



Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

MS-4850: Daniel Jeremy Silver Papers, 1972-1993.

Series IV: Writings and Publications, 1952-1992, undated.

Sub-series A: Books, 1961-1990, undated.

Reel
71

Box
22

Folder
1389a

The Story of Scripture, draft, chapters 1 and 2, 1989.

Chapter 1 - SCRIPTURE

It was through trial and error that people learned that a certain herb is a proven cure for stomach pains or that baiting a trap a certain way is effective or that planting crops after the early spring rains is the best guarantee of a good harvest. No one felt compelled to investigate why and how. Each accomplishment stood alone. There were cures but no field of medicine. When people began to write down their observations, they began to reflect on them in ways they had not done before. They now could abstract theory from a maze of discrete statements and, by going back and rereading half-remembered parts, develop broad concepts.

Since the dawn of what we call history, humans have been conscious of the limits of communication in a purely oral culture and have wanted to equip knowledge with permanence and greater reach. Early attempts to give staying power and transferability were simple: a tribesman might tie knots of various sizes into ropes to represent different weights or measures; a bedouin might draw on a rock the outline of a circle with a line above it as a sign to whoever might come by that he had dug for water at this place and found it. By our standards this was simple stuff, but by using objects to represent ideas, the tangible to suggest the intangible, society had taken the first step toward a written language. The goal was somehow to reify speech, to convert what was a fugitive event into an object which could be handled, carried from place to place, and consulted at will.

which could be mastered only by professionals who spent years

Mastery of the skills which make literacy possible represented a critical step in the development of civilization. To be sure, there were cultures before humans learned to read and write. Preliterate societies were governed by laws, pleased their gods by formal rituals, healed their sick with herbs and amulets, and accumulated practical knowledge about hunting, food gathering, and child rearing. Few, however, would argue against the proposition that literacy allowed civilization to develop at a brisker pace.

In an exclusively oral culture, knowledge reaches no farther than the human voice can carry it and remains available only as long as it can be recovered from someone's memory. The spoken word is evanescent. As soon as it is spoken it disappears. If a father did not teach his son his trade or a shaman reveal to a disciple the magical powers of roots and plants, that knowledge died with him. Literacy provided men and women with a recoverable past and sped the expansion of knowledge by making it possible for information to be exchanged over distances and ~~time~~ time. Though no one alive remembered a set of facts or a piece of poetry, these facts and that poetry once captured in written form could be recaptured at will.

Elaborate pictographic, ideographic, and hieroglyphic writing systems were slowly and painstakingly developed by Chinese, Sumerian, and Egyptian scribes, but such symbol systems were so complex that literacy remained a technical accomplishment which could be mastered only by professionals who spent years

equipping themselves with the necessary skills. These early scripts had many limitations, not the least of which was complexity. Each object and action had its own symbol. Scribes had to memorize thousands of signs. Someone took the trouble to count the number of Chinese characters in the K'anghsi Dictionary of 1716 and came up with the number 40,545. The number of Egyptian hieroglyphs is of the same order of magnitude. Pictograms could suggest simple actions but not tense or relationship. With pictograms you can make lists which tell the number of barrels of wine or bushels of wheat in a storehouse; but you cannot describe the special qualities of a single barrel, say, a light red wine from the Galilee with its special bouquet or aroma.

During the third millennium B.C.E., the Sumerians, among others, discovered ways to relate their signs to sound rather than to objects. Scribes began to develop syllabaries of language symbols based on sound. This was a major breakthrough since there are an infinite number of objects but a finite number of sounds. At first ^{these} ~~this~~ syllabaries were fairly complex but, ultimately, a usable consonantal alphabet was developed -- in effect, a phonetic system in which a limited number of symbols stood for all the sounds used in a language. Various places and cultures have been awarded the laurel for that critical development -- Cyprus, Crete, various tribes of the Sinai Peninsula -- but because its final development, a system of twenty-two consonants, is, as the name alphabet implies, aleph, beth, Semitic in origin, it seems likely that much credit is due the

royal scribes of the ~~Canaanite~~ Canaanite city-states. During the middle of the second millennium, Canaanites developed the consonantal alphabet which later passed from Phoenicia to Greece where, improved by the addition of a vowel system, it became the building block out of which the communication systems of most Western cultures were developed.

The alphabet, like the computer in our day, revolutionized information transmission and retrieval. Language signs could for the first time convey ideas, feelings, and shades of meaning as well as designate objects and simple actions. Acceptance of the written word as reliable came slowly, because so much guesswork was necessary in reading the unstandardized texts, and early language systems of pictograms or primitive phonetics. As syntax, grammar, and spelling were slowly standardized, much of the guesswork involved in reading disappeared. Societies began to look on documents as a reliable means for recording a treaty, a business contract, or the testimony of a witness. The new technology was constantly improved, and mankind had at its disposal a new and powerful tool.

The mystery associated with the new, little understood alphabet symbols which had the wondrous power of conveying sound gave the early writings a magical presence in the popular mind. We who drown in words and paper and look at words without any sense that a script is unusual can hardly credit ^{that} literacy was originally seen as magical. We will not rightly appreciate the early scriptures if we do not credit them with a power which transcended

their context. At the time only a few men could read. Most could not comprehend how a few black squiggles could communicate meaning; for them the written word was both indecipherable and magical. We can see the magic in the way men flocked to scribes for amulets whose images and texts would keep evil spirits from their homes and protect their wives during childbirth. The written words had power -- the power to confiscate their lands or conscript their sons -- and many did not understand how this was so. For us the words lie inert on the page. For the ancient words were inextricably related to sound. No one read, as we do, silently. All who read read aloud. Words had that miraculous power of becoming another category of being. Stories were heard as well as seen and so they summoned as well as described. The name of a god inscribed on an amulet was not simply a name but a spoken appeal and a summons. The God heard the writing. The Bible speaks of priests who "placed" God's special name, YHWH, on the people when they blessed them. Egyptians of the Middle Kingdom period wrote on the inside of coffins formulas which mentioned various gods, names which the deceased could use to call these gods to his aid as he passed into the realm of the blessed dead and so assure himself of admission. In India I have watched illiterates rub their foreheads with palm leaves which were inscribed with words from the Vedas, and in Nepal Tibetan pilgrims circle the great Swayambhu Stupa in Katmandu, twirling prayer wheels whose inscription they cannot read, although the words were alive to them and powerful.

Num 6:27
(22-27)

ok
spelling ✓

Writing was first cultivated for its practical value. The written word allowed kings and governors to keep records of taxes due, treaties entered into, land registries, and inventories of palace possessions. At first scribes were no more than craftsmen who plyed a useful trade; but it was not long before talented practitioners recognized that their skills had other applications. Tablets and scrolls which recorded magical formulas, venerable myths, and prudential advice appeared, and mankind embarked on the long love affair with the written word as literature which has characterized, indeed obsessed, Western civilization until our day.

Although writing was first sponsored by tyrants as a way of increasing their revenues and control, people soon recognized its value in the transmission of ideas. By the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., perhaps three thousand years after Sumerian scribes had developed the first system which can be called a proper system of writing, the Greeks, among others, began to insist on a set of radically new ideas: that books contained what was valuable, noble, and worthy of being preserved, that "real" knowledge required book learning, and that schools were places where young men should learn what was in books. Literacy had become the key to civilization.

The spread of literacy ultimately affected all areas of human culture. The early religions emerged without benefit of the written word and, as we shall see, were never entirely comfortable with it. The religious spirit, conservative by nature,

took a surprisingly long time to recognize the potential of a "scripture". But inevitably, religion began to use the written word to state and disseminate its teachings.

Once writing became common it was inevitable that every religious culture would have a literature. What was not inevitable was that the religions, most notably Judaism since it was the first to do so, should turn some of that literature into a scripture. The five scrolls of Moses and those of the prophets, which were edited in their present form after the fifth century B.C.E., are in fact the first set of religious writings ever consecrated by a community. This historical note is not a claim that "we did it first" but makes the point that it took a long time -- a gap of at least 800 years between Moses and the appearance of the writing we call the Five Books of Moses -- for the community to set down their religious records and longer yet to consider such documents as fundamental and divinely inspired elements in their tradition, as scripture.

Why and how did this happen?

Scripture comes from the Latin scriptura, writing. As the name suggests, it originally defined a manuscript, any manuscript. For reasons no longer recoverable, quite early in the development of the English language, the word scripture began to be used as a specific description for sacred writings, particularly those sacred to Christians. A catechism of the early fourteenth century already uses the term in this context: "For hi es godd, al sais scripture" (Cursor M. 327).

* The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: the Talmudic + Midrashic

9

Evidence (p. 127)

The Oxford English Dictionary narrowly defines scripture as books held to be sacred and inspired, citing the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Putting aside the parochialism of this definition -- the Koran and the Vedas are also unquestionably scriptures -- we can accept a more spacious definition of scripture as a volume or collection of writings accepted by a particular community as divinely inspired and, therefore, authoritative.

Each of the major religious communities treasures a scripture, a sacred text, which records and presents its special message, truths which define doctrine and duty and offer salvation. Each believes its scripture was inspired by God. When texts are quoted in the name of Moses, an Evangelist, Mohammed, or another, it is assumed that these men spoke and wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that these texts are free of personal bias and that, being divine in origin, they transcend the limitations of human intelligence.

