Introduction

Canonical Text and Text-Centered Community

Years ago a teacher of mine introduced me to a new concept of heaven and hell. "Don't think that hell is where people are consumed by fire for their sins or that heaven is where they are rewarded with pleasures for their piety. What really happens is that God gathers everybody in one large hall. Then He gives them the Talmud and commands them to start studying. For the wicked, studying Talmud is hell. For the pious, it's heaven." Clearly, the role of the sacred text in Jewish life is so profound that even the afterlife cannot be imagined without it.

The two main axes of this book are the canonical text and the text-centered community. In particular, I seek to understand the Jewish tradition as a text-centered tradition, not in its ideas about life after death but as this centrality affects life on earth. Rather than searching for the essence of Judaism in shared beliefs and practices that remain constant though they take superficially diverse forms, I have chosen to focus on the shared commitment to certain texts and their role in shaping many aspects of Jewish life and endowing the tradition with coherence.

In the Jewish tradition the centrality of the text takes the place of theological consistency. Jews have had diverse and sometimes opposing ideas about God: the anthropomorphic God of the Midrash, the Aristotelian unmoved mover of Maimonides and his school, the Kabbalah's image of God as a dynamic organism manifested in the complexity of

his varied aspects, the *sefirot*. These conceptions of God have little in common and they are specifically Jewish only insofar as each is a genuine interpretation of Jewish canonical texts.

Not only does the text provide a common background for various ideas and practices; text-centeredness itself has deeper implications. Some of the major developments in Jewish tradition can be understood through the community's notions of its relation to text, of what text is, and how text functions in its midst. Text is thus more than a shared matrix for a diverse tradition—it is one of the tradition's central operative concepts, like "God" or "Israel."

The general classification of Judaism as a "book religion" is well known to students of comparative religion. As in many other religions, among them Islam and Christianity, Scripture is at its center, but the function, development, and implications of the centrality of text for the shape of Judaism are yet to be investigated. As I hope to show, focusing on text-centeredness will highlight the main distinctions between rabbinic Judaism and biblical religion. What made the Torah the main source of religious authority—the locus of religious experience and divine presence and the object of ongoing reflection—is what gave Judaism the form that persists to this day.

This book is not a full historical and chronologically ordered account of canonization within the Jewish tradition. My discussion is organized thematically, referring to different historical moments and to the various canons as they relate to the theme at hand. The first chapter discusses relationships between canon and meaning. The second treats tensions and competing ideas about the notion of authority of texts and interpreters, while the problem of the value of text and curriculum is discussed in the third chapter. Each chapter deals with a different canon within the Jewish tradition: the first focuses on the canonization of the Bible and its effects on Jewish trends in its interpretation; the second analyzes the canonization of the Mishnah and subsequent codes in the Jewish tradition as they relate to the problem of authority and controversy; and the third deals with the struggle accompanying the rise of the Talmud as the main text in the Jewish curriculum from the Middle Ages onward. Although the intense production of different Jewish canons over such a long time span does not receive a systematic historical treatment, the accumulated total does serve as a continuous resource for dealing with problems of canons and their relation to meaning, authority, and value within the Jewish tradition. The conceptual approach to issues of canonization within the Jewish tradition can also be of value to other fields of research such as law and literature, in which similar problems concerning canons arise. It is essential therefore to clarify the two principal concepts: canonical texts and text-centered communities. They are described in the sections below.

冷 KINDS OF CANONS

"Canonical" as an adjective describing a text refers to the text's special status, one that can have many guises. Texts form a normative canon; they are obeyed and followed, as, for example, are Scriptures and legal codes. They can also be canonical as a constitutive part of a curriculum; such texts are not followed in the strict sense but are taught, read, transmitted, and interpreted. These texts establish a formative canon, and they provide a society or a profession with a shared vocabulary. The importance of this kind of canonization is manifest in textcentered societies or institutions in which familiarity with certain texts is a precondition for membership. In yet another sense of the word, which will not be discussed in this book, canonical texts serve as paradigmatic examples of aesthetic value and achievement: models for imitation which set the criteria for what is regarded as a higher form of art. These constitute an exemplary canon. In a much narrower sense of canonization, texts can become exemplars of schools and trends; they highlight the characteristics of the genre lucidly and forcefully, though they do not necessarily represent the best of that genre but rather what most typifies it.

Different kinds of canonization occasionally converge in a single text. For example, the Talmud in Jewish tradition fulfills two canonical functions: it establishes the norms of behavior in many aspects of life and serves a formative function as the fundamental text in the traditional Jewish curriculum, the focus of endless interpretations and debates. (As we shall see, this dual nature of the canonicity of the Talmud was sometimes challenged by Jewish mystics and philosophers who maintained that the Talmud is authoritative in all matters of the law but is not a text worthy of exclusive, ongoing reflection and study).

Not all canonical texts enjoy equal status. Legal tracts are meant to be obeyed but do not form a central part of the curriculum—they are not regarded as "cultural assets." The Talmud, although it is canonical in these two senses—it is meant to be obeyed and studied—is not paradigmatic and did not set a standard for the formation of future texts. Few interpreters of the Talmud tried to imitate it; they did not write more Talmud; they just wrote about the Talmud.³ Texts can therefore exert influence in many realms: they are followed and obeyed, studied and read; they are imitated and revered; and they set a standard and bestow value. They control action, thought, and creativity. It is this whole range of the power and function of texts that we wish to capture with the term "canonization." The distinction among these functions is of special importance to the discussion in the third chapter of the book.

The political dimension of the study of canonization is related to the question of status. Texts issue binding norms, and in many cases expertise in a canonical text underlies a claim to political authority and power. Reference to it is a source of legal and moral justification. The establishment of a curriculum and the definition of values involve strong acts of censorship. Canons are both exclusive and inclusive. They create monopolies and define who is worthy of being heard and who is not. In some situations, disagreement about what is included in the canon can divide a community. The connection between canon and censorship and canonization and crisis, as well as issues of authority and the authoritative interpreter, will be discussed in the second chapter.

Canonization fulfills a demarcating function, as in the example of the fixing of the Christian canon in the second century. The historical background of the canonization of the New Testament is still debated. Some scholars tend to see the process as mainly connected to internal developments in the early Church, others understand it as a powerful reaction to Marcion, a second-century Gnostic.⁴ Marcion claimed that the Old Testament and the Gospels alike distorted the true teaching of Christ. These books were too "Jewish," he said, and he excluded them from the authoritative body of Christian teachings. In his view, holy Scripture contained only the Paulinian material of the New Testament and some parts of the Gospels. At the other extreme, the Jerusalem Church, which adhered at least partially to the Old Testament law, accepted the Gospels and challenged Paul's authority because of his rejection of the law.

The Christian Church, not yet fully defined, was torn between radically different religious outlooks which expressed the inner tension of

its own message. Out of the existing sacred material a fixed canon was formed in response to both the Marcionites' challenge and to the challenge from the more traditional branch in Jerusalem. The establishment of a fixed Christian canon demarcated believers from heretics and erected boundaries between Christians and Gnostics. The logic of fixing a canon as an act of creating boundaries requires the existence of groups that it excludes; canon and heresy are twins.

Since canonical texts have many functions, various arguments are advanced concerning their authority. A text can be authoritative because it claims origin from a unique source such as God, the king, or an expert in the field. Sometimes the authority of texts may be independent of the superior will that instituted them. For H. L. A. Hart the law is authoritative because legal norms were constructed according to the appropriate procedure. This procedure is defined by the legal system itself through a set of high-order rules which dictate that laws should be formed through the Parliament and the like. The authority of a text can also derive from its unique intrinsic merit, like that of a great book. These claims to authority can be challenged on several grounds.

If a text is authoritative, then the issue of who may interpret it is of enormous importance. It is then necessary to explain what justifies the authority of the text and who is authorized to interpret it. These issues are connected to the broader question of what sort of text becomes canonized and for what reason. Is it the text as a potential source of meanings, a specific reading of the text, or is it an institution that defines the meaning of the text? For example, when the Constitution of the United States was made authoritative, was it the specific intention of the writers of the Constitution that was canonized, that is, one particular reading of the text, or was it future readings, that is, any reading that can be justified as a "reading" of the text, so we can say that the text "as such" was canonized? A third option is that only readings produced in the proper institution constitute the true canon. In the case of the Constitution, the Supreme Court's reading is the canonized meaning. Much of the debate about constitutional law revolves around this issue, reflecting internal tensions in the canon's authority.7

Since the meanings of texts are sometimes undetermined, variant interpretations may be used to undermine the practices, beliefs, and institutions that are grounded by reference to canonical texts. Thus canonical texts can easily become subversive texts. Consequently, they

have often been kept safe and out of sight of the very people over whom the texts assert authority. For example, the early writings of Marx were not available in Communist regimes. Likewise, before the Reformation, the Church often argued that the public should learn Scripture from pictures, usually on the walls of the local church, while the texts themselves should be kept from the community.8 Cardinal Newman defends the Catholic preference of traditional over nontraditional interpretation of Scripture as follows: "being withdrawn from public view [the tradition] could not be subjected to the degradation of a comparison [with the text of the New Testament], on the part of inquirers and half-Christians."9 The apostolic tradition was protected from the public eye in an effort to keep it pure and uncontaminated, unlike the New Testament in the hands of the Protestants. In the history of many religious traditions the sacred texts have proved to be as much sources of heresy as sources of faith. "No heretic without a text" is a proverb Spinoza quotes in his Treatise as he describes the widespread sectarianism of the seventeenth century.10 The canonical text with all of its prestige and authority—precisely because of that prestige and authority-must be protected; its readers should be screened and its meanings controlled.

