
The Politics of Biblical Authority

How the Bible Became Holy

by Michael L. Satlow

reviewed by Jeremy Kridel

How did the Bible take on the authority ascribed to it, especially the holiness theists ascribe to the text? Michael L. Satlow, Professor of Jewish Studies at Brown University, seeks to answer that question with *How the Bible Became Holy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

Scholars have long assumed that the communities that produced the books of the Bible recognized those books as being full authorities on religious matters almost as soon as the books took final form. Satlow disagrees. His book is a vigorous, sustained argument that the biblical texts only very gradually acquired holiness – that is, anything beyond the kind of literary authority Shakespeare might have today. Satlow concludes that widespread acceptance of the idea that a biblical text might be something holy and require obeisance came only after the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E.

Satlow's primary contention is that the historical movement that ultimately made the Bible holy came, not from Judea, but from the Greek-speaking Jewish Diaspora. After the break-up of Alexander the Great's empire, elite Jews – primarily priests, but also members of a few wealthy families – sought to improve their economic status and position within the various Greek-run empires by adopting Hellenistic modes of living.

Hellenistic education involved the study of philosophic and poetic texts. But Jerusalem remained off the beaten path of the itinerant philosophers whose teaching was at the center of Hellenistic pedagogy. As a result, older Jewish texts tucked away for literary and scribal purposes in the Temple's archives gained wider circulation as Jews attempted to engage

in Greek-style education, using ancestral texts as the basis for their study. Whereas in Judea this process originally took hold only among elites, according to Satlow, a pervasively textual Jewish culture found its first solid footing among Jews living outside Judea, especially in Alexandria, as a result of their political and cultural outsider status in Alexandrian Greek society.

Jews in Alexandria were not full citizens and were by this time monotheists. Participation in Greek gymnasium education, in which the study of Homer's epics held pride of place, was problematic because of the pagan content of the curriculum. As fortune and the interests of the rulers of Alexandria would have it, these Diaspora Jews had at their disposal a new text: the Septuagint, a translation of the Torah (and, later, other works) into Greek. Alexandrian Jews began to apply the same methods of study to the Septuagint that Greeks in gymnasia applied to Homer and other literature: critical analysis that emphasized universal principles supposedly veiled in the texts.

Sadly, we now have only a smattering of the literary output of Alexandrian Jewish culture, but what we have is astonishingly varied. Alexandrian Jews composed epic poetry, Platonic philosophy, Hellenistic novels, and epistles (a then-popular literary style in which the material takes the form of a letter to a community or prominent individual but was not composed as a real letter or delivered as such). Many of these works involved reinterpretation

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of biblical materials, but they rarely quoted texts directly. Even in this new environment, Jewish religious practice continued to follow the dictates of custom, not text; study of text was a sign of social status, not a matter of practical living.

In Judea, textual study and production did not become central to non-elite Jewish culture until around the time of Jesus. When priestly Sadducees made their bid for power by differentiating themselves from Pharisees, they relied on text instead of the oral traditions of the Pharisees to run the temple and its sacrificial system. That approach appealed to the Maccabees' political successors, who were themselves descendants of a marginal priestly family.

The institution Satlow sees as bringing an awareness of text to the broader population of Judea is the synagogue. That institution, he says, likely was imported from Diaspora communities.

How did synagogues get to Judea? The answer, Satlow tells us, is a matter of cold-blooded politics. Herod the Great, who became Judea's ruler by decree of Rome around 40 B.C.E., was legendarily paranoid and protective of his power; he routinely murdered members of his family as well as his political enemies. Distrusting the Temple's leadership, he imported priestly families from the Diaspora (especially Alexandria) to staff Temple sacrifices. These families, who had already begun to read biblical materials publicly in their synagogues, brought their literary culture with them. Satlow suggests that these immigrants founded synagogues in Judea to help themselves and their families feel more at home in their new, less well-educated culture.

Eventually the idea took hold among Judean Jews. Synagogues sprang up, creating a newly text-centered religious culture. Rather than attend temple sacrifices, people often went to the synagogue and heard a portion of scripture read and explained. From these synagogue readings, which followed no particular plan, the average person would memorize fragments of text, but the close parsing of in-

dividual words and phrases that we associate with biblical interpretation was extraordinarily uncommon. Few Jews could actually read the scriptures. Hebrew had been forgotten among all but the elite classes. The average Jew heard an ad hoc translation of the reading into Aramaic, the language of most Judeans.

Still, textual knowledge was a sign of status. Most biblical texts, when properly interpreted, were considered to have oracular authority, which came from their ability to reveal information about social events of the day. Only the Sadducees (and among them in particular the offshoot group that preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls) attempted to turn the text into something that was taken seriously as a guide to what one ought to do to be a good Jew. Most Jews continued to rely on tradition; text was important, but it still did not have the power of holy authority.

How, then, did rabbinic Judaism come to focus on the prescriptive nature of the biblical text? Satlow's answer, again, is politics.

After the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 C.E. and crushed the Bar Kochba revolt in 135 C.E., Judean Jews regrouped in the Galilee, seeking a way to continue on without the Temple to bind them. With both Pharisees and Sadducees weakened after two failed revolts, they reached a compromise. The two sects merged into a single body of scholars the rabbis who split into two camps, each with its own approach to understanding the role of the biblical text. The Sadducees' insistence upon the binding authority of the Torah was made to coexist, sometimes uncomfortably, with the Pharisees' emphasis on the primacy of oral tradition. Pharisaic traditions sometimes helped to sand the rough edges off the biblical text's harsh decrees. At the same time, the Sadducean emphasis on the text forced a reassessment of which laws were divine and which were to be understood as custom or safeguards against violating the Torah text.

That compromise affected how Jews would interpret scripture down to the present day. The result was to fetishize and freeze the

biblical text as literally the word of Yahweh and to declare the physical scrolls holy, but to leave their interpretation flexible as the rabbis parsed biblical statements into smaller and smaller pieces. Ultimately, this approach led the rabbis to regard the Pharisaic oral tradition as having been given at Sinai and requiring careful preservation.

Only when this system was in place did many Jews begin to accept the notion that action fulfills scripture. And even then, the rabbis' approach to understanding the Bible as a holy text would continue to come under attack

during the Middle Ages. The Bible's function, for medieval Christianity, was to foretell the coming of Jesus and his fulfillment of biblical promises of redemption. The physical integrity of biblical texts was less important.

How the Bible Became Holy takes a fundamentally human-centered approach to understanding the development of Jewish approaches to textual authority. It is only at the very end of Satlow's story that the Bible becomes "holy." And he makes it clear that it is the Jewish people, responding to their own needs, who made it so.

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meetings so that more people will want to come to them?

Congrats to the Humanistic Judaism editor and writers on a great issue.

Walter Hellman
Hillsboro, Oregon

Humanists and Jews?

As humanists, we are concerned about all human beings, not just Jews. We define ourselves as humans first; everything else comes second.

All Jews are humans who wish to identify as Jewish. All Jews are Jews by choice. Human beings are not born Jewish any more than they are born Muslim

— they are born as human beings and 99.5 percent genetically identical.

So, why be Jewish? Because being a Jew provides value in my worldview, in my family relations, in life experiences, and in other ways that have nothing to do with religion. The secular wisdom of Judaism (along with wisdom from other cultures and religions) may be beneficial for instruction on how to live a good life.

Being Jewish does not make me a better human being — there are no "better" human beings. I have no problem being a humanist and a Jew. They don't conflict. My answer to the question, "Why both?" is, because I choose to be both.

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