Scriptures tend to draw to themselves such adjectives as inerrant and infallible. Believers routinely claim that the text is not only pregnant with divine wisdom but flawless, so that for many the common phrase 'holy scripture' seems almost a tautology. Generally, a scripture is seen as the ultimate arbiter of truth. The preacher carries The Book in his hand as he speaks to the faithful. Among medieval scholastics to cite a text proved that an argument was irrefutable.

Like the presence of the Sefer Torah in the synagogue ark, a pulpit-sized Bible on the church lectern gives assurance that

*
Sylvester
Telman makes
the pt. that not
everything
is canonized by
divine inspiration
(and
vice versa)

what is prayed and said there conforms to God's wishes and is right. Enter a synagogue and your eye will be drawn to its most prominent architectural feature, an ark, fronted by a brightly decorated curtain or sliding door which closes off the cabinet's interior. The ark houses parchment scrolls, bound and mantled, inscribed with the Hebrew text of the Five Books of Moses. Each Sabbath and on festivals, holy days, and market days this scroll, the Sefer Torah, is ceremoniously removed and carried to the reader's desk where it is unrolled so that a designated portion can be chanted. Like the synagogue's architecture, the liturgy underscores the centuries-old claim that these texts present God's own words and will; in short, that this is Scripture, "This is the Torah which God commanded us through Moses. . .".

As Galileo and many others learned to their sorrow, Scripture may hold sway even when directly contradicted by empirical knowledge. Why so? Here we must credit -- or blame -- the powerful urge for certainty and confirmation which lies at the base of human need and provides the motive power behind the religious enterprise: we need to know that what we have been assured is truth is in fact true and has been accurately reported to us. Since the text is ascribed to God or ^Ddivine inspiration, a scripture is God's teaching, presented exactly as it was by God to the founding fathers. The text of a scripture exudes certainty. Who can argue with God? It was and is more comforting to accept a scripture as truth than to consider it a

(Today?!)

Dent
4:44

classic which has certain ideas of value. We stake our lives on what we believe rather than on critical thinking.

Those who do not belong to a scripture-cherishing community easily think of scripture as an anthology of classic literature a group accepts as sacred. The believer adores it as the word of God. Rabbinic Judaism describes the Sefer Torah, the Five Books of Moses, spoken and written down by Moses at God's dictation without change or addition. Maimonides' careful formulation sums up the rabbinic position: "The Torah has been revealed from heaven. This implies our belief that the whole of this Torah found in our hands this day is the Torah that was handed down by Moses and that it is all of divine origin. By this I mean that the whole of the Torah came with him from before God in a manner that is metaphysically called 'speaking'; but the real nature of that communication is unknown to everybody except to Moses to whom it came. In handing down the Torah, Moses was like a scribe writing from dictations the whole of it, its chronicles, its narratives and its precepts." ()

Both Catholic and Protestant Christianity taught that the Bible was written by men inspired by the Holy Spirit. Islam knew the Koran as the uncreated and direct word of Allah, "The best of histories" (Sura 12:3), Mohammed's recitation of what he had heard from God.

Over the centuries Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have raised vast and imaginative religious edifices on the foundation of their scriptures. For Western man there was until recently

no more precious object than the Sefer Torah, the New Testament, or the Koran.

Conventional religious wisdom so emphatically declares the existence of a scripture a good thing that the claim was often advanced that possession of a scripture was a clear indication of a religion's superiority over more primitive, largely oral, traditions. During Islam's period of rapid military expansion, when Muslim lawyers had to determine how to treat large non-Muslim captured populations, they developed the category of ahl-ul-kitab, a people of the book, to distinguish groups who could be tolerated in the lands of Islam, dar-al-Islam. Such ahl-ul-kitab, followers of faiths which held a scripture sacred, could be tolerated. Those who did not were to be eliminated by conversion, exile, or death. This distinction was based in part on the assumption that possession of a scripture was evidence of an advanced culture and provided at least a rude measure of the cultural level of a community. Since that assumption is still widespread -- that any religion worthy of its salt has a scripture -- all the "new" religions, Mormonism, Christian Science, even the recently modish cults, quickly developed one. Indeed, contemporary political and economic ideologies which play the role of religion for millions in our heavily secular age have followed suit and, despite blatant anti-religious doctrine, enshrine a scripture: Marx's Das Kapital, Hitler's Mein Kampf, and Mao's Little Red Book. The followers of such doctrines ^{find} ~~have~~ spiritual comfort in the

knowledge that the ideas they hold dear exist on paper as well as in the mind and have a solid form, more substantial than evanescent speech.

If we define religion as the human emotional and intellectual response to the anxiety-laden fact of being alive but never fully at peace in a world not fully understood, it follows that a religious belief cannot be detached or theoretical but grows out of a personal search for a sanctified purpose and a believable hope. Beyond the troubles of each day there must be some sense of the possibility of peace and security, if not in this world then in some other. In religious terms the affirmation of life's possibilities is described as a response to the holy, using holy as a synonym for a dimension of ultimate mystery, God's presence in our lives. A scripture captures and presents that sense of purpose and hope. Scriptures are gospels, 'good tidings,' as well as Torah, 'God's Instructions.'

Human life, fragile and pressured, holds as one of its fondest hopes the impossible dream of total security. Projecting this need on to written documents which deal with themes of stability and permanence, the religious response personifies this sense of permanence in the concept of scripture. A scripture is unchanging, the stable heart of the faith, God's certain teaching and promise. In this sense, a scripture is the quintessential religious object. One of its most characteristic aspects is its immutability. Religions prefer the tried and true, tradition to innovation. Jeremiah's is the typical religious voice: "Stand

פ'2.73 ש' 12N8
 פ'18 מ'2.73 ש' 12N8 (not translated)
 ...
 you in the way, and see ^{not in text} which is the good way. ^{not in text!} It is the old way, ^{perhaps the} and walk therein, ^{is true!} therein shall you find peace of mind."

6:16

(Jer. 6~~X~~10). When innovation proves inescapable, the religious community generally dresses it up as a return to some original teaching.

A scripture's shared purposes and hopes, its narratives, wisdom, and idioms, define a universe of discourse. This sense of bonding becomes particularly important as the close-knit tribal cultures begin to break down and the community can no longer count on daily contact, personal ties, and shared customs to hold it together. With the growth of urban societies and the development of schooling, a scripture provided members of far-flung communities with a focal point, the knowledge that they belong to a single community.

The existence of a scripture is not a prerequisite for a faith's effectiveness but not irrelevant to it. Words are indispensable in communicating the religious vision -- "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God" (John 1:1) -- but the spoken word swiftly disappears. Evanescent and unfinished, the spoken word from the lips of a single individual can be doubted, corrected, argued with, or applauded, and discussion may even persuade the speaker to change his mind. Knowing that the word has become text and assumed a permanent form is reassuring, and having a scripture which has been handled with great care, such as books usually are, offers reassurance that God's words have been transmitted faithfully.

The written word is set. Discussion will not change it. A reader can refute a manuscript point-by-point as he reads it, but the author is not present to be argued with, and the text stubbornly remains unchanged. I have often thought that book burnings are fueled by feelings of frustrated impotence. Someone is deeply disturbed by what he read or has been told is in a book. He feels he can rebut its every argument, but to cancel its teachings he has no recourse but to destroy the offending work, consign it to the flames.

Why did scribes write down and edit the material which became Scripture? Because they were able to do so. They had parchment and quills and the necessary skills. Those who first wrote out this material had no idea that anyone would ever treat their text as sacred. Many texts had ordinary origins, in a well-known story or an ancestor's geneology or royal annals. Others may have been something the scribe had on his mind when he found himself with an unused portion of a parchment sheet and the time to fill it. Though believers find it difficult to admit the lack of any real significance in some scriptural texts, since all are now part of a volume they declare holy, in fact much in every scripture is mundane. The crucial point, of course, is that much is not.

Religions tend to attribute their scriptures to divine inspiration, but the prosaic truth is that scriptures exist in the first instance because men learned to read and write. It was the spread of literacy which was the proximate cause of the publication of scripture. Contrary to conventional wisdom,

What about the
author of
the 1st of
10 commandments?

also idea
that
was a
miracle

religions do not begin with a scripture; rather, a scripture presents some of the literature of that religious tradition at a particular stage in the tradition's development. To use a phrase applicable to the Jewish experience, there was Torah, a body of teachings accepted as sacred, long before there was a Sefer Torah, a text containing those teachings.

Founders speak. They rarely write. One has the feeling that Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed would be surprised to discover that their teachings have become written scripture. Moses was a prophet, a speaker, not a scribe: "and the Lord spoke to Moses, say to ^{the whole assembly of the children} ~~the tribes~~ of Israel" (Lev. 19:1). Jesus talks to his disciples and preaches in the synagogue. He did not ask or require his disciples to write down his sayings. The Koran, as the name implies, is a recitation, a record of Mohammed's speech. Mohammed also was a speaker, not a writer. His speeches, with additions and emendations, were written down more than a generation after his death. He saw himself as the last of a long line of prophet-speakers: Adam, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, John, Jesus. . . Muslim folklore often portrays Mohammed as illiterate, confessedly to emphasize that he had recited God's message exactly as he had heard it.

