

“If You Believed Moses, You Would Believe Me”:
The Portrayal of Jesus as Interpreter of Scripture in John’s Gospel

by

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Abstract

The use of scripture in John's Gospel has been explored extensively by scholars. Less scholarly attention has been paid to the features and significance of the Fourth Gospel's narrative depiction of Jesus himself as interpreter of scripture. This study offers an account of the portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture in John's Gospel through a close reading of selected passages that contribute most directly to that portrayal. Further, this study situates the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus within the exegetical milieu of Early Judaism by providing a survey of portrayals of other scripture-interpreting characters in a range of literature from Jewish antiquity (Deuteronomy, Daniel, Philo, Qumran, Matthew's Gospel, rabbinic literature). Using a five-part heuristic device drawn from my own reading of these texts and influenced by Hindy Najman's account of "Mosaic Discourse" in the Second Temple period, I undertake a comparison of the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus with the portrayals of scripture-interpreting characters in the surveyed works.

The findings of this descriptive and comparative work are that the Fourth Gospel's depiction of Jesus as interpreter of scripture is very much at home in the exegetical milieu of Jewish antiquity. There is little in Jesus' use of scripture, as depicted in the Fourth Gospel, that cannot also be found in other Jewish literature of this era. And yet the cumulative effect of the Fourth Gospel's depiction of its protagonist drawing upon scriptural passages and images overwhelmingly as a witness to his own identity is indeed unique in its rhetorical force and hermeneutical implications. John's Gospel depicts Jesus not only as interpreter of the words of scripture, but as the very Word (Logos) of God made flesh. This portrayal, while drawing upon and exemplifying common elements of the exegetical milieu of Early Judaism, pushes beyond the boundaries of those elements in its depiction of Jesus.

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Chapter 1

Situating This Study in the Context of Scholarship on the Use of Scripture in John's Gospel

The landscape of the use of scripture in John's Gospel has been mapped in considerable detail by scholarship.¹ Some maps explore and describe the allusive use of scriptural images, motifs, figures and themes in John's Gospel. Others attend specifically to the use of explicit scriptural citations in John. Here the traditional areas of inquiry include the potential sources utilized by the Gospel writer, particular formulae and methods of citation, and the interpretive methods at play. Recent developments in the world of scholarship are significantly enriching the data pool from which such maps may be fashioned. I will highlight a few of these developments that directly impact the current study regarding the portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture in John's Gospel.

First, the discovery and analysis of the documents from Qumran have revealed a greater state of fluidity to what we might term "scripture" in the Second Temple period generally and in the first and early second centuries of the Common Era.² There is evidence of the use of texts that were considered to be authoritative writings – texts that functioned as sacred scripture – but it can no longer be assumed that these texts were in a stable, standardized form during that period.³ This new

¹ For recent surveys of scholarship on the use of scripture in John's gospel, see Alicia D. Myers, "Abiding Words: An Introduction to Perspectives on John's Use of Scripture," in *Abiding Words: The Use of Scripture in the Gospel of John*, ed. Alicia D. Myers and Bruce G. Schuchard (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015), 1-18; Alicia D. Myers, *Characterizing Jesus: A Rhetorical Analysis on the Fourth Gospel's Use of Scripture in its Presentation of Jesus* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 1-17; Ruth Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture: "The Jews" and the Scriptural Citations in John 1:19-12:15*, BIS 110 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 5-37; Beth Stovell, *Mapping Metaphorical Discourse in the Fourth Gospel: John's Eternal King* (LB 5; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 1-24.

² Timothy Law (*When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2013], 43) succinctly describes this as "a period of textual plurality."

³ *Ibid.*, 2-3. See also Geza Vermes, "Introduction" in *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 23-24. Regarding the importance of the distinction between "scripture" and "canon," see Michael Holmes, "The Biblical Canon," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed.

data directly impacts analysis of the way such authoritative texts are cited, adapted, and used in the composition of new narratives such as the Fourth Gospel.

Second, there is an increased awareness and appreciation of the significant diversity that existed in the Second Temple period and what is sometimes called Formative or Early Judaism.⁴ Jacob Neusner and Alan Segal's mode of speaking of multiple "Judaisms" in the 1st century has become a truism in the scholarly literature about this period, with the related insight that there is no single stream in the 1st century that can be identified as a kind of "normative Judaism."⁵ This is significant when considering the Fourth Gospel's depiction of Jesus engaged with his contemporaries in intra-Jewish hermeneutical polemics.

A third development in recent scholarship has to do with the growing influence of studies of "inner-biblical interpretation" and the phenomenon of "intertextuality" within scripture itself.⁶ Attending to the processes whereby authoritative texts are interpreted and re-worked in later texts – that is, the study of the dynamics of tradition and innovation within scripture itself – is fundamental to the present project.

Finally, several recent narrative-critical and rhetorical-critical studies focus specifically on the use of scripture in the portrayal of specific characters within the Gospel accounts. In recent publications, Alicia Myers and Ruth Sheridan both attend to the function of explicit citations of

Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 406-426.

⁴ See John J. Collins and Daniel Harlow (preface to *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010], vi) for a discussion of issues involved in naming and delimiting the time frame in question.

⁵ Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 29. See also James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 24. See also Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

⁶ Michael Fishbane's book *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) is a landmark study in the area of "inner-biblical interpretation" within the Hebrew Bible. Richard Hays' book *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) has drawn significant attention to the dynamics of intertextuality in New Testament studies, drawing on the work of contemporary literary critics such as Julia Kristeva and John Hollander.

scripture in John's Gospel in the development of specific characters: "the Jews" (Sheridan)⁷ and Jesus himself (Myers).⁸ Stan Harstine has produced a study of Moses as a character in the Fourth Gospel,⁹ and Michael Labahn, in an essay entitled "Scripture *Talks* Because Jesus *Talks*," argues that scripture itself should be understood as "an orally-performing character" within John's Gospel.¹⁰

The present study is yet another expedition into the rich and varied landscape of the use of scripture in John's Gospel. I intend to explore a question that has yet to be thoroughly pursued in the scholarly literature. While there have been, and continue to be, extensive studies of various facets of the use of scripture in John's Gospel, including recent investigation of the use of scripture in the characterization of key figures in the Gospel narrative, there has yet to be a book-length scholarly study of the features and significance of the Gospel's portrayal of Jesus himself *as interpreter of scripture*.¹¹

Before outlining the plan of the current study, I will comment on a few of the most relevant recent works, highlighting where my approach offers a different angle than that of previous scholarship.

Steve Moyise and Richard Hays have each published recent broad-strokes portraits of the relationship between Old Testament scripture and the Gospel portrayals of Jesus. Moyise offers a short chapter on Jesus' use of scripture in each of the four canonical Gospels, but his primary interest has to do with the question of what we can say about "the historical Jesus" and what the Gospels may

⁷ Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture*.

⁸ Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*.

⁹ Stan Harstine, *Moses as a Character in the Fourth Gospel: A Study of Ancient Reading Techniques*, JSNTSup 229 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Michael Labahn, "Scripture Talks Because Jesus Talks: The Narrative Rhetoric of Persuading and Creativity in John's Use of Scripture" in *The Fourth Gospel in First-Century Media Culture*, ed. Anthony Le Donne and Tom Thatcher (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 140.

¹¹ Judith Lieu's brief essay represents a beginning in this direction ("Narrative Analysis and Scripture in John" in *The Old Testament in the New Testament: Essays in Honour of J.L. North*, ed. Steve Moyise [Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000], 144-163).

and may not reveal about how the historical Jesus interpreted scripture.¹² My interest, by contrast, is to attend to the Gospel portrayals of Jesus as interpreter of scripture as we have them in their final canonical form. Richard Hays' 2014 publication focuses on the New Testament Gospels' "intertextual engagement with Israel's scripture" in their presentation of "the divine identity of Jesus."¹³ The present study will also explore this intertextual engagement but with a specific focus on the Fourth Evangelist's portrayal of Jesus's identity and activity *as interpreter* of Israel's scriptures.

Several recent studies have investigated the use of scripture in the characterization of specific figures in John's Gospel. Most notably for our purposes, Myers has undertaken a rhetorical analysis of the use of scripture in the Fourth Gospel's presentation of Jesus.¹⁴ The question that I am pursuing is distinct from that of Myers, beginning with the observation that the Fourth Gospel does not only use scripture in its presentation of Jesus but *presents Jesus himself as interpreter of scripture*. Scripture is not only used and interpreted by the Gospel writer in the Gospel's characterization of Jesus – the use and interpretation of scripture represents a core facet of Jesus' own identity and activity as presented in the Gospel's narratives. Judith Lieu, in her article "Narrative Analysis and Scripture in John," makes a promising beginning in this direction, briefly exploring "the use of Scripture... as found in the mouths of the various participants in the Johannine drama," including the narrator, Jesus, and the opponents of Jesus.¹⁵ My study continues the kind of exploration suggested and begun by Lieu, with specific and more sustained attention to the presentation of Jesus as interpreter of scripture in John's Gospel.

¹² Steve Moyise, *Jesus and Scripture: Studying the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).

¹³ Richard Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), ix.

¹⁴ Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*.

¹⁵ Lieu, "Narrative Analysis and Scripture in John," 145. See Myers (*Characterizing Jesus*, 7-8) who acknowledges Lieu's "initial investigation" as "preliminary" and "promising" in demonstrating that "there is much more to learn concerning how Scripture is used by characters in the Fourth Gospel."

Another comparable effort is Ellen Bradshaw Aitken's short essay "Tradition in the Mouth of the Hero: Jesus as an Interpreter of Scripture."¹⁶ Drawing upon Richard Martin's work regarding characters performing "authoritative speech acts" in Greek epic poems like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Aitken compares the depiction of Jesus as performer/interpreter of scripture in Luke and Hebrews with the *Heroikos* of Philostratus.¹⁷ Aitken's analysis is suggestive and could be fruitfully brought into dialogue with John's Gospel as well. However, whereas Aitken draws upon classical Greek epics for points of comparison, I compare the depictions of Jesus in John's Gospel with portrayals of other interpreters of scripture in a range of roughly contemporaneous Jewish literature.

A helpful tool for this kind of comparison is provided by the concept of "Mosaic Discourse" as described by Hindy Najman.¹⁸ Mosaic Discourse, in Najman's account, helps to describe the way different figures in the ancient world are depicted as participants in "a discourse tied to a founder," deriving authoritative status from that association.¹⁹ Although Najman does not examine the Gospels among her examples of literature that participate in Mosaic Discourse in the Second Temple period, my study draws upon Najman's work as a resource to facilitate my comparative analysis.²⁰

¹⁶ Ellen Aitken, "Tradition in the Mouth of the Hero: Jesus as an Interpreter of Scripture" in *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark: Essays Dedicated to Werner Kelber*, ed. Richard Horsley, Jonathan Draper, John Foley, and Werner H. Kelber (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006), 97-103.

¹⁷ Aitken ("Tradition in the Mouth of the Hero," 103) notes parallels between their depictions of "the role of the hero as a transmitter of tradition" and the way in which "the special knowledge of the hero... becomes available through the media of cultic practice to those who cultivate affiliation, devotion, and intimacy with the hero."

¹⁸ Hindy Najman, *Seconding Sinai: The Development of Mosaic Discourse in Second Temple Judaism*, JSJS 77 (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12-13. For this concept of a mode of discourse linked to a founder, Najman draws upon the work of Michel Foucault. See Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

²⁰ The "four features of Mosaic Discourse" as articulated by Najman (*Seconding Sinai*, 16-17) are as follows: "I. By reworking and expanding older traditions through interpretation, a new text claims for itself the authority that already attaches to those traditions. II. The new text ascribes to itself the status of Torah. It may portray itself as having either a heavenly or an earthly origin, but in any event as an authentic expression of the Torah of Moses. III. The new text is said to be a re-presentation of the revelation at Sinai. There is repeated emphasis on gaining access to revelation through a re-creation of the Sinai experience. This strategy emphasizes the present-ness of the Sinai event, even in the face of destruction and exile. IV. The new text is said to be associated with, or produced by, the founding figure, Moses. This claim serves to authorize the new

The question under discussion is thus modulated from the more familiar scholarly emphasis on the Gospel writers as interpreters of scripture to an exploration of how the Gospel writers (and John in particular) choose to portray *Jesus* as interpreter of scripture.²¹ The broad question that animates my study, then, is the following: how is Jesus portrayed in John's Gospel as interpreter of Israel's scriptures?²² This gives rise to a series of sub-questions. What are the main characteristics or features of the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus as scripture interpreter? How does this portrayal compare with those of other characters in roughly contemporary Jewish literature who are also depicted as interpreters of scripture? What is the significance of the fact that Jesus is depicted in this way in John's Gospel, and what are some of the potential implications of these observations?

As such, the primary focus of this study is descriptive. I seek to identify and describe key features of the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture. It is, therefore, a literary study, concerned with the literary portrayal of Jesus as the primary protagonist of the Gospel narrative. The secondary focus of this study is comparative, situating the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus within the context of other portrayals of scripture interpreters in a range of literature from

interpretations as divine revelation or dictation and as prophecy or inspired interpretation. The new text can then be seen as an extension of earlier ancestral discourse.”

²¹ The fact of such a portrayal is, of course, also an expression of the fact that the Gospel writers were scripture interpreters. And the fact that Jesus is depicted as an interpreter of scripture, engaged in hermeneutical polemics with other interpreters, may well also be an extension of the kinds of hermeneutical polemics engaged by the Gospel writers in their context. There is a long tradition of reading John's Gospel in precisely this way – as a two-level narrative that recounts the story of Jesus on one level, and narrates the experience of the “Johannine community” at another (e.g.: J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd ed. [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003], first published in 1968; and Raymond E. Brown (*The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* [New York: Paulist Press, 1979]). Attempting to read “behind the text” to investigate the historical experience of the community(ies) that gave rise to John's Gospel is not, however, the focus of my study.

²² The reader will notice that sometimes I refer to Jesus as “an interpreter of scripture,” and at other times I reference him “as interpreter of scripture” or “as scripture interpreter” without using the indefinite article. When the indefinite article is dropped, this is both for the sake of stylistic variation and fluidity as well as to signal a sense of the performative function of this role. That is, to refer to Jesus “as interpreter of scripture” has a parallel in other usages, like “she is visiting in her role as pastor,” when one might also say “as a pastor.” I am not here making a case for a particular understanding or theory of an official role or office of “scripture interpreter” in first century Judaism; I am simply explaining my usage of the phrase. For an analysis of specific scribal roles at the time of Jesus, see Chris Keith, *Jesus Against the Scribal Elite: The Origins of the Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

Jewish antiquity. And the third focus of this study, while necessarily and intentionally understated, is reflective. What is the significance and what might be some of the implications of what my descriptive and comparative work has shown?

The descriptive, comparative, and reflective tasks with regard to Jesus as interpreter of scripture in John's Gospel proceed in this study as follows. Chapter one situates my work within the context of recent scholarship on the use of scripture in the Fourth Gospel, differentiating my research question from those that have most typically been pursued before. Chapter two, in turn, prepares the ground for my descriptive, comparative, and reflective work by surveying a range of literature from Jewish antiquity, attending specifically to the depictions of a variety of different characters that function as scripture interpreters. In so doing, chapter two provides a means of situating the Fourth Gospel's depiction of Jesus within its roughly contemporary Jewish interpretive milieu. This task is aided by utilizing a five part heuristic device derived from my own comparative reading of the selected texts in question and significantly informed and influenced by the work of Najman, whose account of Mosaic Discourse is referenced above.

In chapter three I work at the descriptive task through a close reading of a series of passages within John's Gospel that contribute most directly and significantly to its portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture.

Chapter four then focuses on the comparative task, bringing together the observations and insights from the survey of texts from Jewish antiquity with the findings from the analysis of the Fourth Gospel's depiction of Jesus. This comparative work utilizes the same five part heuristic device that was employed in chapter two.

In chapter five I articulate some conclusions and reflect further on the potential significance and implications of this descriptive and comparative work. I argue that the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture is very much at home in the exegetical milieu of Jewish antiquity in

and around the Second Temple period. There is little in Jesus' use of scripture as depicted in John's Gospel that cannot also be found in other literature from this era. And yet the cumulative impact of the Fourth Gospel's depiction of Jesus as interpreter of scripture, especially in its concentration on and its claims about the identity and mission of Jesus, does indeed appear to be unique in its rhetorical force and in its hermeneutical implications. According to this Gospel, not only does Jesus function as an authoritative interpreter of scripture; he is the incarnate Logos/Wisdom of God. All of scripture testifies to him, and he is, according to this Gospel, the fulfillment, embodiment, and hermeneutical key for understanding the meaning of scripture.

Chapter 2

Character Portrayals of Scripture Interpreters in Selected Texts from Jewish Antiquity

Introduction

To explore the features and significance of the Fourth Gospel's characterization of Jesus as interpreter of scripture, it will be valuable to situate this portrayal in the context of a range of other works in Jewish antiquity that also depict key characters as interpreters of scripture.¹ I will begin this survey with the depiction of Moses in Deuteronomy, since Moses becomes a foundational figure for Judaism in the Second Temple period to the extent that, as Najman has pointed out, "authoritative law comes to be called the Torah of Moses"² and "what *we* might call a 'new' law... is characterized as the Law of Moses"³ (emphasis in the original). In fact, references to the name of Moses in this literature often serve to evoke the written Torah itself – a dynamic that is evident in John's gospel as well.⁴

In her study of a range of Second Temple texts, Najman has argued that Deuteronomy is "a work that may be seen as the origin of Mosaic Discourse and as a model for later instances of that Discourse."⁵ Building on Najman's insights, the present study considers Deuteronomy's depiction of Moses to be a foundational point of reference for portrayals of scripture interpreters in subsequent

¹ While the influences on John's Gospel are by no means limited to Jewish literature, and I make no specific claims (nor does my argument depend on any specific claims) regarding the authorship, date, and location of John's Gospel, I think that John's Gospel is fruitfully considered within the context of – and indeed, as a participant in – the intra-Jewish polemics over the interpretation of scripture.

² Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 10.

³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴ E.g.: John 1:17, 45; 5:39-45; 7:22-23. See also Mk 10:3-5; Luke 24:27. Dorothy A. Lee ("The Significance of Moses in the Gospel of John," *Australian Biblical Review* 63 [2015]: 52) puts it this way: "In part, Moses becomes a cipher for the relationship between Jesus and the law..."

⁵ Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 19.

literary works of Early Judaism and beyond.⁶ I then move on to consider portrayals of scripture interpreters in selected texts from some of those subsequent works: Daniel, Philo, Qumran, Matthew's Gospel, and rabbinic literature.⁷

I identify five features that are common, in various ways and to varying degrees, in the characterization of scripture interpreters in much of this literature. This is not an exhaustive list, but it offers a helpful framework with which to navigate the vast landscape of these writings.⁸ The five features are: 1) the portrayal of a scripture-interpreting character within a narrative literary context; 2) the depiction of the character as an authoritative – and, at times, a radically revisionary – interpreter of scripture; 3) the dynamic interplay between human and divine words in the portrayal of the character; 4) the modes in which the character participates in “contemporizing” scripture;⁹ and 5) the ways in which the depiction of the character includes and points toward the extension of interpretive activity and authority to others. Attending to the presence or absence of these five features, to varying degrees, will prove illuminating for our subsequent exploration of the portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture in John's Gospel.

⁶ Najman's account of “Mosaic Discourse” as evidenced in a range of Second Temple literature has impacted my thinking about the ways in which different texts claim authority for themselves and for the various characters that they portray as scripture interpreters and faithful heirs of the Mosaic legacy. See also David Lincicum's treatment of the reception history and what he terms “the broader effective history of Deuteronomy” in *Paul and the Early Jewish Encounter With Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).

⁷ Clearly other sources could be included as well, such as the biblical depictions of Josiah and Ezra, as well as many examples from the voluminous writings of the Second Temple period (1 Maccabees, Josephus, the Enochan literature, and so on). For our purposes, however, the six selected texts will suffice to give a sense for the range of the characterization of scripture interpreters in Jewish antiquity.

⁸ My indebtedness to Najman is especially evident in the second, third, and fourth features of my schema, which draw upon her account of the four features of “Mosaic Discourse” (see note 20 in chapter one above, and Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 16-17).

⁹ Richard Longenecker (*Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975], 39) uses the term “contemporizing,” and Paul Miller (““They Saw His Glory and Spoke of Him”: The Gospel of John and the Old Testament” in *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament*, ed. Stanley Porter [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006], 129) uses the word “contemporize” to describe the approach of early rabbinic interpreters in making scripture relevant to their current circumstances. Lincicum (*Paul and the Early Jewish Encounter With Deuteronomy*, 3) similarly speaks of the “contemporizing quality” of Deuteronomy.

A. Moses in *Deuteronomy*

Deuteronomy, from beginning to end, is a profoundly hermeneutical work – an interpretive *tour de force*. Placed at the close of the Pentateuch,¹⁰ it is presented as an exposition (1:5) of the commandments of God that were previously delivered at Horeb (Deuteronomy’s name for Sinai) and are now passed on to a new generation on the plains of Moab, poised to enter the land of promise.¹¹ The very essence of Deuteronomy is that it is a re-articulation and indeed, as Michael Fishbane and Bernard Levinson have shown, a fundamental reworking of predecessor texts.¹²

It is not by accident that this foundational exemplar of ancient hermeneutics is presented to the reader in the form of a series of addresses by a particular character, the figure of Moses. Moses is depicted in Deuteronomy as expositor and interpreter *par excellence* of the revelation of God, one who “spoke to the Israelites just as the LORD had commanded him to speak to them” (1:3) and who “undertook to expound this Torah”¹³ (1:5). Deuteronomy’s opening and concluding chapters set the speeches of Moses in a narrative frame that speaks of him in the third person. When read in canonical context, the effect is to distinguish Deuteronomy from the preceding narration in Exodus through Numbers as a subsequent re-telling of the history and the law. Thus Moses in Deuteronomy represents not only the one to whom and through whom the law was given at Horeb (Sinai) but also the one who, in a different place and time, becomes its first and foremost authoritative interpreter for

¹⁰ Gerald Gerbrandt (*Deuteronomy*, Believers Church Bible Commentary [Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2015], 20) calls Deuteronomy “the *capstone* and climax of the Pentateuch.”

¹¹ The Greek name assigned to the book in the Septuagint – “Deutero-nomos,” meaning “second law” – aptly captures this dynamic.

¹² In Levinson’s succinct formulation (*Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Innovation* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], 3): “[c]entral to Deuteronomy is the question of hermeneutics.” Specifically, Levinson argues that “Deuteronomy represents a radical revision of the Covenant Code” of Exod 20:22-23:33. For an encyclopedic treatment of the reworking of predecessor texts within the Hebrew Bible, see Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*.

¹³ In Deut 1:5 the NRSV uses the word “law,” but I have retained the Hebrew word *Torah* for emphasis. Biblical citations throughout this study will be from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

a new generation. Indeed, by means of the book of Deuteronomy as a written text, Moses becomes an authoritative source and interpreter for subsequent generations as well.¹⁴

A close reading of the “words that Moses spoke” (1:1) in Deuteronomy reveals that not only is he portrayed as an authoritative source and interpreter for the commandments of God but a profoundly revisionist one as well. While Levinson has demonstrated Deuteronomy’s “hermeneutics of innovation” in transforming specific legal traditions,¹⁵ Deuteronomy’s Moses also re-tells episodes of the history narrated in Exodus through Numbers, and is depicted not merely as rehearsing but revising those stories in a way that serves to enhance a sense of his own initiative and authority.¹⁶

Indeed, from its very beginning, Deuteronomy is emphatic that “[t]hese are the words that Moses spoke” (1:1).¹⁷ While the text quickly clarifies that “Moses spoke to the Israelites just as the

¹⁴ Najman (*Seconding Sinai*, 19) describes Deuteronomy as “a work that may be seen as the origin of Mosaic Discourse and as a model for later instances of that Discourse.”

¹⁵ See Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation*, 1-6, 23-143.

¹⁶ This is especially evident when comparing the appointment of leaders for Israel in Ex 18:13-27 and Num 11:14-17, narrated as third-person accounts about Moses, with Deuteronomy’s version as a story Moses tells about himself (Deut 1:9-18). Moses’ self-description in the Deuteronomy passage gives an impression of independence, initiative and authority that is noticeably distinct from the other versions of the story. Deuteronomy’s version has Moses assessing the situation and acting entirely on his own, with no mention of advice, aid or instructions from either Jethro or the LORD. Where Moses in both Exodus 18 and Numbers 11 assents to a plan that originates elsewhere, the story in Deuteronomy 1 has the people affirming and assenting to the proposal coming from Moses himself (1:14). Moses’ account in Deuteronomy, rather than emphasizing the faithfulness with which he follows instructions (since in this telling he receives none), concludes instead with his words to the people: “So I charged you at that time with all the things that you should do” (1:18). Deuteronomy’s depiction of Moses’ self-portrayal thus serves to enhance a sense of his own initiative and authority.

A similar dynamic can be observed later in the same chapter, where Moses’ revisionist story-telling has the LORD angry with him and prohibiting his entry into the land “because of you” – that is, the people, “this evil generation” (1:34-37). This claim, repeated in 3:23-28, stands in marked contrast with Numbers 20:10-13 and 27:12-14 where Moses is denied entry to the land because of his own disobedience at the waters of Meribah, where he struck the rock instead of speaking to it as commanded by YHWH. Again, Moses is pictured in Deuteronomy as narrating the history and describing himself in a way that enhances his own status and authority, in this case revising the narrative to deny (or at least omit mention of) his own sin. Strikingly, Deuteronomy 32:48-52 – a third person narrative about Moses, in which YHWH speaks directly – retains Numbers’ rationale for Moses not entering the land. Moses’ self-characterization in 1:37 and 3:23-28 is thus explicitly undermined and contradicted by the third person narration at the end of the book.

¹⁷ This is particularly striking when compared to the conclusion of Numbers, the book that precedes Deuteronomy in the order that came to be canonical. Where Numbers 36:13 summarizes its preceding material by declaring “[t]hese are the commandments and the ordinances that *the LORD* commanded *through Moses*” (emphasis added), the opening words of Deuteronomy put a heavier accent on the agency of Moses himself.

LORD had commanded him to speak to them” (1:3), the emphasis is clear: what follows are the words of Moses. In Deuteronomy the divine voice speaks to Israel by means of a human one, who “undertook to expound this Torah as follows” (1:5).

In fact, Deuteronomy exhibits an intricate interweaving of the words of Moses and the words of God in its portrayal of Moses as expositor of the Torah of God. After Moses’ first-person narration of the people’s history since Horeb in chapters 1-3, he repeatedly asserts his own role in teaching, charging, and “setting before you” the “commandments” and “statutes and ordinances” – that is, “this entire Torah”¹⁸ – of God (4:1-8). While there is the insistence that God intends to speak and does speak to the people of Israel directly (4:10, 12, 15, 36; 5:4), this direct address is in fact carefully circumscribed by the text. In Deuteronomy, God speaks only the Decalogue to the whole assembly of Israel at Horeb.¹⁹ The rest of “the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances” contained in Deuteronomy are voiced exclusively by Moses, who repeatedly and emphatically delivers them in the first person (“the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe” – 4:1; also 4:40; 5:1; 8:1; 11:8, 13; 13:1) with the insistence that these are as “the LORD your God charged me to teach you” (6:1; also 2:1; 1:3).

This pattern of emphatic first person address serves to elevate the agency and authority of Moses. The people have no access to God’s words in Deuteronomy except as mediated by Moses. The human and the divine word have effectively become one, and this union is consummated in the written text of “this Torah” – that is, the book of Deuteronomy – itself.²⁰ Moses is the authoritative

¹⁸ Again, for emphasis, I have retained the Hebrew word *Torah* for the English word “law.” See note 13 above.

¹⁹ Even that direct address is expressed as reported by Moses, in the narrative context of Moses’ first person address – see 5:4ff. Then, at the conclusion of the Decalogue, we are told: “The LORD spoke those words – those and no more – to your whole congregation at the mountain...” Deut 5:19, according to the JPS Tanakh translation (*The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004]). The verse is Deut 5:22 in the NRSV.

