

Scriptures, Sacred Traditions, and Strategies of Religious Subversion

Edited by
MOSHE BLIDSTEIN,
SERGE RUZER,
and DANIEL STÖKL BEN EZRA

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Scriptures, Sacred Traditions, and Strategies of Religious Subversion

Studies in Discourse
with the Work of Guy G. Stroumsa

edited by

Moshe Blidstein, Serge Ruzer,
and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra

Mohr Siebeck

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Introduction

Dialectical developments and metamorphoses of religious outlooks are the bread and butter of the study of religious phenomena. The inclination of the members of each religion to present those developments as glossing the inherited tradition has been amply demonstrated in the research. Yet, acts of power exercised in the struggle for identity, including contestation, controversy, appropriation, interpretation and, finally, polemics against the religious “other,” involve, even if implicitly, the critique of inherited tradition. This volume continues the discussion of the patterns of such polemically charged reevaluations employed across time and religious context, aiming at outlining a typology of attested strategies. It also signals the extreme points of the spectrum, involving either diligently disguised or outright subversions of mainstream forms of belief. These rebellious margins elucidate other, more moderate avenues of interaction, unveiling their implicitly subversive aspects.

Attitudes toward sacred scriptures provide a telling paradigm for the topic as a whole. The religious revolution that took place in the Mediterranean and the Near East in late antiquity and which witnessed the waning of the religions of the ancient world and the rise of Christianity, Rabbinic Judaism, and, later, Islam, was galvanized by scripture. For the new religions in the making, scripture – a revealed text, oral or written, whether inherited from earlier stages of religious history or representing a new phase of revelation, and accessible to all believers – laid at the crux of ritual, authority and identity. However, scripture was not only a core feature of these traditions’ self-understanding, distinguishing them from the older, “pagan” outlooks, but a driving force for the ongoing dynamic of historical change happening among the diverse religious currents emerging in this period. All those individuals or groups who asserted ancient authority perforce made a claim for their scriptural basis as the ultimate fount of that authority and knowledge. Moreover, at the heart of every juncture of differentiation between religious groups, we find contestation over how scripture should be read, understood and applied, and who enjoys the prerogative to do so. Thus, the words, images and paradigms of scripture also became the primary path to religious adhesion, on the one hand, and to dissent, on the other.

Already in the late Second Temple period, different attitudes toward scripture delimited Jewish society into groups or sects distinguished by particular exegesis, with some claiming a dramatically new understanding and revelation. Exegesis found in the Dead Sea Scrolls and earliest Christian compositions bears witness both to outstanding aspirations for novel readings of scripture and to attempts to

anchor these readings in proper authority, insisting on their revelatory character and defining them in terms of the new covenant – strategies characteristic of these two splinter groups.

This early phase also exemplifies the juxtaposition of two directions: re-appropriation of traditional scriptures through re-reading, exegesis and allusion, and the continuous creation and re-creation of a scriptural canon through the sanctification of texts, which propagated the message of the group, while downgrading (or outright rejecting) the canons of others. In fact, further on an even wider variety of strategies emerged, which included not only upholding the status of the scriptures of Israel by applying them to the new messianic era and community, but also a total rejection of their divine status and their ascription to an evil, demonic author (e. g., the Gnostics). Other groups found a place along this spectrum. For Jews who did not embrace the new messianic faith of Jesus' followers, the scriptural dilemma was different but no less acute – how could scriptures, traditionally nurtured and read in connection to a powerful temple cult, be reimaged for a community with at best a fragmented territorial and political center?

More radical strategies vis-à-vis existing sacred writings featured in several religious movements of late antiquity, such as the Marcionites, Manichaeans, and, later, nascent Islam. These groups rejected the earlier scripture on behalf of what was perceived as a new, and true, revelation. Nevertheless, even among those who rejected scripture, its power continued to manifest itself in the drive to contest its authorship and intent. The cases in which inherited scripture was rejected outright, or something close to it, deserve special attention. Bearing in mind the important distinction between deliberate and unintentional strategies of this kind, these cases on the margin may also shed light on implicitly subversive motifs present in more moderate patterns of “conversation with scripture.”