Just as eight centuries passed before the Jews wrote down the stories of the patriarchs and Moses, so for several centuries the early church had texts but no scripture -- the gospels were composed not as scripture but as a life of an exemplary man-God.^{???} Several centuries passed before there was general agreement on

Perhaps
Consider possible
significance of
Moses being
3??
3??
3??
cf
2:16 (cf)
12:16 2:23
also - idea
that Koran
was a
miracle... }

the contents of the Christian Scripture. Critical study of the Koran is still in its infancy; but certainly the first two generations of Mohammed's disciples knew his teachings only by verbal report, and a considerable period of time passed before the leaders were satisfied that they had fully sorted out authentic teachings from spurious ones.

In religion the message precedes the manuscript. Scriptures record primarily the creativity of the past and are themselves creative only in redefining existing traditions by including some and excluding others and thus establishing an authoritative anthology of tradition. Moses, Isaiah, and Jereniah never saw a Sefer Torah; it is doubtful that had one been shown to them they could have assimilated it within a frame of reference they would have understood. In their days the Middle East did not have 'holy' books.

A scripture is a repository of ideas rather than their first statement. Despite the claim that the Hebrew Bible gave the idea of monotheism to the world, the truth is that this idea, like many others, emerged in the minds of Israel's prophets and imaginative thinkers long before it was ever reduced to writing. God's dependable relations to man and history seen as a drama of God's power and justice developed in the minds of prophets.

The most imaginative and radically new religious perspectives often emerged before there was a scripture. Amos and Isaiah heard God or experienced a vision. They did not consult texts. Nor did Jesus or Mohammed, who spoke under the direct influence

of an overwhelming experience in which holy books and proof texts played no role. This was both asset and liability -- the

Once a scripture emerges and is certified, all this changes. Speakers must then tie their message to what is written in The Book. However valid his reasons, no one today could erase or add a text to scripture. Unlike Moses, Jesus knew what a scripture was -- the Sefer Torah and the Prophets had become scripture by his time -- and he refers to ideas which he has heard from these books. Yet he shows no eagerness to have his own teachings written down and certainly did not expect that later generations would consider his every word sacred, scriptural.

Most of the texts which became scripture seem little, if at all, different from those which did not. Genesis talks about God and occasionally quotes a few words from Him but does not introduce its narratives as "the words of God spoken to. . .". Only a small percentage of any Biblical text or of the Koran unabashedly presents itself as revelation. In the Book of Jonah the only words attributed to God are the short oracle, "yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed." The two long histories -- Samuel-Kings and Chronicles -- make no claim to a nobler status than that of history books. Esther never mentions God or claims divine sanction. No one, I am sure, would be more surprised than the author of Ecclesiastes that his rueful ruminations on age and the impermanence of life ended up enshrined in a Bible. Christian exorcists held up a Bible as a shield against the forces of darkness. Believers placed

No text
see
verse 2
(Ch. 1)

A scripture can be taken from place to place; it can be copied over and over again. This was both asset and liability -- the text can reach a wide audience, but how can consistency between versions be guaranteed? In the days of manuscripts, each copy was the work of an individual scribe who worked long and carefully on a difficult text and often saw himself as a partner in the creation of a book. He could, and often did, add or amend, believing that the text was as much his as the original author's. This sense of creative partnership came to an end when the work was declared scripture. A scripture is God's work. No scribe would tamper with God's words.

A scripture cannot be amended. "You shall not add or subtract from it" (Deut. 4:2). Yet, a scripture's authority was not always honored. Think of Jesus speaking of the Torah: "You have heard it said but I say. . .". Only a non-believer or one who believes he speaks with God's authority can directly challenge a scripture. Such is the hold of a scripture that it is, even when challenged, rarely completely rejected. The church bound what it called the Old Testament to its Gospel, and Mohammed spoke of himself as the last and ultimate prophet and in his speeches quotes from the Bible.

A scripture is more than a sacred teaching. Its sentences and words, even its individual letters, are accepted by the faithful as having power of their own. As God's own they participate in His power. Christian exorcists held up a Bible as a shield against the forces of darkness. Believers placed

cherished phrases from their scripture in protective amulets to shield their persons from harm. In the first World War soldiers on both sides carried into battle pocket Bibles inside whose covers were inscribed the soldiers' family lineages as a way of protecting the living and the dead.

I believe that the claim that a particular scripture was revealed often reflected a desire to protect the specific language of some treasured text as much as it was a claim to God's authorship. As communities became more literate they recognized the free and easy way traditions were handled and, needing to believe that they possessed rock-solid, sacred writings, they protected these writings from change by claiming that they were from and by God and by surrounding them with taboos that humans might fear to tamper with them.

The transformation of a body of religious literature into scripture placed authority and truth squarely in the text. Where preliterate societies grounded faith in and derived definition from prophetic statements or community sentiment, literate societies claim faith based in and defined by a text. Text and tradition are declared to be one. Certainty and stability are gained but as the written word defines, it restricts, and flexibility and spontaneity are lost. A scriptural faith must always consider its texts, but the text is not always relevant or helpful to the community's needs. To speak of scripture is to speak of a defined body of writings, and of no other, as inspired. Believers may assume that was

BB ch I
 scriptural texts are recognizable; yet the Talmud reports that the sages were still debating in the second century of this era whether Esther, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs were or were not scripture. Greek Jews had a significantly different text of Jeremiah than the one that found its way into our Bible. The early Church Fathers debated the canonical status of John and a number of apocryphal works, and Christian gnostics had a fifth gospel. Innumerable sayings of Mohammed circulated before and after the official arrangement which is the Koran emerged. Scriptural material is not self-evident. Few scriptural passages begin "thus says the Lord". When a scripture describes the Exodus from Egypt, the miracle of the fishes and the loaves, or Mohammed's ascent from Jerusalem, it does so as if it were writing history, as an observer rather than as God. The begats of Genesis would be nothing more than archaic lists of Israel's presumed ancestors, worth only a learned article on ancient Mesopotamian names, had they not found their way into scripture. God did not determine what is scripture; the community did.

Many of the writings which became scripture originally circulated without sanctifying labels and were treated as no more than pieces of interesting literature. Here and there, for reasons we can no longer detail, a scribe set down a short collection of customary legal formulas or a version of an ancient victory hymn or a well-known story or saga; once the clay or papyrus had been inscribed, there was a chance that some later scribe might come across it and incorporate it into a larger piece he was

working on. Another scribe in a still later generation might introduce this material into a scroll of ancient traditions he was working on and which by good fortune might find its way into an important archive. In these early stages the writing out of texts did not necessarily define them as divine speech. The Deuteronomic histories (Samuel-Kings) actually cite earlier annals; those who claim the whole Bible to be revelation are therefore forced to affirm the absurdity that God, like any professional historian, needed to provide footnotes to validate His observations. Luke indicates in his opening chapter that he knew of several inadequate biographies of Jesus and intends his book to be a useful and accurate correction of their failings; there is not a word in his explanation of his purpose that he had prepared his scroll under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Many of Paul's letters were clearly written as private letters to a particular church.

Yet each scriptural tradition claims otherwise. Islam insists that the entire Koran is the word of God. During the ceremony that attends the reading of the Sefer Torah in the synagogue, an encomium from Psalm 19 is recited: "The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul, the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple, the precepts of the Lord are upright, delighting the mind. . . ~~Behold a good doctrine has been given to you, My Torah. Do not forsake it. It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it and its supporters are many. Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace.~~" Unlike Judaism

When is this said as part of Torah reading liturgy?
 not from Psalms 19

and Islam, Christianity has tended to prefer the term inspiration to revelation and to describe its scripture as written under the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, but it has treated the Testament as a unique and sacred literature which it often unabashedly claimed to be inerrant.

Despite their ubiquity, such dramatic claims present problems. Some scriptural material is neither high-minded nor significant.

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself" and "You shall not hate your brother in your heart" are found in the same list of divine instructions as "you shall not let your cattle gender with diverse kind" and "you shall not round the corners of your hands nor mar the corners of your beards" (Lev. 19). It is hard to

imagine what inspirational benefit comes from the New Testament passage, ^{"Come, and I will show you} ~~which speaks of~~ ^{on} the judgment ^{where, enthroned above} of the great mastery that ^{have} ~~sits upon many waters with whom the~~ kings of the earth committed fornication" (Rev. 17:1-2). Some passages are ascribed

to God, but others are specifically ascribed to individuals:

David, Solomon, Agor, Sons of Korah, Matthew, Mark, Luke. . . Some material is inconsistent, even contradictory.

