

## Reading the Hebrew Bible in Jewish and Christian Antiquity

William A. Tooman

In the last thirty years, Biblical and Second Temple studies have doubled and redoubled the resources invested in the study of ancient Jewish textual culture. Ancient Jewish literacy, text production, textualization, scribal culture, exegesis, and scribal practice are all burgeoning sub-disciplines, disciplines that were sparsely populated only a generation ago. Today, the more established disciplines of textual-criticism, historical-criticism, Israelite and Jewish history, and biblical interpretation must take into account this investment, which has produced a wide and deep body of research and profoundly altered the academic landscape. Many traditional sub-disciplines in biblical studies, for example, are fading from view. In historical criticism, the influence of form criticism and tradition history has been profoundly attenuated, surrendering more and more territory to redaction criticism. In textual criticism, the quest for original readings and *Urtexte* has been almost entirely abandoned (except in the case of select witnesses). Instead, textual-critics profile witnesses and manuscripts, highlighting their unique scribal features, techniques, and *Tendenzen*. The crucial character trait of this trend is a realignment of scholarly values. The old and the original, the recovery of which was once the principle object of historical inquiry, has been forced to give way. Transmitting, rewriting, updating, interpreting, and translating are viewed as equally if not more valuable, activities of erudite, sophisticated, and (most importantly) interesting writers. As a result of this landscape redesign, the boundaries between (so-called) higher-criticism and lower-criticism, between biblical and postbiblical literature, between Israelite and Jewish culture have been all but erased. What remains is a religious culture that is textual through and through, and the production and consumption of religious literature has become the defining characteristic not only of ancient Judaism but of the many disciplines dedicated to its study. This characterization is an exaggeration, to be sure, but it is very difficult to overstate the current academic stress on writing and writtenness.

For all the energy expended on this theme in recent decades, many questions remain unanswered and many more are debated. This collection of essays represents yet another investment of effort to better understand ancient Jewish textual culture. In 2014, the St Andrews *Symposium for Biblical and Early Christian Studies* invited a diverse group of internationally recognized scholars and new researchers to explore the topic “Ancient Readers and Their Scriptures: The Texts, Reading Strategies, and Versions of the Hebrew Bible in Second Temple and Early Judaism.” The collaborators addressed a number of those unanswered and debated questions, including (but not limited to): the materiality of scribal production, contextualization of scribal products, the notion of ancient ‘libraries,’ the compositional and exegetical habits shared by Second Temple Jewish and Christian composers, the text-forms utilized by early Christian and Rabbinic writers, the priorities of early Christian interpreters, the selection and adaptation of written material in new compositions, and early textual manifestations of Jewish and Christian tensions. The essays on these themes are unified by their mutual quest to correct or refine current understanding of a particular scribal practice, product, or culture, adding new contours and definition to the academic landscape.

The three chapters that make up *Part 2, Reading Scripture in the Second Temple Period* are corrective. In the first chapter, “What did Ben Sira’s Bible and Desk Look Like?”, **Lindsey Askin** confronts issues of memory and copying when she asks “what are the roles of memory-reliance and text-reliance in Ben Sira’s composition?” (p. 10). Askin contends that scholars of ancient Jewish literature, including Ben-Sira scholars, make unacknowledged assumptions about authors’ work habits and settings based upon textual reuse, reuse like the allusions to the Hebrew Bible in the *Praise of the Fathers* (Sira 45). It is commonly assumed that scribes “like Ben Sira ‘had their scrolls out’ while writing” (p. 10). To confirm or deny this assumption, Askin addresses Ben Sira’s access to “books” and the “physicality” question: namely, the settings and circumstances in which a writer would have read and written. Thus, she rehearses some of the evidence for libraries (i.e., public or private collections of literature) and their use by ancient writers, as well as surveying types of library furniture, writing tools, and body positions used while writing, all of which place physical constraints on writers’ work habits. The evidence for literary collections is extensive, especially in the Hellenistic Near East, and it must be acknowledged that ancient writers do appear to have worked in and with such ‘libraries’ when possible. This observation, though important and at times underemphasized, is not entirely new. It is in her examination of physical constraints that Askin breaks new ground. She concludes that “[m]any writers read inspiring texts before writing and often took notes beside them. But they physically could not do both at the same time, not with the limits of furniture,” so “[t]he evidence therefore leans towards some, though not total, memory-reliance *while* in the act of writing.” Askin further observes that some editorial process, up to and including rewriting whole texts, typically followed writing, even before the 4th century C.E. and the institution of tables as work-surfaces (which allowed for the use of multiple scrolls side-by-side as it were). The dichotomy between literary-reuse by memory and by copying has been significantly undermined in recent decades (especially in the works of Raymond Person and David Carr). Askin calls scholars to also consider evidence from a new direction, the constraints of the physicality of writing. In so doing, she has further complicated the relationship between memory, copying, and rewriting in the age of ben Sira. The implications of Askin’s conclusions go far beyond ben Sira, of course.

