



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2016.08.07

Michael L. Satlow, *How the Bible Became Holy*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780300171914. Pp. 368. \$35.00. Cloth.

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In *How the Bible Became Holy*, Michael Satlow, Professor of Religious and Judaic Studies at Brown University, attempts to cultivate a fresh narrative for understanding the evolution of textual authority for Jewish and Christian scriptures in antiquity. His research is guided by the question, “How and why did individuals and communities in antiquity regard the texts that would become part of the Bible as authoritative?” (p. 2) Satlow describes how he grappled with this query and ultimately found the traditional answers are unsatisfactory, concluding, “the standard answer needed a gut rehab” (p. 3). Satlow proposes that “*Jews and Christians gave to the texts that constitute our Bible only very limited and specific kinds of authority until well into the third century CE and beyond*” (italics his; p. 3). Thus, “the ‘peoples of the book’ did not know their book very well” (p. 3).

The author sketches three kinds of authority given to texts: normative, literary, and oracular. While most readers naturally assume that “authority” means “normative authority” (i.e., having the power to dictate behaviors) when applied to religious texts, Satlow claims it is anachronistic to view the Bible in this sense since Jews and Christians simply were not very familiar with scripture until the first century CE and thus it would not have occurred to them to consult the Bible for moral guidance (p. 4).¹ Satlow describes literary authority as the authority of older texts that were utilized as models for the development of new ones, either by being reworked entirely or merely being used as a reference. He avers that his third definition of authority, oracular, is actually the most common type of authority given to texts in antiquity. Oracular authority is rendered to a text “that is thought to deliver a message, usually about the future, from the divine realm” (pp. 4-5). This third type of authority is most often linked with the notion of “holy” in the ancient world and “for most Judean Jews, the real value of scripture was its oracular authority (pp. 5-6)”

Satlow’s research is based on two types of primary sources: literary and archaeological. He employs three main kinds of literary evidence: the Bible itself, which he concedes is “a very poor

¹ Satlow claims that “Jesus himself, growing up in Galilee, had very limited knowledge of scripture” (p. 6).

historical source,” as well as Apocrypha/Pseudepigrapha (i.e., texts that were not included in the Jewish or Christian canon) and other philosophical and historical writings. His archaeological evidence includes new finds, reevaluations of old evidence, and demographical studies that have reshaped the way scholarship views antiquity.

Satlow’s methodology is primarily centered on the religious communities that created, read, and copied the scriptures, rather than on the text itself. He seeks to re-tell the story of how the Bible became holy by tracing the historical narrative through three major chronological periods: (1) the Israelite, Judahite, and Persian periods from the ninth to fourth centuries BCE, (2) Alexander the Great and Roman conquests in the Near East from 330-63 BCE, and (3) the Roman period of the first century CE.

In the first section, chapter one, Satlow discusses the Northern Kingdom of Israel (922-722 BCE). He observes that the Bible we have today was written through the somewhat contemptuous eyes of Judah, who envisioned the defeated Israel as representing a cautionary tale against unrighteousness. But in actuality, it is Israel who was the major player in this context and Israel was far more culturally developed than Judah. Satlow notes three elements that bound the diverse nation of Israel together and helped them form a cohesive identity: historical narrative, a common Semitic language, and cultic practices. He suggests that the story of Jacob is a good parallel for the diverse nation of Israel “forming a single identity out of a heterogeneous population” (p. 19). During this time, scribes played an important role in international relations and government administration, but the text that would later become part of the Bible served only practical purposes, such as record keeping or rules and guidelines for governing people. Satlow notes that while it might be tempting to imagine that biblical texts were seen as significant for culture and identity, in reality, “there was nothing particularly ‘sacred’ about these texts” (p. 30).

