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Revelatory Experiences as the Beginning of Scripture: Paul’s Letters and the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible

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Introduction: Revelatory Experiences as an Overlooked Factor in the Origin of Scriptures

What is presented in the following in honoring my dear colleague and friend, Professor Zipi Talshir, is part of a larger project on the question “What is Scripture?” I will propose here some ideas about the very first steps in a historical development that eventually resulted in texts regarded as being “holy” or “canonical.” Methodologically, I follow a historical approach that is informed by theological reflection based on a religious, theistic world view. I am aware that many have reservations about this dual perspective, not least the honoree of this volume, with whom I have had more than one debate on this subject in and around Beer-Sheva. But the topic necessitates at least the willingness to engage with religious experiences and how they might have become causal forces within the historical process. It can hardly be doubted that the revealed “word of the Lord” stands at the heart of the prophetic tradition in the Bible. Many of the prophetic books begin with a reference to the “word of the Lord that happened” to a prophet during a given time, and elements of the historical books focus on the role of the prophets in the development of the course of history.

Author’s note: Again, heartfelt thanks are due to my two young colleagues here in Nottingham, Dr. Christoph Ochs and Peter Watts, who helped me with this essay in many ways.

The formula ויהי דבר־יהוה belongs among the key identifiers of biblical prophecy: 1 Sam 15:10 (with Samuel as recipient); 2 Sam 7:4 (Nathan); 1 Kgs 6:11 (Solomon); 12:22 (Shemaiah); 13:20 (an unnamed prophet); 16:1 (King Jehu); 17:2, 8; 21:17, 28 (Elijah); Isa 38:4 (Isaiah); Jer 1:4, 11, 13, et al. (Jeremiah); Ezek 3:16; 6:1; 7:1, et al.; Jonah 1:1; 3:1; Hag 1:3; Zech 4:8; 6:9, et al.; see also the variations of the formula in Gen 15:1 (Abraham); 1 Kgs 18:1 (Elijah); 18:31 (retrospection on Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had “happened” that is now to be going to be fulfilled); Jer 1:2; Ezek 1:3; Zech 1:1. Israel’s election began with God’s addressing Abram (Gen 12:1, “And the Lord said to Abram”), and the redemption from Egypt is similarly rooted in God’s address to Moses (Exod 3:4). Creation itself is described as a speech-act on the part of God (Gen 1:3, etc.), and the decisive revelation on Mt. Sinai is a public proclamation of God in front of all Israel (Exod 20:1–20; Deut 5:1). When young Samuel was called as a prophet at a time when “the word of the Lord was rare” (1 Sam 3:1), he accepted his commissioning by saying to God, who had called him: “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3:10). This is in short the task of a prophet: to listen to what God is saying and to transmit it to those whom God wants to address (see also Isa 5:9; 6:8–9; Jer 1:9, etc.). The expression גלה את־אזן “to uncover one’s ear” (1 Sam 9:15; 2 Sam 7:27 = 1 Chr 17:25; Isa 22:14; for individual “warnings,” see Job 33:14–18; 36:10–15) for receiving God’s revelation is a very graphic expression of this understanding. Related to the task of being God’s messenger in words and deeds is the imperative to write, which was given to Moses and the prophets.2

The problem is not so much that the biblical texts are ambiguous about this point but, rather, that historical scholarship is somehow oblivious to these claims about a revelatory experience as the prime cause for the prophetic words to be collected and eventually written down. In the wider context of academia and, in particular, professional biblical scholarship, a tendency prevails, as Christine Helmer comments, toward erasing “the religious dimension.” She sees this occurring when religious experiences and religious texts are pressed “into the terms of modern historiography” and “reductionistic models of religion,” only to be explained away “on neuroscientific or other naturalistic grounds.”3 She therefore advises:

If a scholar is sensitive to the inevitable erasure of the religious dimension of religious experience, then she must hold open the possibility of the religious dimension of a religious phenomenon that is irreducible to any other descriptive category.4

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4. Helmer, “Bible, Theology, and the Study of Religion,” 91; see also below, n. 36.
In the same way, biblical departments at universities cannot and should not ignore the fact that at the center of their research are texts that are regarded as “holy” by adherents of millenia-old faith traditions. It is not least because of these communities of faith and their impact on contemporary society that these departments can expect public support and interest in such detailed and painstaking work as text-, source- and redaction-criticism. It was first and foremost the religious value of these texts that resulted in their complex transmission and translation history, which is the focus of this volume and the work of the jubilarian. What I intend to do here, therefore, is to reflect on the religious experiences recorded in the biblical texts as one cause for their preservation and transmission.

The last two decades have witnessed an increased interest in how the Bible came to be the book that it is now, both in its literary and canonical form, involving not only specialists on the Hebrew Bible and early Christian writings but also scholars dealing with ancient Near Eastern textual traditions and their transmission, redaction, and adaptation in scribal workshops attached to temples or royal courts. Related to this topic within Biblical Studies is the question of how scribal professionalism and the nature of a text as Holy Scripture fit together. My interest in this question focuses on the religious element within this process.

5. See especially the fascinating and challenging study of K. van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). The discussion focuses heavily on whether the “scribes behind the Hebrew Bible were attached to the temple” (so van der Toorn) or whether the HB is mainly the product of “palace scribes,” as is claimed by Edward Lipiński, Moshe Weinfeld, and William M. Schniedewind (see van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 82–83). This is an unfortunate reduction of possibilities. Van der Toorn himself points to the fact that available archaeological evidence indicates “that the professional production of written texts must have been significant even in the pre-exilic period” (p. 75). But why is it then necessary to find the authors of the biblical books only in either the temple or the royal court? Literacy in Iron Age Israel was probably more widespread than often assumed, and this means that writing skills also were probably more widely available, as van der Toorn allows; see Helga Weippert, *Palästina in vorhellenistischer Zeit*, Handbuch der Archäologie 2/1 (Munich: Beck, 1988), 578–87: the archaeological evidence suggests “daß weite Bevölkerungskreise über zumindest elementare Lese kenntnisse verfügten” (p. 583) and that it was customary to write larger texts on scrolls or wooden tablets, most of which have perished forever (ibid.); J. Jeremias, “Das Rätsel der Schriftprophetie,” ZAW 125 (2013): 93–117, uses the Balaam inscription of Deir Alla as proof that in 8th-century Palestine there were “Möglichkeiten komplexer Textproduktion auch außerhalb des Königshofes” (p. 100); see further Carr, *Tablet of the Heart*, 111–73, who allows for scribal skills beyond the court and temple—that is, among army officers and especially among the prophets after the time of Isaiah (p. 166); on the question, see also J. Schaper, “A Theology of Writing: The Oral and the Written, God as Scribe, and the Book of Deuteronomy,” in *Anthropology and Biblical Studies: Avenues of Approach*, ed. L. J. Lawrence and M. I. Aguilar (Leiden: Deo, 2004), 78–88; idem, “The Living Word Engraved in Stone: The Interrelationship of the Oral and the Written and the Culture of Memory in
I begin with what seems to me a most obvious assumption, namely, that the prototypes of the present biblical books were written to preserve an experience—either personal or collective—that the people who did the writing valued as some form of divine disclosure. Something extraordinary, something inspirational triggered the prophets to speak and some also to write (or to let others write for them), and to speak and write in such a way that their words were preserved, transmitted, redacted, and read again and again. The manifold religious experiences that shaped Israel as God’s people, and later the church are reflected in the various literary modes and genres used as deposits of God’s revelation. Among them, prophetic oracles, which form the preeminent element in Israel’s unique revelation history, regularly claim to be received directly from God either in the form of a vision or an audition, and although they often address a very specific situation in a given time and are directed to one or more persons in order to influence their actions immediately, they now appear in the Bible predominantly in larger collections of named prophets. Beyond the purely conservational aspect amply attested in ancient Near Eastern prophecy, the collecting and editing of the prophetic oracles into the books of the prophets as we have them now points to an understanding of these prophetic messages as transcending their original context. As Robert Wilson observes, “A prophet’s supporters believe that the prophet truly delivers a divine word.” But what happened when what the prophet foretold had come or not come to

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6. Historical narratives tell in predominantly descriptive terms how Israel experienced God’s election, guidance, judgment, and restoration in its history, whereas prescriptive genres dominate the Torah as well as prophetic and sapiential paraenesis. They relate to their readers various modes of divine disclosure that can be considered in terms of a hierarchy, from ultimately foundational and binding (the Torah as revealed on Mount Sinai) to counsel based on the study of natural phenomena in the wisdom literature, where personified and preexistent wisdom, which was God’s delight at the time of creation (Prov 8:22–31), guarantees the relational and revelatory link to God (Prov 8:32–36). The responsive genres (psalms, prayers, laments, and liturgies) enable direct encounter with the divine from the side of the human partner that can lead to new understandings and, as a result, to new writings.

pass? Could one not discard the written record, if there ever was one, because
the file was somehow closed? Martti Nissinen affirms this on the basis of the
evidence available from outside Israel. He relates that “only exceptionally part
of the prophetic process of communication” took place in written form, and
when this was the case, “the written document was not necessarily filed in the
archives, at any rate not for long-term preservation.” He points out that “the
huge process of collecting, editing, and interpreting prophecy that took place
as a part of the formation of the Hebrew Bible is virtually without precedent
elsewhere in the ancient Near East.”

