# 1

# RITUALIZED TEXT
## THE PENTATEUCH AS A SCRIPTURE

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The Pentateuch consists of five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The most obvious fact about these books is that they are scripture. In fact, they are revered as scripture by three different religious traditions.

Jewish tradition names these five books the *Torah*, which in Hebrew means "law" or "instruction." The Torah is the first part of the Jewish Bible, which is often called the *Tanak*, an acronym for its three sections that also include the Prophets (the *Nebi'im*) and the Writings (the *Kethubim*). The Torah has always been the most important of the three parts. Its five books have shaped Jewish thought and life far more than the other books of Jewish scripture.

Christian tradition preserves Jewish scriptures in the first part, the Old Testament, of the Christian Bible. (For a neutral designation of the collection of books that Jews and Christians both regard as scripture, scholars now usually call it the Hebrew Bible.) So the bibles of different churches all start with the Pentateuch just as the Jewish Bible does. However, Christians emphasize the New Testament, which consists of uniquely Christian books, more than the Old Testament. They focus especially on the four Gospels that contain stories about Jesus's life and teachings, and on the letters of Paul.

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There is another religious tradition that reveres the Pentateuch as scripture. The Samaritans now number fewer than 1,000 people, but two millennia ago they were a large and vibrant community. Since antiquity, they have used the Torah as their only scripture.

You could object that the "Pentateuch," by that name, is really nobody's scripture. That name is a scholarly label for the contents of the Jewish and Samaritan Torah. Samaritans venerate the Torah as their only scripture. Jews venerate the Torah as the most important part of scripture, but the Tanak also contains 19 other books. Christians do not usually distinguish the Pentateuch from the rest of the Bible. They venerate it only as the first five books of their Old Testament, which is overshadowed in Christian thought and liturgy by the New Testament and, especially, by the four Gospels. The phrase, "the Pentateuch as a scripture," in this book's title is artificial. All three religious traditions define the scope of their scriptures differently from one another and by different names.

Nevertheless, describing the Pentateuch as a scripture draws attention to the similar ways in which all three religions treat their scriptures, including these five books. Saying the Pentateuch is a scripture means much more than just that it appears among the sacred books of these three religions. Congregations and religious individuals ritualize these books in distinctive ways that distinguish them as scriptures. Describing the Pentateuch as a scripture therefore requires us to consider the nature and function of scriptures in religious communities generally.

First, however, we need to discuss the term that evokes the Pentateuch's scriptural function for Jews and Samaritans most vividly, the name "Torah."

## Torah and Pentateuch

The word *torah* appears in the Hebrew Bible frequently to refer to specific instructions (e.g. Lev. 6:9, 14, etc.). It may also refer to sets of instructions (Lev. 7:37) and, together with *mishpatim* and *huqim*, to all the stipulations of God's covenant with Israel (Gen. 26:5; Exod. 24:12; Lev. 26:46). The word *torah*, by itself, often refers specifically to priestly instructions or "teachings" (Deut. 33:10; Mal. 2:4–9). It typifies one of the priests' major responsibilities (Deut. 17:11, 18; Ezek. 22:26).[4]

Torah has traditionally been translated by "law." The first to do so were the ancient translators of the Septuagint who used the Greek word *nomos*. Many interpreters now find this translation too restrictive, because *torah* connotes instruction in the form of advice and direction as much as legal mandate. Furthermore, ancient Middle Eastern law collections do not seem

to have functioned as normative legislation. Actually, the Greek word *nomos* described correct performance of temple rituals just as priestly *torah* does in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, written ritual instructions seem to have functioned as normative texts long before written legislation did, and may have been the stimulus for the gradual development of normative written law.

Deuteronomy uses *torah* most often to refer to itself as containing all the stipulations of the covenant (e.g. Deut. 1:5) in the form of a written scroll, *sefer hatorah* "the book of the Torah" (e.g. Deut. 28:61; cf. 2 Kgs. 22:8, 11). Other books of the Hebrew Bible connect this book with Moses, *sefer torat Moshe* "the book of the Torah of Moses" (e.g. Josh. 8:31; 1 Kgs. 2:3; Ezra 7:6; Neh. 8:1). By the early Second Temple period, "the Torah" had come to refer to the Pentateuch in more or less the form we have it today.

