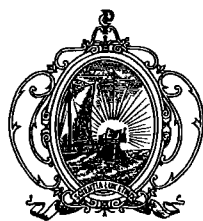


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WHAT IS BIBLE?



PEETERS
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CONTENTS

PREFACE	v
KARIN FINSTERBUSCH AND ARMIN LANGE	
Introduction: The Questions of Bible and Biblical	xI
KLAUS S. DAVIDOWICZ	
The “Science of Judaism” (Wissenschaft des Judentums) and the Bible	1
PART I: BIBLICAL DEBATES	
YOSEF GARFINKEL	
Biblical Archaeology Today: 2010	15
LESTER L. GRABBE	
“Biblical” Archaeology or “Biblical” History?	25
KENT HAROLD RICHARDS	
The Power of Naming Conventions: Biblical Literature	33
GABRIELE BOCCACCINI	
Is Biblical Literature Still a Useful Term in Scholarship?	41
BEATE EGO	
Biblical Interpretation – Yes or No? Some Theoretical Considerations	53
MICHAEL SEGAL	
Biblical Interpretation – Yes and No	63
CHRISTINE HELMER	
Bible, Theology, and the Study of Religion	81
UDO RÜTERSWORDEN	
Concerning Deut 14	95

VIII

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ROBERT A. KRAFT	
What is “Bible”? – From the Perspective of “Text”: The Christian Connections	105
SIDNIE WHITE CRAWFORD	
“Biblical” Text – Yes or No?	113
ANDRÉ LEMAIRE	
Biblical World: Yes or No?	121
Regine HUNZIKER-RODEWALD	
“Biblical World”: Diversity within Unity: Female Iron Age Faces in Palestine/Israel	131
STEVEN D. FRAADE	
Response to “Biblical Debates”: Yes <i>and</i> No	151
Hermann LICHTENBERGER	
What is Bible? – A Response	157

PART II: BETWEEN TORAH AND BIBLE

Lawrence H. SCHIFFMAN	
The Term and Concept of Torah	173
Alexander SAMELY	
The Bible as Talked About: Reflections on the Usage and Conceptual Implications of the Term <i>Miqra</i> ’ in Early Rabbinic Literature	193
Tal ILAN	
The Term and Concept of TaNaKh	219
Roland DEINES	
The Term and Concept of Scripture	235
Heinz-Josef FABRY	
Das „Alte Testament“	283
Ulrike MITTMANN and Rouven GENZ	
The Term and Concept of New Testament	305

PART III: BIBLE BETWEEN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Devorah DIMANT	
The Hebrew Bible in Jewish Context	341
Werner H. SCHMIDT	
Das Alte Testament in der Bibel	355
Bernard L. LEVINSON	
The Development of the Jewish Bible: Critical Reflections upon the Concept of a "Jewish Bible" and on the Idea of Its "Develop- ment"	377
Tobias NICKLAS	
The Development of the Christian Bible	393
List of Contributors	427
Indices	429

RESPONSE TO “BIBLICAL DEBATES”: YES AND NO

Steven D. FRAADE

Despite the rubric of “Biblical Debates,” with each pair of scholars having been assigned, I presume, to argue for a “yes” or “no” position with respect to the appropriateness of pairing “biblical” with “archaeology/history,” “literature,” “interpretation,” “thought and theology,” “text,” and “world,” these are debates in which there were no simple winners or losers, unless we consider each paper to have been a winner in that it enlightened and challenged our thinking on these questions, not just of semantic usage, but of scholarly practice. Rather than responding seriatim to the twelve individual papers, I shall organize my comments around some overarching themes that weave throughout, and others that I wish to introduce so as to extend the debates into related questions.