It is along these scripture-centered lines of development and rupture, primarily in the history of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, that we first contemplated the conference that would be convened in Jerusalem in January of 2016 under the title “Upholding Scripture, Rejecting Scripture: Patterns of Religious Subversion.” Initially, we felt especially attracted to the strategies employed at those fateful parting-of-the-way junctures, which had already drawn much scholarly interest. We saw the conference as a first attempt to chart the typology of attitudes toward inherited texts of sacred status, functioning as means of self-definition and representing a core pattern of religious behavior conditioned by scriptural religious culture. To this end, we intended to bring together scholars who would spearhead discussions on different religious cultures – from antiquity to modernity – in which the relation to scripture had been put to the test.

Early on in the preparation of the conference, however, we sensed that our initial focal point, what may be called the Abrahamic religions, was somewhat off-target, as the story seems to have begun much earlier. Such subversive inter-

actions seem to have played out already in the framework of Greek and, later, Greco-Roman religions. Hence, if we wished to address the issue in a broader phenomenological perspective, a first attempt of the kind, we needed to expand the scope of our inquiry. This would eventually become the aspiration of the conference and even more so of the present volume.

Three methodological points thus bear mention. First, we decided not to limit ourselves to the transformational points of the “parting of the ways” among different religions, since the acts of power vis-à-vis scripture seem to replay themselves, *mutatis mutandis*, throughout history. Moreover, as noted, we do not remain within the foundational era of late antiquity, but make inroads to earlier times as well as to later periods of history. Second, we go beyond the Abrahamic traditions, addressing other Mediterranean and Near Eastern religious outlooks. Finally, we realized that an adequate charting of typology ought to account for ways of coping with other, not necessary scriptural, sources of inherited religious authority.

This subject was also an excellent opportunity to reflect on the life-long scholarship of Guy Stroumsa, Martin Buber Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Professor Emeritus of the Study of the Abrahamic Religions at the University of Oxford. Guy’s research is exceptionally broad in scope, and we could have chosen from any number of topics in the history of religions which converse with his work. However, both his early and his current literary output show a decided devotion to the study of scripture and tradition in the creation of religious subjectivities of individuals and communities. As such, this topic appeared to us most appropriate. It will suffice to mention here only two recent books of many of Guy’s publications – *The Making of Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and *The Scriptural Universe of Ancient Christianity* (Harvard University Press, 2016). An ardent student of the history of comparative religion as a scholarly discipline, Guy also reminded us repeatedly how important the broadening of perspective is for proper understanding of religious processes. Of special notice are his unrelenting incorporation of various Gnostic traditions on the one hand and early Islam on the other into the discourse on religion in late antiquity.

In the following, we offer a peek at the contributions found between these covers (not necessarily in order of appearance in the volume).

Nicole Belayche opens the volume with the article, “Content and, or, Context? Subversive Writing in Greek and Roman Religions,” in which she surveys episodes in which sacred books were upheld or censured in the Roman Republic and Empire. She concludes that book content was a relatively minor factor in the decision to order one or another way of handling the books, which is why we have very little information about such content. Rather, the main question was one of context – whether the books were compatible with the official religion at the time; in other words, whether they could be exploited by those who held the reins in contemporary religious institutions.

John Scheid (“Piété, contestation et livre dans la Rome républicaine. Les épisodes de 213, 186 et 181 av. J.-C.”) probes a related question on the role of authority in evaluating religious practices in Republican Rome – whether the Romans were familiar only with the positive divination rituals of public and domestic religion, or perhaps there are traces of deviant practices derived from prophetic teachings or books. To assess the issue, Scheid examines passages in Titus Livius’ account of dangerous times during the Second Punic War and the following decades. These serve as exempla of the reaction against what the historian regards as a deviation from normal religiosity. The inspired doctrines of prophets or charlatans were of an uncontrollable nature; hence, religious prescriptions must be communicated to and by the authorities or the family. In Rome, therefore, omens were inspected by the authorities, in both the public and private spheres, and only they could determine the meaning of a sign or oracle. Any infringement of these rules incurred sanctions. In fact, we are dealing not with a change in the religious paradigm, and never with revelations calling for a new type of individual religiosity, but rather with those resulting in strict ritual prescriptions, imposed at times through violence or intimidation. Scheid’s investigation coheres with the conclusions of Belayche, that changing religious ideas did not play a significant role in the decision-making concerning innovations in Roman religious practices; rather, these were determined in accordance with political dynamics. Writings of subversive political potential were thus strictly policed.