Early Christian writers referred to the collection as *ho nomos*, "the Law," often together with "the prophets" to describe all the scriptures. The Greek name *pentateuchos* "Pentateuch" means "five cases" and refers to the five books of the Torah. It appeared first in second- and third-century CE Christian authors such as Origen and Tertullian, and probably reflected Hebrew or Aramaic phrases used by the ancient rabbis, such as "the five books of the Torah" (*y. Sotah* 5:6) or "the five fifths of the Torah" (*b. Meg.* 15a). However, the Torah's division into five books was already reflected in the first century CE by Philo (*De Abrahamo* 1) and Josephus (*Apion* 1.8), and perhaps by a fragment among the Dead Sea Scrolls (*1Q30*).

For Jews and Samaritans, "the Torah" remains the name of the five books of the Pentateuch. It evokes not just the literature but the entire tradition of interpreting and living according to its teachings. Thus "Torah" names how the Pentateuch functions as scripture for these religions. But what does it mean to call the Torah, or any other text, "a scripture"?

## Scripture and Ritual

Scholars of religions struggle to define the word "scripture." Religious communities tend to describe their scriptures as holy or sacred, as inspired by God, and as authoritative for their beliefs and practices. They also tend to describe their own scriptures as unique, unlike any other books or texts on earth. Religious communities therefore often resist classifying their sacred texts as belonging to the same category as the scriptures of other religions.[5]

Those who study multiple religions notice, however, that many traditions venerate some texts as sacred and distinguish them from all other texts.

Scholars of religion have therefore filled the category "scripture" with books from many religions. They often distinguish "book religions" from traditions that do not venerate sacred texts. Already in the Middle Ages, Muslim theologians described Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as "religions of the book." In the nineteenth century, Oxford University Press published 50 volumes of English translations of *The Sacred Books of the East*. The editor, Max Müller, wanted to expose Westerners to the scriptures of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Now textbook anthologies, such as Robert Van Voorst's *Anthology of World Scriptures*, make excerpts available from the scriptures of all these religions.

However, reading these various scriptures together shows that their contents have little in common. They contain stories, laws, oracles, moral principles, philosophical speculation, practical advice, prayers, hymns, spells, and much more. No one genre of literature describes them all. "Scripture," then, is not a literary category. Instead, what these texts have in common is that religious communities venerate them.

## The nature of scripture

William Graham observed: "A text becomes 'scripture' in living, subjective relationship to persons and to historical tradition. No text, written, oral, or both, is sacred or authoritative in isolation from a community. A text is only 'scripture' insofar as a group of persons perceives it to be sacred or holy, powerful and meaningful, possessed of an exalted authority, and in some fashion transcendent of, and hence distinct from, other speech and writing. … The 'scriptural' characteristics of a text belong not to the text itself but to its role in a community. 'Scripture' is not a literary genre but a religio-historical one."

Veneration of scriptures takes the form of public and private rituals of various kinds. Rituals draw people's attention to specific practices and ideas. They focus attention on the ritual activity itself in order to make participants more aware of their own relationship to what it represents. Studies of ritual (see Box, "Ritual theories") have revealed the central role that rituals play in human societies at every level.

Rituals, however, have a bad reputation. People associate ritual with unreality, with superstition, and with magic, which they contrast with practical, effective actions. Though this attitude feels modern, it is actually rooted in ancient religious polemics. Christians contrasted "empty rituals" and superstition with knowledge and "true faith" long before rationalists and scientists employed the contrast. Protestants used the term "ritual" to

## Ritual theories

Throughout the twentieth century, many anthropologists and scholars of religion have studied rituals and how they work. They have increasingly focused not on distinguishing rituals from non-rituals, which can be hard to do, but rather on the activity of performing rituals or "ritualizing" which can take place at almost any time and place.

> "Ritualization is a way of acting that specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important or powerful." (Catherine Bell)

Ritualizing requires participants and audience to pay attention to what is being done, how it is being done, and who is doing it. Ritualizing involves doing ordinary activities, such as eating, entering a room, or reading a book, in a formal and regulated way.

> "Ritual relies for its power on the fact that it is concerned with quite ordinary activities placed within an extraordinary setting, that what it describes and displays is, in principle, possible for every occurrence of these acts." (Jonathan Z. Smith)

By performing rituals and witnessing them, people identify themselves with the values represented in the rituals.

> "By performing a [ritual] the participants accept, and indicate to themselves and to others that they accept whatever is encoded in the canon of that order." (Roy Rappaport)

So rituals identify (index) participants with the institutions and traditions that promote and perform those rituals.[6]

attack Catholic ceremonies during the Reformation, medieval Christians used it to disparage Jews, and ancient Christians used it to criticize and suppress pagan sacrifices.

