



---

When Did the Gospels Become Scripture?

Author(s): D. Moody Smith

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 119, No. 1 (Spring, 2000), pp. 3-20

Published by: [The Society of Biblical Literature](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3267965>

Accessed: 06/04/2012 10:18

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*The Society of Biblical Literature* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Biblical Literature*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## WHEN DID THE GOSPELS BECOME SCRIPTURE?

D. MOODY SMITH  
Duke University, Durham, NC 27708

In teaching NT Introduction, I am fond of saying that the authors of NT books would have had no inkling that their writings would become part of something called the New Testament or the Christian Bible, which did not reach exactly its present form until the fourth century. Matthew did not know that his Gospel would begin the NT, although he would be happy to discover that it does. It is well suited for that position and purpose. John did not know that his Gospel would stand in the NT alongside three other, Synoptic Gospels, and that it would be the fourth, presumably to be read after the others. Some exegetes believe that John was actually written with the others in view, but that premise creates as many problems of interpretation as it resolves.<sup>1</sup> However that may be, the presumption of a historical distance, and consequent difference of purpose, between the composition of the NT writings and their incorporation into a canon of scripture is representative of our discipline.

The question When did the Gospels become scripture? is certainly not a new one. Understandably, it is ordinarily construed as a question about the formation of the canon, in this case particularly the four-Gospel canon. The latter question is important, interesting, and the subject of recent, relevant discussions. For example, in his 1996 S.N.T.S. presidential address Graham Stanton argued that the four-Gospel canon was formed sooner rather than later in the second century.<sup>2</sup> More radically, David Trobisch has proposed that the entire NT as we know it was actually assembled, redacted, and published in the latter

Presidential Address delivered at the 1999 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>1</sup> See the summary of this century's scholarly discussion and debate in my *John among the Gospels: The Relationship in Twentieth-Century Research* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). Needless to say, the debate goes on, but perhaps at a less frenetic pace.

<sup>2</sup> Graham N. Stanton, "The Fourfold Gospel," *NTS* 43 (1997) 317–46.

half of the second century.<sup>3</sup> John Barton has argued that by that time the principal elements of the NT were already functioning as scripture, if not referred to as such.<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, any discussion of canon or scripture stands on the shoulders of such contemporary figures as James Barr, Brevard S. Childs, and James A. Sanders, not to mention Bruce M. Metzger.<sup>5</sup> Their contributions and such proposals as I have just mentioned are significant as well as fascinating to me, but I want to pursue a somewhat different tack.

For the purposes of our discussion I accept the distinction between canon and scripture (as set out, for example, by William A. Graham and now widely accepted).<sup>6</sup> Obviously “canon” presumes “scripture,” that is, the recognition of certain writings as possessing peculiar status or importance. “Scripture” means “texts that are revered as especially sacred and authoritative.”<sup>7</sup> “Canon” refers to the delimitation of such texts. Significantly, “canon” (κανὼν) is not used of sacred writings in the NT, but “scripture” (γραφή) of course is. In most, but not all, cases, “scripture” clearly refers to what Christians call the Old Testament. The existence of scripture as well as canon implies the existence of a religious community that accords status and authority to certain texts. It goes without saying that the community in question believes that such status and authority actually belong to, adhere in, the text because of its subject matter, God in relation to human beings.

The authors of the NT books refer to scripture, but—we have assumed—do not think of themselves as writing scripture. We are accustomed to thinking of the Gospels as well as the Epistles as occasional documents generated in specific times and places to address issues of such times and places.<sup>8</sup> Of course,

<sup>3</sup> David Trobisch, *Die Endredaktion des Neuen Testaments: Eine Untersuchung zur Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (NTOA; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, Switzerland, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> John Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text: The Canon in Early Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> The contributions of these scholars are too numerous to enumerate here; I mention representative works that have been important to me: James Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983); Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972). For the history of the development of the canon and related matters I rely on Metzger's *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> William A. Graham, “Scripture,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Mircea Eliade; New York: Macmillan, 1987) 13.142.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>8</sup> “Hence the Gospels, no less than the letters of Paul, are occasional documents, composed in and directed toward specific and local constituencies,” writes Harry Y. Gamble, Jr., who in so saying succinctly sums up the widely held assumption on which much recent Gospel interpretation is based. See his article “Christianity: Scripture and Canon,” in *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective* (ed. Frederick M. Denney and Rodney L. Taylor; Studies in Comparative Religion;

one generally acknowledges that the letters of the apostle Paul were the means of his apostolic presence among his churches, in which they would have been read aloud (1 Thess 5:27; Col 4:16; cf. 2 Cor 10:9–10). 2 Peter 3:15–16 suggests that they were regarded as scripture before there was a NT. The same may also be true of the Gospels, although that is more difficult to document. From Justin Martyr (*First Apology* 67) we learn that at least by mid-second century “the memoirs of the apostles” (i.e., Gospels) were read with the prophets at Sunday services. Justin’s description implies that they were functioning as scripture although neither term (Gospels or scripture) is used. Quite possibly this practice was established well before the time of Justin. To go back even a step further, G. D. Kilpatrick and Michael Goulder have maintained that the Gospel of Matthew was composed for year-round public reading in the service of worship.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Philip Carrington has argued a similar thesis for Mark, namely, that it corresponded to a primitive Christian calendar.<sup>10</sup> Obviously,

---

Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985) 41. But Gamble then adds: “It was somewhat contrary to their actual character as interpretations of the Jesus-traditions that the Gospels came to be valued first as historical records, and not as scripture” (p. 42). He then instances Justin Martyr’s references to the Gospels as “memoirs” or “reminiscences” of the apostles (57 n. 16). Moreover, Gamble has evidently continued to reflect on the matter (see below, n. 11).