₹ TEXT-CENTEREDNESS

Various aspects of the relationship between the Jewish community and its canonized texts are indicative of text-centered communities in general. First, expertise in the text is a source of power and prestige, both religious and political. Religious authority need not rest on expertise in the text; it can be derived from an individual's exclusively ordained role in ritual (priesthood), or from his unique charisma (prophecy). The idea that expertise in the text is a source of authority—an idea that gives rise to the centrality of the scholar in the Jewish hierarchy—defines an important feature of text-centeredness. Such expertise may become the main source of authority, and then priests and prophets are replaced by scholars. The leading role of the scholar constituted a revolutionary, postbiblical conception of religious authority within Judaism, challenging other conceptions.¹¹

A second feature of text-centeredness in the Jewish tradition is that Torah study is considered a foremost religious ideal, indeed a commandment obligating all members of the community. Such a commandment makes membership in the community conditional upon familiarity with the text, and it makes the Torah an ongoing focus of attention. In radical versions of this idea, the Torah is the only focus of attention and thought. The text is an object of reflection, to be explored in depth so that its hidden meanings may be discovered. For when the text moves to the center of attention, it expands its meanings and dimensions.

Both aspects of text-centeredness—the relationship between expertise and authority and the centrality of study—raise questions of access to the text, and whether knowledge of the text is equally distributed among members of the community.

Knowledge of and access to the text are affected by many factors. Literacy can be restricted, as can knowledge of the language in which the text is written. Monopolistic control over the power derived from familiarity with the text can thus be achieved at the basic level of linguistic differentiation, ¹² as was the case with Roman Catholicism: the clergy knew Latin and the laity mostly did not. When there is a gap between the language of the text and that of the community, the rules controlling the translation of the text become crucial. However, in the absence of linguistic barriers, access to the text may be controlled by other measures, such as restrictions on dissemination of the text, restrictions on teaching it, or institutional control of education.

In the case of the Torah, making it public knowledge is emphasized as an obligation in the text itself; the laws are supposed to be read in a public ceremony and made known to the community at large.¹³ While some first-century rabbinic authorities advocated limiting the teaching of Torah to the sons of "good families," the main trend was democratic and the study of Torah was restricted by neither wealth nor lineage.¹⁴

Popular participation in the text was a crucial aspect of the emergence of the text-centered community. Access to knowledge was limited to men, however. According to an opinion that became dominant, Torah may not be taught to women. Since Jewish culture evolved through the interpretation of the canon, and authority was attached to knowledge of the Torah, this discrimination against women had farreaching effects. The unequal distribution of knowledge deprived women of the opportunity to gain the power and influence resulting from engagement with the text. Women hardly participated in shaping the culture, and their voices were unrecorded. In text-centered com-

munities, policies of distribution and access to the text are therefore crucial.

A third aspect of text-centeredness is that the text itself becomes a locus of religious experience. The text serves not only to report sacred events like the Exodus, in which God revealed himself in history, but the very reading of the text becomes a religious drama in and of itself. God is present in the sacred text and studying is thus tantamount to meeting God; it is a moment of great religious intimacy. The Torah becomes a portable Temple, the sacred territory of scholars. The earliest formulation of such an approach to the Torah appears in one of the late Psalms (119:19):"I am a stranger on the earth: do not hide thy commandments from me." The second half of the verse employs a common formula—"do not hide your face from me"—usually used in reference to God in the Psalms, to address the Torah. God and Torah become interchangeable in this Psalm, and this phenomenon marks the beginning of the great rabbinic idea of the text as the center of religious drama.

A fourth aspect of text-centeredness is that agreement on a common text defines the boundaries of the community and makes it cohesive. The shared text may be a source of conflicting beliefs and practices, but the community recognizes that it alone must be used to justify them all. While members of the community may disagree about specific beliefs and practices, they do agree about what is the proper way of justifying them. It is a procedural agreement that all practices, beliefs, or institutions, whatever they may be, are to be justified in reference to the text, as an interpretation of the text. In a text-centered community such as the Jewish one, along with other forms of justification such as local traditions and customs, court enactments, and rulings based on reasoning independent of interpretation, interpretation becomes the main and central form of justification. Legal practice is similarly bounded by such procedural agreement. Courts can produce radically opposing rulings; what binds them together is agreement about the text that is the ground for the rulings.

A shared text is binding under various circumstances. In one case there may be agreement about an interpretation, an agreement which is more than procedural. In cases where concrete interpretations differ, we look for a procedural agreement, that is, we would agree that in order to come to a decision we have to interpret a common text. On the procedural level, one can imagine a case in which there is agreement on the text to be interpreted, but still a disagreement about the interpretive procedure. Hence we should distinguish between two kinds of procedural agreements: agreement about what counts as interpretation, even if there is disagreement about the interpretation itself; agreement only about the text that should be interpreted, but disagreement even on what counts as interpretation. In the legal sphere, judges occasionally argue about what should be interpreted in the text. One party claims that the intention of the legislator should be the object of interpretation, while others search for something else; for example, the best case that can be made out of the text. This is an instance of loose procedural agreement to interpret the same text, but not agreement about what counts as the procedure called "interpretation."

The unifying role of a text in the legal system appears in text-centered communities in stronger and weaker versions. The split between Karaites and Rabbinites in the eighth century had to do with the establishment of the Talmud as the text of reference. The Karaites, who did not accept the Talmud, formed a separate community, unraveling the common bond of text even in its loose form. Although both communities were bound by a common text—the Bible—the canonization of the Oral Law transmitted in the Mishnah and the Talmud as the proper reading of the Bible narrowed the inclusiveness of the community, making the schism between the Karaites and Rabbinites inevitable.¹⁷

After its canonization the Talmud functioned as the binding text, and we can well suppose that canonizing a future interpretation of the Talmud would create another split. When the loss of the common text is compensated by an appeal to other forms of unity that bind communities together, the community stops being text-centered. Until the "emancipation," the Jewish community—with its radical linguistic and geographical diversity, and a certain plurality of practices and beliefs—was a text-centered community united by at least procedural agreement concerning a shared text. The rise of a modern national Jewish identity, stressing other elements of commonality, is in many ways a sign of the loss of the centrality of the text as the binding force.

The Jews became the "people of the book" after a long history that defined the relationship of the community toward the canonized texts and established the diverse functions of texts. What turned the Jews into a text-centered community, with all the repercussions mentioned

above, was a deeply rooted revolution that began at the start of the Second Temple period.¹⁸ During this period text-centeredness manifested itself more forcefully and affected the nature of authority, the basic institutions of society, and spiritual life as a whole. This transformation, as we will see in the pages that follow, is related to the process and understanding of canonization within the rabbinic tradition.

Canon and Meaning

THE USES OF CANON

An intuitive way to make the distinction between canonical and non-canonical works is to classify them according to the authority and value that a community ascribes to certain texts above others. In this sense, canonization is defined in terms of the element added to the text—sacredness, authority, value, prestige, and so on. However, canonization should be viewed not only as the addition of status to an accepted meaning but as a transformation of meaning itself. In modern approaches to meaning much has been said about the effect of context, and canonizing a text clearly involves viewing the text in a certain context. Unlike other texts, canonical texts are read with special commitments and expectations. In other words, canonization affects not only the status of a text but the way it is perceived and read.

A text can be read, recited, kept as a testimony, interpreted, studied, transmitted, rehearsed, told, performed, and so on. Not all texts are studied and not all texts become objects of reflection and interpretation. A prayer book is recited, a contract is something one signs and keeps as a proof and a reminder, a story is something one tells. The multiplicity of the functions of texts applies also to the role of Scripture in different religious traditions. Sacred texts can have performative and informative functions. In the case of the Indian Vedas, the power of the sacred recitation of the text is independent of whether the

reciter understands them.¹ William Graham has emphasized the aural aspect of sacred words, analyzing the importance of recitation of the Qura'n in the Islamic tradition. In the preprint era most believers heard the words of the Scriptures before they saw them in a written form. As Graham has shown, in many religious traditions the primacy of the ear over the eye in regard to the sacred word had enormous effect on the function of these texts. When the ear has primacy, only on rare occasions will an individual meditate upon the words in isolation, facing the written text, and the recitation of the text includes many nondiscursive aspects.² Because Scripture serves such an array of functions in different religions, scholars of comparative religion have concluded that it would be fruitless to seek a general conception that will encompass the role of Scriptures in world religions.³

One of the primary acts of canonization is to establish the particular function for the canonized book. The published letters of a great person are read differently from the way they were read by their original recipients. A diary when published serves totally different functions than when it is written, and a book can become a "textbook." Thus canonization often involves not only adding authority or status to a text, but assigning a function to that text.

The plurality of the functions of texts is strikingly visible in the biblical use of the term "book" (sefer). In the Bible "book" covers a wide range of meanings—in fact, the range covered by our use of the broader term "text." A book in the Bible can be a document. In Deut. 24:1–3, a bill of divorce is called a book of divorce (sefer kritut). A book can be a contract; Jeremiah calls a contract of purchase "the book of purchase" (sefer ha-mikna, Jer. 32:11–16). A letter is also called a book, such as the one David sent to Yoav—a letter with instructions (2 Sam. 11:14, 2 Kings 5:5, Esther 3:13). In light of this variety of functions the word "book" performs in Hebrew and especially in the Bible, the "book of Torah" is a formulation that must be examined carefully. Let us assume that we are at the stage when the Israelites had a more or less fixed version of it. What is the function of the "book of the Torah"—what are its ritualistic or nonritualistic uses—from the point of view of the Torah itself, and why was this specific text written?