1. All agree that the terms “Bible” and “biblical” are both anachronistic and imprecise when used with respect to what were considered authoritative, divinely revealed or inspired writings from the Second Temple period, even if in employing them we intend shorthand for “what was eventually to become ‘Bible’ and ‘biblical.’” Agreeable alternatives, however, are harder to find, since each, in its own way, is anachronistic and imprecise, albeit less so according to its advocates. For example, several of the debaters prefer “scriptures” and “scriptural” in that, unlike “Bible” and “biblical,” they do not suggest a single volume (codex) of fixed content and fixed text, authorized alone as “Holy” by some later religious body. However, it is not so clear to me that in common parlance and understanding “scriptures” would not be understood as “Bible” and “scriptural” as “biblical,” even if the former of each pair carries less theological baggage.¹ Even so, what exactly would be included in “scriptural” that would not be in “biblical,” or vice versa? For example, should

¹ At a conference on “Rewritten Bible” held in Budapest, July 10–13, 2011, many of the speakers preferred to speak of “rewritten scripture/scriptures.” Geza Vermes, who is credited with having coined the expression “rewritten Bible” seemed to think that replacing “Bible” with “scripture/scriptures” was a distinction without a difference.

“scriptures” include *Ben Sira*, the book of *Jubilees*, the *Temple Scroll*, the *Damascus Document*, the *Book of the Watchers*, the *Genesis Apocryphon*, *Peshar Habakkuk*, *Aramaic Levi*, just to list a few texts of various genres that were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, all of which can be assumed to have carried some revelatory authority? In asking this question, however, we need to add “scripture/authority for whom and in what capacity?”

2. Presumably, what qualified as “scriptures” varied across time and place, making it hazardous to extrapolate from one known context to others unknown. However, we should not presume that everyone rode the same single linear temporal route from “scriptures” to “Scripture.” Neither should we presume (as is commonly done) that the variety of versions of “scriptural” texts and the broad range of “para-scriptural” texts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls characterized the scriptural complexion of Jewish society overall. Similarly, we should not presume that Josephus’s twenty-two books (*Ag. Ap.* 1.39–40), or *4 Ezra*’s twenty-four exoteric books (14:45), would have been found in identical order, language, script, recension, text-type and number of scrolls in every well-stocked wealthy Jewish study or apocalyptic communal library. However, neither can we presume that such a “canon” in the making, if we can call it that, obtained *only* for Josephus and the author of *4 Ezra*, and only at the end of the first century C.E. In other words, there is always the possibility that whatever terms we employ, they encompass both too much (in terms of presumed authority) and too little (in terms of possible members). In some contexts “scriptures” and “scriptural” already denote a *limited set of writings*, while in others a *broad kind of writing*. In short, no one semantic size fits all.

3. However, even if we think, as I believe we should, somewhat retroactively of a (non-linear, and non-universal) scriptural *canon in the making*, beginning with the “Torah of Moses” sometime in the fifth century B.C.E., of whose *eventual* canon are we thinking: the Jewish TaNaKh, or the Catholic, Protestant, or Ethiopic Bibles? Was the collection (if we may think of it as such) of seventy esoteric books of *4 Ezra* 14:46, however we imagine its members, as scriptural and canonical (for *4 Ezra*’s interpretive community) as was the collection of twenty-four exoteric books, or was it considered a single collection of ninety-four books for those worthy of both? Or, perhaps we might imagine that for such worthies, it was the seventy esoteric books that carried greater authority (and hence “scripturality”).