**Mika Pajunen** undertakes an examination of *4QBerakhot* (4Q286-87), a fragmentary text that has been linked with the liturgy of the proposed covenant renewal ceremony of the *yahad* (1QS 1-2). Pajunen contends that this still-theoretical social setting has unduly influenced academic analyses of *4QBerakhot*. He undertakes a fresh analysis of the blessings and curses in *4QBerakhot* without assuming a connection to 1QS. What he discovers is an unexpected emphasis on the creation motif in the curses and blessings. He analyzes the creation traditions of Genesis 1:1-2:3 and later traditions receiving them, and scrutinizes how they were reused by the writers of *4QBerakhot*. Pajunen’s analysis leads him to the conclusion that 1QBerakhot is not related to the covenant renewal ritual mentioned in 1QS at all. Rather, it appears to represent a part of a liturgy for a covenant in which God’s elect group blesses his name together with the angels. This conclusion situates *4QBerakhot* with a group of other Dead Sea texts that describe communal praise of God together with the angels, works like *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* and *Hodayot*. In *4QBerakhot* it is only the members of the *yahad* who are able to undertake human-celestial praise, “[t]hus, *4QBerakhot* fits in perfectly with other supposed ritual texts of the *yahad* in its particularistic worldview where their new covenant with God has surpassed

the national covenant that is still part of the  $\iota$ QS description of the ritual.” Pajunen also observes that the emphasis placed on the act of blessing the name of God in *4QBerakhot* agrees with a widespread tradition in the late Second Temple period that humanity was, from the moment of creation, obligated to praise God (e.g., *Festival Prayers*). Pajunen has thus, recontextualized the thought of *4QBerakhot*, both within the *yahad* – in a different liturgical setting – and within the wider thought-world of the Second Temple period.

**Jonathan Norton** revisits the Qumran-Essene hypothesis that not only associates the site with the Essene sect but likewise associates the Dead Sea Scrolls with their “library” (“The Qumran Library and the Shadow it Casts on the Wall of the Cave”). “A fundamental assumption of the Qumran-Essene hypothesis is that the scrolls—their literary and their artefactual features—disclose the character, outlook and history of the inhabitants of Khirbet Qumran and the nature of the life they led there” (p. 44). Norton observes that the Qumran-Essene hypothesis inverts normal analytic procedure. That is, “we do not treat the Qumran library like others known from antiquity ... we do not begin with a library and then seek to understand how it was used by its owners and what it can tell us about their world. We begin with an hypothesis equating the *Yahad* and the Essenes; we find that this hypothesis requires the scrolls be treated as the annals of their owners and that the notion of a scribal sectarian library at Qumran makes this possible” (p. 43). Norton then considers current scholarly evidence for and against designating the Qumran scrolls a “library,” the calligraphic profile of the scrolls and the so-called “Qumran scribal practice,” the connection between the cave finds and the Khirbet Qumran site, and the distribution of texts in the caves. His nuanced conclusion is that although the scrolls do reflect a coherent Jewish movement “none of these material-scribal features that connect the various Qumran scroll caches entails either a common life-setting for all the scrolls or that the scrolls’ discovery context is coterminous with their functional life-setting.” The implication of this conclusion is that “these material connections does not in itself justify the inference that the scrolls disclose life at Qumran and the outlook of those who lived it” (58). His essential conclusion is that “we cannot actually know how and why the scrolls came to be at Qumran.” This however, should not be considered a *problem*. Rather, “by remaining agnostic with regard to the claims of the Qumran-Essene hypothesis, we place ourselves in a position to know more about ancient Jewish peoples’ encounters with their writings” (p. 82). Norton’s lengthy, learned essay represents something of a ground-clearing exercise. As he concludes:

The very particular and highly-invested concept of library outlined here tends to diminish the informative value of the scrolls for illuminating their own context. If we allow one hypothesis to dictate such a narrow picture of the people who wrote, kept and used the scrolls, then the danger remains that the scrolls only illuminate the interior of our hypothesis and not much else” (84).