In contrast to the reputation of rituals, scriptures have been venerated as containers of knowledge and truth. Reading has been cast as the opposite of ritualizing. It can therefore sound very odd to hear reading and writing described as rituals in some circumstances. The concept of ritualized books is so strange that scholars have done little research on this phenomenon, in contrast to the massive amounts of scholarship on the interpretation of books and religions.

Nevertheless, the display, reading, and interpretation of scriptures play obvious roles in the worship services – the rituals – of Jews and Christians, as well as of Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and many other religious groups. In fact, ritualizing scriptures clearly encourages people to believe that these books are authoritative and inspired texts that establish the truth and legitimacy of the religious tradition. By setting aside the polemical history of debates over ritual, we can better understand how ritualizing books promotes religious ideas and practices, and secular ones too.

Rituals make participants pay attention to people, objects, and actions that they otherwise take for granted. Ritualized meals, for example, draw attention to the food itself, how it is prepared, and what it means: the unleavened bread of a Passover Seder, the bread and wine of Communion, the tea of a tea ceremony. Ritual processions require attention to the manner and order in which people enter and leave a room. Ceremonies that mark life transitions focus attention on particular people: the bride and groom at a wedding, the graduates at a college commencement, or the recently deceased at a funeral.

Ritualizing scriptures therefore draws attention to the books themselves – their verbal contents, and also the sound of their words and their physical form and appearance. Scriptures get ritualized in three distinct ways that correspond to the three dimensions of texts.

## The Three Dimensions of Written Texts

Every written text consists of three aspects or dimensions. We usually focus on its meaning, the significance of its words and what they tell us. This interpretive act engages a text's *semantic dimension*.

Before we can understand the meaning of writing, we must turn the visual signs into words. The text must be read aloud or enunciated in our heads. This oral or mental performance engages a text's *performative dimension*.

But before we can even perform a text, we must recognize it as a written text. We have to interpret visual marks as written language (letters or signs), not as art or natural patterns, or we must recognize the shape of an object as likely to contain writing (an envelope, a scroll, or a book, for example). This act of recognition engages a text's *iconic dimension*.

We usually do not pay attention to the three different dimensions of texts. Consider this book that you are now reading. You instantly recognize its shape as a book that probably contains written text. You recognize its Roman letters and (if you are reading this) you turn them into English words

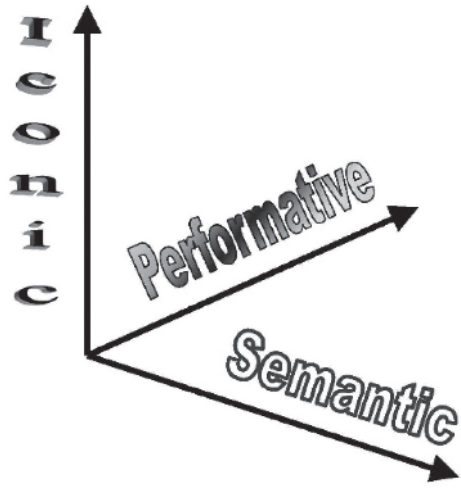



**Figure 1.1** The three dimensions of written texts.

without thinking much about what you are doing. I hope that you also understand the meaning of these sentences without too much difficulty.

We pay attention to the individual dimensions of texts only if we have difficulty – if we have trouble figuring out their meaning (the semantic dimension), if we cannot read smudged type or illegible handwriting (the performative dimension), or if we cannot decide whether marks on paper represent written words or art or random patterns (the iconic dimension). Otherwise, the three dimensions of texts are trivial features of the experience of reading and usually ignored.

When texts get ritualized, however, the three dimensions become important, because texts can be ritualized in each of the dimensions.

The semantic dimension of interpretation can be ritualized by delivering lectures and sermons, by staging debates, and by writing interpretive commentaries on texts. For example, laws and national constitutions get ritualized regularly in the semantic dimension by oral and written interpretations that multiply and grow more elaborate over time. They serve the ritual function of drawing attention to the laws and they index the readers' and listeners' responsibilities under those laws.

The performative dimension of texts can be ritualized by private and public readings and recitations. Religious worship services often focus on reading selections of sacred texts. People may memorize the text. Oral performances may be standardized as chants or set to music as songs. Theatrical scripts, for example, are designed for public performance in

ritual spaces (theaters). They expect audiences and actors to behave in conventional ways that call attention to the play being performed.