²⁰ Gerbrandt (*Deuteronomy*, 43) refers to Deuteronomy as “the word of God” that “comes in human form – one might compare this to the miracle of the incarnation in the New Testament.”

speaker of the words of the LORD, words that have taken the shape, in this literary work, of sacred scripture that is authoritative for Israel on an ongoing basis.

Another striking feature of Deuteronomy's portrayal of Moses as authoritative expositor of "this Torah" is the contemporizing quality of his teaching. This is expressed most vividly in 5:1-5, where Moses "convened all Israel," rehearsing his by-now-familiar role as teacher of "statutes and ordinances" that they are to "learn" and "observe diligently" (5:1). Then Moses makes the following astonishing claim:

The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire. (Deut 5:2-4)

Given that Deuteronomy takes care to set itself apart in space and time as "words that Moses spoke" to a new post-Horeb generation, this contemporizing address stands out all the more. Moses here insists that the covenant God made at Horeb, the "face-to-face" encounter between God and the people of Israel, is to be understood as a *present* reality, not (or not just) a historical one. Moses deliberately and dramatically collapses the time gap that the text has previously taken pains to underline, in order that his current listeners will understand themselves to be present at Horeb, receiving first hand the commandments of the LORD and encountering God face to face.²¹

While Deuteronomy goes to considerable lengths to underline Moses' unique role and authority, the text extends an interpretive and instructional role to others as well, and not only in the explicit promise that "the LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me" (18:15). We have already noted Deuteronomy's description of the appointment of leaders to assist Moses with the administration of justice (1:9-18). Not to be missed is the claim that when these leaders judge, "the

²¹ As Lincicum (*Paul and the Early Jewish Encounter With Deuteronomy*, 3) puts it: "Deuteronomy already represents itself as a re-visioning of the law and rings with a contemporizing quality that seeks to collapse the distance between generations in its telescopic address." Deut 29:14-15 further extends the hermeneutical imagination and "contemporizing quality" exemplified by Deut 5. The present-ness of the covenant with God radiates in all directions – again, through the agency of Moses.

judgment is God's" (1:17). This is an elevated claim for human judgment indeed, and it describes judicial decisions not of Moses but of the leaders selected by the people themselves (1:13). This joint leadership is further enacted when, at the end of the legal corpus of chapters 12-26, we are told that "Moses and the elders of Israel charged all the people as follows: Keep the entire commandment that I am commanding you today" (27:1). Here it is not only Moses who speaks authoritatively; the familiar first person address of Moses is now shared with "the elders of Israel" as well. The same is true in 27:9-10, but now "the levitical priests" are the ones who share with Moses the role of public exhortation of the people.²² While Moses is clearly afforded pride of place as the authoritative speaker, certain elements of distributed legal (and potentially interpretive) authority are present, if understated.²³

B. Daniel in *Daniel*

The book of Daniel is a collection of court stories and apocalyptic visions that are also deeply and explicitly interpretive in their focus and concern. While the bulk of the interpretive activity depicted in Daniel has to do with the meaning of dreams and visions (Dan 2; 4; 7; 8; 10), as well as the mysterious writing on the king's palace wall (Dan 5) and "the book of truth" (Dan 11 and 12), Daniel 9 is explicitly concerned with the interpretation of scripture. Here Daniel is depicted, in first person narration, consulting "the books [*sefarim*]" that record "the word of the LORD to the prophet Jeremiah" (9:2). According to Fishbane, the character of Daniel stands as a paradigmatic figure for the transition from prophets who receive a direct word from YHWH to "a new type of 'prophetic'

²² One must not overstate the case here. In both 27:1 and 27:9-10, the sense is that Moses is the authoritative figure. It could be that the function of the "elders" and "levitical priests" who make the joint pronouncements with him are portrayed as transmitters of Moses' words to the people. Compare the explicitly interpretive role of the Levites in the public Torah reading in Nehemiah 8:7-8. This interpretive/explanatory function, while possible, is not made explicit in Deuteronomy.

²³ Deut 27 is also suggestive: instructions are given to "all the people" to "set up large stones" and "write on them the words of this Torah" (27:1-3; see also v. 8). This task of inscription – first performed by the LORD himself, entrusting the tablets to Moses (5:22) – has now been given to "all the people."

figure – a pneumatic exegete, guided by divine instruction into the true meaning of ancient oracles.”²⁴ Fishbane maintains that in Judaism, from Daniel on, new revelation from God is understood to be received not through a direct spoken word but via inspired study of written texts.²⁵ This claim, while pointing helpfully to the big-picture progression in the move “from scribalism to rabbinism,”²⁶ needs to be qualified in light of the apocalyptic genre which stands precisely within the transition period between the classical biblical prophets and Rabbinic Judaism, and which is characterized by a “a revelation [or, as per Fishbane, “a direct spoken word”²⁷]... mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient...”²⁸ In the case of Daniel 9, the “revelation” given to Daniel is specifically and explicitly that of a novel interpretation of a previously written prophetic oracle (that is, a scriptural text).

The apocalyptic visions of Daniel 7-12, including the exegetical innovation described in Daniel 9, are set in the narrative context provided by the court tales of the first six chapters where Daniel’s identity as interpreter is established. Daniel is part of the group of exiles characterized at the outset as meeting Nebuchadnezzar’s requirements to be “young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent

²⁴ Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 69. Matthias Henze (“The Use of Scripture in the Book of Daniel” in *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism*, ed. Matthias Henze [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012], 300-301) takes issue with Fishbane’s description of Daniel as an inspired exegete. While I agree with Henze’s statements, contra Fishbane, that Daniel 9 depicts Daniel as claiming to understand Jeremiah’s prophecies re: the number of years of Israel’s exile, and not asking for a new interpretation, I disagree that this disqualifies Daniel from being understood as an inspired exegete. See my discussion of the depiction of Daniel as interpreter of scripture in Daniel 9 below.

²⁵ See Fishbane’s essay “From Scribalism to Rabbinism” in *The Garments of Torah*, 64-78, for a description and analysis of this process.

²⁶ The title of Fishbane’s essay on this process. See note 25 above.

²⁷ Fishbane’s phrase in *The Garments of Torah*, 69.

²⁸ The beginning of the definition of “apocalyptic” as described by the Society of Biblical Literature group in *Semeia* 14 (p. 9) is: “Apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient...” As quoted by John J. Collins in *Daniel: with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature* (The Forms of Old Testament Literature XX; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 4. For an extended recent treatment of apocalyptic literature in the context of the writings surveyed in this study, see John J. Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

to serve in the king's palace" (1:3-4). They need to meet these criteria in order to be taught "the literature and language of the Chaldeans" (1:4) – that is, to be trained as scribes for the empire. Following an account of their admirable resistance to the king's diet (with a favourable comparison to those who did not practice such resistance), it is said of Daniel and his three companions that "God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom" with the further detail that "Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams" (1:17). Again they are compared favourably to their interpretive competitors (1:20). Thus Daniel and his companions are depicted from the outset as interpreters with a scribal skill-set whose capacities are to be attributed to God rather than to training received in the Babylonian court.

Daniel's status as a reliable and authoritative interpreter is established through a sequence of narratives demonstrating and confirming the characterization begun in chapter 1. Repeated emphasis is given to the divine origin of Daniel's understanding and interpretations and to Daniel's own piety in seeking God's illumination to provide "the meaning" (*peshet*) of the various mysteries with which he is confronted. While the objects of interpretation are most often dreams and visions (chapters 2, 4, 7, 8, 10-12), chapter 5 has Daniel interpreting written words on the wall of the king's palace, and chapter 9 depicts him pouring over "the books [*sefarim*]... according to the word of the LORD that had come to Jeremiah the prophet" (Dan 9:2). Thus, the depiction of Daniel as interpreter is explicitly extended to include the interpretation of scripture.

The specific issue regarding which Daniel consults these written oracles has to do with "the number of years that... must be fulfilled for the devastation of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years" (9:2). Interestingly, the text gives no indication that Daniel has any questions or uncertainties about the prophecy's meaning.²⁹ The fervent prayer that follows Daniel's mention of the scroll indicates

²⁹ Carol A. Newsom, *Daniel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 287. See also W. Sibley Towner, *Daniel* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1984), 128-129 and Henze, "The Use of Scripture in the Book of Daniel," 301.

that he understands very well the reasons for the exile, which is happening “just as it is written in the law of Moses” (9:13). Daniel’s prayer in this case is a confession and supplication for forgiveness on behalf of Israel (9:11-19, summarized in v. 20), not a request for illumination for the interpretation of a mysterious message. The message, apparently, is quite clear.

Except that it is not. In the midst of this confession and supplication, Daniel describes the arrival of Gabriel who says “I have now come out to give you wisdom and understanding” (9:22), and who reveals the specific and novel interpretation that the seventy years described by Jeremiah are to be understood as seventy weeks of years (seventy times seven), thus significantly prolonging the expected time of exile (9:24-27).

This dramatic interpretive move is attributed to direct revelation by the messenger of God in the midst of Daniel’s earnest and pious study of the written words of Jeremiah. The first-person narrative, depicting Daniel as a faithful and evidently confident interpreter of previously written prophetic texts, takes considerable care to attribute its radically new hermeneutical insight to direct revelation from God’s messenger. The new interpretation does not originate with Daniel – it is revealed to Daniel. This is a key feature of the portrayal of Daniel as an interpreter of scripture.

In our treatment of the depiction of Moses in Deuteronomy we noted the dynamic interplay of human and divine words. Where we might assume the logical pattern to be one of divine speech requiring human interpretation, Daniel frequently puts these the other way around: divinely granted interpretation is needed to make sense of human thoughts and dreams (eg: 2:29-30; 7:1, 28).³⁰ God does not speak directly in Daniel.³¹ Everything is mysterious, requiring interpretation, and the revelation of God consists in furnishing the capacity to interpret correctly. This includes, in chapter 9,

³⁰ It is striking that Daniel describes his own interpretive work as revealed by God “that you [the king] may understand the thoughts of your mind” (2:30). Similarly, after recounting his own vision in chapter 7, the character Daniel, in the first person, declares that “my thoughts greatly terrified me” (7:28).

³¹ Even the vision that Daniel himself receives in chapter 10 requires explanation from the mysterious “one in human form” (10:16, 18) who proceeds, in chapters 11-12, to relate to Daniel “what is inscribed in the book of truth” (10:21).

the written words of scripture, even when the interpreter may not be aware of the mysterious meaning or that such a cryptic meaning exists.³² The accent in Daniel, with regard to the divine role, is on the interpretive act itself. Without divine inspiration, interpretation is impossible.

The radically innovative interpretation of Jeremiah's prophecy, revealed by Gabriel to Daniel in chapter 9, represents another mode of what we have noted in Deuteronomy of "contemporizing" scripture. The hermeneutical innovation introduced by Gabriel gives new life to the old text and ensures that it speaks a powerful contemporary word to those far removed in time from the character of Daniel but living through "one of the most traumatic events in Jewish history" – the persecutions by Antiochus IV and the beginning of the Maccabean revolt – which was likely the period of the compilation of the book of Daniel.³³

The conceit of the text is that the revealed interpretation is to be kept "secret and sealed to the time of the end" (12:4, 9). In other words, the text is presented as a revelation granted in earlier days to Daniel, not to be publically shared until such a time as the events depicted in its visions have come to pass. This, of course, is a familiar trope in the pseudepigraphic writings of the Second Temple period.³⁴ It adds further prestige to Daniel as a reliable and effective interpreter. The text also refers to a future group of people called "those who are wise" (12:3, 10), who "shall shine like the brightness of the sky" (12:3) and who "shall understand" (12:10), even as Daniel himself admits to seeing and not understanding (12:8). Thus there is the suggestion that the function of Daniel as interpreter of dreams and of scripture, with the oft-emphasized God-given gift of understanding, is

³² While the explanation of a cryptic meaning, provided by an otherworldly figure to a human recipient, is characteristic of apocalyptic literature (see Collins, *Daniel*, 4-5), James Kugel (*How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* [New York: Free Press, 2007], 14) describes the assumption that "the Bible was a fundamentally cryptic text" as one of the four key "assumptions" shared by ancient interpreters.

³³ See Newsom, *Daniel*, 23 and John J. Collins, *Daniel, First Maccabees, Second Maccabees with an Excursus on the Apocalyptic Genre* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1981), 16-17.

³⁴ See Newsom, *Daniel*, 365.

carried forward by this community that is also characterized by its understanding of the secrets transmitted by the book itself.³⁵

C. Translators of the Septuagint in Philo's *On the Life of Moses* and his Self-Portrayal in *The Special Laws*

Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus, was “the most prolific commentator on Moses among Second Temple Jewish authors.”³⁶ In keeping with my focus on literary portrayals of characters who interpret scripture, I will briefly consider two such portrayals in the Philonic corpus: Philo's depiction of those who translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, and Philo's own self-portrayal as interpreter of scripture.

Philo's depiction of the Septuagint translators is presented in narrative form, telling the story of how the virtuous Ptolemy Philadelphus, “having conceived a great admiration for and love of the legislation of Moses, conceived the idea of having our laws translated into the Greek language” and contacted the high-priest/ruler of Judea, asking him to select appropriate men for the task (*Mos.* 2.31).³⁷ In his description of the chosen ones and their preparations for their work, Philo emphasizes their knowledge, virtue, and piety (*Mos.* 2.32, 36). Philo reports that God “assented to the their prayers” (*Mos.* 2.36) and recounts how “they, like men inspired, prophesied,” with each one, working independently, miraculously reproducing “the same nouns and verbs, as if some unseen prompter had suggested all their language to them” (*Mos.* 2.37). Philo characterizes the translators as “not mere interpreters but hierophants and prophets... with the most pure spirit of Moses” (*Mos.* 2.40), and his

³⁵ Fishbane (*Garments of Torah*, 69) refers to this group as “a specific community of interpretation” who have experienced “special exegetical illumination” and are “divinely guided into the ‘hidden and sealed’ meaning of ancient revelation (Dan. 12:9).” See also Carol Newsom's discussion (*Daniel*, 22-23) of “the wise” in Daniel 12 as potentially referring to “unrelated groups of scribes” who “took up the popular figure [of Daniel] for their own purposes,” resulting in the compilation of the book of Daniel itself.

³⁶ Gregory E. Sterling, “The Interpreter of Moses: Philo of Alexandria and the Biblical Text,” in *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism*, ed. Matthias Henze (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 415.

³⁷ All citations of Philo are from *The Works of Philo: New Updated Edition*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, 1993, 2013). Adobe PDF eBook.

narrative climaxes with an account of the ongoing annual celebration on the island of Pharos, attended not only by Jews but “a great number of persons of other nations” as well, “reverencing the place in which the first light of interpretation shone forth, and thanking God for that ancient piece of beneficence which was always young and fresh” (*Mos.* 2.41). In this way Philo emphatically depicts the origin of the Greek scriptures as “a major revelatory event” in its own right.³⁸

It is also telling that Philo chooses to narrate the story of the translation of the Hebrew (or as he calls them, Chaldean) scriptures at the beginning of the second volume of *On the Life of Moses*. Not only does he explicitly link the Septuagint translators with “the most pure spirit of Moses” (*Mos.* 2.40); by situating this narrative in the middle of his two-volume treatment of Moses himself, Philo further associates the translators and the product of their work as part and parcel of the Mosaic revelation. The literary context of Philo’s account of the origins of the Greek Bible makes the point powerfully: what Sinai is for Israel, Pharos is for the rest of the world.³⁹

Interestingly, Philo insists that the Septuagint translators were not in any way revisionary. After emphasizing that “every language, and the Greek language above all others, is rich in a variety of words” (*Mos.* 2.38) which can be combined in many different ways to communicate an idea, Philo goes to great lengths to emphasize that “in every case, exactly corresponding Greek words were employed to translate literally the appropriate Chaldaic [Hebrew] words” (*Mos.* 2.38). In fact, he compares this process to those of “geometry and logic” which “do not admit any variety of explanation” (*Mos.* 2.39).⁴⁰ Evidently this claim underlies Philo’s insistence that the translators are

³⁸ Peder Borgen, “Philo of Alexandria as Exegete,” in *A History of Biblical Interpretation: Volume 1 The Ancient Period*, ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 118.

³⁹ See Yehoshua Amir, “Scripture in the Writings of Philo” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder and Harry Sysling (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 443. See also Ellen Birnbaum, “Philo’s Relevance for the Study of Jews and Judaism in Antiquity” in *Reading Philo: A Handbook to Philo of Alexandria*, ed. Terry Seland (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 213-214. See also Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria*, 141.

⁴⁰ *Mos.* 2.39. These claims, of course, fly in the face of what have long been recognized as significant differences between the Septuagint and the Hebrew scriptures. Amir (“Scripture in the Writings of Philo,” 444)

“not mere interpreters but hierophants and prophets” who are perfectly in tune with “the most pure spirit of Moses” (*Mos.* 2.40), and is thus part and parcel of his case for the accuracy and authority of the Greek scriptures themselves.

Philo’s self-portrayal as interpreter of scripture presents a remarkable comparison. As Borgen puts it, Philo sees the Septuagint translation as “a decisive event in revelatory history,” and Philo’s own interpretive activity serves as a continuation of that work.⁴¹ Philo describes himself and his experiences of ascent and inspiration using some of the same vocabulary that he uses for both Moses and the Septuagint translators.⁴² These experiences provide the context for Philo’s explicitly exegetical work: “Behold, therefore, I venture not only to study the sacred commands of Moses, but also with an ardent love of knowledge to investigate each separate one of them, and to endeavor to reveal and to explain to those who wish to understand them, things concerning them which are not known to the multitude” (*Spec.* 3.6). By presenting himself in this way, Philo claims considerable authority for himself and his own interpretive work, which proves to be innovative and revisionary indeed.⁴³ As we shall see below, Philo extends this authority-conferring strategy not only to himself but to the Jewish people as a whole.⁴⁴

The interplay between human and divine words in Philo’s portrayal of the Septuagint translators, and in his own self-portrayal, builds on his depiction of Moses. Philo emphasizes the agency of Moses as lawgiver. Yehoshua Amir, for instance, states: “[i]n the first part [the first volume of Philo’s two-volume work *On the Life of Moses*] Moses is treated without reservation as the author

writes: “It is scarcely conceivable that Philo would have maintained this extravagant opinion if he had had sufficient linguistic knowledge to compare the two texts in detail. What guarantees for him the congruence of the Septuagint with the Hebrew original, is the miracle of the different translators’ word-for-word agreement.”

⁴¹ Peder Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria: An Exegete For His Time* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 156.

⁴² See Amir, “Scripture in the Writings of Philo,” 443.

⁴³ In his selection and sequencing of scriptural material, Philo omits particular episodes and adds his own thoughts and ideas (see Amir, 425-426). And, of course, Philo’s creative allegorical interpretations of scripture are especially well known.

⁴⁴ So Borgen (*Philo of Alexandria*, 204-205): “...Philo’s understanding of Moses ascent as the paradigmatic model of the ascent of the people.”

of the law, with the excellence of the laws serving as proof of their author's outstanding human qualities."⁴⁵ That said, Philo also considers Moses, as prophet, to be the recipient and transmitter of oracles that come directly from God. Consider the first sentence of Philo's treatment of Moses as prophet: "Now I am fully aware that all things written in the sacred books are oracles delivered through Moses; but I will confine myself to those which are more especially his..."⁴⁶ Later in the same sentence Philo states that "of the sacred oracles some are represented as delivered in the person of God by his interpreter, the divine prophet, while others are put in the form of question and answer, and others are delivered by Moses in his own character as a divinely-prompted lawgiver possessed by divine inspiration" (*Mos.* 2.188). Amir wrestles with the tensions inherent in these statements, where Moses is both "receiver and author of the law," coming to the conclusion that "the relationship between what comes to Moses and what he gives out cannot be disentangled. There is more of Moses' own personality in the Torah than the concept of him as interpreter can cover."⁴⁷ Here we see a similar dynamic to what we noticed in the portrayal of Moses in Deuteronomy itself – the interplay between human and divine words in the giving of the Torah cannot be readily "disentangled."

Philo portrays the translators of the Septuagint in precisely parallel ways. Their virtue is extolled and described at length (*Mos.* 2.31-33), and Philo narrates that "they, like men inspired, prophesied, not one saying one thing and another another, but every one of them employed the same nouns and verbs, as if some unseen prompter had suggested all their language to them" (*Mos.* 2.37). In fact, as we have seen, they are described as "not mere interpreters but hierophants and prophets to whom it has been granted in their honest and guileless minds to go along with the most pure spirit of Moses" (*Mos.* 2.40). Here too we see the dynamic interplay between human agency ("honest and

⁴⁵ Amir, "Scripture in the Writings of Philo," 436. Again, Amir (*Ibid.*, 433): "In all the writings he [Philo] devotes to Scripture, he treats Moses as the author. When he quotes a Bible verse, he says: Moses says."

⁴⁶ *Mos.* 2.188 as translated by Amir, "Scripture in the Writings of Philo," 437.

⁴⁷ Amir, *Ibid.*

guileless minds”) and divine words (“as if [by] some unseen prompter”), according to the very spirit and pattern of Moses.⁴⁸

In the third volume of *The Special Laws*, Philo portrays himself in strikingly similar terms. Describing his own experiences of “ascent” and “inspiration” while “always living among the divine oracles and doctrines” (*Spec.* 3.1-5), Philo says: “Look at me. I dare not only read the sacred explanations of Moses, but also in my love of knowledge peer into each to unfold and reveal the things that are not known to the many” (*Spec.* 3.6).⁴⁹ In other places Philo describes visionary, ecstatic, oracular experiences of his own.⁵⁰ Thus Philo includes himself as a participant in the dynamic interplay of human words and divine ones.

As noted above, Philo’s depiction of the Septuagint translators offers an explicit and emphatic example of the process of contemporizing scripture that we have seen expressed in different forms elsewhere in the literature of Jewish antiquity. Philo describes the translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek as a new and enormously significant revelatory event, making the laws of Moses available to the Greek-speaking world. Philo’s self-portrayal expresses a similar dynamic, whereby his own calling “to unfold and reveal the things that are not known to the many” (*Spec.* 3.6) further elucidates the meaning of these ancient texts for his contemporary audience.

Another means of contemporizing Torah, for Philo, is suggested by his depiction of key figures as embodiments of the law. Philo’s portrayal of the Septuagint translators and his own self-portrayal do not in themselves emphasize the ongoing interpretive task of others. Those portrayals appear to be designed to accentuate a particular linkage with the laws of Moses – accurately translating them in the one case and faithfully expounding on them in the other. There are several

⁴⁸ To put this in Najman’s terms we could say that Philo depicts the translators of the Septuagint as participants in Mosaic Discourse.

⁴⁹ Translation by Gregory Sterling as it appears in “The Interpreter of Moses,” 415.

⁵⁰ E.g.: *Spec.* 3:1-6; *Cher.* 27-29; *Migr.* 34-35. See Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria*, 18.

ways, however, in which Philo implies the importance of the ongoing function of scripture interpretation and the extension of this responsibility to others.

In his treatise *On Abraham*, Philo offers an explanation for his narrative approach, which could be considered a form of biography-as-hermeneutics. He describes the patriarchs of the book of Genesis as “living and rational laws” and outlines two reasons why “the lawgiver [Moses] has magnified them” (*Abr.* 5). The first is to demonstrate that the laws of Moses “are not inconsistent with nature” and the second is to demonstrate their practicability, “since the earliest men easily and spontaneously obeyed the unwritten principle of legislation before any one of the particular laws were written down at all” (*Abr.* 5). Thus, Philo concludes, “a man may very properly say that the written laws are nothing more than a memorial of the life of the ancients...” (*Abr.* 5). In other words, the lives of the ancient founders of Israel are embodiments of the Torah, and the commandments of Torah constitute the written formulation of this embodied Torah that is visible in the lives of the ancients.⁵¹ Philo says as much in the concluding sentence of *On Abraham*: “Such is the life of the first author and founder of our nation; a man according to the law, as some persons think, but, as my argument has shown, *one who is himself the unwritten law and justice of God*” (*Abr.* 276, emphasis added). Clearly these are not depictions of the patriarchs as scribes interpreting written texts, but their embodiment of scripture can appropriately be understood as an interpretive act.

Philo is clear at the outset of this treatise as to the purpose of his work in depicting the patriarchs: it is “not merely with the object of praising the men themselves, but also for the sake of exhorting those who read their history, and of leading them on to emulate their conduct” (*Abr.* 4). The patriarchs (and especially Abraham), whose lives are Torah incarnate, are declared to be models for

⁵¹ See Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria*, 69-71. See also Borgen, “Philo of Alexandria as Exegete,” 123. In *Who is the Heir of Divine Things* (*Heres.* 280ff, referenced in Amir, “Scripture in the Writings of Philo,” 451) Philo references the patriarchs as ‘the incorporeal Logoi of the Divine world, whom elsewhere it is accustomed to call ‘angels.’”

the reader to imitate.⁵² Thus the Jewish people are to accomplish the same interpretive act and function as embodied Torah as well.⁵³

D. The Teacher of Righteousness in the *Commentary on Habakkuk* and the *Damascus Document* (Qumran)

The scrolls unearthed at Qumran are the literary legacy of a community that understood itself to be the faithful remnant to which appropriate interpretation had been divinely and exclusively given.⁵⁴ As such, they contribute greatly to our picture of the polemics around scripture interpretation in the Second Temple period. Significantly, the title given to the apparent founder of the Qumran community is “Interpreter of the Law.”⁵⁵ One of the most distinctive forms of scripture interpretation in the Qumran literature is known as *peshet*, which James VanderKam describes as a “type of running commentary, at times verse-by-verse, [which was] unknown in this form prior to the discovery of the *Commentary on Habakkuk* in cave 1.”⁵⁶ The *Commentary on Habakkuk* and the *Damascus Document* offer the most extensive portrayal of the next character to be studied in our survey of depictions of scripture interpreters in Jewish antiquity – the “Teacher of Righteousness” (or “Righteous Teacher”) of Qumran.

⁵² Again, Borgen (*Philo of Alexandria*, 70-71): “To Philo, however, these aspects of virtue and wisdom which Abraham, Isaac and Jacob represented, characterize the Jewish people and its religion” and “... the lives of the virtuous ones are embodiments of the unwritten cosmic law and represent virtues and qualities...” See also Sterling, “The Interpreter of Moses: Philo of Alexandria and the Biblical Text,” 433.

⁵³ Philo’s account of Moses’ entry “into the darkness where God was” in *Mos.* 158, an extended interpretation of Exodus 20:21, presents Moses as paradigmatic model for others as well: “[H]appy are they who have been able to take, or have even diligently labored to take, a faithful copy of this excellence in their own souls.” (*Mos.* 1.159). Martha Himmelfarb (*Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], 49) has described this scene as “perhaps the most extended treatment in Jewish or Christian literature of the divinization of a human being.” Remarkably, it is precisely here, in this scene of the “divinization,” that Moses is lifted up as a paradigm and model for others to follow. See Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria*, 198, 285.

⁵⁴ Philip R. Davies, “Biblical Interpretation in the Dead Sea Scrolls” in *A History of Biblical Interpretation Volume 1: The Ancient Period*, ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 153, referencing CD (the *Damascus Document*) 6:2-11.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, referencing CD 6.7.

⁵⁶ James C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 36.

We have repeatedly observed depictions of scripture interpreters embedded in a narrative context, but in the *Commentary on Habakkuk* the opposite is true. Here what we know about the story of the Teacher of Righteousness and the Qumran community is learned from, and embedded in, an explicitly exegetical document – a verse-by-verse and phrase-by-phrase commentary on the text of Habakkuk. As Philip Davies observes, “[t]he interpretation of the prophetic book turns out to be an account of the origins and history of a figure called the ‘teacher of righteousness,’ his opponents, and the groups which he founded (these details are confirmed in CD 1 and 19-20).”⁵⁷ The *Damascus Document* (CD), by contrast, does portray the Teacher of Righteousness in a narrative context as part of its telling of the history of the Qumran community.