The earliest reference to the Torah as a book is found in Deuteronomy. In the earlier parts of the Torah there is no mention of

the book as a whole. Instead we have different texts, written on different occasions, that integrate the book of Torah. In Exodus we encounter "the book of the covenant" (sefer ha-brit). This is a legal document, a contract, to remind a party of the obligation he has taken upon himself. Moses gives to the people the laws he heard from God, the people accept them, and he subsequently writes them in a book which is called "the book of the covenant":

And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord . . . And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the hearing of the people, and they said: "All that the Lord has said will we do, and obey." And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said: "Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made you concerning all these words." (Exod. 24:4–8)

The writing and the reading of the book is part of a covenant-sealing ceremony that includes the ritual spilling of the blood of the sacrifice and throwing the blood on both parties to the contract: Israel and the altar which represents God. (The term "book" is used in the same context in Josh. 24:26.) This contract was placed in the temple, as was common procedure with treaties of suzerainty between kings and vassals. Such treaties were kept in temples dedicated to the gods, who would punish the party that violated the contract.⁴

The same pattern carries over into a more secular context, when Israel accepted a new form of government, kingship, and Saul was enthroned. Samuel, much against his will, "told the people the rules of the kingdom and wrote them in a book and laid it up before the Lord" (1 Sam. 10:25). In the covenantal context, writing is a sign of commitment; texts are a physical embodiment of will, objects of consent. They also serve to remind people of their promise. God asked Moses to write in a book, as a reminder, that war against Amalek is everlasting till the total destruction of the Amalekites (Exod. 17:14). In the book of Joshua the covenant was first read aloud to all the people of Israel, and the words were then engraved in stone. In this way they become "edut," a testimony written on immutable stone (Josh. 8:31-35). The text of the Torah in this case does not function as an object to be studied and reflected upon. Rather, it is meant to be an embodiment of commitment, a testimony that is publicly read in covenant rituals and kept in front of God.

Here the function of the sacred text, from the point of view of the text itself, is to serve as the physical statement of a commitment, and it is kept as a testimony to this commitment, with all the implied sanctions if the covenant is violated. Writing the text is part of a covenantal ritual, and the function of text is defined in that context. What is important about this use of the text is that the people who committed themselves to the text may very well be illiterate. Moses told the Israelites the laws, which they accepted and fully understood orally; only then did he write down the laws.⁵

The pedagogic function of the book of the Torah is first mentioned in Deuteronomy, which uses the expression "book of the Torah" and the verb "to learn" or "study" used in reference to it.6 "Learning" has a special sense in this context. In many verses in which learning is mentioned, the people become acquainted with the book and thus "learn" to fear God and to keep his commandments. When teaching is equivalent to announcing and telling, studying is therefore listening. One learns from the book but one does not learn the book.

The activities of learning and repeating resemble other mnemonic activities such as placing the text on the doorpost of the house, binding the text upon one's arm and between one's eyes, or carrying the text around. In those contexts learning does not mean reflecting or discovering. The text is not an object of art with many meanings and layers; it has surface rather than depth, and one must listen to it again and again in order to overcome forgetfulness. Used in this manner, the text is not problematized. It has no contradictions to resolve, hints to follow, or allusions to grasp. Even as a contract it is not self-referential, in the way we relate to contracts today.

This is not, by any means, meant to imply that the text of the Torah is not artistically and carefully constructed. The text was definitely produced and guarded by a group of priestly scribes. Moreover, there is clear evidence that earlier materials were recycled and used by different authors, and those sources are quoted and subtly rephrased to produce the later layers. Michael Fishbane argues that we can find cases of internal biblical interpretation in which a discernible effort is made to overcome contradictions existing in the earlier stages. But these findings must be accepted with some reservations. The distinction between rewriting and interpreting is not maintained at this stage, and no assumption is made that a sealed text exists—a finished product to be interpreted but not to be amended. The later strata of the text rewrite

and rephrase the older ones, producing a new one. Even later, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, an intermediary stage between internal biblical interpretation and rabbinic interpretation, the distinction between text and interpretation is blurred. In the Temple Scroll the interpretation is inserted into the text and the book of Deuteronomy is rewritten. The editor and the interpreter are still one and the same, constructing a new text out of the old one rather than interpreting the old one.9

Thus "the book of the Torah" displays multiple functions within the Torah itself. In Exodus, books are not to be learned; they are to be signed and kept. Deuteronomy presents the Torah as something to be learned and read. Even the king, for example, is obligated to write out a copy of the Torah and to read the Torah all his life; this is so that he will learn to fear God and follow his laws. At this stage it is not the text as such that is the object of learning: one does not learn the text, one learns from the text.¹⁰

In the Bible the clearest formulation of the idea of Torah as a constant object of inquiry and reflection appears in later materials. As mentioned in the introduction, in Psalm 119 (which is dated by scholars to the second century B.C.) learning is a constant source of joy and religious intimacy; the Torah becomes interchangeable with God. Another even earlier manifestation of this understanding of the Torah appears in the descriptions of Ezra's activities and his role as a scribe. A new verb is used to describe Ezra's way of studying: doresh be-Torat Moshe. The verb lidrosh means to search or to inquire. The application of this verb to the study of Torah implies a notion of the text as something that requires probing, not only reciting or reading; it contains allusions and hints; it is a subtle code.11 The transformation of the function of the text to an object of contemplation in the full sense of the word is therefore a later development. The Torah moves from being the basic contract—the text which is the core of obligation—to being the center of curriculum, a text that is studied and contemplated.

This is one of the major shifts in the function of the text leading to a text-centered community. The change in function also entails change in meaning and in the way the text is read, in the expectations and demands that readers bring to the text. It becomes an object with depth, something to be discovered; and it becomes self-referential. Questions about the law come to be answered in reference to the law itself. Studying moves beyond reminding and reciting; it takes on the aspects of inquiring, investigating, contemplating.

The shift in the function of the text and justification of the new concept of its dimensions are achieved through the new reading of the text itself, in which the text proclaims its new function as if it had been there forever. It is part of that new meaning that such a shift should be effected by appealing to the text itself. This great revolution in interpretation is directly connected with the formation of a text-centered society, the rise of the scholar as an authority figure, the end of prophecy, and the decline of the priesthood—and all these changes are related to the act of sealing the canonical text.

? THE SEALED CANON

There are two basic types of canon: open and sealed. In the open one all the elements are canonical, and other canonical texts may be added at any time. An example of an open canon is a system of legislation that permits the addition of new laws whose legal status will be as binding as the existing law. In a sealed canon, by contrast, the status of the textual elements is exclusive, and no new texts of equal importance may be added. Not all Scriptures are bound and closed; in the Hindu tradition the sacred texts are by far more fluid and open than others. The Bible is the most prominent example of a sealed and exclusive canon.

The chronology of the sealing the Bible is complex. The first aspect of this process is agreement on the list of canonical books, and the second involves the time when those books reached a relatively fixed version. As late as the generation after the destruction of the Second Temple, around 90 c.e., the Sages of Yavneh argue about the place of some books of the canon, although these disputes, for the most part, concern the writings rather than the prophets. There is also testimony of dispute over the book of Ezekiel and its place in the canon at the end of the Second Temple period. Nonetheless the canon seems to have been established during the Second Temple era, apparently during the late Persian or early Hellenistic period, perhaps as early as 150 B.C. Remnants of all the biblical books (aside from the book of Esther) were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Josephus mentions the existence of twenty-two books of the Bible prior to the rabbinic debates over the canon. 14

The disagreements among the Sages, recorded in the Mishnah in the Tractate Yadaim, are about whether to exclude books already part of

the canon, and not whether to include new items in the canon. Interestingly, none of the opinions censoring the existing canon was accepted. According to rabbinic tradition, the criterion for inclusion in Scripture depends upon whether or not the book was divinely inspired. (From a rabbinic perspective this is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Thus not every prophecy was included in the Bible, only those that were relevant to future generations.) Since, according to rabbinic tradition, prophecy ceased during the Persian period, any book after that time would by definition be excluded from the canon. Yet the cessation of prophecy is not a likely reason for the exclusion of the Apocrypha from the canon. Perhaps the need to exclude any possible additions to the canon explains how the rabbis determined when prophecy ceased and not vice versa.

It is also very difficult to establish criteria for judging whether a book was divinely inspired, aside from its acceptance as such by the community. Nothing in the book of Ben Sira is particularly problematic, yet it is excluded from the rabbinic canon because of its late date. We can therefore assume that in the rabbinic circles the canon was regarded as sealed before the time of Yavneh, and its sealing is connected to a general view concerning the cessation of prophecy.¹⁵

On the other hand, although remnants of most of the existing canon were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls at least a century prior to Yavneh, additional authoritative texts were also found there, indicating that the Judean Desert sect might have had a larger canon. Some scholars claim that those texts, such as the Damascus Document and the various *pesharim*, are inspired interpretations of the established canon and not additions to the canon. Others maintain that at least the Temple Scroll is not only an interpretation of Scripture but a new version of Scripture revealed to the members of the sect. ¹⁶ In addition, there is good reason to assume that some apocalyptic material that was excluded from the rabbinic canon, such as the Book of Jubilees, was included in the Dead Sea canon.

In addition to the difficulty of dating the sealing of the canon within rabbinic tradition, it possible that other Jewish groups might have had different canons. We lack sufficient historical knowledge to resolve this issue, however, and I do not intend to add speculation to existing conjectures concerning the chronology of the canon. I will focus on a different problem: the consequences of the sealing of the canon for the formation of the text-centered community.

Rabbinic tradition speaks of the dual sealing of the Scriptures; on the one hand the Torah of Moses, the first five books of the Bible, and on the other, the sealing of the prophetic books and the writings that make up the rest of the Bible. The difference between the two sealing lies not only in the attribution of the Pentateuch to Moses, the greatest of the prophets, but also and primarily in a qualitative difference between the status of the Law of Moses and that of other prophecies. In the view of the Sages, the Torah of Moses is the only legislation allowed through prophecy. The Sifra comments on the verse "These are the commandments": "from this we learn that from now on no prophet can add anything new."17 The other prophets speak out on numerous subjects, but they do not enact new law. A prophet is not permitted to introduce a new festival, although he is allowed to foretell surrender or revolt against a Babylonian king. According to the Sages, if a prophet seems to create a new law it is in fact either a reform enacted without the authority of prophecy or a law emerging from an interpretation of the Law of Moses. The internal sealing of the Torah within the Scriptures served to restrict prophetic activity to a nonlegislative realm, or to put it more extremely, as Maimonides understood it, this internal sealing confined the prophets to the task of admonishing the people to obey the Law of Moses.18

Before considering the question of sealing the canon and its implications for authority, we must discuss what happens to the meaning of a text after it is sealed. Does the meaning of an already canonical but unsealed text change when it is sealed? And does there ensue a fundamental difference in the way this text is regarded?