Though as a matter of fact, none of the Western faiths admitted that their scripture was anything but uniformly divine, in practice they tended to emphasize some parts of scripture over others. The rabbis distinguished the Sefer Torah, the Five Books of Moses, from the rest of the Hebrew Scripture. The Sefer Torah was accepted as directly revealed by God. No one, not even the prophet Moses who presumably first spoke these words to the

community, in any way intruded on God's revelation. The special sacredness of the Sefer Torah was emphasized by the fact that the only scroll kept in the synagogue ark and read through systematically and publicly, on an annual schedule, was the scroll in which these books of Moses were inscribed. Readings from other parts of the Hebrew Scripture, particularly from the Prophets, were chosen for their relevance to the Torah portion, but no attempt was made to place such readings on a symbolically equal level. The church, too, made distinctions. Old Testament readings were considered scriptural, but not in all aspects definitive for Christians. Many groups within the church did not treat apocalyptic readings like the Book of Revelation with the same reverence as the Gospels and Pauline literature.

Scriptures first became integral to religion at a particular time in human history which roughly coincides with the spread of literacy and the rise of urban society. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, all developed sacred books to which a high degree of authority, and infallibility, was ascribed. In each case these books became central to the subsequent development of religious practice and teaching. Each of these religions has a Book, but none is contained or fully defined by that book. Despite the dominant role a scripture occupies in religious life, it can never fully control the upsurge of the human spirit seeking communion with God, the spirit that gives a faith vitality and confidence. Even after The Book becomes consecrated, mystics

and others maintain intense spiritual lives only partially determined by it. Nothing can stifle the desire of the human spirit to commune with the divine or the special capacity of those who commune with God and hear His voice. When the gates of revelation are declared closed and the scripture completed, interpreters inevitably appear who claim an authority to construe the text's meaning in ways derived less from logical analysis of the text than from the Holy Spirit or a bat Kol, a voice originating in the heavens.

The ~~Scripture~~ Torah, the New Testament, and the Koran rarely enjoyed unquestioned authority within their respective communities, for official practice often deviated from the clear intent of specific scriptural statements. Rabbinic interpretation effectively cancelled Torah laws which stipulated death for adultery and witchcraft by surrounding such cases with complex legal requirements almost impossible to meet. The Gospels assume the Jewish calendar, but the church soon introduced its own. While ^{each} scriptural religion affirmed its Book as God's Book and treated it with reverence, each interpretation became not only a sacred discipline but a battlefield as believers fought to make scripture say what they wanted and needed it to say.

Many texts fail to make clear whom an author was addressing, what specifically he wanted to accomplish, and even what general purpose he had in mind. When the Biblical tradition says "Love your friend as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) is it encouraging simple respect for others, charity, sacrificial concern for another's

these teachings into texts.

life and person, or simply counseling unselfishness? Who is that "friend"? An intimate, any passerby, or simply one of your own tribe? What does the command "love" require? An occasional helping hand? Sacrificial care? The Biblical sentence provides a few clues. Interpretation is inevitable.

Scriptures are unabashedly praised by the faithful as books of unique and inestimable worth, but such praise does not tell us with any precision wherein lies its special merit. Is the text holy because it presents the inspired wisdom of a God-intoxicated sage or seer? Does its merit lie in the fact that it presents the fundamental teachings of a particular tradition? Is it, in fact, God's words?

Why did Judaism, and later other traditions, make so much of the possession of a scripture after having flourished, in Judaism's case for centuries, without a scripture? There have been as many answers to this question as students who have seriously posed it. Some speak of the importance of scripture in providing to a particular religious enterprise a necessary centerpiece, defining and giving shape, from which all teachings flow. Others emphasize a scripture's importance in confirming values and teachings in a world where any teaching or value can be disputed and any assertion questioned; a scripture declares that certain values and teachings are God's own and, therefore, beyond debate. ^{a scripture is no more than an artifact of} Others argue that, [^]literate societies, an inevitable consequence of the growing numbers of those who could and did read and write, who sanctified certain teachings and set these teachings into texts.

The shrine libraries of the ancient Middle East included works of law, myth, hymn, and wisdom -- in style, and sometimes even in substance, not unlike much of the material which found its way into the Bible. In Hellenistic times The Temple in Jerusalem had a sizable library which included, among many other works, scrolls which ultimately made their way into the Hebrew Scriptures. Many of these rolls, those that would be chosen and those that were not, were studied and believed in Biblical times. Few besides the Five Books of Moses were treated as sacrosanct. No one was disturbed to find different versions of various narratives in circulation. Scribes who copied these scrolls felt free to add and emend.

However venerated, a classic is not yet a scripture. A question which is not often put, and less often answered, is: why, beginning in the late pre-Christian centuries, were first the Jews and then others no longer satisfied to have a library of thoughtful and inspiring religious classics but felt impelled to turn certain of their scrolls into scripture? That they did feel so impelled cannot be denied.

A thorough knowledge of its scripture is helpful in understanding a particular religion, but you cannot build an image of that religion on the basis of its scripture. A Martian who had read a scripture before visiting the faithful earthlings, observing their ways and listening to their views, would have a difficult time relating what he had seen and heard of the living community to what he had read in their Holy Book. The Hebrew Scripture

What about
28 detail later
Also 105

does not mention the synagogue, the office of the rabbi, the separation of men and women at worship, or even the requirement of a public ritual of reading from the scripture. On the other hand, the Five Books of Moses go on at great length about the sacrificial cult, a dynastic priesthood, and stipulates that a witch must be burned and an adultress stoned, all completely irrelevant to today's practice. The New Testament makes no mention of popes, the divinity of Mary, Christmas, or tithing.

Most religions gloss over the many ways in which current practice and doctrine diverge from that presented in Scripture, but the Catholic Church, which has a penchant for neat and careful formulation, has said openly that the Church affirms teachings which are not found in its scripture. At the Council of Trent in 1648, and more recently at the Second Vatican Council in a dogmatic Constitutional on Divine Elevation entitled Dei Verbum, Rome made clear that there are fundamental teachings -- the immaculate conception, Mary's bodily assumption into heaven, and papal infallibility -- which do not derive directly from scripture but "from the non-written traditions which the apostles had received from Christ, Himself, or through the dictation of the Holy Spirit", traditions which were "by continuous succession preserved in the Catholic Church" and so "are to be accounted with the same sense of devotion and reverence as scripture."

Judaism has its Sefer Torah, its Scripture, but it also has a Talmud, a massive body of teaching and law, edited more than fifteen hundred years after Sinai, which rabbinic piety

The conventional wisdom has been that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are and have been from the beginning definable and consistent entities. At times heretics and enthusiasts tried to reshape the tradition, but the scripture was there, acting like a magnet, pulling deviants back to the source. An attractive idea, and inaccurate. Most scriptures lacked the range or detail to give full shape to their evolving traditions. They become important symbols, but the actual task of definition is left to other works.

✓
Gott's
rec.
correct

a more practical purpose, specifically to provide the faith with an inclusive and functional text in which doctrine and duty are defined.

Where a scripture tends to be effective and compelling as literature, the second scripture -- the Talmud, Canon Law, and the Shariyah -- tends to be prosaic, not at all the kind of book you would pick up to calm distress or anxiety or to find encouragement in sorrow. Scholastics and theologians turn to their second scripture for definitive answers on issues of obligation and structure. The general community acknowledges the importance of its second scripture but tends to leave its study to experts. The importance of the Talmud in Jewish education is probably due to a recognition of the limitations of the Sefer Torah as a basis for teaching the whole range of Jewish obligations. These second scriptures are not given a major place in the worship hall but are essential in the study hall and council chamber.

The relation of a religious community to its two scriptures is not unlike the marriage relationships in polygamous societies where several wives live together in amity for a while under the same tent, until, inevitably, someone or something comes along to disturb the relationship among the women. In Judaism and Christianity groups like the Karaites and Protestants came along and argued that the second "marriage" was not sanctified, that only the original testament was inspired. The second scripture is functional rather than symbolic, ^{yet} since authority must be acknowledged as central to the community's well-being, it is dressed up with some of the symbols of scriptural authority and

presents itself as inspired interpretation rather than as direct or inspired revelation.

A scripture may be venerated and symbolically affirmed as the centerpiece of the religious enterprise, but in matters of practice it often does not have the last word. Scriptures are texts assumed to be central; but, in an effective sense the meaning derived from them is determined by the evolving life of that society. The needs and interests of the synagogue, church, or mosque determined the Scripture's meaning. Most people accept a scripture not for what it is but for what it has become in the hands of their leaders. The Roman Catholic Bible is scripture as interpreted by the teaching of the official church. The Church affirms that its Scripture is the ultimate authority on faith and morals, but clearly, the Church has made its scripture yield strong positions on such issues as birth control and abortion which the scripture really does not deal with. The Bible as read by liberal American Protestantism is an historically conditional document which espouses Christology and the social gospel. The same Bible in the hands of evangelical American Protestantism is a messianic document which espoused the transforming power of faith in a person's life. In every way possible each faith community emphasized the incomparability and crucial importance of its scripture.

Scriptures are books which paradoxically are meant to be heard rather than read. Muslim worship begins with the recitation of the first Sura. On certain occasions the recitation of the religious moment depends upon immediacy. Congregational worship

whole Koran is required. The church and the synagogue developed formal cycles of scripture to be read aloud during worship. The spoken word conveys an immediacy denied to the written word. When I hear portions of the Torah aloud, I sense its sacredness; when I scan the same text in my study I search rather carefully for its meaning. I read to learn. I listen to respond. Scriptures have been carefully studied, declared both pious and meritorious, but their ultimate power comes in hearing God's words spoken, intoned, or chanted. A text read aloud regains some of its original power as God's words. Hearing the scripture read aloud allows the worshipper, even if the words are not fully understood, to participate in the original revelation and, therefore, in a truly redemptive experience which brings him close to God and can change his life.

