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**EHUD BEN ZVI, (ED.),  
REREADING *ORACLES OF GOD*: TWENTY YEARS AFTER  
JOHN BARTON, *ORACLES OF GOD: PERCEPTIONS OF  
PROPHECY IN ISRAEL AFTER THE EXILE* (LONDON:  
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## INTRODUCTION

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As we exchanged e-mail notes on a variety of matters, by late June 2006, Hindy Najman brought up that John Barton, *Oracles of God* is about to be reprinted, twenty years after its publication. She suggested that it is about time to revisit this book, its claims and its impact in the field.

I could not agree more. Kugel correctly states that this is “a subtle and important book.” *Oracles of God* challenged some important positions and approaches that were “mainstream” in the mid 80s and in many ways pointed at stances that will be developed only much later in research. *Oracles of God* was clearly one of the most important books published by the mid 80’s in terms of new approaches to prophetic (and related) literature and its reception in late Second Temple Period. It was time to reread, re-evaluate and re-enter into conversation with the book, with the hindsight of twenty more years of research.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, at a personal level, revisiting *Oracles of God* fit well with my research interests and my institutional commitments (see below). As soon as Najman raised the issue, I thought it would create an opportunity to rethink the question of whether much of Barton’s observations about the reception of prophetic books in the late Second Temple apply also to the processes that shaped the present compositional level of the prophetic book, left clear marks in the texts themselves and not only or even mainly at the level of isolated pericopes within the books, and contributed much to their acceptance as “authoritative” within the communities that produced them, likely, in the Persian period, that is, a few centuries earlier than the

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<sup>1</sup> The number of works on matters covered in *Oracles of God* in the last twenty years is astonishing. This by itself demonstrates that this volume focused twenty years ago on areas of research that will eventually become central in much of the present-day scholarly debate. For a few, illustrative examples of publications in *some* of the relevant areas during the last decade, see M. H. Floyd and R. D. Haak (eds.) *Prophets, Prophecy, and Prophetic Texts in Second Temple Judaism* (LHBOTS, 427; New York/London: T & T Clark, 2006); L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders (eds.), *The Canon Debate: On the Origins and Formation of the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002); P. R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools. The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (LAI; Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox, 1998); J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998) and L. L. Grabbe and R. D. Haak (eds.), *Knowing the End from the Beginning* (JSPS, 46; London: T & T Clark International, 2003).

late Second Temple period. Several of my colleagues and I have been discussing these matters for a while.

As co-chair of a Research Programme of the European Association of Biblical Studies (EABS) entitled “Israel and the Production and Reception of Authoritative Books in the Persian and Hellenistic Periods,” I immediately saw the many ways in which such a renewed conversation with the book and the author could contribute to the goals of the Research Programme. Prof. Diana Edelman, the co-chair of the Programme, immediately agreed and by early July 2006 Hindy Najman and I began organizing a session panel for the 2007 annual meeting of the EABS devoted to a discussion on *Oracles of God*, in addition to the regular sessions of the Programme.

Philip Davies, James Kugel and Hindy Najman agreed to present their viewpoints on the book. John Barton agreed to provide a response. The following contributions represent the revised versions of the papers presented by the mentioned panelists during the session along with John Barton’s response.

I would like to mention also that following the papers and the response a wide range and enlightening discussion developed. Without attempting to reconstruct the actual discussion, which in any case, would have been perceived differently by the various participants, a few illustrative issues may be mentioned. The matter of how or why does *Oracles of God* reconstruct the historical, monarchic prophets was brought up, along with the question of whether it lionizes them. Issues associated with sociology of knowledge were raised in this regard. There was some discussion on the question of whether the fact that prophetic books in the form of the fifteen books from Isaiah-Malachi were not produced after a certain period (late Persian-early Hellenistic?) may indicate a literary (and ideological?) genre awareness, independent at least in part of later developments in the conceptualization of prophet and prophecy. Finally, there was an observation about the absence of any sustained analysis or discussion of the testimony of the Book of Chronicles on the matters discussed in *Oracles of God*. It was suggested that the absence may be seen as indicative of the relatively lack of interest in Chronicles within the scholarly community twenty years ago.

All in all, the panelist’s papers, Barton’s response and the discussion that ensued are proof positive of the enduring significance of *Oracles of God* and the questions and issues that it raises. This being so, it was decided that the papers and the response warrant wide publication.

Following the precedent of colleagues who edited similar ‘conversations’ for this journal, I asked the contributors to revise their works for publication, but I did not ask them to convert their works into formal articles with extensive documentation, footnotes, and so forth. This means that their contributions retain many of the stylistic characteristics of a paper delivered in an originally oral setting. To be sure, contributors were allowed to add any footnotes that they deemed helpful for readers to understand the context, force and setting of their evaluations, but the decision whether to do so was left to the discretion of the individual participants.

Finally, I wish to extend my thanks to Hindy Najman for suggesting that we should revisit the book, and for her characteristic energy and good sense as we organized the panel. I would like to thank each of the contributors: Philip R. Davies; James Kugel and Hindy Najman (again) for their willingness to revise and publish their papers in the *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* and John Barton for his informative response.

## ‘BEGINNING AT THE END’

PHILIP R. DAVIES

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There are, unfortunately, not that many scholarly books that combine common sense and wholesale iconoclasm as does this one. The main argument of *Oracles of God* is that in the Second Temple period (as we have since come to call it) prophecy was understood differently than now, in two major respects. First, it embraced more than the fifteen books that we now generally mean by the term (Isaiah to Malachi), and included everything in the scriptures outside the Torah, the books of Moses; thus historiographical books in particular were treated as products of prophecy, and indeed as such came to be called ‘Former Prophets’. Until the rabbinic era there was no Jewish canon of scriptures, but only ‘scriptures’, which were generally referred to in the Second Temple era as ‘law and prophets’. Everything outside Torah was secondary in authority, undifferentiated in status and without any fixed ‘canonical’ sequence or ‘canonical’ hermeneutical significance. Daniel and David were also regarded as prophets, while in *Contra Apionem* Josephus treated the writers of the biblical historiography as prophets also. Second, the individual prophets themselves were understood not as having addressed a particular historical or social context but as mediating a divine knowledge, heavenly mysteries, valid for all time. It is therefore meaningless to distinguish prophecy from ‘apocalyptic’ and indeed the latter category should really be abolished. John Barton’s book challenges to many received ideas, and remains a challenging thesis twenty years after its publication.

The book thus deals with canon, prophecy and apocalyptic; but in a way that closely relates them all, and it is easier for me not to separate them either. I will start by noting that my own definition of ‘canon’ is rather different; for me a canon is not necessarily closed, but represents the classical corpus of the literate guild (Davies 1998).<sup>2</sup> John Barton and I agree that with allowance for our different definition, we have fairly similar views about the growth of the collection of books of scripture, including the conclusion that some books, such as the Enoch writings, omitted from the Masoretic canon once belonged to them. We differ, however, on the basis for their exclusion from the canon (see below), and because I accept a no-

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<sup>2</sup> I apologize for referring to my own publications; but I have been engaged closely with all these topics over many years and have no space to rehearse what I have said elsewhere.

tion of ‘canon’ as an ongoing venture, I am prepared to see some hermeneutical maneuvering at a large level—though we would both agree in resisting any ‘canonical’ dimension of the kind promoted by Brevard Childs.

John argued that in the Second Temple period contemporary ‘prophecy’ embraced a range of divinatory activities, and the books of prophecy were interpreted in accordance with this range. The prophet was understood to be more ‘like an apocalypticist’ than the moral spokesman of modern scholarship (132), and ‘non-esoteric’ media, such as the speaking of oracles, were probably even regarded as inferior to the supernatural knowledge displayed by other forms of supernatural divination (137). There was no recognition of prophecy as a *genre*: rather, prophets were understood as (a) moral instructors; (b) predictors of the future in a general way; (c) revealers of secrets about the end of history and (d) mysteries about the transcendental world; ‘speculative theology’ (152-3). All of these are certainly typical of ‘apocalyptic’ literature; I would use the term ‘mantic’ for this culture, a belief not only that there were heavenly secrets—which nearly everyone shared—but that they could be divined or revealed by specialized techniques.

The one fundamental point that *Oracles of God* makes, then, is that Second Temple Judaism reflects a society quite different from that of monarchic period Israel and Judah, and that the literature inherited from an earlier era was read in terms appropriate to its own times. There is no smooth development between prophecy and its later interpretation. John even hints that even the classical scholarly understanding of the prophets themselves (which he has, he admits, taken for granted) may be in need of revision. For if Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah *et al.* were ‘prophets’ then they were not like most of their own contemporaries. (‘It remains to ask whether modern scholarship can do better in establishing what the ‘old prophets’ were really like. I believe that it can....’ (273).