The *Damascus Document* introduces the Teacher of Righteousness at the beginning of its account of Israel’s unfaithfulness and the struggles of the remnant that God opted not to destroy.⁵⁸ Even that remnant “recognized that they were guilty men,” and “for twenty years they were like blind men groping for the way” (CD 1.10). At this point we are told that “God observed their deeds, that they sought Him with a whole heart, and He raised for them a Teacher of Righteousness to guide them in the way of His heart” (CD 1.10-11). The *Damascus Document* goes on to outline predictions for the future of the community and regulations for it to follow, with repeated emphasis on the role of authoritative interpretation and interpreters who function as the successors of the Teacher of Righteousness. These interpretive functionaries are variously named the Teacher of the Community, the Guardian of the Congregation/Camp, the Judge of the Congregation, and Priests.⁵⁹ Clearly, whereas the Interpreter of the Law and the Teacher of Righteousness are presented as authoritative

⁵⁷ Davies, “Biblical Interpretation in the DSS,” 158. Similarly, Geza Vermes observes: “[t]he Habakkuk Commentary is one of the main sources for the study of Qumran origins, as well as Essene Bible exegesis and the sect’s theology regarding prophecy.” See Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 50th anniversary edition (London: Penguin, 2011), 509.

⁵⁸ In what follows, all citations from the Dead Sea Scrolls are from Geza Vermes, trans., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 50th anniversary edition (London: Penguin, 2011).

⁵⁹ CD 8-14. See Vermes, *The Complete DSS*, 136-145.

figures from the community's past, the *Damascus Document* describes an ongoing function for future authoritative interpretive leadership, which is understood to be critical for the sectarians' future in repeated calls "to return to the Law of Moses" (CD 15.10, 13; 16.1).

The Teacher of Righteousness is portrayed in the *Commentary on Habakkuk* as a figure "to whom God made known all the mysteries of the words of His servants the prophets" (1QpHab 7.5).⁶⁰ The *Damascus Document*, in narrative rather than *peshet* form, similarly depicts the Teacher of Righteousness as one "raised for them... to guide them in the way of His heart" (CD 1.12). In that document's repeated calls "to return to the Law of Moses" (CD 15.10, 13; 16.1), emphasis on "the interpretation of the Law in which the men of perfect holiness walk,"⁶¹ and provision for ongoing hermeneutical leadership in the community,⁶² it is clear that the Teacher of Righteousness as well as his successors in leadership are presented as authoritative interpreters of scripture.

But are they portrayed as revisionist and innovative in their interpretations? The Qumran documents present an overwhelming confidence in the rightness of their interpretations, presumably rooted in and in some sense authorized by the Teacher of Righteousness himself.⁶³ As far as they are concerned, they and only they are party to appropriate and faithful understandings and practice of the Laws of Moses. Fishbane describes how this sectarian belief "that only they were the bearers of the esoteric sense of the ancient revelations" constitutes an "ideology" that represents a dramatic departure from Deuteronomy 29:28.⁶⁴ In the Qumran documents themselves, however, one gets no

⁶⁰ This is in contrast to "those who were unfaithful together with the Liar, in that they [did] not [listen to the word received by] the Teacher of Righteousness from the mouth of God" (1QpHab 2.1-3).

⁶¹ Geza, *Complete DSS*, 136.

⁶² CD 8-14. See Geza, *Complete DSS*, 136-145.

⁶³ See Davies, "Biblical Interpretation in the DSS," 158; Michael Fishbane, "Interpretation of Mikra at Qumran" in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder and Harry Sysling (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 373; George J. Brooke, "Prophetic Interpretation in the *Pesharim*" in *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism*, ed. Matthias Henze (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 246.

⁶⁴ According to that verse, "the hidden things are the LORD's and the revealed things are ours and our children's forever, to perform all the words of this Torah." Fishbane ("Interpretation of Mikra at Qumran," 364) points to CD 3.13, which declares that God has revealed "the hidden things" to "the remnant which held fast to

sense that the Teacher of Righteousness was understood to be innovative or revisionary in his interpretation of scripture.

The interplay of divine and human words is dramatically evident in the Habakkuk Commentary's characteristic technique of verse-by-verse, phrase-by-phrase "atomistic identification,"⁶⁵ associating particular words, names, or elements in the scriptural text with something or someone in the current or near-past experience of the Qumran community. This style of running commentary, which has become known as *peshet* (from the repeated phrase "interpreted this means..." or "its *peshet* is..."), creates such a tight linkage between the prophetic book and the story of the Qumran community that the one is read essentially as a coded narration of the history of the other.

It is precisely in this way that we are introduced to the character of the Teacher of Righteousness himself, who is identified as the referent of "the righteous" in Hab. 1:4, 1:13, and 2:4 (1QpHab 1, 5, and 8 respectively). Where Hab. 2:2 instructs the prophet to "write down the vision and make it plain upon the tablets, that he who reads may read it speedily," the Commentary declares the identity of "he who reads" to be "the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God made known all the mysteries of the of the words of His servants the Prophets" (1QpHab 7). Thus we see the Teacher of Righteousness declared to be the intended subject of the very words of God as spoken to Habakkuk.⁶⁶

In this depiction we note another kind of dynamic interplay between divine words and human ones. On the one hand it may seem that the technique of "atomistic identification" drives a wedge between divine and human words, distinguishing clearly between the prophetic text and its *peshet* or

the commandments of God" – that is, the Qumran community itself. In other words, according to this key identity document for the Qumran community, "the 'revealed things' were for all Jews, but the 'hidden things' were for them alone." This conviction – that God's will is esoteric and only accessible to the faithful remnant through the inspired interpretation of the Teacher of Righteousness and his successors – is indeed a significant departure from Deut 29:28 and 30:11-14, with their expressed confidence in the public availability, comprehensibility, and practicability of the Torah.

⁶⁵ A descriptive term used by Brooke, "Prophetic Interpretation in the *Pesharim*," 249, 251.

⁶⁶ See Fishbane, "Interpretation of Mikra at Qumran," 373.

interpretation. On the other hand, as various scholars have pointed out, Qumran's *pesharim* share, for that community, the prophetic status of the texts that they interpret.⁶⁷ The Teacher is portrayed as the inspired interpreter "to whom God made known all the mysteries of the words of His servants the Prophets" (1*QpHab* 7), and as George Brooke puts it, the Teacher's interpretations were understood to be "as much a matter of divine revelation as the oracle originally received by the prophet."⁶⁸ In fact, this is the basis for the Qumran community's sectarian identity: they, and only they, constitute the faithful remnant of Israel, following the inspired interpretation of their Teacher and his successors.⁶⁹ We see, then, in the Qumran community, yet another permutation of the various ways in which human and divine words are understood to function together in authoritative ways, through interpretation, for the believing community.

This *peshet* style of verse-by-verse exposition is also, of course, a vivid mode of contemporizing prophetic texts.⁷⁰ As Davies points out: "[t]he purpose of the *pesharim* is not to reveal the future, but to show that what was predicted long ago in Scripture has already taken place."⁷¹

⁶⁷ Ibid., 364; Brooke, "Prophetic Interpretation in the *Pesharim*," 247-248; Davies, "Biblical Interpretation in the DSS," 153, 159.

⁶⁸ Brooke, "Prophetic Interpretation in the *Pesharim*," 247, in note 38, quoting himself from "Prophecy" in *EDSS*, 699. Further, Brooke states: "... the *pesharim* can be viewed as continuous with the prophetic texts they interpret and, as such, as a further form of prophecy in their own right." Brooke, "Prophetic Interpretation in the *Pesharim*," 248.

⁶⁹ 1*QpHab* 8.1-3, commenting on the statement in Hab 2:4 that "the righteous shall live by his faith," declares emphatically that "[i]nterpreted this concerns all those who observe the Law in the House of Judah, whom God will deliver from the House of Judgment because of their suffering and because of their faith in the Teacher of Righteousness." Evidently "his faith" in Hab 2:4 is understood to mean "the ToR's faith," and it is "faith in the Teacher of Righteousness" in turn that guarantees correct observance of the Law. See also Fishbane, "Interpretation of Mikra at Qumran," 364.

⁷⁰ So Sheridan (*Retelling Scripture*, 13), making reference to Stephen Witmer ("Approaches to Scripture in the Fourth Gospel and the Qumran *Pesharim*," *NovT* 48, no. 4 [2006], 316-318): "In terms of its content, *peshet* exegesis thoroughly 'contemporizes' the ancient Scriptures, reading in them references to certain figures or incidents in the Qumran community."

⁷¹ Davies, "Biblical Interpretation in the DSS," 158.

Through *peshet* interpretation of the scriptural prophets, the story of the present Qumran community is told. The *pesharim* represent a line-by-line mode of reading ancient scripture in the present tense.⁷²

Authoritative interpretation of scripture for the Qumran community does not end with the Teacher of Righteousness. First of all, there are the Qumran texts themselves, which are never presented as direct speech or writing of the Teacher of Righteousness, but which draw confidently upon his authority and claim it for themselves.⁷³ In VanderKam's words, "the interpreter assumes that he has the correct reading, perhaps one traceable to the Teacher of Righteousness himself... [i]f so, the *pesharim* are instances of inspired text joined with revealed interpretation – a formidable combination indeed."⁷⁴ This "formidable combination" is also apparent in the second mode through which the authoritative interpretive role of the Teacher of Righteousness is extended – the community's various roles and institutions of leadership.

The *Damascus Document* describes explicit provisions for the ongoing leadership of the community, for which hermeneutical authority seems to be the essential feature. In fact, "a turning point in the history of the sect is when God raises up 'men of understanding' from Aaron and 'men of discernment' from Israel to dig the 'well' i.e., to study and interpret the Torah (CD 6:2-11)."⁷⁵ A sequence of authoritative interpreters is then described.⁷⁶

⁷² Davies (Ibid., 164) describes it this way: "[f]rom their perspective... everything they wrote did no more than make clear Scripture's true meaning, and in it they saw their own selves."

⁷³ Brooke ("Prophetic Interpretation in the *Pesharim*," 246) states: "[f]ew scholars would say that *Peshet Habakkuk* is a product of the Teacher of Righteousness, since it speaks about him in the third person, but it was almost certainly intended to contain inspired interpretations as if they had been divinely revealed to him." The same could be said of the portrayal of the Teacher in the *Damascus Document*. Other Qumran documents, however, do present themselves pseudepigraphically as first person address of God to Moses. See Fishbane, "Interpretation of Mikra at Qumran," 350-351, regarding the *Temple Scroll*.

⁷⁴ VanderKam, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 37.

⁷⁵ Fishbane, "Interpretation of Mikra at Qumran," 361. As Fishbane (Ibid., 366) goes on to point out, "[i]n a sustained and repeated image, this revelation of true interpretations for the faithful is likened to a well of living water." See CD 3-6.

⁷⁶ See CD 10.5-6; 13.1-6. Again, Fishbane (Ibid., 362): "The cumulative impression of the Qumran scrolls, then, is that its primary text, Mikra, is the product of divine revelation; and that its own texts, which extend and develop the teachings of God, in various legal-sectarian collections and in various pesherite commentaries, are *also* the product of divine revelation." Emphasis in the original.

Finally, it must be emphasized that not only leaders are to study Torah at Qumran. The *Community Rule* institutes the practice of around-the-clock Torah study that applies to all members of the community (1QS 6.6-10), illustrating what Brooke describes as their self-understanding as “a continuation of earlier prophetic activity.”⁷⁷ It is evident that the ongoing study and interpretation of scripture, as well as the ongoing production of new exegetical works and community documents, is important to the self-identity of the Qumran community which understands itself as the faithful remnant of Israel. The Teacher of Righteousness, depicted as exegete extraordinaire, serves as a model and paradigm for a succession of leaders and indeed for the community as a whole, all of whom are to be engaged in continuous Torah study.

E. Jesus in *The Gospel According to Matthew*

While all of the Synoptic Gospels are important points of comparison for the portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture in John’s Gospel, Matthew is especially crucial for our purposes, as it has been described as “by far the most Jewish of the Gospels.”⁷⁸ While this may be overstating the case,⁷⁹ there is no doubt that Matthew is particularly concerned to portray Jesus as an observant Jew

⁷⁷ Brooke, “Prophetic Interpretation in the *Pesharim*,” 252. As Vermes (“The Religious Ideas of the Community,” in *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 81) points out: “[t]he fact that the Community Rule is satisfied to state without any specification that a single deliberate transgression of the Mosaic Law would entail irrevocable expulsion from the sect implies that the elite sectaries subject to this rule did not need detailed guidance: they were supposed to be fully versed in the Torah.”

⁷⁸ L. Michael White, *Scripting Jesus: The Gospels in Rewrite* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 310.

⁷⁹ Comparable claims have been made for John’s gospel as well. See Judith Lieu, “Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel: Explanation and Hermeneutics” in *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Reimund Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt, and Frederique Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 101, referencing H. Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel* (Uppsala, 1929). See also James H. Charlesworth, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gospel According to John” in *Exploring the Gospel of John*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 76. It is anachronistic to draw sharp lines between “Christianity” and “Judaism” at the time of the writing of Matthew’s gospel, as these only emerged as identifiably separate religions later. See J. Andrew Overman (*Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism* [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1990], 1-34) for a nuanced treatment of the relationship between “Matthean Judaism” and “formative Judaism” within the sectarian environment of 165B.C.E. – 100 C.E.

and a righteous teacher of Torah⁸⁰ who upholds the law although his interpretation of it clearly differs from that of “the scribes and the Pharisees” who are presented as his opponents throughout.⁸¹

As in each of the Gospels that came to be included in the New Testament, Matthew presents Jesus as a scripture-interpreting character in a narrative context of itinerant healing and teaching ministry. Matthew’s Gospel accentuates Jesus’ role as Torah teacher, dedicating over 300 verses to his teaching organized into five distinct addresses, which some have seen as an intentional allusion or parallel to the five books of Moses.⁸² The overall construction of Matthew’s narrative heightens the emphasis on scripture interpretation and fulfillment⁸³ as Matthew adapts Markan controversy stories and includes all of Mark’s explicit citations of scripture while adding 30 additional ones,⁸⁴ including an infancy narrative that is saturated with scriptural quotations and allusions,⁸⁵ setting the stage to see Jesus in the role of a new Moses.⁸⁶ Two other notable additions in Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus are the fleshed-out temptation narrative of 4:1-11 (compared to Mark’s single verse) and the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7. In both cases, the interpretation of scripture is squarely in view and Jesus is presented as “an accurate and knowledgeable interpreter of the law.”⁸⁷

⁸⁰ “The Righteous Teacher of Torah” is the title of a chapter on Matthew’s Gospel in White’s *Scripting Jesus*.

⁸¹ See Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel*, 80.

⁸² Each of these addresses concludes with near identical wording: “Now it came to pass when Jesus had finished these sayings...” 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1. See White, *Scripting Jesus*, 303 and Moyise, *Jesus and Scripture*, 50. Overman (*Matthew’s Gospel*, 123) further describes of the “unusual emphasis on teaching in Matthew,” including the uniquely Matthean concern for calling no one “rabbi” or “teacher” except the Christ (23:8-10), while at the same time mandating a prominent teaching function to the disciples (28:19-20). See Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel*, 122-130.

⁸³ For a brief description of Matthew’s distinctive use of the fulfillment formula, see Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 36-38.

⁸⁴ Moyise, *Jesus and Scripture*, 33,

⁸⁵ As Overman (*Matthew’s Gospel*, 77) notes: “[r]oughly half of the fulfillment citations are concentrated in the Matthean birth narrative.”

⁸⁶ For an in depth treatment of Matthew’s depiction of Jesus as a new Moses, see Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993).

⁸⁷ Alan F. Segal, “Matthew’s Jewish Voice” in *Social History of the Matthean Community: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, ed. David L. Balch (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 4. Chris Keith has made the case that the controversies and conflicts over scripture interpretation depicted in the gospels have to do not only with the content of Jesus’ teaching, but with the question of whether or not Jesus would have been perceived to have the scribal status and authority to engage in such interpretation and teaching in the first place.

In fact, Matthew's characterization of Jesus goes to some lengths to downplay the more radically revisionary interpretive moves suggested by Mark's Gospel. In the debate about handwashing and purity, where the Markan narrator draws the conclusion that Jesus "declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19), Matthew's account makes no such claim.⁸⁸ Mark's Jesus does not dispute that his disciples' grain-picking constitutes a violation of the sabbath (Mark 2:23-27) whereas Matthew's Jesus claims they are "guiltless" (Mt 12:1-8).⁸⁹ In his teaching on reconciliation in 5:23-24, Jesus assumes that his followers will continue to give gifts at the altar, and in the midst of his blistering verbal attack of the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23 Jesus critiques them for neglecting "the weightier matters of the law" while assuming that the regulations around tithing are still in force (23:23-24). Matthew's polemic against ἀνομία ("lawlessness;" 7:23; 13:41; 23:28; 24:12)⁹⁰ and his distinctive use of δικαιοσύνη ("righteousness"), evidently "entailing the performance of the commandments of Judaism,"⁹¹ all would indicate that Matthew portrays Jesus emphatically as one who upholds – and calls on others to uphold – the Torah.⁹²

The dynamic interplay between human and divine words that we have noted in other literature of Jewish antiquity is present and prominent in Matthew's Gospel as well. A voice from heaven is featured at two key moments in the narrative: Jesus' baptism at the beginning of his ministry (3:17), and the transfiguration in the middle (17:1-8). In each case, in scenes dense with scriptural references and allusions, the voice functions as a confirmation of the identity of Jesus,

In his analysis, Keith too highlights Matthew's efforts to ensure a depiction of Jesus in line with the Torah, in contrast with Mark's more blunt and enigmatic portrayal and Luke's concern to depict Jesus in a way that is most palatable in a Greco-Roman intellectual milieu. See Keith, *Jesus Against The Scribal Elite*, 6, 41-65.

⁸⁸ Overman (*Matthew's Gospel*, 83) states: "Mark's response to the accusations of the scribes and Pharisees is far too extreme for Matthew."

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 80-82.

⁹⁰ Matthew is the only gospel writer to use this term, and it is used more often in Matthew's gospel than in any other document in the New Testament. See Segal, "Matthew's Jewish Voice," 21.

⁹¹ As Segal (*Ibid.*) points out: "... another distinctly Matthean word, δικαιοσύνη, or righteousness, used seven times in Matthew but elsewhere only in Luke 1:75 and John 16:8, 10."

⁹² Segal (*Ibid.*, 21-22) describes Matthew as taking an intermediate position in the early church between "extreme Paulinism" on the one hand and those who held "too literal an understanding of the law" on the other.

recasting the very words of scripture in order to confer authority on him.⁹³ In Matthew's Gospel the divine voice is an interpreter of scripture too.

The interplay of human and divine speech is also present outside of these specific intrusions of a "voice from heaven" into the narrative. Matthew's Gospel concludes with Jesus' claim and instruction that "[a]ll authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (28:1-20). Here Jesus' words (commandments) have attained the kind of status normally ascribed to the commandments of God. Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel Jesus is also depicted as speaking in ways that are characteristic of divine speech. Examples include Jesus commanding the wind and the waves (8:23-27), his pronouncement of forgiveness of sins (9:1-8), and his claim that "heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away (24:35).⁹⁴

Certainly in Matthew's portrayal of Jesus we see multiple instances of the phenomenon we have described as contemporizing scripture, finding ways to bridge the temporal gap between the giving of the Torah at Sinai and the ongoing ways in which it is understood to speak to contemporary concerns. At times this takes the shape of interpretive debate on the Torah and its application to current issues like divorce, oaths, tithes, levirate marriage, sabbath observance, and so on. In 11:14 we see Jesus using a direct "this is that" type of hermeneutic that is reminiscent of the *peshet* of Qumran. He twice draws upon Hosea 6:6 (Mt. 9:9-13; 12:1-8) in response to challenges to his and his disciples' practices with regards to table fellowship and sabbath observance, respectively. Repeated

⁹³ The voice from heaven quotes scripture in reference to Jesus at his baptism (3:17), weaving together Psalm 2:7 regarding royal sonship and the "servant" of Isaiah 42:1. The transfiguration scene, in the midst of hermeneutical debate and confusion as the gospel narrative has progressed, places Jesus on a mountain in conversation with none other than Elijah and Moses, with the heavenly voice repeating the baptismal assertion of Jesus' identity as "my Son, the Beloved" (17:5).

⁹⁴ Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 47.

claims that Jesus' actions fulfill scripture are not only made by the Gospel's narrator but are placed upon Jesus' lips as well.⁹⁵

Probably the most well known depiction of Jesus contemporizing Torah in Matthew's Gospel are the so-called "antitheses" in the Sermon on the Mount: "you have heard it said... but I say..." (5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). Given the way that Matthew's narrative and five-fold sermonic structure present Jesus in a typological relationship to Moses, this new address from the mountaintop powerfully echoes the giving of the law at Sinai. And in light of Matthew's overall portrayal of Jesus as a careful and authoritative interpreter of scripture, these statements can be seen as examples of Jesus functioning in a rabbinic (in fact, Pharisaic) mode of "building a fence around the Torah."⁹⁶ Far from abolishing the law – something that he insists at the outset of this section that he is not doing (5:17-20) – Jesus here intensifies it.⁹⁷ Clearly Jesus is portrayed as an authoritative figure and an active participant in the vigorous debates of the late Second Temple period regarding how to follow the commandments of God in the midst of everyday life (*halakah*).

Matthew is also explicit and emphatic in articulating the way in which the ongoing task of scripture interpretation and discernment is passed on to the community of disciples. Despite his scathing critiques of scribes at various points in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus articulates a positive and ongoing scribal function in 13:52 and 23:34. Matthew 16:19 depicts Jesus granting "the keys of heaven" along with the assertion that "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose will be loosed in heaven." The language of "binding and losing" is familiar vocabulary "indicating 'forbid and permit' (in a legal sense), according to rabbinic teachings."⁹⁸

⁹⁵ For example: 11:4-6 (Cf. Isa 29:18-19; 34:4-6; 61:1-2); 21:13, 16; 26:31, 64.

⁹⁶ Babylonian Talmud (BT) *Avot* 1.1. All citations from the Talmud, unless otherwise noted, are from *The Talmud: A Selection*, ed. and trans. Norman Solomon (London: Penguin Classics, 2009).

⁹⁷ White, *Scripting Jesus*, 313.

⁹⁸ Aaron M. Gale, note on Matt 16:13-23 in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 30-31. Regarding the imagery of keys, Overman (*Matthew's Gospel*, 20) describes three texts - 2 Bar. 10:18; 4 Bar. 4:4, and *Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* – where the keys of the temple are thrown up to heaven because those

The mandate for ongoing and authoritative interpretive activity is further described in a series of instructions for the correction and intended re-integration of “a brother who sins against you” (18:15-20). Again the identical language of “binding and loosing” is used, along with the assurance that “if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (18:19-20). This statement too is reminiscent of rabbinic teaching of the presence of the Divine (*shekinah*) when people study Torah together.⁹⁹ Matthew’s Jesus is not the only one depicted with interpretive authority and responsibility. The ongoing community gathered in his name is to exercise this authority and responsibility too.

F. The Sages (especially Hillel) in Rabbinic Literature

I will conclude this survey with some observations about depictions of the sages, and Hillel the Elder in particular, in the literature of Rabbinic Judaism. Although the Talmud of the Land of Israel and the Talmud of Babylonia reached closure at a time well past that of the other writings surveyed above (ca. 400 C.E. and 600 C.E. respectively),¹⁰⁰ the descriptions of the sages and their debates in this literature preserve and comment on some traditions that date from a time roughly contemporary with the composition of John’s Gospel.¹⁰¹ As Jacob Neusner says, the rabbinic literature can be viewed as “a coherent reading of and response to Scripture, competing with other

entrusted with them proved to be “false stewards.” Overman (Ibid., 21) goes on to say that “[t]he image of the keys in this period is used by these various authors to draw attention to the failure of the Jewish leadership, their infidelity, and their loss of authority to act as the interpreters of God’s law and will on behalf of the people. Interestingly, as is well known, Matthew seizes upon this very image for his own community.”

⁹⁹ Gale, note on Matt 18:20 in *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 34. See *Avot* 3.2, 6.

¹⁰⁰ Jacob Neusner, *Rabbinic Literature: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 3.

¹⁰¹ Both Talmuds are structured around the Mishnah, which reached closure around 200 CE. According to Binyamin Lau (*The Sages: Character, Context & Creativity Volume 1: The Second Temple Period*, trans. Michael Prawer [Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2007], xxiii.), “... caution is required, but even so, it is clear that rabbinic literature has preserved authentic memories from the Second Temple period.” Also, as Baruch Bokser (foreword in *The Talmud: Selected Writings* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989], 1) puts it: “[t]he Talmud reflects the thinking of those Sages who shaped Judaism in the first to sixth centuries C.E. and who created Rabbinic Judaism.”

responses to the same revealed writings.”¹⁰² Getting a sense for the ways in which sages are depicted in this literature as interpreters of scripture, in comparison with other portrayals of scripture interpreters that we have seen in some of the literature of Jewish antiquity, will provide another helpful point of reference for our study of John’s portrayal of Jesus.

The rabbinic literature is vast, including a variety of forms from the “philosophical law code” of the Mishnah¹⁰³ to a range of midrash and commentary on the written Torah and the Mishnah, reaching a climax (although not a conclusion) with the Talmud of the Land of Israel and the Babylonian Talmud. Neusner describes the Talmuds as “composites of three kinds of materials: (1) exegeses of the Mishnah...; (2) exegeses of Scripture; and (3) accounts of the men who provide both.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, even though this literature is not presented in the form of a narrative *per se*, narrative elements are present throughout, including, in both the Mishnah (to a lesser extent) and the Talmuds, short narratives or scenes that provide a situational context or frame for particular rabbinic discussions and debates.¹⁰⁵

The rabbinic literature accords particular prominence to the figure of Hillel the Elder (ca. 50 BCE to 10 CE, a near contemporary of Jesus)¹⁰⁶ who was “compared... to Ezra in having reestablished the Torah when it was being forgotten.”¹⁰⁷ The Jerusalem Talmud depicts Hillel’s rise to leadership as being cemented not only by his prowess in interpretation of the written Torah but in his memory and faithful adherence to the oral Torah as he received the tradition from his rabbinic

¹⁰² Neusner, *Rabbinic Literature*, 1.

¹⁰³ According to Neusner (*The Oral Torah* [San Francisco: Harper & Row: 1986], xiv) the Mishnah is “the first and most important document of the memorized Torah... a philosophical law code that defined everything that followed.”

¹⁰⁴ Neusner, *Rabbinic Literature*, 37.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 64.

¹⁰⁷ Yitzhak Buxbaum, *The Life and Teachings of Hillel* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1994), 118.

teachers.¹⁰⁸ Hillel is also depicted as a gifted teacher who was willing and able to articulate the Torah in succinct and readily accessible ways, famously uttering his articulation of the “Golden Rule” to a Gentile questioner who asked him to summarize the whole Torah while standing on one leg.¹⁰⁹

In several instances Hillel is depicted as radically revisionary in his interpretation of scripture. Foremost among these examples is his innovation in the matter of the sabbatical release of debts. According to Deuteronomy 15, debts are to be forgiven on the seventh year. That very text, however, cautions about the likelihood that creditors may be disinclined to provide a loan as the seventh year approaches (Dt. 15:9-10). This could have the effect of freezing credit and causing hardship to those in need. According to the Mishnah, Hillel dealt with this problem by instituting the *prosbul*, whereby a creditor could officially transfer to the court a debt owed to him, enabling the creditor to collect the debt “whenever I please.”¹¹⁰ This move can be evaluated differently,¹¹¹ but the point here is to notice the remarkable way in which Hillel, through interpretation of Torah, found a way to allow people to circumvent the release of debts mandated in the Torah.¹¹² This account of Hillel’s hermeneutical creativity is part of his portrayal as an authoritative and innovative interpreter of scripture.