His conclusions, thus, coincides with the growing compromise-view that the connection between the caves and site is not so certain as once assumed, and the identification of the site’s occupants with the Essenes is not iron-clad either. Rather than speaking to ancient practices of reading and writing, per se, Norton attempts to show that a more agnostic view on the life-setting of the scrolls has greater potential to yield new evidence about reading and writing, evidence that is not constrained by predetermined conclusions.

All three essays in *Part 2* represent correctives of one sort or another. Though in broad terms they fundamentally agree with commonly held scholarly positions, they serve

as cautions and correctives. All three warn against *unexamined associations* of one sort of another: associating the ancient physicalities of writing with our own; associating 4QBerakhot with the covenant-renewal liturgy mentioned in 1QS; or associating the Dead Sea Scrolls' physical setting and their functional life-setting. Just considering these three associations, our writers show how they have led to unproven (if not doubtful) conclusions, and they caution against scholarly hubris. Not only do we not know as much as we suppose about ancient practices of reading and writing, but we do not know as much as we suppose about the ways that we make associations and reach conclusions.

*Part 3* turns to the theme *The New Testament and Practices of Reading and Reusing Jewish Scripture*. The first essay, by Susan Docherty, addresses the topic "Exegetical Methods in the New Testament and 'Rewritten Bible': A Comparative Analysis."<sup>1</sup> Since no systematic investigation of this kind has been undertaken to date, Docherty's essay represents a "map" of "potential avenues for further exploration." For this initial exploration, she focuses on Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* (designated *L.A.B.*). Docherty notes, almost immediately, that scholarship has focused on *exegetical traditions* common to the New Testament writings and rewritten bible texts, traditions like the belief that the Mosaic law was given through angels, the atoning value of the aborted sacrifice of Isaac and that of Jesus of Nazareth, conception and birth stories of central figures like Moses and Samson as compared with Jesus, and so forth. Comparison of the *exegetical methods* employed in the two corpora, however, remains at a very early stage. Among the few scholars to attempt something in this direction are Richard Bauckham, Craig Evans, Eckart Reinmuth, Marko Jauhiainen, and Beate Kowalksi. This, Docherty argues, is where significant advances can be made. She identifies seven 'exegetical methods' shared by the NT and *L.A.B.*: "citations containing direct speech [from HB]," "direct citations in speeches," "scriptural allusions in speeches and prayers," "repeated citations," "textual proximity as a relevant factor for interpretation," "fulfillment' of scripture," and "prominence of reference to Genesis." Not all of these are of a kind, of course, as Docherty points out. Nor are these 'techniques' unique to rewritten bible. They are evident within other genres of early Jewish interpretation, such as the *pesharim*, targumim and midrashim. Nonetheless, less attention has been paid to exegetical similarities between rewritten bible and the NT, and Docherty calls for more detailed analysis of the precise interpretative techniques employed in rewritten bible, and comparison with the writings of the New Testament.

In his essay titled "The *Vorlage* of the Deuteronomy Quotations Common to the *Corpus Philonicum* and Paul's Letter to the Romans," Gert Steyn begins with the observation that the book of Hebrews and Philo not only share many quotations of the Torah in common, but they have the same text form, a text form that deviates from the readings of the MT and from the Greek versions. This inevitably raises the question whether Hebrews and Philo might share a common LXX *Vorlage* of the Torah. Steyn explores this question further, widening the investigation to consider commonalities between Torah quotations in the epistle to the Romans and in Philo. Steyn examines three quotations that appear in Romans and Philo: Deut 29:4, 30:12-14, 32:34-36. These cases are

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<sup>1</sup> "Rewritten Bible," "Rewritten scripture," or just "rewriting" is a contested category. Which texts can be so classified and whether or not they share enough literary conventions to constitute a genre is debated. Docherty includes (at least) Genesis Apocryphon (1Q20), *Jubilees*, the *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo, and Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* in the category.