Bernard Levinson makes a similar point when he criticizes Biblical Studies
for not giving enough attention to “the remarkable issue” that isolated pro-
phetic oracles “developed altogether” into Scripture and, finally, a canonical
collection in a way that could not be foreseen. He concedes that, “in isolation,
almost all the individual phenomena that we associate with the Bible in indi-
vidual terms are already present in cuneiform literature.” But after listing these
common elements he concludes:

But in the ancient Near East, none of this material ever came together to form
anything like a scripture, either with its distinctive textual features, like the dense
weave of inter-textual connections that hold the separate parts together, let alone
with its distinctive ideological features, such as the truth claims it mounts, the
extraordinary demands for adherence it requires from its audience to uphold the

8. M. Nissinen, Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East, SBLWAW 12 (At-
lanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 4–5, and 98 on the Nineveh Oracles. All of the
29 individual oracles relate to the two kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal, who seemed to
be the only kings of Assyria “who purposefully let prophecies . . . be filed away,” probably
because “they were more attentive to prophecy than any of their predecessors.” See also
idem, “Spoken, Written, Quoted, and Invented: Orality and Writtenness in Ancient Near
Eastern Prophecy,” in Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy,
ed. E. Ben Zvi and M. H. Floyd, SBLSymS 10 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000),
235–71, who discusses evidence for immediate written accounts of prophetic appearances
(pp. 242–48). See also M. J. de Jong, Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets:
A Comparative Study of the Earliest Stages of the Isaiah Tradition and the Neo-Assyrian
Prophecies, VTSup 117 (Leiden: Brill, 2007). He also points out that “evidence for ancient
Near Eastern prophecy comes from royal correspondence, royal archives and steles,” which
explains the topical relationship with kingship, although this is “not necessarily representa-
tive of all prophecy” (p. 183). The point to make, however, is that these prophecies, be they
to the king or in relation to other persons and affairs, had no lasting transmission history and
survived only as archaeological artefacts. This is the key difference from the biblical texts,
which represent an uninterrupted transmission that began with their original textualization,
most likely in the immediate context of and closely related to the prophet who initially for-
mulated the message. De Jong’s study also provides a helpful summary of the relevant texts
(pp. 171–88).

9. Nissinen, Prophets and Prophecy, 5; see also Jeremias, “Schriftprophetie,” 95–96,
103–5.
demands it seeks to place upon them, or the polemics it makes opposing competing ideologies.¹⁰

One can think of more than one reason for this exceptional status, but prominence should be given to the possibility that the community who knew and believed these prophecies somehow concluded that their meaning was “not exhausted by a single fulfilment.”¹¹ Hence, for the beginning of the prophetic collections and books, one should not look to the temple or the royal court but to those who accepted the prophetic messages as genuinely being God’s word to his people, and it is prudent to follow James Crenshaw and others who argue for a group of disciples as the main and initial preservers and transmitters of a prophet’s heritage, from which a reception history could emerge.¹²

The ability to create meaning and to attract faith and obedience (and a resulting support in terms of time, means, and devotion) beyond its immediate historical context (or Sitz im Leben) is the key requirement for a religious message on the road to canonicity. In the biblical texts (and in other revelation-based belief-systems as well), the reference point that allows an individual to call others into obedience is “the word of God.” This is said to have been experienced by the prophet in the form of a divinely given vision, hearing, summoning, or action that transcends everyday experience in such a way that the one to whom it was given could not escape its consequences (cf. Isa 6:1–8; Jer 1:6–9; 11:21; 15:10ff.; 17:15–16; 20:7ff.; Ezek 2:1ff.; Amos 3:8; 7:15). The late Erich Zenger wrote in one of his last publications: “Biblical religion is not an imagination of the divine, but the reception of history as word, listening to the speech of prophetic women and men, and attention to the instruction of the priests and the teachers of wisdom.”¹³

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¹¹ Wilson, “Scribal Culture,” 106: “The Isaiah Community seems to have taken this belief [that the prophet “truly delivers a divine word’] one step further. They seem to have believed that First Isaiah’s prophecies were eternally true and were not exhausted by a single fulfillment.” See also my “Scripture,” 305–6. In contrast to the biblical transmission history, prophetic texts preserved on cuneiform tablets never became part of a canon or a Scripture-like collection and were seemingly never used as guidance for a religiously motivated community that was unconnected to their original addressee or context.


¹³ E. Zenger, “‘If You Listen to My Voice . . .’” (Exodus 19:5): The Mystery of Revelation,” in The Bible as a Human Witness to Divine Revelation: Hearing the Word of God
Hearing and responding as a people to what was received as God’s word can therefore be taken as the key to Israel’s written heritage in the Hebrew Bible, which relates itself throughout to this initial revelatory experience. Zenger makes another important observation: “The truth that biblical religion is a religion of hearing is expressed with prophetic force when cultic sacrifices, the fundamental acts of ancient piety, are devalued, and even rejected, in favour of the demand for hearing.” It is therefore worthwhile when looking at Israel’s Scriptures not only to look for analogies in surrounding cultures but also to identify the peculiarities of the Hebrew Bible, which is theologically but also historically not “a book among books” but “the book above books.”

One important difference between the biblical prophets and their ancient Near Eastern “colleagues,” in addition to those already mentioned, is their seeking of a large audience and wide publicity: they do not predominantly address individuals such as the king (see, for example, 1 Sam 22:5; 2 Sam 12:7; Isa 38:1; Hag 2:21) but often seek to address—ideally—all people (Isa 1:3–4; 2:1; 5:3; 6:9; 30:9–10; Jer 7:1–2, 25; 25:2; 26:5, 8; 28:1ff.; 38:1; 43:1; 44:24; Hos 4:1; 14:2; Joel 2:16; Amos 3:1; 5:1; 7:15–16; Hag 1:2–3; Zech 5:4–5) or all the inhabitants of a city (1 Kgs 22:10, Jer 25:2; Jonah 3:4; Mic 5:1; Neh 6:7; see also Isa 1:10). This understanding is rooted in the covenant between Israel and Yhwh, which included “all Israel” and laid the covenantal obligations on all Israel (Exod 19:17; 20:18–22; 34:32; 35:1; Deut 1:1; 4:44; 5:1; 29:1–2; Joshua 23–24).

As a consequence, all Israel was summoned to obey God’s commandments. Accordingly, the prophets laid the blame for breaking the covenant on the people as a whole (Judg 6:7–10; 2 Kgs 17:13ff.; Isa 5:7; 30:9; Jer 5: 7:25–31; 44:4–6; Zeph 1; Dan 9:6; 2 Chr 14:19–20), even though sometimes the leaders of Israel were addressed specifically (e.g., Isa 7:3, 13; 28:1–6, 7–13; Hos 5:1; Amos 4:1; Joel 1:2; Mic 3:1; see also Jer 8:1–3). They were addressed—publicly—because they represented Israel and were responsible for its spiritual well-being. That all people were judged in relation to Yhwh is another distinctive feature that separates Israel’s prophecy from its ancient Near Eastern parallels. The prophetic announcements could be further accompanied by symbolic actions in public (e.g., Isa 20:1–6; Jer 19:1–15; 27:1–2; Ezek 4:4–8) and symbolic names given to their children (Isa 7:3, 14; 8:1–3; Hos 1:4, 6, 9).

The fair number of hints regarding written public messages are also closely related to these attempts to reach and address the whole nation. Though the biblical references are far from being unequivocal (Isa 8:1–2; 38:9; Hab 2:2; through Historically Dissimilar Traditions, ed. R. Heskett and B. Irwin, LHBOTS 469 (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010), 15–31 (esp. p. 18).)

14. Ibid., 19, with reference to 1 Sam 15:22–23b; Amos 5:21–24; Jer 7:21–24; Qoh 4:17–5:1, 6; to which can be added Isa 1:11–15; Hos 12:12; and Amos 4:4–5.
see also Deut 27:2–3; Jer 17:1; 51:60–62; Dan 5:5), 17 there is archaeological evidence especially from Israel—with the Book of Balaam serving as an example from its immediate geographical neighborhood—that confirms the public display of prophetic texts even away from the main temple and the capital:

- The Book of Balaam, written on plaster at the entrance of a building, which was discovered in 1967 in Deir Alla (Jordan), bears the superscription: “Book of [B]alaam, [son of Beo]r, seer of the gods” and contains the description of a vision and the reception of an oracle given to the seer by the god El. This inscription dates to about 800–750 B.C.E. and is evidence of written testimonies of a divine disclosure. 18 There is some discussion about the nature of the building, because nothing points to a religious context besides the inscription. As one of the excavators, G. van der Kooij writes, “The building remains show no indication of cultic use. On the other hand, the quarters excavated do have a domestic and an industrial and commercial character.” 19 The cultic interpretation seems to be favored mainly because of a preconceived judgment that prophetic texts have their place only in temples. 20

- Evidence from Kuntillet ʿAjrud (Ḥorvat Teman), located roughly halfway between Beer-Sheva and Eilat, from around the same time as Deir Alla provides evidence of the public display of a text describing an epiphany of Yahweh (or another deity) who is designated bʿl (lord) in the form of a prophetic oracle. 21

17. See van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 179–81. On Isa 38:9 (and also Psalms 57–59), see Zevit, *Ancient Israel*, 365–66, who sees evidence that “psalms and prayers of a public nature may have been inscribed on steles for public display” (p. 365). The Zakkur Stele (see n. 18) would then be the closest parallel to Isa 38:9.

18. See van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 175–76; van der Toorn mentions further an Assyrian dream report about the sun-god Sin’s warning of a plot against the king, which he accepts as attesting “the phenomenon of written prophecy displayed in a public place” (p. 181). This illustrates that it “was not totally foreign in the ancient Near East” to publish a prophecy by way of “a display inscription” (p. 180). Further pieces of evidence for such a praxis are the Amman Citadel inscription, publishing an oracle delivered in the name of Milcom, and the Zakkur Stele, which is a public report of a ruler’s prayer to Baalshamayn and the answer he received through “seers.” For these texts, see C.-L. Seow, “West Semitic Sources,” in *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, ed. M. Nissinen, SBLWAW 12 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 201–18 (esp. pp. 202–7; on Deir Alla, see pp. 207–12).

19. G. van der Kooij, “Deir ‘Alla, Tell,” *NEAEHL* 1.338–42 (esp. p. 341), where a facsimile of the plaster inscription can also be found; a very detailed description and commentary are also presented in Zevit, *Ancient Israel*, 370–405.

20. See as an example the argument in Weippert, *Palästina in vorhellenistischer Zeit*, 626–27 (on Kuntillet ‘Ajrud [see also n. 21], see pp. 625–26).