Reflecting on the purpose of the Gospels in his magisterial *Formation of the Christian Bible* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1972) 122, Hans von Campenhausen writes: “As regards the formation of the Canon, the only question of interest is whether, and if so in what way, the authors of the Gospels invested their works with a claim which did not simply assert the independent authority attaching to any genuine tradition but demanded special status for this particular book. In the case of the traditional Four this never happens. The majority of them are completely silent concerning what it was that made them undertake their task, or the importance and function of their work.” Actually, only Matthew and Mark are silent. Luke is quite explicit (1:1–3) and John is scarcely silent (21:24–25)

<sup>9</sup> G. D. Kilpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950) esp. 72–100, on “The Liturgical Character of the Gospels”; see also M. D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974), who regards Matthew as a midrashic expansion of Mark, parallel to Chronicles’ relation to Kings (esp. pp. 3–9), intended to be read around the church’s year (pp. 182–83). Both Kilpatrick and Goulder set Matthew against the background of Jewish synagogue worship practice.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Carrington argues in detail that Mark was composed as Gospel lessons for a church year (*The Primitive Christian Calendar: A Study in the Making of the Marcan Gospel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952]). W. D. Davies does not accept Carrington’s arguments, but, referring to Kilpatrick on Matthew, believes his general thesis regarding the influence of liturgical practice worthy of further consideration (“Reflections on Archbishop Carrington’s ‘The Primitive Christian Calendar,’” in *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology: In Honour of C. H. Dodd* [ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956] 124–52, esp. 148).

Paul F. Bradshaw rightly emphasizes the paucity of evidence for the first century, or NT period, and rejects as without adequate foundation the work of Carrington, Goulder, and Kilpatrick, among others (*The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* [New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992] 30–56). Certainly he

external evidence is lacking, but no less so than in the case of hypothetical Gospel sources (Q; the  $\sigma\mu\epsilon\iota\alpha$ -source) or earlier traditions (as delineated by form criticism). In fact, the commonly accepted hypothesis that such materials were employed in preaching or catechesis already implies their authoritative character. The leap from such uses in the fifties to the reading of the Gospels in church worship a hundred years later is a reasonable one, even if we cannot document the earlier stages. Probably an intermediate stage would have been the use of only one Gospel as the authoritative document of a particular church (or churches). Thus, as tradition holds, Mark in Rome or John in Ephesus.

If the Gospels were composed for reading in worship services, they were likely intended for concrete church settings. Yet their use year-round would imply that they were conceived to address a general or broad range of needs rather than specific internal crises or issues.

In fact, the generally held presumption that the Gospels, like the Epistles, were written for individual Christian communities to address their specific situations or needs has recently been sharply questioned by Richard Bauckham.<sup>11</sup> He points out that the possibility that any of the Gospels was written for a broader, general Christian audience is seldom entertained, much less embraced, in contemporary Gospel scholarship. Acknowledging that each of the Gospels would have been affected by the circumstances of its origin, Bauckham argues that this does not mean they were addressed to those circumstances primarily. He goes on to suggest that they were intended for Christians generally.

Bauckham raises the question of whether we too easily take for granted the time-and-place-specific purpose and character of the Gospels. His thesis is worth serious consideration, but rather than engage it directly I want to pursue a similar interest and sense of the nature of the Gospels in a somewhat different way by asking the parallel but related question: Did the authors of the Gospels intend to write scripture? To answer that they did would not, of course, imply

---

is correct in his judgment that the evidence is too slim and too ambiguous to allow for persuasive reconstructions of earliest worship practice. (This is, as he observes, as problematic for early Judaism as for ancient Christianity.) On the other hand, if one asks for what purpose were the Gospels written or what function did they fulfill, one can scarcely exclude public reading in services of worship as a likely possibility; perhaps the most likely possibility in light of the evidence of Justin Martyr and our best estimate of the function of pre-Gospel sources and traditions.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Bauckham, "For Whom Were the Gospels Written?" in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (ed. R. Bauckham; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 9–48. D. N. Peterson also objects to the assumption that Gospels, particularly Mark, not only arose from, but were addressed to, a specific early Christian setting. See his Duke University Ph.D. dissertation (1995), "The Origins of Mark: The Marcan Community in Current Debate."

On the wider intended audience of Gospels, see also Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1995) 102–3, as well as Barton, who contemplates the possibility that John and Matthew were composed as scripture (*Holy Writings*, 25).

that they were writing for the NT canon, whose existence they could have scarcely foreseen. Whether they did or did not should be approached on the basis of an examination of the form and content of the Gospels, as well as their broader literary and historical context within ancient Judaism and early Christianity. As we shall see, there is no single or simple answer, but the pursuit of the question I find fascinating.

I am well aware that the question of definition—beyond the quite general one offered by William Graham—remains largely outstanding. Yet that is one of those questions that, like most important questions, looks simpler at first glance than on close examination. As Graham says, “the term *scripture* is commonly used as though it designated a self-evident and simple religious phenomenon readily identifiable . . .,” but in the next sentence he concludes that “*scripture* is a term of considerable ambiguity and complexity.”<sup>12</sup>

We do not have a more precise definition of scripture ready at hand, although our ancient Christian sources seem to assume that readers know what scripture is. In our own exploration we may be able to see better how scripture was understood in the early church and by certain NT writers. I propose now to do two things: first, to look at the Gospels themselves in order to ask how or in what sense they qualify as scripture and, indeed, whether they were intended as scripture; second, to ask whether the results of this survey of the Gospels correlate positively with developments in the Jewish matrix of early Christianity: Was Jewish scripture still being written?