The subversive potential characterizing the realization of the political utility of religion appears later in the volume, in Mark Silk’s “On Tolerating Religious ‘Others’ in the Twelfth Century.” Silk takes a stand in the debate on whether medieval society was totally lacking in tolerance towards other religious communities and the idea that it did allow for some dissent. In the twelfth century, Abelard introduced the notion that philosophers of all religions could craft a legitimate and just society based on natural reason; the manifestation of such a society in his time, he argued, was the monastery. Following Abelard, John of Salisbury praised ancient (pagan) Roman figures as religious leaders who instituted religion in order to mold a just and ordered society. Both of them countered the consensus, present since Augustine, that paganism was wholly illegitimate, and that its religious falsity resulted in social non-utility. Though such views became a commonplace in the Latin West following the spread of Aristotelianism in the 13th century, they are shown to already have roots in the 12th century Renaissance. Thus, this medieval tradition of religious toleration is not tied to intellectual humility or to feelings of common humanity, but to an understanding of the political utility of religion as such, extending to Christianity as well.

Two contributions engage the subversive potential of forms of language in Greek and Roman thought and literature. They show that subversion of received religious ideas may take place through ambiguous modes of writing and speech, which may be practiced either in circumscribed social circles (such as the philo-

sophical) or among the wider public. Philippe Borgeaud (“Mythe et écriture. Une approche grecque [platonicienne]”) discusses various aspects of the relation between *logos* and *mythos* elaborated in classical Greek thought, concentrating on Platonic writings. While the exigencies of logic, precision and tradition associated with the former renders it a frozen, and perforce, deficient attempt at reflecting life, the latter, distinguished by a liberating cloak of dissimulation – and shared solely with a close circle of fellow philosophers – permits real freedom, including that of rejecting foundational beliefs. The study zeros in on an illuminating overlap, attested in the sources under discussion, between the *logos-mythos* opposition and the one found between written text and oral discourse.

In their essay “Phaedrus on Greek Myth, Roman Religion and the Origin of Slavish Language,” Hubert Cancik and Hildegard Cancik-Lindemaier analyze the complex strategies of the early first-century fabulist Gaius Julius Phaedrus, the freedman of Augustus in imperial Rome, when dealing with elements of traditional religious beliefs and cult. Since an open rejection would have been deemed sacrilegious, the subversive author, especially if he, like Phaedrus, was of low lineage, would have been well advised to conceal his true intentions under the guise of allegory. The discussion of this ancient doubletalk stratagem ends with a consideration of its much later offshoots and repercussions, as well as modern attempts to be freed from its constraints. The subversive options uncovered in this paper form a corollary to the more rigid political-religious structures discussed in the aforementioned contributions of Belayche and Scheid.

Sharon Weisser (“Do we Have to Study the Torah? Philo of Alexandria and the Proofs for the Existence of God”), closing the section on Antiquity, asks whether the study of Torah is essential from the perspective of Philo’s philosophy. For Philo, happiness is reached through knowledge of God; though there is no question that God can be known through Torah study, this is not the only path. Weisser shows that knowledge of God is more naturally achieved by contemplation of nature or the creation as a whole, as well as by contemplation of the self – though achieving this contemplation does require God’s assistance. Indeed, contemplation of creation can yield information not only about the existence of God, but also about his character and attributes, such as his power and providence. Weisser thus answers her question in the negative – the Torah is not epistemologically essential for Philo, even if it fulfils many other functions. This surprising conclusion demonstrates how philosophical inquiry in the Hellenistic world could undermine religious truths even if it did not set out to do so.