21. Z. Meshel, “Teman, Ḥorvat.” *NEAEHL* 4.1458–64, describes the site as a “wayside shrine” (p. 1463); on the inscriptions, see pp. 1461–62; and now S. Ahituv, E. Eshel, and Z. Meshel, “The Inscriptions,” in *Kuntillet ʿAğrud (Horvat Teman): An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border*, ed. Z. Meshel (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2012), 73–142. For a critical rereading and discussion of three of them, on which is a description of a theophany (= inscription 4.2), see E. Blum, “Die Wandinschriften 4.2 und 4.6 sowie die Pithos-Inschrift 3.9 aus Kuntillet ʿ Ağrud,” *ZDPV* 129 (2013): 21–54 (for understanding baʿal, see p. 28 n. 22). Blum interprets inscription 4.2 as “die Ankündigung der göttlichen Hilfe in einer die Natur erschütternden Theophanie mittels eines wie auch im-
Again, the text—written in ink on wall plaster and located in the center of the entryway to a building with unknown function (fortress, cultic shrine, way station for perambulating merchants?)—is preserved only in fragments, and the readings are disputed. But there is no doubt that texts similar to what can now be found in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible were written on a wall to be read by the few who sought shelter in this desolate place. The site revealed over 50 inscriptions, and about 30 of them contain more than just one or two letters. Most famous among them are those that refer to “YHWH of Teman/Shomron and his ashera,” inscribed on the rims of large decorated pithoi (the famous Pithos A and B).

- Zioni Zevit, in his highly informative chapter “Writ on Rock—Script on Stone” mentions further a Hebrew ink-on-rock inscription in a cave in the Judean Desert, near En-gedi, that was discovered by P. Bar-Adon in 1974. It is dated to around 700 B.C.E. and contains a blessing and a curse that seem to be connected to Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem in 701. The echoes within the very fragmented text of Isaiah’s words against Assur (Isa 10:7–8; 30:31) cause Zevit “to speculate fancifully” that the inscription may be a “commentary on an oracle heard by its author in Jerusalem before the Assyrian siege.”

- The tomb inscription from Khirbet el-Qom seems to commemorate the successful intercession of a prophet or mantic before YHWH for the benefit of the person interred in this tomb.

- The newly found Hazon Gabriel, which might be dated to the late 1st century B.C.E. is also an ink-on-stone inscription that once decorated a wall in a large chamber. The text repeatedly contains the phrase “Thus said the Lord of Hosts” and similar expressions (lines 11, 13, 17–18, etc.), and it speaks about “prophets” that the Lord sent to his people (lines 69–70). Yardeni and Elizur characterize the inscription as “a collection of short prophecies dictated to a scribe, in a manner similar to prophecies appearing in the Hebrew Bible,” although the language used “sounds more like Mishnaic Hebrew than Biblical Hebrew.”

This impressive list supports the main point: there is evidence, inside the Bible and outside of it, that literary documents based on and documenting revelatory experiences were produced from the 8th to the 1st century B.C.E.

Historians of the genesis of the biblical texts cannot therefore ignore the very
experience that stands at the beginning of these texts and confine themselves to the redactional process alone. These texts—to which can also be added La-
chisch Ostracon 3 mentioning a prophetic oracle—leave no doubt that pro-
phetic oracles and divine disclosures played an important role throughout the 
revelatory history of Israel and that they were not confined to Jerusalem and 
the temple. It is also evident that these oracles were put into writing using 
literary forms that were similar to those found in the Hebrew Bible and were 
obviously in chronological proximity to the pertinent events. The notion of 
revelation as invention in the scribal workshop centuries after the presumed 
lifetime of the prophets cannot be accounted for given the available evidence. 
In particular, it does not explain why the priestly scribes would have invented 
prophetic voices that were regularly so critical of their own profession.

The following approach to the phenomenon of revelatory experiences as 
the beginning of Scripture confines itself to the question what happened? and 
requires a willingness to accept that a certain message is based on what was 
once experienced as divine revelation. In addition to biblical examples, the 
history of religion in the past and present provides ample analogies of indi-
viduals who claim that they have received some form of divine, transempiri-
cal instruction or knowledge and as a result preached and/or wrote books to 
describe and preserve what they experienced. In the same way, one also must 
accept the possibility that in some cases these revelatory experiences allowed 
people to express things that were beyond the knowledge available to them 
through their upbringing, education, and cultural and intellectual context. As 
a biblical example, one might think of the prophet Amos, who most likely 
had no literary or priestly education (Amos 7:14: “I am not a prophet, and I 
am not a prophet’s disciple” [JPS]) but stands chronologically as the first in 
the line of the “Schriftpropheten” and is commemorated as the inaugurator 
of a prophetic book under his name that displays astonishing rhetorical force. 
Although there is no consensus about which parts of the book can be traced to 
the historical Amos, many scholars assume that the core of the two visionary

25. Lachish Ostracon 3, lines 20–21, where a subaltern officer quotes in a letter to his 
commander another letter written by a prophet sending a one-word warning. Johannes Renz 
notes that the one word quote should not be seen as the whole content of the letter, but rather 
its beginning or a key sentence of its content, see Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik I: 
Die althebräischen Inschriften, vol. 1: Text und Kommentar (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche 
Buchgesellschaft, 1995), 419 n. 1. The text is also found in Seow, “West Semitic Sources,” 
212–15. Van der Toorn regards the Lachish ostraca as “copies of letters written on papyrus,” 
which were kept by the sender (Scribal Culture, 181), and it seems likely that similar archi-
val conventions can also be presupposed for the prophets. Like the officers who need proof 
of sending the required information, so the prophets would need to have proof of what they 
said in the name of God. Given the fact that these oracles were often of a political nature and 
that competing prophecies occurred, prophets could easily find themselves accused of sup-
porting the wrong side, and for such instances it might have been necessary to keep a copy as 
security against false allegations in conflicts with other prophets or as part of court intrigues.
cycles in chs. 1–2 and 7–9 form the oldest part of the book, clearly indicating that a visionary call experience (7:15; see 1:1–2; 3:7–8; 4:13) stands at the beginning, followed by further divine disclosures (7:1, 4, 7; 8:1; 9:1). Or, as Jörg Jeremias wrote in the preface to his commentary: “Wer dem historischen Amos begegnen will, sollte am ehesten bei der Lektüre der Visionen einsetzen.”

What is impossible to decide through historical inquiry is the veracity of such a claim. But acknowledging the historical problem of the inaccessibility of a past prophetic experience does not necessarily lead to the reductionists’ conclusion that the claim to be “divine revelation” is nothing more than the “construct of the Hebrew scribes,” as van der Toorn suggests. According to him, the priestly scribes responsible for the prophetic books invoked “the revelation paradigm” and by doing so claimed for their texts the status of divine revelation—but only “when written texts supplant[ed] the oral tradition as the principal source of authority and the main channel of information.” Van der Toorn holds this to be mainly a postexilic development with its earliest traces related to Jeremiah and his time. His argument is that, as long as the transmission of prophetic lore and divine rights were mainly oral, the priests and scribes had an unchallengeable authority about the religious tradition, because only they knew it, and without their treasured memories no certain knowledge about divine matters was possible. As a consequence, van der Toorn minimizes early written records of prophetic messages. He acknowledges the existence of “prophetic collections in the monarchic period” but assumes that they were “considerably smaller” and, due to “the impression of incoherence and disorder,” rather more like “anthologies and compilations of quite heterogeneous materials” and therefore not “‘the master plan of a single creative mind.’”

26. See the discussion in E. Zenger, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1998), 489–92; and more recently T. S. Hadjie, *The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos*, BZAW 393 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), who concludes that no “clear distinction can be maintained between Amos and his ‘disciples’ who wrote down his words. We know Amos only through the portrait painted for us by his followers.” He continues by stating that “this portrait follows in basic outline the original contours of the figure of the historical prophet” and that “there is not sufficient evidence to deny to Amos any of the major themes found in the book” (p. 208). The core of the book was written and brought together from two originally independent scrolls of Amos-words (written before 722) into one document in the 7th century.

27. J. Jeremias, *Der Prophet Amos*, 3rd ed., ATD 24/2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), ix. See also P. Riede, *Vom Erbarmen zum Gericht: Die Visionen des Amosbuches (Am 7–9*) und ihr literatur- und traditionsgeschichtlicher Zusammenhang*, WMANT 120 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2008), who claims that the visionary accounts are chronologically closely related to the historical prophet.


29. Ibid., 177, quoting William McKane, “Prophecy and Prophetic Literature,” in *Tradition and Interpretation: Essays by the Members of the Society for Old Testament Study,*
Van der Toorn also discusses at length the ancient Near Eastern parallels to written reports of prophetic oracles, which were made immediately after their reception through the prophet or prophetess, but this evidence can be used very differently from his own analysis. In the rare instances where multiple versions of the same revelatory event have been preserved, van der Toorn tends to over-interpret the differences in the wording of these logged oracles to prove that “scribal interpretation” changed the message, whereas one could instead point to the astonishing similarity of the different reports to underline their accuracy. Their differences do not go beyond those evident within the synoptic tradition or Luke’s three versions of the same narrative of Paul’s Damascus experience (see below). The transcript of an oral message would in most cases have led to certain changes and those who wrote (who I doubt were always professional scribes) would have adapted it “to suit the conventions of the written genre,” although this is not the same as inventing revelation.

Van der Toorn further claims “that the prophetic collections of the Bible are basically compilations of separate oracles” and that therefore “the context of the collection is secondary to the separate oracle record.” Surely no one wants to disagree with this observation, but does this prove that the compilers invented revelation? They sorted it and integrated individual elements in a wider narrative to enhance the intelligibility of the given oracle. But this is not necessarily a distortion of the original meaning, because often the full meaning of a message (or a historical event, or a life’s worth) becomes visible only from hindsight. Integration into larger contexts therefore does not necessarily mean the loss of the original meaning but might lead to the gaining of a wider meaning. While van der Toorn uses this to demonstrate that the result of the scribal work is in the end an invented revelation, one can also draw the theological conclusion that through this process the original revelations are contextualized within the ongoing salvation history of God and his people, which is at the same time a history of divine revelation.