The Book of Numbers 15:32–36 recounts the story of a man who is found gathering sticks on the Sabbath and brought before Moses. Moses does not know what to do and waits for God to judge for him; finally he receives a response. Had Moses been one of the Sages, or had such a problem arisen after Moses' death, the solution would have been reached through a consideration of the meaning of "work," which the Torah forbids on the Sabbath. Questions like these are raised by the hundreds in the Talmud. Knowing that the sole texts prescribing conduct on the Sabbath were the Ten Commandments and isolated passages of the Bible, the rabbis were compelled to undertake a campaign of interpretation in order to respond to such questions. Thus the sealing of these texts endowed them with increased breadth and depth. Henceforth the texts themselves would have to be probed to provide solu-

tions to all possible questions. In our example the term "work" in the verse "You shall not do any work" becomes amplified to contain most of the information about the laws of the Sabbath.

The sealed text is laden with an unprecedented burden, and it is no wonder that with the passage of time the literal meaning of expressions gradually deteriorated, just as a hook on which too much is hung eventually snaps under the weight. The rabbis themselves comment upon the relationship between the profusion of laws concerning the Sabbath and the brevity of the biblical text: "The laws of the Sabbath are mountains suspended on a hair, for the verses are few and the laws many" (Mish. Hagigah, 1:8).

When prophecy as legislation ended and the text was sealed as a consequence, text became self-referential in a circular way. The sealed text not only acquires the status of exclusivity but new information can be gained mainly through interpreting the text, and the problems that arise are resolved by the text itself. The self-referential text is the exclusive container of any future rulings. According to the Bible itself, Torah study means memorizing the text and passing it on to subsequent generations. But after the sealing of the text, the Scriptures became also an object of interpretation and contemplation, like an artistic creation. As the sealed text acquires new dimensions, Torah study acquires different meaning.

№ AUTHORITY AND SEALING

Looking at the distinction between open and sealed canons, the position of the sealed canon seems to be stronger at first glance. Besides being canonical, the text is also the sole authority. But the sealing of the text engenders both the bestowal and the removal of authority. The sealing of Scripture arrested the prophetic activity that had been instrumental in its formulation and, by awarding absolute authority to previous prophecies, dissipated the power of contemporary prophecies. The moment the text was sealed, authority was removed from the writers of the text and transferred to its interpreters; denied to the prophets and awarded to the Sages. "Henceforth you must incline your ear to the works of the learned."

The sealing of the Scriptures does indeed indicate recognition of the exclusive authority of these texts, but at the same time the authority

is redistributed. Thus the sealing of the Scriptures instigates a comprehensive upheaval within the Jewish community. The new leadership model of the Torah scholar arises, the religious ideal of Torah study becomes central, and new institutions such as the *beit midrash* acquire a prestigious position in the community. A new genre of writing also develops, that of interpretative texts linked to biblical verses.

In addition, other texts knock on the doors of the canon. Once the gates were locked, the texts still claiming to be part of the Scriptures became Apocrypha. A severe act of censorship seems to be a concomitant of the act of sealing. Not only does the bearer of authority change; the very source of authority changes as well. The rabbis do not derive their authority from direct, personal experience of revelation but rather from being the interpreters of the sealed revelation. As David Weiss Halivni formulated the rise of Midrash: "Canonization (even in its early, imperfect state) dried up the flow of direct information from God to man (or was it the other way around, that the drying up was responsible for the canonization?), forcing man to rely on Midrash and intellectual endeavor that anchors the preset in the past."²⁰

The sealing of the Scriptures transformed both the structure and the source of authority. It is important to note that this change in the conception of authority, although it dominates the central current of Judaism, was not fully accepted. Within the talmudic corpus we still find attempts to draw authority from revelation or divine inspiration, a practice that continued through the Middle Ages and later. ²¹ Other techniques for answering legal questions, such as the use of dreams, omens, and revelations, persisted alongside strict legal reasoning, but these were marginalized.

The following story from the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Temurah, exemplifies the transition from inspiration to interpretation. The story appears with other stories whose central motif is the halakhic situation immediately after the death of Moses, and it attempts to fill the gap in continuity found in the opening verses of the book of Joshua: "Now after the death of Moses the servant of the Lord it came to pass that the Lord spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' minister, saying 'Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over the Jordan, thou and all this people to the land which I do give to them, to the children of Israel."

What happened between the death of Moses and the injunction to Joshua to cross the Jordan? The simplest answer is that Moses was for-

bidden to enter the Promised Land, so after his death God ordered Joshua to lead the people there. Yet such an answer does not satisfy the exegetical flair with which gaps in the biblical narrative can be filled. According to the Midrash, this is what occurred, in those very words:

Rav Judah reported in the name of Rav: when Moses departed this world for the Garden of Eden he said to Joshua: "Ask me concerning all the doubts you have." He replied to him: "My master, have I ever left you for one hour and gone elsewhere? [that is, I have no doubts]. Did you not write concerning me in the Torah: 'But his servant Joshua departed not out of the Tabernacle'" (Exod. 33:11). Immediately the strength of Moses weakened [that is, he took offense at Joshua's remark, which implied Joshua no longer had need of him] and Joshua forgot 300 laws and there arose 700 doubts concerning laws. Then all the Israelites rose up to kill him. The Holy One blessed be He then said to him: "It is not possible to tell you [these laws]. Go and occupy their attention in war," as it says: "Now after the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, it came to pass that the Lord spoke." (Josh. 1:1)

This story appears with other stories relating to the death of Moses and to forgetting. On the same page of the Talmud there is another example of the same preoccupation:

Rav Judah reported in the name of Samuel: 300 traditional laws were forgotten during the period of mourning for Moses. They said to Joshua, "Ask"; he replied: "It is not in heaven" (Deut. 03:12). They [the Israelites] said to Samuel: "Ask"; he replied "These are the commandments" (Num. 36:13) [implying that since the promulgation of these commandments no prophet has the right to introduce anything new].

God refrains from answering the halakhic questions posed to Him. He thus refuses to help Joshua, the conceited pupil who has forgotten the teaching, and will not give him a response that will ease all the doubts that have beset him. Instead of a halakhic answer, Joshua receives a bit of Machiavellian advice from God: if you wish to escape the fury of the people alive, go and distract them with political problems.

This is an interesting view of the war that was fought to conquer the land, implying that it began because of Joshua's failure as a Torah scholar. Had Joshua correctly answered the questions posed in the *beit* midrash, he would not have become the military commander who started a war to save his own skin. This *midrash* thus reflects the transition from prophets to rabbis at the moment when prophecy becomes halakhically forbidden, and it also expresses implicit pride in the new figure of the Torah scholar and his superiority over the man of war.²²

Thus there is latent tension in the sealing of the canon which does not exist in an open canon. This tension originates in the paradoxical outcome of the sealing itself: the act of awarding exclusive authority places out of reach the activity which first created the canon. This does not occur in the case of an open canon. When a canon is sealed, one can expect an all-encompassing change in the conception of authority, its source, and its bearers. As in the case discussed above, the movement from prophet to scholar and from prophecy to interpretation accompanies a new conception of the text, allowing for the variety of interpretation initiated by scholars.

The movement from prophet to the commentator is accompanied by another shift, no less drastic, from priest to scholar. This aspect of the change in the conception of authority was due to the rise of the expert-interpreter. From the second century B.C.E., and perhaps even earlier, a new religious elite began to emerge: that of the Sages. Their relative influence and impact on the rest of the community waxed and waned over time, and their power was institutionalized to varying degrees in different eras. Before the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., the Sages seem to have been a totally uninstitutionalized force, and historians debate the extent of power and influence they exerted on the Jewish masses.23 After the destruction of the Temple, the Sages emerged as the only existing elite, and in the third and fourth centuries they reached the height of their influence and institutionalized power, although their actual impact on the general population still needs careful evaluation. Among the most interesting changes that came with the rise of the Sages was the decline of priestly leadership. According to one view, the priests had been the primary force in the transmission and interpretation of the tradition, and the decline of priestly leadership followed the destruction the Temple. Hence it began only in 70 c.e., and even after this date priests continued to hold a broader leadership role. According to another view the shift began before the destruction of the Temple, as early as the Hellenistic period in the second century B.C.E., for the Sages had already formed a popular and influential alternative to the priesthood while the Temple was still in existence.

Detailed analysis of the historical problem is beyond the scope of this work; we will refer only to sources from the end of the second century C.E., which articulate the normative consequences of this shift.24 In this striking example of setting priorities for saving lives when sacrifices are inevitable, the Mishnah expresses its preference for scholars over priests: a bastard scholar must be saved before an ignorant high priest. Scholarship with defective lineage is thus preferable to ignorance with the best lineage.25 Unlike the authority of the priest, that of the scholar does not rest on a monopoly over ritual. Priestly authority rests on the claim that a certain group has the exclusive right to perform a variety of rituals. The priests alone can atone for the people in the Temple; the priests alone maintain the order of nature by continuing the daily ritual routine in the Temple. The well-being of the community is therefore dependent upon individuals who have exclusive control over these cardinal religious goods. This exclusivity is guarded by exclusivity of lineage and is the source of priestly power. Unlike priests, scholars in the rabbinic tradition have no unique role in the ritual. Every ritual performed by them can also be performed by the rest of the community. Even more, in institutions formed by the rabbis for the performance of ritual, such as the synagogue, the priests have very limited monopoly on ritual. Any Jew can blow the shofar; any Jew can read the Torah, and so on. The expert's authority is derived not from his exclusive role in the ritual but from his skills as interpreter of the sealed text.

THE MEANING OF THE CANONICAL TEXT

Clearly, the status of the book changes when as part of the Scripture it becomes authoritative, but does its meaning also change, and if so, in what way? A case in point is the book of Ecclesiastes, whose composition has been dated to the third century B.C.E. and whose text reflects a deeply skeptical position typical of early Hellenistic philosophy. Traditional motifs such as Divine Providence and revelation are absent in Ecclesiastes, and it contains more than a hint of heresy. God, though omnipotent, is quite arbitrary: "In my own brief span of life, I have seen both these things: sometimes a good man perishes in spite of his goodness, and sometimes a wicked one endures in spite of his wickedness" (7.15). Piety, therefore, is not recommended: "So do not

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overdo goodness and do not act the wise man to excess . . ." (7.16). A nihilistic mood pervades the book in its meditations on the meaning-lessness of man's deeds and efforts, and the hedonistic conclusion it reaches derives in part from this feeling: "There is nothing worthwhile for a man but to eat and drink and afford himself enjoyment within his means" (2.24). The tenet that is probably most central to biblical faith, the meaningfulness of history, is rejected by Ecclesiastes, where history is described as a recurring cycle of meaningless events. The sons reenact the deeds of the fathers, and there is nothing new under the sun.