## I

We may start with the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew begins with a genealogy that sets Jesus in the context and lineage of the Davidic monarchy. In doing so, Matthew makes clear that Jesus represents the restoration of that dynasty and therefore of the history of Israel and the history of salvation. Thus Jesus continues the biblical narrative. Moreover, the genealogy itself is a biblical genre or form, characteristic of Hebrew scripture, although there are parallels outside the Bible and Judaism.<sup>13</sup> Thus, 1 Chronicles begins with a nine-chapter genealogy. The narrative of Jesus’ birth is then punctuated by scriptural prophecies, which, interestingly enough, are not introduced as scripture—as if scripture were in a different category from this Gospel—but as what was spoken by the prophets. (Jesus himself later, and appropriately, refers or alludes to

<sup>12</sup> Graham, “Scripture,” 133.

<sup>13</sup> See William S. Kurz, “Luke 3:23–38 and Greco-Roman and Biblical Genealogies,” in *Luke-Acts: New Perspectives from the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar* (ed. C. H. Talbert; New York: Crossroad, 1984) 169–87; also Gerard Mussies, “Parallels to Matthew’s Version of the Pedigree of Jesus,” *NovT* 28 (1986) 32–47. For the biblical and Jewish milieu, Marshall D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies: With Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus* (2d ed.; SNTSMS 8; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

scripture, e.g., 21:16; 21:42; etc.) Of course, all the Gospels at one point or another refer to scripture, meaning Jewish scripture or the OT.

That Matthew's Gospel is intended to be a definitive presentation of Jesus, particularly in the five thematic discourses of his teaching, scarcely requires demonstration. Probably those five discourses are intended to correspond to the five books of Moses, as Jesus himself seems to fulfill, or supersede, the role of Moses, whose status is not denied but revised.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the concluding promise of Jesus covers the history of salvation from his departure to the end (28:20). The definitive revelation has now been given, and nothing new or different is to be expected.

In their ICC commentary, W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison infer from the apparently intentional scriptural analogies, especially the genealogy, that Matthew probably conceived "his gospel as a continuation of the biblical history—and also, perhaps, that he conceived of his work as belonging to the same literary category as the scriptural cycles treating of OT figures." Moreover, βίβλος γενέσεως is the author's deliberate evocation of the Genesis narrative, to which he intends to offer a counterpart.<sup>15</sup>

In describing Matthew to beginning students as an effort to continue the biblical history (Davies and Allison), one must make clear that it is only one possible continuation of that story, and a distinctively Christian one at that. Another continuation of the biblical story may be found, for example, in 1 Maccabees, whose author also writes in a scriptural style: "In those days certain renegades came out from Israel and misled many, saying, 'Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles around us, for since we separated from them many disasters have come upon us'" (1 Macc 1:11). One could cite many other examples. Of course, 1 Maccabees deals with a period nearly two centuries before the appearance of Jesus, so Matthew and 1 Maccabees are not mutually exclusive continuations of the biblical story. (1 Maccabees has accordingly been preserved among Christian versions of the OT.) Nevertheless, 1 Maccabees is far more obviously a continuation of the biblical (OT) story than is Matthew a continuation of the story of the Hasmonean era. 1 Maccabees hardly anticipates Matthew (as Isaiah may be construed to). The principal point, however, is that 1 Maccabees does continue the biblical story in a recognizably similar narrative genre and style, even as Matthew does. More than one author seems to be writing "scripture" in the postbiblical period.

Something similar could be said of Luke, whose biblical, Septuagintal

<sup>14</sup> See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (ICC; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988–97) 1.423–24.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 187; cf. pp. 149–55 on βίβλος γενέσεως as a title. On the scriptural qualities of Matthew, as well as the other Synoptic Gospels, see E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989) 258–64 (Matthew), 270–75 (Mark), 290–96 (Luke).

phrasing has often been noticed.<sup>16</sup> For example, Luke (2:1), like the author of 1 Maccabees (1:11), writes “in those days,” in apparent imitation of the biblical style (cf. Judg 21:25). The opening narratives of Jesus’ birth and childhood, where Luke is relatively free to compose, are through and through biblical in style and content. Mary’s response to the annunciation (1:47–55) is, of course, a recapitulation of Hannah’s prayer in 1 Sam 2:1–10. Thus, Luke in ways different from Matthew’s deliberately imitates or parallels scriptural style. Moreover, Luke, like Matthew, uses the opening, infancy narratives to establish Jesus’ continuity with biblical history. Salvation history continues with Jesus. At the end, on the road to Emmaus, the disciples express the disappointed hope that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel (24:21; cf. Acts 1:6). Needless to say, Luke’s intention is taken up and brought to a kind of culmination in the book of Acts, as he extends the narrative beyond Jesus into the mission of the church, which does not contradict, but fulfills, the hope of Israel.<sup>17</sup>

Did Luke intend to write scripture? A recent commentator has put it this way: “Luke sees his writings as a continuation of the scriptural story. . . . The Lukan evangelist is a writer of Scripture, a hagiographer who is proclaiming what ‘God has accomplished among us.’”<sup>18</sup> His prefaces (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–2) may have led us to put him into the same category as Josephus and Hellenistic historians generally rather than the writers of scripture. Of course, Josephus thought of himself as an inspired author,<sup>19</sup> and he rewrites biblical history as well as narrating the postbiblical period. Sirach too begins with a preface (albeit by a later hand) which also accounts for the origin of the book. Probably Luke’s preface gives some indication of the situation he faced and the use he anticipated for his own Gospel. Yet it does not necessarily imply that he intended to write history and not scripture.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps he intended to do both.