#### FROM PROPHECY BACK TO PROPHETS

‘Beginning at the end’ (the phrase is used on p. 4) is indeed a fruitful way to understand not only prophecy and canon, but the history of ancient Israel and Judah. John Barton cannot be accused of ignoring the complexity of the process leading from prophets to prophecy. Some careless readers may nevertheless retain the impression from *Oracles of God* that there is a perceptible gap between ‘prophecy’ and its interpretation. But of course there is not, and the prophetic books themselves cannot be placed on either side of such a gap. Every single one—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve—bears clear marks of having been composed, produced, or completed ‘after the exile’. The books themselves neither come directly from prophets, nor have they been transmitted from disciples of prophets. There may be in some cases original prophetic oracles at the core, but the creation of scrolls in which these and others are collected and expanded is the work of scribes (Davies 2000). Of most of the ‘minor’ prophets—especially Habakkuk, Micah, Malachi, Joel, Nahum and Obadiah (Jonah does not really count!)—we know little or nothing, and the biographical data on all of them are al-

most entirely editorial. We know of other prophets (and prophetesses) in ancient Israel and Judah, including ‘false’ ones; there must have been many more than fifteen. What or who singled these particular ones out and put twelve of them into a single scroll? We can hardly deny that the ‘Scroll of the Twelve’ is itself as much *creating* as *preserving* (I would even say: ‘defining’) what came to be understood as ‘prophecy’ in the sense of a recognized determinate list of divine spokesmen to Israel prophecy? But that process is perhaps already reflected within the collection itself. Zech. 1:4 reads:

‘Do not be like your ancestors, to whom the former prophets (הַנְּבִיאִים הָרִאשׁוֹנִים) proclaimed, “Thus says Yhwh Sebaot, ‘Return from your evil ways and your evil deeds’”. But they did not hear or pay attention to me’, says Yhwh.

John thinks (19) that ‘former’ indicates a reference to a body of pre-exilic prophets as opposed to postexilic ones like Haggai and Zechariah themselves. But who does the author of Zechariah mean, and where does he get his information? Why and how can he reduce their message to such a simple formula? Or is this a later editorial expansion? The reference to ‘my servants the prophets’, found a couple of verses later (v. 6)—and also in 2 Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos and Jeremiah, as well as Ezra and Daniel—suggests a standard (Deuteronomistic) formula, and implies that ‘prophecy’ is already canonized (in my own definition of the term) into a literary collection. The prophets themselves have already become literary figures. But Zechariah’s characterization of their message surely applies to what we know as ‘Latter’ Prophets’, and not the books of Joshua, Samuel or Kings, later to be referred to, on John’s argument, as ‘prophecy’.

The same is true of Deuteronomy. When Deut. 18 legislates about prophets, it clearly understands them as (a) foretellers and (b) moral or legal instructors. Hence, they are true prophets only if their predictions are correct. But even this is not enough; if they encourage others to do what is not prescribed in the torah, they are false (and hence prophecy is really unnecessary). Prophecy can be validated, according to Deuteronomy, only *after* the event it predicts; and even then it is judged by written Torah. There is surely some evidence here of an understanding of ‘prophecy’ that accords neither with our modern anthropological notion, nor with the understanding that John has so thoroughly exposed in the Second Temple period, but with what we find in Zechariah, or perhaps even in the Book of the Twelve as a whole. At any rate, in Deuteronomy, not only is prophecy defined as ‘repeated torah’, but torah itself is the product of a prophet, the greatest and definitive prophet, Moses. Deuteronomic ideology also understands prophecy to be, like torah, a *written* corpus that reinforces its covenantal status by ethical exhortation as well by embellishing the threats and promises (Jeremiah 36 makes the parallel with torah, and the mechanisms of transmission, quite plain, in describing the transition from a word from God to prophet, then from prophet to scribe and finally from scribe to reader).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> On the whole question of the relationship between torah and prophets as canons, see Blenkinsopp, 1977.



The Deuteronomic prophet, therefore, is a covenant mediator, underscoring torah and the blessings and curses that the covenant invokes. Torah and prophecy are complementary resources. This ideology played a major role in the production of the Book of the Twelve, and such a precise view of what a prophet was therefore existed in the Second Temple period—prior to, or perhaps alongside the wider view that, as John puts it (147-8) ‘prophetic scriptures existed to teach truths that one could not know otherwise’.

What, then, explains the fact that historiography also came to be associated with prophecy, that these ‘truths’ would include a knowledge of the past as well as the future? One possible answer is close to hand: Moses himself, the Deuteronomic prophet, is also the archetypal historian. Deuteronomy itself (though perhaps by means of a later expansion of a lawcode) supplies a historical retrospect to the speech that forms the main body; and hence Moses also becomes a narrator of history. The entire Torah—which became substantially a work of history—then comes to be assigned to Moses (thus a work of prophecy) and, just as the ‘Latter’ Prophets are repeaters of the law in torah, so the ‘Former Prophets’ are his successors as narrators of the past—an equally inspired product of divine revelation. The narratives of the Torah and of Joshua-Kings are, arguably, histories of the covenant and the consequences of its failure; closely linked to the theme of the Deuteronomic prophets, but, perhaps, a development of it rather than an intrinsic component.

These observations do not undermine the thesis of *Oracles of God*. They complicate it a little, however, suggesting that there are ‘perceptions of ancient prophecy’ that also belong to the Second Temple, and are found in the scriptures themselves. ‘Prophecy’ (as opposed to simply ‘intermediation’, a culturally well-established range of activities) is a developing concept—personally would say an *emerging* concept—during the Second Temple era, and developing in various ways. But of course we should not assume that all Jews were Deuteronomists. The New Testament view of Satan and his evil spirits, and its attention towards an expected climax of history, is much closer to the books of Enoch than to Genesis 2-4, where disobedience to divine commands seems to be the root of evil and the Serpent is a mere crawling snake. The world-view of late Second Temple Judaism, is certainly closer to what we call ‘apocalyptic’ and hence its understanding of the processes of intermediation were essentially mantic. We can now say this without much fear of contradiction; in 1986 it was a viewpoint that was only just emerging. The view that Second Temple Judaism was different from the earlier religions of Israel and Judah goes back a long way, but that the Jewish scriptures themselves did not always reflect, far less dictate what most Jews in the Second Temple period believed and did still needs repeating.

The Deuteronom[ist]ic perception of prophecy restricts the modes of prophetic divination to two: voices and visions. These are clearly not understood as divination; the initiative rests always with the deity, and the prophet is no more than a mouthpiece (who increasingly needed the assistance of a second, angelic intermediary). Divination was bad, prophecy

good: *ergo*, prophecy was not divination. These other forms of divination (for prophecy *is* of course, one of the types of divination) are glimpsed within the canon and even more outside it. But were these uncanonized (or, in my own terminology, ‘decanonized’), mostly so-called ‘apocalyptic’ books finally omitted from the scriptural canon because they were deemed unfit for public consumption, as John Barton suggests? Yes: the divine mysteries were not supposed to be investigated. But their rejection may not be altogether benign as *Oracles of God* suggests, and while we have hints, within the canon, of traditions about the great Adam and about Enoch himself, in P (Gen. 1:26; 5:22-24) as well as of a great spilling of blood leading to the Flood (as the Noachic covenant implies), we also have hints that everything to do with Enoch was effaced. Compare Enoch’s treatment in J, Gen. 4:17-18; Adam’s disobedience and punishment, and the curiously truncated story in Gen. 6:1-4 (for more argumentation, see Davies 2006). This antipathy to what it regards as divination is consistent with the Deuteronom[ist]c definition of the prophet who simply utters what God tells or shows him, namely the dangers of disobeying the covenant and the rewards of keeping it. But regardless of these qualifications, I agree fully with John’s attack on ‘apocalyptic’ as a special category, in which he follows Rowland (Rowland 1982—another book that was generally less heeded than it should have been). ‘Apocalyptic’ writings are an entirely normal and natural product of the ancient world’s obsession with divination. Rather, it is the biblical ‘prophecy’ that looks artificially restricted. Why this antipathy to divination took root is a matter for a major study. But it was the primary occupation of many priestly guilds and we can speculate on what the priests of the Second period Jewish temples in Jerusalem, Gerizim, Samaria, and elsewhere did by way of it. We get next to nothing in the Pentateuch or Psalms; even the ephod becomes a piece of costume!