If I hear a prophet speak I may be moved by his voice, manner, or commanding presence as well as his words. If I am in a room which contains a manuscript of his words ~~but which contains no manuscript of his words~~ but I do not open it, it may as well not be there. It is one thing to be, say, part of Amos' audience at Beth-el, quite another to read what survives of his speech in the quiet of a study. God did not write to Moses. God spoke to him. God did not send Jeremiah a letter detailing his mission. Jeremiah felt the word of God as a burning fire within him. Paul had a transforming vision on the road to Damascus. Islam accepted the Koran as Mohammed's repetition of the Word of God mediated through the Angel Gabriel. The power of the religious moment depends upon immediacy. Congregational worship

acknowledges the power ascribed to the scriptural word by always including a section in which someone reads aloud or recites a portion of scripture. When a minister begins to read the scripture lesson, he announces: "Hear the word of God."

Physically, a scripture looks like any other book, but it is treated as a book like unto no other. As a physical object, a scripture is handled with great care, lovingly. Once established, the text is copied with great care, lovingly. Piety inevitably surrounds a scripture with rites and practices which emphasize its sacredness and unique importance. A worshipper in the synagogue crossing in front of the Ark containing the scrolls of the Sefer Torah will stop and bow before passing on.

Jewish scribes developed formal rules which governed the preparation of the Sefer Torah. It was to be handwritten on parchment, using the Ashurit or square script. Forty-two lines to a column, the opening "B" of "In the Beginning" must be set down double-sized. In the Middle Ages Hebrew scribes were warned not only to set down certain letters double size or half size according to ancient patterns of inscription but to make sure that the crowns which adorn certain letters were in place and had their proper number of strokes.

Muslim law insists a Koran must not be laid on the ground or allowed to come in contact with anything dirty. The Koran could be written in any of a number of Arabic scripts, but care was always taken with the writing, and systems of ornamentation were developed to indicate the beginning and end of

verses and when the reciter should prostrate himself. Until quite recently Muslim religious leaders resisted the publication of printed editions of the Koran on the grounds that a special sense of the sacred inhered in a hand-copied manuscript which the mechanical process of printing could never impart. Among the glories of medieval Christianity are the magnificent illuminated Gospel and Bible manuscripts inscribed and painted in the monasteries of the time.

~~Pre-literate~~ Prefliterate and semi-literate societies treasured traditions which passed on through the generations with a significant degree of fidelity. Still, changes were constantly made in oral presentations. The general conservatism which surrounded the transmission of well-known material has led students to exaggerate the degree of fidelity maintained by oral transmission. Studies of rhapsodists and storytellers in traditional cultures have shown that though they believe that they repeat the material without change, they never tell the story quite the same way twice. The teller responds to his audience and they to him and this interchange causes subtle changes as the teller chooses the words and images which will be most attractive and understandable to his audience. Storytellers constantly modify their narratives to make them more understandable or exciting to an audience. Myths were subtly reshaped with each retelling to fit new social or ethical attitudes. Even the formulas in which laws were presented were modified over time to fit changed circumstances. Some mythological tales like that of the flood and Noah can be traced back

to earlier prototypes, but the Biblical story is not a stencil of the earlier Gilgamesh epic. Rather, it is a much transformed version which reflects meanings appropriate to the Israelite ethos. Where Utnapishtim, the Gilgamesh hero, was saved by the goddess Ea because she had taken a fancy to him, Noah is saved by God because he was a righteous man.

Judaism emerged in an environment where writing was little known. There was no history in West Asia of communities enshrining Holy Books. Worship consisted of sacrifices and sacred formulas chanted by priests. There was no tradition of books being read as part of a public ceremony. Habits of mind which had developed in oral societies, particularly a strong awareness of the importance of immediacy in religious experience, worked against the enshrinement of the written word. The written word is a record of a religious experience, not the experience itself. Traditions of an oral society may be primitive, but they have the advantage of a compelling intimacy and directness which tend to be lost when traditions are written down. Putting words on parchment or paper places them outside the mind. But the wellsprings of commitment lie inside the human soul. While a literate culture can have a rich and imaginative religious literature, its dependence on the written word inevitably creates distance between the community and its faith. The written word is useful for analysis rather than a compelling method for meeting God. Even the most compelling and powerful speech become text, loses something of its vitality.

A recitation is flexible. A scripture text is frozen. Times change. Conditions change. Constitutions require amendment. Calling ideas timeless does not make them so. Scriptures claim to present general truths but, in fact, they contain materials written at a particular time and place and use the language of their day, its images and idioms as well as its science and superstition. Fixed texts need to be provided with flexibility so they can address new needs and fit new outlooks.

The meaning of any text lies in the eye and mind of the reader who provides the text with context, his context, and therefore, with meaning. The meaning that the faithful found, and find, in their scripture reveals more about their interests, needs, level of culture, and the state of their faith at a particular juncture than it does about the original intent of the text.

Over the years religionists devised intricate systems of interpretation, some of which simply drew out a text's logical inference while others came to remarkable conclusions by defying every canon of logic. People read into their scripture what they needed to find there and all the while apologetes proclaimed proudly that their teachings were scriptural. An analogy can be usefully drawn between scripture and the American Constitution in respect to their roles in society. The Constitution's text and the arguments advanced by those who wrote its paragraphs have a certain force which the courts take under advisement, but in rendering decisions the courts also take into consideration,

although not always acknowledging that they do, the needs and attitudes of contemporary society. The language of the Constitution exerts an authority which cannot be willfully flaunted and is sometimes inescapable; but when there is a desire to do so interpreters can stretch the letter of the law until the spirit of the times overwhelms it. The power of judicial review is the power to change the Constitution. Interpretation and commentary represent the ways religionists change their scripture and thereby their faith.

Ingenious systems of interpretation were developed. Since words can be understood many ways, once that interpretive process is begun there is a problem of limits. The rabbis found the basis for the prohibition of mixing meat and milk dishes in an old agricultural law, "not to boil a kid in its mother's milk" (Ex. 23:19, which apparently was originally designed to protect a farmer in desperate times from the temptation of killing off his only breeding animal. The relationship of ideas is tenuous and, as in many cases, based on the most slender of connections.

Recognizing the various ways in which a Biblical sentence could be interpreted -- according to common sense and context, metaphorically, by various techniques of association, allegorically, esoterically -- the rabbis often quoted a line from Jeremiah, "Behold My word is like fire - declares the Lord - and like a hammer that shatters rock" (Jer. 23:29). Interpretations, like sparks, fly off in all directions and each spark gives off some light. The issue for us is no longer, if it ever was, what the text

have
apparent
to this
anti

Jer
23:29
see
Sabb
686

originally meant but what it means to the present generation. Those who wrote official commentary asserted that they were simply making clear their scripture's original meaning, presenting to the community what was there and had always been there, but more was there than met the eye. Though they did not know the term and would have emphatically denied its implications if they had, the leaders of the scriptural religions took an existentialist attitude toward scripture. It meant what they needed it to mean. Christian commentators found references to Jesus and the Christ in literally hundreds of nooks and crannies of the Hebrew Scripture, references which were not apparent to non-Christians.

A medieval rabbi used a homely but effective illustration to make the point that God had intended His word to be interpreted:

A king had two slaves whom he loved intensely.

He gave each one a measure of wheat and a bundle

of flax. The intelligent one wove the flax

into a cloth and made flour from the wheat,

sifted it, ground it, kneaded it, baked it,

and before the king returned set it (the bread)

on the table on a cloth he had made. The

stupid one did not do a thing (with the

gifts the king had given him). After some

time the king returned from his trip and

said to them: "My sons, bring me what I

gave you." One brought out the table set

with bread on the tablecloth; the other

scriptures of the major faiths have been important sources of

brought out the wheat in a basket and the bundle of flax with it. What an embarrassment that was!

Which do you think was more beloved? . . .

(Similarly) when the Holy One, Blessed Be He, gave the Torah to Israel, He gave it as wheat from which to make flour and flax from which to make clothing through the rules of interpretation." ()

Since a scripture is, as we have seen, an anthology of diverse thoughts and elements believed to have an inherent unity because they came from God, the learned and thoughtful had to interpret in order to define and make clear a message that is coherent despite appearances that it is not. To impose on the text the unity they knew was there, they necessarily emphasized some texts and pushed aside others. This was not simply an intellectual exercise. Christians, such as Augustine, insisted

the Bible was infallible in all its parts, without contradiction between its elements, for a properly defined faith was necessary for salvation. "Faith," he wrote, "will stagger if the authority of the divine scripture wavers." (). For Augustine a proper understanding of the Bible was essential; God had chosen and equipped the Church to be its infallible interpreter.