Revelatory experiences are mostly of a very private and individual nature, and the details of the circumstances are seldom recorded and even more rarely witnessed by others. In the case of the Apostle Paul, we hear about his visionary experiences mainly because he was required to defend his authority, and even then he resorted to extreme brevity (Gal 1:12; 2:2; 1 Cor 9:8; 15:8; see also 1 Cor 14:6, 18–19; Eph 3:3) or even distancing 3rd-person language.


31. Ibid., 125–41. See also my “Scripture,” 305.
Paul’s Letters and the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible

(2 Cor 12:1–7). The most detailed report about his vision of the risen Christ is in Acts, where Luke inserts three slightly differing versions into his narrative (Acts 9:1–7; 22:3–16; 26:12–18, see also Acts 16:9–10; 18:9). That we do not have more biographical details about the prophets and the circumstances of their revelatory experiences seems to me, not proof of a predominantly literary production unaffected by any “real” prophetic experience with the divine (as, for example, Philip Davies thinks), but quite the opposite. 32

The compilers of the books in the name of a given prophet did not make up stories to fill existing gaps in knowledge or to satisfy biographic curiosity. They confined themselves to the task of collecting and editing (rather conservatively) the available material. The often enigmatic brevity of prophetic texts, the lack of a narrative context for many oracles, and the presence of very few details about how they actually experienced their auditions or visions is much harder to explain in the case of a purely literary phenomenon than in a collection of divine disclosures whose contours were limited in their content, focus, and clarity according to what was revealed. Hence, if these texts are allowed to be in the first place what they claim to be—namely, the deposit and summation of revelatory experiences (which does not mean that they truly were divine disclosures but only that they were firmly believed to be so by others and treated accordingly)—there is less pressure to explain their “incoherence and disorder” 33 and other “strange” elements on the basis of either a sophisticated literary theory or a creative redactional process that allows for freely “inventing revelation.” 34 If the prophetic books were purely and predominantly the result of such professional scribal activities, would we not expect “better” books, which indeed would display “the master plan of a single creative mind” (or a well-organized literary guild), the absence of which van der Toorn demonstrates? 35

It is therefore ultimately much more likely and in line with what the texts themselves claim that at their core stands an “inspired” individual rather than a professional clerk, scribe, bureaucrat, or other religious functionary. This person formulated the essence of what he saw, heard, or otherwise experienced as divine disclosure with the rhetorical and literary means within his reach. Most likely these would have included certain preconceptions based on the already available prophetic traditions, which might have helped and formed to a certain degree the recording of what was revealed. Historians of religion need not appreciate or regard these divine encounters as binding in any way, but they would do well to adopt a certain readiness to consider them as reflecting an

33. Van der Toorn, Scribal Culture, 177.
34. Ibid., 205ff.
35. See above, n. 29.
actual revelatory experience that was a subjective, formative historical cause. If we accept the above—namely, that revelatory experiences are formative historical causes—then the following options seem to be valid:

(1) The prophet (that is, any person who claims to be delivering a message whose content s/he regards as divinely revealed specifically to him/her) did indeed have a revelatory experience in the form of an audition, vision, or some other form of encounter with what s/he regards as divine; all actions as a result of this encounter (certain deeds or proclamations) need to be understood by the observing historian as part of the resulting binding obligation felt by the prophet; s/he acts in good faith, and this may influence the subsequent historical development of his/her message. Thus the personal conviction of being called by the divine cannot be ignored by the historian from the outset, even though it is impossible to examine the veracity of this basic experience critically. Decisive for the historical process, however, is whether this message was believed to be true and accordingly put into action.

(2) The second option is that the revelatory claim was made up based on already-existing models accepted in a given cultural and religious context. The moment any prophet is successful in his claim that God has spoken to him and people accept his message as a “word of God,” others will use this


37. See Nissinen, Prophets and Prophecy, 1, who defines prophecy as the “human transmission of allegedly divine messages” that were obtained by a non-inductive form of divination; that is, “prophets—like dreamers and unlike astrologers or haruspices—do not employ methods based on systematic observations and their scholarly interpretation, but act as direct mouthpieces of gods whose messages they communicate.”
same method to gain influence or authority. So, from the beginning, any true “word of God” would be followed by those who imitated its style and genre for their own ends. This might be done in good will and with honest intentions to support a cause regarded as good or important, but it might also be misused for making a living or business. That the biblical authors were aware of this problem is illustrated by the texts that advise discernment between true and false prophets and also in the conflict stories between court prophets and the independent prophets whose authority rested on their charismatic gifts.38

Where the work of the historian ends, the task of the theologian is not yet finished. A theological examination is not only interested in the subjective persuasion of the “prophet” to be summoned by God but also in knowing whether this revelatory experience should be regarded as genuine divine disclosure or not. The theological question is not the topic of this essay but is nevertheless worth mentioning, because the historical process of canonization cannot be understood without it. A text that claims to contain the “word of God” receives the status of Scripture or of being canonical for a community only when its members are convinced that this claim is true. In other words, people in the past made theological judgments about the authenticity of a revelatory event, and their validation (whatever the contemporary historian or theologian thinks about it) determined the impact of the initial revelatory event.

Only after a validation of this sort would a community be prepared to accept the event as a “word of God” (which can include redactional adaptations to already-existing Scriptures) and, as a result, incorporate it into their personal and communal spiritual life. This most likely happened (if it happened at all) gradually, after something professed to be a divinely inspired message was written down for the first time, although the element of writing does imply a strong desire to preserve the “word of Yhwh” from the outset.

But before the message was fully recognized within a larger community, a centuries-long period of time might go by. This is acknowledged in some of the prophetic books when the futility of the prophets’ preaching and the failure to elicit obedience to their message from the addressees were openly conceded. However, this was not regarded as the falsification of the prophets’ words but was attributed to the people’s sin. The message was nevertheless regarded as

38. Most notable is the story of Micaiah ben Imlah against the 400 prophets of Ahab (1 Kgs 22:5–28 // 2 Chr 18:4–27), with the recounting of Micaiah’s vision of God sitting on his throne in the center. See also the conflict between Jeremiah and his prophet colleague Hananiah (Jeremiah 27–28), where it is clear that the prophets saw themselves as part of an enduring line of tradition (28:8–9; compare with Deut 13:1–5; 18:15–22). See also J. L. Crenshaw, Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect upon Israelite Religion, BZAW 124 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971). A comparable phenomenon in the New Testament is the issue of fake letters (which makes sense only in a context in which letters by certain figures, such as Paul were already treated as authoritative); see 2 Thess 2:2, see also Acts 15:24; 2 Cor 3:1.
true and in need of preservation to prove God’s sovereignty when it had come to pass. Hence, means were taken to preserve it until the “appointed time” (Hab 2:3, Ps 102:14; Dan 8:19). However, during this process—from initial writing to full recognition as canonical—the text must have been held in high regard in certain circles; otherwise, it would not have survived. In another article, I pointed out the implications of this for our understanding of a “word of God” as becoming Scripture:

One has to keep in mind that in antiquity, every message or piece of knowledge that was intended to outlive its progenitor needed a support group willing and able to provide the required means to preserve the message and pass it on to a future generation. This would have implied very often not just a mechanical act of preservation or transmission but also the additional labour of adaptation and interpretation. This is true for any kind of text, and certainly also for religious ones. Regarding the latter, their support is based on their achievements within a religious community that was willing in the first place to accept the message and claim of the respective texts. If texts that claimed to be divinely authorized messages were not supported long enough and did not make it into a form of enduring communal reception, they would lose their initial impact if there was any and fall into oblivion. The final stage of communal acceptance within the Jewish-Christian tradition was to become part of those texts that were regarded as scriptural and, therefore, fit to be used in the worship of the respective communities.

The transformation of a revelatory experience into a text and from there into Scripture presupposes that a written product of one or more individuals at a given time has gained religious authority within Israel, or at least a large enough and cross-generational community within it. The authority, function, and impact of these texts are then no longer directly linked in chronological and geographical terms with the circumstances that initially led to their creation. In this process, the following elements need to be taken into account:

39. See Jeremias, “Schriftprophetie,” 101–2: The refusal of the prophetic message led to writing, the main task of which was to function “als der Garant der Wahrheit eines Gotteswortes bis zu seiner Bestätigung durch den Verlauf der Geschichte.”

40. The Deuteronomistic interest in fulfilled prophecy, which is evidenced by 58 recorded fulfillments, is another way to indicate that what is not yet fulfilled will come true as surely as the other words spoken by God’s prophets; for a full list and discussion of these texts, see Zevit, Ancient Israel, 481–89.

41. Deines, “The Term and Concept of Scripture,” 300, see also Crenshaw, “Transmitting Prophecy.” For a list of forgotten books mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, see L. Martin McDonald, “Canon,” in The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies, ed. J. W. Rogerson and J. Lieu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 777–809 (esp. p. 785), where he also mentions that “the survivability of the ancient scriptures had much to do with their ability to be interpreted afresh in new communities and new circumstances.” Lucky finds of ancient collections of literature such as the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Nag Hammadi texts, which have a scriptural character and partly laid claim to divine authority/inspiration, sometimes obscure the fact that these writings had already lost their support group in antiquity.

42. See for a similar list Crenshaw, “Transmitting Prophecy,” 37.
1. A conviction that one has a divine message to communicate (“word of God to . . .”)
2. An audience who is willing to receive such a message as “divine” (“word of God through . . .”)
3. A memorable and transmittable (most-likely written) stabilization of the “divine” message
4. An audience who is willing to believe and respond to it with action/life/faith (the preserved text as a deposit of the “divine” word by which the community or part of it lives)
5. A continuous transmission and (if necessary) adaptation of the received “divine” message (at which point professional scribes might be involved); status of “Scripture”
6. Integration into a larger collection/corpus of sacred texts (proto-canonization; this can happen from stage 3 onward)  
7. Acknowledgment as part of a canon

Pace van der Toorn and others, it immediately seems much more likely that the initial steps (which can vary from book to book) are not the result of an institutionally controlled or regulated process of production or selection but a rather fluid, seemingly contingent development that made some texts (and the groups behind these texts) into winners in the long term and others into losers in the process of canonical development. My interest is focused on the question of what factors placed a “divine” message on the road to victory and finally turned it into Scripture. The intriguing element in this process is that, during the formative centuries, for the production of Scripture no formal institutions either in Jewish or Christian culture had the authority or power to inaugurate or guarantee this sort of development. Neither the temple in Jerusalem nor any bishop or synod in the first three centuries of the Christian era had the means to “make” a Bible. Religious hierarchies cannot enforce or uphold a

43. This is the phase when innerbiblical interpretation starts to become a discernible object for the onlooking historian, although I assume that this process began even earlier; see my “Scripture,” 302. The classic study is still M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); a helpful research review can be found in B. M. Levinson, *Der kreative Kanon: Innerbiblische Schriftauslegung und religionsgeschichtlicher Wandel im alten Israel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), which is based on (but not identical to) idem, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); see also B. Ego, “Biblical Interpretation—Yes or No? Some Theoretical Considerations,” in *What Is Bible?* ed. K. Finsterbusch and A. Lange, CBET 67 (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 53–62.

