹¹ The reasons for this change are worth exploring in their own right, but in the last few minutes of my presentation here I wish to consider a slightly different question: *When authors of the late Second Temple period and later wrote new scriptures in the names of ancient prophets, why did they write pseudepigraphically and how did they themselves understand the process of writing and the authority of the works they produced?*

Obviously, there is likely to be more than one answer to this question, depending on the work and its author's situation. In some cases the author may have published a potentially seditious work in another's name in order to escape the attention of the authorities. Or the author may have written pseudonymously in order to honor the ancient figure or in an attempt to pass off a forgery in order to convince the audience of the author's agenda. But all three of these explanations leave us less than clear regarding the author's internal state and motivation. My proposal addresses this problem and may explain the thinking of at least some ancient authors who published revelatory works in the

¹⁰ The *Apocryphon of Joshua* is very poorly preserved and Joshua is not explicitly called a prophet in the surviving text, but surely Joshua's curse is understood as a prophetic oracle in both the *Apocryphon* and 4QTestimonia.

¹¹ Ben Sira is, of course, a wisdom composition published under the name of its actual author, but it is not clear to me that anyone regarded it as scripture in the Hellenistic period.

names of earlier scriptural prophets. *I suggest that these authors were "channeling" the prophets.*

The experience of "channeling" is a type of "mediumship" (to use the anthropological term) in which the channeler is temporarily possessed by the spirit of a (usually famous) dead person and receives or transmits revelations from this person.¹² We have at least one striking case of channeling of a deceased prophet in the late Second Temple period, that of the apostle Paul and his relationship with the risen Jesus. It is frequently noted that in his letters Paul distinguishes carefully between his own advice and the authoritative word of the Lord, that is, Jesus. He quotes the Lord's teaching on divorce in 1 Cor 7:10-11 (cf. Mk 10:2-9) and his teaching on payment for missionaries in 9:14 (cf. Q 10:2-7). But although Paul makes this distinction, there is another that he fails to make. For him, the words of the Lord he received in post-crucifixion revelatory experiences are on exactly the same level as the words of the earthly Jesus. Paul emphasizes in Gal 1:11-12 that the gospel he preached came to him "through a revelation of Jesus Christ" and not by any earthly human agency. In 2 Cor 12:8-9, he quotes a revelatory dominical word of encouragement regarding his thorn in the flesh. In 1 Cor 11:23-26, he gives a brief account of the Last Supper which he "received from the Lord" (raising the uncomfortable possibility that Mark's account of this event could be based on Paul's revelation rather than any historical tradition). And in 1 Thess 4:15, Paul describes the coming parousia of the Lord which he declares to the Thessalonians "by the word of the Lord." Conceivably this could be an oral tradition put in Jesus' mouth, but it may well also be one of the revelations Paul himself received. In a word, Paul was channeling Jesus. The details of the experience are unclear: we do not know whether Jesus appeared to him in dreams or visions or possessed him and spoke through him. But Paul was a conduit for new sayings of the Lord. He made no bones about their origins, but proceeded with the comfortable assumption that his audience would grant these sayings the same authority as those of the earthly Jesus.

A second, somewhat different type of mediumship is presented in a fictional setting in the account of Ezra's reconstruction of the lost exoteric and esoteric scriptures in *4 Ezra* 14. God gave Ezra a potent drink that caused him to dictate the text of the seventy lost scriptures for forty days, while scribes copied them down. This is a more specific type of channeling known as "automatic writing," in which the medium writes down the words of a deceased author as though by dictation.¹³

The experiences of Paul and pseudo-Ezra provide a potential background to the production of new scriptures in the names of ancient prophets from the late Second Temple era and later. The writers of books such as Daniel, the Book of the Watchers, *4 Ezra*, *2 Baruch*, etc., may have been channeling the spirits of

¹² John Klimo, *Channeling: Investigations on Receiving Information from Paranormal Sources* (2nd ed.; North Atlantic Books, 1998).

¹³ Philo's description of the "fourth kind of trance," one experienced by prophets, is perhaps also worthy of attention in this context (*Heir* 249, 258-63).

those prophets and writing down their experiences afterwards, or they may have been writing the new scriptures from the mouths of the dead authors directly by automatic writing. It seems worthwhile to re-examine the numerous Hellenistic and later revelatory works in the light of the anthropological literature on mediumship, channeling, and related phenomena. This is a project I hope to undertake in the future.

(I am grateful to Jonathan G. Campbell for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.)