The iconic dimension of texts can be ritualized by changing how a book looks and by handling it in special ways. The text can be written in distinctive scripts or printed in unusual fonts. Its pages can be decorated and illustrated. Its binding or container can be embellished with art and valuable materials. For example, publishers produce collector's editions in leather bindings and gilt edges so buyers can show visually that they find a particular book valuable. Texts can also be displayed prominently on shelves or tables, held up for people to see, and paraded in elaborate processions. Rare books frequently get displayed in museums, in libraries, and even in private homes.

Only written texts can be ritualized in these three dimensions. A visual symbol such as a cross or a flag can be ritualized in the iconic dimension: it can be displayed, elaborated in art, and paraded in processions. Visual symbols can also be ritualized in the semantic dimension: their meanings can be elaborated and debated, sometimes at great length. But crosses and flags cannot be ritualized in the performative dimension: they contain no written words that can be turned into mental or oral language. On the other hand, an oral epic can be ritualized by retelling it or even staging it. Its interpretation can also be elaborated and debated at length. But there is no physical object to display or decorate. Therefore, oral epics and other oral traditions can be ritualized in the performative and semantic dimension, but not in the iconic dimension, while visual symbols can be ritualized in the iconic and semantic dimensions, but not in the performative dimension. Only written texts can be ritualized in all three dimensions.

## Ritualizing Scriptures in Three Dimensions

Most texts do not get ritualized much in any dimension, and those that do usually get ritualized in only one or two dimensions. A distinctive feature of religious scriptures is that they get ritualized in all three dimensions.

Religious traditions that emphasize scriptures give prominent attention to their semantic interpretation. They include Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Taoists, Hindus, and Jains, as well as Jews, Samaritans, and Christians. All of them sponsor speakers and literature that interpret their scriptures, and give their best interpreters positions of respect and influence. Most of them encourage lay people to study the scriptures and their interpretations. Ritualizing the semantic dimension tends to increase the authority of scriptures and the authority of people who can interpret them convincingly. These religions therefore give respect and influence

to scholars, priests, preachers, rabbis, imams, or sages who are expert in the scriptures and their interpretation.

These traditions also highlight the oral performance of scriptures, to the point that reading or reciting scripture is a key component of their worship services. They often require that scriptures be performed orally in distinctive ways, with particular pronunciations or with prescribed chants. Verses of scriptures frequently get sung to melodies, with or without instrumental accompaniments. Some scriptures that contain vivid stories get performed theatrically. Traditions of enacting scriptural stories are thousands of years old in Europe and India. Now they frequently appear on television and in films. There is even older evidence for artistic traditions of illustrating scriptural stories and calligraphy that elaborates the written texts artistically. All these media can be used to perform the words and contents of scriptures. Ritualizing their performative dimension in these ways draws people's attention to the scriptures and inspires those who hear and see the performances. They often regard inspiration as characteristic of scripture.

Religious traditions that emphasize scripture also ritualize the physical form of their scriptures. The script or typeface may take distinctive forms and be arranged in unusual ways. The pages may be decorated and their contents may be illustrated. The cover or binding of the book may take a stereotypical form so that people easily recognize it as that scripture, or it may be bound in expensive materials. People display scriptures in their congregations, sanctuaries and homes. They carry them in the form of

## The effects of ritualizing scriptures

Ritualizing each of a scripture's three dimensions makes the book's message more persuasive to those who venerate it. Theories of rhetoric, that is, of persuasion, help us understand how this works. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) described three factors necessary to make a speech persuasive. The words (*logos*) of the speech must, of course, make a convincing argument. The speech, however, must also appeal to the audience's assumptions and feelings (*pathos*). And the speaker must project an attractive and trustworthy character (*ethos*). Scriptures are not speeches, but ritualizing their three dimensions increases their persuasive appeal in these same ways: interpreting them increases the authority (*logos*) of their contents and their interpreters, performing their words and contents inspires audiences (*pathos*), and displaying and decorating them legitimizes (*ethos*) the communities and traditions that venerate them.[7]

complete books or as miniature amulets. They wave them in rituals of worship or preaching, of celebration or protest. In all these ways, the visual appearance of scriptures distinguishes them from other books and emphasizes their importance. Ritualizing their iconic dimensions in these ways draws attention and legitimizes the religious tradition that venerates them and the people who possess and handle them.