complicated by the fact that Paul conflates phrases from several scriptural verses when he quotes. He also, at times, incorporates motifs from his own writings into his quotations. Steyn concludes that Paul's quotation of Deut 29:4 and the accompanying exegesis are "midrashic" at least in so far a midrash can be defined as an "argumentative form, usually consisting of a main text that is explained and interpreted by secondary texts." Philo, however, adheres more closely to the wording and spirit of the LXX. Paul's adapted quotation of Deut 30:12-14 and those of Philo, who quotes the same verses on three occasions, are more closely aligned, but again Philo shows more fidelity to the LXX than does Paul. In the case of Deut 32:34-16, the Philo's reading corresponds to the LXX, whereas Paul's corresponds to the MT (and Heb 10:30). Paul and Philo, in these three cases anyway, do not appear to share a common *Vorlage*. But they do manifest a shared consciousness of the importance of these passages and of their interpretations. Philo and Paul, in this sense, drink from the same Second Temple Jewish well. Steyn concludes, from this, that Paul's arguments, whether directed toward a Jewish, Gentile, or mixed group, would have appealed to those who stood "close to the Jewish tradition" (115). Further, Steyn asks "whether the ... quotations of Philo might be closer to the text of the Old Greek Version of the Pentateuch, whereas those of Paul might be closer to that of the Antiochene text of the LXX." The sample is too small for conclusive results, but they do seem to gesture in this direction (116).

**Martin Karrer** turns his attention to quotations of the Jewish Scriptures in the words of Jesus. His essay "Scriptural Quotations in the Jesus Tradition and Early Christianity: Textual History and Theology" winds its way through an array of related topics and issues: quotations in the NT, "peculiarities" of the major manuscripts, the history of the Jesus tradition, and recensions and stylistic phenomena in the transmission of the Septuagint. These four intertwined pathways – after close scrutiny of particular examples and evidence – lead Karrer to four interlaced conclusions. First, not only did Jesus and his followers know the Jewish scriptures well, they also access to manuscripts of the books that later became the Septuagint or the Hebrew Bible. Second, in defiance of one popular consensus in NT scholarship, Karrer shows that some of these quotations were based on Aramaic or Hebrew texts, the most celebrated example of which is Jesus' cry on the cross. (He quickly qualifies that the great majority of quotations in the Jesus tradition most-closely represent the Greek scriptural witnesses.) Thus, while the Greek versions were the most widely utilized sources for the NT authors, one cannot entirely ignore Hebrew and Aramaic. Third, the first Christian writers made use of all the extant Greek versions of their day: OG, manuscripts influenced by *kaige*, Antiochene-Lucianic forms, and prototypes of 'The Three' (Theodotion, Symmachus, Aquila). Charting the history of early Christian textual-reuse can provide essential information about the textual history of the Greek traditions. Fourth, Karrer concludes that there was no reverse-influence between the NT and the Greek versions. That is, quotations in the New Testament normally did not influence the Septuagint. This conclusion increases the relevance of the data provided by NT quotations regarding the textual history of the Greek versions. These four conclusions, Karrer contends, call for further examination of the precise form(s) of all early Christian quotations of the Jewish scriptures. The evidence of which is essential to understanding early Christianity's Jewish Hellenistic context, the theology of Greek scriptures and NT alike, and the history of the Greek versions in the first centuries of the Common Era.

Paul Sloan discusses Zech 13:7-14:5 as an “interpretive framework” for Mark 13 in his essay “The Return of the Shepherd.” Sloan’s attention is drawn, in particular, to Mark 13:26: “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.” Sloan sides with the traditional interpretation of the verse as a reference to Jesus’ future *parousia*, against Caird, Wright, McKnight, France and others who dispute the traditional reading. Overlooked in this debate, according to Sloan, is the conflate allusion to Dan 7:13 and Zech 14:5 in the verse. The allusion to Dan 7:13 is widely recognized. The allusion to Zech 14:5 is less so. Sloan contends that the Gospel author read Zech 13:7-14:5 as an oracle about the eschaton. Moreover, due to additional lexical and thematic correspondences between the two (including the observation that Mark 13 and Zech 13:7-14:5 manifest a shared sequence of elements that is too similar to be coincidental), he concludes that it is Zech that is the “operative text” (144) for Mark 13, not Dan 7:13. The “coming” in Mark 13:26, then, refers not to Daniel – which might be a reference to an enthronement or ascension, in any case – but to Zechariah’s “divine advent.” Thus, he concludes “Mark 13 expands the scheme contained in Zechariah 13-14, using the latter as its framing source, and conclude that Mark 13:26, like 8:38, refers to what is classically called Jesus’ ‘second coming’” (153).