<sup>16</sup> On Lukan style, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)* (AB 28; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981) 107–27, esp. 113–22 on the relation to biblical, particularly Septuagintal, style.

<sup>17</sup> See David Ravens, *Luke and the Restoration of Israel* (JSNTSup 119; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

<sup>18</sup> Craig A. Evans, “Luke and the Rewritten Bible: Aspects of Lukan Hagiography,” in *The Pseudepigrapha and Early Biblical Interpretation* (ed. James H. Charlesworth and C. A. Evans; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 200–201. In a footnote (n. 73) Evans continues: “Simply put, Luke may have thought that Luke-Acts belongs in the *Old Testament*, not some sort of *New Testament*.” See also David P. Moessner, *Lord of the Banquet: The Literary and Theological Significance of the Lukan Travel Narrative* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 325; as well as William S. Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts: Dynamics of Biblical Narrative* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 159–66.

<sup>19</sup> See David E. Aune, “Charismatic Exegesis in Early Judaism and Early Christianity,” in *The Pseudepigrapha and Early Biblical Interpretation* (ed. James H. Charlesworth and C. A. Evans; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 138.

<sup>20</sup> See Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke’s Gospel: Literary convention and social context in Luke 1.1–4 and Acts 1.1* (SNTSMS 78; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), whose extensive canvassing of ancient sources calls any such easy generalization into question. She



Obviously he intended to supersede Mark, as well as whatever other Gospels, or Gospel-like writings, he knew. Matthew's appropriation of 90 percent of Mark indicates that he had the same intention—to displace Mark. (Evidently, Matthew, as well as Luke, did not regard Mark as scripture.)

But how was Mark by then actually functioning? As scripture? It is remarkable and significant that Mark was used independently by Matthew and Luke, who apparently composed their Gospels in different Christian centers. Quite possibly Mark was read aloud in the churches of Matthew and Luke. Whether or not Mark was written for a general Christian audience, it obviously found such a broader usage. It seems to have functioned as scripture early on.

Arguably, both Matthew and Luke rewrite, augment, and re-present the Markan narrative to produce documents better suited to function as scripture for Christian audiences generally. Sometimes Matthew and Luke's common omissions of Markan materials serve such a purpose. Thus they both excise the names of the sons of Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21), which evidently were significant for Mark's audience but not for a more general one. They both excise the strange narrative of the young man's fleeing naked in the night at Jesus' arrest (Mark 14:51–52), which may have puzzled them as much as it has puzzled us. They both omit Mark's concluding statement that the women at the tomb said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid (16:8). How then could the narrative continue? And for both Matthew and Luke it is important that this biblical, scriptural narrative continue.

In what sense does Mark think the scriptural (OT) narrative should or would continue? Of course, Mark presents Jesus as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy from the outset of his own narrative (1:2-3).<sup>21</sup> Yet Mark is not nearly so explicit as Matthew and Luke about how Jesus represents the continuation of the biblical story. In fact, it is also much less clear how Jesus' messiahship is understood, despite the importance of the title of Christ in Mark (1:1; 8:29; 14:61–62). Even, and particularly, the high priest's and the council's reactions to Jesus' positive answer to the question of whether he was the Messiah imply a Christian rather than a Jewish conception of messiahship, that is, Christology rather than messianism. Curiously, despite having been addressed as Son of David (Mark 10:47–48), the Markan Jesus seems to question the Messiah's Davidic sonship (12:35–37). No doubt Mark believed Jesus was the Messiah expected by contemporary Jews, but he does not place Jesus within the framework of such expectation as carefully as do Matthew and Luke. Thus he does

---

writes: "Once the preface is over, Luke reverts with startling suddenness to a 'biblical' style with which he clearly feels much more at home" (p. 175).

<sup>21</sup> On Mark's intentional use of scripture, particularly (Deutero-)Isaiah, see Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992).

not contribute, as they do, to the articulation of the self-identity of emerging Christianity vis-à-vis Judaism.

To jump ahead for a moment, something similar is happening in the Gospel of John. In John when Jesus' Davidic lineage is challenged by some (7:42), the fourth evangelist strikingly allows their objection to go unanswered. Yet John actually pays much more attention than Mark to Jewish messianic hopes or expectations and whether or in what sense Jesus may be thought to fulfill them. As we have already suggested, both Matthew and Luke also have a great deal more to say than Mark on both counts—that is: (1) how Jesus and his following represent the continuation of the biblical narrative and (2) how or in what sense Jesus is the fulfillment of messianic expectations. Thus they remedy Mark's deficiencies and in doing so write narratives that seem better candidates to become scripture.

In this respect the character of Mark is closely related to, perhaps a result of, its apocalyptic, eschatological perspective. Mark's eschatology, which suggests to many exegetes something significant about its setting and purpose, comes to climactic expression in chap. 13.<sup>22</sup> Both Matthew and Luke take up this discourse, but for them it does not occupy so central a role.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, they alter it in significant ways. To put matters succinctly, the centrality and urgency of the expectation of the imminent future revelation of Jesus suggest that Mark does not anticipate a long shelf life for his book. Conversely, Matthew and Luke anticipate a longer shelf life for theirs. Although this state of affairs does not necessarily imply that they intended to write scripture while Mark did not, it is quite congruent with such a purpose. In their tendency to generalize Mark's narrative and thus to presume a broader horizon, both spatially and temporally, Matthew and Luke write Gospels better suited to function as scripture for Christian churches in various places.

