

Becoming a People of the Book: Texts, “Scripture,” and “Canon” among Christ Groups in the Second Century CE

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Marcion was the first leader among Christ groups to identify a canon of the movement’s literary productions to the exclusion of any other textual authority, sometime in the 130s or 140s CE. Other leaders and their Christ groups balked at this formalization of textual authority, and it would take another century for them to treat Christian texts as “scripture,” let alone start thinking in terms of a limited “canon.” When Irenaeus in the late second century and Tertullian in the early third century stress *four* gospels, they are explicitly opposing Marcion’s attempt to close off a canon at only a single gospel, rather than setting their own canonical maximum. In examining processes by which texts became authoritative, “scriptural,” or “canonical” in the early Christ groups, therefore, we are dealing with distinct trajectories and tempos among the different groups. Marcion’s initiative clearly takes precedence, and similar, later moves in other Christ groups show some degree of response and reaction to him.¹ It becomes important, therefore, to understand the cultural context of Marcion’s time, and how his contemporaries understood texts in relation to authority. Rather than read Christian “scripture” and “canon” back into Marcion’s time from later Christian models of textual authority, we need to read history forward from the primarily personal and oral modes of authority in the earliest Christ groups to a point where they would even consider transferring that authority to written texts, and becomes a “People of the Book.”

1. Textual Authority in an Oral Culture

An investigation into the process by which texts became authoritative—and hence “scriptural”—among early Christ groups must necessarily begin by identifying a locus or setting of authority. Where was authority located in early Christ groups, and more to the point, where did it operate, such that texts could be correlated with it? Our chief obstacle—in this as in most historical investigations—is the anachronistic set of assumptions with which we approach the question.

¹ See Jason BeDuhn, *The First New Testament: Marcion’s Scriptural Canon* (Salem: Polebridge, 2013).

We think of Christians as, like their Jewish forebears, “people of the book.” We assume that Christians were, from the beginning, members of a religious movement with authority based in texts. That assumption keeps us from looking for processes by which texts could and did become authoritative in what remained a predominantly oral culture. In other words, contrary to our conditioning, texts do not carry their own authority inherently within them. They derive authority from other sources—cultural or institutional forces that bestow authority *on* texts.

In looking for the sources which bestow authority on texts, we need to decide at the outset whether we are interested in the views of a tiny set of literati or of whole communities of practitioners. One marker of textual authority discussed in previous studies of canon is citation, whereby a later text looks to an earlier one as authoritative.² With a few pioneering forebears, this sort of elite scholastic discourse begins to gel towards the end of the second century, in figures such as Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Theophilus of Antioch.³ This literary development parallels the formation of elite literary canons in Greco-Roman scholastic settings, and should not be confused with the formation of “scripture,” that is, authoritative religious texts used in liturgical community settings. But such confusion has predominated in the study of Christian canon-formation. Any evidence on community textual practices has been drowned out by an over-reliance on sources that belong to an intra-elite discourse among a handful of early Christian intellectuals whose activity was epiphenomenal on the larger community life of Christian groups who went on about their business largely disconnected from what the intellectuals were talking about. We need to recognize that, for most members of the

² Another kind of potential evidence for scriptural status is reverence for the text, in the form of a careful fixity in its wording. But this is elusive in the case of early Christian “scripture.” The evidence suggests that Marcion “canonized” certain texts without being careful to harmonize or normalize the texts of multiple copies. Attention to the fixity of the text comes after, not before canonization, an observation made by others in recent years, e.g., Stephen B. Chapman, “How the Biblical Canon Began,” in Margalit Finkelberg and Guy G. Stroumsa, *Homer, the Bible, and Beyond: Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 29-51, at 49; David Stern, “On Canonization in Rabbinic Judaism,” in *ibid.*, 227-252, at 229. In fact, manuscript evidence shows that the New Testament canon never became as fixed textually as the Jewish scriptures did.

³ Authoritative citation of other Christian texts proves elusive in early Christian writers. Some of them do formally cite Jewish scriptures, but never Christian writings in the same manner, until Marcion. The Pastorals and 2 Peter make slight gestures in this direction, but are likely to be post-Marcion compositions. 1 Clement will be dealt with below as a case pointing in a different direction. Reportedly, Basilides worked with a gospel text in this way, but nothing survives to verify the report.

community, the authority of texts operated not in the production of other texts dependent on them, but in their actual public use, where 95% of Christians would actually be exposed to them, read out in community assemblies. This is scarcely a controversial point, since one of the primary criteria later applied to determine which texts had sufficient authority to be included in the Christian canon was that they had been actually read out in such assemblies. Therefore, the citation of a text in the writings of the sort of intellectual figures mentioned above does not prove anything about the broader authority of the text in the absence of clear evidence that it was actually used in community gatherings.

To understand in what way such texts were “sanctified” as authoritative in the setting of Christian assemblies, we need to identify what type of assemblies these were, and what kind of authority texts would have in assemblies of that type. Here we can’t go far wrong in applying the typology of Wayne Meeks, who proposed four possible models of the early Christian *ekklesia*: the household, the school, the synagogue, and the voluntary association.⁴ We will leave aside the household as not germane to our topic, except as it was the locus of other sorts of institutions, e.g., schools or voluntary associations. The school did have authoritative texts, and even canons,⁵ and the ethos of philosophical schools in particular contributes to the formation of that later scholastic literary discourse within Christianity mentioned above.⁶ Figures such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and later Origen were not formal leaders of their local Christian communities, but more-or-less freelance teachers who handled themselves as if “Christian” was another philosophical school identity alongside of “Platonist,” “Stoic,” and “Epicurean.” Irenaeus and Theophilus of Antioch were bishops who chose to make forays of their own into this intellectual culture, which was by no means an obligation of their office. This activity was distinct from what they did in the company of other Christians in their assemblies.

⁴ Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 75-84.

⁵ Such as the ten orators, nine or ten lyric poets, five tragic poets, etc.; see A. Lesky, *A History of Greek Literature*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1996), 108, 179, 410-11, 418, 592).

⁶ See Eric W. Scherbenske, *Canonizing Paul: Ancient Editorial Practice and the Corpus Paulinum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15-70, on the characteristics of editions and canons in ancient Greco-Roman literature. These practices of the literati were brought to bear on Christian religious texts at a later stage, with Origen being the first known Christian writer to employ them in the mid-third century.