Replacing the dispensing of justice with an authoritative lawcode and intermediation with covenant prophecy, and emasculating both by reducing them to sets of books purportedly from long dead recipients of the divine word, the most powerful omen of all was created: a religious canon whose author was God himself. As *Oracles of God* brilliantly shows, the scriptures themselves became omens, signs of the divine world. They could in their turn be deciphered by further inspiration (Daniel, the Qumran *pesharim*) or, in the manner of the ancient divining guilds, such interpretation could be codified, not into omen-lists but into rabbinic rules of exegesis, *middot*. Or allegorized (Philo), or subjected to *atbash* or *gematria*. Or ‘fulfilled’ by more recent events. ‘Bible codes’ are as old as the Bible itself. And of course even today many devout Christians regard a randomly taken (but divinely prompted) scriptural text to supply the divine message for the here and now. The perception of ancient prophecy that John’s book investigates is still alive and well.

I have really done no more than add a few footnotes to a book that I greatly admire and that thoroughly deserves its imminent reprinting. I also look forward to reading, before too long, the fruits of that study on which

John had embarked when he was distracted by this one, where he will move even further from the end towards the beginning.

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## THE BIBLE OF CHANGED MEANINGS: SOME THOUGHTS ON JOHN BARTON'S *ORACLES OF GOD*

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John Barton's *Oracles of God* is a subtle and important book, and for both these reasons I am reluctant to try to summarize it in a few too-general sentences. Since, however, it is necessary for me to put at least one or two of its main points into evidence at the start, I hope I will be forgiven the oversimplification that such summary necessarily entails.

Barton begins with a challenge to the idea of an original, tripartite canon; he seeks to argue, convincingly, to my mind, for an originally bipartite conception of Scripture, that is, the Pentateuch on the one hand and everything else on the other. In a remarkable tour-de-force, Barton marshals evidence from the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, Philo and Josephus, the New Testament and rabbinic writings, to try to understand significance of Scripture and its components for the ancient communities, Jewish and Christian, that held them sacred. Finally, he proceeds to examine *how* prophetic writings were interpreted in the period when Scripture's contours had not yet, or were just attaining, their final form. He shows that prophecy was perceived as ethical instruction; as predictive of events in the reader's own day or the near-future; as setting forth the great divine plan in history; and as providing insider information (mystical revelations) about the nature of God and His interaction with mankind. All this, it seems to me, is altogether persuasive, and it is certainly encouraging that, after a brief sleep, this important work is now being awakened and republished for re-consideration by the scholarly community.

In the following I wish to explore briefly the broader implications of Barton's presentation of the Second Temple period's understanding of prophecy—or, rather, *mis*understanding, as he might say, since his book sharply juxtaposes what prophecy really was, as far as we understand it today, to what Second Temple exegetes thought it was. The question I wish to address is what this view of prophecy's misinterpretation seems to suggest for the Bible as a whole. For surely, Barton's depiction of biblical interpretation in the Second Temple period applies to more than the prophetic books; it is equally valid for other parts of Scripture. They too came to be wildly misunderstood, or, as I would prefer to put it, radically reconfigured.

So it was that biblical narrative was interpreted and expounded by Second Temple exegetes (whether this was done on purpose or quite unconsciously is a complicated issue, and one that need not detain us here) in a way utterly out of keeping with what we now think we know about the texts' true significance. I believe that most scholars nowadays agree that the stories of Genesis were by and large originally written as etiological tales (in Gunkel's sense);<sup>4</sup> that is, they aimed at using figures from the ancient past (sometimes wholly invented ones) to explain various aspects of the writer's own world—using, for example, the figure of Cain to “explain” the murderous and lopsided vengeance practiced by his alleged descendants, the Kenites;<sup>5</sup> or depicting the early rivalry of two brothers, Jacob and Esau, in order to explain the close connection yet unceasing rivalry of their putative offspring, the peoples of Israel and Edom.<sup>6</sup>

If this modern understanding of the Genesis stories is correct, then surely the way these same stories were interpreted in Second Temple times was profoundly out of keeping with their original character. In the book of *Jubilees*,<sup>7</sup> in the writings of Ben Sira,<sup>8</sup> in the *Genesis Apocryphon* and in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*,<sup>9</sup> the figures depicted in these and other stories are no longer taken as representative of their descendants, the Kenites or Israel and Edom, *in illo tempore*. Instead, these figures are understood to be individuals, real people from the ancient past, whose lives are being narrated in Scripture because they essentially constitute lessons in ethics and proper behavior. Cain, for example, becomes quite literally demonic, the offspring of the devil, whereas his brother Abel becomes what he never was in the biblical story, good, indeed, angelic.<sup>10</sup> Jacob and Esau similarly become ethical type and antitype: everything Jacob does is right and proper, and everything Esau does is the opposite.<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, this required a certain interpretive dexterity, since such is certainly not the picture of the two brothers as presented in Genesis. How was this done? Here is *Jubilees*' rewording of the opening portrayal of the two brothers in Genesis 25:25-27:

Rebekah bore to Isaac two sons, Jacob and Esau, and Jacob was a perfect and upright man, while Esau was rough, a man of the field and hairy; it was Jacob who dwelt in tents. When the boys grew up, Jacob learned to write; but Esau did not learn, for he was a man of the field

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<sup>4</sup> H. Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1964), 25.

<sup>5</sup> J. Kugel *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 62–68.

<sup>6</sup> Gunkel, *Legends*, 19–23.

<sup>7</sup> Jub. 4:1–6, 31–32; 19:13–14, 26:13–18, etc.

<sup>8</sup> For Jacob and the stolen blessing, see Ben Sira 44:22–23; for this approach to biblical figures as a whole, chapters 44–50.

<sup>9</sup> For the overall approach of these and other texts, see my *Traditions of the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), esp. 9–35.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 146–69.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 352–76.

and a hunter, and he learned war, and all his deeds were rough. And Abraham loved Jacob, but Isaac loved Esau (Jub. 19:13-15).<sup>12</sup>

In the corresponding Genesis verses, Jacob is not really a virtuous bookworm, nor is Esau, as in the words of this passage, “rough” or someone who “learned war.” Actually, Jacob is something of a homebody and a momma’s boy (that is why Rebekah is said in Genesis to love Jacob, while Isaac prefers Esau). Nor is Esau presented in the Genesis passage as wicked or even “rough”: he’s more of an unreflective, athletic type—the proverbial “dumb jock”—who is beloved by his father Isaac precisely because he brings home for dinner the game he hunts in the great outdoors.

Pressed to explain how he arrived at his rather different description of the two brothers, the author of *Jubilees* would no doubt insist that its main elements are all there in the Genesis text. Thus, the biblical assertion that Jacob “dwelt in tents,” seemed to *Jubilees*’ author odd because of the plural, “tents”; how many tents does one person need to dwell in? (To Gunkel, of course, the use of the plural would probably only have confirmed the etiological character of this narrative: in it, “Jacob” really stands for the people of Israel, who of course need more than one tent for their dwellings.) But how to explain this plural in Second Temple times? Someone who wished to think ill of Jacob in those days would no doubt have said that this showed that he was a philanderer, hopping from tent to tent while the other men-folk were off hunting with Esau. But of course Second Temple exegetes did *not* wish to think ill of Jacob—quite the contrary. And so the other “tent” that he was deemed to frequent was that of a school-teacher. While Esau was off hunting, exercising his atavistic love of killing animals and thus (*Jubilees*’ author would say) gaining practice for war (see Gen. 27:40), Jacob was a diligent student; as *Jubilees* says, “he learned to write.” (This same approach is continued in later Jewish exegesis: *Targum Onqelos*, *Targum Neophyti*, *Sifrei Deuteronomy* and other texts all repeat the idea that Jacob attended school, indeed, in the words of this last source, he “observed the entire Torah” even though it had not yet been promulgated at Mt. Sinai.)<sup>13</sup>

This was certainly a good start at Jacob’s rehabilitation, but the bare biblical narrative still left Jacob doing a number of things with questionable ethical implications. How, for example, to explain Jacob’s bald-faced lie when he pretended to be Esau in the incident of Isaac’s blessing in Genesis 27? Poor Isaac, even though old and blind, senses something is wrong when he asks, “Who are you, my son?” And Jacob’s answer—“I am Esau, your firstborn” (Gen. 27:18-19)—could not but bring the blush of shame to the cheek of any Second Temple reader of this text. To the rescue came the same sort of creative exegesis I have been describing (though again, I’m not at all sure it did not start off rather tongue-in-cheek). According to this approach, attested both in *Jubilees* and later in rabbinic midrash, Isaac did not ask one question, but two: “Who are you? My son?” Jacob answers the

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<sup>12</sup> Translation based on: J. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees* (Louvain: Peeters, 1989, 112–13.