44. Differently, for example, A. van der Kooij, “Authoritative Scriptures and Scribal Culture,” in *Authoritative Scriptures in Ancient Judaism*, ed. M. Popović, JSJSup 141 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 55–71, who defines the starting point for a text’s becoming Scripture: “A given set of books were considered authoritative because they were ancestral/ancient, were kept in the temple and were worthy of study.” He also claims that these texts were regarded as authoritative because the “the appropriate authorities—the scholar scribes” had studied them
message as “divine” as easily as van der Toorn assumes, especially not when it is connected with judgment and doom. As Jeremias points out, the refusal of the prophets in Israel is largely due to the novelty and unpopularity of their message for the people, not just the ruling elite.\textsuperscript{45}

Van der Toorn, however, claims that “the Bible was born and studied in the scribal workshop of the temple” and was in its fundamental essence “a book of the clergy.”\textsuperscript{46} This might be true for a book like Chronicles and most likely also for most of the various stages that lead to the Pentateuch, but is it convincing for a book like Amos? The scathing remarks in Amos against cultic worship (e.g., Amos 4:4–5; 5:21–23, 25; 7:9), even if they are directed against the sanctuaries in Israel and not the temple in Jerusalem, inevitably threaten the temple as well (see 6:1: Zion and Samaria are mentioned in parallelism). In addition, true religious authority lies with the prophets and not with any religious functionary (cf. 7:14–15; 3:7). The prophets receive the true and powerful word of God (7:15–17), and they—not the priests—act as successful intercessors to avert divine punishment (7:1–6). How likely is it that a priestly hierarchy would promote its own antagonists?\textsuperscript{47}

Established religious hierarchies nearly always and everywhere suffer from a loss of credibility as the unavoidable result of the fact that they are legitimized and established—which often also includes being paid—for their religious duties or services. And the authority of those who receive a payment or reward for loyalty to a higher cause can potentially be compromised because there is inevitably a suspicion that they are doing what they do to protect their own prestigious position. Hence official or institutional religious legitimacy is, in prophetic religions such as Judaism and Christianity, regularly counterbalanced and most often also preceded by a charismatic legitimacy that is individual, nonhereditary, unpaid, and often even persecuted by the institutionalized religious authorities. The beginning of Scripture was therefore not a religious institution or a group of priests and professional scribes striving for power by inventing a holy book. When such phenomena occur, it is more likely due to later developments that use or misuse an already-existing belief system.

From the Prophets of the Hebrew Bible to the Witnesses of Jesus

It is obvious that tracing the beginning of the development from revelation to canon in historical terms is hindered by the inaccessibility of these events or the effects that they had on the recipients and their target audiences. The

(p. 70). This might be true for the 3rd century, but it does not explain how these books came into being in the first place and endured long enough to become ancestral/ancient.

46. Van der Toorn, Scribal Culture, 2.
suggestion made in the following is to bridge this gap by approximating this phenomenon through yet another analogy that is historically relatively well documented. I want to offer—in a context dominated by scholarship on the Hebrew Bible—some insights from the New Testament writings into the self-understanding of those who claim to have “a word of God” to communicate as the result of a revelatory divine event.

These testimonies are chronologically separated from the Hebrew prophets by many centuries, but they share a common “theology.” Many New Testament figures and authors related their experience and teaching to the Hebrew Bible in such a way that they conceived themselves as continuing the work of the prophets by writing a new chapter in this ongoing history of God with his people.48 In order to do so, they did not look for religious and scribal professionals or for institutional support from priests or the temple (whose authorities were, in any case, opposed to them, as they were similarly opposed to the prophets of old). The authors of the New Testament themselves were not priests, professional scribes (although Paul and probably a few others had received some formal education with regard to Hebrew Scriptures), members of any distinct religious class or society, and most if not all of them were not members of any literate elite group. They were, as far as we know, rather average authors and, from the time of Origen at the latest, Christian writers had to defend the relatively poor style of the New Testament writings against the derision of their pagan readers.49 Origen defends their style with these words *(Contra Celsum 1.62)*:

I affirm in reply to this that to people who can study the question about Jesus’ apostles intelligently and reasonably it will appear that these men taught Christianity by divine power (δυνάμει θείῃ ἐδίδασκον οὗτοι τὸν χριστιανισὸν) and succeeded in bringing many to obey the word of God (τῷ λόγῳ τοῦ θεοῦ). For in them there was no power of speaking or of giving an ordered narrative by the standards of Greek dialectical or rhetorical arts which convinced the hearers. It seems to me that if Jesus had chosen some men who were wise in the eyes of the multitudes, and who were capable of thinking and speaking acceptably to crowds, and if he had used them as the means of propagating his teaching, he might on very good grounds have been suspected of making use of a method similar to that of philosophers who are leaders of some particular sect. The truth of the claim that his teaching is divine would no longer have been self-evident (οὐκέτα ἡ περὶ τοῦ θείου εἶναι τὸν λόγον ἐπαγγελία ἀνεφαίνετο), in that the

48. This is the main topic of my article “Did Matthew Know He Was Writing Scripture?” (see n. 1). Since I published this article, a new book by M. J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013) has appeared, making a very similar argument; see especially pp. 67–78, 91–103, 119–54.

gospel and the preaching were in persuasive words of the wisdom that consists in literary style and composition. And the faith, like the faith of the philosophers of this world in their doctrines, would have been in the wisdom of men, and not in the power of God (cf. 1 Cor 1:18f.).

According to Origen, it is the “power of God” that stands behind the apostolic writings and makes them authoritative, not the persuasiveness of their authors and their rhetorical skills. It is interesting to see how the argument concerning poor literary quality was used in early form-critical studies and then also by Adolf Deissmann (who used contemporary nonliterary documents such as papyri to demonstrate that NT Greek belongs to standard koine Greek and is not a special language of the Holy Spirit) to downplay any literary interests among the first generation of Christian authors. As a consequence, this was then used as an argument against their thinking of themselves as authors of Scripture or of anything intended to last beyond its immediate purpose.

Nevertheless, the heritage of the first generation of Christian authors forms the foundation of the world’s largest religion, which has influenced children and geniuses, farmers and professors in all four corners of the earth. The Christian faith had no political support during its first 300 years, and afterward political support was won only in the Roman Empire. But its message swiftly reached territories way beyond the borders of Rome, and from there it continued its progress for many centuries without the help of institutional power. That the canonical process inside and outside the borders of the Roman Empire resulted in a more-or-less equally delineated corpus of writings is nothing short of a historical miracle, particularly considering the diversity of Christian communities and the rivalries and theological disputes among them. The very few books about which no agreement could be achieved do not undermine this overall picture but strengthen it, because they show that the various communities could make independent decisions.

The basic core of this message, the εὐαγγέλιον, was the conviction that the one God had spoken to the people of Israel through his son, who was therefore venerated as the “Logos” and “word of God made flesh.” The lasting deposit of this revelation and epiphany of God was thought to be contained in the writ-


51. See Kruger, *Question of Canon*, 81–82 on Franz Overbeck; and pp. 91–92 on Adolf Deissmann (1866–1933). On the latter, see also A. Gerber, *Deissmann the Philologist*, BZNW 171 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010).

52. Cf. John 1:1ff.; Ps.-Justin, *Oratio ad Graecos* 5, where the author of this apology repeatedly refers to the “divine logos” as the one who teaches and guides him and, through him, also invites others to be guided by the logos (for the text, see Fiedrowicz, *Christen und Heiden*, 54).
ings we now have in the New Testament. Its authors claim, in various ways, that they are reporting a divine revelation. But it is one thing to claim divine authority and another to find people who accept it. Acceptance of a message as having divine authority is beyond the author’s influence, and at this time there was no authority available to enforce acceptance of the claim. Without active support within a community and through a community, any message claiming to be a word of God or revelation would vanish in time, either by being actively rejected or (and this may have happened much more often) by simply being ignored and therefore forgotten. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries, a large number of texts claimed to be the true or secret or hidden revelation of the words of Jesus or of some other founding figure in the Christian tradition. But these texts were not able to win enough enduring acceptance to survive. Their claim to be based on divine revelation failed to convince a large enough group to sustain them, and hence they fell into oblivion. This failure of some supposedly revealed literature is important to bear in mind because it documents the willingness of the ancients to discern critically. It is not easy to make people believe in a divine message, even though early on, in the 2nd century, the author Lucian of the Syrian city of Samosata (ca. 120–80 C.E.) mocked the followers of Jesus for their credulity.

