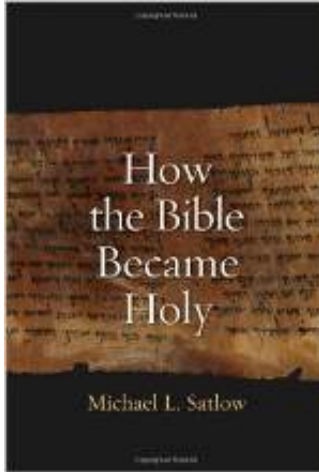




A Genealogy of Biblical Authority



Book review

Ronald Hendel | 30.09.2014

Michael L. Satlow:

How the Bible Became Holy.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

368 pp. \$35.00

Michael L. Satlow, a distinguished scholar of rabbinic Judaism at Brown University, has written an engaging book with an innovative thesis about “how the Bible became holy.” He states his thesis clearly: “*Jews and Christians gave to the texts that constitute our Bible only very limited and specific kinds of authority until well into the third century CE and beyond*” (emphasis in original, p. 3). As a scholar of the Hebrew Bible, I find this to be an intriguing proposal. I state at the outset that I do not find it convincing. But Satlow forces us to reexamine what we know (versus what we think we know) about these issues in a fresh and interesting way.

Satlow’s argument is presented in a narrative history of the Bible and its cultural world from Solomon to the Mishnah, in other words, tenth century BCE to third century CE. This is a massive amount of territory, which is filled with historiographical problems and pitfalls. Satlow is clearly more comfortable with the sources of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, but he does a brave job negotiating the history of the Bible from the Iron Age onward.

The leitmotif of the book is that the Bible was not very important during what we call the biblical period, including the Second Temple period. This emphasis is a salutary corrective to anachronistic projections of biblical literacy onto the ancient Israelites. The biblical writings were composed by literate people who, by definition, belonged to the educated class. Most people were perhaps only functionally literate, and biblical scrolls were probably quite rare throughout antiquity. Many of the preexilic writings that ended up in the Bible may have been stored in royal or temple archives and only made public in the postexilic period. The story of Ezra reading “the scroll of the Torah of Moses” to the assembled public in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 8) is the Bible’s own representation of the “publication” of the Torah in the mid-fifth century BCE. So we should not expect the biblical writings—particularly the Torah—to have had much of an impact before this time. Satlow’s argument clarifies the low profile of biblical texts in the public imagination during much of the biblical period.

Satlow's thesis becomes more controversial in the centuries after the Restoration period. He maintains that Ezra's Torah had very little impact for most of the next five hundred years. This is a difficult view to maintain. Satlow achieves this by positing minimal interpretations of the textual data that we have, and by postulating that contrary examples, such as the scripture-saturated writings in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which indicate a high authority granted to the Bible, are anomalous.

For example, the status of the biblical books (or, to be more precise, books that later came to be called "biblical") in the Septuagint and 1 Enoch is downplayed in Satlow's story. The earliest portions of these works stem from the third century BCE. He argues that the translation of the Torah into Greek was a project of the Library of Alexandria and had nothing to do with the Jewish community of Alexandria. He writes: "The Septuagint began as a relatively small-scale administrative exercise.... The new Greek scrolls were neither very readable nor influential, and they were filed away" (pp. 169-170). This is a possible minimal reading of the Septuagint project. But the strangeness of the Greek makes it unlikely. Satlow argues that the Greek-Hebrew hybrid translation language was "not because the translators made a deliberate choice to make the underlying Hebrew text visible in the Greek. Rather, it was because their Greek was not very good" (p. 158). But a weak grasp of Greek does not cause the preservation of Hebrew syntax, nor does it demand a literalistic word-by-word translation. Satlow argues for the minimal importance of the biblical text by proposing a strained explanation for the textual phenomenon at hand. It is much easier to explain the strangeness of Septuagint Greek as the result of a translation technique that aims to preserve the sacred details (viz. lexemes, word order, and syntax) of the source text. When the Septuagint translates *tohu wavohu* (Genesis 1:2) as *aoratos kai akataskeuastos* (invisible and unorganized), this is not bad Greek, but rather a sophisticated Platonizing rendition that preserves the lexical and syntactic form of the Hebrew source. In this translation, Genesis is represented as the source of true philosophy.

Similarly, Satlow maintains that 1 Enoch, one of the more influential works of Second Temple Judaism, "knows and draws from several of the texts that would become biblical, but gives them little explicit authority" (p. 121). This is technically correct, since 1 Enoch does not explicitly cite the biblical books. However, 1 Enoch is in many respects a tapestry of biblical allusions and interpretations. For instance, the extended theophany in 1 Enoch 1 is a *mélange* of quotations from biblical books. 1 Enoch 1-36 is an extended apocalyptic commentary on Genesis 6-9. It is more correct to say that 1 Enoch is completely intoxicated by the biblical writings, indicating that its authors granted high authority to these texts.

Satlow concedes that the biblical writings were regarded as divine oracles by some people during the Second Temple period, but he maintains that the books had not yet achieved "normative" authority. (For example, for 1 Maccabees, he writes that "the authority of the 'book of the law' here is prophetic or oracular, not normative" [p. 144]. For Paul, he argues that "his patchy knowledge of scripture and the oracular authority that he assigned to it were typical products of a Jerusalem education" [p. 211].) But since he does not clarify what he means by "normative" authority, this seems to be a distinction without a difference. If a book consists of the "oracles of God," then it presumably has a very high status, something like normativity.

In Satlow's story, the driving force behind the elevation of scripture to a high status toward the end of the Second Temple period was the Sadducees. This is the weakest part of the book, simply because we know almost nothing about the Sadducees. Satlow seems to grant the paucity of our knowledge, but builds a grand narrative around this group nonetheless. He associates the Sadducees with the authors of 1 Enoch and Daniel, and claims that the Qumran sect was Sadducean, which explains their attachment to written texts. The Sadducees were the group that "increasingly turned to written texts as a source of authority" and whose text-centered ideology eventually prevailed (p. 182). Since the classical rabbis similarly viewed scriptures so highly, "the Sadducees posthumously won" (p. 275). Only at the end of the story, in the second and third century CE, does scripture become truly holy.

This is an invigorating story. I doubt that it is a correct one. Satlow's claim that "*only very limited and specific kinds of authority*" was granted to the Hebrew Bible in the Second Temple period suffers from a vagueness about the kinds of textual authority and from a minimalist reading of many sources. Satlow grants that Jews in the mid-second century BCE ascribed "differing levels of mainly prophetic (oracular) and scribal, or literary authority" to various biblical books, but claims that "what they by and large lacked was normative authority" (p. 149). But he does not explain what he means by this parceling out of authority. The rabbis, who are the telos of the story, seem finally to grant a "normative" authority to the Bible that was previously absent: "For the rabbis, it was not a collection of oracles, but the source of all true knowledge.... The rabbis thus saw scripture as 'omnisignificant'" (p. 268). This may be true, as far as it goes, but it seems arbitrary to equate "normative authority" with rabbinic hermeneutics. The story's end—that the rabbis made the Bible holy—does not deliver.

However, by pursuing these intricate byways in the genealogy of the Bible and its textual authority, and by pointing out that it is not a mirror of ancient Jewish culture as such, Satlow performs a valuable task. His book should stimulate lively discussion on what we do and do not know about these complicated issues.

Editorial remarks

Source: [H-Net Reviews](#); this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](#).