¹⁰⁸ See Buxbaum, *Life and Teachings of Hillel*, 23ff.

¹⁰⁹ BT, *Shabbat* 2.

¹¹⁰ BT, *Shevi’it* 10.2-3.

¹¹¹ According to Buxbaum (*Life and Teachings of Hillel*, 53): “This accommodation to reality and seemingly to the rich [the *prosbul*] was actually intended as an emergency measure to save the poor by ensuring their ability to secure necessary loans.” Compare to Neusner (*Judaism at the Beginning of Christianity*, 67): “Debtors, moreover, were here given a good motive to dislike Pharisees, who now rendered their debts into a perpetual burden.”

¹¹² Buxbaum, *Life and Teachings of Hillel*, note 3 on p. 314. *Sifre Deuteronomy* 113 describes how Hillel interpreted Deut 15:3 literally, where it says that “you must remit your claim...” By assigning the debt to the court, it was no longer “your” claim, and therefore could be collected. See Buxbaum, *Life and Teachings of Hillel*, 314. Neusner, in his historical-critical analysis (*Judaism at the Beginning of Christianity*, 66), identifies two sub-strata in the Mishnah’s account, one of which claiming “that Hillel’s action was based upon sound exegesis of Scripture, and did not represent modification of the law” and the other that “Hillel did change the law to accommodate it to the needs of the day.” Neusner (*Ibid.*, 67) further argues “the possibility that the *prosbul* existed before Hillel’s day. He served as a convenient name on which to hang Pharisaic acceptance of it, despite contravening scriptural law.”

Central to the depiction of the sages in rabbinic literature is the Mishnah's description of the unbroken chain of tradition transmitting the Oral Torah from Moses "to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, the elders to the prophets, and the prophets... to the men of the Great Synod."¹¹³ The tractate *Avot* (*Wisdom of the Fathers*) carries on this foundational claim by listing a series of teachings attached to the names of rabbis who continue that chain in a direct line from Sinai until the very sages identified as the speakers in the Mishnah itself. As Neusner puts it, "the implication is clear. What a given sage tells us *now* derives from what God told Moses *then*"¹¹⁴ (emphasis in the original). The written Torah and the oral Torah together constitute, in the Talmudic formulation, "the one whole Torah of Moses, our rabbi."¹¹⁵ When the rabbis discern and dispute together, the rulings that emerge are understood to be identical to what God told Moses on Sinai. In this way, human words become divine words; or, to put it differently, divine words are expressed in an ongoing way through human ones.

Hillel looms large in the literature of the Oral Torah. In the tractate *Avot*, more sayings are attributed to Hillel than to anyone else. One of the many stories about Hillel associates him explicitly with both Moses and Ezra in its articulation of the transition from the age of prophecy to that of the sages, with the continued presence of "a heavenly voice":

Our rabbis taught: Since the death of the last prophets – Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi – the holy spirit was removed from Israel, but they would still hear a heavenly voice.

Once, while the sages were reclining at a meeting... they heard a voice from heaven saying: 'There is one among you who is worthy that the Divine Presence rest upon him as it did on our teacher Moses, but his generation does not merit it.' Hearing this, all the sages fixed their eyes on Hillel the Elder.

And when he died they said in his eulogy: O Hasid! O humble man! Disciple of Ezra!¹¹⁶

¹¹³ BT *Avot* 1:1.

¹¹⁴ Neusner, *The Oral Torah*, viii.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹¹⁶ From BT *Sanhedrin* 11a, quoted in Buxbaum, *Life and Teachings of Hillel*, 248. Hillel the Elder is similarly linked to Moses in *Sifre Deuteronomy*, where he and two others (Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiba) are said to have died, like Moses, at the age of 120. *Sifre Deuteronomy* 357, as referenced in Buxbaum, *Life and Teachings of Hillel*, 44.

Here we see yet another example of the way that authoritative status is conferred by association with Moses. The concept of Oral Torah represents this kind of authority-conferring strategy writ large, as the ongoing deliberations and decisions of the rabbis are represented as having the status and enjoying the authority of Torah given by God to Moses at Sinai.¹¹⁷ Hillel the Elder represents a particularly significant link in that chain and a particularly vivid example of that dynamic.

Another Hillel story, again featuring the “voice from heaven,” provides support for this understanding of the nature and function of the Oral Torah. The tractate *Eruvin* 13b says that after a three-year dispute between the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel, a voice from heaven said “[t]hese as well as those are words of the living God, but the halakah is in agreement with the rulings of the House of Hillel.”¹¹⁸ This remarkable declaration is an oft-cited and profoundly influential assertion in Rabbinic Judaism. In the deliberations of the rabbis – including their disagreements and contradictory positions – can be heard “the words of the living God.” Again, human and divine words have become one. Clearly the concept of Oral Torah is itself a mode of contemporizing Torah.¹¹⁹

This dynamic of contemporizing Torah goes hand in hand with the extension of the interpretive role to others over time. Adin Steinsaltz highlights this move when he draws attention to

¹¹⁷ Cf. the four features of “Mosaic Discourse” as described by Hindy Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 16-17.

¹¹⁸ BT *Eruvin* 13b, www.sefaria.org/sheets/3834, accessed April 20, 2016.

¹¹⁹ I will note two further rabbinic stories that highlight this function in their depiction of specific characters through whom scripture is understood to speak in the present tense.

In the first, a scene from Hillel’s deathbed, as described in *Avot d’Rabbi Natan* 28 (cited in Buxbaum, *Life and Teachings of Hillel*, 265), Hillel delivers a farewell discourse to his disciples, referencing Proverbs 8:21. “About you it is said in the Torah, ‘I will cause those who love me to inherit richly, and I will fill their treasuries.’” This kind of present-tense claim about the referent of scripture is reminiscent of what we have seen in the pesher of Qumran and the New Testament Gospels.

In the second, the Babylonian Talmud (BT *Menahot*, 3) tells a story of Moses himself sitting in the eighth row of the academy of Rabbi Akiva, unable to understand the discussion. When asked by his disciples for the basis of his teaching, Akiva replies: “It is Torah [received by] Moses at Sinai.” Upon hearing this, “Moses was reassured.” This narrative offers yet another vivid articulation of the rabbinic contention that the current deliberations and teachings of Torah, even when made new in ways that Moses himself could not understand, do in fact cohere with the revelation received by Moses at Sinai. There is the insistence that God’s covenant and the Mosaic Torah itself is experienced and articulated and made new with every generation – a move that parallels what we have observed in Deut 5:3 where the covenant is described as “not with our ancestors... but with us, who are all of us here alive today”.

“the custom [in the Talmud] of quoting the views of various rabbis in the present tense... [t]his stylistic habit reflects the belief that the work is not merely a record of the opinions of the scholars of past ages.”¹²⁰ The dialogical nature of the Talmud invites this sense of participation in an ongoing conversation, and the inclusion of materials like Hillel’s seven rules for biblical interpretation in *Avot d’Rabbi Natan* explicitly offers hermeneutical tools for the ongoing interpretive task.

The story of “the oven of Akhnai” is an exceptionally vivid depiction of the centrality of this ongoing interpretive responsibility. In a sharp debate regarding purity and impurity, there is a disagreement between the majority of sages and Rabbi Eliezer, who not only “put forward every conceivable argument” but also performed a variety of miracles, finally calling upon heaven in support of his view. Indeed, a voice from heaven declares Rabbi Eliezer to be right, at which point “Rabbi Joshua arose to his feet, and declared: ‘It is not in heaven’” – that is, quoting Dt 30:12. This narrative is told in the Mishnah – the Gemara goes on to make explicit the implication: “[n]ow that the Torah has been given on Mount Sinai we no longer pay attention to any heavenly voice...” The tale concludes with Elijah relaying God’s own response to the interaction, which is one of approval. “He laughed and said ‘My children have outvoted Me, my children have outvoted Me!’”¹²¹

It is hard to imagine a more emphatic declaration that the responsibility to discern how to be faithful to God’s laws has now passed decisively into the hands of human interpreters. Even the divine voice itself cannot override the interpretive authority of the rabbis, now that the Torah has been

¹²⁰ Adin Steinsaltz, *The Essential Talmud*, trans. Chaya Galai, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 7. In his further description of the unique character of Talmudic literature, Steinsaltz (*Ibid.*, 8-9) makes the point that “[i]t is impossible to arrive at external knowledge of this work... True knowledge can only be attained through spiritual communion, and the student must participate intellectually and emotionally in the talmudic debate, himself becoming, to a certain degree, a creator.”

¹²¹ BT *Bava Metzi’a*, 4.59b.

given and is no longer “in heaven.” This is a high view of the ongoing human interpretive task indeed, and according to the rabbis, this is the way God wants it.¹²²

Summary

This brief survey demonstrates considerable diversity amidst the five common features that we have been tracking in the portrayal of particular characters as interpreters of scripture in a range of texts from Jewish antiquity. What we have observed in this literature will illuminate our exploration of the Fourth Gospel’s portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture, as we will be able to compare the strategies that John employs with those available and utilized by others within a range of texts that, like John, arise out of the fertile soil of those very scriptures.

1. While it is common to depict a scripture-interpreting character as part of a narrative in one form or another, this is accomplished very differently in each of the works surveyed, with Qumran’s *Commentary on Habakkuk* reversing the pattern by embedding its portrayal of the Teacher of Righteousness in a scriptural commentary rather than the other way around.

2. A range of techniques is used to confer status and authority onto the various interpreters, from accounts of receiving direct address from God (Moses in Deuteronomy) to divine inspiration in interpretation (Daniel, and the Septuagint translators in Philo) to various modes of associating the interpreter with authoritative figures - especially Moses - from the past (Jesus in typological relationship to Moses in Matthew, and the sages as links in the ongoing chain of Oral Torah in rabbinic literature).

3. We have observed in each case the dynamic interplay of human and divine words, in which the two are variously identified and differentiated, and yet by various means they effectively become

¹²² For a concise description and overview of the dynamics of this ongoing interpretive task within rabbinic Judaism, see Eliezer Berkovits, *Not In Heaven: The Nature and Function of Jewish Law* (1983; repr., Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2014), especially 70-106.

one, with human interpreters functioning as conduits for, or embodiments of, the words of God addressed to their contexts and communities.

4. Diverse means of contemporizing scripture have been highlighted, whereby the Sinai event is rendered a current experience and scripture is read in the present tense. The toolbox of mechanisms to accomplish this is varied – from Moses’ time-collapsing assertion in Deuteronomy 5 to Jesus’ so-called “antitheses” in Matthew 5; from Philo’s confidence in the translation of scripture into Greek as a new revelatory event to Qumran’s mode of identifying the words of scripture with specific present or near-past referents, as well as the rabbis’ continued assertion that their deliberations and judgments constitute nothing less than the very Torah given to Moses at Sinai.

5. Several of these works – most notably in Qumran, Matthew’s Gospel and the rabbinic literature – are emphatic and explicit in their extension of interpretive responsibility and authority to others, beyond the central character or characters upon whom they focus as interpreters of scripture. I have suggested instances where this element may be detected in Deuteronomy, Daniel, and Philo as well, but these would seem to be somewhat more implicit and understated in their transference of an interpretive role to others.

How and to what degree are these same features present in the Fourth Gospel and its portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture? What comparative light can these depictions of scripture interpreters in Jewish antiquity shed on John’s narrative depiction of an authoritative interpreter who speaks divine words (indeed, who is the divine Logos/Word made flesh; 1:1), who claims that “Moses wrote about me” (5:46) and who extends interpretive responsibility and authority to his disciples? It is to the Fourth Gospel that we now turn, with a close reading of a variety of passages that are particularly significant for their contribution to the depiction of Jesus as interpreter of scripture. The observations from these close readings will position us to be able to propose at least provisional answers to the questions posed above.

Chapter 3

The Portrayal of Jesus as Interpreter of Scripture in John's Gospel

As highlighted in the introductory chapter of this study, the use of scripture in John's Gospel has been and continues to be a topic of considerable discussion and debate in the scholarly literature. While it is broadly recognized that "Israel's Scriptures form the foundation on which the narrative of the Gospel of John is written"¹ and that John's Gospel is "steeped in Old Testament... symbolism and motifs,"² there is no consensus on the number of explicit scriptural citations in John³ much less other scriptural references, allusions, and "echoes."⁴ It has been observed that John's Gospel contains fewer identifiable direct references to scripture than the synoptic Gospels,⁵ just as it recounts fewer episodes and interactions, but that the Fourth Gospel gives more space to each episode,⁶ playing with scriptural images and motifs in creative and impressionistic ways.⁷ It has also been noted that John's Gospel speaks frequently of "scripture" in a more broad, generalized sense without referencing or identifying

¹ Myers, "Abiding Words: An Introduction to Perspectives on John's Use of Scripture," 1. See also Anthony T. Hanson, "John's Use of Scripture" in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. Craig A. Evans and W. Richard Stegner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 375. See also Lieu, "Narrative Analysis and Scripture in John," 144.

² Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture*, 1. See also Catrin Williams, "Patriarchs and Prophets Remembered: Framing Israel's Past in the Gospel of John," in *Abiding Words: The Use of Scripture in the Gospel of John*, ed. Alicia D. Myers and Bruce G. Schuchard (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015), 187.

³ See Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture*, 103-106. See also Johannes Beutler, S.J., "The Use of 'Scripture' in the Gospel of John," in *Exploring the Gospel of John*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 147.

⁴ See Richard Hays (*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 25-33) for a description of "echoes" and "hermeneutical reflections and constraints" on their identification and use in biblical interpretation.

⁵ Sanghee M. Ahn, *The Christological Witness Function of the Old Testament Characters in the Gospel of John*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 305.

⁶ See Jo-Ann A. Brant, *John*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 13.

⁷ Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 78.

specific scriptural passages as such.⁸ Within the rich and complex tapestry of John's use of scripture, scholarly studies tend to focus on the explicit citations.⁹

My focus in this study is not to attempt an analysis of the use of scripture in John's Gospel as a whole but rather to attend specifically to the Gospel's portrayal of the character of Jesus himself as interpreter of scripture. In what follows I will situate John's portrayal of Jesus within the "big picture" narrative context of the Gospel's literary structure, and then proceed to a close reading of a series of passages that contribute significantly to the depiction of Jesus as interpreter of scripture. These passages include instances of explicit citations of scripture as well as instances where scriptural allusions and imagery are present but no explicit citation of a specific scriptural passage is in view. We will then be in a position to identify and summarize a number of key characteristics that emerge from our reading and proceed in the next chapter of this study to compare John's portrayal of Jesus with other depictions of scripture interpreters in a range of literature from Jewish antiquity that was surveyed in chapter two.

A. Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel with Regard to Its Portrayal of Jesus as Interpreter of Scripture

The shape of John's Gospel in its final form can be mapped according to a four-part structure:¹⁰ the Prologue (1:1-18),¹¹ the Book of Signs (1:19-12:50), the Book of Glory (13:1-20:31),

⁸ See Beutler, "The Use of 'Scripture' in the Gospel of John," 150-156.

⁹ Lieu's comment in this regard ("Narrative Analysis and Scripture in John," 145) is representative, if rather more vivid than most: "In what follows, the use of Scripture will be explored as found in the mouths of the various participants in the Johannine drama. To attempt this with every whisper of scriptural allusion and symbolism would take more than the present exercise has space for, and risk running aground in the swamps of verification already referred to. I shall, therefore, limit myself to explicit, acknowledged, references to Scripture – unmistakable quotations together with appeals to what is written, the Law or to the prophet(s) – while recognizing that to do so can only be a preliminary stage." See also Longenecker (*Biblical Interpretation in the Apostolic Era*, 11-12, 57) and Maarten J.J. Menken (*Old Testament Quotations in the Fourth Gospel: Studies in Textual Form* [Kampen, The Netherlands: Pharos Publishing House, 1996], 11).

¹⁰ In this mode of dividing up the structure of John's Gospel, but not in the names given to each section, I am following following Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth On Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 14. "The Book of Signs" and "the Book of Glory" as titles

and the Epilogue (21:1-25). Each of these four sections makes particular contributions to the Gospel's overall portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture.

The Prologue, by evoking scripture from its opening words (“in the beginning”) and poetically establishing the characterization of the Logos of God becoming flesh, sets up the irony that will pervade the Gospel, as the audience is alerted to the identity and mission of Jesus in a way that characters in the narrative are not. It is surely not by accident that the name of Jesus first appears in John's Gospel linked to that of Moses, with reference to the gift of the law (1:17). How are we to understand the relationship between Jesus and Moses, Jesus and Torah, Jesus and scripture?¹² These questions are dramatically foregrounded by naming Jesus and Moses together in the climax to this introductory section of the Gospel.

The bulk of the Fourth Gospel divides rather neatly into two parts, with a significant shift in the way the narrative introduces scripture citations beginning in chapter 12, the hinge section between those two parts.¹³ During the account of Jesus' public ministry in the first twelve chapters, explicit citations of scripture are frequently introduced with a variation on the phrase “it is written” (2:17; 6:31, 45; 10:34; 12:14).¹⁴ A different citation formula is used in 12:38: “This was to fulfill the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah...” From this point on, every explicit citation of scripture in the Gospel is

derive from Raymond E. Brown, *Gospel According to John I-XII*, The Anchor Bible 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1966), cxxxviii-cxxxix. Lincoln (*Truth On Trial*, 15) critiques these titles.

¹¹ Although she discusses 1:1-18 as a section in the structure of her commentary, Brant (*John*, 26-27) notes that “[s]ome ancient witnesses treat 1:14 as the prologue's conclusion... and 1:15-18 as the words of John the Baptist... This commentary follows this early tradition and treats 1:1-14 as the prologue proper and 1:15-18 as the beginning of John's witness, which continues in 1:19-34.”

¹² Lee's comment (“The Significance of Moses in the Gospel of John,” 52) regarding all four Gospels is particularly *a propos* here: “In part, Moses becomes a cipher for the relationship between Jesus and the law.”

¹³ This shift is observed by many commentators. See Francis Moloney, “The Gospel of John: The ‘End’ of Scripture,” *Interpretation* 63 (4) (2009), 357-360; “The Gospel of John as Scripture,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67 (2005): 457-460; William Randolph Bynum, “Quotations of Zechariah in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Abiding Words: The Use of Scripture in the Gospel of John*, ed. Alicia D. Myers and Bruce G. Schuchard (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015), 52-54; Martin Hengel, “The Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel” in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. Craig A. Evans and W. Richard Stegner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 392-394.

¹⁴ Or “as the scripture has said” (7:38, 42), or “as the prophet Isaiah said” (1:23).

introduced with a variation on the fulfillment formula (12:38; 13:18; 15:25; 19:24, 36). Where the first series of citations is descriptive (making the claim that what Jesus is saying and doing has already been written about in scripture), the second set seems to be prescriptive (Jesus is speaking and acting intentionally and explicitly in order to fulfill – or to provoke others to fulfill¹⁵ - the words of scripture).¹⁶ At the close of each of these two major sections there is a reference to the disciples' temporary lack of understanding vis-à-vis the scriptures (12:16; 20:9). According to these verses it is only in retrospect, after Jesus' death and resurrection, that hermeneutical insight is available to the disciples – an assertion already made in 2:22.¹⁷

Finally, in the Epilogue or “second ending” of the Gospel, there is a renewed emphasis on reliable “testimony” and what is “written” – terms that are used throughout the narrative to describe the relationship between scripture and Jesus. But now this reliable written testimony has to do with the self-conscious literary production that is the Gospel itself (21:24-25). And although there are no explicit citations of scripture in the Epilogue, there is ample evidence, as demonstrated by Francis Moloney, Adele Reinhartz, Chris Keith and others, that Jesus' words and, indeed, the written Gospel itself are presented as having the status and authority of scripture for the believing audience.¹⁸

We will consider these matters in greater detail below. For now, suffice it to observe that the complex and multi-faceted relationship between Jesus and scripture is woven into the narrative

¹⁵ See Lieu (“Narrative Analysis and Scripture in John,” 150) for her discussion of an example of this in John 19:28.

¹⁶ See Sheridan (*Retelling Scripture*, 49) regarding Scripture *witnessing* to Jesus in the first half of John's Gospel, and Scripture *fulfilled* by Jesus in the second half. See also Sheridan's discussion (*Ibid.*, 30-31) of Obermann's proposal of a change of audience (transition from debates with the Jews toward a turn toward “his own”) as a reason for this shift.

¹⁷ This dynamic is observed by multiple commentators. See especially Michael A. Daise, “Quotations With ‘Remembrance’ Formulae in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Abiding Words: The Use of Scripture in the Gospel of John*, ed. Alicia D. Myers and Bruce G. Schuchard (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015), 75-91; and Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 85-86.

¹⁸ See Moloney, “The Gospel of John: The ‘End’ of Scripture,” 360-366; “The Gospel of John as Scripture,” 454-468; Adele Reinhartz, “Torah Reading in the Johannine Community,” in *Journal of Early Christian History* 5.2 (2015): 111-116; Chris Keith, “The Competitive Textualization of the Jesus Tradition in John 20:30-31 and 21:24-25,” in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 78.2 (2016): 321-337. See also Wayne Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology*, NovTSup XIV (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967), 289.

structure of the Fourth Gospel. As we shall see, Jesus is presented as a character who is steeped in the scriptures of Israel and who draws upon them in ways that elicit a range of responses, from enthusiastic acceptance to uncertainty and confusion to deadly opposition. What is it about Jesus' use of scripture that has this effect? What kind of scripture interpreter is Jesus, according to the Fourth Gospel?

B. Selected Key Passages for the Portrayal of Jesus as Interpreter of Scripture in John's Gospel

1. Law Through Moses, Grace and Truth Through Jesus: an introduction to the hermeneutical agenda of the Fourth Gospel (1:1-18)

Key to the characterization of Jesus in John's Gospel is the manner of his introduction in the Prologue. The opening words of the Fourth Gospel (Ἐν ἀρχῇ - "In the beginning") are identical to those of Genesis 1:1 (LXX).¹⁹ Peder Borgen has argued that the Prologue of John's Gospel is an exposition of the beginning of Genesis,²⁰ and Daniel Boyarin sees the Logos of John's Prologue as "the product of a scriptural reading of Genesis 1 and Proverbs 8 together."²¹ Craig Keener notes the connections between John's description of the Logos and Jewish literature regarding divine Wisdom²² and the widespread identification of Wisdom with Torah.²³ He further observes that "[p]laying on the

¹⁹ Peder Borgen, *The Gospel of John: More Light From Philo, Paul and Archaeology* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2014), 46.

²⁰ See Peder Borgen, *Philo, John and Paul: New Perspectives on Judaism and Early Christianity* (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1987), 76-93.

²¹ Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 94-95. Boyarin (Ibid., 95) identifies this "scriptural reading" as an exemplar of "the formal characteristics of midrash as a mode of reading Scripture", where a primary exegeted text, typically from the Pentateuch, invokes other texts from the Prophets and Writings to form an "intertextual framework of ideas and language that is used to interpret and expand the Pentateuchal text being preached." This explains, according to Boyarin, why John 1:1 speaks of "Logos" (Word) rather than "Sophia" (Wisdom). Genesis 1, in which the world comes into existence through the spoken word of God, is the primary exegeted text, and Wisdom texts such as Proverbs 8 are brought to bear as intertexts. Boyarin further points out (Ibid., 96) that "Philo, like others, identifies Sophia and the Logos as a single entity." Others have argued that John 1:1 uses Logos rather than Sophia because the grammatically masculine term Logos aligns with Jesus' masculine gender, as compared to the feminine Sophia. See Borgen, *Gospel of John*, 47.

²² Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 352.

²³ Ibid., 354.

link between Torah and Wisdom, the Fourth Gospel presents the Logos of its prologue as Torah.”²⁴ Thus “Jesus himself embodies the Torah and is its fullest revelation... It is rejecting Jesus, rather than obeying him, that constitutes rejection of Torah (cf. 1:11-13).”²⁵ In this way, from the outset, the Prologue of John’s Gospel situates the reader in an intertextual world that powerfully evokes a multitude of themes and images drawn from Israel’s scriptures.²⁶

It is in the midst of this intertextual matrix that the name of Jesus first appears in John’s Gospel. We have already noted that the character of Jesus is first introduced by name in juxtaposition with that of Moses in 1:17. “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (ὅτι ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωϋσέως ἐδόθη, ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο). How are we to understand the relationship between these two phrases? What is the relationship between “the law... given through Moses” and the “grace and truth” that “came through Jesus Christ”?

Scholarship is divided on this question. Some see in this verse a self-evident paradigm of contrast, opposition, or replacement.²⁷ In his discussion of this passage John Painter goes so far as to say that “[t]hrough his [Jesus’] appearance the Law of Moses has become obsolete.”²⁸ Keener characterizes the Moses/Jesus clauses in 1:17 as a “clear contrast.”²⁹ Other scholars are more

²⁴ Ibid., 360. See also Reinhartz, “Torah Reading,” 115.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Other motifs in the Prologue also powerfully evoke a multitude of scriptural allusions and references, including light and darkness, rejection by “his own,” “children of God,” seeing/not seeing God.

²⁷ Lincoln, *Truth On Trial*, 14, 232; Jerome H. Neyrey, S.J. *The Gospel of John*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 46; Reinhartz, annotation on John 1:17 in *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 158; John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 448.

²⁸ John Painter, *The Quest For the Messiah: The History, Literature and Theology of the Johannine Community*, 2 ed. (Abingdon: T&T Clarke, 1993), 149. Further, Painter (Ibid., 244) notes that “only in Jn 1.17 is the Law/grace antithesis expressly stated.” Painter (Ibid., 147) identifies this “Law/grace antithesis” as “not Johannine but Pauline, and attempts to account for its presence in John 1:17 by postulating its subsequent addition as “editorial material” by a “Hellenist’ community where the Pauline antithesis was known and affirmed.” (147).

²⁹ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 361.

circumspect in their discussion of this verse.³⁰ Lieu, for instance, points out that “[t]he absence of any conjunctive particle... leaves unstated how the two clauses relate to each other.”³¹ While Myers sees indicators of Jesus’ “superiority” over Moses in the Prologue (and specifically in 1:17-18),³² she goes on to say that “no competition between Jesus and Moses is implied since they are both part of the same scriptural narrative (cf. Jn 1.17, 45; 5.39-46).”³³ She comes to this conclusion in part because she considers the text as an example of the Greek rhetorical technique of *synkrisis* – comparing someone with a famous example, and drawing upon the opinions of famous people – as a way to bolster someone’s status and authority.³⁴

Boyarin, approaching the Prologue from the point of view of Jewish midrashic exegesis, also takes a more nuanced view regarding the Moses/Jesus relationship as depicted in John’s Prologue. Boyarin sees the beginning of the Prologue as an expression of “common ‘Jewish’ Logos theology,”³⁵ and distinguishes between the initial “law given through Moses” as “the earlier attempt of the Logos to enter the world” (that is, *Logos Asarkos*, Word without flesh, word as written text), and the subsequent coming of the *Logos Ensarkos* (enfleshed Word).³⁶ Thus, “[f]or John... Jesus comes to fulfill the mission of Moses, not to displace it. The Torah simply needed a better exegete, the *Logos*

³⁰ See Brown, *John I-XII*, 16. Moloney at times uses “replacement” language but continually tries to nuance it (see Francis Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading the Fourth Gospel: John 1-4* [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993], 47-48, 51). See also Ahn, *The Christological Witness Function*, 239.

³¹ Lieu, “Narrative Analysis,” 147. Ahn (*Christological Witness Function*, 239) makes the same observation, as does Meeks (*Prophet-King*, 288 n. 2), although Meeks reverses himself a few pages later (*Ibid.*, 299) when he states that “1:17 explicitly contrasts the gift of the Torah through Moses with the event of grace and truth through Jesus.”

³² Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*, 68-70

³³ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 68. See also Brant (*John*, 36) regarding guidelines for encomia. A related approach could be to understand the relationship between the two clauses in terms of the parallelism – in this case, the parallelism of “intensification” – characteristic of Hebrew poetry. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), especially 1-28 on “The Dynamics of Parallelism” and 75-103 on “Structures of Intensification.”