<sup>13</sup> Kugel, *Traditions*, 354.

second question first, “I am,” then adding as an afterthought, “Esau is your firstborn (that is: עֵשָׂו בְּכֹרֶךְ אֲנֹכִי [stop]).”<sup>14</sup>

Through such strategies were the stories of Genesis—and other stories as well—converted into what they never were intended to be. David similarly becomes a model of probity, and even his great ethical slip-up, his sin with Bathsheba, is converted by ancient interpreters into a tale of sin *and repentance* (which it certainly is not in 2 Samuel). The beginnings of David’s transformation into penitent sinner are attested as early as the psalm superscription of Psalm 51, “A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba,” followed immediately by: “Have mercy on me, O God, in keeping with Your kindness, and according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.” Indeed, as Barton and others have shown, David came to be utterly transformed in Second Temple exegesis: he becomes the author of all 150 of the canonical psalms, indeed of some 4,050 liturgical compositions according to the Qumran text 11Q5 “David’s Compositions,”<sup>15</sup> while at the same time becoming a prophet in his own right; according to this same Qumran text, he was gifted with “prophecy from the Most High,”<sup>16</sup> and a similar assertion is found in a passing mention in Philo of Alexandria.<sup>17</sup> David’s prophetic standing later becomes a commonplace—“David, being therefore a prophet”—it says in the book of Acts, and the same assertion is found in other early Christian writings as well as here and there in the rabbinic corpus.<sup>18</sup>

It was not just biblical narratives that were transformed in post-exilic times, but laws as well. The law forbidding the worship of Molech in Lev. 18:21—“You shall not give of your offspring to be passed to [the god] Molech”—was interpreted in post-exilic times as having absolutely nothing to do with that particular deity. Instead, it was understood, in *Jubilees*, in Targum Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan, in the Peshitta, and in the Babylonian Talmud, as referring to the prohibition of intermarriage: “You shall not give of your seed for sexual relations with a daughter of the nations, to pass over to idolatry, and you shall not profane the name of God.”<sup>19</sup>

The Hebrew Bible mentions a number of polygamous men, Abraham and Jacob and David and so forth, with no an apparent approbation expressed in the text. But in the “camps” of the Dead Sea Scrolls community

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 359–60.

<sup>15</sup> column xxviii; see F. Garcia-Martinez and E. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1998) vol. 2 :1178–79.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., loc cit.

<sup>17</sup> Philo, *Quis Haeris*, 290, refers to the author of Psalm 84 (apparently David) as “a certain prophetic fellow.”

<sup>18</sup> See J. A. Fitzmyer, “David, Being Therefore a Prophet...” *CBQ* 34 (1972), 332–39; J. Kugel, “David the Prophet” in Kugel, *Poetry and Prophecy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 45–55.

<sup>19</sup> G. Vermes, “Leviticus 18:21 in Ancient Biblical Exegesis,” in E. Fleischer and J. J. Petuchowski, eds. *Studies in Aggadab, Targum, and Jewish Liturgy in Memory of Joseph Heinemann* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1981), 108–24.

a man was forbidden to be married to two women simultaneously.<sup>20</sup> To support this practice, the Damascus Document cited the law of Deut. 17:17 prohibiting the king from “having multiple wives”; this was interpreted as forbidding any more than *one* wife, and the prohibition was to be taken to apply to the people as a whole. To further buttress this understanding, the Damascus Document cited two other biblical verses, the biblical assertion that “male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:27) and “two by two they entered the ark” (Gen. 7:9), neither of which, however, appears to be addressed to the issue of polygamy.<sup>21</sup> There could scarcely be a more straightforward biblical law than “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (Exod. 21:24), yet it is clear that this law ultimately came to be understood by Jewish exegetes in exactly the opposite sense, *not* an eye for eye, but monetary compensation for an eye.<sup>22</sup> In fact, it is difficult to point to very many biblical laws that were *not* changed, slightly or fundamentally, by post-exilic interpretation—laws of the sabbath and of festivals, laws of warfare, laws of commerce and the taking of interest, sabbatical year laws, and on and on.

The Psalms also underwent a radical transformation (this case is rather better known, so I will not need to elaborate much).<sup>23</sup> Mention has already been made of the tradition of Davidic authorship of the psalms, but this is only the tail-end of a transformation that began far earlier. In a nutshell, compositions that were for the most part created to be recited in cultic circumstances, as an accompaniment or complement to the animal sacrifices offered there, eventually came to be de-contextualized. “I come before You” was no longer the declaration of a worshiper arrived at the sacred precinct of God’s dwelling-place, but the affirmation of God’s omnipresence by a worshiper praying in church or synagogue or in his or her own home. Indeed, in this same period the psalms were becoming more than the personal prayers of a divinely inspired servant of God (that is, David); they were now interpreted as Scripture, *prophecy* (again I refer to Barton’s book among others), full of hints about God’s ways with mankind or His plans for mankind’s future.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For the implications of this statement for divorce there is a considerable literature; see, inter alia: G. Vermes, “Sectarian Matrimonial Halakhah in the Damascus Rule,” *JJS* 25 (1974), 197–98; J. Baumgarten, “The Qumran-Essene Restraints on Marriage” in L. Schiffman, *Archaeology and History of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 14–15; D.D. Swanson, *The Temple Scroll and the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 138; G. Brin, “Divorce at Qumran,” in M. Bernstein et al., *Legal Texts and Legal Issues* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 236–37.

<sup>21</sup> Dam. Doc. 4:20–5:2.

<sup>22</sup> This interpretation is first attested in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 4:280 and then fully articulated in the b. Talmud, *Baba Qamma* 83b–84a.

<sup>23</sup> Among the earliest studies of this process was S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), vol. 2, esp. 109.; also S. Holm-Nielsen, “The Importance of Late Jewish Psalmody,” in *Studia Theologica* 14 (1953) and J. Becker, *Israel deutet seine Psalmen* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1966)..

<sup>24</sup> Above, note 12.



To summarize a case that doubtless should be presented in far greater detail: post-exilic biblical interpretation utterly transformed the meaning of every part of the Bible. It became—I think this is no exaggeration—a different book, one whose several parts would be quite unrecognizable to their original authors in their new interpretation. The question I wish to pose in mentioning all this—in a sense, it is a question that arises naturally out of John Barton’s book—is: what is one to make of this circumstance?

It would not be a mischaracterizing of Barton’s approach to say that, despite his evident care and sympathy in amassing his evidence of the great reconfiguration of classical prophecy that took place in postexilic times, to him this transformation is ultimately wrong and in need of correction. “In reality,” he writes, “we should have to say [that] they [the classical prophets] were not what the ancient world called prophets; they were individuals without a status, lone geniuses whom any generic title belittles.”<sup>25</sup> To the extent that their misunderstanding as “prophets” is still with us, then, it should be set aright; what we need to understand is who these prophets *really* were, not who they were misconstrued to be. Barton further writes: “The classical prophets were eccentrics, strange and alarming figures who broke the mould of accepted beliefs and values but who, in the process, changed those values and altered the national religion into something scarcely paralleled in the ancient world. For postexilic Judaism, [however,] especially in its development from the time of Ezra, the prophets were characters in a book written by the finger of God. Their utterances were not the words of mortal men, but divine oracles.”<sup>26</sup>

It is an article of faith—or at least an article of *some* faiths—that the true study of the various parts of the Hebrew Bible is all about recovering their real meaning, by which is meant their *original* meaning, indeed, recovering to the extent possible the real people and events behind those texts, the real Isaiah and Jeremiah as they actually were. This proposition seems so self-evident that it hardly needs to be stated—and yet, the question I wish to pose (I am afraid that, in the present format, I can do no more than pose it) is whether this is really so.

Was not the *original* Bible, the Bible that was accepted as such by ancient Jews and Christians, in fact the highly transformed Bible that John Barton and I describe—the one in which the stories of Genesis had become ethical tales and moral parables, in which old laws had acquired entirely new meanings, in which the psalms had become the promptings of every heart in any place, and in which prophecy had long ago ceased to be understood as the eccentric words of “strange and alarming figures” but instead had become divinely dictated teachings about right conduct, about prophetic knowledge of the present day, about the divine plan for history, and so forth? This was, after all, the book that ancient Jews and Christians canonized. Just as much as they canonized its table of contents, they canonized a

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<sup>25</sup> John Barton, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile* (New York: Oxford, 1986)

272.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 269.

way of reading it and a set of assumptions about the people in it and what they wished to impart. The canonizers did not canonize ancient Israelite history; they canonized the words of this book, and a very specific (and easily describable) way of reading those words. (Barton has described it quite well.)