One of the least examined commorplaces of our times is that a Bible is a good book, many would say The Good Book. To believers their scripture is an unmitigated source of blessing and a statement of redemptive truths. It cannot be doubted that the scriptures of the major faiths have been important sources of

Probably from
On Xian
Doctrine.

encouragement and wisdom for millions. Many have found the courage to keep going on the basis of texts which have been quoted or read to them. But these texts can also mislead. The ~~Biblical~~ warning "as you shall sow so shall you reap," (~~Leviticus 6:15~~) has caused many who were simply unlucky to suffer guilt and heartache. Paul's "it is better to marry than to burn" (I. Cor. 7:9) has seriously confused society's understanding of the appropriate role of the sexual in human relationships. Mohammed's justification of war as a means of gaining ^{authority over unbelievers and converting} them to Islam (Koran 9:5, 4:76, 2:214, 8:39) continues to encourage political violence in the Middle East and elsewhere. Since scripture fixes for all times its community's sacred teaching, a scriptural religion must resort to restatements -- Vatican II declarations are good examples -- which speak the old phrases in a "new" light or develop ingenious commentary which permits it to dismiss most changes as no change at all. Scriptures are elemental forces which can be helpful or harmful, and sometimes both.

When ~~community~~ ^{commentary} cannot fix up a scriptural text, the text may impose on a community ideas it no longer accepts and burdens it cannot bear. The Torah rule requiring that all debts be remitted each sabbatical year is a case in point. Designed to prevent the impoverishment of a population which consisted largely of farmers and herdsman who survived on the edge of economic disaster and regularly fell into debt when crops failed or someone took over the market, this rule gave the herders and farmers a second chance and reflects a concept of morality appropriate to a simple

limit the faith's ability to adjust to inevitable changes in the

X
for the work
of the 1st
I can find
that vs in
Q.T.!

Deut
15:1

agrarian economy. During Hellenistic times, as commerce began to play a major role in the economy of an increasingly urbanized community, the sabbatical rule became a stumbling block to economic development. No one would lend money during the later years of the sabbatical cycle, and without money the economy ground to a halt. To get around the text, which is presented in the Sefer Torah as one of God's specific commands for all times, the sages devised a complicated legal fiction to circumvent the express intent of scripture. Their actions were understandable, even commendable, responsive to a recognized communal need, but what kind of scripture is it that imposes unacceptable rules on a community? If a scripture has elements which need to be set aside, is it really a repository of eternal truth?

The Sefer Torah, the New Testament, and the Koran are seen by their faithful adherents not only as literatures of exceptional and unique merit but as the inspired and sacred platform on which their house of faith rests. But the relationship is not consistently and purely benevolent. A scripture is a written document full of worthy themes seen as ultimate truths. As such it is definitive and restrictive. Writings accepted as sacrosanct provide the faith an unchanging universe of discourse: idioms, personalities, a calendar, laws. As conditions change the words may be quoted to quite different purposes, but they remain the same words. The phrases and ideas of a scripture, like those of the American Constitution, are used in every generation, not always to the same purpose. Yet, its unshakable presence often serves to limit the faith's ability to adjust to inevitable changes in the

M.
Slevitt
10:34

social order. The presence of an unchanging scripture cannot in itself enable a community to avoid change. Issues come up which the scripture never imagined or, as with the sabbatical law, rules apposite to one situation may not be to another.

A religious tradition must continuously adjust to a changing environment. Commentary and interpretation provide that possibility. Interpretation finds fresh and unexpected meanings in a text. If a religion is to survive, commentary is necessary, but commentary also introduces into the faith a new kind of priesthood -- the authority of those who can read and interpret. With commentary comes the dominance of a new elite, the learned and the trained, who "do" the commentary and determine which interpretations are acceptable. Particularly during those centuries when literacy was a rare accomplishment, a scriptural religion tended to give authority to those who claimed the power to interpret. Those who could not read were urged to submit and abide. A scriptural religion tends to be defined from above.

Inevitably, distance opens between the leaders, those who define, and the faithful, those who obey. Inevitably, an official church emerges as a separate entity distinct from the community of believers. When this happens religious coercion is usually not far behind. The community's ultimate response to coercion will be to rally behind leaders who claim that the present elite have misdefined scripture for them. More often than not, the rebellious message is: "read" scripture, do not leave it to others to tell you what God has said. That was the basis of the

that many translations present difficulties. No one can honestly

Protestant Reformation, which urged, in effect, that the substance of the faith was not in the church but in the Bible. The Protestants quickly found that many could read the text and make sense of it, so within a generation or two Protestants had formed sects which accepted the interpretation of one or another leader: Calvin, Luther, Zwingli. . . A measure of unity was achieved because groups tended to follow their leaders' interpretations as they had once followed Rome's lead, the only difference being that Rome had insisted on submission and the protesting churches continued to emphasize independence of thought, making up one's own mind about scripture.

The co-existence of a scripture and an accepted commentary also gave institutional authorities a basis for opposing any claim that a new message had been received from God that ran contrary to official teaching. Continuity was assured but at the price of silencing or driving off those who felt they had known God intimately or heard Him speak.

When speech becomes text, a problem of language often arises. The later reader may not understand the language of the original version. Even if he reads Hebrew, Latin, or Arabic, it will likely be a modern dialect like Mishnaic Hebrew, Church Latin, or medieval Arabic and not the classic tongue. Idioms which meant one thing when they were spoken may now be read differently and suggest other meanings. The meaning of certain words may no longer be known. The best of today's scholars, armed with the results of centuries of textual and linguistic research, admit that many translations present difficulties. No one can honestly

say he believes every line and word of his scripture because no one knows exactly what every line means. Until recently every line of Scripture was translated, but a number of recent translations admit textual difficulties by noting in appropriate places that the meaning is uncertain or that there are other possible translations.

If scholars do not fully understand The Book, few of the faithful are put off by that fact. They accept that The Book is holy, that its language is holy. Many accepted that the Scripture was written in God's native tongue. Jews assume God speaks Hebrew, Muslims that He speaks Arabic. To this day while synagogue liturgy can be recited in any vernacular, the Sefer Torah is to be read in Hebrew. Islam discouraged translations of the Koran. School boys in all parts of the Muslim world, even if they do not speak Arabic, learn the Koran in Arabic. To translate God's speech into another language than His own, Arabic, would not only distort its meaning but deprive the words of much of their innate power. Christians have a somewhat different approach to language since, unlike the Torah and the Koran, their Bible is a translation. Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek, but the Greek and Syrian Bibles in the East and the Latin in the West were quickly accepted not as translations but as scriptures and their texts accepted as sacrosanct. Scriptures provide communicants a powerful and compelling symbol: 'Here is your duty. Here are your hopes. It is all here, you do not have to guess about it.' But when you look at the authority of the gods of West Asia interacting with humans and

behind the symbol to the text's substance it becomes clear that the sense of certainty comes at a price. Part of that price has already been paid during the selection process. Inevitably, words and themes of beauty were left out. Archeologists recovered from the caves above Qumran a Psalter which contained several beautiful psalms which were not included in the received text. Someone made an arbitrary selection from the available collection of psalms and hymns in order, for some scribal reason, to limit the collection to one hundred and fifty hymns. In defining the scriptural canon, the rabbis excluded a considerable literature; some like Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon have survived outside the canon and their value can still be appreciated. It would be hard to explain why the apocryphal additions to Jeremiah and Daniel were not included in their respective rolls. Much of the richness and variety of Christianity's and Islam's formulation period were also left behind. There were other gospels and many other teachings attributed to Mohammed. A scripture inevitably denies a community some of its past.

Preliterate societies were organized within a tight web of custom, law, and tradition accepted as natural and required by the gods. Social tradition enshrined in the collective memory such diverse elements as formulae for keeping evil spirits at bay and knowledge of when to plant and when to harvest. No one distinguished between tradition and revelation. Well known, implicitly trusted, and repeated over generations with a high degree of reliability, this body of material carried the highest authority. The gods of West Asia interacted with humans and

inspired them with ideas of justice and responsibility, but they did not speak through texts. This world is still reflected in the book of Genesis which never claims that its text is divinely inspired, yet presents a narrative which was clearly fully trusted. Traditions were true because they were familiar. There was little inclination to fuss about their historical facticity. The famous first line of the Bible might, without contradicting its original spirit, be translated as an early storyteller might have spoken: "Once upon a time long ago God created the Heavens and the Earth." Only when Genesis became scripture did it become a matter of doctrine that God had created the cosmos and life on earth in six days, and only then was it required that not a word be changed by the scribes who copied it.

Much in the Hebrew Scriptures began as ordinary literature. The editors of the New Testament were aware of that much that they included had not been written as sacred literature. The author of Luke wrote to a friend that "many writers have undertaken to draw up an account of the events that have happened among us, following the traditions handed down to us by the original eyewitnesses. . ." and speaks of his desire "to write a connected narrative for you so as to give you authentic knowledge about the matters of which you have been informed" (1:1-4). This is the way a historian writes who is setting down a particular report of a series of events.