The latter did not operate like schoolrooms, and for this reason the kind of authority texts could have within them was quite different.⁷

We are left, then, with two possible models of the early Christian assembly—the synagogue and the voluntary association—by which we might shed light on the kind of authority texts could derive in such settings. But it must be pointed out at the outset that Jewish synagogues were themselves a form of the club or association, specifically the “Diasporic or Immigrant Associations” identified in John Kloppenborg’s recent study that were a basic subset of the association phenomenon in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds.⁸ As such, they had certain distinct relations to texts apart from those in other kinds of associations. But it is also true that they need separate consideration due to the prevailing assumption that early Christian groups derived from this specific kind of antecedent community structure and practices, and specifically its practices related to texts.

2. Texts in the Synagogue

Given the Jewish origins of Christianity, it is natural that when we think about authoritative “scriptures” taken up into “canons,” the model that comes first to mind is that of the Jewish scriptures, which in fact Christians ultimately accepted into their canon. If we assume that early Christian assemblies were direct outgrowths of the Jewish synagogue, then it would follow that

⁷ The Hellenistic school curriculum sanctified certain authors as “classics,” and compiled canons of them as authoritative reference points for literary composition. But more germane to our topic is the sanctification of texts as sources for authoritative views to which followers commit, i.e., within philosophical traditions, whether of Plato or Epicurus or Hermes Trismegistus. Much as with the “classical” literary writers, the total output of these authors was sanctified, and a canon was created by sifting works attributed to them for authenticity. The closest early Christian practice comes to this is with the Pauline corpus, and it is intriguing that letters of Plato and Epicurus were also sanctified and subsequently canonized. This setting has importance for the later canonization process within Christianity, but as a somewhat artificial way of handling texts that were previously sanctified in a very different way.

⁸ See John S. Kloppenborg, *Christ’s Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 25-29. The synagogue as an institution functioned at times as a school, but at other times as a voluntary association of the “Diasporic” type. In such groups the charter would not be merely a record of an ordinary founder or group of founders of the association, but of a culture hero, such as Moses, and the record would include the cultural myths on a larger scale, because the narrative of the group’s foundation was interwoven with that of the culture as a whole. Diasporic clubs crossed over into school functions because of the concern to educate future generations in their heritage.

Christian practice with regard to the sanctification of texts as authoritative scripture is a direct continuation of Jewish synagogue practice centered around Torah reading. At first that might seem to be the simplest, most elegant conclusion; but there are a number of serious problems with it that give us reason to look beyond the Jewish model to other forms of textual authority in the ancient world.

Harry Gamble has identified the most basic problem:

It is easily assumed that the early church simply transposed synagogue practice into its own context, but this cannot be taken for granted. No explicit evidence attests the liturgical reading of either Torah or the prophets in Christian assemblies of the first century. . . . For these reasons it cannot be uncritically assumed that scripture reading belonged from the outset to specifically Christian worship.”⁹

Similarly, Guy Stroumsa notes the description of early Christian leaders as *agrammatoi* and *idiotai* by the book of Acts itself, and adds: “One deals here with a religious movement whose oral character almost erases the traditional centrality of the Jewish scriptures.” These early Christians, he concludes, “can hardly be said to perceive themselves as a ‘people of the book.’”¹⁰ In fact, there is an inherent contradiction in biblical studies over the imagined relationship of early Christians to texts. On the one hand, the formation of gospels is understood to entail a substantial period of orality, in which not only ordinary Christians but even their leaders were largely unlettered and operated primarily in an oral medium. But on the other hand, it is imagined that, in continuity with the synagogue, the Tanakh or Septuagint was the “bible” of early Christians, read and studied on a regular basis. These two pictures of early Christians are incompatible.

As Gamble, Stroumsa, and others note, the development of formal Torah-reading as part of a Sabbath liturgical service in the Jewish synagogue may itself be a second century CE phenomenon contemporaneous with, rather than antecedent to, the same development in

⁹ Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 211-212.

¹⁰ Guy G. Stroumsa, “Early Christianity – A Religion of the Book?” in M. Finkelberg and G. G. Stroumsa, *Homer, the Bible, and Beyond: Literacy and Religious Canons in the Ancient World* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 153-174, at 159.

Christian assemblies.¹¹ Testimony to Torah-reading in the first century CE and earlier centuries connects mostly to *study* of the Torah, in a scholastic context, which entailed either private study under a tutor or schoolrooms under the authority of “scribes” or “sages.” This practice trained new scribes and sages to copy and interpret the Torah and other texts as codes of law or sacred lore. These were indeed “scriptures” in the sense of authoritative texts, but they existed to be *consulted* as needed, and very often such consultation entailed the scribe or sage debating and giving answers from memory of texts that were only read as they were being copied. Most of the time, they rested in a cabinet—an iconic reference point for oral traditions rather than regularly read texts. Certain Jewish sectarian groups may have focused their practices on Torah reading prior to the Jewish War, but only succeeded in disseminating this as regular synagogue practice after it. “In the turmoil of the post-war situation, the rabbis promoted the canon as the new symbol of unity of post-cultic Israel.”¹² This involved a heightened role for text in synagogue practice, which prior to the war may have entailed little more than reciting the Decalogue.¹³ In short, Torah study was an elite, schoolroom practice, not a public, liturgical one until after the destruction of the Temple, and so was not something the first Christians would have carried over into their practice from prior Jewish practices of congregational worship.

Harry Gamble, while noting this evidentiary problem with simply assuming continuities of “scriptural” practices between Jewish and Christian communities, nevertheless thinks we can postulate scripture reading in Christian assemblies, specifically of Jewish scriptures, on the grounds that early Christian writers—such as Paul, Barnabas, and Clement of Rome—cite the authority of those scriptures in making rhetorical arguments. This line of argument puts Gamble in the awkward position of asserting that “Paul’s letters are the best evidence for the question of

¹¹ Cf. C. Perrot “The Reading of the Bible in the Ancient Synagogue,” in M. J. Mulder and H. Sysling, *Mikra. Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 137-159, at 156-159; Z. Zevit, “The Second-Third Century Canonization of the Hebrew Bible and its Influence on Christian Canonizing,” in A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn, *Canonization and Decanonization: Papers Presented to the International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions (LISOR), held at Leiden 9-10 January 1997* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 133-160, at 154. The value of the evidence of the scene of such Torah reading in Luke 4 is entangled with questions about the date of Luke, with a second century date looking more likely in recent scholarship.

¹² J. Schaper, “The Rabbinic Canon and the Old Testament of the Early Church: A Social-Historical View,” in Kooij & Toorn 1998, 93-106, at 100.