So the Bible that modern scholarship is so eager to discover is really a Bible that never was: it is actually the raw material that only became the Bible following its radical reconfiguration in post-exilic times. There is something thrilling—I certainly do not wish to deny it—in contemplating that raw material on its own, including thinking about the real Isaiah and Jeremiah before their radical make-over. But there is also a paradox inherent in that operation. To the extent that we are successful in unmasking the oracles of God and showing them to be the work of altogether human eccentrics, have we not, in some basic sense, undone Scripture as well? I am aware, of course, of the answer of some: “Oh no, on the contrary! We will have acquired a more realistic, a more truthful, sense of who these people really were.” I know that answer; I just do not believe it.

Rather, I should say that, after nearly two centuries of modern biblical scholarship, that paradox is still with us, still unresolved. We want to have our Bible and criticize it too. The result is a kind of compromise Scripture. Those are indeed etiological tales in Genesis, but somehow—even if one reads the most hard-nosed of modern commentators—there is still a little ethical lesson lurking between the etiological lines. Take, as only one brief example, that other narrative in which Jacob ends up supplanting his brother, the one in which he gets Esau to sell him his birthright for a bowl of stew. For modern scholars, this is generally understood in very much the same way as the story of the stolen blessing: here too is an etiological narrative in which the two brothers really represent the two nations they were deemed to have founded, Israel and Edom. If, in later times, Israel came to dominate its once more powerful neighbor Edom, then this story (like that of the stolen blessing) will seem to have predicted and explained that change: Jacob was indeed once the “younger” brother (that is, the smaller and newer nation), but one day, back *in illo tempore*, he took advantage of his famished brother and got him to sell his birthright for a pittance. As a result, Jacob and the nation descended from him acquired their superior status; as in all etiological tales, the distant past explains the (biblical) present.

This was fine as an etiological tale, and the stereotypical portraits that it embodies (already discussed in regard to the story of the stolen blessing)—Jacob is the clever but somewhat ruthless stay-at-home, Esau is the muscle-bound but not-too-clever outdoorsman—must have brought a smile of satisfaction to ancient Israelites who heard the tale. But such a tale can hardly sit well with our own idea (inherited from the ancient interpreters) that the Bible is a book replete with moral instruction, in which figures like Jacob are necessarily models of ethical probity. So, at least in a great many modern commentaries and introductions, the etiological side of

things is down-played as the commentator desperately seeks to save Jacob's reputation:

**Esau parts with the birthright.**—The superiority of Israel to Edom is popularly explained by a typical incident, familiar to the pastoral tribes bordering on the desert, where the wild huntsman would come famishing to the shepherd's tent to beg for a morsel of food. At such times the 'man of the field' is at the mercy of the tent-dweller; and the ordinary Israelite would see nothing immoral in a transaction like this, where the advantage is pressed to the uttermost.<sup>27</sup>

Here, one cannot but notice the delicately worded heading, "Esau *parts with* the birthright," along with the (quite unsupported) assertion that this was a "typical incident" in ancient times. Note also the implied description of Esau as "wild," and the insinuation that Jacob was a shepherd—neither of these has any basis in this biblical narrative itself. Finally, the commentator's observation that "an ordinary Israelite" would see nothing immoral in Jacob's behavior is meant to argue against our own, unavoidable impression that Jacob was indeed doing something immoral.

Another commentator sums up the episode thus: "Esau, slave of his appetites, fell into Jacob's trap like a hungry bird."<sup>28</sup> No doubt every starving person might be described as a slave of his appetites, but what exactly was Jacob's "trap"? There is no indication that he planned to cook up his lentils so as to tempt Esau, only that he cruelly withheld them after Esau showed up until Esau would agree to the deal. Yet another scholar opines:

The purpose of the action is to illustrate the superiority of the younger brother, who is astute and farsighted. Esau's words and actions are a deliberate caricature: he is uncouth, coarse, and stupid. Jacob, on the contrary, is farsighted; he thinks of the future and is determined to rise in the world.<sup>29</sup>

The apologetic character of this observation hardly requires commentary. But consider another assessment of this incident:

The Bible is not here condoning what has been obtained by trickery. On the contrary, the way the narrative is handled makes clear that Jacob has a claim on the birthright wholly and solely by virtue of God's predetermination. In the other words, the presence of the oracle in the story [in Gen. 25:23] constitutes, in effect, a moral judgment upon Jacob's behavior.<sup>30</sup>

Here, at least, the commentator is prepared to accept that Jacob behaved unethically (though again, it was not so much by "trickery" as by exploitation). But he goes on to say what the biblical text does not even

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<sup>27</sup> John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (International Critical Commentary) (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1910), 361.

<sup>28</sup> J. H. Tullock, *The Old Testament Story* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2000), p. 50

<sup>29</sup> C. Westermann, *Genesis* (London: T & T. Clark: 1987) 183.

<sup>30</sup> N. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1970) 183.

imply, that Jacob's *real* claim to his brother's birthright comes "wholly and solely by virtue of God's predetermination" as expressed in Gen. 25:23. On the contrary, what this story says is that Jacob *officially* acquired his brother's birthright thanks to Esau's sale of it in extreme circumstances. That is why Jacob makes Esau *take an oath*, to make it official. The rest is just the commentator's wishful thinking; there is no hint of any "moral judgment upon Jacob's behavior" in the story itself.

Such apologetics are really a holdover from the overall approach and interpretive assumptions championed by the Bible's ancient interpreters. These modern commentators are thus mixing two different ways of reading, that of modern scholarship (etiological narratives, individuals representative of corporate entities) and that of the ancient interpreters (tales about real individuals whose stories are narrated for the purpose of moral instruction). The two cannot truly coexist; anyone who maintains that the stories of Genesis are largely etiological in character cannot honestly claim that they also have seem to have some moral lesson to impart; this is true not only of Jacob and Esau, but of a most of the Genesis tales. Thus, Cain's brother Abel was not, as ancient interpreters maintained, "good"<sup>31</sup>—he was just a victim. And Jacob was not (as we have seen) particularly good either, especially in the stories that touch on his youth. Indeed, the trickiness or outright dishonesty that characterized his behavior was shared by his mother Rebekah (whose idea the stolen blessing was in the first place, Gen. 25:7-10); her brother Laban, Jacob's uncle (who switched the brides on Jacob's wedding night and later tried to cheat Jacob out of his wages, Gen. 29:23-29; 31:17, 39-43); Laban's daughter Leah, who must have done a certain amount of pretending on that same wedding night too (Gen. 29:25); and Laban's other daughter Rachel, who was actually a thief, stealing her father's valued *teraphim* from under his own nose (Gen. 31:19). There are not a lot of ethical lessons to be learned from this family *unless* one is prepared to follow the ancient interpreters in their dogged remaking of the text.

The same paradox holds for Scripture's other parts—for prophetic books, for the psalms, for Proverbs, perhaps most strikingly of all for the Song of Solomon, which for centuries was taken as an allegory of God's love for Israel, or Christ's love for the Church. Now that scholars have demonstrated conclusively that it was *really*, originally, no allegory at all, but a pastiche of erotic poetry that in fact bears a striking resemblance to ancient Egyptian writings of the same genre<sup>32</sup>—now that this has been shown, what is it still doing in the Bible? Or is it just possible that its transformation into an allegory of divine love amounted to an act of radical rewriting, in fact, the creation of a new text (even though not a word of the original had been changed)? And is it not so that it was this rewritten text, this alle-

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<sup>31</sup> Kugel, *Traditions*, 151–52.

<sup>32</sup> This theme is elaborated in numerous modern commentaries: see M. V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin, 1985) ; for other comparative material, M. Pope, *The Song of Songs* (AB) (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1977) 54–89

gory (and not the erotic love poem), that gained entry into the Bible in the first place? If that is true of the Song of Solomon, is it not also true of the re-understanding of the psalms outside of their original cultic context, the re-understanding of the Genesis stories as little lessons in ethics, and even the re-understanding of the words of Israel's classical prophets as oracles of God? Can they cease to be oracles of God and still be our Bible?

## REFLECTIONS ON JOHN BARTON'S ORACLES OF GOD

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"Philosophy is perfectly right in saying that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other clause -- that it must be lived forwards." Soren Kierkegaard

Over 20 years ago John Barton published *Oracles of God* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1986). And yet, we are only beginning to catch up with his courageous and decisive break from prior scholarly presuppositions. But our challenge now, perhaps for the next twenty years, is to internalize the insights of *Oracles of God* and then to imagine what should come next and how we are to take his challenges and rethink the existing scholarly assumptions about prophecy.

It has taken biblical studies sixty years to accept that the Dead Sea Scrolls require us to rethink many of the presuppositions that have been part of our field for well over two hundred years. Indeed, many biblicalists have refused to do so, claiming that they are responsible only for the canonical materials that are part of the Protestant or Jewish biblical tradition. Barton courageously embraced the new information from the scrolls and sought to work out some of the implications for thinking about (1) canon; (2) genre; (3) prophecy and apocalyptic; (4) OT and NT; and (5) hellenistic Jewish traditions, not to mention (6) how to conceive of pseudepigraphic texts.