In the final chapter of Part 3, “The Hybrid Isaiah Quotation in Luke 4:18-19,” Joseph Lear Jr examines the story of Jesus’ synagogue reading in Nazareth, in which he announces the fulfillment of Isa 4:18-19. After itemizing differences between Jesus’ quotation and the Greek versions (including plusses, minuses and substitutions), Lear observes that the quote is actually a hybrid of Isa 61:1-2 and 58:6. This insight is not new, but Lear shows that Lukan scholars cannot agree why Luke has omitted “to heal those broken in heart” from Isa 61:1 and “the day of vengeance, to comfort all those who mourn” from Isa 61:2, why he included the line “to send those who are oppressed into liberty” from Isa 58:6, nor why the final verb of the quotation was changed from *κηρύσσω* (Isa 61:2) to *καλέω*. Lear proposes that the change is aesthetic: to create verbal parallelisms between the final four phrases in the quotation. Rather than disrupting Isa 61:1-2, these changes were careful to preserve “the meaning of the original” Isaiah 61:1-2. In the context of Luke’s gospel, the quotation is connected to the theme of sonship, the broader theme of this and the surrounding pericopae. Lear has deviated from Lukan scholarship (broadly understood) by arguing that Luke was *not* willing to sacrifice the sense of his source text to serve his own literary and theological purposes. Textual change, he argues, is not necessarily indicative of semantic change. More than this, Lear argues that Luke goes out of his way to replicate Hebrew poetic aesthetics, preserving the character of his source, not just its meaning.

Each chapter in this section has a fine-grained focus, considering a single quotation or a few quotations of the Hebrew scriptures. Nonetheless, each has implications that nuance our understanding early Christian scriptural reuse more broadly. Steyn and Karrer remind us of and add to the slowly emerging, highly complex picture of the precise text form(s) of quotations employed by specific authors or works – a topic not infrequently dismissed by breezy assertions that NT authors quoted whimsically or faultily, and that they only quoted from the Greek version(s), however understood. Sloan and Lear each marshal an apologetic for the NT writers. Sloan asserts that the writer of Mark 13 had a high respect for the structure and sense of Zechariah 13:7-14:5 and even adopted its organizational and thematic shape. Lear contends, similarly, that Luke’s writer(s) maintained the aesthetic and semantic integrity of Isa 61:1-2 and 58:6, even while altering their graphic representation. All four essays eschew popular generalizations about the

NT's reuse of the Hebrew scriptures and increase the volume of current calls for more complex, more flexible portraits of early Christian reading practices.

*Part 4, Reading Scripture in Rabbinic Judaism*, begins with **Willem Smelik's** "United in Adam We Stand: A Single, Huge, Aramaic Spoken Heretic. Sequences of Adam's Creation in Early Rabbinic Literature." God, we are told in Gen 1, created humans after his own likeness. From this, Jewish exegetes implied that the first human was "an androgyne as huge as its own Maker" (168). Adam's vast size was surrendered when he sinned, and the myth of his original size and its loss is perceptible in certain rabbinic texts, three of which are examined by Smelik: *m. San.* 4:5, *t. San.* 8, and *b. San.* 38b. "The way these latter [two] texts select and sequence, and thereby resignify and embed these Adamic traditions, is the subject of the present essay" (169). In particular, Smelik identifies and explores two phenomena that effected the reception of the First Adam tradition: the selective use of circulating traditions, which were transmitted in blocks, and their reuse and adaptation in subsequent rabbinic texts (191-193). *Mishna Sanhedrin* 4:5 includes two interpretations of Gen 4:10 and four reasons for Adam's unique creation. The interpretations of Gen 4:10 are brought to bear on *halakic* concerns regarding evidence offered in capital cases. In the two interpretations, we see how elements of the First Adam myth were "marshalled for good effect as raw material, realigned to serve new purposes, divested of their original impetus" (192). In *Bavli Sanhedrin* 38b, traditions about the First Adam (attributed to Rav Yehuda) have been neatly and intricately woven together. In their new garb, these traditions correspond to the four reasons that the *mishna* gave for creating Adam as a solitary being. The new text is no longer a speculation about the creation of the First Adam or a *halakic* supplement but a homily on *m. San.* 4:5, Gen 1:26-27 and Psalm 139, providing the Adam myth with another new function. From all this, Smelik draws important conclusions about the evolution of several intertwined texts and ideas, including God's desire to create humans and sustenance of them, the likeness of God in humans, and the singularity of God.