Certainly, in the early centuries no one involved with what became scripture had a scripture in mind. Many of the stories, proverbs, and laws had circulated orally for a considerable

period of time. What was written down can puzzle us in many ways, particularly as to why it became scripture. It may occur in several versions; it may be unedifying (the story of a frightened Abraham passing off his wife as his sister). A particular story may simply have been well known and well loved or part of the established notes from which storytellers recited the life of a patriarch. Familiarity was often enough. Chance also played a role in what became scripture; a scribe might add a sentence or two to the parchment he had copied and forever after a psalm had a few extra lines. We think of an anthology as a collection of the best writing of a certain type, that scripture includes works of high quality and important to the community's life; but there is also much that is not. To be included in scripture's table of contents was a consequence of other criteria as well as of quality.

1:15 Some texts in Scripture acquired more importance as circumstances changed. "Repent ye, for the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15) rang with a sense of urgency in the first century when people believed that Jesus was about to return and then lost much of its force when Christians had to abandon hope in a proximate Second Coming. Even if few had confidence it would happen in their lifetime, the Second Coming theme remained Christian doctrine, cherished for its message of hope, but not insisted upon in any literal way. So long as each religious tradition endowed its scripture with sanctity and believed it was the word of God, and so long as its belief was reinforced by parochial schooling and communal conditioning, its scripture the interpretation of scripture differs from age to age, what

was the basis of religious life. When in modern times the challenges to once confidently held beliefs became more numerous and more persuasive, the once indisputable consensus began to unravel. As the multi-disciplined university curriculum took over from the homogeneous curriculum of the cathedral school, the Madrasa, and the yeshivah, the disciplines of history, archeology, literary criticism, etymology, sociology, and a variety of other studies began to raise questions about the reliability of what was in The Book. The world was not created in six days. During the Exodus the sun did not stand still for the Israelites to complete their destruction of a Moabite army. The story of a virgin birth and an immaculate conception were not historical facts but recreations of pre-Christian myths.

In the 19th and 20th centuries people began to notice the seams which hold the parts together and to question the accuracy of scriptural statements. As knowledge grew of the oral pre-history of a scripture and the recognition that scripture had incorporated materials from other cultures, people began to ask whether a scripture can be accepted either as a full statement of the faith at the time of its composition or even as a unique composition. Questions began to be asked: about the relationship between scripture and current church teachings, about the varying, even contradictory, historical interpretations, about the text's divinity. If the devil can quote scripture to his benefit, so can the minister. If various layers of human concern can be shown to exist within and behind the received text and if the interpretation of scripture differs from age to age, what

7/11/12
J. N. K.
10:12

about it is divine? If the scripture is inspired, why did interpretations sometimes have to turn it on its ear? How to account for discrepancies? In one chapter of the Book of Samuel God orders a judge to anoint a king over Israel (1. Sam. 12). In another God complains to Samuel because the tribes are demanding that a king be appointed (1 Sam. 8:7). Christian apologetes have spent many lifetimes trying to harmonize the various gospel accounts of Jesus' career. The Koran affirms free will: "The truth is from you Lord, so let whosoever will, believe; and let whosoever will disbelieve" (18:28) and denies it: "God leads astray whom He wills and guides whom He wills" (16:95).

I watched the other night a televangelist encourage his viewers to mount a campaign to require their local schools to teach a literal version of Genesis I including the doctrine of man's special creation. He dismissed the Big Bang and Evolution as unproven theories put forward by disciples of a pseudo-religion called humanism. He pounded away at his claim that no one should trust mere theories since God long since had revealed in the Bible the truth of these matters. Interestingly, that preacher did not encourage his flock to celebrate the calendar of holidays and the dietary laws which his Bible specifically mandates. His literalism was selective.

This evangelist would claim that those were Old Testament laws and that he follows the New Testament. But does he? Actually, the New Testament is inconsistent on this point. Paul denies the continuing authority of the Mosaic law; Jesus does not. In Jesus' eyes the law will remain binding at least until End Time.

Is this really
such an
appropriate
example of
discrepancies
in the Bible?
It appears so
easy to harmonize

} ←

X "Not an iota or a dot of the law would pass away until all will be accomplished" (Mat. 5:11). One can legitimately prefer Paul to Jesus, but at the least the preacher should recognize that what he teaches is not the Bible, or even his Bible, but an arbitrary selection of Biblical texts. Despite his claims, he does not take the scripture literally. He takes it selectively. His Bible leaves out any and all ideas which do not conform to an evangelical Christianity and small-town, mid-American morality.

We are more conscious today than perhaps ever before that a scripture, any scripture, is a mixed bag in which proponents of opposing views can usually find some support. We may approve "Have we not all one Father," (Mal. 2:10) or the example of strong, independent-minded women like Huldah, Deborah, and Ataliah, or the moral urgency of "burn out the evil from your midst," but the white supremacist, the male chauvinist, and the defender of privilege can also cite texts which seek to validate his convictions: texts about "hewers of wood and drawers of water," (Josh. 9:21) laws which gave a father control of his daughter's person, and Samuel's acquiescence in the sacralization of royal prerogatives.

Though the Hebrew scripture represents itself as an inspired text and is acclaimed by many as the word of God, it includes not only factually suspect history but some teachings that seem unworthy of man, much less of God. Abraham hardly sets an example of manly responsibility when, at Sarah's insistence, he orders Hagar out of his tent. How can anyone consider the brutal stories of conquest and battle in the Book of Judges as inspired?

No scripture is noble in all its parts or even sensible. Read any enshrined apocalypse. The Islamic concept of a holy war, Jihad, gives any humane spirit pause, as must some of Mohammed's demands that various tribes who opposed him be extirpated. The New Testament's bitter and intemperate condemnation of Jewish leaders as deicides, hypocrites, liars, and whitened sepulchers are not only baseless charges but have caused centuries of suffering. Unfortunately, when such a text becomes scripture, it cannot be expunged, however pernicious its consequences.

Endorsing a scripture, a community defines it as the speech of God, holy, true, inerrant. Piety is one thing, the text another.

Every scripture contains misstatements, false statements, and contradictions. This ^{assumption} (fact is so well known that forty years ago it became a popular lyric in ^{widespread / generally accepted} Rogers and Hammerstein's musical ^{George Gershwin's opera} Oklahoma: "The things that you're liable to read in the Bible, it ain't necessarily so."

Some see the problem as no more than accommodating exuberant stories -- Joshua commanding the sun to stand still, Jesus multiplying the fish and the loaves -- which can easily be explained as the enthusiastic way the ancients treated legends.

Moreover, the problem is not simply one of exuberance.

Scriptures contain contradictory statements. In Numbers God consecrates the family of Aaron as priests, in Ezekiel the family of Zadok. According to one Sefer Torah statement, the Paschal sacrifice must be roasted (Ex. 11:9), according to another, boiled (Deut. 16:7, and the roasting requirement says specifically, "you shall not eat the paschal sacrifice. . .boiled in water.")

At times a text leads to contradictory conclusions. The rule in Leviticus is that Pentecost is to be celebrated seven weeks after "the day after the Sabbath," from the day when you bring the sheaf of the wave offering (Lev. 23:15). ✓ The key term here is 'Sabbath'. Most of us think of Sabbath as the seventh day of the week; the day of rest. In the Bible Sabbath sometimes designates simply a holiday. Yom Kippur is called a Sabbath of complete rest. When, then, shall the count of the seven weeks begin? From the Sabbath day which falls during the Passover Festival? From the first Sabbath which occurs after the Passover Festival? As it stands, this text admits ^{either} ~~any~~ of these explanations and it turns out that each of these explanations reflects traditions {which were} well-known in Biblical times. The Pharisees counted from the day after the opening day of the Festival. The Qumran monastics counted from the day after the first Sabbath following the close of Passover, and the medieval Karaites, picking up older traditions, counted from the day of the first evening of the Festival. It was a traumatic shock to most believers when research made it clear that the Five Books of Moses, the New Testament, and the Koran ~~were~~ composite and edited works rather than a single record written under the inspiration of God. It was even more of a shock when it was realized that the "original words" could not be recaptured and that some of the text never had been spoken at Sinai. Deuteronomy presents a different view of the Exodus-Sinai trek and different formulas for certain laws than we find in Exodus-Numbers. There are four distinct gospel versions of .

Jesus' life and a single account can be shaped only if the reader arbitrarily decides which version of a particular incident or speech is "original."

Contrary to conventional thinking there is no single scriptural point of view. Saint and devil, orthodox and heretic, prophet and profit-seekers can find texts which seem to justify their approach to scripture^e. Each will argue that those who quote scripture to contrary purpose wrench the texts out of context. Some seem to do so. Others do not. The rabbis frequently admitted that the sages could espouse divergent, but equally defensible, views with the ultimate rationalization: "Both this and this [one sage's view and a divergent viewpoint] are the words of the living God." ([?]~~citation~~). In fact, there is no methodology which can assimilate, evaluate, and draw¹ into a single coherent^{and} consistent teaching every sentence of a scripture.