Chapter two covers approximately 150 years, the time between the fall of the Northern Kingdom to the Assyrians and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army (722-586 BCE). During this time, Judah developed a significant literary culture and witnessed a veritable explosion in the production of literary texts, as evidenced by the appearance of a large number of inscriptions. Satlow credits this to the influx of Israelites fleeing from the Assyrian forces into Judah, many of whom possessed useful skills and knowledge, including a large number of skilled scribes. This period saw the development of Deuteronomistic literature, which Satlow suggests was an “an academic exercise composed by scribes,” and gave rise to Proverbs, which was originally intended for the elite (p. 41). By 586, the scribes of Judah had produced a number of texts that bolstered their own authority and achieved positions of power and influence in Hezekiah’s court. While it was originally written by Hezekiah’s scribes as “a utopian scribal fantasy,” the discovery of the scroll of the Torah during the reign of Josiah was greeted as “a living and relevant oracle” (p. 44). Satlow explains, “The key to national well-being was divine favor, and gaining divine favor, according to this oracle, required convincing the priests and prophets to change the status quo and persuading the people to accept a new set of religious norms” (p. 44). The reading of the scroll of the Torah thus marked a watershed moment in textual authority: a written document was accorded official religious authority. A shift is apparent, from authority and power belonging to the people who possess, copy, interpret, and distribute texts, to authority and power being conferred to the written scroll itself. During this period, only oracles (the prophecies and the words of YHWH) were deemed authoritative, that is, so long as they were perceived to have come to fruition. For

example, when Israel fell and Judah rose, it was thought that YHWH had performed this and thus such oracles garnered authority.

Chapter three is about the Judahites during their captivity in Babylonia, Persia, and Yehud (586-520 BCE). One of the major correctives Satlow wishes to provide in this chapter is to show that the deportation, though devastating in many ways, did not have as much theological impact as the biblical texts portray. Satlow profiles the Judahite people's perception of divinity by looking at several texts: the fifth-century cuneiform tablets from Nippur, the "Cyrus Cylinder", Deutero-Isaiah, and Esther. The inferences he draws from the artifacts and texts are that the Judahites were not economically different than other peoples in their context, but in the mid-sixth century BCE, they become more monotheistic. Even in captivity they are able to continue their religious practices.

Chapter four is about the Judean scribe Ezra, who had gained a status among Jews "that was second only to Moses" (p.69) as well as the formation of the Pentateuch (520-458 BCE). Satlow describes how Ezra reads to the population from the "book of the law of Moses" in Nehemiah 8:1 and explores what this book might have been. He adopts Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis to answer this question, and contends that Ezra is citing texts that resemble the P and D sources. Satlow highlights Ezra's strong ideological opposition against intermarriage as evidence that Ezra not only had a strong familiarity with pre-exilic biblical sources but that these were deemed by Ezra to have binding moral authority. The chapter concludes by noting that Ezra's "attempt to establish the written text that he brought with him as law—his claim that the text had normative authority . . . was largely a failure" (p. 84).

Chapter five is about the period from Nehemiah to Chronicles (445-350 BCE), a time when written biblical texts "remained almost unknown outside of the rarefied circles of Jerusalem priests and scribes" (p. 85). Even though in this period the various pieces of the Pentateuch began to coalesce and take form, for Satlow, it is unlikely that these texts had much normative authority, especially given that "most people did not read and there were no regular public recitations of these texts" (p. 100). He concludes that during this time, the texts would have been perceived to be "almost academic texts, ancient histories to be worked over by scribes" (pp. 85-86).

Part two of the book begins with chapter six, Hellenism in Judea (350-175 BCE). Satlow illustrates how Hellenism brought a number of institutions, ideas, and values to the Judeans that resulted in a sudden proliferation of texts, including copies and revisions of old texts and the production of new ones. He examines three of these new books: Ecclesiastes, Ben Sira, and 1 Enoch, and describes how these texts manifested diverse responses to the way Hellenism was radically changing the landscape of second-century Judea.

In chapter seven, Satlow describes the three popular historical accounts of the Maccabean Revolt (175-135 BCE), each of which fails to delve into the root causes behind the revolt. Behind the rebellion, he claims, was a civil war caused by competing claims for power and money. The upshot of the Maccabean Revolt was the creation of two parties, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who would lead to "a seismic shift in the role played by writings that were thought to be sacred" (p. 125). Ritual purity also became more prominent than before, because God demanded it, and impurity would lead to divine retribution. Ritual purity was taken seriously for those entering into

the temple, as one must be pure before God, but detailed rules regarding purity were transmitted from priests, not derived directly from written sources, such as Leviticus.