A number of contributions tackle various dimensions and modes of the Jewish-Christian-Islamic dispute over scripture. Moshe Blidstein’s article, “Antilegal Exempla in Late Ancient Christian Exegesis,” examines a tradition in late antique Christian writings and exegesis, according to which even in the period between the sin of the golden calf and the coming of Jesus the Jews were not truly obligated to perform the law, despite the voluminous scriptural evidence stating

otherwise. This is adduced from actions of patriarchs and prophets, which can be seen as going against Torah laws. Such actions were interpreted as intentional subversions of the law, intended to show that it is not in fact obligatory. Some of these arguments can already be found in Marcion, in the second century, but despite his castigation as a heretic, they resurface in “orthodox” Christian writings of the third to the seventh centuries. This tradition exemplifies the greater weight given in Christian exegesis to the actions of core biblical figures over the actual laws ordained by God. Blidstein’s contribution discloses an exegetical strategy in which one genre of scripture is pitted directly against another. The choices made in these strategies have repercussions for other religious dimensions, such as conceptions of history and the role of the saint or patriarch.

The contestation over scripture is analyzed further in Maren Niehoff’s article, “Colonizing and Decolonizing the Creation: A Dispute between Rabbi Hoshaya and Origen,” which examines how Genesis Rabba’s exegesis of the creation in the first chapter of Genesis responds to Christian exegesis, especially that of Origen in his Homilies on Genesis and on the Gospel of John. Origen and Rabbi Hoshaya, who were contemporaries in third-century Caesarea, were interested in the interpretation of the creation and in inscribing Christian and Jewish theologies, respectively, into “the beginning.” This can be seen in Origen’s exegesis of Genesis 1:26, and in Hoshaya’s interpretation of Genesis 1:1 at the opening of Genesis Rabba. It is suggested that Hoshaya’s midrash, depicting the Torah as the blueprint for the creation of the world, ought to be understood as a polemical response to the Christian interpretation (following the Johannine Prologue) of “the beginning” as “the word” equated with the son, Jesus. The shift in the Jewish interpretation of Genesis 1:1 becomes obvious if we compare Philo’s embrace of the idea of the “beginning” as relating to the logos to Hoshaya’s rejection of this notion. A polemical response can also be found in Hoshaya’s interpretation of Genesis 1:26, “let us make man.” This contribution lays bare the centrality of the Jewish-Christian debate to the formation of exegetical strategies and the degree to which an understanding of the texts relies on it. Furthermore, it shows that this debate was by no means exclusively one of competing interpretations, but entailed borrowing tools and concepts from the “competitor,” while relying on common precursors such as Philo.

Lorenzo Perrone’s study on “Origen Reading the Psalms: The Challenge of a Christian Interpretation” addresses the Alexandrian’s comprehensive effort to validate the Book of Psalms through a multifaceted Christian reappraisal of the meanings embedded in it. Having started the work on his *Commentary on Psalms* in Alexandria, Origen continued the enterprise in Caesarea, always keeping in mind the opinions and possible counterarguments of his Jewish interlocutors – real and imagined. The article treats the role allotted in Origen’s strategies of appropriation to analysis of the individual psalms’ titles and the so-called “person speaking” hermeneutical device that permits the propagation of

both christological and ecclesiological interpretations without the total denial of the historical, that is, Jewish, one. This balancing act emerges as a foundational means of appropriation, which connects the study, as well as its focus on Origen and Caesarea, to Niehoff's essay.

The interweaving of Abrahamic traditions is brought to the fore in Gilles Dorival's study "Is Maryam, Sister of Aaron, the Same as Maryam, the Mother of Jesus? Quran 19:28 Revisited." Dorival discusses an illuminating test case of an early Islamic tradition coping with a Quranic saying, which, seemingly untroubled by the anachronism, addresses Maryam, Jesus mother, as "sister of Aaron." Dorival analyzes evidence for the existence of this motif, reaching an intriguing conclusion about its possible Christian provenance. The author outlines the complex strategy employed here by Muslim authors vis-à-vis the scriptural heritage of Jews and Christians. Although not committed to the canonical, written, form of that heritage, these authors are eager to avoid blatantly contradicting its overall historical framework, employing for that end the fail-proof means of typological exegesis.