³⁵ See Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 97, 105.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

Ensarkos, a fitting teacher of flesh and blood.”³⁷ In fact, “[w]hen the incarnate Logos speaks, he speaks Torah.”³⁸ This reading, says Boyarin, “supports the interpretation of the coming of Christ as a supplement to the Torah.”³⁹ This reading also places the depiction of Jesus as “exegete” of Torah at centre stage in his introduction as a character in the Fourth Gospel.

Indeed, many scholars have observed close connections between the language and imagery of John 1:16-18 with Exodus 33-34, a key text depicting the giving of the law at Sinai.⁴⁰ Particularly notable for our purposes, as noted above, is the pairing in 1:17 of “the law (ὁ νόμος) given through Moses” (the subject of the Exodus account) with “grace and truth” (ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια) which a number of scholars identify as a Johannine translation of the terms $\tau\omicron\pi$ and $\eta\mu\alpha$ in the divine self-revelation in Ex 34:6.⁴¹ John’s Prologue comes to a climax with the declaration that the task of the one “who is close to the Father’s heart” is to “make him known” – literally, to “exegete” (ἐξηγήσατο) God to others (1:18).⁴²

There is neither time nor space in the present study to pursue the many further questions and issues that arise even from this cursory look at the manner in which Jesus is introduced as a character in the Prologue of John’s Gospel. Suffice it to note that John’s Gospel introduces Jesus in a way that 1) points to his identity as the Logos/Wisdom of God made flesh, 2) identifies him in relationship with Moses and the giving of the law, and 3) identifies a revealing (“exegetical”) role as core to his

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ See Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 150; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 420-423; Marie-Émile Boismard, *Moses or Jesus: An Essay in Johannine Christology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 93-98; Christopher A. Maronde, “Moses in the Gospel of John,” in *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 77 (2013): 28-29; Stan Harstine, *Moses as a Character in the Fourth Gospel: A Study of Ancient Reading Techniques*, JSNTSup 229 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 47-48.

⁴¹ For example: Anthony Tyrrell Hanson, *The Prophetic Gospel: A Study of John and the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 21; Meeks (*Prophet-King*, 288 n. 2). The Septuagint translates $\eta\mu\alpha$ $\tau\omicron\pi$ as πολυέλεος καὶ ἀληθινός.

⁴² See Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture*, 195. Also Robert Kysar, *Voyages With John: Charting the Fourth Gospel* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 34.

identity and mission (1:18). Jesus is portrayed from the beginning of John's Gospel in multiple, complex and inter-related forms of relationship with the scriptures of Israel.

2. About Whom Moses in the Law and Also the Prophets Wrote: initial encounters and a hermeneutical transformation (1:19-51)

After the Prologue's scripture-soaked introduction of Jesus, providing a poetic view of the cosmic context in which the Fourth Gospel's audience is led to understand the identity and mission of Jesus, our initial encounters with the character of Jesus in the subsequent narrative are no less steeped in scripture. John the Baptist⁴³ responds to questions (gives "testimony") about his own identity in light of various scriptural figures (the Messiah, Elijah, the prophet – 1:19-22), declares himself to be the Isaianic "voice of one crying out in the wilderness" (1:23), and points to Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29, 36) and "the Son of God" (1:34). The first characters to speak directly with Jesus are soon enthusiastic about his identity, declaring him to be "the Messiah" (1:41) and "him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote" (1:45). In this way, before we have heard Jesus utter anything except "what are you looking for?" and "come and see"⁴⁴ (1:38-39), he is intimately linked to Israel's scriptures in a variety of ways by the Gospel's narrator and by every character who interacts with him.

This linkage is further evoked and developed in Jesus' interaction with Nathanael, which is set up in the context of an interpretive claim made by Philip: "we have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote" (1:45). Nathanael's initial posture is one of skepticism, and while his disdainful reply may reflect cultural attitudes and stereotypes about Nazareth and Galilee,⁴⁵

⁴³ As Brant (*John*, 45) notes, John is never called "the Baptist" in the Fourth Gospel, but I will follow Brant's practice of referring to him in that way in order to avoid confusion between the character of John in the narrative and the name traditionally associated with the writing of the Fourth Gospel.

⁴⁴ Keener (*Gospel of John*, 485) notes that "'come and see' was a standard phrase in ancient literature, including for halakic investigation," and references many examples from ancient literature. See also Keener, 471-472.

⁴⁵ For a brief comment on this possibility see Keener, *Gospel of John*, 483.

the narrative context implies that Nathanael's response regarding Jesus' origins, like that of the Pharisees in 7:52, arises out of his reading and understanding of scripture. This possibility is suggested by Jesus' comment that "I saw you under the fig tree" – a traditional image in rabbinic Judaism for the study of Torah.⁴⁶ If this suggestion holds, then what we have in Nathanael's rapid and astonishing about-face, declaring Jesus to be "Rabbi" and "the Son of God" and "the King of Israel," may be seen as an example and indeed a paradigm of hermeneutical transformation prompted by an encounter with Jesus.⁴⁷ Thus John's Gospel provides an example at the outset of someone whose study of scripture initially leads him to reject such claims about Jesus but whose encounter with Jesus results in a hermeneutical shift that enables him to identify Jesus with exalted titles. Others, as we shall see, do not make this hermeneutical shift, and this tension lies at the centre of much of the conflict in John's Gospel.

Nathanael first hears of Jesus through Philip's interpretive claims; the first words Nathanael hears from Jesus himself evoke scripture without citing it. Jesus' greeting in 1:47 is witty and playful, alluding through wordplay to the figure of Jacob/Israel and to the scriptural narratives about his trickery or "deceit."⁴⁸ Jesus' statement at the end of the dialogue builds on these allusions by evoking the account of Jacob's dream with angels ascending and descending on a ladder stretching from earth to heaven (Gen. 28:12). Jesus, however, modifies the image to picture "the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man," declaring this to be a vision that his new disciples can expect to see in the future (John 1:51). As Myers puts it: "the evangelist illustrates Jesus' knowledge of Israel's story, as well as his connection to it, by manipulating the narrative of Jacob's famous vision

⁴⁶ See Neyrey, *The Gospel of John*, 58 for references to multiple rabbinic texts that make this connection. See also Hanson, *The Prophetic Gospel*, 39 and R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 123.

⁴⁷ See Neyrey, *The Gospel of John*, 57-58.

⁴⁸ See Genesis 27, especially 27:35.

to contextualize his own ministry.”⁴⁹ Jesus thus writes himself and his disciples into the script provided by scripture,⁵⁰ setting up expectations that “you will see greater things than these” (1:50) – including, we may suppose, new interpretive insights – that are yet to come.

3. Just As Moses Lifted Up the Serpent: a nighttime encounter with an ambiguous hermeneutical result (3:1-15)

If Jesus’ interaction with Nathanael effected a transformation in that potential disciple’s understanding of Israel’s scriptures, the results of Jesus’ dialogue with Nicodemus are decidedly more ambiguous. Introduced as “a man from the Pharisees” and “a leader of the Jews” (3:1), Nicodemus approaches Jesus by night and affirms Jesus’ teaching credentials in a way that “might serve as an invitation to debate.”⁵¹ Brant describes the dialogue that follows as a “hint of flyting” (that is, a verbal show of wits characterized by an exchange of insults and provocations) that “does not escalate into a full-fledged verbal combat” but “establishes Jesus’ supremacy as the master of such contests before the stakes become high.”⁵²

In 3:14 Jesus clearly references scripture, without citing it directly, in commenting on the story of Moses lifting up the serpent in Numbers 21:4-9. By comparing the lifting-up of the Son of Man to Moses’ lifting-up of the serpent in the wilderness, Jesus again writes himself and others into the scriptural narrative. Myers says it well: “By comparing Jesus to the bronze serpent of Numbers 21, the evangelist presents a Jesus who understands his own mission as a continuation of Israel’s sacred history, and who regards Scripture as a witness to his own mission rather than just as a

⁴⁹ Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*, 84.

⁵⁰ See Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*, 84-85.

⁵¹ Jo-Ann A. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 129. Keener (*Gospel of John*, 536) notes that “Jewish teachers often studied at night, especially those who had to work during the day; thus Nicodemus may have come to receive instruction from a greater sage, namely Jesus. More likely, he comes at night to avoid being seen...” Neyrey too (*Gospel of John*, 76) sees ambiguity here regarding Nicodemus’ intentions for approaching Jesus, whether he is positioning himself to learn or to teach.

⁵² Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*, 128. See 123-124 for a description of flyting and 128-130 for an application of this concept to Jesus’ interaction with Nicodemus. Neyrey (*Gospel of John*, 78-79) sees this interaction as an example of the cultural pattern of “challenge and riposte” as well as the literary pattern of statement-misunderstanding-clarification.

testimony to God's past salvific acts."⁵³ This pattern, as we shall see, represents one of the most persistent features of the portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture throughout John's Gospel.

The depiction of Jesus in this interaction with Nicodemus demonstrates another characteristic feature of John's Gospel, and that is the narrative technique whereby the voice of the character is blended with that of the narrator to the point that the two become indistinguishable from each other. We see this already in the Prologue, where it is unclear whether 1:16-18 represents a continuation of the voice and "testimony" of John the Baptist, who is mentioned in 1:15 and again in 1:19, or if those verses are voiced instead by the narrator of the Gospel. A similar dynamic is apparent in 3:10-21, where Jesus' speech begins with first person narration in 3:10-12, after which the first person referent drops out.⁵⁴ While it seems reasonable to attribute 3:13-15 – including the reference to Moses and the bronze serpent – as part of Jesus' response to Nicodemus (elsewhere too Jesus refers to himself obliquely as "the Son of Man"⁵⁵), verses 16-21 sound more like the voice of the narrator, despite the fact that there has been no explicit signal that the speaker has changed.⁵⁶

This stylistic feature of John's narrative, while somewhat confusing and disorienting for the reader who would like to identify who is speaking, can be recognized as a coherent and consistent part of the Fourth Gospel's characterization of Jesus. John's Gospel has no qualms about placing the "fulfillment formula" on the lips of Jesus and other characters in the narrative in precisely the same way that the formula is voiced elsewhere by the narrator.⁵⁷ The rhetorical effect of this narrative technique is to fuse the voice of the character with that of the narrator – and even, as we shall see, with that of scripture – in a unified testimony to the identity of Jesus. The character of Jesus draws

⁵³ Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*, 92.

⁵⁴ The same dynamic is also present in 3:27-36, again with regard to the voice of John the Baptist and the voice of the narrator.

⁵⁵ 1:51; 5:27; 6:27, 53, 62; 8:28; 9:35; 12:23, 34; 13:31.

⁵⁶ As Brant (*John*, 79) puts it: "Nicodemus does not speak after 3:9, and Jesus ceases to use first-person and second-person pronouns after 3:12. It is reasonable to conclude that the narrator's voice has replaced that of Jesus and speaks to the Gospel's audience rather than to Nicodemus."

⁵⁷ See Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*, 125.

upon scripture in the same ways that the narrator does, as a means to tell and help the reader understand the story of Jesus. In John's Gospel the narrator, the protagonist, and even scripture itself speak with one voice, and they speak about Jesus.⁵⁸

4. *Living Water: a midday encounter at the well featuring hermeneutical issues (4:1-42)*

It is commonly observed that Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman provides a striking counterpoint and contrast with the Nicodemus episode.⁵⁹ Within the narrative world of the Fourth Gospel, the fact that Jesus converses with the Samaritan woman is considered to be surprising (4:9, 27). When considered from the point of view of the interpretation of scripture, this dialogue is more surprising still.

The Samaritan woman engages Jesus in a free-flowing theological conversation that is much more incisive, nuanced and playful than the previous interaction with Nicodemus.⁶⁰ The setting and discussion are replete with scriptural issues, allusions and overtones.⁶¹ From an initial discussion about water and "living water" in the context of the well of "our ancestor Jacob," the conversation ranges to include issues such as the appropriate place and manner of worship (4:20-24), salvation as being "from the Jews" (4:22), the nature of God (4:23-24), and the identity of Jesus as prophet (4:19) and Messiah (4:25-26). It is to the Samaritan woman that Jesus makes the unambiguous and astonishing assertion that he is the expected Messiah (4:25-26), and she becomes an effective public

⁵⁸ See especially Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture* for her repeated emphasis on the manner in which Scripture functions as a "witness" to Jesus in John's Gospel. See also Adele Reinhartz, "John," in *The New Testament: Fortress Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Margaret Aymer, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge and David A. Sanchez (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 275.

⁵⁹ So Neyrey (*The Gospel of John*, 95): "she is best appreciated as the antithesis of Nicodemus."

⁶⁰ See Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew* (New York: Harper One, 2006), 135-138.

⁶¹ The scene is set up in a way that has been recognized as "a parody of a type-scene from Hebrew Scripture" (so Brant, *John*, 81), where a man meets a woman at a well, typically resulting in betrothal/marriage (See Gen 24, 29, Ex 2). Levine (*Misunderstood Jew*, 138) describes Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman as "banter spiced with what the Gospel's readers would have recognized to be sexually suggestive: references to wells and cisterns, fountains and living water, especially when made by a man and a woman at a well, are overflowing with innuendo." As Levine points out, Proverbs 5:15-16 and Song of Songs 4:15 are particularly evocative in this regard. See Levine (*Misunderstood Jew*, 135-138) and Robert Alter (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. [New York: Basic Books, 2011], 61-78) for treatments of the "woman at the well" type-scene in the Hebrew Bible.

spokesperson in her community, inviting them to also encounter Jesus (4:28-30, 39-42). Not only is the woman undergoing a transformation in her own understandings (4:29), the result of her “word” and “testimony” (4:39, 42) is a transformation in her entire community, which comes to the remarkable confession that Jesus is “the Saviour of the world” (4:42). While this episode does not include explicit citations of scripture, it is important to the developing portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture in John’s Gospel. One of the characteristics of that portrayal is that Jesus is depicted as engaging in extended and fruitful interpretive conversation with a surprising conversation partner.⁶²

Scriptural antecedents for the “living water” imagery that Jesus introduces into the conversation (4:10-14) are too numerous to discuss in any detail here.⁶³ Some of the most prominent and most frequently identified by scholars include Jeremiah 2:13 and 17:13, in which YHWH is identified as “the fountain of living water” that has been “forsaken.”⁶⁴ When Jesus makes his offer of “living water” to the Samaritan woman, he does not appear to be citing any of these passages directly but is nevertheless appropriating this pervasive scriptural imagery with considerable freedom.⁶⁵ Similarly, Jesus’ statement that “the water that I will give will become in them a spring [πηγή] of water gushing up to eternal life” resonates with the imagery of Isaiah 58:11, where a faithful, Torah-observant people are said to be “like a watered garden, like a spring [πηγή] whose waters never fail.”

⁶² Also notable is the sheer length of the interaction. As Brant (*Dialogue and Drama*, 208) points out: “the Fourth Gospel’s Samaritan woman has nine lines of dialogue with Jesus and two with her community.”

⁶³ See Keener, *Gospel of John*, 602-605 and George Beasley-Murray (*John*. Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 36. [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987], 60-61 for helpful surveys of numerous texts that represent possible allusions. See also note 61 above for Levine’s discussion (*Misunderstood Jew*, 135-138) of several sexually suggestive scriptural references to “living water.”

⁶⁴ See Keener, *Gospel of John*, 604; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 60; Brant, *John*, 84; Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John’s Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1994), 106-107.

⁶⁵ In rabbinic literature, as Keener (*Gospel of John*, 603), Beasley-Murray (*John*, 59-61), and Fishbane (*Garments of Torah*, 76-78) point out, Torah is sometimes compared to water and Torah teachers to wells. Keener (*Ibid*) and Fishbane (*Ibid*) also highlight that the presence of this imagery is also evident in the *Damascus Document* of Qumran, where an interpretation of Numbers 21:17-18 describes “the Well” as “the Law”, and “the Leaders of the People” as those who have come to dig the well of Torah (CD VI.4-12).

Again, although Jesus is not directly quoting scripture here, scriptural echoes are in evidence.⁶⁶ Jesus responds to the woman's question in a way that we have already identified as characteristic of his portrayal in the Fourth Gospel: he alludes to scripture, without citing it directly, and inserts himself and his conversation partner into the scriptural account. Jesus draws with considerable versatility and creativity from a scriptural well that is very deep indeed.

It is striking to note, in this Jewish-Samaritan conversation (4:9), that the prophetic texts mentioned above, while "scriptural" for Jews, did not have scriptural status for Samaritans. For the Samaritans, scripture was – and, indeed, is – the Pentateuch.⁶⁷ One may legitimately ask how or whether these potential echoes of prophetic texts might have been detected or understood by a Samaritan woman.⁶⁸ It is also notable that, having referenced Jacob in her initial response to Jesus (4:12), the woman later steers the conversation to the most contested hermeneutical (and political) issue that divided Samaritans from Jews: the status of Mount Gerazim or Jerusalem as the appropriate cite of worship (4:19-20).⁶⁹ This issue represents the most prominent distinction between the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Pentateuch in the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible: the addition of several verses, or parts thereof, that "highlight the importance of Mt. Gerazim in the history of Israel" and that "constitute the Samaritan Tenth Commandment."⁷⁰ As such, the significance of Mt.

⁶⁶ Isaiah 58:11 and John 4:14 are comparable to other rabbinic sources, described by Fishbane (*Garments of Torah*, 77), in which "[t]he Torah is deemed the saving water of life" and "scholars of the Law are described as a font of waters." Fishbane (Ibid.) cites Rabbi Meir in *M. Avot* VI.1 who describes "[w]hoever devotedly studies the Torah" as "Beloved Companion, who loves the Divine Presence and loves all creatures," further stating that "*the mysteries (razei) of the Torah are revealed (megallin) to him, and he becomes like an overflowing fountain and ceaseless torrent...*" (emphasis added by Fishbane). The points of connection with Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman are readily apparent.

⁶⁷ Ruairidh Bóid, "Use, Authority and Exegesis of Mikra in the Samaritan Tradition" in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder and Harry Sysling (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 595.

⁶⁸ As Brant (*John*, 86) points out: "The Gospel of John draws heavily on the Prophets for proof of Jesus' identity, texts that the Samaritans would not have held to be canonical."

⁶⁹ See Reinhard Pummer, "Samaritan Pentateuch" in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 1189.

⁷⁰ Ibid. Pummer (Ibid.) goes on to say that "all twenty-one occurrences of the Deuteronomic formula "the place that the LORD your God *will* choose" were changed [in the Samaritan Pentateuch] to "the place that

Gerazim vis-à-vis Jerusalem was a matter of considerable interpretive controversy between Jews and Samaritans, and it is precisely this issue that the Samaritan woman, with startling abruptness, introduces into the conversation.

It is equally striking to note that Jesus, while identifying himself with “the Jews” and stating that “[y]ou worship what you do not know; we worship what we know,” does not directly engage the Gerazim-Jerusalem debate. Instead, as Brant points out, “Jesus’ next assertion suggests that both Jewish and Samaritan worship have been inadequate.”⁷¹ The woman then introduces the expectation of a Messiah into the conversation (4:25), and it is at this point that Jesus discloses his messianic identity (4:26).⁷² While the dialogue is then interrupted by the arrival of Jesus’ disciples, we soon discover that the Samaritan woman is taking Jesus’ messianic claim seriously (4:29-30). Not only are her perspectives evidently in the process of being transformed, her word/testimony (4:39) prompts an apparent transformation in the community as well, as they too encounter Jesus and call him “the Savior of the world” (4:42).

Further exploration of the details of these interactions is beyond the scope of this study. For our purposes it is sufficient to note the presence of interpretive issues and allusions in Jesus’ dialogue with the Samaritan woman. In this passage, as in the depiction of Nathanael in 1:43-51, such dialogue results in a transformed understanding of Jesus’ identity for those who accept his claims. These kinds of interpretive and transformational encounters with a range of different characters constitute a significant feature of the portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture in John’s Gospel.

the LORD your God *has* chosen.” The changes were made in each case by omitting one Hebrew letter from one word (MT *ybhΩr* [imperfect “will choose”] to SP *bhΩr* [perfect “has chosen”]). Whereas the unnamed place in the MT was eventually understood to refer to Jerusalem (which was not yet conquered in the life time of Moses and could therefore not be named), the Samaritans claim that the “place” is Mt. Gerazim.”

⁷¹ Brant, *John*, 86.

⁷² Brant (Ibid.) indicates that “Samaritan messianic expectations were in an excited state shortly after the time of Jesus’s ministry.”

5. *If You Believed Moses, You Would Believe Me, For He Wrote About Me: a sabbath day hermeneutical controversy (5:1-47)*

Chapter 5 marks a transition point in John's Gospel in a variety of ways. After the sequence of more private interactions that we have observed, in which key features of Jesus' depiction as interpreter of scripture are already established, the narrative moves in chapters 5-10 to a series of public discussions and controversies that take the form of an extended trial scene.⁷³ A number of these episodes are shaped with an initial healing or miraculous act by Jesus which gives rise to extended dialogue (or, as in chapter 5, mostly monologue), in the course of which Jesus makes a series of what many of his listeners find to be astonishing and unacceptable – indeed, blasphemous – claims. These claims, as we shall see, are rooted in particular (and particularly controversial) readings of Israel's scriptures.

Myers considers John 5 to have “a special place in the Johannine narrative and its rhetorical aims, particularly with regard to its characterization of Jesus.”⁷⁴ She notes that chapter 5, as “[t]he first, extended trial-like scene between Jesus and the Jews... sets the stage for the encounters that follow and form a baseline for the responses Jesus offers in each of them,” with chapters 6-10 regularly referring back to the issues identified in this passage.⁷⁵ Myers' insight holds true for the portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture in John's Gospel as well; chapter 5 is a particularly important keynote in that portrayal.

As Sheridan points out, “the Jews” emerge in chapters 5-10 as the primary target audience for the explicit citations of scripture within the narrative.⁷⁶ Sheridan notes that the function of the

⁷³ Lincoln (*Truth on Trial*, 139 and 311-313) observes that John's Gospel, unlike the synoptics, depicts no trial of Jesus before the Jewish Sanhedrin, giving the trial before Pilate considerably more prominence. Instead, Jesus' public ministry is presented as a kind of extended trial.

⁷⁴ Alicia D. Myers, “‘Jesus Said to Them...’: The Adaptation of Juridical Rhetoric in John 5:19-47,” *JBL* 132.2 (2013), 418.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture*, 213, 235.

scripture citations is to witness to Jesus in order to move the Gospel's audience to believe in him and to "have life in his name" (20:31), but the irony is that within the narrative itself these usages of scripture serve to further alienate their target audience, "the Jews."⁷⁷ In Brant's succinct formulation: "[c]hapter 5 marks the narrative's turn from an emphasis on reception of Jesus to rejection."⁷⁸ A key element of that "turn," as we shall see, has to do with Jesus' and his opponents' mutual repudiation of each other's hermeneutical posture vis-à-vis the scriptures of Israel.

In fact, John 5 has been recognized as a crucial articulation of the hermeneutics of Jesus in John's Gospel.⁷⁹ Where we have already seen Jesus portrayed as interpreter of scripture in a series of episodes leading up to chapter 5, it is at this point, in response to the hostile questioning of the Jewish authorities, that Jesus not only demonstrates but explicitly articulates key elements of his hermeneutical approach to the scriptures of Israel.⁸⁰ This hermeneutical approach, as we shall see, remains consistent and representative both of the narrator and of Jesus as a literary character throughout the subsequent unfolding of the Fourth Gospel. As such, John 5 stands at the crux of the agenda of the present study.

The theme that prompts the dialogue in John 5 is introduced in a characteristically Johannine way, as Jesus' healing of a sick man is recounted while withholding crucial information until after the action is completed: "[n]ow that day was a sabbath" (5:9). At this point "the Jews" take issue, pointing out to the man: "it is not lawful for you to carry your mat" (5:10). Evidently this is a straightforward matter of the violation of the prohibition against carrying any object outside of the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 195, 213.

⁷⁸ Brant, *John*, 99.

⁷⁹ See Ahn, *Christological Witness Function*, 251; Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 76.

⁸⁰ Hays (*Reading Backwards*, 76) says of 5:39-47: "... at the climax of this discourse, just about a quarter of the way through John's narrative, we come at last upon the fundamental hermeneutical claim – now stated in Jesus' own words – that illuminates John's approach to reading Israel's Scripture."

domain of one's household on the sabbath day (Jer 17:21-22).⁸¹ It does not remain a straightforward matter for long.

After the healed man is confronted, first by "the Jews" and then again by Jesus, he reports his healer to the interrogators who subsequently pursue Jesus "because he was doing such things on the sabbath" (5:16). Jesus' next comment raises the stakes for the ensuing controversy: "My Father is still working, and I also am working" (5:17). The response to this statement is swift and decisive; for the first time in the Gospel we are told that there is a plot to kill Jesus (5:18). The issue has now escalated from one of sabbath observance to the claims that "the Jews" understand Jesus to be making regarding his own identity. The charge that Jesus is "making himself equal to God" persists and becomes a mainstay of the opposition to Jesus in the narrative (cf. 10:33; 19:7).

Upon closer inspection, Jesus' assertion in 5:17 turns out to be another example of his interpretation of scripture. Borgen has shown that this statement reflects a "widespread exegetical debate on Gen 2:2-3" in the Second Temple period, attested as early as the second century B.C.E. as well as in Philo and rabbinic writings.⁸² At issue was how it could be said that God "rested" on the seventh day, when God evidently continues to work on the sabbath in the natural processes of the world (birth, death, rainfall, etc.).⁸³ We do not need to enter into the details of that debate; suffice it to say, with Borgen, that Jesus' contention in 5:17 that God "is still working" (even on the sabbath) represents an interpretive option regarding Gen 2:2-3 that was known and available in the intellectual milieu of the Judaism(s) of the 1st century.⁸⁴

What is controversial about Jesus' statement, then, would not seem to be the contention that God is "still working" on the sabbath, but Jesus' suggestion that this fact somehow justifies his own

⁸¹ See Reinhartz's note on this verse in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 168.

⁸² Borgen, "The Gospel of John and Philo of Alexandria" in *The Gospel of John: More Light*, 47-48.

⁸³ See Brant, *John*, 105.

⁸⁴ Borgen ("The Gospel of John and Philo of Alexandria," *The Gospel of John: More Light*, 48) states that "[a]n interpretation of Gen 2:2-3 similar to Philo's seems to be presupposed in John 5:1-18."

“working” on the sabbath, along with his manner of speaking of God as “[m]y Father.” These are the claims that arouse indignation, as they are understood by “the Jews” to mean that Jesus was “thereby making himself equal to God” (5:18).⁸⁵

The claim to be working as his Father is working can be seen as an interpretive move regarding the scriptural commandments to keep the sabbath. In Exodus 20:11 the rationale for sabbath-keeping is the imitation of God. John 5:17 depicts Jesus adopting this same rationale to defend his action of healing on the sabbath. He has changed the subject from the matter of “carrying a burden” on the sabbath day to the rationale given for sabbath legislation in the first place – the imitation of God – and claims that his healing work is in line with such imitation. By healing on the sabbath Jesus is in fact imitating God, who continues to “work” and sustain life on the sabbath.⁸⁶ This is precisely the line taken in Jesus’ subsequent discourse about the Son imitating his Father (5:19-30).⁸⁷ With this bold interpretive move Jesus defends his actions and undercuts his questioners’ interpretation of scriptural sabbath legislation.