The book of Ecclesiastes, which not only contradicts the beliefs represented in the Bible but also expresses a radically different temperament and consciousness, is bound together with the rest of the Bible, just as the Epistle of James in the New Testament is found alongside the other Epistles.

When Ecclesiastes was introduced into the body of the Scriptures, however, it was required to give up its unique and heretical message. The moment it became part of the scriptural canon, the exegete was obligated to make it consistent with the rest of the Scriptures. This new reading means implicitly that its original meaning will be lost. Thus it is too general and essentially useless to say merely that canonization imbues the book with authority, for the authority is conditional upon a specific way of reading the text. After the act of canonization, the expositor is no longer called upon to justify his views in accordance with Ecclesiastes. On the contrary, Ecclesiastes must be justified in the eyes of the expositor. The reader, more than the text itself, becomes the bearer of authority.

The Midrash deals with the heretical elements of the book in the following manner:

Rabbi Benjamin ben Levi stated [that] the Sages wanted to inter the book of Ecclesiastes, for they found in it ideas that leaned toward heresy. They argued, was it right that Solomon should have said the following: "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth" (Eccles. 11:9). Moses said, "Go not about after your own heart and your own eyes" (Num. 15:39), but Solomon said, "Walk in the ways of thy heart and in the sight of thine eyes" (Eccles. 11:9). What then? Is all restraint to be removed? Are there neither judges nor justice? When, however, he said, "But know then that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment," they admitted that Solomon had spoken well.

Rabbi Samuel ben Nahmani stated [that] the Sages intended to inter the book of Ecclesiastes because they found ideas in it that leaned toward heresy. They said, "Should Solomon have uttered the following: 'What profit hath man of all his labor'?" This might imply, might it not, that labor in the study of the Torah was also included? On the other hand, they argued, if he had said "of all labor" and left it at that, we might have thought that he meant to include labor as well in the study of Torah. However, he does not say this but "of all his labor," implying that it is in his own labor that man finds no profit, but that he does find profit in the labor of studying Torah. R. Judah explained that "under the sun" he has no profit but above the sun [in heaven] he has. (Midrash Rabbah Leviticus, XVIII)

This *midrash* addresses the two central themes of Ecclesiastes: the sentiment of the futility of human expectations and its hedonism. The feeling of hopelessness endangers man's motivation to perform the commandments, for they seem to be among those things that offer no profit. Thus the interpreter annotates the phrase "all of his labors" and explains that it does not include the labor of Torah. In this way the feeling of despair expressed in Ecclesiastes is transferred to the realm of secular life and is even transformed into an encouraging voice urging the fulfillment of the precepts and labor in Torah study. The advocacy of hedonism in Ecclesiastes becomes a threat: know that God will be the judge of your indulgence.

The new reading is applied throughout Ecclesiastes *Rabbah*, and is exemplified by the following general rule which appears in that text:

"I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to get pleasure so long as they live. But also that every man should eat and drink" (Eccles. 3:12:f). R. Tanhuma in the name of R. Nahman, the son of R. Samuel b. Nahman, and R. Menahem [in another version: R. Jeremiah and R. Mayasha in the name of R. Samuel b. R. Isaac] said: "All the eating and drinking mentioned in this book refer to Torah and good deeds." (Eccles. R. 3:12)

The hedonistic message becomes a metaphor; whenever Ecclesiastes tells you to eat and drink, know that what he means is "go and do good deeds and study Torah." The book of Ecclesiastes thus pays dearly for the everlasting fame it wins by being canonized; renown comes at the expense of distortion and effacement of its unique and radical message.

The accommodation of the text to the canon was made possible not only by reinterpretation but by additions to the text itself. The closing verses seem to have been added to alter the general nature of the book: "The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: Revere God and observe His Commandments! For this applies to all mankind. That God will call every creature to account for everything unknown, be it good or bad." How different this is compared to what seems to have been the original ending, seven verses earlier: "Utter futility—said Koheleth—All is futile!" (12:9).

The canonization of a book is not tantamount to an acceptance of its meaning as authoritative. The inclusion of the Song of Songs in the canon does not give courtship and love the status of an obligation. Rather, the canonical position of this poem compels a metaphorical reading of it, making the love described there a metaphor for the relationship between man and God. The same is true for the book of Esther. It is not the canonization of a comedy about courtly life in a kingdom of Persia, as the book may be read and as Luther did in fact read it, hence refusing to make it canonical. In the Jewish canonization of Esther the absence of God's name (which does not appear once in the entire book) acquires religious meaning: it represents the concealment of the Divine Presence from Israel, and the miracle which occurs is also concealed in a series of events that seem completely coincidental.27 Paradoxically, then, the canonization of a work sometimes serves to suppress its most plausible readings. Moreover, the implications of the particular kind of reading that allows for inclusion in the canon may be far-reaching and also pose a certain danger. Because the canonization of a book is in fact the canonization of a very specific reading of it, one must make certain the reader does indeed read it that way. Otherwise, the book becomes a blessing and a curse: it becomes renowned as an authoritative and holy book yet could lead to heretical conclusions. It is easy to imagine a reader who, knowing the Ecclesiastes is a holy book and its message obligatory by virtue of being canonical, reads the recommendations of hedonism without interpreting every mention of eating and drinking as a metaphorical expression of Torah and good deeds. In that reader's hands Ecclesiastes is clearly a dangerous book, and his reading must be mediated by outside influences. The same is true every time the commentary on a book of the Scriptures becomes distant from the text itself.

CANON AND THE PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY

In short, canonization of a text may at times serve to take the authority away from its original meaning, allowing the commentator to choose the meaning that will be deemed authoritative. In reality, he wields authority over the text. In the interpretation of Esther and other books, the text is read in the "best" possible light in order to redeem it—a light that is consistent with what the interpreter believes is expressed in the rest of Scriptures.

This phenomenon in the interpretation of a canonical text is an example of what Willard Quine has called "the principle of charity," a topic that promises to broaden our perspective on the subject of canonization. The principle of charity is an interpretative method that would yield an optimally successful text. For example, although a person's words might be read as self-contradictory and thus meaningless, they should not be interpreted in that way. If someone tells us he feels good and bad, we should not take his statement as meaningless but rather understand by this that sometimes he feels good and sometimes bad, or that his feelings are mixed.²⁸

In Quine's usage, the principle entails quite a limited amount of charity. He discusses problems of translation that involve the use of basic logical rules. In cases of radical translation a charitable attitude is adopted so that a speaker's words will make sense and the sentence he utters can have meaning, any meaning. Charity is not used here to interpret the other's statements in the best possible light, but simply to shed some light on them. The other limit of charity is that use of the principle is not based on any assumptions of the speaker's talent and capability but is simply the precondition for understanding any discussion. Charity amounts to seeing the other as a user of a language, and it is necessary for holding a conversation.

The following example will help clarify the distinction between the level of charity required for shedding any light at all on a sentence and the level of placing it in the best light. A given conversation might be fraught with suspicion; for various reasons the speaker may think that his interlocutor is lying and is therefore totally uncharitable in this sense. Sometimes we just take it for granted that the other is lying, so we apply the principle of "liar until proved truthful." But even so, we

must employ the sort of charity that Quine defines, for in order to tell a lie, the other must make sense and speak a shared language.

Ronald Dworkin extends Quine's principle of charity in interpretation to the second level. Dworkin claims that the choice between competing interpretations is governed by the criterion of which interpretation shows the work in the best light. In literary interpretation we will choose the one that accounts for all the aspects of the narrative. An interpretation that seems to leave a portion of the story unconnected and therefore superfluous will be ruled out. In legal interpretation the standard for the best possible interpretation is not aesthetic but moral. We will select the interpretation that makes the best moral case of the legal material. According to Dworkin, even those who claim that we must discover the original intention of the legislator base their opinion on the belief that this is the best possible way of reading a legal text. The writer's intention does not provide an independent criterion for establishing the meaning of the text; Dworkin rejects that standard and argues that those who adopt it do so for political reasons. In their view, this is the only way that the legal system can achieve stability and be freed from the arbitrariness of the interpreter—the judge. Their prime guiding principle of interpretation is a value judgment concerning the optimal interpretative strategy, not an objective standard for interpretation. Moreover, according to Dworkin, in reconstructing the writer's intention we attempt to present it in the best possible light. Interpretation is thus closely linked to evaluation, and value serves as the ultimate standard for interpretation.29

Dworkin seems to claim that this attitude defines the activity of interpretation in general, and it certainly does apply to canonical texts. With regard to many ordinary texts, however, there is no commitment to presenting the text in the best possible light. In court, lawyers seek to interpret the law not in the best possible moral light but in the manner that will best serve their clients. And literary critics sometimes strive to represent works in the worst possible light. By contrast, the commitment of the judge is to make the best moral case, and it demands a unique attitude toward the text. The judge's position is not always grounded in his belief that the text he is interpreting is morally perfect, but rather in his role in the system. From his point of view the canonization of the legal text not only endows it with authority but also requires a commitment to make the best of it. At other times the reverse will be true: the same attitude will be derived not from the

role in the system but from belief in the intrinsic value of the canonical work. What defines the consideration of an artistic work as canonical will be that attitude of presenting it in the best possible aesthetic light.