Paul to the Thessalonians as a Case Study

In the remainder of this essay, I want to present one example from the New Testament, taken from the letters of the Apostle Paul, to illustrate how the claim of divine revelation influenced the writing and reception of Paul’s letters. This is just one example. I am convinced that it would be possible to demon-

53. For a statement from the perspective of a classic and rather liberal scholar, see H. Lietzmann, “Der Theolog und das Neue Testament,” in Kleine Schriften II: Studien zum Neuen Testament, ed. H. K. Aland, TU 68 (Berlin: Akademie, 1958), 3–8. For Lietzmann, the New Testament is the only way to approach God’s revelation in Jesus, and this is why the words of the authors of the New Testament are of prime importance for the Christian theologian, even if he is aware that any stabilization of the revelation in a text is necessarily a reduction of meaning and complexity. For Christians, the New Testament is not just a historic document but the source of the knowledge of God (“Quell der Gotteserkenntnis”). They engage with the authors of the New Testament because they expect God to talk to them through the biblical authors: “Er lauscht den Worten der Apostel, weil sie ihm von Gott predigen, von dem Gott, der heute wirkt wie vor aller Zeit, und er müht sich um die schärfste Erfassung ihrer Worte, weil er weiß, daß hier durch Menschenmund Gott selbst zu ihm spricht. So sind ihm die Sätze des Neuen Testaments nicht Zeugnisse der Vergangenheit, sondern Anruf des ewigen Gottes an ihn selbst in ständiger Gegenwart” (p. 7).

54. For references, see my “Did Matthew Know He Was Writing Scripture?” 107–8 n. 8.

55. M. Hengel, “Die ersten nichtchristlichen Leser der Evangelien,” Jesus und die Evangelien: Kleine Schriften V, WUNT 211 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 702–25 (esp. pp. 707–8), who discusses The Passing of Peregrinus (Peregrinus Proteus) and Philopseudes (Φιλοψευδῆς Ἄπιστόν, Lover of Lies or Cheater; Der Lügenfreund) as being partly based on Gospel stories.
strate that a good number of the writings in the New Testament were intended to be Scripture-like—in other words, that they wanted to provide testimony or to instruct their addressees on the basis of what the authors had experienced as God’s revelation in their own time. 56 They presented God’s revelation of himself in Jesus as a continuation of the way that he revealed himself in previous times through the prophets and other mediators. This explains not only why the New Testament authors used scriptural quotations so frequently to mark this continuation but also why they adopted—albeit quite freely—a biblical or scriptural style for their own writings. This also implies a certain awareness of the implications of testifying to the revelation of God through Jesus on a parallel with the prophetic witness, which is clearly illustrated by the opening verses of the Letter to the Hebrews (1:1–2):

1 Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατράσιν ἐν τοῖς προφήταις
2 ἐπ᾿ ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων ἐλάλησεν ἡμῖν ἐν υἱῷ, ὃν ἔθηκεν κληρονόμον πάντων, δι᾿ ὑμᾶς αἰώνας;

While God spoke many times and in varied ways in time past to the fathers through the prophets, in these last days he spoke to us by a/the son, whom he placed as heir of everything, through whom he also created the universe.

The notion and awareness of Jesus’ being the ultimate revelation of God for the last times can be taken as the default setting of the New Testament authors, even though they do not all express it as clearly as the unknown author of the Letter to the Hebrews.57


The Apostle Paul is the best known author of any of the New Testament writings, and he is the first one we can identify with certainty. He was not a follower of Jesus but was in Jerusalem during the short period of Jesus’ activity. It seems possible that he in some way or another encountered Jesus’ message, if not Jesus himself, given his persecution of his followers (Acts 8:1). His surprising move from foe to follower somewhere between 31 and 33 C.E. made him a kind of outsider among the earliest followers of Jesus, who became the nucleus of the communities formed in Jesus’ name. As a result, Paul had to defend his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ, and he did this with recourse to his call or conversion on the road to Damascus, which involved a revelatory experience in which he saw the risen Jesus in a vision. He based his authority as an apostle on this experience, as can be seen clearly from 1 Cor 9:1 in a context where this authority stood in question:

Οὐκ εἰμὶ ἐλεύθερος; οὐκ εἰμὶ ἀπόστολος; οὐχὶ Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν ἑόρακα;

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?

Later in 1 Corinthians, Paul refers back to the same event when he lists those to whom the risen Jesus appeared (1 Cor 15:3–11):

5 καὶ ὅτι ὃ ὁ πρῶτος ἡμῖν ἁγιώτατος ἦτα τοῖς δώδεκα· ὥσπερ ὁ πρῶτος ἡμῖν ἁγιώτατος ἦτα τοῖς δώδεκα·
8 ἔσχατον δὲ πάντων ὡσπερ εἰς τῷ ἐκτρώματι ὁ πρῶτος ἡμῖν ἁγιώτατος ἦτα τοῖς δώδεκα·
9 Ἐγὼ γὰρ εἰμὶ ὁ ἐλάχιστος τῶν ἀποστόλων διὸ ἐδίωξα τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ·

4 And that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. . . . 8 Last of all as though to a miscarriage he appeared also to me. 9 But I am the least of the apostles—not worthy to be called an apostle—because I have persecuted the church of God.

1:9–11; 1 Pet 1:3–5, 10–12, 20–23; 2 Pet 1:16–21; 3:2; 1 John 1:1–4; 5:10–11; Rev 1:1–3; 22:16–19. In other texts the notion of Jesus’ being the ultimate revelation of God is more implicit—for example, Mark 1:10–11; 4:41; etc.


In the Letter to the Galatians (1:11–15), he describes the Damascus road event as a revelation, and the language he uses to describe his call is reminiscent of Jeremiah’s call:

\[\text{Γνωρίζω γὰρ ὑμῖν, ἀδελφοί, τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τὸ εὐαγγελισθὲν ὑπ’ ἐμοῦ ὑπὸ οὐκ ἔστιν κατὰ ἄνθρωπον.} \]

12 \[\text{οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐγὼ παρὰ ἄνθρωπον παρέλαβον αὐτὸ ὑπὸ οὐκ ἔστιν ἀνθρώπου ἢ ἐδιδάχθην ἀλλὰ ἐκ οὐρανοῦ ἢ ἐδημάχθην ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ.} \]

15 \[\text{Ὅτε δὲ εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς ὁ ἀφορίσας με ἐκ κοιλίας μητρός μου καὶ καλέσας διὰ τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ 16 ἀποκαλύψαι τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν ἐμοὶ, ἵνα εὐαγγελίζωμαι αὐτόν ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν.} \]

I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel which is preached as gospel by me, is not according to a human (origin).

12 For I received it neither from a human being nor was it taught (to me) but (I received it) through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

15 But when God, who set me apart out of the womb of my mother and called me through his grace, 16 was pleased to reveal his son to me, so that I may preach him as gospel among the nations, . . .

Paul, despite his self-estimation as a “miscarriage” or unworthy apostle, became, together with Peter, the main founding figure of the church. His letter to the newly founded community in Thessalonica is probably the first of his preserved letters and is therefore quite likely the oldest written document in the NT. The letter contains no reference to or quotation from the Jewish Scriptures (which is otherwise a typical feature of most of the NT writings and also of Paul’s letters) but refers repeatedly to “the gospel,” τὸ εὐαγγέλιον (1 Thess 1:5; 2:2, 4, 8–9; 3:2; always with the article); this can be described more precisely as the “gospel of God” (2:2, 8–9) or, once, as the “gospel of Christ” (3:2, ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ). In 1:8, the parallel expression “the word of the Lord” (ὁ λόγος τοῦ κυρίου) is used. The first use of εὐαγγέλιον in 1:5 reveals Paul’s understanding of it:

. . . τὸ εὐαγγέλιον ἠμᾶς ἐγενέθη εἰς υμᾶς ἐν λόγῳ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ στῇ πνεύματι ἁγίῳ καὶ στῇ πληροφορίᾳ πολλῇ . . .

. . . our gospel “happened among” (NRSV came to) you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full assurance.

The preaching of the gospel was accompanied by “powerful” (ἐν δυνάμει) manifestations of God, which were seen as confirmation of the message that Paul preached (see also 1 Cor 1:25; 2:4). From Acts and the other Pauline correspondence, we can confidently determine that these were healings done by Paul and signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the new converts, such as speaking in tongues. 61 In 1 Thess 2:1–12, Paul reminds the community that they received the gospel from him and his co-workers and that he taught them to lead a life worthy of God’s calling. In 2:13, he praises the Thessalonians that they “received” (παραλαμβάνειν) the message he preached, not as a “human word” only, but as what it really is: “God’s word.” 62

Thus, Paul equates “the apostolic preaching” of the gospel with “the chosen instrument of God through which his [= God’s] word is manifest in the world,” 63 and by this means he attributes to his preaching the same spiritual and religious quality as that of the biblical prophets, who are regularly described as communicators of God’s word to his people. That the prophets play a major role in the self-understanding of the early messengers of Jesus Christ 64 is evident even in 1 Thessalonians, despite the letter’s dearth of direct references to the Hebrew Bible. In 1 Thess 2:15, Paul reminds the readers of the fate of certain followers of Christ Jesus in Judea at the hands of their fellow Jews, who “killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets” and are now persecuting Paul and his like as well (ἡμᾶς ἐκδιωξάντων). It was not yet 20 years since Paul himself had been among these persecutors, and this may explain the harsh tone, which he is now leveling against his previous self. The main reason for his attack is that other Jews want to hinder him from talking “to the Gentiles so that they might

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61. Ibid., 180–87, on 1 Thess 1:5.
62. See T. Holtz, Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher, EKK 13 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986), 98–99: “Das Predigtwort ergeht durch den Apostel, aber es ist Gottes Wort” (p. 98). The use of παραλαμβάνειν for the preached word of Paul implies further that it is received and kept like an authoritative tradition in a stable form. Again Holtz: “Das Predigtwort, in dem Gottes eigenes Wort begegnet, wird empfangen als ein Überlieferungsgut. Es ist nicht ein nur aktuell im Ertönen und Gehörtwerden sich konstituierendes Gotteswort, es ist vielmehr ein in Dauer geltendes und kann entsprechend aufbewahrt und weitergegeben werden.” For παραλαμβάνειν as a technical term for the reception of a tradition equivalent to the rabbinic נabilité (cf. m. Pe’ah 2:6; m. ’Abot 1:1, 3, etc.), see further 1 Cor 11:23; 15:1–3; Gal 1:9; 1 Thess 4:1; 2 Thess 3:6; Col 2:6–8; for the canonical implications, see Kruger, The Question of Canon, 86, 124–26. In Gal 1:12, Paul parallels παραλαμβάνειν with “being taught” (διδάσκεσθαι) but emphasizes that the origin of this gospel was not παρὰ ἀνθρώπου but δι’ ἁπαξαρίστως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ—that is, a divine revelation stands at the beginning of the tradition that he transmits and to which he commits his communities. When Paul describes his handing over of what he has received, the verb παραδίδομαι is used in much the same way as the rabbinic נ_PIXM. The famous opening line of m. ’Abot 1:1 has close parallels in 1 Cor 11:23; 15:3.
63. For this precise understanding, avoiding a simplistic equation of Paul’s preaching with the word of God, see Bell, Irrevocable Call, 63.
be saved” (2:16). It is the hindrance of God’s word being spread to all that he regards as displeasing God (see very similarly Matt 23:13). This short reference is enough to show: (1) that the Thessalonians heard from Paul about the biblical prophets and the traditions regarding their violent deaths (a common topic in early Christian literature; see Matt 23:34–36 // Luke 11:49–51; Mark 12:1–9; Acts 7:52); and (2) that Paul sees his own persecution as evidence that he stands in line with the prophets of old. His self-characterization as one who preaches God’s word is actually a prophetic one, evidence of which can be found in other parts of the Pauline correspondence as well.