Obviously, the eschatology of the Synoptic tradition, and that of early Christianity generally, is being revamped in John, who gives explicit indications that this is a conscious, intentional process (11:23–27; 14:22–24; 21:20–23). While their eschatologies differ, neither Mark nor John seems to fit easily into the pattern or shape of scripture understood as the ongoing saga of Israel. Both have obvious roots in, and positive contacts with, that saga.<sup>24</sup> Although both are

<sup>22</sup> The importance of the Little Apocalypse was underscored already by W. Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction History of the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969) esp. 151–206.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 190–206.

<sup>24</sup> That exegesis of this saga, its traditions and literature, is not just a postbiblical activity is the central thesis of the important work of Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985). On the use of scripture within scripture in the OT and intertestamental books, see *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture: Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars, SSF* (ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 25–83

construable as a continuation of it, neither provides as smooth a transition as do Matthew and Luke.

Continuation of the biblical narrative is not, however, an essential aspect of scripture. Obviously, the canon of both Testaments is full of books or parts of books that are not narrative. Nevertheless, the biblical narrative is the backbone of both Testaments. Although the narrative of the Tanak does not require the Gospel narrative of the NT as its completion, that narrative presupposes what has gone before. Moreover, the early Christian claim that the narrative and prophecies of old are fulfilled and continued in Jesus and the church prefigures, perhaps even demands, the production of more scripture, which will explain how this happened. Such scripture is required to explain this not first of all to outsiders but rather to Christians themselves. It becomes an essential part of their identity and self-understanding.

What about John? That the Gospel of John originated in a specific setting of dialogue and conflict between Jews who believed Jesus to be the Messiah and those who denied it with increasing vigor is now one of the more securely established results of Gospel research.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the clear evidence of the redaction, as well as recensions, of the Gospel, together with the Johannine letters and the book of Revelation (with its distinctive points of contact with the Gospel<sup>26</sup>), all suggest that the Johannine writings arose out of Christian communities involved in specific and identifiable situations and were in large measure addressed to them. And yet the Gospel of John's purpose and meaning transcend its originative situation. The farewell discourses already suggest this, as they address major, and broader, issues generally relevant to a distinctively Christian community. Certainly the Epistles reflect a different setting, but one in which the Gospel continued to be read as an authoritative document. If Raymond Brown is correct, as I think he is, 1 John not only presupposes the Gospel of John, and only John, but is engaged in an exegetical controversy over the correct interpretation of this Gospel.<sup>27</sup> This then implies that some form of the Gospel of John was, for certain circles, already functioning as scripture. That a broader audience is in view is pretty clearly indicated by chap. 21, which

---

(for OT), 99–189 (for later books). The citing of scripture as such begins in the apocryphal or deuterocanonical books but is infrequent until the NT and Qumran.

<sup>25</sup> The fundamental work remains J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (2d ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). See the important assessment of Martyn's work by John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), who calls it "probably the most important single work on the Gospel since Bultmann's commentary" (p. 107).

<sup>26</sup> On the affinities between Revelation and the Gospel and Epistles of John, see the dissertation of Jörg Frey, "Erwägungen zum Verhältnis der Johannesapokalypse zu den übrigen Schriften im Corpus Johanneum," published as an appendix to Martin Hengel, *Die johanneische Frage: Ein Lösungsversuch* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1993) 326–429.

<sup>27</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB 30; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), in my view still the most persuasive commentary on the Johannine Epistles, is based on this premise.

reestablishes Peter, and even the authority of Peter, while underscoring the independence of the Beloved Disciple, whose authority underwrites the Gospel. The colophon of the final recension of the Gospel (21:25) then speaks of “the books that would be written” and suggests that the author of chap. 21 knows of the existence of other books, presumably one or more of the Synoptics and perhaps other Gospels, which may for him count as scripture. Is there here a hint even of a Gospel canon? That is too much to claim, although the possibility is real. However that may be, the warrant for believing this Gospel as the work of the Beloved Disciple is made clear (John 21:24), and it functions very much like the preface of Luke’s Gospel, to assure the reader of the veracity and weight of what is written.

Is it the case that Luke and Matthew incorporated Mark into their Gospels with a view to writing more suitably scriptural accounts? By the same token, has John’s narrative been subjected to a similar process, which we can detect only in its redaction history? I think the answer is yes in both cases.

John’s final effect and therefore his purpose seem to be somewhat different, however, from Matthew’s and Luke’s. That John becomes scripture in the same sense, or within the same theological frame of reference, is by no means clear. No question Jesus is the Messiah of Israel (1:41, 49), the one “about whom Moses wrote in the law, as well as the prophets” (1:48). Yet such positive assertions are counterbalanced by the several references to “your law” (e.g., 8:17), namely, the law of the Jews, and by the blanket opening statement that “he came to his own home and his own people did not receive him” (1:11 RSV). Nevertheless, in John’s Gospel Jesus is a Jew (4:9); salvation is from the Jews (4:22); John the Baptist was sent to reveal Jesus to Israel (1:31). This is a complex issue, yet there is hardly the kind of continuity between Israel and Jesus, or Israel and the church through Jesus, that is found in Luke-Acts. John could scarcely have expected his work to become a part of a Jewish Bible. If it is scripture at all, it must become a part of a new covenant or New Testament. With respect to their supersessionism, John and the Epistle to the Hebrews (esp. chap. 8) seem to share common ground.