Barton argued against the consensus in the early eighties that a tripartite canon was fixed in late second temple times. Here are four passages from Barton's book where this position is argued:

(A)

An 'untraditional' view of the history of the canon in the age of the New Testament might be characterized by three essential theses:

(1) The classification of scriptural books was bipartite, not tripartite, and a 'Prophet' was any book with scriptural status outside the Pentateuch.

(2) The word 'canon' itself is a most inappropriate term to describe the Scriptures of Jews and Christians in the first few centuries of our era.

(3) The books of Scripture were not arranged in any particular order from which theological implications can be derived. (44)

(B)

If the word ‘canon’ is to be used at all, then it should probably be in the sense in which the term was sometimes used in the early Church, to denote a ‘norm’ or regulative standard rather than a closed body of texts. In this sense there is no doubt that the Pentateuch can very well be said to have been the ‘canon’ for post-exilic Judaism, at least from the time of Ezra. Almost all the ancient writers we have so far discussed make it clear that ‘Moses’ had a higher status than any other prophet, however venerable, and it is very unusual for the boundary between the Torah and the rest of the Scriptures to be blurred. Though I have been arguing that the distinction between ‘Prophets’ and ‘Writings’ is unattested in our period, the same can most certainly not be said of the boundary between the Prophets and the Law. While, as we have seen, Christian writers tend to see no divide between the end of Deuteronomy and the beginning of Joshua, this is not so in Judaism, where ‘words of *qabbalah*’ cannot overrule ‘words of *torah*’. But in the more common sense, even the Torah is not a ‘canon,’ for it was never selected from any larger collection. (63)

(C)

The purpose of this section has been to argue that the term ‘canon’ obscures more than it clarifies if we are trying to understand what Scripture—and in particular ‘prophetic’ Scripture—meant in Judaism in New Testament times; and to find a way of describing how Scripture functioned that would do more justice to the categories in which people at the time actually thought. (80)

(D)

The positive of advantage of setting aside the notion that there was a ‘canon’ of Scripture in our period is that we are free to register various nuances of emphasis in the attitudes to Scripture that prevailed in various groups. (80)

In the above passages, Barton argues in a compelling manner that the term “canon” itself is not helpful. Moreover, Barton asks us, as have other scholars in recent times,<sup>33</sup> to stop employing a term that only reinforces

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<sup>33</sup> Eugene Ulrich, “The Bible in the Making: The Scriptures at Qumran,” in *The Community of the Renewed Covenant* (ed. E. Ulrich and J. C. VanderKam; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1994), 77–94; Julio Trebolle Barrera, “The Authoritative Functions of Scriptural Works at Qumran,” in *The Community of the Renewed Covenant* (ed. E. Ulrich and J. C. VanderKam; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 95–110; James A. Sanders, “Introduction: Why the Pseudepigrapha?,” in *The Pseudepigrapha and Early Biblical Interpretation* (ed. J.H. Charlesworth and C.A. Evans; JSPSup 14; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 13–19; Frank Moore Cross, “The Old Testament at Qumrân,” in *The Ancient Library of Qumran* (3d rev. ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press and Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1958), 121–42; Frank Moore Cross and Shemaryahu Talmon, eds., *Qumran and the History of the Biblical Text* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); James C.

anachronistic assumptions about our ancient traditions. He calls upon scholars to release themselves from any hierarchical ordering of texts. While, at the same time, Barton maintains through *Oracles of God* that the Pentateuch was primary and authoritative. He nevertheless argues that we cannot speak of a canon as late as the New Testament and even later for Jewish groups. Thus, the writing of new scripture remains possible within the various communities of Second Temple Judaism and even beyond.

Related to the challenge that we should not assume a fixed canon is the assumption that the canon is composed of discrete generic categories (e.g., prophecy, law, liturgy, history and wisdom). Barton challenged assumptions such as: prophecy ended and was replaced by apocalyptic and wisdom. First he says that prophecy is transformed, but that the revelatory persists. I believe that the concession that prophecy is transformed is unnecessary in light of what he argues elsewhere in the book, but nevertheless I agree strongly with his claim that it is inaccurate to speak of a prophetic end or closure. Secondly, Barton challenges the tradition of generic definitions between prophecy and apocalyptic. The nature of generic definition has been subjected to recent challenge.<sup>34</sup> But this path was paved already in *Oracles of God*:

No one in our period, if asked to define a ‘prophetic book’, would have said anything about genre: one would have heard only about the book’s divine origin, and the inspiration of the author which made it possible for him to write down the divine oracles he was given. And—to come now to the point—the kind of information that the reader would expect to obtain from the book would not be determined by any internal criteria, based on a judgment about its genre, but solely on his conception of the kind of information prophetic inspiration had existed to impart. As we have already seen, for a great many writers in our period that meant arcane information. Prophetic scriptures existed to teach truths that one could not know otherwise. What literary genres they adopted in doing so was quite beside the point. (147-148)

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VanderKam, “Authoritative Literature in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *DSD* 5 (1998) 382–402; Julio Trebolle Barrera, “A ‘Canon Within a Canon’: Two Series of Old Testament Books Differently Transmitted, Interpreted and Authorized,” *RQ* 19 (2000) 383–99; Stephen B. Chapman, “‘The Law and the Words’ as a Canonical Formula within the Old Testament,” in *The Interpretation of Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity: Studies in Language and Tradition* (ed. C.A. Evans; JSPSup 33; SSEJC 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 26–74; Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of the Bible* (SDSSRL; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leiden: Brill, 1999); “Para-Mania: Beside, Before, and Beyond Bible Studies (SBL Presidential Address, 18 Nov 2006),” *JBL* 126 (2007) 5–27.

<sup>34</sup> See recent discussion of genre distinctions by Carol A. Newsom, “Spying out the Land: A Report from Genealogy,” in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. R.L. Troxel, K.G. Friebel, D.R. Magary; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 437–460; Benjamin G. Wright and Lawrence M. Wills, eds., *Conflicted Boundaries in Wisdom and Apocalypticism* (Symposium Series; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005); Hindy Najman, *Seconding Sinai: The Development of Mosaic Discourse in Second Temple Judaism* (JSJSupp 77; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 16–17.



As this passage shows (along with the much more elaborate discussion in *Oracles of God*), Barton rejected sharp distinctions between what was called wisdom/apocalyptic and prophetic literature, three groups of texts that should not have been separated generically. But more to the point, he understood how the communities themselves were not only thinking in terms of their idealized past, but rather living forwards. Thus, Barton described how traditions were solidified and the past was transformed in new historical and spiritual contexts.

Once we give up on a small and pre-exilic (with a few exilic exceptions) genre called “prophesy” and once we accept that there is no fixed canon, the logical next step is to accept texts such as Jubilees (texts that are pseudepigraphically attributed to earlier figures) as scriptural. They, like the later book of Revelation or even 11QT, can be included in a larger collection of scriptural traditions that become part of an authoritative scriptural collection. Barton wrote:

In light of our discussion of the state of the canon in our period, I would suggest that Jubilees stood, for the groups that recognized its inspiration, within ‘Scripture’ rather than over against it, but in a direct relationship to the Pentateuch rather than to the rest of Scripture taken together. For me... I would put it as follows: as the oral Law is to the Pentateuch in its character of halakah, so the ‘prophetic’ books, in so far as they are understood as ‘secret’ books, are to the Pentateuch in its character as the revelation of the divine nature and the origins and character of the universe. For, as we have seen, it is not only ‘pseudepigraphical’ works that are treated in our period as esoteric in character; the same was believed about Ezekiel and probably also about the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. Once we eliminate the anachronistic category of ‘canonicity,’ which drives an artificial wedge between Ezekiel and Jubilees, the picture that results is quite a simple one. Some ‘scriptures’ were thought by some to provide secret information that Moses had not thought it good to communicate to the generality of the people, and this at one and the same time increased the prestige of such books and suggested that they should remain concealed from the general public—while also conveniently explaining the fact that no one had ever heard of them before. (75)

In addition, Barton offers what I consider to be a very subtle understanding of how the later representation of the earlier figure can be more real to the community than the earlier historical figure. Early on in *Oracles of God*, Barton writes:

The heirs of those who change the life and thought of a nation as much as both pre- and post-exilic prophets did may not, however, remember them for what they really achieved, but for reasons with little or no basis in historical reality. Equally, they may remember other people as great leaders or teachers who to the modern historian seem likely to have been scarcely important at all, or even not to have existed. The importance of Moses for Judaism of the Second Temple has very little to do with ‘the historical Moses’; for the historian of Judaism nothing would be changed if it could be shown that Moses was a pure invention. His importance in the post-exilic age lay in what he was thought to have

done, and questions about reliability of the post-exilic picture of him are questions about the history of the second millennium BC, not about Second Temple Judaism. It so happens that there are historical figures for whom both sorts of question are equally interesting: the real Socrates and the Socrates of Plato and the Plato of Platonism. The same is unlikely to be true of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, who are surely more important for the traditions about them than they ever were in life, at least if the criterion of a person's importance is his influence on subsequent history. Of them we might say what H.G. Gadamer said of Achilles: 'The reality of the representation is greater than that of the original it represents: the Achilles of Homer is more real than the original Achilles.' (2)

It is not that traditions are invented in order to glorify a founding figure, still less that they are invented in order to deceive their audience; rather, the place occupied by the founder in the minds of certain people attracts certain traditions to the man. To this I should like to add, however, that the founder is not unaffected by this accumulation of traditions under his name. His identity evolves at the same time. Moreover Barton argues for the authenticity of pseudepigraphic works as part of the second temple scriptural corpus that is not closed in a fixed canonical collection:

It may appear an irrelevance to bring pseudepigraphical works into the discussion, for are not most such works outside the canon in any case? But my point is that one of the effects of such pseudonymity is to confer on these books the same kind of potential authority that the books to which the canon was eventually limited were felt to possess. The same considerations apply to the Ezra or the Enoch literature as to Daniel. It is said that 'the canon of the Prophets' must have been closed before Daniel was written, or the book would have been included in it. But if the canon of the Prophets was closed, what point can there have been in attributing the book to Daniel, rather than calling it by the name of its real author? If the attribution confers no authority, it is pointless. In the same way it makes good sense to attribute a book to Ezra, if it is known that any book by Ezra is bound to bear a seal of divine approval; but if it is held that all the genuine Ezra books have been found, and are in a closed canon, then the false attribution becomes an obvious confession of spuriousness. This does not necessarily undercut the common observation that ancient ideas of 'authorship' were different from modern ones, and that people may have been willing to countenance such false attributions without accusing the author of 'forgery'; indeed, it is because 'authorship' was so much more fluid a concept that it is hard to believe in a canon, with its implication that certain books *claiming* the authority of some ancient worthy should be disregarded as 'inauthentic.' Pseudonymous writers were not trying to get their works 'added to the canon': the whole idea is an anachronism. Questions about whether pseudepigraphy was an attempt to gain 'canonical' status for a book, whether sects that used particular pseudepigrapha regarded them as 'canonical,' and so on, are in reality non-questions, proceeding from a misunderstanding of the attitude to ancient writings that prevailed in our period. All are agreed that *one* purpose at least of pseudonymous attribution was to confer on a book the authority of a figure from the past,

from a time when divine wisdom was available to the great inspired figures whose names were held in honour; and that kind of authority was all there was to get, in a period which knew nothing of officially approved lists of canonical works. (61)

To take one step further, Barton breaks with the assumption—of longstanding importance within biblical scholarship, especially scholarship of Protestant provenance—that earlier traditions are more authentic than later ones. One consequence of this assumption is the idea that the earliest prophetic texts, or the earliest strata of those texts, are the most authentic, while later texts attributed to prophetic figures are inauthentic: mere pseudepigrapha. In contrast, Barton states that when we put aside our customary assumptions and look at pseudonymously attributed Second Temple texts, we find that these newer texts should be understood as making a genuine claim for authenticity, a claim that could trump the earlier “more authentic” traditions in the eyes of their Second Temple readers:

Indeed it is tempting to say that the gift of interpreting prophecies is a *higher* gift than that required to deliver them in the first place: one would not be surprised to find someone who had it, such as the Teacher of Righteousness, described as a ‘prophet’! (197)

On the whole, indeed, writers of our period regarded what may be called ‘non-esoteric’ prophecy as a lower, not a higher skill than supernatural knowledge of the remote future and of cosmic secrets. It is difficult to imagine a culture before the Enlightenment that would not have done so; for the direct inspiration from God which reveals mysteries is surely greater than the most sublime of natural skills. We may if we wish regard the political sensitivity of a prophet like Isaiah as greater than the visions of Enoch, but we should be clear that in doing so we are at variance with most of our predecessors in any religion. For the people of our period, if Isaiah was as great as Enoch that would have to mean that he too had journeyed through the heavens: *deceit, ergo factus est*—the Ascension of Isaiah tells us all about it. (137)

Authors of pseudonymous works, then, were making a claim that was capable of being true or false, and it was in fact false. It is, however, perfectly conceivable that they were themselves convinced that it was true. If ordinary ancient attitudes to authorship have some features that seem alien to us, it is even harder for us to get inside the mind of someone who believes that a revelation he has just received from God was in reality made to a prophet who lived many hundreds of years ago; but such ideas are by no means without parallel even in the modern world. (211)

So, attributing new traditions to earlier prophets does not necessarily suggest a compromised state of divine interpretation, but rather suggests an extended and even more authentic tradition. This on its own would have been an enormous contribution to scholarship (both in 1986 and today in 2007), but it is only Barton’s starting point. He goes on to question the definitions and distinctions of genre that have played a major role in biblical scholarship:

There is, however, another consequence which may be less obvious, but is important for thinking ourselves back into the frame of mind of our period. I have been suggesting that many of the pseudonymous works of Second Temple Judaism are, as one might say, pastiche 'Prophets': artificially produced 'holy books,' put into circulation under the fiction that they dated back to the 'prophetic age.' If one tries to imagine how one might go about writing such a book, the immediate question will arise: what type of book is one trying to write?—or, in other words, with what conventions is the book to work? In our terms this is a question about genre. But for people in our period, as we have seen, genre is not a central concern in reading Scripture. In their context, the kind of book that a 'scriptural' or 'prophetic' author will produce will have to be merely an imitation of whichever of the (genuinely old) prophetic books he has read and values most. And since most of these are composite, heavily redacted, inconsistent works, it will not be surprising if a pastiche of them manifests the same characteristics. This explains, it seems to me, many of the puzzling features in works from the Second Temple period, which cause such agonies when scholars have to produce classified anthologies of them. Is Jubilees 'apocalyptic'? Are the Testaments of the Twelve patriarchs wisdom or apocalyptic? Are the Psalms of Solomon hymnody, oracles, or apocalypses? And so on... The fact is that the people who wrote most of these works [Pseudepigrapha] did not trouble their heads about genre at all, but simply looked at their scriptures and wrote more of the same. Because we read Isaiah, or Proverbs, or Job, as reconstructed by critical scholarship, we tend not to notice that *in their present form* these books are just as formless as the Pseudepigrapha. (148-149)

In conclusion, how might we go beyond Barton's work? First, the role of interpretation in the history of revelation and ongoing text production must still be developed along the lines that Barton has only suggested in his book. Moreover, a deeper engagement with early rabbinic traditions would deepen Barton's insights into the ongoing prophetic traditions within New Testament and early Christian tradition. Still, Barton has opened the door for both of these endeavors and it is up to us to keep moving forward as we struggle to understand these texts and the communities that produced them.

What makes historical understanding so difficult and so valuable is that it requires one to think oneself out of the presuppositions of one's own time and to project oneself imaginatively into the presuppositions of another time. It is perhaps because John Barton saw his way into the past with historical precision and unparalleled imagination that he then wrote a book that was far ahead of his own time. We are still trying to catch up with him.

## ORACLES OF GOD REVISITED

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I am both delighted and surprised to find that there is room for a fresh edition of this book, first published in 1986. I am especially indebted to Hindy Najman, the moving force behind this session, for her interest in the book, and grateful to other readers whose comments on it helped to suggest to the publishers that the time might be right to reissue it.

Apart from corrections to misprints, this is a reprint of the 1986 edition. The book represented a particular moment in scholarship, and to update it I would have had to write a fresh book. I hope of course that new readers will find it still relevant to the question of how ancient prophecy was perceived in later times. There is nothing in it I feel the need to retract, though my thinking on some of the issues has moved on in various ways, as reflected in more recent publications.