Ritualization plays an important role in making some texts seem more authoritative than others. Regular and repeated interpretation of the same book makes its contents seem more important for how to think and act. But the reverse is also true: displaying a book of instructions makes rituals seem more legitimate. The visible presence of authoritative books counters doubts about the competence or honesty of the person leading the rituals.[8]

In fact, people in the ancient Middle East first began regarding some texts as normative, that is, as authoritative for how to behave, when those texts described how to conduct rituals. Kings and priests and magicians from Babylon to Egypt consulted ritual texts to tell them, for example, where to build temples, when to make offerings to the gods, and how to cast curses. But the famous law code of Hammurabi and other royal law codes were not consulted for how to conduct criminal trials, which were based on custom instead. Textual authority developed first around ritual texts.

The same pattern can be observed in the developing authority of biblical books. Many claim inspiration from God, most obviously books like Isaiah and Jeremiah that state that God gave the prophets these messages. The first Jewish scripture did not consist of prophetic books, however, but of the Pentateuch. Genesis 1 does not begin with any explicit claim of inspiration or even of authorship. The Pentateuch does contain laws spoken by God to Moses. But what differentiates it most from other biblical books is that ritual instructions lie at its center in Exodus 25–40, Leviticus, and parts of Numbers. Stories of the Torah's growing authority in the Second Temple period emphasize that it first dictated ritual behavior, especially how to celebrate the annual festivals of Passover and *Sukkot* (Booths). Only centuries later did its laws begin to apply in criminal courts and civil society. (See "The Rhetoric of Law After Ezra" on p. 200.)

## The Pentateuch in Three Dimensions

Understanding how a book functions as scripture therefore involves how it gets ritualized in each of three dimensions and the social effects of these rituals. Chapters 3–5 will describe how religious communities have ritualized

the Pentateuch. The specifics vary from one tradition to another and from time to time and place to place.

For example, Jews and Samaritans use scrolls of the Torah in synagogue services. The form of the book itself therefore distinguishes it as sacred scripture. Torah scrolls also receive distinctive covers and get housed in cabinets, Torah arks, that emphasize the sanctity of the text. Christians, by contrast, use a different book form for their scriptures, a codex that binds folded pages together on one edge. Because of Christian influence, the codex became the standard shape for almost all books in Western cultures. But Christians continue to distinguish their Bibles, with the Pentateuch included, by decorative bindings and distinctive typography. Jews, Samaritans, and Christians have reproduced quotations from their scriptures in monumental form on walls, plaques, and gravestones. All three religions tend to display their books of scripture prominently and parade them publicly. So they all ritualize the iconic dimension of their scriptures, even though the specific forms and methods vary.

Jews, Samaritans, and Christians also give prominent attention to reading scriptures. Reading selected texts aloud is so common in their worship services that it is a defining characteristic of what makes them worship services. The services of Jewish and Samaritan synagogues highlight the Pentateuch by reading the entire Torah through sequentially over the course of a year. Christian churches focus on other parts of their bibles and usually read only selected parts of the Pentateuch aloud, mostly from Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy. The readings often take musical form as chants. Scriptural texts are also set to music and sung by congregations and choirs. Biblical stories, including the Pentateuch's, are a major source of themes for artistic illustration and theatrical productions, now including television and film. Though the methods and forms vary, all three religions ritualize the Pentateuch's performative dimension to a high degree.

The three religions that venerate the Pentateuch as scripture also give attention to interpreting its meaning. Worship services feature sermons based on scriptural texts. Congregations promote group study of scripture by children and adults. To support these activities, scholars write commentaries explaining the texts. The published literature about the Pentateuch is therefore vast and grows every year. Most scholars would distinguish their activities from the rituals of congregational worship. But their repetitive focus on religious texts bears all the hallmarks of ritualizing activity, and has the same effect: it draws attention to the scriptures and publicly enhances their value. So, again, though the methods vary over time and by tradition, Jews, Samaritans, and Christians have all ritualized the Pentateuch's semantic dimension from antiquity to today.