One should at this point ask also about the so-called apocryphal Gospels: Did their authors presume to be writing scripture? The fact is that in most cases we do not know enough about their content to say. The best surviving, complete exemplar is the *Gospel of Thomas*. No doubt *Thomas* presents itself as an authoritative work. It is intended to be scriptural in that sense. One could not, in the nature of the case (and because of our lack of knowledge), separate the canonical Gospels from the noncanonical on the basis of whether or not their authors conceived of their works as authoritative and thus scripture. Yet *Thomas* differs sharply from the canonical Gospels in ways that are not only obvious but significant for our question. *Thomas* is not a narrative; it could not, I think by intention, be construed as continuing the biblical story. One might

object that *Thomas* is wisdom, a biblical genre, the wisdom of Jesus, not narrative, as was the hypothetical Q source. Yet Q maintains a future, eschatological perspective that is missing from *Thomas*. Moreover, unlike Q, *Thomas* contains no explicit references to scripture.<sup>28</sup> Not only is scripture not cited; there is no indication that any scripture is presupposed. (Saying 66 reflects Psalm 118:22 but does not cite it as scripture.) There is no presumed scriptural story for which *Thomas* could present itself as the next chapter.

It is becoming obvious that the answer to the question of whether the evangelists intended to write scripture depends on what is meant by scripture. If we mean by "scripture" an authoritative document for a group of Christians, all the Gospels, including *Thomas*, were intended to be scripture. We have, however, narrowed our focus to ask whether Gospels show evidence of having been composed as specifically biblical, in the sense of Jewish or Jewish-Christian scripture. We have found reason to think that Matthew and Luke were composed to fulfill such a role. At the other end of the spectrum, apparently *Thomas* was not. *Thomas* was composed not for biblical religion but, so to speak, for another, new, esoteric religion. It presupposes neither the biblical narrative of the Hebrew scriptures nor the narrative of Jesus' ministry. (Is it perhaps telling that Jesus is not called Christ/Messiah in *Thomas*?) John and Mark fall somewhere between, if for different reasons.

Yet Mark and John have something else in common. To use terminology introduced now a generation ago, they represent parallel trajectories in Gospel development.<sup>29</sup> The Markan trajectory expands, with Mark's co-option by Matthew and Luke, into the Synoptic trajectory. The Johannine trajectory remains within what we now call the Gospel of John. The jagged edges of the Markan eschatology and Christology are smoothed out into the more scriptural narratives composed by Matthew and Luke. John continues to go its separate way, rooted in the ancient biblical narrative but affirming in ways different from Matthew and Luke that the narrative comes to a theological climax and end with Jesus. Jesus' τετέλεσται from the cross means that the narrative is finished as well. The Johannine tradition, or scripture, stands in tension with the Synoptic, even as it was placed alongside it in the developing Christian canon of the NT.

Now, as we turn away from specifically Christian developments to look briefly at the contemporary Jewish matrix or milieu against which the emergence of Christian scriptures must be seen, one other observation may be in order.

<sup>28</sup> On the influence of scripture on Q there are two important articles from a recent Louvain colloquium: C. M. Tuckett, "Scripture and Q," and Frans Neirynck, "Q6,20b-21; 7,22 and Isaiah 61," both published in *The Scriptures in the Gospels* (ed. C. M. Tuckett; BETL 131; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997) 3-26, 27-64, respectively.

<sup>29</sup> James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

I have dealt only with the Gospels. Of course, the Revelation to John insists on its right to be heard as just that—revelation—as the author warns in advance against any tampering with the authoritative book he has written (Rev 22:18–19). Strangely, or not so strangely, the first and last books of the NT present themselves as scripture. But that is a story for another day, except that it attests the existence of the idea of distinctively Christian scriptures before the end of the first century. Strikingly, the initial NT book is a Gospel that begins with a royal, Davidic genealogy and the final one is an apocalypse that characterizes itself as prophecy (1:3; 22:18). Of course, although Revelation has no explicit scriptural citation, it is replete with scriptural, especially prophetic, language. Whether or not some individual planned the NT that way (Trobisch), the meaning and significance are clear enough. Revelation implies the continuation and culmination of the biblical story.<sup>30</sup>

## II

What is happening in the NT should not surprise us, however, given what we now know about the production and use of books in intertestamental (and I use the term deliberately) Judaism. We have already noticed the scriptural character of 1 Maccabees. Of course, all the apocryphal or deuterocanonical books can by definition claim recognition as scripture in some religious communities, that is, churches in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. It is perhaps too much to claim that the pseudepigraphical books by their very ascription to ancient worthies were intended as scripture.<sup>31</sup> Yet the obvious intention of such ascriptions was to lend them authority and weight.<sup>32</sup> Thus,

<sup>30</sup> Note the bold, but in my judgment correct, assessment of Revelation by Richard Bauckham: “It is a book designed to be read in constant intertextual relationship with the Old Testament. John was writing what he understood to be a work of prophetic scripture, the climax of prophetic revelation, which gathered up the meaning of the Old Testament scriptures and disclosed the way in which it was being and was to be fulfilled in the last days” (*The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993] xi). Cf. Bauckham’s similar statement in *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 5.

<sup>31</sup> Roger Beckwith argues that the OT canon was in effect closed by the time of Jesus and the earliest church (by the time of Judas Maccabeus) (*The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and its Background in Early Judaism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986] 406) and that the pseudepigraphical books could have had little hope of gaining canonicity. On the other hand, James A. Sanders and James C. VanderKam observe the “biblical” character, as well as the ascriptions, of many pseudepigraphical books. See Sanders, “Introduction: Why the Pseudepigrapha?” and VanderKam, “Biblical Interpretation in 1 Enoch and Jubilees,” in *The Pseudepigrapha and Early Biblical Interpretation* (ed. James H. Charlesworth and C. A. Evans; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 13–19 and 19–125 respectively; see esp. p. 97. VanderKam explicitly rejects the view of Beckwith (p. 97).