4. Although all of the ancient terms used to denote Bible/Scripture/ scriptures emphasize their *written* form (מקרא, כתבי קודש, ספר תורה, γραφή, βιβλία), by which form their authority was affirmed and conveyed, they would most commonly have been encountered orally or, more precisely, aurally. That is, most people (excluding perhaps the rich) would have *heard* these texts read (or recited from memory) rather than have read the texts themselves, whether in private or in group settings. They would not individually have had access to written texts, and certainly not to collections thereof, except as they were read and/or expounded in public settings. Also, some component texts of what was eventually to become the TaNaKh or the Holy Bible would have been read and heard more frequently than others, with some not having been publicly read at all. How would this have affected their scriptural status at an early stage of canon in the making? This is an area that requires further investigation in relation to our understanding of the process of scriptural canonization, as a corrective to the anachronistic sense of canon formation as being equivalent to the formation of a singular book (codex). Recognition of the oral/aural reception of written "scriptures" has other far-reaching implications, not yet addressed in these debates. What is the "scriptural/authoritative" status of the oral traditions that accompany, complement, and elucidate iconically written, but orally/aurally received "scriptures." This, we know from Josephus (*Ant.* 13.297), was a central issue of dispute between the Sadducees and Pharisees with regard to the orally transmitted "traditions of the ancestors." The distinction between written scriptures and oral traditions is one thing in the *theory of revelation*, but what about in the *practice of reception*, where the dividing line between what is written *inside the text* and is orally transmitted *outside (or alongside) the text* is not so easy to discern? In other words, what is the process and what are the circumstances by which oral teaching acquires scriptural, or near-scriptural, authority before it too is eventually set in and accessed in writing?

5. Another but related area for further fruitful discussion is the relation of written scriptures to their written, but, in some cases, orally delivered translations. To what extent, and under what circumstances, do the latter share in, derive from, and/or contribute to the scriptural/authoritative standing of the former? Does translation complement, supplement, or supplant that which it translates? Although translation presumes a prior text in need of translation, the relation between the two is not as linear as it would appear, since the history of scriptural translation extends at

least as far back as the mid-third century B.C.E. (with the Alexandrian Jewish translation[s] of the Torah into Greek), and perhaps as far back as the fifth century B.C.E. (Neh 8:8 as denoting translation into Aramaic and/or explication), that is, into the very time of scriptural formation itself. Thus, we may ask, under what conditions do translations (and interpretive paraphrases) become “scriptures” or “scriptural” in their own free-standing rights, or only as accompaniments to the scriptural texts that they render and to which they are performatively linked?

6. Related to the previous point is another aspect of the “biblical debates” not explored by our debaters, that being the question of language itself. How does (do) the language(s) of scripture (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek for antiquity) contribute to the authority of scriptures and vice versa? How do scriptural languages acquire or confer holiness? What are the registers of scriptural languages? Are they artificial, archaizing, or “anti-languages”? How much of their status is “lost (or gained) in translation”? These are questions that cannot be explored here, but need to be included in future debates as to what defines and qualifies as “scripture.”

7. While much has been written and said about the authority claims made of and for scriptural texts, not enough has been said of the authority that such texts confer, and the authority-granting strategies by which they do so, upon their redactors, transmitters, readers, auditors, translators, and interpreters, whether they be priests, scribes, teachers, sages, or communities, and the physical locales in which those texts are studied, read, heard, or inscribed, whether they be temples, synagogues, churches, homes, or open spaces.

8. Finally, I wish to conclude by returning to a question raised in the first debate, that is, the relation between semantic principle and mundane practicality. As scholars and teachers we need to be mindful of our ability to communicate to audiences and funders for whom “Bible” and “biblical” are just fine for being so familiar, even as we seek to educate them about the origins of what were to become *the* (or their) Bible(s) long before the word or concept was known in its later senses.

Let me illustrate with an anecdote. At my university, a long-standing introductory undergraduate course was once known as “Introduction to the Old Testament.” However, when it was incorporated into the Program in Judaic Studies it was renamed “Introduction to the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible.” In recent years, however, enrollments in that course had been dropping, in part because Jewish students found “Old

Testament" to sound too Christian, while Christian (and Jewish) students were put off by "Hebrew Bible" as suggesting study of a text in Hebrew. This semester the instructor changed the title to simply "The Bible" (with the course description beginning, "The writings common to both Jewish and Christian scripture"). Suddenly, enrollments tripled. If I may paraphrase *Pirke Avot* 2:2, "It is good to combine the study (and teaching) of Torah with (regard for) the ways of the world."