In the case of a sacred text the speaker is God and it is thus by definition perfect; not only can no contradictions exist but the text is the best possible. Such an assumption naturally influences the way the text is read in relation to other sources that seem less perfect in comparison. Reading a holy text requires using the principle of charity as generously as possible in interpreting it, since it is inconceivable that such a text could err. We apply the principle of charity in our reading of a holy text not only to ensure its meaningfulness when literal interpretation creates an impression of meaninglessness, but also to ensure that it corresponds to the highest criteria of perfection. In the case of the Scriptures, there is an a priori interpretative commitment to show the text in the best possible light. Conversely, the loss of this sense of obligation to the text is an undeniable sign that it is no longer perceived as holy. Making use of the principle of charity, the following principle can be stipulated: the degree of canonicity of a text corresponds to the amount of charity it receives in its interpretation. The more canonical a text, the more generous its treatment.

A conscious expression of the principle of pure charity in reading of Scripture is found in Maimonides' declaration in the *Guide to the Perplexed*.

Know that our shunning the affirmation of the eternity of the world is not due to a text figuring in the Torah according to which the world has been produced in time. For the texts indicating that the world has been produced in time are not more numerous than those indicating that the deity is a body. Nor are the gates of figurative interpretation shut in our faces or impossible of access to us regarding the subject of the creation of the world in time. For we could interpret them as figurative, as we have done when denying His corporeality. (II, 25)

Maimonides states that if it were clear to him in a metaphysical sense that in truth the world was eternal rather than created, he would interpret the Scriptures in harmony with this truth. He applied the same principle in his treatment of the expressions in the Bible describing God in corporeal terms: he interpreted them in accordance with the metaphysical truth that God is not material. He assumes that we are

aware of proved metaphysical truths, and that Scripture, by definition, speaks the truth. Hence instances when two statements seem to contradict each other must be resolved by a metaphorical interpretation of the Scriptures, as in the numerous cases of corporealization found in the Bible. According to this approach, the canonical status of the text entails interpreting it with the maximum amount of charity.

However, Maimonides' teaching runs counter to the opposite intuition regarding the interpretation of Scripture, an intuition that introduces an entirely contrary hermeneutic principle and derives a different meaning from the canonical status of the text. Maimonides' view that a holy text necessitates maximal charity in its interpretation is opposed by the view that a holy text must be interpreted with minimal charity. If a scriptural expression appears to contradict commonly accepted metaphysical axioms—by implying the materiality of God, for example—then that metaphysical position must be abandoned. The interpreter must concede that what he had believed to be a metaphysical axiom is incorrect. Similarly in questions of justice: if he sees something in the text that seems unjust to him, rather than offer a more just explanation, he must revise his own concepts of justice.

This approach confronts the reader with two options, one more radical than the other. The more moderate one is that the reader must suspend his moral judgment facing the sacred text. The reader is not required to redefine his moral principles completely, but is forbidden to accommodate the text to these principles in the face of a contradictory commandment of God. According to the radical approach, it is the text that must determine the interpreter's concept of charity. He cannot postulate a conception of justice or truth that he formulated before his encounter with the text and still interpret the text in the best possible light. The holiness and authority of the text is so allencompassing that it alone determines the concepts of good and evil, truth and falsity; no other criterion exists by which it can be interpreted.

The moderate approach does not entail a complete revaluation and negation of moral convictions and metaphysical knowledge which, according to the radical approach, ought to be constituted solely by the canonical text. Rather, it demands suspension of value and knowledge in cases of conflict and disallows the accommodation of the text to values and beliefs that were consistent with the previous conception of charity.

The radical position may also be expressed as follows: all that we know about God comes from revelation. In contrast, Maimonides declared that his knowledge of God was independent; He is not material, hence all corporeal descriptions will be explained in a metaphorical sense. This position is unacceptable in a theology that emphasizes that the distance between God and man can be bridged by revelation alone. Its adherents would agree that the text must be interpreted in the best possible light, but that would be an empty demand, for what is positive and negative can only be known from the text itself.

Interpretation of Scripture is thus divided into two opposing attitudes toward the principle of charity in interpretation. One claims that its nature as a sacred text demands a maximal, indeed nearly infinite, degree of charity in interpretation, while the other argues that the nature of a sacred text demands absolute abstention from the principle of charity, since the text alone determines what is charity.

These contrary attitudes regarding the principle of charity in interpretation of Scripture are related to the degree that the text is seen as making all-encompassing demands upon the interpreter. This in turn depends on whether the interpreter can refer to any sort of legitimate background for assistance in the exegesis of the Scriptures. In the view of the moderates such a background does exit, but the radicals, rejecting the principle of charity in interpretation of the Scriptures, would argue that there can be none, since all human knowledge is as naught compared to revelation, which establishes the entire fund of knowledge appropriate to its interpretation. The question of the exclusivity of the sacred text, which is implicit in this disagreement, came out into the open in Rabbi Elfakar's contestation of the Guide to the Perplexed.

Yehudah Elfakar, a rabbi from Toledo who participated in the debate over Maimonides' writings that erupted in the fourth decade of the thirteenth century, was critical of Maimonides' interpretative strategy. In his opinion, Maimonides was justified in denying corporealization in the Scriptures, but not because of arguments against corporealization in the philosophy of Aristotle, but because the Torah itself explicitly rejects corporealization. This is in fact the only legitimate argument that could be made in defense of a metaphorical interpretation of the materialist expressions.³¹ Spinoza in his *Treatise* attacks Maimonides on the same point.³² In Part II of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides declared that if he had proof the world was eternal, he would interpret the Torah in conformity with that view of an eternal

world, just as he did with expressions of corporeality. This declaration, according to R. Elfakar, demonstrates his bond to Aristotle rather than to the Torah. If you possess proof that the world is eternal and the Torah seems to say that the world is created, you must abandon that proof. He argues that no relevant external background information can serve as criterion for interpreting the Torah itself, whereas Maimonides accepts the independent truth of philosophy while denying that the Torah could possibly contradict it.

These two contrary positions on reading Scripture "with charity" share one assumption: what is written in Scripture is truth. The dispute between the view of Maimonides and that of Elfakar resides in their respective solutions to problems of apparent contradiction between Scripture and truth. In these cases, should Scripture be accommodated to the readers' beliefs about truth, or should those beliefs be accommodated to the meaning of Scripture?³³

In scriptural interpretation, the religious conception of the distance between God and the reader is the central hermeneutical issue. The interpreter must either abnegate himself before God, setting aside the whole of his human consciousness as irrelevant, or allow his human consciousness to serve as a legitimate hermeneutical tool. At this juncture we face a fundamental tension affecting the act of reading canonical texts according to the principle of charity. The midrashic interpretation of that principle is exemplified in the passage from Ecclesiastes discussed earlier. The reading was based on knowledge originating within the Scriptures. That is, the rabbis reinterpreted the hedonistic words of Ecclesiastes in the light of Moses' injunction, "Go not about after your own heart and your own eyes."

Besides Maimonides, there are other instances of traditional scriptural readings that base the principle of charity on sources of authority external to the canonical corpus. To dwell on this question of external and internal influence would divert us from the problem of canonization, however, and lead us toward the problem of interpretation, and I wish to deal with the latter only in its connection with the former.³⁴

Canonizing a text results in increased flexibility in its interpretation, such as the use of complex hermeneutical devices of accommodation to

yield the best possible reading. This phenomenon conflicts with the restrictive impulse of canonization itself, an act which creates boundaries and in many cases censors other texts and prevents them from becoming canonical. In addition, textual fluidity is often arrested with canonization. The legal and narrative material of canonized texts used to be transmitted in a number of traditional ways which were developed before the authoritative canon became fixed. In some cases, canonization does not mean a selection of the one and only version of the existing legal and narrative material. Rather, the older traditions are included in the canon and juxtaposed within it—contradicting and duplicating each other. Fixing a canon arrests the process of multiplicity of traditions, and it is usually accompanied by the establishment of a precise version of the text itself.

This tension between the hermeneutical openness created by canonizing a text and the restrictive tendency manifested by the canonization is revealed in a far more radical form when we examine two elements in Jewish hermeneutics which became central to the attitude towards a canonical, revealed text in the Middle Ages. The first is the concept of the multilayered text, which includes an esoteric and hidden layer. The second is the idea that a canonized text speaks a qualitatively different kind of language, and conventional hermeneutic devices are therefore incapable of uncovering its deepest layers. The concept of the Torah as a multilayered text hiding a secret esoteric meaning, and the claim that divine language necessitates unconventional modes of interpretation, enlarge the possibility of deriving meanings from the text almost endlessly.

The idea of the multilayered text with hidden esoteric meaning took root in Jewish hermeneutics as early as the first and second centuries, although it is not the organizing principle of the hermeneutical endeavor in midrashic literature.³⁵ This concept grew powerful in the Middle Ages, permitting new metaphysical and theological visions to be integrated into the Torah, a text which seemed superficially either alien or indifferent to these formulations. Both Kabbalah and Jewish philosophy were bold, innovative theological ventures, and they could be integrated in the tradition because they presented themselves as articulations of the Torah's hidden message. This grand interpretative move, which thoroughly transformed the most basic conceptions of Judaism, was sustained by complex theories of language and divine speech and by political and theological notions of esotericism. For one

of the major achievements of both Kabbalah and Jewish philosophy was the development of new notions of Torah and language. These novel conceptions of the canon served in turn to integrate the other substantive innovations of Kabbalah and Jewish philosophy by means of complex hermeneutical systems. The emergence of new notions of Torah and the development of innovative interpretive techniques to expand and open the text enlarged the implications canonicity had for meaning.

Kabbalistic conceptions of the Torah have been discussed by several scholars, among them Gershom Scholem and Moshe Idel, in various thorough works on kabbalistic hermeneutics.³⁶ Within the Maimonidean tradition interpretation also received a thorough analysis.³⁷ A detailed account of the fascinating history of hermeneutics within these two movements is beyond the scope of this work. Instead, I will discuss two classical texts of each school: Maimonides' introduction to The Guide of the Perplexed and Nachmanides' introduction to his commentary of the Torah. In discussing the conception of canon of these two outstanding figures of medieval Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah, I endeavor to show how their conceptions opened the text to derive new forms of meaning and also wish to emphasize the connection between secrecy and nonconventional hermeneutics.