¹³ *bBer.* 12a; see Schaper, 102.

the public reading of scripture in first-century Christianity (though he never mentions the subject)”! Nevertheless, he believes the conclusion justified because, “To say that the use of scripture belonged to theological argument but not to liturgical practice is to introduce a distinction that was foreign to the concrete life of the early church.”¹⁴ But precisely on this point Gamble is in error. Just such a distinction is very clearly in evidence, and texts are used in very different ways in the two contexts. Nowhere is this clearer than in the letters of Paul, which nowhere refer to reading *anything* in church meetings, other than his letters as messages to the assembly (I will return to this important point below). Paul’s Letter to the Galatians offers the perfect counterpoint to Gamble’s assertion. In this letter, Paul employs passages from Jewish scripture as part of his theological argument that the Galatian Christians *should have nothing to do with the religious practices taught in Jewish scripture*. Indeed, Paul cites Torah authoritatively for the purpose of arguing that the Galatians should not treat the Torah as authoritative. The irony of Paul’s rhetorical method helps to explain the confusion it has caused among scholars about the place of scriptures in Paul’s communities. The Galatian Christians would not have been able to make any sense of Paul’s biblical argumentation, because by Paul’s own account, he never exposed them to any elements of Jewish religious culture. The question then is for whom Paul was making such arguments? Although Paul’s letters appear to belong to community correspondence rather than scholastic literature, Paul indulges in small scholastic performances as part of his rhetorical acts of persuasion. In other words, he falls into the schoolroom mode in which he himself evidently learned Torah. And in that mode he invokes a text that no one has in front of them, asserting what it says and what it means while it remains an unopened, inert icon either in a cabinet or, in fact, nowhere at all within reach of those engaged in the debate.¹⁵ The use of literary resources in such scholastic argumentation need have no relation to textual use in liturgical practice, and the latter certainly cannot be proven from the former.

The problem with the thesis of early Christian continuity with synagogue practice, therefore, begins with the lack of evidence for anything in synagogue practice to continue, followed by the total absence of scripture reading in descriptions of Christian meetings in Paul (hymns, instruction, revelations, tongues and interpretations, and meal, but no reading), Acts

¹⁴ Gamble 1995, 213.

¹⁵ Gamble points out the unlikelihood that a typical Christian community could have afforded a full set of Jewish scriptures (Gamble 1995, 214).

(teaching, prayers, and meal), or Pliny the Younger's account (hymns, prayers, oaths, and meal). Where scripture reading does start to appear in second century sources, the latter predominantly represent a particular kind of Christianity, one that has specifically anchored itself in continuity with Jewish scriptures in distinction from other forms of Christianity that have not. Figures such as Justin and Tatian and Theophilus speak of being converted to Christianity by the *Jewish* scriptures.¹⁶ The timing of their emergence as Christian leaders is suggestive: in the aftermath of the Bar Kokhba War and the temporary suppression of Jewish practice by the state. In this historical context, we should consider the possibility that these Christians were actively appropriating scripture along with the claim to be "True Israel." There appears to be a direct correlation between the second century emergence of the Christian claim to be "True Israel" and the use of Jewish scripture. Indeed, there is clear evidence of *increasing* convergence with synagogue practice in later centuries (e.g., Justin reflects a relatively loose and informal selection of readings, whereas 4th century Antioch followed Jewish practice of one reading from Torah and one from the Prophets).¹⁷ As Daniel Boyarin has argued, we need to once and for all leave behind developmental models that presuppose Christianity receiving the totality of its Jewish elements at the beginning; instead we need to think in terms of the co-evolution of Christianity and Judaism, with ongoing mutual influence, throughout late antiquity.¹⁸

It is in this context of an *emergent* synagogue practice of liturgical Torah reading (and incipient canonization) in the second century that we can examine the earliest explicit reference to the practice of reading texts in Christian assemblies in Justin Martyr. Prior to Justin, we do not have a shred of direct testimony to the reading of texts in Christian assemblies (other than correspondence, on which see further below), and this poses a serious challenge to the assumption of continuity with a reading-focused synagogue practice.

If before the mid-second century some texts were publicly read in Christian assemblies, it is still difficult to determine just how early this practice began or how widely it was followed. . . . The earliest reports about Christian liturgical gatherings yield no clear

¹⁶ Justin, Dial. 7; Tatian, Orat. 29; Theophilus, Ad Aut. 1.14.

¹⁷ Gamble 1995, 217.

¹⁸ Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

evidence on these points and leave uncertain much else about the occasions and character of early Christian worship.¹⁹

Writing in the mid-second century, Justin refers to reading from “the prophets” and “memoirs of the apostles,” albeit not in a formal, liturgical way.²⁰ These texts might not be what they at first appear to be. For instance, based on what he says elsewhere in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, the text of “the prophets” used in his church may have been a florilegium of prophetic passages keyed to fulfillment in Jesus. In other words, even someone as literate as Justin was working with Cliff Notes versions of “scripture.”

Justin’s “memoirs of the apostles” have been the subject of a great deal of modern speculation. The consensus opinion is that they are some sort of pastiche of gospel materials, not any one of our familiar gospels. But something even more significant than that is to be gleaned from the specific term Justin uses for these texts, *hypomnēmata*, which had a very precise meaning in Justin’s world not sufficiently captured by the English word “memoir.” The term *hypomnēmata* refers to “notes,” i.e., writings that are *not* texts, not finished authorized compositions.²¹ Such notes “as a rule were not suitable material for publication, and very often their reliability was highly questionable.”²² They were private notes made only for private use, not public dissemination or the ancient equivalent of publication. Justin identified himself with the scholastic culture where this term was used to relegate written material to a decidedly second-class, unofficial status. We have no basis to think he did not understand or misused the term. Such materials often were even made physically different from the standard presentation of a “text,” e.g., copied onto tablets or into notebooks, rather than written out on scrolls.²³

Rabbinic sources show attention to this same distinction, absorbed along with other aspects of Hellenistic scholastic culture, in maintaining physical, performative, and evaluative

¹⁹ Gamble 1995, 206.

²⁰ Justin Martyr 1 Apol. 1.67: “memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets”; the reference to reading scripture in Christian assemblies in 1 Timothy 4:13 cannot be precisely dated, and is likely to be roughly contemporaneous with Justin.

²¹ See T. W. Allen, *Homer: The Origins and Transmission* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925/1969), 307ff.; cf. G. Zuntz, “Die Aristophanes-scholien der Papyri: Teil III. Schlussfolgerungen,” *Byzantion* 14 (1939) 545-614 at 560.

²² Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1962), 87.

²³ See Lieberman 1962, 205.

differences between “scripture” and *megilot setarim*, “secret rolls” not in the sense of esoteric texts, but materials for private reading rather than public recitation, which did not carry any authority.

As was the case in other Hellenistic period societies that distinguished between a *syngrama*, an authorized inscription accorded official status, and a *hypomnema*, written notes for private use, Jews distinguished between texts that were intended for public reading and those that were mere jottings, *aides de memoire*. From the perspective of rabbinic culture, inscriptions in the latter category were ‘phantom texts’; these could be seen and silently read, but they merited no particular cultural attention and could not be adduced as sources of authority. Scholars of the classical rabbinic period, geonim and medieval scholars, designated inscriptions in this latter category as “*megilot setarim*,” “scrolls to be sequestered—a term misunderstood by some later researchers. Unlike official writings, which were often posted on walls, the cultural status of *megilot setarim* was made evident in the fact that they were kept out of the public view and hidden in private recesses [*setarim*].²⁴

The distinction even extended to the manner in which the contents were read. Torah became “scripture” when it came to be performed in a liturgical setting where it was *chanted* in a formal cantillated melody handed down from generation to generation. R. ‘Aqiva condemned those who “read” (*qoreh*) from the ‘external books’, that is, chanted them the way that biblical texts are (M. San. 10:1). “[H]e did not censure the simple act of reading books of the Apocrypha (those excluded from the canon by rabbinic Jews), but the act of reading aloud from them with melodic chanting in a liturgical setting.”²⁵ Exposure to the “scriptural” text had a liturgical quality not found in the reading, even the reading aloud, of *megilot setarim* or *hypomnēmata*. “The observance of these regulations in public practice made the map of Jewish knowledge something other than a purely academic construct, for disparate corpora of tradition were encountered and

²⁴ Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud: Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 21-22.

²⁵ Fishman 2011, 22.

experienced in different ways.”²⁶ In this way, Justin’s choice of wording signaled that the “memoirs of the apostles” were decidedly *not* “scripture.”

Even if Justin was thinking of the apostles as the pupils of Jesus, jotting down their recollection of the master’s lectures (a typical scenario in which the term *hypomnēmata* was employed), the authentic and authorized, and for that reason authoritative version of those lectures did not take a written form, but remained oral. That did not mean the oral form of Jesus’ teaching lacked authority. Quite the contrary. The quotation habits of early Christian writers are quite telling in this regard. Jesus’ words are quoted *from the oral tradition* very precisely and carefully, practically as oracles. But the narratives around Jesus’ words are handled very loosely, reworked at whim. This is one of the reasons it had proven difficult to pin down Justin’s gospel sources as texts, because he does not treat them as “scripture,” nor even as proper texts, but precisely as *hypomnēmata* that do not merit careful citation. The same is true of nearly all second century Christian writers when dealing with gospel material. The letters of Paul get a different treatment. Paul’s instructions to the Colossians and Laodiceans regarding the reading of his own letters does not represent “sanctification” in Gamble’s terms, and point in a different direction that requires the context of the remaining model for early Christian community: the voluntary association.

3. Texts in the Clubhouse

That leads us to a final possible setting for the sanctification of texts within early Christianity: the voluntary association, specifically the “Cultic Association” type whose membership was voluntary rather than ethnic in origin.²⁷ Here we are dealing neither with “classics” analogous to the school tradition, nor “scriptures” as in the synagogue, but *documents*, specifically the charter documents (*instrumentum*) of voluntary associations by which they commemorated their foundation and governed their proceedings. Such documents arose on specific occasions of association formation or at other key turning points (especially endowments and reorganizations) in the development of the association. Unlike later synagogue and church practice, where authoritative texts were read out at every meeting, the documents of voluntary associations

²⁶ Fishman 2011, 22.

²⁷ See Kloppenborg 2019, 29-32.

would be read out less frequently, on certain key occasions. That is why texts do not figure prominently in descriptions of the activities of voluntary associations, although there is plenty of evidence they were present and used.

Much of what we know about the operation of voluntary associations comes from inscriptions. The majority of these inscriptions do not mention texts explicitly in their description of club activities, which are dominated by rules of membership and planning for meals and various cultic acts. But of course these inscriptions themselves are texts, and almost always copies of charter documents kept by the association. These inscriptions made valued documents of the association's archive permanent and public. In short, these inscribed texts were *syngrama*, "an authorized inscription accorded official status . . . official writings, which were often posted on walls."²⁸ The role of such texts was to charter the non-textual activities of the club, in much the same way that Paul's letters do not talk about the use of texts in Christian meetings, but are themselves essential texts chartering the practices in those meetings. Nevertheless, a significant number of the inscriptions do make explicit mention of the creation and preservation of the association's charter documents. One need only peruse the collection of such inscriptions in Ascough, Harland, and Kloppenborg to marshal the evidence on this point.²⁹

For example, a second century BCE inscription from the island of Thera records the foundation of a household association dedicated to the Muses, with detailed instructions for its operation, including the following: "Let the association choose a supervisor. Let the one chosen convene a meeting annually on the second day of the festival and let him plan everything to do with the association, so that it will be administered as it is written in the testament and the law."³⁰ It goes on to say, "In order that everything will be administered thoroughly according to the testament and the law and the decisions of the association for all time, and in case anyone should not act according to the law or the testament or the decisions . . . let the supervisor write these things down." This record will then be the reference for a committee of elected men charged with ensuring that all things are done in accordance with it. The supervisor is charged to "provide a box in which the writings of the association are to be placed," while the association is to elect an archivist (*grammatophylax*), "who will receive an account from the supervisor, the

²⁸ Fishman 2011, 21-22.

²⁹ Richard S. Ascough, Philip A. Harland, John S. Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), hereafter AHK.

³⁰ AHK, #243, at 149.

writing tablet with the transcription of the law and testament, and he shall guard the box with the papyri in it . . . He will also bring them to the meeting.”³¹

The “testament” in the Theran inscription is a purely domestic story of one family’s experiences and determination to establish a cultic association. But other associations recited divine narratives in their meetings. An inscription of the Iobacchoi association of Athens contemporaneous with early Christian groups records the reading out of “the statutes drawn up by the former priests,” which were then acclaimed and inscribed.³² These statutes call for regular meetings at which the priest will “give the *theologia* that the former priest Nikomachos inaugurated” – i.e. a scripted recitation of either a narrative or other set of declarations about Dionysus.³³ This text itself was *not* inscribed, but presumably kept in a book chest in the clubhouse or in the possession of the priest. Justin’s “memoirs of the apostles” or gospel texts evidently played a similar role in periodic readings within Christian assemblies.