As Jesus continues his speech in 5:19-30, reflecting further on the Son’s imitation of the Father, he uses a cluster of images and vocabulary drawn from the book of Daniel. The repeated references to resurrection and judgment, coupled with the prominent role of “the Son of Man,” are

⁸⁵ On the face of it, the critique of Jesus calling God “my Father” seems surprising, considering that such language is well attested in scripture, including references to God as “Father” of the collective peoplehood of Israel (e.g.: Deut 32:6; Isaiah 63:16; Jer 3:4, 19; Malachi 1:6, 2:10) as well as to an individual (most often the king: 2 Samuel 7:14, Psalm 2:7; 68:5; 89:26; 1 Chronicles 17:13; 22:10; 28:6). Keener (*Gospel of John*, 646) frames the matter thus: “The issue is not calling God ‘Father’ (5:18) in a general sense, as this was a title for God in Judaism and for the supreme deity among many pagans as well. The issue is that he calls him his Father in a way unique to himself, implying something more than solidarity with the Jewish people as God’s children (see the debate in 8:37-47).”

⁸⁶ In her notes on this passage, Reinhartz (*The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 168) says: “... according to Gen 2.2-3, God rested on the seventh day of creation. Hellenistic Jewish speculation (Philo, *Cher.* 86-90; *Leg. All.* 1.5-6) conceded that God did not rest on subsequent Sabbaths, given that vegetation grew, children were born, and other natural processes continued.”

⁸⁷ Borgen (“Observations on God’s Agent and Agency in John’s Gospel,” *The Gospel of John: More Light*, 196) recognizes here an articulation of “the Jewish concept of agent/agency” which is “broader than just that of the actual sending of an emissary” and “comprises other forms of authorized activity.”

evocative of passages like Daniel 7:13-14 and 12:1-3.⁸⁸ Again Jesus is not quoting scripture directly, but he appropriates the imagery and vocabulary of Daniel to make a series of bold claims about his own identity and role as “the Son” of “the Father” – to give life (5:21, 26), to execute judgment (5:27, 30), to use his voice to call “all who are in their graves” either “to the resurrection of life” or “to the resurrection of condemnation” (5:25, 28-29). In the process, Jesus identifies himself with Daniel’s “Son of Man” figure (Dan 7:13-14), declaring that “my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (5:30). At this point in the narrative Jesus’ audience has good reason to be “astonished” (5:28). On what authority can Jesus be saying these things? This is the question to which Jesus turns next.

Lincoln and others have identified the prevalence of the language of lawsuits and trials throughout John’s Gospel, and in John 5 specifically.⁸⁹ The depiction of Jesus as God’s authorized agent or representative carries over into this forensic language where, as Lincoln says, “the relation between the authorizer and the agent is so close that a person’s response to, and treatment of, the latter are considered to be a response to, and treatment of, the former.”⁹⁰ This is precisely what we see articulated in 5:23 as well as other places in John’s Gospel (cf. 12:44-45; 14:9; 15:23).⁹¹

In keeping with this legal milieu, and with the stipulation in Deuteronomy 17:6 of multiple witnesses for the prosecution of capital cases, Jesus acknowledges that to testify on his own behalf would be inadequate (John 5:31). He then proceeds to call a series of unconventional witnesses to the stand. The first witness is John, who “testified to the truth” (5:33; cf. 1:6-8, 15). “The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing” constitute the second witness. The

⁸⁸ Nils Dahl (“Do Not Wonder! John 5:28-29 and Johannine Eschatology Once More” in *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul and John in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. Robert T. Fortna and Beverly R. Gaventa [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990], 326) argues that 5:28-29 is modeled on Daniel 12:2, while drawing upon Isaiah 26:19 LXX, Ezekiel 37:12-13, and Daniel 7 as well.

⁸⁹ See Lincoln, *Truth on Trial* and Myers, “Jesus Said to Them.”

⁹⁰ Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 187.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

third is “the Father” himself: “And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf” (5:37a). Jesus is depicted as adopting the traditional form and scriptural requirement of witnesses and exercising considerable freedom in applying it to his situation.

Having identified “the Father who sent me” as one of the witnesses for his defense, Jesus then declares: “You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent” (5:37-38). This could be an allusion to Exodus 20:18-21, in which the frightened people “stood at a distance,” witnessed thunder and lightning and asked Moses to be their go-between with God at Sinai (and thus had “never heard his [God’s] voice or seen his form,” as Jesus puts it in John 5:37). It could also allude to Deuteronomy 4:12, which describes the scene differently: “Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice.” In either case, Jesus’ words represent a polemical use of the scriptural tradition to describe present reality in a way that comes across as a strongly worded criticism of his questioners. In apparent agreement with Exodus 20:18-21 (no words, no form) and in direct contradiction to Deuteronomy 4:12 (words, but no form), Jesus is essentially saying: “Not only have you not seen God’s form, you have never even heard God’s voice!” This is a harsh and astonishing statement indeed, calling into question not only the specifics of this or that interpretation of the law, but whether Jesus’ accusers have ever really “heard God’s voice” (received the law) at all. It is, in effect, a declaration that the rejection of Jesus constitutes an undoing of the Sinai event.

Jesus’ speech builds to a climax in John 5:39-47, bringing together elements from the previous discussion (witnesses, Jesus as authorized agent), and delivers, on the lips of Jesus, the Fourth Gospel’s clearest articulation of Jesus’ hermeneutical posture vis-à-vis the scriptures of

Israel.⁹² After the provocative and polemical declaration in 5:37-38 regarding where his questioners stand in relation to the foundational Sinai event, Jesus goes on to say: “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (5:39-40). Here we see Jesus declaring something that is entirely consistent with the way scripture is used throughout the Fourth Gospel: the scriptures of Israel testify about Jesus.⁹³ The initial verb (ἐραυνᾶτε) can be read as either an indicative or an imperative (“You search the scriptures” or “Search the scriptures!”);⁹⁴ either way, it indicates exegetical activity, and should not be construed as expressing disagreement with the fundamental conviction that Torah-study is life-giving (e.g. Psalm 1). The claim here is that the process of “searching the scriptures” is life-giving precisely because (and, indeed, insofar as) it points to Jesus. As John Painter indicates, “[h]ere, in Jn 5.39, 45-47, it is clear that the evangelist has a positive view of the Jewish Scriptures, seen as a witness to Jesus as the one sent from the Father.”⁹⁵

The problem, as articulated by Jesus, is not that his listeners “search the scriptures.” The problem is that they do not accept that the scriptures’ witness to Jesus, and they refuse to “come to me to have life” (5:40). In other words, “the Jews” in chapter 5 (and, as we shall see, beyond) do not undergo the kind of transformed understanding of Jesus’ identity that we have noted in the encounters with Nathanael and the Samaritan woman.

Jesus continues, “Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope” (5:45). Previously it seemed that Jesus was calling witnesses to defend himself against the accusations of his questioners. Now the situation is reversed and the tables are turned. The witnesses that Jesus calls are witnesses for the prosecution. The very

⁹² Hays (*Reading Backwards*, 76) refers to John 5:39-47 as “the fundamental hermeneutical claim – now stated in Jesus’ own words – that illumines John’s approach to reading Israel’s Scripture.”

⁹³ Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture*, 235.

⁹⁴ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 659.

⁹⁵ Painter, *Quest For the Messiah*, 244.

ones who have been accusing Jesus of transgressing the law are themselves brought to trial, according to the process outlined in Deut 17:6, and accused by none other than Moses himself. The very speaker and transmitter of the words of the Torah is the one who, according to Jesus, is the accuser of those attempting to safeguard and help the people to abide by those words. And those are precisely the words that, Jesus claims, they do not have “abiding in them” and which function instead as witnesses against them. The function and action of scripture has turned out, in the reading of Jesus, to be dramatically different than what the erstwhile scriptural experts had assumed.

Jesus’ discourse and its depiction of his fundamental hermeneutical posture vis-à-vis the scriptures come to a climax with these words: “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?” (5:46-47). Here Jesus voices his agreement with what Philip already declared to Nathanael in 1:45. The critique is not that Jesus’ accusers “search the scriptures” and they should not – the problem is that they do not see where (and to whom) the scriptures are pointing. They do not see the congruency between Jesus and the Torah, between “what Moses wrote” and “what I say.”

To be sure, Jesus gives no specifics here about where, or how, “Moses wrote about me.” No specific passage of scripture is cited.⁹⁶ Obviously Jesus’ claim is far from self-evident to his hearers who are in fact very knowledgeable and committed to Israel’s scriptures. Again, Jesus’ claim is not that the scriptures are wrong and ought to be abandoned.⁹⁷ Nor is he declaring that he replaces the

⁹⁶ Some scholars (E.g.: Boismard, *Moses or Jesus*, 27-28; Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 294-295) see this as pointing to Deuteronomy 18 and the promise of a “prophet like Moses.” Others are unsure, and Beutler (“The Use of ‘Scripture’ in the Gospel of John,” 151-153) indicates that this should be understood as a reference to scripture in general rather than a particular passage.

⁹⁷ Contra A.J. Droge (“No One Has Ever Seen God’: Revisionary Criticism in the Fourth Gospel” in *From Prophecy to Testament: The Old Testament in the New*, ed. Craig Evans [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004], 173) who contends that “the Fourth Gospel is unequivocal about the Scriptures falsely so called: they are unreliable, riddled with falsehoods, dangerous, evil. They are, in short, one of the instrumentalities by which the thieves and robbers [10:8] steal, slaughter, and destroy.” Droge’s approach to John 1:17-18 leads him (Ibid., 172-172) to muse that “we might begin to wonder whether the Fourth Gospel wasn’t perhaps espousing a position analogous to Marcion.”

scriptures of Israel and that they have no further use or effect.⁹⁸ Rather, as we have seen repeatedly, John's Gospel depicts Jesus as practicing – and now explicitly articulating – a hermeneutic that highly values scripture, that draws upon it constantly and creatively, and that places himself at the centre of its narrative and meaning. Jesus himself is the hermeneutical key that unlocks the meaning of scripture.⁹⁹ The writer of John's Gospel believes this, constructing the Gospel account (including its use of scripture) accordingly; and the character of Jesus, within the Gospel account, knows it too, articulating it here as a fundamental interpretive principle.

Painter makes the important observation that in 5:47 Jesus compares the “failure to believe the written words (γράμματα) of Moses with their failure to believe his oral words (ῥήματα).”¹⁰⁰ This points to another crucial characteristic of the hermeneutics of Jesus as depicted in the Fourth Gospel; Jesus' own words come to be treated as having the status and authority of scripture.¹⁰¹ This dynamic can be seen in various places in the Gospel narrative,¹⁰² and here it is suggested in the formulation of Jesus himself. As in 1:17, Jesus and Moses are presented side by side, and the relationship between them is of considerable hermeneutical importance. This relationship is best described not as challenge or competition or abrogation or replacement, but rather as witness.¹⁰³ All of scripture, in John's Gospel, functions as a witness to Jesus, and in this passage Jesus makes that claim explicitly.

⁹⁸ Contra Lincoln (*Truth on Trial*, 54), who states that “[f]rom the implied author's point of view, the validity of the law lay in the past (cf. John 1:17).”

⁹⁹ See Lincoln (*Truth On Trial*, 237), who also uses the terminology of Jesus as “hermeneutical key.”

¹⁰⁰ Painter, *Quest for the Messiah*, 244.

¹⁰¹ See Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 289; Moloney, “The Gospel of John: The ‘End’ of Scripture,” 360-366; “The Gospel of John as Scripture,” 454-468; Reinhartz, “Torah Reading,” 111-116; Keith, “The Competitive Textualization of the Jesus Tradition,” 321-337.

¹⁰² This is signaled notably in 2:22, in the pairing of the words of “the scripture” with “the word that Jesus had spoken,” and in 18:9 and 18:32, where the narrator uses the scriptural fulfillment formula to refer to the words of Jesus. See Moloney (“The Gospel of John: The ‘End’ of Scripture,” 360-366 and “The Gospel of John as Scripture,” 454-468), who sees 18:9 as a reference to Jesus' words in 17:12. See also Reinhartz, “Torah Reading,” 113-115.

¹⁰³ See Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*, 184; Lee, “The Significance of Moses in the Gospel of John,” 66; Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture*, 235; Ahn, *Christological Witness Function*, 19.

In addition, as Hays points out, “[t]here is a fateful circularity here: reading the writings of Moses should lead to believing in Jesus; but in order to understand Moses’ words, one must first come to Jesus to receive life... (5:38)... Only those who enter this hermeneutical loop at the point of believing Jesus can rightly understand what Moses wrote.”¹⁰⁴ This “hermeneutical loop,” as we shall see, becomes increasingly prominent in the progression of controversies between Jesus and “the Jews” over precisely these issues: the meaning of scripture and the identity of Jesus.

6. Not Moses Who Gave... But My Father Who Gives: a seaside discussion with mixed hermeneutical results (6:1-71)

Immediately after linking himself with Moses (5:45-47), Jesus is depicted crossing a “sea” (6:1), going “up the mountain” (6:3) and providing a miraculous meal to an assembled multitude (6:4-13). The connections with Moses and Israel’s foundational experiences of exodus, Sinai, and manna could hardly be clearer.¹⁰⁵ John 6:1-14 is an instance where the actions of Jesus, and not just his words, are depicted as a kind of re-enactment of scripture and, as such, can themselves be seen as a vivid and dramatic act of scripture interpretation.¹⁰⁶

The next day, in response to the questing crowd that crosses the sea and calls him “rabbi” (6:25), Jesus deftly connects their previous experience of the miraculous meal with an allusion to yet another scriptural tradition. “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life,” he says, in language that strongly evokes (but does not directly cite) Isaiah 55:1-2. Again appropriating for himself the title “Son of Man,” Jesus inserts himself into the scriptural narrative by declaring himself to be the one who is in a position to “give” this non-perishing “food” (6:27) – a

¹⁰⁴ Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 77.

¹⁰⁵ The experience of receiving manna in the wilderness (“bread from heaven” - Ex 16:4) is recounted in Exodus 16 and Numbers 11, and referenced many times throughout scripture (eg. Ps. 78:24; Ps. 105:40; Neh 9:15). The “feeding of the 5000” in John 6 also shows a remarkable resemblance to the story about Elisha in 2 Kings 4:42-44.

¹⁰⁶ See Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*, 111. A similar dynamic where the narrative suggests that Jesus is intentionally enacting scripture can be seen in John 12:14-15.

function that is a divine prerogative in Isaiah 55. Once again this bold claim is underwritten by the insistence that he is acting as the authorized agent of “God the Father” who in this instance is said to “set his seal” of approval upon Jesus (6:27).

Jesus’ offer of “food that endures for eternal life” in this interaction recalls his similar offer of “living water” to the Samaritan woman in 4:10 and 4:14. Like the woman’s response to Jesus, and in marked contrast to that of “the Jews” in chapter five, the crowd, while skeptical, shows signs of positive interest and engages Jesus in further conversation to clarify his enigmatic offer.

It is the crowd that explicitly introduces scripture into the discussion, following up Jesus’ offer of “food” by referring to their “ancestors” who “ate manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’” (6:31). This reference to scripture “seems to be a paraphrase of a combination of Exod. 16:4, 15 and Ps. 78:24.”¹⁰⁷ Jesus responds immediately with a clarification that the subject in this verse is God, not Moses, and he goes on to make another dramatic – by now we can say characteristic – move. Where the crowd was apparently referencing the scriptural tradition by way of analogy, Jesus re-situates his hearers in the midst of the scriptural drama in the present tense: “[I]t was not Moses who *gave* you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who *gives* you the true bread from heaven” (6:32). The manna experience described in scripture is, according to Jesus, an ongoing present reality: “For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (6:33). Jesus calls his listeners to see themselves not only as heirs and successors to “ancestors” whose experience is recounted in scripture. Rather, they are to understand themselves as actors in the scriptural drama that continues in the present tense. “Bread from heaven,” according to Jesus, is not just an ancient scriptural memory; it is a present reality.

This approach is perfectly in tune with Jesus’ earlier allusion to Isaiah 55:1-5 and its ringing invitation to “Come, buy and eat!... eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your

¹⁰⁷ Brant, *John*, 121.

ear, and come to me; listen, *so that you may live.*” Jesus makes the same interpretive leap as the prophet Isaiah – from the past-tense scriptural accounts of the manna experience to the present-tense insistence that “the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven *and gives life to the world*” (6:33). The crowd is invited to follow Jesus’ imaginative re-articulation of the scriptural script. And like the Samaritan woman who says “give me this water” (4:15), the crowd also responds positively, “give us this bread always” (6:34). Although the crowd is undoubtedly depicted as having arrived at only partial understanding, this account so far would seem to be another of the Fourth Gospel’s hermeneutical success stories.

Jesus, however, does not stop there, pointing out yet again the flawed understanding demonstrated by his hearers. Where they ask Jesus to “give us this bread always,” Jesus asserts his claim that “I *am* the bread of life” (6:35), making explicit that “I have come down from heaven” and rehearsing the by-now familiar theme that he is functioning as the agent of “him who sent me” (6:38), with the extraordinary authority, as “the Son” of “my Father,” to “raise them [“all who see the Son and believe in him”] up on the last day” (6:39-40). These claims prompt the scene’s transition to a dialogue with “the Jews,” who – in yet another echo of the scriptural accounts of Moses, manna, and people in the wilderness – “began to complain about him” (6:41).¹⁰⁸ In response to these complaints, Jesus in turn introduces another explicit citation of scripture into the conversation.

The logic of Jesus’ response is reminiscent of what we observed in John 5, where Jesus stated that “Moses wrote about me” and “if you believed Moses, you would believe me” (5:46). In 6:43 Jesus

¹⁰⁸ As Myers (*Characterizing Jesus*, 109) notes, the appearance of the verb Ἐγόγγυζον (“to murmur”) further connects this scene with the exodus narratives, as that is precisely the verb used to describe the “murmuring” of the people in the wilderness. Sheridan (*Retelling Scripture*, 156-158) sees here another aspect of the “retelling” of Scripture in the Fourth Gospel’s narrative. Interestingly, where Myers thinks “the Jews” overhear the conversation with the crowd, Sheridan (*Ibid.*, 144) suggests instead that the term “the Jews” comes to be used for the same people, when “the crowd” proves to not believe Jesus. This presents an interesting possibility in light of our study of the portrayals of Jesus and others as interpreters of scripture. It would suggest that the term “the Jews” in John’s Gospel functions, among other things, as a hermeneutical indicator delineating those who do not accept the hermeneutics of Jesus.

bolsters his claims by again referring what is “written”, this time citing what is “written in the prophets: ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’” Jesus appropriates this prophetic word from Isaiah 54:13 by declaring that “[e]veryone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (6:45). Being “taught by God” and “coming to me” are functionally equated here. The implication – like the “hermeneutical loop” identified in John 5¹⁰⁹ – is that proper interpretation of “what is written” in scripture leads to Jesus, and that “coming to Jesus” leads to (or is a pre-condition of) proper interpretation of scripture. Jesus’ statements in 5:46 and 6:45 parallel each other and make essentially the same point: “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me” (5:46) and “[e]veryone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (6:45). This is not a rejection or replacement of scripture; it is, rather, a forceful claim about the purpose of scripture and Jesus’ own status and authority vis-à-vis scripture.

And it is a claim that extends a kind of “scriptural” authority to the words of Jesus himself. Without denigrating what came before or denying “the original and ongoing relevance of the Torah itself”¹¹⁰ – indeed, while claiming and insisting on continuity with it – the Fourth Gospel attributes the highest status and authority to Jesus’ own words (e.g.: 2:22; 3:34; 5:34; 6:63; 14:23-24).¹¹¹ The Bread of Life discourse in John 6 includes its own version of this recurring motif when Jesus says “[t]he words [ῥήματα] that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (6:63). Jesus’ claims constitute a “hard word [λόγος]” that “many of his disciples” cannot accept (6:60), but Simon Peter does accept them, affirming that “[y]ou have the words [ῥήματα] of eternal life” (6:68). The capacity and/or willingness to accept Jesus’ word/words (that is, to accept Jesus as Word) is, in this Gospel, the most crucial hermeneutical move of all.

¹⁰⁹ See page 30 above, referencing Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 76.

¹¹⁰ Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture*, 158.

¹¹¹ I agree with Lincoln (*Truth on Trial* p. 55) that, according to John 5-6, “Scripture has to be understood in light of the word of Jesus,” but I disagree with his assumption that this necessarily pits Jesus’ word as over/against that of scripture.

7. *Rivers of Living Water: hermeneutical debate at the Festival of Booths (7:10-52)*

John 7 continues the previous chapter's pattern of identifying a variety of groups and sub-groups that engage Jesus and respond in a variety of ways to the interpretive moves and dramatic claims that he is making.¹¹² Keith has drawn attention to the significance of the fact that in John, as well as in the Synoptic Gospels, not only the content of Jesus' teaching is controversial but the fact that he is teaching at all.¹¹³ Jesus claims interpretive/scribal authority when it is by no means evident in the Gospel accounts that he has the traditional qualifications to do so. Jesus' response to questions about his interpretive credentials (7:15) is consistent with what we have seen earlier in the Fourth Gospel: he again claims to function as the authorized and reliable agent of God, declaring that "[m]y teaching is not mine but his who sent me" (7:16). And again Jesus describes a "hermeneutical loop"¹¹⁴ where "[a]nyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own" (7:17). Desire and commitment "to do the will of God" is decisive for determining the appropriateness of Jesus' teaching, as in his response to the crowd's question in 6:28-29. Belief/trust in Jesus as God's authorized agent is constitutive of doing the will/work of God, and also determinative for appropriate hermeneutics, according to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel.

In the narrative of John 7, Jesus proceeds to reiterate this claim by re-introducing Moses into the conversation in terms that harken back to his programmatic hermeneutical discourse in chapter five. As in that preceding discussion, Jesus' reference to Moses as the one who "gave" the law (7:19, 22; cf. 1:17) signals that Jesus, and not his questioners, stands in continuity with Moses and "what he

¹¹² Given my focus on the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture, space does not permit discussion of the variety of hermeneutical options and assumptions demonstrated by Jesus' own "brothers" (7:3-9), "the Jews" (7:11-18, 35-36), "the crowds" (7:12-13, 31, 40-44), "some of the people of Jerusalem" (7:25-31), "the Pharisees... and the chief priests" (7:32-34, 45-52), and "the temple police" (7:32-34, 45-52). Clearly, however, chapter 7 depicts Jesus engaged in vigorous hermeneutical discussion and debate with a broad range of other interpreters. Indeed, the hermeneutics of Jesus expose and provoke the interpretive reflections and assumptions of others.

¹¹³ See Keith, *Jesus Against the Scribal Elite*, especially 41-43.

¹¹⁴ Hays' term, from *Reading Backwards*, 76.

wrote” (5:46-47). To see this continuity, according to Jesus, is “right judgment;” to disparage Jesus’ healing activity on the sabbath and its hermeneutical justification is instead to “judge by appearances” (7:24). Jesus here continues the polemic from his discourse in chapter five, but it is a polemic against what Jesus identifies as his questioners’ unfaithfulness to Moses and the law (7:19; cf. 5:45-47), not against Moses or the law itself.¹¹⁵

Jesus in John 7 does not limit his interpretive work to hermeneutical debate with “the Jews” (7:14-24). On the festival’s climactic final day Jesus makes a brief and dramatic public declaration that is, again, a remarkable and deeply controversial interpretive move vis-à-vis the scriptures of Israel: “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water’” (7:37-38). Jesus now declares, in the most public and official setting imaginable, something parallel to what he has claimed previously in private conversation with the Samaritan woman (4:10), in seaside discussion with a crowd (6:27, 35), and in synagogue teaching in Capernaum (6:47-59). In the midst of a festival overflowing with water imagery,¹¹⁶ Jesus publically declares himself to be a source of water for “anyone who is thirsty,” citing “the scripture” in support of this claim.

The source of the purported scriptural reference in 7:38 is famously ambiguous. As Ruth Sheridan states, “a myriad of OT texts could plausibly be considered as sources,”¹¹⁷ referring to Edwin Freed who identifies no less than 36 Old Testament texts as “likely” sources for this citation.¹¹⁸ Sheridan concludes: “[g]iven the almost endless list of possible sources, it is wise to consider that John may here be conflating one or more (perhaps even several) OT texts, weaving them together to suit his Christological agenda.”¹¹⁹ While this is undoubtedly true, from the standpoint of

¹¹⁵ See Keener, *Gospel of John*, 714.

¹¹⁶ See Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God*, 184-185.

¹¹⁷ Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture*, 184.

¹¹⁸ Edwin Freed, *Old Testament Quotations in the Gospel of John* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965), 31-33.

¹¹⁹ Sheridan, *Re-Telling Scripture*, 185.

the focus of my study it may also be said that this capacity for “conflating one or more... texts, weaving them together” also adheres to the Fourth Gospel’s characterization of Jesus himself as interpreter of scripture. Jesus draws upon a plethora of scriptural passages and images and puts them together in a concise and rhetorically powerful way to make a claim about his own identity and mission.¹²⁰ Further, as Myers has pointed out, “[h]aving Jesus bring various texts together to form a ‘new’ scriptural quotation reflects the evangelist’s equation of Jesus’ words with Scripture elsewhere in his Gospel (cf. Jn 2.22; 18.9, 32).”¹²¹

It is also significant to note that the translation of this “new [or, at least, newly paraphrased/synthesized] scriptural citation” in 7:38 is ambiguous regarding where the “rivers of living water” come from. As Brant indicates, “[t]he awkward construction allows the belly to belong either to the believer or to Jesus.”¹²² While the narrator’s explanatory comment gives the sense that the reference is to the “belly” of Jesus,¹²³ the reference is a close parallel to Jesus’ comment to the Samaritan woman, which was explicit in connecting the “spring of water gushing up” with “those who drink of the water that I will give” (4:14). Both meanings fit with what we have previously observed about Jesus as interpreter of scripture in John’s Gospel. Here again we see him drawing creatively upon a variety of scriptural streams, writing himself and others into the script provided by scripture.

8. Abraham Rejoiced That He Would See My Day: a hermeneutical breaking point at the Festival of Booths (8:12-59)

¹²⁰ See Lincoln’s discussion (*Truth on Trial*, 51-54) of the “composite quotation” of 7:38 in light of the scriptural accounts of water flowing from the rock, multiple references in Deuteronomy and Psalms of YHWH referred to as “the rock,” and 1 Cor 10:4 which also uses this imagery in identifying Christ as the rock from which people drank.

¹²¹ Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*, 116.

¹²² Brant, *John*, 140. See also Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 52-54.

¹²³ “Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive” (7:39; cf. 15:26).

The discussion in the temple in John 8 resumes¹²⁴ with another dramatic declaration from Jesus – “I am the light of the world” (8:12) – followed by an escalating series of questions and arguments that culminate with “the Jews” picking up stones to kill him, and his departure from the temple (8:59). This section repeats and reinforces a number of elements that we have already seen in the Fourth Gospel’s characterization of Jesus as interpreter of scripture.

First of all, 8:12 represents another instance of Jesus’ use of “I am” statements in John’s Gospel. Brant highlights Isaiah’s use of the phrase “light of the world” to refer to the role of God’s servant, pointing out that “[i]n the context of the Feast of Sukkoth, the emphatic language of ‘I am’ echoes the divine name YHWH. Jesus claims to be a theophany of God’s glory that led the Israelites from bondage in Egypt and that now dwells in the temple.”¹²⁵ Once again, Jesus boldly stakes a claim to the familiar language and imagery of scripture, appropriating it to describe his own identity and mission.

The ensuing debate rehearses a number of elements that were identified in our discussion of John 5 and its inauguration of the extended “trial” sequence in chapters 5-10. Discussion of what constitutes valid testimony and the legal requirement of two or more witnesses (8:13-18), Jesus’ insistence that as God’s authorized agent “I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the

¹²⁴ Many scholars note that 8:12 seems to pick up where chapter 7 left off, and 8:1-11 is a somewhat free-floating episode that various manuscript traditions place in different places, including in different Gospels. John’s Gospel in its “final form” includes this episode, but in the interests of space I will not discuss it here, except to say that here too Jesus is portrayed in a kind of hermeneutical controversy with “the scribes and the Pharisees” (a designation for Jesus’ opponents that is typical of the Synoptic Gospels, but occurs only in this episode in John). In its present context, in terms of the Fourth Gospel’s portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture, the primary contribution of the episode is to demonstrate Jesus’ rhetorical skill as well as his compassion. There is no reason to believe that Jesus’ approach to Mosaic law in this passage is to be distinguished from prevailing practice within Judaism (Brant [*John*, 142] indicates that “it seems logical to assume that Jesus is supposed to disagree with the penalty”), in light of the Mishnah’s oft-referenced statements regarding the rarity of executing a capital sentence (“Any Sanhedrin that executes a capital sentence once in seven years is known as a brutal [Sanhedrin]; Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaria says, Once in seventy years; Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Aquiva say, Had we been in the Sanhedrin, no one would ever have been put to death.” [BT *Makkot*]).