A similar challenge lies at the heart of Adam Silverstein's article ("Did Haman Have a Brother? On a Deceptively Interesting Error in a Modern Persian Dictionary"). Silverstein investigates a seemingly nonsensical tradition that Haman was the brother of Abraham, found in many Persian publications. He shows how this genealogy could have developed despite its chronological incongruity, building on extra-biblical traditions on Abraham's brother, Haran, and on the confusion between his execution by fire and the execution of Haman; the Babylonian Talmud also attests this confusion. Such traditions demonstrate the flexibility with which commentators of the scripture approach their canonical texts and their willingness to sacrifice the Bible's narrative structure for the sake of making text relevant to their communities. Here, too, the interweaving of Abrahamic traditions is the missing piece of the puzzle.

The late antiquity section concludes on a playful note with Michel Tardieu's article, "Le conquérant et le macrobiote. Épisode de la philosophie barbare." Tardieu discusses the tradition on a subversive comical dialogue under the rule of 'Abū Bakr (12 H./633), between Khālid b. al-Walīd – the Arab-Muslim general and conqueror of 'Irak and the future victor over the Byzantine army at the battle of Yarmūk (15 H./636) – and the Christian sage of al-Ḥīra, the poet and dream interpreter 'Abd al-Masiḥ, who was charged with the task of negotiating the surrender of the town. This tradition relates the first contact between the powers of the new religion with the Arabs of the exterior – from a historical town previously under the rule of the Persian Empire – and their acquaintance with the dominant Christian culture of the Near East. This apparently historical fiction, preserved in nine recensions, is the first-known example of a Muslim-Christian polemic and certainly the only one in which the impossibility of communication is depicted humorously. The form of this comic dialectical exchange appears to

be rooted in the literary genre of the first century BC *Life of Aesop*. This type of comical dialogue, aimed at subverting the hegemonic powers, also seems to have later medieval parallels. The study discusses various examples, with the identity of the “other” always sought in vain. Sage, jongleur, peasant and slave are all Aesopic figures involved in a comic universal subversion.

Subversion through humor in intra-religious encounters features also in the contribution of Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, “The Christian Scriptures and Toledot Yeshu.” Stökl Ben Ezra examines the use of scripture – especially the New Testament – by the authors of the *Toledot Yeshu*, a grotesque retelling of Jesus’s story appearing in many recensions in the Middle Ages in all Jewish languages. The subversiveness of this text is shown to work on several levels, including sexual humor and outlandish tales, as well as a repurposing of Paul’s mission and ingenious puns on some New Testament verses in order to mock the narrative and theology of the Christian texts. Thus the text could speak in subversive undertones to various strata of medieval Jewish society, and also, perhaps, be used as a counter-liturgy on major Christian holidays.

A number of contributions scrutinize strategies of canonization and de-canonization, both significant modes of subversion. Sergey Minov (“*The Exhortation of the Apostle Peter: A Syriac Pseudepigraphon and its Monastic Context*”) produces an edition from two manuscripts, with a translation, of a short Syriac text of unknown provenance and dating (though certainly postdating the 4th century), hitherto never published. The text purports to relate an admonitory speech by the apostle Peter. *The Exhortation of Peter* promotes the monastic ideals of xeniteia and virginity, leveraging for that purpose the canonical genre of the master-servant parable.

Yuri Stoyanov (“Subverting Scripture by Parascriptural Works in Medieval Eastern and Western Christian Dualism”) presents the scripture-related predilections of medieval sectarian Christian groups, such as Paulicans, Bogomils, and Cathars. He sets forth the complex intertextual relationships with diverse and widely disseminated pseudepigraphic compositions. The analysis homes in on the sectarians’ reliance on motifs from medieval versions of early Jewish and Christian pseudepigraphic literature as the preferred scriptural basis for the dualist outlook. This turns out to be a salient trend in medieval Eastern Christian dualism. In a telling parallel to ancient Gnosticism, the dualist re-mythologization was accomplished through the selective application of earlier pseudepigraphic material in the service of subversive exegesis of the normative scriptures.