An inscription from the same period from Magnesia in Caria recounts the foundation narrative of the local Dionysian associations: how a local prodigy led to an embassy to Delphi, whose oracle instructed them to bring maenads from Thebes to establish the cult in Magnesia, not only its rites (*orgia*), but also its rules (*nomima*). Three associations were created by the Theban maenads Kosko, Baubo, and Thettale.³⁴ Undoubtedly, each of these associations regularly recounted this foundation story. An inscription from Thessalonika contemporaneous with early Christian groups similarly recounts the dissemination of the cult of Sarapis two centuries earlier to the city of Opus, in the form of a miraculous letter from the god, passed from person to person, through a line of apostolic succession. Recording this narrative in the temple of the Egyptian gods in Thessalonika implies that the letter served as a charter document of the cultic association there (even though the continuation of the narrative is lost, where the culminating transmission to the city would have mentioned).³⁵

It was quite common for a set of correspondence involved in the formation of an association, or acknowledging the rights of an existing association, or recording special events in

³¹ AHK #243, at 150.

³² AHK #7, at 13.

³³ AHK #7, at 16.

³⁴ AHK #202, at 122-123.

³⁵ AHK #52, at 49. An inscription dating to the time of the events just described similarly records the establishment of the cult of Sarapis on Delos, also in response to a series of dreams bestowed on successive generations of an Egyptian family (AHK #221, at 133-134).

its development, to be permanently recorded in an inscription.³⁶ For example, the Tyrian merchant colony at Puteoli recorded the correspondence it had with its home city, establishing a funding arrangement for its local cultural center and its sacrifices to the traditional gods.³⁷ Other associations kept correspondence from emperors or other officials, sanctioning or confirming the organization's right to exist, or giving it honored recognition or even endowments. So, for example, Hadrian endowed a Roman athletic association dedicated to Herakles with a facility, including a "building to store your common documents," of which a copy of this very letter of endowment was a part.³⁸ Josephus is able to quote such official correspondence affirming the privileges of various local Jewish communities over the course of several centuries, apparently drawn from the archives of local synagogues that operated just like other associations.³⁹

Our earliest Christian texts, the letters of Paul, can be compared to such organizational correspondence, confirming the status of the local association, sending greetings from one community to another, and providing rules to be observed. Having organized Christian associations in person and orally, Paul later had occasion to write to them reinforcing his foundations, or correcting them as needed. These texts were preserved by the association as authoritative for no other reason than that they were founding documents of the association, to be referenced on certain occasions or as needed. A Hellenistic period inscription from Philadelphia in Lydia reports how instructions were given in a dream for establishing a household association dedicated to Zeus Eumenes and other savior gods, including the proper performance of purifications, cleansings, and mysteries. The inscription makes a permanent record of this charter document of the association.⁴⁰ The charter outlines a moral code of conduct required of all members, similar to that outlined in Paul's letters, and charges members to put their hand on the inscribed charter at monthly meetings, as a test of their adherence to it.⁴¹

Other inscriptions imply the recording, storing, and periodic referencing of texts in order to plan and maintain observances the texts establish. An association at Picenum made provision

³⁶ Cf. AHK #123, 84-85; #163, at 104; #192, at 117.

³⁷ AHK #317, at 203-205.

³⁸ AHK #320, at 206-207.

³⁹ The letters of Plato and Epicurus offer a similar sanctification of correspondence from the philosophical schools.

⁴⁰ AHK #121, at 83.

⁴¹ AHK #121, at 84.

for the selection of an executive secretary (*epissophus*) and a keeper of the archives.⁴² The Tyrian merchant colony on Delos recorded the sponsorship of their Herakles association by the suitably named Patron, son of Dorotheos, with the instructions that praise of him – which entailed recounting the memorial of his benefactions – be proclaimed “during the sacrifices as they are taking place *and in the synods*.”⁴³ In the same way, the Berytian merchant colony on Delos recorded the sponsorship of their Poseidon association by the Roman Marcus Minatius, with instructions for an annual proclamation at the festival of Poseidon, *and in monthly synod meetings*.⁴⁴ Similarly, an association dedicated to Helios and the Heliads on Rhodes honored its benefactor Dionysodoros by recording the history of his benefactions, and ordering that, “in order that everything takes place according to the decree and according to the laws, let his crowning be proclaimed *in the meetings* on the second day after the sacred rites,” with the exact wording provided. Anyone who “goes against what is written” is to be fined.⁴⁵ James Hanges has argued that Paul’s exhortation “not to go beyond what is written” in 1 Cor 4:6 refers to similar written bylaws of the association;⁴⁶ and John Kloppenborg notes a similar proposed explanation for 1 Cor 14:33b-35 as originally a marginal note referring not the “Law” but to one of the bylaws of the Corinthian Christian association.⁴⁷ Club decisions would have been taken down in writing and stored in the archives of an association, when not recorded in inscriptions. Such records functioned as a reference that could be checked at appropriate times in order to plan and observe what they called for.

We see precisely this kind of arrangement in the Acts of the Martyrs of Scilli, Numidia, recording an interrogation that took place on 17 July 180 C.E. The proconsul Saturninus matter of factly asks, “Quae sunt res in capsula vestra?” He seems to assume that a club would have a *capsa*, a case, chest, or cabinet holding documents. The Christian Speratus answers, “Libri et epistolae Pauli viri iusti” – books and epistles of Paul, a just man.⁴⁸ These constitute the complete “library,” if you will, of this Christian association. Nothing is said of sacred writings

⁴² Dessau, *Inscr. Lat. sel.* 7215.

⁴³ AHK #223, at 135-136.

⁴⁴ AHK #224, at 136-137.

⁴⁵ AHK #255, at 156-159.

⁴⁶ James C. Hanges, “1 Corinthians 4:6 and the Possibility of Written Bylaws in the Corinthian Church,” *JBL* 117 (1998) 275-298.

⁴⁷ Kloppenborg 2019, 41; cf. William O. Walker, *Interpolations in the Pauline Letters* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

⁴⁸ R. Knopf, G. Krüger, G. Ruhback, *Ausgewählte Märtyrerkten* (Tübingen, 1965), 29.18-19.

or scriptures, and nothing suggests continuity with synagogue practice.⁴⁹ The proconsul and the Christians speak the same language: that of association documents to be secured as evidence in the trial.