<sup>32</sup> John Barton observes that ascribing pseudonymous works to ancient prophetic or similar figures was a way of claiming authority for them (*Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy*

2 Esdras speaks of ninety-four books of which only twenty-four constitute the Hebrew canon as we know it. (Of course, Jude 14–15 cites *1 Enoch* 1:9, apparently as scripture.) One major preoccupation seems to have been the retelling and rewriting of biblical history. Thus we have *Jubilees* and the *Genesis Apocryphon*. Some books such as the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* supplement the Bible. Some, the apocalypses, extend the story into the future.

The closing of the Jewish canon (traditionally associated with Jamnia in the year 90) presupposes this penumbra of Jewish books, represented at least in part by the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. The very idea of closing a canon implies the existence of claimants to be denied. By the traditional date of closure Christian Gospels had come into existence, and they—or at least some of them—looked like candidates for incorporation into a Bible as scripture—perhaps also to Jews, who would have rejected them. Whether the Gospels were among such rejected books is a fascinating question, and this has been proposed, but, as far as I can see, adequate evidence is lacking.<sup>33</sup> In any event, the Gospels were written at a time of great literary productivity within Judaism, a time when the continuing production of scripture was not unthinkable in some circles.

It is tempting to describe the postbiblical or intertestamental period as the Age of Scripture—scripture being written as well as fulfilled—and not just for nascent Christianity but for Judaism as well. In this regard the example of the Qumran community is particularly instructive. Over forty years ago Krister Stendahl noted the important phenomenological parallel between the Essenes of the Qumran community and the earliest church. Both were eschatological sects who believed themselves to be the heirs to scriptural promise and recipients of the coming messianic, eschatological salvation. Stendahl wrote: “We are now for the first time in a position where we can compare the messianic expectation of the Jewish sect called the Christians with another Jewish sect, already on the scene in the time of Jesus.”<sup>34</sup> That was in 1957. A few years later Joseph A. Fitzmyer published his analysis “The Use of Explicit Old Testament Quotations in the Qumran Literature and in the New Testament,”<sup>35</sup> in which

---

in *Israel after the Exile* [New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986] 61–62). Otherwise such ascriptions would be pointless.

<sup>33</sup> See W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966) 273–75, who accepts the arguments of K. G. Kuhn that “books of the *minim*” in rabbinic sources scarcely refers to Gospels.

<sup>34</sup> Krister Stendahl, “The Scrolls and the New Testament: An Introduction and a Perspective,” in *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (ed. K. Stendahl; New York: Harper, 1957) 7.

<sup>35</sup> *NTS* 7 (1960–61) 297–333. It is an interesting fact that, while the mode of scripture citation in the Dead Sea Scrolls closely parallels the NT, that of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha on the whole does not. See Devorah Dimant, “Use and Interpretation of Mikra in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in*

he demonstrated in detail the close affinities between the use and citation of scripture in Qumran and in the NT. It would be convenient to be able to argue that the Essenes were in the process of producing their own “New Testament” when their life was cut short. They had been assiduously preserving and copying scripture and books that might claim scriptural authority. Moreover, their *Hymns* (*Hodayot*) are expressions of a piety comparable to the canonical Psalms. The *Community Rule* is clearly authoritative for the community, although it does not have the breadth and scope of the Gospel of Matthew, which has sometimes been compared with it. From our perspective, the *Community Rule* is not naturally understood as scripture. Unlike Matthew, it does not extend the biblical narrative. It is not written in imitation of scripture, nor does it address itself to Israel generally. Moreover, it does not have the universal applicability of the wisdom books. It is clearly and by intention a sectarian document. The same could be said of the *Damascus Document*. Yet to say that a writing is sectarian does not, of course, mean that it could not be scriptural. (We are here once again coming up against the question of definition.)

Fitzmyer has observed an important difference of outlook that characterizes the NT over against the Scrolls: “The Qumran theology is still dominated by a forward look, an expectation of what is to come about in the *eschaton*, whereas the Christian theology is more characterized by a backward glance, seeing the culmination of all that has preceded in the advent of Christ.”<sup>36</sup> Perhaps it would be fair to say that the Essenes were on the verge of being able to write their New Testament, for they certainly believed themselves to be recipients of a new covenant.

As Fitzmyer realized, the difference had to do with belief, Christology, but this in turn reflected the difference in where Christians believed themselves to be in the eschatological scheme of things. A new and definitive revelation had occurred. The backward glance of Christians became increasingly a backward stare, as the difference between John’s Gospel and Mark’s shows. In fact, one could imagine that as Christians, or Jews who were becoming Christians, looked increasingly to the past they more and more felt a need to commemorate and celebrate it in worship. Thus, scripture was needed and was written. If Mark and Q (or *Thomas*) do not look so much like scripture, Matthew, Luke, and the final form of John do.

Obviously, my presumption has been that the earliest development of Christian scripture occurred in a Jewish milieu that was becoming Christian. Such a presumption makes theological and historical sense to the degree that Christian Gospels commend themselves as the continuation of biblical narra-

---

*Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. Martin Jan Mulder and Harry Sysling; CRINT 2/1; Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 379–419, esp. 384–400.

<sup>36</sup> Fitzmyer, “Use of Explicit Old Testament Quotations,” 303–4.



tive. It is not sheer coincidence that Carrington, Kilpatrick, and Goulder, who see Matthew and Mark as originating in liturgical settings—and therefore in a real sense already scriptural—all maintain that such settings had their roots in the worship of the synagogue.