Both the power of the canon and the abiding urge to undermine it are reinforced by Aryeh Kofsky and Serge Ruzer in their essay “The Gospel According to Tolstoy: Between Nineteenth-Century Lives of Jesus, Tatian and Marcion,” which explores the late nineteenth-century enterprise of the great Russian writer, who produced his own version of the Gospel. The study relates to the combined influence of contemporaneous forces of secularization, new critical scholarship

of the Gospel text, as well as the extensive reading of the author and his personal religious quest in producing a treatise deemed scandalous by church authorities. The indebtedness to such second-century figures as Tatian and Marcion is noted, but Tolstoy – who challenges an already established canonical New Testament tradition unanimously upheld by the entrenched ecclesiastical order – emerges as more daring still. Characteristically, the ultimate subversion of rewriting a foundational sacred text is held by Tolstoy as the only way to expose the eternal truth of Christianity.

Historical and geographical relativization and contextualization have had a major impact on the assessment of scripture. The historical framework forms the gist of Giovanni Filoramo's contribution "The Power of the Spiritual Man: the Subversive Exegesis of the Historian in Gottfried Arnold's *Ketzergeschichte* (1699)," which contextualizes Arnold's rethinking of the Church's past as part of a centuries-long history of "subversive historiography." This tradition, which relied on the claim of the Spirit-induced understanding, viewed the development of the mainstream Church as stages of deterioration or, rather, a great fall. Inspired by the Homilies of Pseudo-Macarius, Arnold considered his subversive exegesis of history a necessary step on the way to overcoming evil and reaching enlightenment – a stance that would later inspire, *inter alia*, Goethe and Tolstoy.

Zur Shalev's contribution ("Apocalyptic Travelers: The Seventeenth-Century Search for the Seven Churches of Asia"), is the mirror image of Filoramo's, as it considers a case of upholding scripture through geographical contextualization. Shalev delineates the late seventeenth-century quest undertaken by a number of mostly English enthusiasts, stationed or sojourning in Asia Minor, for the Seven Churches mentioned in the first three chapters of the New Testament Book of Revelation. Allowing the author to unearth the political and ecclesiastical grounding of the quest, the topic also provides an instructive example of an attempt to preserve the historical and geographical value of scriptural evidence. Such an aspiration presents itself as especially telling in view of the apocalyptic, and thus at times explicitly "outlandish," character of the sacred text in question.

The volume concludes with the text of the talk delivered by Guy Stroumsa at the close of the January 2016 Jerusalem conference. This text, though meant for concrete circumstances and oral presentation, not only situates subversion as foundational to the history of religion, it also poignantly showcases what Guy dubs the "duty of subversion"; the inalienable aspect of the freedom of research conducted by the students of religious phenomena and of the Humanities in general. This brings Stroumsa to the link between the struggle for academic freedom and that for a free and humane society. The volume could not end on a more fitting note.

The undersigned editors of the volume were at different periods Guy Stroumsa's Ph.D. students. The same goes for our co-editor Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra. Our work

on the volume is an expression of our deep gratitude and appreciation for Guy as a scholar and friend. We are thankful to Aryeh Kofsky, another former Ph.D. student of Guy, for his good advice and most timely help at the final stages of the project. Our thanks go as well to Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, yet another former Ph.D. student of Guy, for her valuable support, and to Christoph Marksches for his encouragement. We greatly appreciate the financial assistance provided by the Center for the Study of Christianity and the Department of Comparative Religion of the Hebrew University, and are most grateful to the Thyssen Stiftung for the funds that made the January 2016 Jerusalem conference possible. Finally, we thank Sara Tropper for her diligent efforts to improve the English of the volume.

Jerusalem, November 2017

Moshe Blidstein and Serge Ruzer