¹²⁵ Brant, *John*, 142, also referencing Mary Coloe, *God Dwells With Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 135-136, 142-143.

Father instructed me” (8:28, 19-29), and the conscription of Abraham as a witness to Jesus (8:56) all closely resemble the content and function of the similar discussions and claims in John 5. The logic of 8:42 reproduces almost exactly the logic of 5:46. Similarly, the language of accepting/keeping “my word” (8:43)/“his word” (8:55)/“the words of God” (8:47) is a familiar theme from chapter five. The circularity of 8:47 is a close corollary of the “hermeneutical loop” that we noted in 5:37-47, where a proper reading of “Moses” leads (or should lead) to belief in Jesus (5:46-47), but is not possible without first believing in Jesus (5:38).

Thus we see that the portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture in John 8 is consistent with what has come before, as is the manner in which his interpretive claims antagonize “the Jews,” leading to them seeking his death (8:59; cf. 5:18). The same is true of chapter 10, to which we now turn.

9. The Father And I Are One: blasphemous hermeneutics? (10:1-42)

On the heels of the mini-drama recounted in John 9 we come to another encounter where Jesus continues the pattern of speaking with scripture-saturated imagery and, in his response to the objections raised, proceeds to make further interpretive moves that are deemed blasphemous. Having appropriated for himself the scriptural imagery of “living water” (chapters 4 and 7) and “bread from heaven” (chapter 6), and having declared that “before Abraham was, I am” (8:58), John 10 depicts Jesus delivering yet another extended discourse in which he weaves together a complex tapestry of scriptural allusions in making further “I am” statements. Jesus identifies himself as “the gate for the sheep” (10:7, 9) and, especially, as “the good shepherd” (10:2-5, 11, 14-16), drawing this imagery from a broad network of scriptural passages among which Ezekiel 34 and 37:24-28 are particularly

significant.¹²⁶ Again we see Jesus drawing upon scriptural images and motifs, without citing scripture directly, in order to describe his own identity and mission.

And again we note that Jesus' interpretive moves prompt division (σχίσμα; cf. 7:43; 9:16) among his listeners, who are compelled to engage in interpretive activity themselves to try to figure out what Jesus is saying (10:19-24). In this case, their questions about whether or not Jesus is proclaiming himself to be the Messiah (that is, the Davidic "shepherd" of Ezekiel 34 and 37) would indicate that they are indeed following Jesus' interpretive lead. Jesus' answer (10:25; cf. 5:31-36) reiterates what we have heard from him earlier: the key category for achieving hermeneutical understanding has to do with whether or not one "believes" in him and his witnesses (here "the works that I do"). Again we note a kind of circularity whereby an appropriate reading of scripture is crucial to understanding and "believing" in Jesus' claims, and acceptance of those claims is essentially declared to be a pre-condition for appropriate interpretation of scripture (10:26-27; cf. 5:46-47).

This discussion moves directly to another instance of what appears to be – and is certainly understood to be – a radical re-reading of scripture indeed. At the conclusion of another series of his reiterated claims to function as God's authorized agent, Jesus states: "The Father and I are one" (10:30). The response to this statement is immediate: "[t]he Jews took up stones again to stone him" because of his "blasphemy" (10:31, 33), in accordance with the punishment prescribed in Leviticus 24:15-16.

Deuteronomy 6:4, often called the *Shema* ("Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one"¹²⁷) was "the central confession of Israel"¹²⁸ which, "[d]uring the late Second Temple period...

¹²⁶ See Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 87-90 and Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture*, 198 for their discussion of John 10's allusions to other scriptural texts regarding shepherds.

¹²⁷ The NRSV and the JPS translation both render יהוה אחד (κύριος εἷς ἐστίν in the LXX) as "the LORD alone." I have translated it as "the LORD is one" to accentuate its connection to the "oneness" discussion that follows in this pericope in John's Gospel. This translation ("the LORD is one") is also a possibility for the Hebrew, and a literal translation of the Greek (see Jerome Neyrey, "I Said: You Are Gods," in *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009], 318).

rose to special prominence both in the synagogue liturgy and in individual piety, a position that it still maintains.”¹²⁹ Keener observes that “Greek thinkers could speak of the deity as a unity, but Jewish hearers would think even more immediately of the *Shema*, the basic confession of Judaism that affirmed God’s unity.”¹³⁰ Myers states that “Jesus’ comment in Jn 10.30 appears to be a *paraphrasis* of the *Shema*, adjusted by Jesus to emphasize his unity with the Father.”¹³¹ Here Jesus is doing what we have observed many times before: boldly writing himself into the script provided by scripture. To do so with regard to the foundational text of the *Shema* is a shockingly radical interpretive move. As the narrative unfolds, it is certainly seen as such by Jesus’ listeners.

While the commentators mentioned above perceive a connection between John 10:30 and the *Shema*, and Myers acknowledges it explicitly as an interpretive move, Jesus’ claim of unity with the Father in 10:30 is rarely if ever connected with his repeated and emphatic extension of that unity to his disciples in 17:22.¹³² This observation again supports what we have indicated previously; a key characteristic of the hermeneutics of Jesus is to write both himself *and others* into the script provided by scripture.

When facing the charge of “making himself equal to God” in 5:18, we noted that Jesus draws upon a series of witnesses including “the scriptures” and “Moses” in his defense, without specifying particular passages of scripture (5:31-47). In 10:32 Jesus’ initial response, paralleling 5:36, is to draw attention to his “good works” which derive from “the Father”. These are – apparently, for Jesus – decisive for the evaluation of his hermeneutical claims. After the clarification from his questioners that they are not objecting to his “good works” but to his “blasphemy” (10:33) – a clarification that

¹²⁸ Lincicum, *Paul and the Early Jewish Encounter With Deuteronomy*, 47.

¹²⁹ Note on Deut 6:4 in *The Jewish Study Bible*.

¹³⁰ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 826.

¹³¹ Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*, 122.

¹³² A notable exception to scholarly neglect of this connection is Robert J. Suderman (“The Replacement Pattern in the Fourth Gospel: A Persecuted Community Confronts Its Past” [doctoral dissertation, La Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 1994], 157-180), in his discussion of the “solidarity motif” in John’s Gospel. See also Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 266.

serves to reinforce Jesus' rhetorical skill, in getting his accusers to acknowledge his actions as "good" when previously they have not – Jesus draws upon a specific passage of scripture as part of his defense against their charges. In so doing he provides yet another demonstration of his interpretive, as well as rhetorical, prowess.

In this instance Jesus quotes a passage of scripture directly. "I said, you are gods" represents a verbatim citation of the Septuagint translation Psalm 82:6 (81:6 LXX).¹³³ Without entering into a detailed analysis of Jesus' interpretive and rhetorical strategy here,¹³⁴ for our purposes it is sufficient to note that Jesus is portrayed as citing scripture directly as authoritative, with the declaration that "the scripture cannot be annulled" (10:34-35). He doubles down with his technique of creative exegesis and appropriation of a scriptural passage to defend himself against charges arising from his previous provocative interpretive statement. Again his own identity and his "works" as the commissioned agent of the Father are represented by Jesus to be decisive for the credibility of his interpretive claims (10:37-38). And again, as Myers points out, "he uses the passage not to find common ground but to turn the tables on his accusers."¹³⁵ With this interaction and his withdrawal from the temple, Jesus' hermeneutical discussions with "the Jews" in John's Gospel come to an end.¹³⁶

10. To Fulfill The Scripture: hermeneutics as guide to action (13:18-19; 15:25; 17:12; 18:9; 19:24-25, 19:28-30, 36-37)

We have noted previously the transition in citation formulae, from "it is written" in chapters 1-11 to "in order to fulfill the scripture" beginning in 12:38. The first series of citations is descriptive, making the claim that what Jesus is saying and doing has already been written about in scripture,

¹³³ Borgen, "The Gospel of John and Philo of Alexandria," in *The Gospel of John: More Light*, 46.

¹³⁴ A strategy that was not unprecedented in Early Judaism. See Borgen's discussion ("Philo of Alexandria as Exegete," in *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, 119) of how Philo and the rabbis referenced various scriptural passages, including Exod 4:16 and 7:1, in discussion about humans being called "God."

¹³⁵ Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*, 122.

¹³⁶ See Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture*, 209, referencing Coloe, *God Dwells With Us*, 147, 145.

whereas the second set seems to emphasize that Jesus is speaking and acting intentionally and explicitly in order to fulfill – or to provoke others to fulfill¹³⁷ – the words of scripture.¹³⁸ This theme of fulfillment is given particularly emphatic and dramatic voice with Jesus’ final words from the cross: “I thirst” (which is said explicitly, according to 19:28, “to fulfill the scripture”¹³⁹) and then “[i]t is finished” (19:30).¹⁴⁰ It is significant that Jesus is portrayed as interpreter of scripture, consciously and intentionally aligning his words and actions with scripture, until his final (pre-resurrection) breath.

11. Keep My Words: the hermeneutics of new/old commandments (13:1-16:33)

John 13-17 includes three instances where Jesus explicitly refers to “scripture” – 13:18, 15:25, and 17:12.¹⁴¹ In each of these instances the pattern holds: the Fourth Gospel portrays Jesus to be understanding, describing and aligning his activity and identity with what he finds in scripture. These are acts of scripture interpretation.

Beyond these explicit references to scripture, the Farewell Discourse provides further examples of the hermeneutics of Jesus vis-à-vis the scriptures of Israel. Jesus’ statement in 14:7 is part and parcel of the interpretive moves that he has been making through the Gospel narrative, demonstrating the same logical structure as 5:46 and 8:39. Vine imagery (15:1-7) is pervasive in the scriptures of Israel, used over two hundred times,¹⁴² often depicting Israel as a vineyard or vine.¹⁴³ The point here is not to attempt to identify a particular scriptural passage to which Jesus refers; rather,

¹³⁷ See Lieu, “Narrative Analysis and Scripture in John,” 150 for her discussion of this dynamic in 19:28.

¹³⁸ This dynamic is evident in 13:18-19, 15:25, 17:12 on the lips of Jesus himself, and in 18:9, 19:24-25, 19:28, and 19:36-37 as recounted by the narrator.

¹³⁹ Likely Ps 69 (68LXX):21. See Reinhartz’ note on this verse in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 192.

¹⁴⁰ See Moloney, “The Gospel of John as Scripture,” 460.

¹⁴¹ The scriptural referent in 13:18 is recognizable as Psalm 41(40):10, which is likely the case for 17:12 as well (so Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*, 124). The scriptural source for 15:25 is not as clear and is “open to debate” (Ibid., 125), but is most often identified as Psalm 69(68):4.

¹⁴² Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God*, 330.

¹⁴³ See Keener, *Gospel of John*, 988-993 and Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God*, 330-334 for discussion of this imagery in John 15 in relation to its use in many passages of scripture, including (among many others) Ps 80:14-15; Isa 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jer 2:21; 12:10; Ezek 17:5-10.

it is to note once again the manner in which John 15 depicts Jesus' use of this imagery, much as he draws upon the imagery of "living water" (chapters 4 and 7), "bread from heaven" (chapter 6), and sheep/shepherd (chapter 10). Repeatedly we have seen Jesus portrayed in John's Gospel as appropriating scriptural imagery without citing it directly, adapting it and applying it to himself and his own mission and identity as well as that of his followers.

Indeed, the depiction of Jesus issuing "a new commandment" (13:34) and his repeated and emphatic exhortation to "keep my words" (14:23-24) and "my commandments" (14:15; 15:10, 12, 17) are deeply reminiscent of the language and posture of Deuteronomy.¹⁴⁴ Alfred Lacomara argues that "the deuteronomic discourses of Moses were the model for the FD [Farewell Discourse]."¹⁴⁵ This may be seen as a further working out of the fundamental hermeneutical posture set forth by Jesus in 5:46-47, in which he claims continuity and congruency with Moses.

12. Your Word, My Word, Their Word: the ongoing hermeneutics of testimony (17:1-26)

We have observed that the Fourth Gospel's narrative elevates the words of Jesus to the status and authority ascribed to the written words of scripture. The words of others, beyond those of Jesus, are also granted remarkable status and authority in this Gospel. This dynamic is exceptionally vivid in Jesus' prayer in chapter 17, where he speaks of "your word [τὸν λόγον σου]" (17:6, referring to the word of the Father), and that "the words [ῥήματα] that you gave to me I have given to them" (17:8; cf. "your word [τὸν λόγον σου]" in 7:14, also referring to Jesus giving God's word to his disciples). Jesus asserts that "those whom you gave me... have kept your word [τὸν λόγον σου]" (17:6) and have "received them [‘the words that you gave me’]" (17:8a), with the all-important Johannine result that they "know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me" (17:8b).

¹⁴⁴ See Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 46, 67.

¹⁴⁵ Alfred Lacomara, "Deuteronomy and the Farewell Discourse (Jn 13:31-16:33)," in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 36 (1974): 82.

Jesus then goes on to pray “not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of *those who will believe in me through their word* [διὰ τοῦ λόγου αὐτῶν]” (17:20).

The “word [λόγον]” is thus faithfully passed on from the Father to Jesus, from Jesus to his disciples, from the disciples to others. The best model that we have seen in John’s Gospel for what Jesus is describing here is the Samaritan woman, whose “word” was decisive (διὰ τὸν λόγον) in bringing many from her village to “believe in him” (4:39).¹⁴⁶ The Samaritan woman can be seen as paradigmatic of what his followers are called to do, which is an extension of what he himself has “come down from heaven” to do: “to testify to the truth” (18:37). The promised Advocate is to share the same function (15:26), as are Jesus’ own disciples (15:27).

Jesus’ prayer proceeds from the significance and function of “their word” to express the passionate desire and goal of unity: “... that they may all be one. As you, father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (17:21). We have already noted Jesus’ unity statement in 10:30 as an interpretive act vis-à-vis the *Shema* (Deut 6:4) – a hermeneutical move that was unacceptable to his interrogators. Here Jesus revisits that same interpretive act and extends it even further to include his disciples and all “those who will believe in me through their word” (17:20) in the “oneness” of God. The purpose of this oneness – “so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (17:21) – is identical to the purpose of the literary work of the Gospel itself as expressed in 20:31. The written Gospel too is to function as an authoritative “word” that “testifies to the truth” and draws people to “believe” in Jesus as the one sent from God.

Jesus’ prayer for unity is radical indeed, and its hermeneutical implications are not to be overlooked. The oneness that Jesus intends, with his disciples and with his Father, extends to the ongoing task of remembering and receiving fresh instruction and insight (14:26) – including insight

¹⁴⁶ Although the villagers – not Jesus! – subsequently denigrate the value of “what [she] said” in comparison with Jesus’ own words (4:42).

into the meaning of scripture (2:22; 12:16; 20:9) – and articulating a “word” that will bring others to believe. Authority and empowerment for this task are vividly portrayed in 20:19-23, with the gift of the Holy Spirit and the explicit mandate: “[a]s the Father has sent me, so I send you.” John’s Gospel portrays Jesus as interpreter of scripture who came “to testify to the truth,” and his followers as no less so.

C. Summary: Key Features of the Portrayal of Jesus as Interpreter of Scripture in John’s Gospel

While by no means an exhaustive list, the following summary highlights the most prominent characteristics that we have observed in our study of the portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture in John’s Gospel.

1. Jesus is introduced in the scripture-saturated Prologue to the Fourth Gospel, and the name of Jesus first appears in direct relationship with that of Moses and the giving of the law. From the beginning of John’s Gospel and throughout its unfolding narrative, Jesus is portrayed in multiple, complex, and inter-related forms of relationship with the scriptures of Israel. Issues regarding Jesus’ relationship to and interpretation of scripture are central to this Gospel from the outset.

2. Jesus is depicted as a knowledgeable interpreter of scripture who draws upon a broad range of scriptural texts and images. At times he quotes scripture directly, and often he references or evokes scriptural passages and images without any direct citation, adapting them in creative and surprising (even shocking) ways for his own rhetorical purposes.

3. Jesus frequently and boldly writes himself into the script provided by scripture, appropriating scriptural texts and imagery in order to describe his own identity and mission. The overwhelmingly predominant usage and function of scripture in John’s Gospel is to serve as a witness to the identity and mission of Jesus.

4. Jesus also frequently and boldly writes others into the scriptural script as well, calling his listeners and conversation partners to situate themselves within the narratives of scripture and to understand themselves as actors in the scriptural drama that continues in the present tense.

5. Jesus engages in interpretive conversation and debate with a variety of conversation partners, including surprising ones, in a variety of private and public, formal and informal settings. His bold interpretive moves – usually connected to assertions about his own identity – provoke a range of responses, from enthusiastic acceptance to uncertainty and confusion to determined and deadly opposition. Encounter with Jesus prompts hermeneutical transformation for those who accept his claims; those who do not accept his claims are frequently characterized – by Jesus and by the Fourth Gospel’s narrator – as doing so because of their interpretive posture and understandings vis-à-vis scripture.

6. While Jesus is portrayed as making bold and controversial interpretive moves, particularly with regard to his own identity and mission, this depiction situates him as a participant in intra-Jewish hermeneutical debates, utilizing familiar Jewish interpretive techniques, and drawing upon interpretive options that were known and available in the 1st century Jewish intellectual milieu.

7. John 5:46-47 can be understood as a programmatic statement of the hermeneutics of Jesus in John’s Gospel: “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?” (5:46-47). Jesus claims continuity with Moses. Jesus positions himself at the centre of scripture’s narrative and meaning (“he [Moses] wrote about me” and “the scriptures... testify on my behalf” – 5:46 and 5:39). Jesus himself is the hermeneutical key that unlocks the meaning of scripture; acceptance of Jesus’ claims is a precondition for scriptural understanding. Belief in Jesus and his “works” are considered to be decisive for appropriate hermeneutics. There is a circularity to this logic (what Hays has termed a

“hermeneutical loop”¹⁴⁷): appropriate interpretation of scripture is crucial to understanding and “believing” in Jesus and his claims, while belief in Jesus is essentially asserted to be a pre-condition for appropriate interpretation of scripture.

7. The actions of Jesus, and not just his words, are depicted as an enactment of scripture and, as such, can themselves be seen as vivid and dramatic acts of scripture interpretation. While scripture is called upon to explain his words and actions, Jesus is also depicted to be consciously and intentionally aligning his words and actions with those of scripture.

8. Not only is Jesus paralleled with Moses (1:17; 5:46-47), and Jesus’ words paired with those of scripture (2:22; 18:9, 32), but in so doing Jesus’ words are treated in John’s Gospel with the kind of status and authority granted to the written words of scripture. Indeed, the Fourth Gospel presents itself as reliable and authoritative testimony/scripture (20:31; 21:24), and the followers of Jesus are depicted as interpreters of scripture engaged in hermeneutical reflection on the written words of scripture as well as the words and actions of Jesus (2:22; 12:16; 20:9). Further, the ongoing words and testimony of Jesus’ followers are depicted as having considerable status and authority as well (14:12; 18:8, 14, 20).

¹⁴⁷ Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 77.

Chapter 4

John's Jesus as Interpreter of Scripture

Among Other Interpreters in Jewish Antiquity

Having surveyed a range of literature in Jewish antiquity featuring depictions of characters that interpret scripture, and having explored in some detail the depiction of Jesus as interpreter of scripture in John's Gospel, it remains to bring the findings from these studies into conversation with each other. To do so I will employ the same five part heuristic device utilized in chapter two of this study. As commonalities and contrasts come into sharper relief, we will be in a better position to identify insights and implications that emerge from this comparative analysis.

A. Scripture-interpreting character in narrative context

It is common in the literature of Jewish antiquity to depict a scripture-interpreting character as part of a narrative in one form or another. This is accomplished differently in each of the works surveyed. Among these, not surprisingly, Matthew's Gospel is closest to John as a narrative depiction of Jesus as interpreter of scripture, although the narrative structure of the First Gospel and the other Synoptics is quite distinct from that of the Fourth. Philo includes a brief narrative account of those who translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, inserting it into his broader work *On The Life of Moses*,¹ while interspersing comments regarding his own interpretive role throughout his various writings. The depiction of Daniel in the book of Daniel takes on yet another narrative structure, with a sequence of court tales recounted by third person narration in chapters 1-6,² setting the context and establishing Daniel's interpretive credentials for the series of apocalyptic visions voiced in the first person that constitute the second half of the book in its final form. In each of the above cases, a

¹ *Mos.* 2.25-44.

² Daniel does not appear in chapter 3, which tells of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, while chapter 4 is related in the first person by the character of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar.

narrative structure – although variously shaped – is readily apparent. In what follows I will comment briefly on the contrasting literary structures of Deuteronomy, Qumran’s *Habakkuk Commentary*, and depictions of Hillel and other sages in rabbinic literature, in relation to the Fourth Gospel’s narrative structure in its depiction of Jesus as interpreter of scripture.

We have observed that Deuteronomy, in contrast to the books preceding it in canonical sequence, is structured as a series of lengthy discourses by Moses with a frame of third person narration at the beginning and end of the book. John’s Gospel is also uniquely characterized by a series of extended speeches by Jesus, including the lengthy “Farewell Address” that, as Lacorama has convincingly argued, is patterned after the deuteronomic discourses of Moses.³ The first person discourses are knitted together by third person narration throughout the Fourth Gospel, as compared to Deuteronomy’s outer narrative frame. Nevertheless it is significant that John’s portrayal of Jesus is not only verbally and repeatedly linked to Moses, but is structured in a way that calls to mind the depiction of Moses in Deuteronomy.⁴

³ See Lacorama, “Deuteronomy and the Farewell Discourse,” 65, 82. See also Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 46.

⁴ Although the Fourth Gospel’s relationship to the Synoptic Gospels remains disputed, a growing number of scholars acknowledge the possibility that John demonstrates awareness of the other Gospels. (So Brant [*John*, 10: “The hypothesis that John knew one or more of the Synoptic Gospels remains viable.” See also White [*Scripting Jesus*, 352-353], who takes the position that the writer of John “knew and depended one or more of the Synoptics.”) If the suggestion holds that the Fourth Gospel represents a subsequent re-working of synoptic material, then another comparison with Deuteronomy presents itself. As we have noted, Deuteronomy positions itself, and its depiction of Moses, self-consciously as a subsequent re-telling and exposition/interpretation of the law given previously at Sinai. John could be seen to occupy a similar position vis-à-vis the Synoptic Gospels, as a subsequent re-telling of earlier traditions, structured to a significant extent around a series of extended speeches by Jesus.

Keith moves in this direction with his characterization of the Fourth Gospel as “a competitive textualization of the Jesus tradition” vis-à-vis the Synoptics (“The Competitive Textualization of the Jesus Tradition”), as does Levinson (*Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation*) with his analysis of Deuteronomy as a radical re-working of the Covenant Code. Both Keith and Levinson depict this process in an adversarial sense, asserting that these new literary works (John’s Gospel and Deuteronomy, respectively) were intended to supplant and replace the preceding documents. Najman (*Seconding Sinai*, 20-29) critiques Levinson’s adversarial assumptions, which she demonstrates to be an inadequate and anachronistic reading of ancient conceptions of authorship. My suggestion above, following Najman’s analysis, takes a more positive view of this intertextual process regarding the potential relationship between John’s Gospel and the Synoptic Gospels by viewing these documents in canonical perspective.

Qumran's *Commentary on Habakkuk* reverses the pattern. Rather than situating its portrayal of the Teacher of Righteousness in a narrative context, the depiction of the scripture interpreter in this case is embedded in an explicitly exegetical document, a commentary on the biblical book of Habakkuk.⁵ While this represents a contrast to the narrative literary structure of John's Gospel, the Habakkuk Commentary's characteristic *peshet* approach of identifying specific elements from the biblical text with contemporary referents – a way of reading scripture in the present tense, as a description of the experience of the Qumran community – has much in common with the Fourth Gospel's insistence that what is written in scripture refers to Jesus. Indeed, this interpretive approach is characteristic of Jesus himself, as portrayed in John's Gospel.⁶

One of the points of similarity between the depiction of Jesus as interpreter of scripture in John's Gospel and that of the sages in rabbinic literature is the prevalence of dialogue and dispute as a means of working out the hermeneutical agenda at stake. We have seen that the Fourth Gospel depicts Jesus engaging in interpretive discussions with a variety of conversation partners, including surprising ones. Hermeneutical dialogue and dispute are, in fact, key characteristics of the Fourth Gospel's narrative strategy. Much the same can be said for the depictions of the sages in rabbinic literature; dialogue and dispute are not only characteristic of the Talmud but constitutive of it.

That said, it is striking that the depictions of the sages in rabbinic literature up until the closure of the Babylonian Talmud tend not to take the shape of extended narrative accounts of individual rabbis. Some narrative elements are present throughout this literature, including short narratives or scenes that provide a situational context or frame for particular rabbinic discussions and debates,⁷ but even such major figures as Hillel are not the subjects of an extended narration of their lives and teachings in the way that the Fourth Gospel and the other Gospels present Jesus. Perhaps we

⁵ See *1QpHab* 1.13; 2.2; 5.10; 7.4-5; 8.1-3; 9.9-10; 11.4-5.

⁶ See Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 157.

⁷ Neusner, *Rabbinic Literature*, 37.

could say that the Torah itself and its continued elaboration and application (that is, interpretation) is the main character of the ongoing narrative in the rabbinic literature, with the rabbis presented as the supporting cast rather than the headliner on the Talmudic marquee. The Fourth Gospel, on the other hand, is intensely focused on the identity and mission of Jesus who is undoubtedly the star attraction. In its narrative depiction, the emphasis lies with the witness of the scriptures to the truth of Jesus' claims rather than the other way around. This is a significant difference between the narrative context for the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture compared to the depictions of the sages in rabbinic literature.

B. Authoritative and revisionary interpreter of scripture

In the Fourth Gospel, as in each and every other example that we have surveyed from the literature of Jewish antiquity, an authoritative interpreter of scripture is portrayed. A range of techniques are used to confer status and authority on the various interpreters: accounts and assertions of receiving direct address from God (Moses in Deuteronomy); divine inspiration in the interpretation of written texts (Daniel, the Teacher of Righteousness at Qumran, and the Septuagint translators in Philo); and various modes of associating the interpreter with authoritative figures – especially Moses – from Israel's past (the depiction of Jesus as Torah teacher in typological relationship to Moses in Matthew's Gospel, and the sages as links in the ongoing chain of Oral Torah in rabbinic literature). While a variety of authority-conferring strategies are employed, the claim to interpretive authority, in one way or another, is pervasive.