One may argue that this sort of prophetic self-awareness relates to his oral preaching only and does not allow extrapolation to any “canonical” authorial claim for his letters. But it is not that simple to differentiate between oral and written material: It is clear that in the time of Paul the message of the prophets is accessed in written form as Scripture, which means that the notion that the “word of God” is actually a written word can be taken as the rule rather than the exception. This can easily be demonstrated by Paul’s regular use of the term γραφή and the passive perfect forms of γράφειν to introduce quotations from the prophets in his letters. But more interesting is the fact

65. On 1 Thess 2:14–16, see Niebuhr, Heidenapostel, 69–70; Bell, Irrevocable Call, 69–72; Schnelle, Apostle Paul, 179–81.


68. This argument was again brought to the fore in J. Becker, Mündliche und schriftliche Autorität im frühen Christentum (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 66–72, who rightly emphasizes the Holy Spirit as the source of the letters’ authority (p. 70), but he denies that the letters were intended to have any further function beyond clarifying the immediate concerns addressed in them (pp. 71–72). This is why Becker downplays the references to an exchange of letters between the Pauline communities (see n. 72 below) and also argues against the idea that Paul himself inaugurated a first collection of his letters (see n. 73 below).

69. For references, see my “Scripture,” 290–91, where I demonstrate that despite the importance of written Scriptures in the time of the New Testament the oral dimension of Scripture as Word of God” was never lost from sight. Important treatments of Paul’s use of Scripture include R. B. Hays, Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); D.-A. Koch, Die Schrift als Zeuge des Evangeliums, BTH 69 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986); C. D. Stanley, Paul and the Language of Scripture: Citation Technique in the Pauline Epistles and Contemporary Literature, MSSNTS 69 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); J. Whitlock, Schrift und Inspiration: Studien zur
that, in writing to the Thessalonians, Paul supplements his preaching of the
gospel with the written form of a letter, which can be seen as a kind of sum-
mary, a reminder, or a further explanation. In doing this, he takes up again an
element of the prophetic ministry of Jeremiah, who also bridged geographical
distance with a letter to the community in Babylon (Jeremiah 29). The result-
ing overlap between Paul’s preaching of the gospel as “God’s word” and its
written crystallization inevitably transfers the spiritual quality attributed to the
oral message to its written imprint as well. The challenge for early Christians
was how to integrate their understanding of God’s new revelation in the form
of the gospel message (which was available early on in both oral and written
form) into the established understanding of Jewish Scriptures as the container
of God’s authoritative messages and revelations for all times (see, for example,
Matt 5:17; John 2:22; Rom 1:1–2).

Vorstellung von inspirierter Schrift und inspirierter Schriftauslegung im antiken Judentum
und in den paulinischen Schriften, WMANT 98 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2002).
See further C. A. Evans and J. A. Sanders, eds., Paul and the Scriptures of Israel, JSNTSup
83 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); S. E. Porter and C. D. Stanley, eds., As It Is
Written: Studying Paul’s Use of Scripture, SBLSymS 50 (Leiden: Brill, 2008). A challeng-
ing view on Paul’s understanding of Scripture was recently presented by G. H. van Kooten,
“Ancestral, Oracular and Prophetic Authority: ‘Scriptural Authority’ according to Paul and
Philo,” in Authoritative Scriptures in Ancient Judaism, ed. M. Popović, JSISup 141 (Leiden:
Brill, 2010), 267–308, which I find unconvincing in its sharp distinction between revelation
and Jewish Scripture. But even if van Kooten is right, it would not harm my argument: in
this case, one would need to acknowledge that Paul clearly separates immediate oracular
revelation (1st-person language with God as subject) and “God’s manifestation in the works
of creation and in the advent of Christ” (p. 303) from the witness of divine revelation through
the biblical authors.

70. Jeremiah 29 in fact portrays an extended, hostile exchange of prophetic letters be-
tween Jerusalem and the Babylonian exiles. The prophet Shemaiah of Nehelam wrote one or
two letters against Jeremiah to Jerusalem (29:25–28), complaining about Jeremiah’s inter-
fERENCE in the exiles’ affairs, to which Jeremiah retorted with yet another letter containing a
the prophet Elijah once sent a letter (מכתב) to King Jehoram of Judah, announcing his judg-
ment and death as a word of God. Prophetic letters might also be implied in 2 Kings 19 //
Isaiah 37 with Isaiah as potential letter writer to King Hezekiah. In 2 Kgs 19:9, the Assyrian
king sent messengers to Hezekiah; what Hezekiah received, however, was a written docu-
ment (ספירות, LXX τὰ βιβλία), which he presented to God in the temple (19:14). The same
expression for sending messengers as in 19:9–10 is also used in 19:6 (for Isaiah’s answer to
the king after he sent messengers to the prophet, among them Shebna the scribe, see 19:2)
and 19:20, which makes it likely that these messages and prophetic oracles were delivered
in both oral and accompanying written form. On these letters, see Doering, Ancient Jewish
Letters, 104–8, 112.

71. See already H. von Campenhausen, The Formation of the Christian Bible (Philadel-
phia: Fortress, 1972), 64–65; and more recently Childs, Reading Paul, 4 n. 4, who claims
that the Early Church “was never without a canon since it assumed Israel’s Scriptures as
normative. From its inception, the major theological problem was to relate the evangelical
tradition of the gospel with its inherited Scriptures” (see also p. 61); Kruger, Question of the
The second part of Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians leaves no doubt that he considers himself in a position to teach the Thessalonians “how it is necessary to walk and to please God” (4:1 . . . τὸ πῶς δεῖ ὑμᾶς περιπατεῖν καὶ ἀρέσκειν θεῷ . . .). It is a kind of new Halakah, and Paul’s use of περιπατεῖν “to walk (or to live one’s life)” is telling in this respect. This new Halakah is something the new believers need “to receive” (παραλαμβάνειν), and it is composed of “certain commandments” (τίνας παραγγελίας) that he gave to the Thessalonians “through the Lord Jesus” (4:2). This hints at a rather unspectacular form of revelatory experience, and Paul did not elaborate on how he received these instructions from the Lord Jesus. But it is obvious that he expected obedience to them, because they were not his own ideas but the “word of God” for the Thessalonians.

About the eschatological future, he tells the community “with a word of the Lord” (ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου) what will happen to the ones who had died before the hoped-for return of Jesus (4:15). He quotes this “word of the Lord” at some length (4:15–17) and concludes the section with the admonition “comfort one another with these words” (4:18). How seriously Paul took the importance of his letter can also be seen at the end in 5:27, where in very strong words he urges the recipients of the letter to read it to all members of the congregation: Ἐνορκίζω ὑμᾶς τὸν κύριον ἀναγνωσθῆναι τὴν ἐπιστολὴν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς “I adjure you regarding the Lord to have the letter read to all members (of the community).”

Canon, 21, 94–95. How the authority of Jesus as “word of God” could function to place him (and, as a result, the apostles as his mouth-pieces) next to Hebrew Scriptures can be seen in the concluding comment of the fourth evangelist’s version of Jesus’ so-called cleansing of the temple (John 2:22): After the resurrection, the disciples remembered what Jesus said with regard to “this temple” because “they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus said to them” (ἐπίστευσαν τῇ γραφῇ καὶ τῷ λόγῳ ὃν ἐplements ὁ Ἰησοῦς). Here ἡ γραφή and the λόγος of Jesus form a double object of the verb πιστεύειν, thus implying that “Scripture” and Jesus’ word are equally authoritative. This makes the books containing Jesus’ words into “biblical” books very much like the books of the prophets containing the words of God. Nicklas, with reference to John 2:22, sees here not just an equation so that ‘‘scripture’ and ‘Jesus’ word’ are . . . standing side by side for John” but that the latter “increasingly developed into the decisive criteria for a Christian understanding of Israel’s Scriptures” (“Development of the Christian Bible,” 397).