4. Marcion's Reform of Christian Associations and Their Charter Documents

Marcion, as a *naukleros*, that is, a certified member of a maritime trade organization, moved among associations that operated in the fashion described in the previous section, with charter documents, minutes, and other authoritative records.⁵⁰ Tertullian, referring to Marcion's literary endowment to his community, appears to be citing Marcion himself using the appropriate terminology, when he refers to the *Evangelion* and *Apostolikon*—what we anachronistically might be tempted to call the “canon” of Marcion's church—as together constituting the *instrumentum* of Marcionite communities, i.e., the set of their official organizational documents, which Tertullian clarifies with the synonym *testamentum* seen in some of the association inscriptions discussed in the previous section.⁵¹

In such organizations, textual concerns were determined largely by the legal and constitutional force of such documents, and so focused on authenticity, secure transmission, and guarding against interpolation and forgery. These are precisely the concerns Marcion expresses with regard to the authoritative texts being used in Christian assemblies. He speaks of the authenticity of Paul's letters and the gospel text; he expresses concern about corruption, interpolation, or adulteration; and he uses intertextual confirmation of one document (the *Evangelion*) by means of another (the *Apostolikon* with its reference to an “evangelion”). These concerns overlap with those at work in the production of literary editions and canons in the school setting, where the works of a great author of the past were subjected to scrutiny in the preparation of an authorized version, valued either for their intellectual content (e.g., Hippocrates, Plato) or their aesthetic merit (e.g., playwrights, poets), or both (Homer). Eventually, a Christian scholastic tradition would form and see itself in light of these literary

⁴⁹ The community may have been Marcionite, as a couple remarks suggest: “I serve that god whom no man has seen or can see” and “Today we are martyrs in heaven.” But this evidence in itself is insufficient to draw a certain conclusion.

⁵⁰ See Kloppenbog 2019, 32-37.

⁵¹ Tertullian, Adv. Marc. 4.1: instrumenti, vel, quod magis usui est dicere, testamenti.

projects. But in the second century, the writings circulating among early Christ groups did not belong to “literature” in that sense.⁵² Religious texts generally were not objects of this sort of scholastic editorial activity, and club documents likewise fell below standards of high literature that would attract such attention. The latter received scrutiny, therefore, only in the context of their traditional or quasi-legal authority.

Marcion begins with the authority of Paul, as the founder of the Christian associations he regards as normative. It is the role of correspondence as charter documents in ancient associations that explains the often remarked upon oddity of the predominance of letters in the Christian New Testament. Nothing in prior notions of “scripture” in the Jewish tradition would lead us to expect such importance bestowed upon letters. But it makes perfect sense within the world of Greco-Roman clubs. It is in this context that we can best understand the Marcionite *Prologues* to Paul’s letters, since they place each letter in a specific historical context, authenticate them by time and place of composition, and indicate their character as either affirmations or corrections of the practices of the association in question. While Eric Scherbenske compares them to literary *hypotheses*,⁵³ they lack many of the features of that genre. They are, by comparison, stripped down to a few essentials that can be described as quasi-legal in their focus. After identifications of the author and recipients of the letter, and the location where it was written, each *Prologue* addresses only whether the recipients were faithfully following Paul’s foundation of the community, or interlopers had led them into other practices, and therefore whether the letter contains affirmations or corrections of the community’s practices. This information prepares the reader to properly understand the matters discussed as either binding or non-binding on the association’s members. As regards Paul’s citation of authoritative Jewish “scriptures” in his letters, Marcion evidently understood this in a legal manner appropriate for an *instrumentum* – that is, Paul cited the terms of the “old covenant” as relevant in establishing the terms of his “new covenant” as a reform or replacement of the prior rules of association. This was Marcion’s way of finding a logical resolution to the puzzle of how Paul could cite the very law he was insisting was “ended” and “abolished.” His *Antitheses*, or

⁵² See, however, the argument of Heidi Wendt, “Marcion the Shipmaster: Unlikely Religious Experts of the Roman World,” in M. Vinzent, *Marcion of Sinope as Religious Entrepreneur*, *Studia Patristica XCIV* (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 55-74, that Marcion fits the type of the want-to-be intellectual of working-class background who ventures into the practices of elite scholastic culture.

⁵³ Scherbenske 2013, 60-65, 85-86.

Proevangelion—prefaced to the *Evangelion* just as the prologues were to each subsection of the *Apostolikon*—likewise takes the form of a legal argument outlining the distinctive foundation of the new Christian association against an older, rejected model.

Perusal of Paul's letters by Marcion uncovered references to another authoritative source of guidance for the association, what Paul calls "my gospel." Against the background of Greco-Roman religious practice, Marcion understood *euangelion* to refer to a cultic narrative such as those read out in Dionysian clubs, or at the annual mysteries of the temple of Hera on Samos, for example. So Marcion tracked down a text that plausibly fit what Paul was referring to, and identified it as the *Evangelion* of the Christian associations Paul founded. Now the set of charter documents, the *instrumentum* of the Christian associations, was complete. Marcion endowed each of the associations in his network with such a set—and behold, a Christian "canon" is born. The criteria Marcion applies suit legal documents, foundational charters, whose authority rests upon their origination and unaltered preservation as reference points for binding commitments, rights, and responsibilities.

These are not criteria of "scripture" – of Jewish scripture, for instance. Authenticity, in the sense of historical situatedness and authorship, is completely irrelevant for the authority and later canonicity of the books of the Tanakh. And as a corollary of that, interpolation is not a factor, because the received version of the text is the one granted authority and canonicity. Likewise intertextuality as a means of granting authority is not something made explicit on the surface of the texts of the Tanakh (although it may operate as subtext). The fact that Marcion's criteria are invoked later in the Christian canonical process reflects either Marcion's direct influence or, perhaps more likely, the actual background of the texts in question as charter documents. In other words, evaluative concerns from the legal world of charter documents are projected onto texts that originally had nothing to do with that world, and literature that previously had authority as anonymous received texts of cultural heritage come to be scrutinized for authoritative authorship and purity of transmission. The latter kind of pedigree is invented and imposed on them, as works of "Moses" or "Solomon," for instance, and a fixed "original" text is secured for works with a long prehistory of amalgamation already forgotten in their past.