### III

In conclusion, we return to the question of definition. Over a quarter of a century ago Wilfred Cantwell Smith sharply criticized the guild of biblical scholars for paying no attention to the scriptural status of the literature we study.<sup>37</sup> In a way perhaps somewhat different from what Smith anticipated I have nevertheless spoken to the broader issue he raised. Smith himself quails before the difficulty of defining scripture and complains that “probably no one on earth today quite knows what scripture ‘is’ . . .”<sup>38</sup> Yet as he had already observed, “Scripture as a form and as a concept gradually emerged and developed in the Near East in a process of consolidation whose virtually complete stage comes with the Qur’an.”<sup>39</sup>

When one casts the net broadly, Graham’s “texts that are revered as especially sacred and authoritative” is about as good as we can do by way of definition. When Smith looks at Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, however, he sees this “process of consolidation,” which reaches completion in Islam. There the text of the Qur’an *is* revelation. This is different from ancient Judaism or early Christianity, although the latter have of course developed comparable forms of scriptural fundamentalism.<sup>40</sup> In biblical Judaism and Christianity, however, rev-

<sup>37</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible,” *JAAR* 39 (1971) 131–40.

<sup>38</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 212.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. See also the significant article of W. D. Davies, “Canon and Christology,” in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament: Studies in Christology in Memory of George Bradford Caird* (ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright; Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 19–36. Davies articulates the distinctive role of the canon of scripture in Judaism as defining Israel through its history and finds no real parallel in, for example, the role of Homer in Greek history and culture (esp. pp. 27–30). Davies had already proposed that Christ assumed for Christianity the role of Torah in Judaism (pp. 34–36, where he cites his own *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*). Interestingly enough, Smith maintains that in Islam the place of Christ is taken by the Qur’an, so that the most fruitful comparison is not between the Qur’an and (Christian) Bible but between the Qur’an and Christ (*What Is Scripture*, 46).

I was also helped by the substantive literature review of Martin S. Jaffee, “Oral Culture in Scriptural Religion: Some Exploratory Studies,” *RSR* 24/3 (July 1998) 223–30, who deals with works of William A. Graham, Barbara A. Holdrege, Susan Niditch, and Mary Carruthers.

<sup>40</sup> For the articulation and elaboration of this insight I am indebted to my colleague Bruce B. Lawrence, whose *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) was republished with a new preface by the author as part of the series *Studies in Comparative Religion*, ed. Frederick M. Denny (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).

elation is given in historical events, acts, and words, which are interpreted first orally and then in writing, scripture, as revelation. This, I think, is for them the central and crucial part of the process to which Smith refers.

In the case of the earliest Christian Gospels we observed already that the initial and fundamental impulse for their composition came with the proclamation of Jesus as the fulfillment of scripture. The use of the Gospels alongside the older, Jewish scriptures in worship, certainly as early as the mid-second century, probably much earlier, was likely a continuation of the use to which the earlier Gospel traditions had already been put. Matthew and Luke particularly, if in different ways, adopted biblical genres and styles as they also continued the biblical story. This is nowhere clearer than in their infancy narratives. In his own independent mode, John rewrites the story of creation from Genesis, like many of his Jewish contemporaries retelling the biblical narrative, but in a revolutionary way.

In looking at the Gospels, I am suggesting, we are already observing an important stage in the process to which Smith refers. If I have made a case for anything it is this: that the intention to write scripture should not be excluded from a consideration of the purpose as well as the result of the composition of the Gospels. Perhaps in purpose as well as effect the Gospels tell us something about what scripture is. Thus they contribute to the resolution of the problem of the definition of scripture.

We began by asking whether the evangelists intended to write scripture. If I had to give a brief answer to that question, I would say that the two Gospels based on Mark were written to function as scripture for the burgeoning Christian communities, whether or not Matthew and Luke thought in those terms. They give not only a narrative of Jesus' career but a substantial representation of his teaching. Because of this neither is as gripping a narrative as Mark. Did Mark intend to write scripture? Perhaps, but I find that a difficult question to answer. It soon became evident, however, that his Gospel, and the gospel genre, met a need for (distinctively Christian) scripture, although at least Matthew and Luke thought Mark needed improvement.

What about John? If John thought he could improve on Mark, he did so by setting Mark aside and starting again. John's Gospel is, in my view, an independent effort to do what Mark had done but to do it differently. When one asks about John, one should probably ask, Which stage of John? At some point, John begins to function as scripture for its community, as 1 John suggests. In its present canonical form it apparently contemplates the existence of other Gospels (21:25, "the books that would be written"), possibly one or more of the Synoptics.<sup>41</sup> Did (the redactor of) John think that they were to be regarded as scrip-

<sup>41</sup> In discussing the scriptural character of the Gospels, we have not considered apostolic origin, which became an important factor in the development and delineation of the NT canon, although it had not been in the writing of Gospel scriptures. The Gospel of John, however, claims

ture too? With that question we have arrived at the subject of John and the Synoptic Gospels. Did John know them? Accept them? Reject them? To some of us these questions are endlessly fascinating. But let's stop there and leave them for another day!

---

apostolic authorship in its final colophon (21:24), in which it is attributed to the disciple whom Jesus loved. He has borne witness to these things and caused them to be written, and "we" (his circle of disciples?) know that his witness is true. Such a claim of apostolic origin is unique in the Gospels and stands in contrast with John's earlier colophon (20:30–31), which presents the purpose of the Gospel but not its authorization. Apostolic origin is mentioned at just the point that other books, which the world could not hold, come into view (21:25). If these books were other Gospels, one would need to know which ones to believe and on what basis.