### Deuteronomy commands Torah's ritualization

*YHWH spoke these words to your whole congregation on the mountain in a loud voice out of fire, cloud and darkness, and added nothing more. Then God wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.* (Deut. 5:22)

*Have the words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Repeat them to your children and talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk down the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as a sign on your hand and make them a symbol between your eyes. Inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.* (Deut. 6:6–9)

*YHWH said to me, "Carve two stone tablets … and make a wooden ark. I will write the words on the tablets … and you must put them in the ark."* (Deut. 10:1–2)

*Moses wrote down this law and gave it to the levitical priests, who carry the Ark of the Covenant, and to all the Israelite elders. He commanded them, "Every seventh year … you shall read this Torah in the presence of all Israel. Gather the people, men, women, children and immigrants among you, so that they may hear and learn to be in awe of YHWH your God and to be careful to do all the words of this Torah."* (Deut. 31:9–12)

*Moses commanded the Levites who carry the Ark of the Covenant of YHWH, "Take this Torah scroll and put it beside the Ark of the Covenant of YHWH your God, where it will serve as a witness against you."* (Deut. 31:25–26)

The tendency to ritualize the Pentateuch can partly be explained by the fact that the Pentateuch itself commands its ritualization in all three textual dimensions. Deuteronomy 31:10–13 requires that the Torah be read aloud to all the Israelites every seven years (see Box, "Deuteronomy commands Torah's ritualization"). The performative nature of this activity is clearly marked by scheduling the reading every seven years, by its setting during *Sukkot*, the Festival of Booths, and by requiring that everyone participate, including men, women, and children. The ritual aims explicitly for instructional goals, "so that they may hear and learn," thus also ritualizing its semantic dimension. Later, the same chapter commands its iconic ritualization. The physical scroll must be placed beside the ark in the holiest part of Israel's sanctuary as an icon of Israel's covenant with God. The ark itself contains the tablets of the commandments (Deut. 10:1–5) that God spoke aloud to Israel, according to Deut. 5:22 (and also Exod. 20:1–19, 25:16). The ark, then, served as a reliquary, a container for a sacred relic. In this case, that relic is a text, stone tablets of the commandments that were written by God.

Deuteronomy also requires that at least parts of the Torah be ritualized by Israelites at home. It emphasizes meditating regularly on its words "in your hearts," that is, by memorizing them, and teaching them to children. Such performative and semantic ritualization should be joined with iconic

ritualization by wearing its words on arm and forehead and writing them on gates (Deut. 6:6–9).

So the writers of Deuteronomy anticipated that Torah would be ritualized as scripture in all three of its textual dimensions. And, in fact, the Torah's three dimensions did get ritualized when it first began to function as a scripture, in the time of the priest and scribe Ezra.

## Scripturalizing Torah in the Time of Ezra

The biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe Ezra as a Jewish priest and scribe from Babylon. The Persian emperor commissioned him to appoint judges. Ezra also devoted himself to religious reform based on "the Torah of Moses that YHWH God gave to Israel" (Ezra 7:6). He focused especially on two issues. He led the Jerusalem community to prohibit marriage to foreign women and to dissolve such marriages that had already taken place (Ezra 10). This ban on intermarriage was more comprehensive than what the Pentateuch actually requires. That discrepancy has led some historians to think that Ezra's Torah was not exactly the same as the Pentateuch that we now possess. Others argue that Ezra simply interpreted the Pentateuch more strictly than necessary. At any rate, the story implies that Ezra used the Torah's authority to regulate marriages.

Ezra also led the Jerusalem community in a public reading of the Torah scroll (Neh. 8, see Box, "Ezra's Torah reading"). He was visibly supported by community leaders standing on each side of him. When he displayed the scroll, the people responded with ritual words ("Amen") and bows of reverence. They stood at attention while Ezra read aloud for the whole morning. Levites interpreted or translated the meaning of what Ezra read. Readings and study continued on the following days. They culminated in celebrating the annual festival of *Sukkot* on the basis of the Torah's instructions (Neh. 8:14–17). Later, the whole community renewed the covenant with God and committed themselves to funding the temple in Jerusalem (Neh. 10).

This scripture reading ceremony illustrates a typical feature of rituals (see Box "Ritual theories," above). Simply by participating and being seen to participate in this ritual, the people of Jerusalem accepted the legitimacy of the Torah and of Ezra as its authoritative interpreter. Whatever their private misgivings may have been, they publicly committed themselves to obey the commandments of the Torah. That meant, to begin with, celebrating *Sukkot* correctly.