"The Variant reading וְלוֹ / וְלוֹא of Psalm 139:16 in Rabbinic Literature" by **Dagmar Börner-Klein** begins with the observation that despite persistent assertions that the rabbis made exclusive use of the MT (or nearly exclusive) variant readings are well known the Rabbinic literature (per Abulafia, ibn Labrat, Seeligmann, Aptowitz, Levy, Teeter, etc.). She then turns to the variant וְלוֹ / וְלוֹא in Psalm 139:16: "Your eyes saw my unformed substance; and in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them [וְלוֹא]/ when he (or 'it') was one of them [וְלוֹ]. Not just an oral variant, the reading וְלוֹ is already attested in 11QPsa<sup>a</sup> and appears as a marginal reading in the Aleppo and Leningrad codices. Whether this reading was known to the rabbis or invented by them independently, it resolves the difficulty in understanding the last line of v. 16. The reading וְלוֹ is employed in Midrash Tanchuma, Yalkut Shimoni, and *S. Eli. Rab.* 1-2. The reading is also discussed by the medievals David Kimḥi and Jehuda he-Ḥassid. Her analysis underlines and supports the conclusion that, for the rabbis, a variant was not correct-or-error, original-or-secondary, as a modern text-critic might conclude. A variant is, in the plain sense of the phrase, a variant *reading*. Börner-Klein cites Seeligmann in conclusion "Midrashim which are built on readings of the Bible text apparently deviating from MT are of particular interest and of no small importance for the history of the Biblical text."

The third and final essay in Part 4 is **Abraham Berkovitz**' "Jewish and Christian Exegetical Controversy in Late Antiquity: The Case of Psalm 22 and the Esther Narrative." Berkovitz discusses the Jewish anti-Christian polemical identification of Psalm 22 with Esther and the Purim narrative. Studies to date focus on Midrash Tehillim (Menn, Tkacz, Dorival), and Berkovitz expands upon these studies by including earlier rabbinic materials that link Esther and Purim to Psalm 22. Christian exegetes saw in Psa 22 a prefiguration of the Passion story. Beginning in the late second century, Jews were already linking Psa 22 with Esther as a counter-reading. In one interpretive stream, the voice of the psalm was identified with Esther who "acquired the role of a true Jewish Christ, vitiating Jesus' claim to that title" (219). Other Late Antique sources went further, equating Haman with Jesus and the enemies of Esther with their Christian neighbors. In this way, Esther and Psalm 22 provided templates for Jews define their relationship with Christianity. As Berkovitz concludes, "These texts attest to the rise of a Jewish Passion counter-narrative featuring Esther simultaneously as a type and countertype of Christ. These rabbinic comments belong to a larger trend beginning in the third century – earlier than scholars have previously recognized – and culminating in the eleventh-century Midrash Tehillim" (219).

The three essays that make up Part 4 explore rabbinic reading strategies and exegetical techniques. Smelik describes the exegetical redeployment of the First Adam tradition and the role it plays in different social contexts and in the development of several related theological debates. Börner-Klein seconds proposals that emphasize the importance of variant readings in rabbinic exegetical activity and Berkovitz establishes the antiquity of Jewish polemical readings of Psa 22. All three highlight the sophistication and nuance of rabbinic techniques and strategies, and all three challenge particular trends in current scholarship. Smelik challenges ideas that rabbinic exegetical writings can be characterized by incoherence of ideas or composition. Even seemingly aggregated texts can be the product of careful rewriting and revision. Börner-Klein challenges assumptions about a fixed-form for the rabbinic scriptures and the nature of variants for rabbinic writings, and Berkovitz challenges those who see Christian-Jewish polemical exegesis as a (more-or-less) medieval phenomenon.

The essays collected here cover a variety of times, places, and religious communities, as well as many different facets of the encounter with the Hebrew Scriptures in antiquity. Despite this, they possess an unexpected unity. All the essays challenge scholarly assumptions or 'popular' academic wisdom in one way or another. They refine our understanding of the culture of writing and writtenness that characterizes Second Temple communities, and they correct a number assumptions and methodological infelicities, guiding future researchers toward firm and fruitful ground.