72. A similar command can be found at the end of Colossians, in 4:16: καὶ ὅταν ἀναγνωσθῇ παρ’ ὑμῖν ἡ ἐπιστολή, ποιήσατε ἵνα καὶ ἐν τῇ Λαοδίκεια ἐκκλησίᾳ ἀναγνωσθῇ, καὶ τὴν ἐκ Λαοδίκειας ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀναγνώτε. For differing views on the evidence from this verse, depending on whether one regards Colossians as authentic or pseudepigraphical, see Kruger, The Question of Canon, 126, 199; Becker, Mündliche und schriftliche Autorität, 71, 168–69; another example of Paul’s reflection on his letters as authoritative is 2 Cor 10:8–11, where v. 8 reveals a strong Jeremianic tone (cf. Jer 1:10; 24:6; 42:10; 45:5), and the argumentation ends in v. 17 with a quotation from Jeremiah (9:22–23) that is, according to U. Heckel, the key to the whole section of 2 Corinthians 10–13; see U. Heckel, “Jer 9,22f. als Schlüssel für 2 Kor 10–13,” in Schriftauslegung im antiken Judentum und im Urchristentum, ed. M. Hengel and H. Löhr, WUNT 73 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebecke, 1994), 206–25.
Paul obviously wanted his letter to be read to the whole congregation during one of their regular gatherings. But these regular gatherings were not just a social coming together but also an act of worship similar to the gathering in a synagogue, where the reading of Scripture played a prominent part (see Acts 15:21). Given the strong Jewish matrix of early Christianity, it is almost certain that the Jewish Scriptures were read, studied, and preached about in the earliest “Christian” gatherings, and this further accounts for the many scriptural references in the NT writings. The oldest preserved “sermons” in the NT are laden with scriptural allusions (Acts 2:14–36; 3:12–26; 7:2–53; 13:15–41; 17:2, 11; 18:4, 15; 28:23; Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11; Hebrews; see also Acts 8:28–36), and it is obvious that the Jewish Scriptures played an important role in Christian identity formation from the very beginning. Hence, when Paul wished his letter to the Thessalonians, containing binding commands and authoritative teaching authorized by the Lord, to be read in a setting where Jewish Holy Scriptures played a crucial role in the worship of a community, it aligned his own writing closely with the already established Scriptures. But, again, it is one thing to ask a community to believe that something should be regarded as God’s word and another for it to be received as God’s word.

In the case of 1 Thessalonians, the reception history allows for some glimpses into the way in which the letter was regarded from earliest times. The first thing to remember is that the letter survived and became part of a collection of Pauline letters—a process that began in the last quarter of the 1st century and is attested by P46 in the second half of the 2nd century. The Papyrus 46 is the oldest manuscript containing a collection of Paul’s letters and is usually dated around the year 200. The most detailed study of its text-critical value and the questions arising with regard to the formation of the Pauline corpus is Günther Zuntz, The Text of the Epistles: A Disquisition upon the Corpus Paulinum, The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy 1946 (London: Published for the British Academy, 1953). The standard assumption is that, around 100 C.E. at the latest, a collection of the 14 Pauline letters was made based on Alexandrian philological principles, and this became the single archetype for the extant Pauline corpus. On the formation of the Corpus Paulinum, see A. von Harnack, Die Briefsammlung des Apostels Paulus und die anderen vorkonstantinischen Briefsammlungen (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1926), 6–27; Kurt Aland, “Die Entstehung des Corpus Paulinum,” in Neuestamentliche Entwürfe, TB 63 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1979), 302–50; A. Lindemann, “Die Sammlung der Paulusbriefe im 1. und 2. Jahrhundert,” in The Biblical Canons, ed. J.-M. Auwers and H. J. de Jonge, BETL 163 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 321–52; and Childs, Reading Paul. A much-discussed proposal has been presented by David Trobisch, who argues that Paul himself is responsible for a first edition of his letters (comprising the two letters to the Corinthians, Romans, and Galatians) that he sent to Ephesus (and perhaps other communities in Asia Minor) as a theological justification for the independent identity of the new “Christian” communities from Judaism and at the same time maintaining the inseparable connection between Jewish and Gentile Christians; see D. Trobisch, Paul’s Letter Collection (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); idem, The First Edition of the New Testament (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 60–62 (on Paul’s letters); in the 2000 study, he argues that a carefully redacted edition of the NT in its present form already existed in the 2nd century. So far, Trobisch has not received much support; see, among
most remarkable (and regularly ignored) fact is that Paul’s letters survived long enough to become part of a collection. Even if we allow that such a collection originated as early as the end of the first century, this means that 1 Thessalonians would have already been preserved for at least 30 or 40 years. The question that needs to be asked, therefore, is why it was preserved at all. The view that Paul’s letters were kept as a kind of souvenir or memorabilia of this “famous” apostle, as Jürgen Becker has recently suggested, projects a later perception of Paul onto the very beginning of his ministry in the West. 74 When Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, he was not yet the “celebrity” or acclaimed authority that he would become some 30 years later. Quite the opposite: he was a disputed figure in the early church, and many thought themselves to have good reason to contradict his teaching. He was not yet “Saint Paul” or anything similar. Nevertheless, the churches kept his letters (though not all of them) and obviously treasured them in such a way that they were regarded as formative from very early on, as can be seen by their reception in the Deutero-Pauline tradition (a label that makes sense only if Paul’s letter writing was regarded as authoritative or at least influential), 2 Pet 3:16, the letters of Ignatius, the canon of Marcion, and Canon Muratori—covering the time from Paul’s death through the entire 2nd century. 75 So an important, though often neglected observation is that someone preserved Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, which is not as self-evident as it might seem. This is further highlighted by the fact that some of Paul’s letters were lost (e.g., some of the Corinthian correspondence;
see also 1 Cor 5:9; the Letters to the Laodiceans, Col 4:16; Phil 3:1 may also point to a previous letter).

In the case of 1 Thessalonians, there is an additional witness in the form of 2 Thessalonians, which presupposes the first letter and represents the earliest testimony to its impact. The authenticity of 2 Thessalonians is disputed, but this does not affect the general argument. The letter belonged to the earliest collection of Pauline letters from the beginning of the 2nd century and must have been written at the end of the 1st century at the latest. Personally, I think that the arguments against its authenticity are not convincing but are based on preconceived, theologically biased prejudices regarding what theologians (especially Protestant theologians) do and do not want to be connected with Paul. The main topic of the letter—namely, the return or second coming of Jesus, which is depicted quite vividly in apocalyptic coloring, with angels and judgment and the final overcoming of the antichrist—is greatly disliked by “enlightened” Christianity and therefore easily dispensed with as pseudepigraphical. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that it is literally dependent on 1 Thessalonians. In fact, the remarkable closeness of the two letters is the main argument adduced against its authenticity.

Those who take the letter to be authentic date it to the immediate aftermath of the first letter, whose vivid description of the second coming of Jesus obviously caused some ethical and theological issues within the Thessalonian church, which the second letter seeks to address. Here again, a key feature is obedience to the “gospel of our Lord Jesus” (cf. 2 Thess 1:8, ὑπακούουσιν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ). The saving act on the day of judgment depends on the belief that the Thessalonians exercised regarding what Paul had witnessed on their behalf (1:10, ὅτι ἐπιστεύθη τὸ μαρτύριον ἡμῶν ἐφ᾿ ὑμᾶς “because our testimony among you was believed”). The “gospel of


78. Pokorný and Heckel, Einleitung, 650. In particular, the direct appeal to his own authority in handing down tradition (2 Thess 2:15; 3:17) is often seen as evidence for the pseudepigraphical character of the letter. But there is nothing in these verses that cannot be found in the undisputed Pauline letters, in which he can present his own teaching and himself as an agent of tradition and a role model for other Christians in similarly strong terms; compare with, for example, Rom 1:5; 16:26 (Paul is commissioned to exhort the Gentiles to the obedience of faith); 1 Cor 11:2; 15:2; Gal 1:6–12; Phil 4:9; 2 Tim 2:2, etc.
our Lord Jesus” and the “testimony” of Paul are thus more or less identical (see also 2:14: God called them “through our gospel”—ἐκάλεσεν υἱῶν διὰ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου ἡμῶν), and obedience to Jesus implies obedience to Paul (3:4–6, 12). The second chapter of the letter deals, then, with the question that caused the problems: some thought that “the day of the Lord is already here” (2:2). Paul warns them not to become worried about this question so easily “either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us” (μήτε διὰ πνεύματος μήτε διὰ λόγου μήτε δι’ ἐπιστολῆς ὡς δι’ ἡμῶν). This triple list displays exactly the spiritual sources upon which these early churches lived, namely, (1) “the Spirit,” which means a kind of direct uttering caused by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Thess 5:19–20; 1 Cor 12:3–11; 14:1ff., etc.); (2) “a word,” which here means presumably a Jesus tradition or a sermon based on one (cf. 1 Thess 1:8; 2:13; 4:15); and (3) “a letter” from Paul himself. In other words, we have a revelatory experience (the Spirit) or a revelatory message (the words of Jesus) and an oral and/or written reflection upon it as the main sources of authority. And already here the possibility arises that someone else was misusing the means of a letter to introduce another teaching in Paul’s name. Therefore, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of what he has told them (2 Thess 2:5) and to use their already existing knowledge as a criterion to discern false teachings (see already 1 Thess 5:21, πάντα δὲ δοκιμάζετε, τὸ καλὸν κατέχετε). The final admonition in this regard is to keep steadfast to the “traditions” they had received from Paul through his teaching in oral and written form (2:15, στήκετε καὶ κρατεῖτε τὰς παραδόσεις ὡς ἐπιστολῆς ἡμῶν). The close relationship in wording between 1 and 2 Thessalonians is then best explained under the assumption that Paul worked from the copy of the first letter to clarify the misunderstandings that it caused.

Conclusion

What I hope to have demonstrated is the close relation between revelatory events and their imprints in the biblical tradition. I have chosen the earliest

79. Richards, Paul and First-Century Letter Writing, 156–61, points out that “modern classical scholarship generally agrees that ancient letter writers kept copies of their letters” (p. 156). Ample evidence of this exists among classical authors, and Richards argues that this is probable for Paul as well (pp. 214–15). The close relationship in wording between 1 and 2 Thessalonians is then best explained under the assumption that Paul worked from the copy of the first letter to clarify the misunderstandings that it caused.
writing in the New Testament to illustrate how quickly this process took place. Hardly more than a century passed between Jesus’ life and its understanding as the ultimate form of God’s revelation and its stabilization in authoritative writings which were regarded as equal to the Jewish Scripture (cf. 2 Pet 3:2, 15–16), with the first authoritative texts already in existence within 20 years after Jesus’ death. This happened without the influence of institutions, professional scribes, or established hierarchies. The message received its lasting meaning beyond the immediate reason for its composition through the authority of the messenger as a witness to the decisive revelatory event (cf. Acts 1:21–22; 2:32; 3:15; 10:39, 41; 13:31; 22:15; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:3–8; 1 Pet 5:1; 2 Pet 1:16–18; 1 John 1:1–3). It is worthwhile testing further whether these insights into the way the NT writings became Scripture might also shed some light on the genesis of the books of the Hebrew Bible.