**Ezra's Torah reading**

*All the people joined as one … and asked Ezra to bring the book of the Torah of Moses which YHWH had commanded Israel. … He read from it … from dawn to noon to the men and women and children old enough to understand, and the people listened closely to the Torah. The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden speaker's platform, and [the priests and elders] stood next to him. Ezra opened the book where all the people could see, because he was standing higher than the people. When he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed YHWH, the great God, and all the people raised their hands and responded, "Amen, amen." Then they bowed down before YHWH with their faces to the ground. … The Levites helped the people in their places understand the Torah. Thus they read from the book of the Torah of God with interpretation to explain the meaning, so they could understand the reading.* (Neh. 8:1–8)

To later Jews and by the standards of the Torah itself (Deut. 6:1–9; 31:9–13), the description of Ezra and his actions in Nehemiah 8 exemplifies what a rabbi (a Jewish religious leader) should be and do. He leads the people to read and study the Torah, and to observe the laws of God that it contains. Ezra establishes the model of scholarly religious leadership that has predominated in Judaism for 2,000 years, and in Christianity and Islam as well.

So it is surprising to notice that Ezra is almost the first person in the Bible to be shown acting in these ways. Moses, of course, exemplifies this kind of leadership in the Pentateuch, and his successor, Joshua, also read and inscribed the Torah for Israel (Josh. 8:30–35). However, from the time of Moses and Joshua until the time of Ezra more than 800 years later, there is only one story about Israel's political or religious leaders behaving in this way. In fact, the stories of events during these centuries contain almost no references to the book of Torah, except three times in commentary by characters or narrators (1 Kgs. 2:3; 2 Kgs. 14:5–6; 17:34–40). Only one story features a Torah scroll as a key element. That is the story of the Torah found in the late seventh century and its ritualized reading by King Josiah (2 Kgs. 22–23). But the resulting religious reform seems to have had no lasting impact. The stories of the following kings and of Judah's exile from its land do not feature a book of Torah. In the Bible after the Pentateuch and apart from 2 Kings 22–23, the Torah appears as a prominent feature of the plot only in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and in the books of Chronicles, which is a history of the kingdoms written after the time of Ezra. The Bible suggests that from the generation of Moses to the post-exilic generation of Ezra, the religious practices of Israel and Judah were not based on a written book of scripture.

It was only in the time of Ezra and afterwards, that is, in the Persian period (539–ca. 330 BCE), that the Torah began to function regularly as scripture for many Jews. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 will detail the evidence for this claim. For now, it is important to notice that, according to Nehemiah 8, Ezra ritualized all three dimensions of scripture. He displayed the physical scroll to the people, who rose to their feet at the sight and then bowed down (iconic dimension 8:5–6). He read it aloud on each day of the festival (performative dimension 8:3, 18). And the Levites interpreted its meaning to the people, while the leaders studied it for guidance (semantic dimension 8:7–8, 13). Here we find the three-dimensional ritualization that distinguishes later scriptures, such as the Torah scroll, the Bible, and the Qur'an, from secular texts.

## The Persian Empire and the Pentateuch

The Babylonian Empire conquered the Kingdom of Judah in 587 BCE. Many Judeans, especially upper-class priests, scribes, and royalty, were exiled to Mesopotamia. Less than 50 years later, the Babylonians themselves were conquered by the Persians. The Persian conqueror, Cyrus, issued a decree allowing exiles to return to their native lands and rebuild their homes and temples. Descendants of the Judean exiles began to slowly make their way back to Jerusalem. They rebuilt their villages and their temple (Ezra 2–6), but restoring the city and its economy took hundreds of years.

Sometime in the next century (historians give dates ranging from 450 to 399 BCE), the Persian emperor sent Ezra to the province containing Judea. Some historians argue that Ezra's story shows that the Persian Empire played a role in turning the Pentateuch into official Jewish law. At least the biblical writers claimed there was imperial support for scripturalizing the Torah in the Persian period.

Whatever the historical facts may have been, Nehemiah 8 shows that its authors thought the Torah should be ritualized just as Deuteronomy requires. Chapters 3–5 will demonstrate that from the time of Ezra in the Persian period on, the Pentateuch was in fact increasingly ritualized in all three dimensions as a scripture. So the story of Ezra's Torah illustrates a turning point in the history of the Pentateuch's scripturalization, whatever the role of the Persian Empire may have been.

## Ezra in history and tradition

The Persian emperor sent Ezra "to appoint judges," according to Ezra 7:25. He apparently carried with him a Torah scroll (7:14). Ezra, besides being a Persian official, was also a Jewish priest and "a scribe skilled in the law (torah) of Moses" who "had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:6, 10). The biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah depict Ezra as entirely concerned with the people's religious faithfulness. Once he reached Jerusalem, Ezra reformed the community's marriage laws (Ezra 10) and ritual calendar (Neh. 8) according to his interpretation of the Torah. He even required Judean men to divorce and send away their foreign wives for fear that the immigrants would introduce their gods to the Judeans.