Once the community of believers included many who accepted the Talmudic^(word) teaching that every line of the Sefer Torah came down from Heaven (b. San 99b) or the Protestant thesis (Calvin's) that the New Testament was "breathed out" by God and that its teachings are inerrant. Many believers no longer do. Many can no longer accept Maimonides' exposition of the doctrine that there is no difference in significance between verses like 'and the sons of Ham were ^{Cush}Cush^{Phut} and Mizraim, ^{Phut}Phut and Canaan' (Gen. 10:6). . . and verses like 'I am the Lord your God' (Ex. 20:2) and 'Hear O Israel' (Deut. 6:4). They are all equally of divine origin and all belong to 'the law of the Lord which is perfect, pure, holy and true.'" To prove his point Maimonides quotes a rabbinic

Phut

legend which describes Manasseh as the worst of all infidels because he had taught that there were significant and insignificant sentences in the Sefer Torah ("a kernel and a husk"). "Truly," Maimonides concluded, "there are in every letter of the Torah wise maxims and admirable truths. . ." (, a human re).

Recognizing that such claims could not be sustained, some abandoned their religious heritage. If the faith claimed Scripture as its authority and the Scripture contained inaccuracies, then they felt that their faith was without basis. Others were not disturbed by the evidence of modern scholarship. Many did not know or care to know what research had shown, or if they knew about it they were satisfied by the argument that God's ways and words were unique and cannot and must not be judged by the same canons we apply to other writings. Others accepted the idea that Scripture is not inerrant but insisted that the value of scripture lay in its unique spirit and moral vision and that its essential teaching remained as valid today as it had ever been.

Today there is no longer a consensus about scripture among believers. Today many affirm that if there is to be a messianic age humans, not God, will bring it about. That's the essence of the social gospel. Yet, in our era of technical triumphs we have seen the re-emergence of evangelical groups who, despairing over man's capacity to build a bright future, turn back to texts which speak of a Second Coming and of a supernatural intervention.

In modern times non-fundamentalist communicants prefer to talk of inspiration rather than revelation and to define inspiration in relatively modest terms -- as the special insight of

someone of high imaginative and intellectual capacity who, in thinking about ultimate questions, has touched on the truths which animate the universe. They see the great spiritual truths which underlie their faith. They look on their Bible as a product of a partnership between man and God, a human response to the divine. Their scripture's truth lies in the spirit which animates the whole rather than in accuracy of particular facts and detail. They like to talk of the great themes which presumedly inform the text. They have no trouble admitting that the world was not created in six days or that the miracle stories told about Jesus are in fact just that, stories. Such is human nature and the need for reassurance that many who no longer believe their Bible nonetheless remain easy within their faith, easily participate in liturgies which eulogize the Bible, and expect those who preach to them to draw ideas, illustrations, and inspiration from the Holy Book. The Anglican Bishop, John Robinson, gained some notoriety a quarter century ago by writing about The Death of God. Yet, he found nothing unusual in speaking on God's disappearance from history from a pulpit which prominently displayed a Bible proclaiming God's presence. Scriptures have a power which transcends their contents and humans have spiritual needs which transcend the need for accuracy in a scripture.

In the centuries when the claims of faith went largely unchallenged, interpreters honestly felt that they were simply bringing out their scripture's deepest meanings. In fact, much of what was discovered in the text was not there: vide any concept of resurrection in the Sefer Torah or the Prophets or any prophecy.

about Jesus in the Hebrew Scriptures. Interpretation reflected what those who guided their communities needed to find there.

In Judaism this was achieved by a process called midrash. Midrash accepts as self-evident the proposition that Sefer Torah is a unique literature, God's, but it is not content to take a Biblical text at face value. The literal meaning, its ideas clearly and fully expressed, is only one of many God placed within a particular paragraph or sentence. Each word, each letter of the text, is part of God's revelation, and therefore every sentence, phrase, word, and letter was placed there for a purpose. The Bible's full meaning in part depends on understanding these non-contextual matters. To make this understanding possible, God enlightened certain masters and enabled them to interpret the text so that all could understand its real meaning.

The human mind being extraordinarily imaginative, commentators have always been able to manipulate texts to give them acceptable meanings. But what of the obvious contextual meaning that is patently illogical or unacceptable? The Bible speaks of a six-day creation. The New Testament describes Jesus as the son of God. The Koran indicates that Mohammed actually entered Heaven. In earlier times rationalist interpreters explained these texts as allegories or metaphors. They accepted the idea that there are several levels of meaning in a scriptural text -- sermonic, metaphorical, allegoric, esoteric -- but also insisted that the straight-forward reading must not be dismissed. It was early Protestant doctrine, if one can for these purposes put Luther and Calvin together, that the plain sense of scripture must always

Sabbath
 636
 be considered. The Biblical rabbis said the same of the Peshat,
 their system of straight-forward contextual interpretation. Yet,
 if the plain sense of scripture is considered and taken as authori-
 tative, then on an issue such as evolution, the fundamentalists
 cannot be denied. The plain sense of Genesis is that Adam was
 created separately and specially. Similarly, those Christians who
 argue against an easy acceptance of ecumenism and religious
 pluralism rely on texts which insist that a true Christian must
 separate from all who do not accept official doctrine (John
 2:9-10). If you do not assume that a scripture is fully revealed
 by God, these issues can be easily handled; but if God is the
 author, then every part of scripture must be without error.

Elaborate and elegant systems of commentary and interpretation
 were developed by scripture-based traditionalists to save their
 scripture from any imputation that it was inconsistent, mistaken,
 or untrue in any of its parts. These interpreters consciously
 and unconsciously subsumed, or sought to subsume, the entire scrip-
 tural corpus into a unitary, coherent, and consistent world view.
 They were so successful that to this day most believers think of
 the Bible as a book which presents a consistent theology and
 ethic. Even those who know that the Bible is an anthology assume
 that all the parts ultimately reflect a single theme. They argue
 that the Song of Songs is not a collection of early and earthy
 love and wedding poems which would have no particular reason to
 be in a scripture but a sustained poetic allegory in which the
 lover and his beloved presumed represent God's love for Israel
 and Israel's for God. The idea that everything in scripture is

is not scriptural dies hard. Many a Biblical scholar, particularly if he comes out of a Protestant community whose sense of unity depends almost entirely on the assumption of the value and unity of Scripture, will end his major work with a chapter entitled "Toward a Biblical Theology."

Both fundamentalist and modern believers assert on faith that their scripture presents a coherent teaching, though they will differ in describing that teaching. But if we approach the text without the assumption that it must necessarily carry coherent teaching, then no one interpretation fits all its parts and the scripture permits several interpretations. A close reading of the scriptural text makes it clear that the work reflects a particular period and a particular culture. This is the paradox that creates commentary -- that massive body of interpretation designed to remove anachronisms, rationalize outdated ideas, and read new ideas into the text.

To understand the complex relationship of faith and text, we will follow the history of one scripture, the oldest, the Hebrew Scriptures, seeking to define at each stage the complex relationship of a living faith and its texts. We will see that the relationship of a faith community to its scripture is never, as piety claims, a submissive and unquestioning acceptance of ^a what the scripture affirms, that while the scripture becomes a sturdy symbol of continuity, in actual practice the community turns from a simple reading of scripture to interpretation and interpretive process. One might say that people turn to their scripture for inspiration and to the Talmud -- or to Canon Law and Shariyah -- for discipline.

To the surprise of many, scripture has again become of interest in many parts of our world and among many groups, not only as symbol, but as a first and full statement of the will of God. Intense groups of believers insist that they base their ways of life on their scripture. In their eyes it is all knowing, infallible, the source of all truth. In this country many fundamentalist believers take a particular side of some of the most contentious issues of the time -- birth control, abortion, what to teach about creation and evolution, the place of prayer in public life, the death penalty, and civil rights -- not on the merits of the issue but because they believe their scripture has foreclosed all but one option. Some believe that this kind of piety exists only in the Bible Belt, but that's not quite true. I have a friend who found civil rights and nuclear disarmament in his Bible, where millions of others find an intense and rather narrow piety.

Scriptures have played, and continue to play, important roles in the everyday life of the faithful and some of the not so faithful, and, therefore, need to be understood. Understanding necessarily requires that we search out their symbolic and actual role in faith. We will find that the relationship between Scripture and faith, even for those who unabashedly proclaim their scripture inerrant and sufficient, is complex. However strong the claims and pressures certain books can exert on us, life cannot be lived from a book.

Even if scriptures are not, in fact, the comforting and rock-solid presences conventional wisdom insisted they were and should be, they act in precisely that way. Once authorized, they

become and remain the most significant symbol of a faith's unique and consistent teachings and authority. In every faith people are encouraged to turn to their scripture for advice, encouragement, and comfort, advice which, it is claimed, has proven its worth over time. Sermons are preached to show how the text, the unchanged and unchanging truth, offers answers to the problems of the day.

In an overly complex age such as ours where change is the only constant, there is an urgent desire for certainty. One weakness of modern learning is that it is so overwhelming and so full of qualifications that it provides more questions than answers to those (the already confused) who must decide whether to be faithful to their marriage, committed to a particular set of social or political values, strict or permissive with their children, or able to let an aged parent die with some dignity. What American evangelists and Iranian mullahs and those in the Jewish community who claim to be Torah-true offer is precisely that sense of certainty, a comforting sense of ancient authority and eternal verities presented as God's will. They insist that the symbol is in fact a statement of reality, that their scripture is the truth, the ^whole truth and nothing but the truth. Many seek just such reassurance, and many accept that it cannot be found.

Chapman
Beautifully
written