What set Marcion apart from other Christian leaders of his time was his organizational work on an empire-wide scale, commented upon by his opponents. Before Marcion, most Christian communities were local, with a consciousness of an overall movement, but little in the

way of concrete coordination. The first signs of such larger coordination appear in the second half of the second century, in the wake of Marcion's own network building. Marcion sought to standardize organization, practice, and discourse of the Christian associations, and in doing so needed to standardize – that is, “canonize” – their charter documents, in order to ensure consistency among them.

What Marcion objected to in the operation of the Roman *ekklesia* was a confusion of its charter by the introduction of “the Law and the Prophets” – that is, the introduction of the practice of reading from Jewish scripture. Remember that our other evidence suggests that this practice was being introduced precisely at this time in the first half of the second century, and Ignatius of Antioch references the same “Judaizing” development.⁵⁴ That means when Marcion attacks it as an innovation, he is describing accurately the developments of his time.⁵⁵ Hence, Marcion's move to set up a canonical bulwark that excluded the Jewish scriptures can be seen as a conservative act, attempting to secure the tradition against the spread of this innovation by appealing to other texts that could legitimately claim to have the authority of charter documents of the Christian associations. As Jan Assmann has argued, it is in times of “intra-cultural polarization” that canons are created.⁵⁶

By Marcion's own statements, his canon was meant to exclude other texts being used or cited authoritatively, namely, Jewish scriptures. I would suggest that his move had another purpose: to impose textual authority as a counterweight to the personal authority of Christian leaders whom Marcion believed were leading the community into a dangerous syncretism with Jewish ideas. Obviously, these are interconnected concerns. Those other early Christian writers contemporary with Marcion who did cite authoritative, and so “scriptural” texts (and these were a minority among them) cited Jewish scriptures. Marcion objected to this innovation (for so he saw it), and argued that the only texts that should possess such authority for Christians were a narrative about the mythological founder of the Christian community, and a set of letters from the historical founder of specific communities, setting forth guidelines for community

⁵⁴ Magnesians 8-10; Philadelphians 5-9.

⁵⁵ Zevit 1998 reconstructs the conditions in the early second-century in which Jewish synagogues would have developed practices that influenced Christians in close contact with them. He regards the Christian response as “benignly imitative” of Jewish practice, (158), but in doing so he neglects the polemical and appropriational turn following the Bar Kokhba War.

⁵⁶ J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1992), 125.

organization and the conduct of its members. In this way, Marcion was sanctifying texts not only as a counterweight to rival texts, but also to sanctified persons, who had the ability to innovate on their personal authority. Marcion apparently believed that statements made by Jesus and Paul would foreclose this convergence with synagogue practice, and hoped that no personal authority could ever outweigh the instructions of the religion's founders.

5. "Scripture" and "Canon" Before and After Marcion

Finally, we must address the question whether these texts that Marcion promoted had "scriptural" authority prior to his collection and canonization of them? Was his act of canonization based in the prior authority of these texts, or did they gain authority only with his act of canonization? Although some Christians contemporaneous with Marcion began to cite Jewish texts as authoritative, and read out these texts in meetings, they did not cite Christian compositions this way (e.g., Ignatius, Justin, Polycarp). Marcion, as far as we can prove, was the first person to cite Christian texts as authoritative. Yet there is no lapse of time between Marcion treating these texts as "scripture" and his consolidation of them in a "canon." The two developments happen simultaneously. No one before Marcion had cited either the Gospel of Luke or the letters of Paul as authoritative scripture.

But we can complicate the answer by noting that Paul's letters would have had *local* authority previously, as charter documents preserved and used in the specific communities to which they were addressed, since they were actually composed with such a function, with Paul fully participating in the culture of voluntary associations. This is precisely how Paul's letters to the Corinthians function in 1st Clement, the earliest text other than Marcion to cite one of Paul's letters.⁵⁷ The fact that Clement of Rome knows 1st Corinthians (but apparently not 2nd Corinthians) has often been cited as proof that Paul's letters circulated more broadly and presumably with wider authority already before Marcion.⁵⁸ But closer examination of 1st Clement calls that argument into question. Clement is intervening in a conflict within the

⁵⁷ It cannot be proven that it predates Marcion, but it may. See L. L. Welborn, "On the Date of First Clement," *Biblical Research* 29 (1984) 35-54 for an argument placing Clement post-Marcion.

⁵⁸ The evidence of Ignatius, who mentions Paul writing multiple letters, is problematic both for the uncertain date of Ignatius and questions about the text of his letters.

Corinthian Christian assembly, about which he has been informed by one faction. Clement knows 1st Corinthians almost certainly because that faction has sent him a copy of this charter document of the Corinthian church to which they are appealing for the legitimacy of their position. Clement recognizes Paul as an exemplary community builder (5), but in no other way accords him broader authority beyond the communities he founded.⁵⁹ This is sufficient for Clement's purpose. It must be noted that Clement rhetorically assumes that the Corinthian Christians "know the sacred scriptures" and "have studied the divine utterances" (1 Clem. 53), and "have spent careful study on the maxims of the divine teaching" (1 Clem. 62), all referring to the Jewish scriptures. Previous scholars, such as Harnack,⁶⁰ took such remarks at face value, missing their character as a rhetorical tactic, whereby the speaker claims a textual authority his audience is unable to gainsay without exposing the lack of education the speaker has so graciously assumed for them. In any case, similarly sweeping generic references to the authority of "the gospel" in this period refers to something even less referenceable, a fluid oral body of traditions. Paul is typically referenced in the same generic way, as a legendary community-founder, with practically no mention of the content of his instructions. Attention to the latter came only in response to Marcion's compilation of local charters into a collection meant to be authoritative for all. For the first time, Paul's argumentation in specific settings for particular purposes could be seen as a body of teaching, and for some recognized as problematic. When the Marcionite controversy divided the Christian associations throughout the Roman Empire, most (if not all, e.g., Justin Martyr) of Marcion's opponents were unwilling to throw the Pauline baby out with the Marcionite bathwater, and continued to grant Paul the authority of a legitimate community founder, while placing him in the safe domesticating company of other community founders and authorities.⁶¹ By the time we get to Irenaeus and Tertullian at the end of the second

⁵⁹ For example, while citing "your letter" received by the Corinthians from Paul (47), he says nothing about Paul's letter to the Romans, although it contained plenty of material useful to his arguments. Therefore, either Clement does not know the letter, or it does not possess authority because Paul did not found the church in Rome.

⁶⁰ Adolf von Harnack, *New Testament Studies, V: Bible Reading in the Early Church* (1912), 32ff.