Why should a text hide anything, especially if the hidden meaning is the most important, revealing the true nature of God? Maimonides' idea of the necessity of esotericism is grounded in the deep cleavage between the enlightened elite and the ignorant masses. The noncorporeal abstract conception of God could not be disclosed to the masses exoterically, since they cannot grasp a nonmaterial existence. Furthermore, such a conception of God and a naturalistic theology accompanying it would endanger the social order, which depends upon belief in Divine Providence and retribution. A widespread belief in a personal God who rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked is the main motivation for maintaining the basic norms necessary for social stability. An Aristotelian naturalistic theology would be dangerous to the uninitiated.

These political arguments are the core of Maimonides' explanation for the need to conceal a philosophical understanding of God behind the anthropomorphic image presented at the surface of the biblical text. There is another, entirely apolitical explanation of esotericism which Maimonides ties to the elusive and ineffable nature of metaphysical

truth. God's essence can be expressed only through indirect hints and allusions. It is not that the surface of the text is a coded message constructed intentionally by the prophets to hide its deeper layer. Rather, it is only the indirect means for expressing what is ineffable. This apolitical conception of esotericism is expressed in Maimonides' introduction to the *Guide* alongside the political argument:

Know that whenever one of the perfect wishes to mention, either orally or in writing, something that he understands of these secrets, accordingly to the degree of his perfection, he is unable to explain with complete clarity and coherence even the portion that he has apprehended, as he could do with the other sciences whose teaching is generally recognized. Rather there will befall him when teaching another that which he had undergone when learning himself. I mean to say that the subject matter will appear, flash, and then be hidden again, as though this were the nature of this subject matter be there much or little of it. For this reason all the Sages possessing knowledge of God the Lord, knowers of the truth, when they aimed at teaching something of this subject matter, spoke of it only in parables and riddles.³⁸

It would seem natural for the idea of the esoteric layer of the text to be connected with the claim that divine language is qualitatively different from ordinary language and thus in need of a nonconventional hermeneutic approach to unlock its meanings. Interestingly, Maimonides, one of the main exponents of the concept of a multilayered Torah, rejects the idea of a divine language. According to him, all languages, including Hebrew, the sacred language, are products of human convention. The sacredness of Hebrew as the language of the Torah does not derive from its unique ontological status as a divine, presocial, cosmic, and natural language, but from its social conventions, such as the lack of names for sexual organs in Hebrew.³⁹ The hidden layer of the text is thus revealed by conventional features that exist in any language. Maimonides describes the *Guide of the Perplexed* as a hermeneutical text:

The first purpose of this Treatise is to explain the meanings of certain terms occurring in books of prophecy. Some of these terms are equivocal; hence the ignorant attribute to them only one or some of the meanings in which the term in question is used. Others are derivative terms; hence they attribute to them only the original meaning from which the

other meaning is derived. Others are amphibolous terms, so that at times they are believed to be univocal and at other times equivocal. . .

This Treatise also has a second purpose: namely, the explanation of very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets but not explicitly identified there as such. Hence an ignorant or heedless individual might think that they possess only an external sense, but no internal one.

All the terms Maimonides endeavors to explain denote more than one object or concept in the language. The existence of equivocal terms in language is a great source of confusion—among them taking a metaphor literally—especially when the very identification of metaphors demands prior metaphysical knowledge. This is the case with corporeal terms concerning God in the Torah, such as God's hand and many other terms, which the ignorant take at face value, claiming that the Torah describes an anthropomorphic, corporeal God. Yet it is principally these equivocal terms and parables that make esotericism possible. Parables and equivocal terms make it possible to address two audiences simultaneously—the enlightened and the ignorant. The enlightened audience grasps the "internal" meaning of the equivocal term and the parable, and the ignorant, its surface. A language lacking equivocal terms—in which every word denotes only one object or concept-would be completely transparent and thus could not be prophetic, since it would be unable to address a heterogeneous community and speak to the two audiences in it. Esotericism is therefore both expressed and uncovered through a conventional feature of language, equivocation, a feature which is an impediment to communication though it has great political uses. 40 In the Maimonidean tradition the idea of the multilayered canon is thus supported by a view of the world that postulates the political and social need for esotericism, the equivocal nature of language which serves as a medium for both revealing and hiding, and a notion of the canon that addresses a heterogeneous community. This outlook deepened and broadened the interpretive possibilities of the Torah. With a detailed hermeneutic project—which reinterprets concepts as metaphors and narratives as allegories—the philosophical religious sensibility was presented as the hidden and deeper meaning of the canon.41

In the Kabbalah, in contrast, the idea of the multilayered text is supported by the notion of a presocial, cosmic, divine language which is qualitatively different from conventional language. Unlike the Maimonidean tradition, which regarded language, even the holy language, as a social convention, the kabbalists' view of Torah language enriched the interpretative possibilities to infinity.⁴² The question of whether Scripture speaks in a qualitatively different language and hence must be approached with hermeneutic tools not applicable to human speech was debated within rabbinic Midrash from the second century onwards. According to the school of R. Ishmael, the Torah spoke in the language of humans. Thus it used conventional rhetorical devices such as doubling a term or a commandment to emphasize a point. According to R. Akiva, there is no redundancy in the text and any duplication is present in order to teach us something new.⁴³ Given their conception of Torah language as divine, the kabbalists' hermeneutics is a continuation of the trend of R. Akiva's school.

In his introduction to commentary of the Torah, Nachmanides writes that part of the Mosaic revelation was oral, and it included the knowledge of the whole chain of being from the lowest elements to the knowledge of the divine: "Fifty gates [degrees] of understanding were created in the world and all were transmitted to Moses with one exception, as it is said 'Thou hast made him but little lower [than] the angels." The last gate, not given to Moses, is the unknown essence of God. In the next paragraph Nachmanides states:

Everything that was transmitted to Moses our teacher through the fortynine gates of understanding was written in the Torah explicitly or by implication in words, in the numerical value of the letters or in the form of the letters, that is, whether written normally or with some change in form such as bent or crooked letters and other deviations, or in the tips of the letters and their crownlets.

The Torah implicitly includes all possible knowledge, and an interpreter armed with the proper hermeneutical key can lay bare those secrets. 44 King Solomon, according to Nachmanides, possessed the keys to such wisdom: "King Solomon, peace be upon him, whom God had given wisdom and knowledge, derived it all from the Torah, and from it he studied until he knew the secret of all things created, even of the forces and characteristics of plants so that he wrote about them even a Book of 'Medicine." Nachmanides claims that nonconventional hermeneutic devices—the numerical values of letters, the shape of the letters, and so on—are the way to attain knowledge. He justifies his claim on the grounds of the existence of rules and traditions prescribing

the detailed forms of each letter in the Torah—including the tips of the letters and their crownlets. Since changes in the shape of letters presumably do not affect the conventional meaning of words, the insistence on particular shapes in writing a Torah scroll is a sign that each of them does make a difference—by conveying a coded message.⁴⁵

Nachmanides develops the idea that the insistence on nonsemantic aspects in the preservation and transmission of the canonical text signifies the need to apply nonconventional hermeneutics to lay bare hidden layers of meaning; this leads him to support a far more radical interpretive kabbalistic tradition:

We have yet another mystic tradition that the whole Torah is comprised of Names of the Holy One, blessed be He, and that the letters of the words separate themselves into Divine names when divided in a different manner . . . It is for this reason that a Scroll of the Torah in which a mistake has been made in one letter's being added or subtracted is disqualified [even though the literal meaning remains unchanged], for this principle obligates us to disqualify a scroll of the Torah in which one letter vav is missing from the word otam—of which there are thirty-nine fully spelled ones in the Torah [although the same word appears many times without a vav] . . . It is this principle which has caused the Biblical scholars to count every full and defective word in the Torah and Scripture and to compose books on the Masoretic text.

The existence of precise rules prescribing the preservation of particular letters whose addition or deletion does not make any difference in literal meaning supports the radical interpretative possibility that with a different division, the Torah would consist of a sequence of God's names. The existing division of words becomes only one possible reading of the text. The reason every letter in the present form of the Torah is prescribed, even those which make no difference in meaning, is that they would make a difference if the division into words were different. The interpretative potential of the text is extended significantly by the argument that other meanings can be drawn from the text by changing the division of the letters into words. In his own writings Nachmanides never practiced such a technique, but the enormous potential embodied in the deconstruction of the sequence of letters in the text was practiced in a radical fashion by Abraham Abulafia one generation after Nachmanides.46 Nachmanides adds to the worddivision notion the idea that the Torah in its original form, prior to the creation of the world, was written in an uninterrupted sequence, not divided into words, and this sequence is one long name of God. In its hidden primordial form, the Torah is a manifestation of God's essence, his name, which was turned into communicative revelation through certain ordering of letters into words.

Nachmanides' argument reveals an interesting reciprocal tension between consolidation of the canonical text and radical hermeneutical openness. The strict canonization of the Torah—not only its precise words in their proper sequence but also variations in shapes of letter, crownlets, and the addition or deletion of letters which make no literal difference—are taken as expanding the hermeneutical possibilities. Shapes of letters and their numerical values become bearers of meaning, and therefore the semantic field of the text is extended far beyond its straightforward surface meaning. Paradoxically, the canonical text, because it has been fixed to the last detail, becomes saturated with signifiers which, in principle, contain all knowledge—divine and natural.

The extension of the possibility of signification is accompanied by another paradoxical move in Nachmanides' introduction. According to him, the Torah in its primary condition, before it became a particular sequence of words, was a long name of God and therefore signified only one thing—God. The magnitude of signification of the Torah in its present form, which includes all knowledge, is reduced in the deeper primary level of the text to one object. It can even be said that in its deepest layer the text loses all its semantic quality, since God's name has no ordinary referential function. The name is a direct manifestation of God, and, in some kabbalistic traditions, identical with God. It is no accident that Nachmanides alludes to the magical uses of God's names that are hidden in the text, since they themselves bear divine powers.