Chapter eight is about Judea in 135-104 BCE. This period saw the rise of the Pharisees and Sadducees, both of whom opposed the Hasmoneans. Unlike the Pharisees who placed authority on unrecorded laws handed down orally, the Sadducees deemed only those rules and regulations written down in scripture were valid and binding. While noting they were a diverse group, Satlow credits the Sadducees with bringing their preference for the authority of written, divinely revealed texts to the Hasmonean court. He posits that a Sadducee is the author of 1 Maccabees, since the group held some power in Hyrcanus' Hasmonean kingdom, and that there is evidence that written texts had authority to some extent. The book of 1 Maccabees, as well as the Temple Scroll and Jubilees, also penned by (radical) Sadducees, reflect the varying levels of normative authority placed on texts in that period.

Chapter nine explains the circumstances under which Jewish texts were translated into Greek (i.e. the Septuagint) in the third century BCE to the first century CE. One theory of the impetus of the Septuagint translation is that Ptolemy's court (the successors of Alexander) acquired texts from Jerusalem, wishing to know more about their subjects' *politeia*, and that the director of the renowned Library of Alexandria made the request (the Letter of Aristeas). On the other hand, Satlow says it possible that Ptolemy II made the request and the "Jerusalem priests sent not only the scroll but its translators as well," which would account for a wooden Greek translation (p. 158). Though not much came of this at first, the translation was rediscovered by educated Jews in Alexandria who built an intellectual culture around it "in order to participate in the flourishing academic world around them" (p. 170).

In chapter ten Satlow describes the texts now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls as key to understanding the development of normative authority in the Bible. He follows the story of a separatist group of Sadducees encamped at Qumran who saw themselves as a remnant of God's obedient people whose "primary task was to follow God's rules, as revealed from earlier authoritative texts and their interpretation" (p. 177). What is significant here is that this elite educated group living on the fringes rendered authority to "the actual physical scrolls of texts that it regarded as authoritative" (p. 188).

Part three begins with chapter eleven, Jesus and the Synagogue (4 BCE-30 CE). Satlow states that though the Gospels depict Jesus debating with the Pharisees and quoting scripture, "he much prefers to use actions and parables rather than scripture and its interpretation; scripture per se appeared to have played a marginal role in his religious life" (p. 208). Furthermore, "Scripture is still a 'vague term' during this period and what counted as scripture and precisely how it counted were 'still fuzzy' (p. 209).

Chapter twelve is about Paul (37-66 CE), who is credited as "among the first to see the meaning of Jesus's life and death through the lens of scripture" (p. 211). Satlow argues that Paul's letters offer insight into how different ancient communities understood scripture and the authority they gave it. Paul's letters often cite Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy, which bolsters their oracular authority, but his letters also contain a "charismatic authority," which enables Paul to have the power to solve practical problems in the floundering Christian communities (p. 218).

Chapter thirteen is about the Gospels (66-100 CE). Satlow states that “The end of the first century CE was awash in Christian texts. Whatever their authors intended, though, these texts were rarely seen as ‘scripture’ by the communities that read them” (p. 238). Reading these texts aloud at a worship service would have seemed odd to Gentiles, but not to Jews. The use of the first penned gospel, Mark, by Matthew, Luke, and John, also supports an overarching theme throughout Satlow’s work, that biblical writers tend to utilize earlier works by reworking them for their own purposes.

Chapter fourteen describes the early Christians’ (100-200 CE) use of scripture. Satlow believes that the Christians’ preference for the codex over the scroll indicates a utilitarian function of the physical form that the scriptures were preserved; and therefore “Christians were also implicitly asserting that the *text* was less important than the *message*” (italics his; p. 256). Chapter fifteen narrates the role rabbis played in sanctifying Jewish texts (100-220 CE). Ultimately, Satlow ends his story here with the rabbis, for whom scripture “was not a collection of oracles but the source of all true knowledge. It was not just a historical record of God’s revelation but the very place at which God continued to reveal his will to his people” (p. 268). The rabbis’ had a two-fold understanding of the holiness of scripture: the very words were seen as “divine and containing all possible knowledge,” and the scrolls themselves were also to be treated as holy and venerated (p. 275). Since the physical scrolls themselves were sacred, Satlow remarks that they became “a precious reference book and object of veneration rather than a living document. Scripture thus *loses* importance to the oral traditions and the give-and-take that accompanies them” (p. 273).