Many historians suspect that the biblical writers changed Ezra from being a Persian official who oversaw the appointment of judges to being a religious reformer. They think that the biblical writers reinterpreted the commission of Ezra as a Persian bureaucrat (Ezra 7:12–26) and turned him into a Torah scribe and religious reformer. In that case, Nehemiah 8's depiction of Ezra reading the Torah scroll may not be historically accurate. Other historians defend the story as a plausible account of how the Persians sponsored the development of local ethnic laws (see Box, "The Persian Empire and the Pentateuch).

What is clear is that the biblical writers present Ezra as a model of Torah observance. They were not interested in Persian bureaucracy. Instead, they use the story of Ezra to show how Torah *should* be ritualized and what its effects *should* be.

Within a century after the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were written, someone revised them to emphasize this theme even more. The author of the book of *1 Esdras* omitted the governor Nehemiah as well as the criticisms of the priests' marriages. This rearrangement turned Ezra's ritual of Torah reading into the climax and conclusion of the work. *1 Esdras* thus presented Torah observance as the ultimate solution to the problem of sin and divine punishment.[9]

Historical arguments about the accuracy of the biblical depiction of Ezra and his Torah in the context of Persian imperial policies (see boxes, "The Persian Empire and the Pentateuch" and "Ezra in history and tradition") do not affect the claim that the Pentateuch began to be ritualized as scripture, as Torah, during this time. The story of the priest and scribe Ezra

who brought the Torah from Babylon and read it to the people of Jerusalem so that they renewed their commitment to God and the temple, that story shows how the writers of Ezra and Nehemiah thought the Pentateuch should be ritualized. From the time of Ezra on, Jews and Samaritans did ritualize the Torah more and more. There is no sign that this was the case before this time. It is only from the time of Ezra on, that is, from the middle or late Persian period or, more broadly, from the early Second Temple period, that the Torah began to function regularly as scripture.

The story of Ezra serves therefore to mark a turning point in religious history and in the history of scripturalization. It provides information about the political, social, and religious reasons Jews began to ritualize the Torah in all three dimensions. It shows us how they imagined doing it properly, and this model of ritual behavior corresponds more or less with how later congregations ritualize their scriptures. The story illustrates the social effects of ritualizing Torah: in the iconic dimension by legitimizing Ezra's leadership, in the performative dimension by inspiring the whole community to devote themselves to following Torah, and in the semantic dimension by empowering the authority of Torah's interpreters, of Ezra and the Levites who assisted him.

This book will therefore organize its discussion of the scripturalization of the Pentateuch around this turning point in the time of Ezra. Since the Torah began to be scripturalized in this period, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 will first describe the Pentateuch's ritualization from this time forward in each of the three textual dimensions respectively. I will survey the history of the Pentateuch's ritualization "after Ezra" right up to the present day. Only then will we consider the Pentateuch's prior history. I will evaluate what we can know about the origins and ritualization of each of the Pentateuch's dimensions "before Ezra," that is, before they began to be ritualized regularly to turn the Torah into the first written scripture of Western religious history.

## Reading the Pentateuch as a Scripture

Almost all readers of the Pentateuch know about its status as scripture before they start reading. That is why I have begun by discussing the nature of scriptures and the Pentateuch's ritualization in the three textual dimensions of scriptures. People learn that the Torah or the Bible is scripture because they have been exposed to its ritualization in one or more dimensions. Only then do they begin to read the text for themselves,

either on their own or in a congregational study group or in a college class. Almost everybody reads the Pentateuch knowing that it functions as Jewish and Christian scripture.

Many readers find, however, that the contents of the Pentateuch are not what its status as scripture led them to expect. They find stories that depict God differently than do Jewish rabbis and Christian preachers. They find ritual instructions for sacrifices that Jews and Christians do not follow. They find laws that conflict with modern standards of justice and ethics, and they find stories that contradict modern science. The Pentateuch's literary structure also confuses readers because it does not correspond to how modern novels or textbooks are organized.

While understanding the Pentateuch as a scripture helps to explain how it gets used by Jews and Christians, it does not explain its contents. The contents of scriptures in other religious traditions differ too much from the Bible and from each other to provide any guidance for how to read this particular scripture. Therefore the next chapter surveys the contents of the Pentateuch from a different perspective, namely, that of rhetoric. I will summarize the Pentateuch as a work of literature that has persuasive effects on devout readers.