⁶¹ Recent scholarship understands Acts to be composed with this intent. Paul is both subordinated to the Jerusalem leadership of Peter and James, and at the same time made the main character and hero of the second half of the book. This narrative strategy could be explained by two different compositional intentions. The author could wish to win over Paul's partisans to this domesticated version of their apostle by celebrating him in this way. Or the author could be

and beginning of the third century, Paul has acquired authority even in communities he did not found—the sort of authority Marcion had sought to give him several generations earlier.

But neither the strictly local authority that individual letters of Paul originally had, nor the general authority given them by Marcion, is “scriptural.” The very term had no place in the expectations and operations of early Christian associations. Indeed, the concept of “scripture” comes to be imposed on the texts of the later Christian New Testament only when what Marcion feared and resisted occurred: the amalgamation of those texts with Jewish “scripture.” For Marcion, Paul’s letters possessed intrinsic authority at the time of their composition as charter documents of local Christian associations. But because this authority was vested in Paul himself, as authoritative founder, Marcion saw his letters as possessing more than merely local authority; he saw them as a complementary set providing norms that could be implemented in any association. Paul’s communities were the mother associations, on the basis of which new ones could be established, as was common practice at the time. So Marcion viewed Paul’s letters as authoritative for the entire network of Christian associations, and through the act of canonization secured that status for them to the exclusion of any other text, with the exception, of course, of the gospel.

It has been common in biblical studies to treat gospels as community charters of a kind, using a narrative of Jesus to establish and sanction norms of belief, practice, and values for the communities that read them. Matthew and Luke, and their common Q source, could plausibly function this way; it’s harder to make that case for Mark and John, I think, and the same might be said for most gospel texts. They don’t place practical instruction very far forward in their narratives. In fact, it may be the integration of the Q source with its clear normative character, that sets Matthew and Luke apart. In other words, Gospel texts as a genre do not appear to be primarily norm-setting or practical, but rather eulogistic, extolling Jesus in the same way that the *theologia* of the Thera association extolled Dionysus. So they might be charter documents of this kind, rather than the way we have tended to think of them. That is, the individual anecdotes about Jesus came to be assembled into connected narratives to serve the function of cultic myths read out in Christian associations, and their production was an honored creative assignment, much as Nikomachos was commemorated as the author (theologian) of the Dionysian *theologia*

redeeming Paul for those opponents of Marcion who otherwise might be inclined to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

of Thera. It is impossible to say whether the gospel Marcion put into his canon had “scriptural” status in some community before him, or whether he plucked it out of obscurity and endowed it with such status by canonizing it as the appropriate narrative of the mythic hero of the Christian clubs. Here I would simply refer the reader back to the prior discussion of *hypomnemata* and their decidedly un-scriptural status.

6. Conclusion

The importance of Marcion on the subject of the origins of Christian scripture and canon, therefore, is to permit us to break out of the assumption of continuity between synagogue and church in the processes by which texts acquired “scriptural” authority. This analysis may not hold true for all early Christ groups, but Marcionites and a variety of other such communities certainly did not see themselves in continuity with the Jewish synagogue, at least not the classic model of synagogue that most of us think of, which probably arose too late to be a precedent for early Christian community life. We must always be alert for how a single term, such as “synagogue,” may conflate quite different institutions. In the absence of the classic synagogue form as a point of origin, Christ groups would have been working with different models of sanctifying texts than are later found in such Jewish institutions. These Christ groups had formed in the larger Hellenistic culture of voluntary associations independently and probably before the full development of a Torah-focused synagogue praxis. The synagogue was simply the Jewish and Samaritan variant on the model of the voluntary association, and saw development towards textualization at the same time the same development was occurring in Christian associations. This reorientation to text probably occurred within the Jewish synagogue in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, and began to influence the sister communities of Christians. Marcion objected to this innovation, and reached into the *capsa* of the Christian associations for texts that had a comparable authority within the role texts held in voluntary associations. Marcion accentuated their authority by canonization, that is, by closing off any addition or amendment to the existing charter documents. But other Christians resisted the move to canon, and continued to develop reading practices in their meetings that incorporated both Jewish and Christian compositions, and in this way established connections to Jewish scriptural concepts as the latter were forming. This development has obscured the previous period of

Christian practice from the historian's gaze, and made Marcion look like the innovator in his rejection of connections to the synagogue. But we are now in a position to understand his actions in the context of the foundation and regulation of voluntary associations more broadly, and consider the degree to which his rivals may have been innovating under the influence of emergent synagogue practice.

For these reasons, it is inappropriate to speak of Christian "scriptures" in the second century, for all that it implies about a natural, organic continuation of an assumed (but problematic) earlier Jewish scripturalism. Harry Gamble proposed that texts first become authoritative, sanctified, and hence "scripture" as a *prerequisite* for a later canon-formation.⁶² But the evidence does not bear out this simple, monolithic trajectory. Rather, textual authority is diffuse and variegated, setting-dependent, limited, and specialized. Canonization solidifies and consolidates textual authority, within the terms of the canon's purpose. There are multiple canons within a single community based upon function, as well as canons within canons. Within Jewish practice, the complex use of scripture in weekly and festival readings makes use of distinct, interlocking canons. Medieval Christian Bibles regularly omit the Apocalypse of John because, although it is "canonical," it is not part of the liturgical "canon," i.e., readings are not taken from it in church. We almost invariably speak too broadly and imprecisely when we speak of "scripture" and "canon" as if they were obvious, clearly defined categories in our data.

As various loosely affiliated groups and communities came over time to identify with "Judaism" or "Christianity," their textual practices and repertoire similarly solidified in differentiated ways. There were canons aplenty from which both groups could draw inspiration and criteria for settling textual authority in their communities: medical, astrological, and alchemical canons, philosophical canons, poetic canons, theatrical canons. There was nothing new in that. But *scriptural* canons awaited the creation of something called "scripture," which only came into being with the emergence of these religions themselves in the second and following centuries. We impose the concept of scripture earlier in history only by anachronism, by assuming that scripture is a "natural" category of religious activity. But in fact it is a historical emergent, part of a reordering of institutional religion as distinct "religions" that began approximately two thousand years ago. So, in order to understand where scriptural canons came from historically, we must put our minds back into a time before "scripture" was an obvious and

⁶² Gamble 1995, 214

ubiquitous thing. Among Christ groups that organized themselves on the model of voluntary associations, the idea of textual authority derived from the sort of texts and their uses found in such institutions, and that is the light in which we must understand the formation of the Christian canon, and some of its most noticeable peculiarities, before that original context became obscured by the redefinition of *what* was canonized as “scripture.”