In summary, while Satlow should be lauded for exploring a thesis that is both provocative and innovative, several criticisms come to the fore. One particularly problematic aspect of his methodology is his reliance on the concept of three distinct types of textual authority in the ancient world. Because his argument hinges on these three paradigms of authority, it is peculiar that they are only briefly explained in his introduction. The book would have benefited greatly if Satlow had parsed out his definitions and understanding of authority in more detail, particularly stronger distinctions between oracular and normative authority. His argument that in the ancient world scripture was accorded oracular authority, not nominative authority, relies too heavily on the imposition of his own artificial and vague categories of authority. He provides little evidence that oracular authority was seen by those in the ancient world as a distinctive and separate kind of authority than normative authority. If a text was understood as containing the very words of God, was it not then considered as morally binding? While Satlow’s three typologies of authority might seem convenient for the sake of analysis, he does not satisfactorily prove that ancient people understand authority in terms of the discrete categories he has created.

His case for lack of early Christian textual authority in chapter fourteen is not one of his strongest arguments. In order to prove that the physical words of the biblical text were of little importance to Christians, he says “almost all the surviving ancient papyri of early Christian texts were found in the ancient *garbage dump* of Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. Christians disposed of these texts just as they did their other refuse” (p. 256). Satlow’s claim that Christian texts were not deemed holy because they were discovered in a garbage dump is but one example of purporting his own thesis at the expense of a multitude of unknown factors. It is unlikely that a single discovery of documents at Oxyrhynchus is indicative of early Christian disregard for scripture. Satlow’s

statement, “Christians disposed of these text just as they did their other refuse,” is baseless and inappropriate (p. 256). Furthermore, Satlow contrasts the early Christians’ alleged disregard for scripture with the rabbis’ reverence for the scrolls: “The production of a written scroll for the reading of the Torah was visually significant. The scroll was itself produced, stored, and cared for according to a strict ritual. Unlike the Christian codices, the scroll (and not merely its content) mattered” (pp. 270-71). While Satlow is correct that Christian codices did not enjoy such high religious rituals as the rabbis imposed, that does not *ipso facto* diminish their role in the Christians’ perception of scripture.

Satlow’s contention that “The physical aspects of the text, then, had only secondary (if any) importance,” and he continues, “The physical words on a page were just that, devoid of any special status” fails to acknowledge the significance of *nomina sacra* (p. 256). This convention was found in Christian manuscripts as early as the second century CE, but the practice probably began as early as the first century. Hurtado states, “the *nomina sacra* can be thought of as ‘hybrid’ phenomena that combine textual and iconographic features and functions, with particular sacred words presented in a special written form that was intended to mark them off from the surrounding text and express special reverence for them as visual signs.”² If these sacred words were set apart as something special, this seems to connote more authority on these texts than non-religious texts, and attenuates Satlow’s claim that the physical words of the biblical text were unimportant (or secondary) for early Christians.

In conclusion, Satlow’s attempt to cover a tremendous expanse of biblical terrain leaves many historical eras underrepresented and superficially glossed over, however, his ability to trace a single thread of biblical authority through such expansive terrain should be commended. To his benefit, he is entirely forthcoming about his view of scripture and, when there are competing theories, Satlow is clear about which one he is following and why. For example, while it is uncertain who commissioned the Septuagint, he provides a synopsis of the competing theories before carrying on with his view. Another example, for his choice of authorship of biblical books, whether he takes a minority position or not, he nevertheless lays multiple arguments on the table so that the reader may also form an opinion. To produce a work of this magnitude is an achievement, and barring the criticisms above, there is much fodder in this work for scholarly debate and imagination.

² Larry W. Hurtado, “Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*: A Proposal,” *JBL* 117.4 (1998): 672-673.