This connection between Torah and God informs other esoteric conceptions of the Torah in which the surface serves as a complex symbolic language reflecting God's dynamic aspects—the *sefirot*. The conception of the Torah as a direct symbolic manifestation of God's inner life, sometimes as identical with God, provides a ground for esotericism vastly different from the one offered by Maimonides. Kabbalistic conceptions of esotericism are not political, and the hidden layer of the text is not an intentionally obscure message. It is a direct reflection of God's hidden, ineffable nature, to which one can only allude indirectly through a complex, symbolic language.

The rise of esotericism in the Middle Ages and the growing tendency to use nonconventional modes of interpretation, supported by innovative conceptions of the Torah, were the background for the introduction of two powerful world views into the canon—the philosophical and the kabbalistic. The complex hermeneutical endeavor, reflected in hundreds of commentaries written at the time, attests to a paradoxical situation in which the solid, authoritative, fixed canon came to be reinterpreted in a most radical fashion. Framing a text as canonical and, in our case, as divinely revealed opens hermeneutical possibilities that threaten to erode its "original" and straightforward core.

UNCHARITABLE READINGS OF CANONS

Texts are given readings varying from a minimal degree of charity, which implies the effort to make sense, to the extreme charity that is typical of the reading of canonized texts. Loss of charity in its primary sense is a form of decanonization of the text. But there is a deeper version of decanonization which is intimately connected to the withdrawal of charity and may be called the principle of uncharity.

Paradoxically again, canonized works can elicit a radically uncharitable reading. "Uncharitable" here is not meant in Quine's sense of reading utterances uncharitably as meaningless; rather, the text is unmasked, as it is a conspiratorial device that conceals meaning. In this reading the canonical text makes perfect sense, but the sense it makes is in the service of an unjust cause.

One of the most fascinating cases of the principle of uncharity is the Gnostic reading of the Bible as a text given by a demiurge with evil intentions. The Gnostics believed that the power that created the universe was a demiurge—an evil god. A benevolent god is alien to this world, and the gnosis (knowledge) of his redemptive existence is the message of the believers. One of the many Gnostic groups active during the second century, followers of Marcion, identified the demiurge with the God of Israel, the giver of the Torah. This Christian Gnostic sect believed that some sections of the New Testament did constitute the revelation of the true benevolent God, while the rest of Scripture ought to be screened and condemned as the work of the demiurge.⁴⁷ The good God, according to the Gnostic text "The Testimony of Baruch," sent his angel Baruch to Moses bearing the good laws: "Baruch was now

sent to Moses, and through him he spoke to the children of Israel that they should turn to the Good. But the third angel (in service of the demiurge), through the soul which since Eden dwells in Moses as also in all men, darkened the commandments of Baruch and brought it about that they should listen to his own."⁴⁸ The good God tried to reveal laws of righteousness to Moses, but the demiurge had control of the human soul so he distorted the righteous laws and darkened the commandments. Therefore the laws of Moses did not come from the good God.

Gnosticism was by no mean a unified phenomenon; it took many shapes and forms. It existed in both Jewish and Christian variants and had its followers within the Hellenistic pagan culture. Both in its Jewish and Christian forms Gnosticism developed a close and complex relationship to the Bible, and the plurality of Gnostic outlooks is manifested in the relationships of Gnostic texts to the Bible, which vary from total rejection to full acceptance.⁴⁹ Here I will focus on the rejectionists.

The Gnostic rejection of the world and its religious authorities and beliefs produced the most uncharitable reading of the Bible, the same Bible that was most charitably read by Christian and Jews alike. The Gnostic readings postulate an evil God-creator who gave the Torah to mankind as another shrewd device for its torment. It is the task of the Gnostic, he who has the knowledge of the supreme, benevolent, true, hidden, and alien God, to unmask the evil nature of the demiurge and expose his revelation. The manner in which the text is read is the polar opposite of the Jewish reading. The creation myth in Genesis, as unmasked by the Gnostics, reveals the true creation. In the story of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, the good character of the story is the serpent who wanted Adam and Eve to have knowledge of good and evil for their own benefit. Hence he advised them to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, while the demiurge deprived them of that benefit out of sheer jealousy. The Gnostics offered many explanations of how the demiurge was created out of the good God, but that is less relevant to our discussion than the creation of the world by this demiurge, a story that is heavily based on a negative reading of Genesis.⁵⁰

After the demiurge himself was created and in his turn created a host of subsidiary powers, he realized that there is a superior god that endangers his existence. (According to some Gnostic sources, the demiurge became aware of God's existence when he saw God's beautiful

image reflected on the water.) The demiurge wanted to enslave the righteous God (called Adam of Light) by creating a man in God's image and controlling him—in effect, using man as hostage since he bears God's likeness. The verse "Let us make an Adam in our image and likeness," which in Genesis refers to God's announcement of the creation of man, is interpreted in a Gnostic text as a conspiratorial plan offered by the demiurge to his angels:

Yes, if you do not want him [the good God Adam of Light] to be able to ruin our work, come let us create a man out of earth according to the image of our body and according to the likeness of this being [that is, Adam of Light] to serve us; so that when he [Adam of Light] sees his likeness he might become enamored of it. No longer will he ruin our work; rather we shall make those who are born out of the light our servants.

The Gnostic reader focuses on the plural tense that appears in the biblical verse (Gen. 1:26) in which God says, "We shall make." The plural form is a sign of deliberate conspiracy, something invented and carried out by a group. The same plural pronoun also troubled other readers—charitable readers. The Midrash understood the plural as implying that God consulted with the angels in the creation of Adam. This consultation was interpreted as a lesson to future generations that even the great must seek advice from the humble. The plural subject that the Gnostics took as a sign of conspiracy is read by the charitable reader as a sign of humility on the part of God.⁵¹

The continuation of the creation story, according to this Gnostic document, is a series of conspiratorial acts carried out by the demiurge and his council, though they do not realize that the benevolent God turns every plan against the conspirators. The attacks and counterattacks by the good God are modeled according to the Biblical story, but with a revised evaluation. The Adam of Light, the benevolent God, sends Eve to rescue man after he was created by the demiurge; she gives life to Adam, who describes her as Mother of all living creatures. The demiurge, realizing that Eve is working against him, tries to defile her. To defend herself, Eve forges another image in her likeness, then she hides and becomes the Tree of Knowledge. The story goes on: "Then the seven of them together laid plans. They came up to Adam and Eve timidly: they said to him, 'the fruit of all the trees created for you in Paradise shall be eaten; but for the tree of knowledge, control your-

selves and do not eat from it. If you eat, you will die." At this moment appears the serpent, the good adviser: "Then came the wisest of all creatures, who is called Beast. And when he saw the likeness of their mother Eve and he said to her . . ." The serpent's speech from the Genesis story is repeated here word by word until the last sentence, which makes all the difference: "Indeed it was in jealousy that he said this to you, so that you would not eat from it." In the Gnostic transvaluation, the two characters who in the Bible are the cause of Adam's disobedience, Eve and the serpent, are described as good instructors who are sent to rescue Adam from the jealousy of the demiurge—the biblical God.

The expulsion from Eden is described in the same conspiratorial mode: "Behold, Adam has come to be like one of us, so that he knows the difference between the light and the darkness. Now perhaps he will be deceived as in the case of the tree of knowledge and also will come to the tree of life and eat from it and become immortal and become lord and despise us and disdain us and all our glory. Then he will denounce us along with our universe, come let us expel him from Paradise." The devaluation continues across biblical sacred history. A denunciation of biblical heroes appears in the Gnostic text "The Second Treatise of the Great Seth":

For Adam was a laughingstock since he was made a counterfeit type of man . . . And Abraham and Isaac and Jacob were a laughingstock since they, the counterfeit fathers, were given a name by the Hebdomad . . . Moses a faithful servant, was a laughingstock, having been named "the Friend," since they perversely bore witness concerning him who never knew me. . . . For the Archon (the Demiurge) was a laughingstock because he said: "I am God, and there is none greater than I." ⁵³

To use Nietzsche's term, this is a total transvaluation of values: what the demiurge represents as worthy and good is exposed as bad. The Gnostic reading thoroughly decanonizes the text. Instead of assuming a charitable attitude towards the canon, the Gnostics adopt an extreme uncharitable reading of it and make of it a religious obligation. From a hermeneutical point of view, the relativism created by the shift of perspective is fantastic. The identical text, read with radically opposing attitudes, yields opposite meanings, yet both are coherent and the text seems to contain them both. One reading gives us a text that is a sacred gift from a benevolent God, while the other reads in the text a wholesale conspiracy of the demiurge.

The Gnostics seize upon a deep ambivalence in the biblical text: God creates Adam in his likeness yet prohibits him from becoming like God; this ambivalence gives rise to two different and opposing evaluations. In one of the most powerful passages from a Gnostic tract, "The Testimony of Truth," the author formulates the problem in the boldest possible terms:

But of what sort is this God? First he maliciously refused Adam from eating of the tree of knowledge. And secondly he said, "Adam where are you?" God does not have foreknowledge; otherwise would he not know from the beginning? And afterwards he said, "Let us cast him out of this place, lest he eat of the tree of life and live forever." Surely he has shown himself to be a malicious grudge. And what kind of a God is this? For great is the blindness of those who read and they did not know him. And he said "I am the jealous God; I will bring the sins of the fathers upon the children until three and four generations." And he said, "I will make their heart thick and I will cause their mind to become blind that they might not know nor comprehend the things that are said." But these things he has said to those who believe in him and serve him.⁵⁴

An interesting twist on the theme of jealousy was brought out in a passage from the Secret Book of John: "And when he saw the creation which surrounds him and the multitudes of angels around him which had come forth from him, he said to them, 'I am a jealous God, and there is no other God beside me.' But by announcing this he indicated to the angels that another God does exist; for if there were no other one, of whom would he be jealous?" Modern biblical criticism, with all its loss of charity toward the sacred text, is mild compared to this ancient criticism and decanonization.

Since canonization determines the function of texts and affects the expectations of the community of readers, it has great impact not only on the status of texts but on their meaning. There is an interesting asymmetrical relation between canonization and hermeneutical openness. The more canonized the text, the broader interpretative possibilities it offers.