The book was originally conceived as a seamless whole, but with hindsight it can be seen to have engaged with two separate though interlinked questions. The first of these questions is the process by which the Bible came to contain a section called 'the Prophets'. My examination of this question was intended purely as prolegomena to the books' main task, the question of how prophecy thus defined was read in later years. But it inevitably raised large questions about the canonization of the Old Testament as a whole, and this is a matter which, though already being discussed in the 1980s, has burgeoned enormously since. On the whole it is this part of *Oracles of God* that seems to have attracted the most attention in subsequent scholarship, precisely because the origins of the canon have now become a topic of such general interest, to a degree that I would not have expected in 1986.<sup>35</sup> I have also contributed further myself in *The Spirit and the Letter: Studies in the Biblical Canon*, London: SPCK, 1997 (American edition *Holy Writings, Sacred Text: The Canon in Early Christianity*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997). But also to be mentioned, of course, is the important work of Philip Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Bible*, London: SPCK 1998, which accepts many of my positions but very reasonably argues that the Bible in the New Testament period was probably

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<sup>35</sup> The following two works are central to recent discussion of the canon, and contain extensive and up-to-date bibliographies: L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders (eds.), *The Canon Debate*, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002; and J.-M. Auwers and H. J. de Jonge (eds.), *The Biblical Canons*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003.

sometimes conceptualized as twofold and sometimes as threefold, whereas I had argued for a bipartite structure only. I think he is right about this, though the fact that a bipartite idea did exist alongside the tripartite one remains important.

Recent work on the Dead Sea Scrolls has on the whole I think supported my suggestions, taken further in *The Spirit and the Letter*, that the term 'canonical' is often an anachronistic term to use for this period. The discussion of the various arrangements of the Psalms is a good case in point: it seems impossible to say that there was a canonical order (the Massoretic one) but that other arrangements were sometimes made for liturgical purposes. So far as the evidence goes, there seems simply to have been a number of ways of arranging the Psalms, none more 'canonical' than any other. Similar issues arise even in the case of the Pentateuch, where we cannot be sure that the Qumran community recognized as authoritative 'our' Pentateuch and rewrote it for specific purposes, rather than that they regarded it too as capable of existing in several editions. The evidence from this period is that certain books were certainly authoritative, but the exact form of those books was as yet unfixed. The Temple Scroll may even suggest that some of the laws in the Pentateuch were still subject to revision into a form that seemed to the Qumran community even more authoritative than the form they had received.<sup>36</sup> The Scroll may be what Hindy Najman describes as a 'divine pseudepigraphon'.

The second question addressed in the original book is the one signalled in the subtitle, *Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile*. How did people in later times read whichever books it was that they regarded as 'the prophets'? On the whole I do not think my discussion of this has been so widely received as my work on the canon. The suggestion that attention to the reception-history of 'prophecy' might render the term 'apocalyptic' unnecessary, for example, does not seem to have been taken up at all, and perhaps it was wishful thinking to imagine that it would be. Just two years before, John Collins had published his major work *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity*, New York: Crossroad, 1984, and it was a serious failure on my part not to take account of that in my own work. Subsequent work on prophecy, however, has continued to concentrate on the 'real' prophets rather than on their reception in the Second Temple period; and the assumption that 'apocalyptic' is a different phenomenon is firmly ingrained. No one seems to have looked carefully at my four proposed 'modes' of reading prophetic literature, and in particular at the distinction between the second and third, which I still believe might contribute to greater clarity in thinking about biblical 'eschatology'. The four types of reading, I might just recall, are prophecy as ethical instruction, prophecy as divine foreknowledge of the present day, prophecy as a divine plan for history, and prophecy as insight into divine mysteries. I still think

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<sup>36</sup> There is an important discussion of this in Molly Zahn, 'New Voices, Ancient Words: Characterizing Biblical Reuse in the Temple Scroll', a paper given at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Toronto 2002, and now published in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, ed. John Day, London: T & T Clark, 2005.

that as a piece of mapwork this classification is useful. The first and the last modes tend to be overlooked in discussion of the reception history of the prophets, though this may change as reception history becomes ever more important in our field. And the second or third are still, I believe, widely conflated, though in fact they are very different ways of approaching what most biblical scholars would still call eschatology. In the second, there is a belief that prophetic predictions have come or are coming true even as we speak, a type of reading very common at Qumran and among the early Christians, while the third is compatible with a belief that human history still has plenty of time to unfold and can be found, for example, in some rabbinic eschatological thinking as certainly also in what emerged as mainstream Christianity. In some respects the two modes are diametrically opposed, and I think this is still not widely grasped. So far as I can tell not much work has been done since this book was published on this second question, the ‘profile’ of ancient prophets in post-exilic times, which is one reason why I think that republication is justified.

If *Oracles of God* can continue to make any contribution, however, perhaps it lies in the fact that as originally conceived it did not separate the two questions just highlighted, but did indeed see them as inextricably linked. What people in later times thought constituted ‘prophecy’, and how they both read existing examples of the genre and also wrote pseudonymous prophecies of their own, are completely interconnected. This fact is relevant to such matters as the *pesher* interpretations at Qumran, as I tried to show, and to the attitude there towards works which some scholars regard as ‘biblical’ and others as ‘non-canonical’, and also towards the genre commonly called ‘rewritten Bible’. My own conviction is that there is often anachronism in these distinctions, and that the Dead Sea community—like early Christians and other Jewish groups of the time—saw genuinely old and purportedly old writings (which they were not in a position to distinguish), together with reworkings of such texts, as forming a continuum. When one adds that some of the pseudonymous works claimed to interpret the genuinely old one (as, for example, Daniel interprets Jeremiah), then the whole of the available literature tends to coalesce into a single mass, within which terms such as ‘canonical’ are rather unhelpful. What I tried to do in the book was to draw a map of how ancient ‘prophecy’ was interpreted, both in exegetical literature (such as the writings of Philo and Josephus) and in the ways it was imitated, which would recapture the thought-world of the time, rather than impose on it what are essentially later questions, such as the question of the canon surely is.

In summary, my purpose was to expose the characteristics (often very strange to our eyes) both of literature composed in the Second Temple period and of the modes in which it understood earlier texts, and to show how each aspect contributed to the other. Reception history, in 1986 only beginning in biblical studies, is now a major field in its own right, but it is seldom used to explain the origin and character of works written in the period when earlier works were being ‘received’. I hope that *Oracles of God* still has something to contribute to that task.

In response to Philip Davies, I would accept his point that my discussion took as given that the ‘real’ pre-exilic prophets were very much as Old Testament scholarship, particularly in the German-speaking world, has presented them: that is, as very different from what was made of them in later times. It may be that later perceptions of the early prophets were not so wrong after all: that they actually were prognosticators of the future, mystics, even ethical teachers. If I do return to trying to reconstruct the ‘real’ prophets, I may well find that I drew too sharp a distinction between them and what was made of them in later times, and there was more of a continuum in biblical prophecy than I supposed. I would still argue that for heuristic purposes it is important not to let our reading of later prophecy, and of the reception of earlier prophecy in later times, be clouded by presuppositions drawn from scholarly study of the pre-exilic prophets. We must try to see how people in Second Temple times actually read the old prophets, whether or not they perceived them correctly.

James Kugel made the point that in later Judaism it is my mode 1 that prevailed: the prophets, like everything else in the Tanakh, came to be seen as important mostly for their ethical value. Narrative, prophecy, even psalmody became a source of instruction in how to keep Torah. While continuing to stress that the other modes were important too, especially perhaps in movements that did not flow on into rabbinic Judaism (Qumran, the early Christians, Jewish mysticism), I would agree that the normative model in traditional Judaism has been the ethical one. Kugel asks whether we should seek to get back behind this anyway: why not accept the way the Bible came to be read, and eschew the quest for some earlier or ‘original’ marks of prophecy? Here I would reply that the quest is interesting and important for the historian of early Judaism as it began to form in the Second Temple period, but also (as I said in the panel discussion) for those religious readers of the Bible who think that the ‘original’ meaning is significant (as Protestants generally do).

Hindy Najman backed up my suggestion that the term ‘canon’ is often anachronistic in the period I was studying. Jubilees and the Temple Scroll may well have counted as ‘scripture’ for some groups, but to ask whether or not they were therefore ‘canonical’ is to ask a question that belongs to a later time, unless one treats ‘canonical’ as simply synonymous with ‘scriptural’. She also agreed that there is often a weak sense of genre-differences in early Judaism, so that just as (compare Kugel’s arguments) prophecy and psalmody can be treated as Torah, so wisdom and prophecy can be read as what we would call apocalyptic. I think this is extremely important. Modern biblical criticism hangs very much on the ability to distinguish genre, but to study the Second Temple period we must try to project ourselves back into a world before criticism, when the inspiration of holy books was much more important than their genre, and so they could all be read for the sake of whatever kind of information people supposed God was most concerned to provide for the community. God could use any genre to communicate any kind of information: on this all agreed.



I am most grateful for the discussion, and it is now much more likely that I will go on to try and get back to the 'original' prophets, as I intended to do twenty years ago when I began what I then thought of as mere prolegomena!