In some of these portrayals the interpreter is openly or even emphatically depicted as radical or revisionary in their scriptural interpretations. Daniel's interpretive move vis-à-vis the written oracles of Jeremiah with regard to the duration of the exile is radical and revisionary indeed, but it is carefully credited to a direct divine revelation.⁸ Despite repeated emphasis on Daniel's exceptional

⁸ Dan 9:1-2, 20-27.

wisdom and interpretive abilities, the text insists that this interpretive insight is given to Daniel from God; it does not derive from him, nor from his scribal training in the Babylonian court. The rabbinic literature, on the other hand, has no qualms about attributing radically revisionary hermeneutical moves to the sages in their deliberations. Particularly notable in this regard, as we have seen, is Hillel's institution of the *prosbul*, a demonstration of his interpretive prowess that was decisive for his rise to leadership, exhibiting remarkable creativity in interpreting Torah in such a way as to circumvent the clear requirements of Torah.⁹ As the rabbinic story of "the oven of Akhnai" makes clear, the Torah "is not in heaven" – the ongoing process of authoritative interpretation and application of Torah has been decisively entrusted to human (that is, rabbinic) interpreters, and even a "voice from heaven" cannot override that authority.¹⁰

In other instances such interpretive radicality or revisionism is denied, whether explicitly or by obscuring its presence. Moses' re-narration of the history and re-articulation of the law as depicted in Deuteronomy is demonstrably revisionary, and yet the narrative voice of Deuteronomy itself belies any such revision. Philo is emphatic that those who produced the Septuagint were not in any way revisionary in their translation from Hebrew to Greek, describing their process as both divinely inspired and mathematical in their precision.¹¹ The Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit an unfailing confidence in the truthfulness and accuracy of their *peshirim* (interpretations) that understand the referents of scripture to be the founders and members of their own community, with no hint that other interpretive possibilities might have validity. Jesus as depicted in Matthew's Gospel, while he clearly disagrees with the "scribes and Pharisees" on multiple matters of scripture interpretation, claims to "fulfill" and

⁹ BT, *Shevi'it* 10.1-3.

¹⁰ BT, *Bava Metzi'a* 4.59.

¹¹ *Mos.* 2.38-39.

not “abolish” scripture.¹² In fact, as noted above, Matthew’s Gospel seems to go out of its way to downplay the more radically revisionary potential suggested at various points by Mark’s Gospel.¹³

Whether explicitly and self-consciously revisionary or not, all of the literature surveyed above shows evident concern for the grounding and authorizing of their current interpretive moves as a faithful expression (indeed, in several instances, as *the* faithful expression) of the inherited scriptural traditions of Israel. The scripture-interpreting protagonists in this literature invariably root their claims – however openly revisionary they may or may not be – in Israel’s scriptural legacy. Najman’s account of Mosaic Discourse provides a helpful tool for the description of the dynamic that we see in these texts, as association with Moses and a re-presentation of the experience of Sinai are enlisted in various ways to present characters as interpretive authorities.¹⁴

The same can be said for the portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture in John’s Gospel. As we have seen, while the Fourth Gospel repeatedly portrays Jesus saying and doing things that are shocking and inappropriate – even blasphemous – for many in his narrative audience (most notably “the Jews”),¹⁵ the Gospel and its protagonist are insistent that these words and actions are consistent and in continuity with the meaning of scripture, which witnesses to (and for) Jesus and (astonishingly) against his opponents.¹⁶ Where “the Jews” declare discipleship to Jesus to be antithetical to that of Moses (9:28-29) and claim scriptural support for their opposition to Jesus (e.g. 7:52), the Gospel and its protagonist are unrelenting in their contention that Jesus represents and enacts the true meaning of scripture.¹⁷ In the face of “the Jews” contention that they are the

¹² Matt 5:17-20.

¹³ For example, compare Mk 7:1-23 and Matt 15:1-20, which omits the radical assertion in Mk 7:19b that “thus he declared all foods clean.” See also Matt 19:9, which allows for an exception to the prohibition of divorce whereas Mk 10:11-12 does not.

¹⁴ See Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 13-19.

¹⁵ 5:17-18; 6:41; 8:58-59; 10:30-31.

¹⁶ E.g. 5:39-47; 10:32-39.

¹⁷ E.g. 1:51; 2:17-22; 3:12-15; 5:39-47; 6:31-40, 43-51; 7:21-24.

hermeneutical experts and that Jesus' radical statements are scripturally out of bounds, the Fourth Gospel and its protagonist claim that belief in Jesus is in fact essential to appropriate hermeneutics.¹⁸

The issue of authority and from whence it derives is of major importance in the Fourth Gospel. At one level, Jesus is depicted as an interpreter of scripture in debate with other interpreters, and the origin of his interpretive authority is the subject of considerable and ongoing debate within the narrative.¹⁹ At another level, the Prologue establishes Jesus' authority by introducing him not as an interpreter among other interpreters but as the divine Logos itself made flesh and dwelling among "us" (1:14). This sets up a dramatic irony that pervades the Gospel account, where the Gospel audience is aware of the source and nature of Jesus' authority in a way that is not accessible to the narrative audience. The result is a kind of double portrayal, where Jesus is depicted as an interpreter of scripture in conversation and debate with other interpreters who repeatedly upholds and draws upon the authority of scripture. At the same time, because Jesus is depicted as the incarnate Logos of God, one gets the sense that the authority structure regarding interpretation of scripture is essentially inverted in this Gospel. Labahn goes so far as to suggest, amidst the oral/written dynamics in first century media culture, that Jesus is the authority that underwrites the authority of scripture in John's Gospel, and not the other way around.²⁰

Here we see the "hermeneutical loop" that is characteristic of the Fourth Gospel's presentation of Jesus and his authority vis-à-vis the scriptures of Israel and their authority.²¹ Scripture, properly understood, according to the claims of this Gospel, witnesses to Jesus and leads to belief in Jesus; at the same time, belief in Jesus is presented as a precondition of appropriate understanding of scripture. The authority of the words of scripture and the authority of the words of

¹⁸ See 5:39-47; 7:47-52.

¹⁹ E.g. 7:14-18; 40-52. See Keith, *Jesus Against the Scribal Elite*, 41-43, 123-125.

²⁰ Labahn, "Scripture Talks Because Jesus Talks," 152, 154.

²¹ Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 77.

Jesus are simultaneously asserted with a kind of circularity that is both a cause and a result of the frequent schisms (σχίσμα) that John's Gospel describes in connection with the twin issues (which are, for this Gospel, really one issue) of appropriate hermeneutics and Jesus' identity.

Jesus is indeed depicted in John's Gospel as an authoritative and profoundly revisionary interpreter of scripture. It would seem that the uniqueness of the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus as scripture interpreter is not in the exegetical techniques that he uses, or even in the conclusions that he reaches about particular interpretive issues,²² but in the interface between hermeneutics and his own identity. The Qumran community too saw scripture as referring to the Teacher of Righteousness and other figures and events in their community's experience, but the degree to which seemingly every available scriptural image is appropriated and applied to Jesus in John's Gospel outstrips even the Qumran literature's interpretive self-identification with and in the text. The Johannine Jesus articulates it well in what can be considered his programmatic hermeneutical statement in 5:39-47, insisting that the scriptures testify on his behalf, that Moses wrote about him, and that comprehension of the words of Moses and his own words are mutually dependent.

C. Interplay between human and divine words

We have noted the dynamic interplay of human and divine words in a range of portrayals of scripture-interpreting characters in Jewish antiquity where divine and human words are identified and differentiated by a variety of means.²³ And yet in each of these texts they effectively become one,

²² As demonstrated in my discussion of 5:17 and 10:34 in chapter 3 of this study, Jesus' interpretive moves here are not without precedent in Jewish antiquity – indeed, this very fact is central to Jesus' own argument in 10:34-36.

²³ For example: Deuteronomy's voicing as "the words of Moses" through whom the Torah of God is communicated (Deut 1:1); Daniel's insistence that its main protagonist's interpretive capacity, as well as the content of his interpretations, are God-given (Dan 9:21-23; cf. 1:17; 2:19, 47; 8:15-19; 10:1); the technique of "atomistic exegesis" in Qumran's *Habakkuk Commentary* in which words of scripture and their *peshet* or interpretation are systematically laid side by side.

with human interpreters functioning as conduits for, or embodiments of, the words of God addressed to their contexts and communities.²⁴

John's Gospel also exhibits a dynamic interplay between human and divine words in its portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture. Like Moses in Deuteronomy, John's Jesus functions as the authorized agent/envoy of God, faithfully passing on the words that he has been given to speak.²⁵ Like Daniel, John's Jesus is depicted as having extraordinary wisdom and interpretive insight,²⁶ and his words (including his interpretation of previously written scripture) in turn become written in a "book" that becomes authoritative for subsequent communities. As in Philo, where human and divine words in the giving of the Torah are inextricably interwoven and where the Septuagint translators are described as having "honest and guileless minds to go along with the most pure spirit of Moses,"²⁷ John's Jesus too insists that he faithfully transmits what he has been given²⁸ and that his words are in continuity and not in tension with those of Moses.²⁹ Like the rabbis, who boldly claimed that in their deliberations and interpretive decisions could be heard the very words of God as spoken to Moses at Sinai, so John's Jesus insists that his words are not his own but those of the Father who sent him and that his claims are consistent with – in fact, he himself is the subject of – "what Moses wrote" (5:46-

²⁴ For example: Philo's accounts of the lives of the patriarchs as embodiments of the law of God (*Abr.* 5, 276); the inspired work of the Septuagint translators as a major revelatory event on par with Sinai (*Mos.* 2.25-27, 40-41); his own interpretive activity as an extension of that work (*Spec.* 3.6); Jesus' adoption of divine modes of speech in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 8:23-27; 9:1-8; 24:35); and the rabbinic maxim, expressed by the "voice from heaven" that "these as well as those [the words of the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai] are words of the living God" (BT, *Eruvin* 13b, as cited in Berkovits, *Not In Heaven*, 77).

²⁵ And much as Deuteronomy emphasizes the agency and authority of Moses in expositing the laws of God ("the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe" [4:1; also 4:40; 5:1; 8:1; 11:8, 13; 13:1]), the Fourth Gospel depicts Jesus speaking with considerable authority and agency ("keep my words" [14:22-24; cf 8:51-52]; "a new commandment I am giving you" [13:34; 15:10, 12, 17]). Just as the heightened authority and agency of Moses and "the words of Moses" (1:1) do not connote a departure or distinction from the originating source and authority of his words (God), the same is true of (and repeatedly emphasized by) Jesus in John's Gospel (12:14-50; 14:23-24; 17:8).

²⁶ Although unlike Daniel, Jesus' extraordinary capacities are depicted as deriving from his identity as the Logos made flesh. We are offered no scene of Jesus receiving divine illumination in this Gospel; he knows it already.

²⁷ *Mos.* 2.40.

²⁸ 12:49; 14:10, 24; 17:8, 14.

²⁹ 5:46-47.

47). And as in the *Habakkuk Commentary* of Qumran, where *peshet* (interpretation) is laid side by side with the words and phrases of scripture and is granted authoritative status on par with scripture, so are the words of John's Jesus paired with those of scripture (2:22; 5:47) and accorded scriptural status and authority.

This "scripturalization" of the words of Jesus in John's Gospel represents a significant element in the interplay of human and divine words in the portrayal of the Jesus-scripture relationship. As we have seen, the name of Jesus is first introduced in John's Gospel in conjunction with that of Moses and in connection with the giving of the law (1:17). In the course of John's narrative, while the words of Jesus continue to be identified as distinct from those of scripture, they continue to be paired with the words of scripture, and treated as similarly authoritative (2:22; 5:46-47). Once alerted to this formal parallel between the words of scripture and the words of Jesus, other texts come into sharp relief as evidence that Jesus' words themselves are being treated as having the status and authority of scripture. In both 18:9 and 18:32 the narrator uses the fulfillment formula, the standard introduction to scripture citations in the second half of John's Gospel, to refer not to scripture but to the words of Jesus.³⁰ With these observations in view, other references to people believing "the word that Jesus spoke" (4:50) or "because of his word" (4:41) – coupled with Jesus' own comments about those who "keep my words" (14:22-24; 8:51-52) and assurance that the Paraclete will "remind you of all that I have said to you" (14:26) – take on additional significance. For John's Gospel, the words of Jesus have acquired scriptural status and are to be treated as such.

³⁰ So Moloney ("The Gospel of John: The 'End' of Scripture," 361): "In 18:9, the Scripture of 17:12 is clarified as the word Jesus had spoken. The Scripture that is fulfilled *is the word of Jesus!*" (emphasis in the original).

This “scripturalization” of Jesus’ words is also evident in the self-referential statements whereby the Fourth Gospel, as Moloney, Reinhartz, and Keith have argued, presents itself as “scripture.”³¹

As the above comparisons demonstrate, the portrayal of Jesus in John’s Gospel participates in the Jewish interpretive milieu where, in a variety of modes and by a variety of strategies and literary techniques, human words come to be identified with/as divine instruction, and divine words are understood to be expressed through human ones. What is already written – including what is recognized as authoritative writing/scripture as well as new writing in which the interpreter participates in some way – is part of this dynamic in each case as well. Human and divine words interface in authoritative written texts and in their exposition by interpreters who lay claim to divine authority and empowerment in a variety of ways. John’s Jesus is very much part of this dynamic that various writings of Jewish antiquity hold in common.

And yet with the portrayal of Jesus in John’s Gospel we see something distinct as well. Jesus as interpreter of scripture is authoritative because of who he is. Jesus does not only communicate divine words, he *is* the divine Word, the embodiment of the Logos of God. While this is a unique feature of the Fourth Gospel’s depiction of Jesus in comparison to Matthew and the other Synoptic Gospels,³² in some respects, as we have seen, this notion of embodied Torah is not unique to John’s Gospel. Philo describes the patriarchs as “living and rational laws” and Abraham in particular as “the unwritten law and justice of God.” Rabbinic literature too describes the lives of rabbis as embodiments of Torah. Sirach 24:8 depicts the Creator instructing Wisdom – identified later in the same chapter (v. 23) with the Torah – to “pitch your tent in Jacob.” And yet the intensity of the

³¹ See Moloney, “The Gospel of John: The ‘End’ of Scripture,” 360-366; “The Gospel of John as Scripture,” 454-468; Reinhartz, “Torah Reading in the Johannine Community,” 111-116; Keith, “The Competitive Textualization of the Jesus Tradition,” 321-337.

³² In the synoptics – and especially in Matthew – Jesus is presented as repeatedly engaging in debates over scriptural interpretation that have to do with specific halakhic matters of obedience to Torah (regarding marriage/divorce, fasting, sabbath observance, etc.). In John’s Gospel, as Robert Kysar points out (*The Maverick Gospel*, 11): “the controversy is almost always over the issue of Jesus’ identity. It involves the interpretation of Torah only insofar as that is relevant to a proper understanding of who Jesus is.”

Fourth Gospel's identification of Wisdom/Torah as embodied decisively in the person of Jesus is unmatched in any of these examples. As passage after passage and symbol after symbol are appropriated as finding their meaning and fulfillment in Jesus, a dynamic is set up whereby Jesus is the object of scriptural interpretation and not only the subject who interprets scripture in the Fourth Gospel. He is the hermeneutical key to the appropriate interpretation of scripture, and his own words – and the written Gospel that communicates them and testifies to his identity – function as scripture for the believing community as well. The interplay of human and divine words is dynamic indeed in the multi-faceted portrayal of Jesus as both interpreting and interpreted Word in the Fourth Gospel.

D. Contemporizing scripture

In our survey of portrayals of characters as scripture interpreters in Jewish antiquity, we have encountered a variety of techniques and mechanisms for the “contemporization” of scripture whereby past events recounted in scripture are rendered a current experience and scripture is read in the present tense. Moses' chronology-collapsing claim in Deut 5:2-4 – that the present generation and not their ancestors were the ones present at Horeb (Sinai) to whom God spoke “face to face” – finds a close parallel in John 6:31-34 where Jesus explicitly and emphatically re-orientes the crowd's reference to a past-tense event (“as it is written, he gave them bread from heaven to eat”) to a present-tense reality (“it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven” 6:31-32). Philo's depiction of the translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek on the island of Pharos as a “major revelatory event”³³ on par with that of Sinai is comparable in John's Gospel with the repeated pairing of the revelatory events associated with Moses and Jesus.³⁴ The repeated rabbinic assertion that contemporary deliberations and judgments of the rabbis constitute nothing less than the contemporary manifestation of the Torah of God delivered

³³ Borgen's phrase (“Philo of Alexandria as Exegete,” 118).

³⁴ E.g.: 1:17-18; 5:46-47; the language of “keep my words” and the giving of “a new commandment,” deeply reminiscent of Moses' speeches in Deuteronomy, in Jesus' Farewell Discourse and prayer in chapters 13-17.

to Moses at Sinai³⁵ – this too can be compared with Jesus’ claim to cohere with “what Moses wrote” (5:45-47).

The Habakkuk Commentary’s *peshet* technique of declaring “this [a word or phrase from scripture] is that [a current or near-current figure or experience in the Qumran community]” is also comparable to the oft-noted Johannine Jesus’ habit of boldly inserting himself and others as the intended referents of a particular scriptural text.³⁶ Richard Longenecker describes this development at Qumran as “recreating the Danielic pattern of interpretation.”³⁷ Strikingly, while Matthew’s Jesus also utilizes this *peshet* type of interpretation, the First Gospel also pictures Jesus as a Torah teacher fully engaged in exegetical debate about specific matters of *halakah*. The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel (Matt 5-7) represents an example of contemporizing Torah in a rather more rabbinic mode. In the Fourth Gospel, by contrast, Jesus’ interest in *halakah* appears to be minimal, and the overwhelming focus of his contemporizing interpretive work with scripture has to do with the presentation and explanation of his own mission and identity.³⁸

Given the above, once again we can see that John’s Gospel portrays Jesus as an interpreter of scripture who is very much a part of the first century Jewish exegetical milieu, making use of known and accepted interpretive techniques.³⁹ Jewish antiquity’s common toolbox of strategies for

³⁵ Neusner, *Oral Torah*, viii, referencing BT, *Avot* 1:1.

³⁶ Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 157. Although *peshet* interpretation was not unique to Qumran, Longenecker (Ibid., 39) distinguishes between rabbinic and Qumranic contemporizing *peshet* techniques: “... while in the Talmudic literature there is a contemporizing treatment of Holy Writ that seeks to make God’s Word relevant to the present circumstances and on-going situations, among the Dead Sea covenanters the biblical texts were looked upon from the perspective of imminent apocalyptic fulfillment.” Similarly, Longenecker (Ibid., 44) distinguishes between the “charismatic midrash” of Qumran and the “scholastic midrash” of the rabbis, while describing a “raz (mystery)-*peshet* (interpretation)” hermeneutic in Daniel and Qumran (Ibid., 41-42). Longenecker (Ibid., 151, 157) considers that “a *peshet* type of interpretation is dominant” in John’s Gospel as well as in Matthew.

³⁷ Ibid., 42.

³⁸ So Kysar, *The Maverick Gospel*, 11.

³⁹ See Longenecker (*Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*) who structures his study along the lines of different Jewish exegetical procedures and techniques, tracing literalist, midrashic, *peshet*, and allegorical interpretation in a range of first century Jewish interpreters (Qumran, Philo, rabbis, and various New Testament writings).

contemporizing scripture is full and varied, and Jesus is portrayed in the Fourth Gospel as a master craftsman in this regard.⁴⁰

And yet the cumulative effect of all of these exegetical techniques and procedures for contemporizing scripture, when applied so thoroughly and intensively by and to the person of Jesus, results in a unique portrayal of a scripture-interpreting character. This uniqueness is set up once again by the Johannine Prologue's description of the Logos of God becoming flesh. In this scripture-saturated poetic introduction, the person of Jesus represents the embodiment of the Logos/Wisdom/Torah of God.⁴¹ The very words (Word) of God, by means of which the cosmos were created (Gen 1), become present-tense flesh and blood reality in the person of Jesus. In this sense we could say that, in John's Gospel, incarnation is "contemporization" *extraordinaire*.

Jesus' boldness in writing himself into the script of Israel's scriptures, while it has precedent in the *peshet* modes of interpretation evidenced in the writings of Qumran and others, seems to push beyond those precedents. John's Jesus claims that Moses wrote about him (5:46), that Abraham saw his "day" and rejoiced (8:56), and the narrator further adds that Isaiah "saw his glory and spoke about him" (12:41). In his famous "I am" statements, Jesus claims to be the awaited Messiah (4:25-26), the bread (manna) from heaven (6:32-41), the light of the world (8:12), the good shepherd (10:11, 14), the resurrection and the life (11:25), the way/truth/life (14:6), the vine (15:1, 5) – in each case, appropriating language and imagery from Israel's scriptures and applying them decisively to himself. The cumulative rhetorical effect of this concentration of scriptural imagery onto the person of Jesus is overwhelming and, as far as I can see, unprecedented in the literature of Jewish antiquity.

This dynamic may be helpfully described with reference to yet another comparison between the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus and that of the Teacher of Righteousness in the Qumran

⁴⁰ The "scripturalization" of Jesus' words, as well as the Fourth Gospel's own claim to be scripture – both of which have been discussed above – can also be seen as "contemporizing" moves vis-à-vis scripture.

⁴¹ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 360; Reinhartz, "Torah Reading," 115-116.

literature. Longenecker describes scriptural interpretation at Qumran as “revelatory and/or charismatic in nature,” where “[c]ertain of the prophecies had been given in cryptic and enigmatic terms, and no one could understand their true meaning until the Teacher of Righteousness was given the interpretive key.”⁴² What is unique about the Fourth Gospel’s presentation of Jesus in this regard is the extent to which he has not only been “given” but that he *is* that “interpretive key.” With Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, it is not merely a matter of receiving divine illumination of the meaning of the scriptures and the purposes of God – illumination that, as we have seen, is claimed in the portrayals of Philo and Daniel and the Teacher of Righteousness and so on. Scripture and its meaning have become “contemporized” decisively in the very person of Jesus, according to the Fourth Gospel’s portrayal from the Prologue onward. Hence, once again, the “hermeneutical loop” that we observed at various points in chapter three: a correct reading of scripture, according to this Gospel, results in belief in Jesus, while at the same time belief in Jesus is a precondition for appropriate hermeneutics.⁴³ Again, it is the identity of Jesus that is the focus – both of the Fourth Gospel and, according to that Gospel, of the witness of all of scripture itself. Scripture finds its “contemporization” most fully in the person of Jesus, to the point that belief in “what Moses wrote” and in “what I [Jesus] say” (5:47) become so intertwined as to be virtually indistinguishable.

E. Extending interpretive responsibility and authority to others

The fifth and final category in our heuristic device for comparing the portrayals of scripture-interpreting characters in the literature of Jewish antiquity has to do with the extension of interpretive authority and responsibility to others, typically to the followers or disciples of the protagonist. As I have suggested in chapter two, this element may be detected in Deuteronomy, Daniel, and Philo, but

⁴² Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 43-44. See also Kugel (*How To Read the Bible*, 14) who describes the understanding of the Bible as “a fundamentally cryptic text” as a common assumption among “all ancient interpreters.”

⁴³ Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 77.

in a somewhat implicit and understated fashion. In these cases the accent is upon the authority and reliability of the primary protagonist, with less emphasis on the transference of an interpretive role to others. Several other writings – most notably the Qumran documents, Matthew’s Gospel and the rabbinic literature – are emphatic and explicit in their extension of interpretive responsibility and authority beyond the central character or characters upon whom they focus as interpreters of scripture.

We have seen the centrality of the ongoing function of Torah study for the community at Qumran. The founding figure is called “The Interpreter of the Law”⁴⁴ and the God-given interpretive prowess of the Teacher of Righteousness is foundational and carried forward by a carefully delineated succession of leadership roles, among which interpretive functions and authority are prominent.⁴⁵ Furthermore, there are explicit directives that make it clear that Torah study is an ongoing requirement for all participants, not only the leadership, of the Qumran community.⁴⁶

The intense concern for the ongoing process of Torah study in the rabbinic literature can hardly be overstated. This process is central to what it means to be the faithful people of God, with lives structured around the authoritative instruction (Torah) of “Moses, our rabbi” as studied, debated, discerned, and articulated in an unbroken chain by the rabbis. The foundational documents of rabbinic Judaism epitomize and perpetuate such a process of ongoing study, debate, and discernment, as the Torah is understood to exist and carry forward in two media, written and oral, thus providing the structural mechanism for continuing authoritative interpretive activity and responsibility. As the Talmud so memorably put it, God studies Torah too,⁴⁷ and even God’s interpretive perspective is subject to the authority of the rabbis.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ CD 6.7.

⁴⁵ CD 10:5-6; 13:1-6.

⁴⁶ 1Qs 6.6-10.

⁴⁷ BT, *Avoda Zarah* 3b.

⁴⁸ See my discussion in chapter 2 above regarding the Talmudic story of the oven of Akhnai (BT *Bava Metzi’a*, 4.59b.)

Matthew's Gospel is also emphatic in the extension of ongoing responsibility and authority for the interpretation of scripture to Jesus' disciples. We have observed Matthew's depiction of Jesus as authoritative Torah teacher, engaged in debate and exposition regarding specific matters of *halakah*. Matthew's Jesus twice uses the language of "binding and loosing" – with its connotations in rabbinic literature to authoritative scriptural discernment regarding what to permit and what to prohibit – to describe the ongoing function of the community of his followers (16:19; 18:18). The positive and ongoing function attributed to "a scribe trained for the kingdom" (13:52), the granting of "the keys to the kingdom of heaven" (16:19), the promise to be present "where two or three are gathered in my name" (18:20), and the prominence of the teaching function in the resurrected Jesus' final commissioning of his disciples (28:20) – all of these carry overtones of the ongoing and authoritative interpretive function passed along to Jesus' followers.

The Fourth Gospel shares elements of all of the above in its portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture and the extension of interpretive responsibility and authority to others. Like the depictions of Moses in Deuteronomy, Daniel in Daniel, and the Septuagint translators in Philo's *On the Life of Moses*, John's Gospel is so focused on establishing the authority of its protagonist that the extension of interpretive authority and responsibility to others seems implicit and understated by comparison. Nevertheless, upon closer inspection we can see that John's Gospel too depicts the empowerment of the disciples of Jesus for ongoing interpretive work, with regard to the scriptures of Israel, with regard to the words of Jesus himself (which, as we have seen, take on the status and authority of scripture in this Gospel), and with regard to the heightened status and authority of the words of his followers themselves.

John's Gospel witnesses to the significance of a post-resurrection hermeneutic, especially through the "remembrance" motif that indicates ongoing interpretive activity after the timeframe of

the Gospel narrative itself.⁴⁹ The importance of the ongoing interpretive responsibility and authority of the community of Jesus' followers is accentuated when we consider that, as argued above, Jesus' words themselves come to be "scripturalized" (depicted as having the status and authority of scripture) in John's Gospel. Further, if we follow the analysis of Moloney, Keith, and others, the Fourth Gospel depicts itself as authoritative scripture.⁵⁰ When we take all of this into consideration, we see a variety of passages in the Gospel that point to the mandate and empowerment of the disciples for ongoing interpretive work vis-à-vis "scripture," whether that be the written scriptures of Israel⁵¹ or the words of Jesus as presented and "scripturalized" in the Fourth Gospel itself.⁵²

Jesus' references to "a new commandment" (13:34) and "my commandments" (15:10, 12) and his calls to "keep my words"⁵³ are helpfully understood as part of this dynamic. Also, on this reading, the promise of the Paraclete who "will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (14:26) can be understood as empowerment for ongoing "scriptural" interpretation and discernment. Ruth Sheridan and Martin Hengel read it in precisely this way.⁵⁴ Alan Culpepper

⁴⁹ See Daise, "Quotations with 'Remembrance' Formulae in the Fourth Gospel," 75-91. While John's Gospel does not include a narrative description of a dramatic moment of exegetical illumination as in Luke 24, the reality of this ongoing interpretive activity is presupposed by the narrative and becomes evident in the retrospective point of view described in 2:17-22, 12:16, and 20:9. This interpretive activity presupposed by not only the Fourth Gospel but all New Testament texts is vividly characterized by Donald Juel (*Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1988], 2) as "a vast network of exegesis to which we have only limited access."

⁵⁰ See Moloney, "The Gospel of John: The 'End' of Scripture," 360-366; "The Gospel of John as Scripture," 454-468; Keith, "The Competitive Textualization of the Jesus Tradition," 321-337; Reinhartz, "Torah Reading," 111-116; Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 289-290.

⁵¹ 2:22; 12:16; 20:9.

⁵² 2:22; 14:26.

⁵³ 14:14:23-24; 8:51; cf. 8:31 ("if you continue in my word"); 8:43 ("It is because you cannot accept my word"); 15:7 ("if you abide in me and my words abide in you"); 15:10 ("if you keep my commandments... just as I have kept my Father's commandments...").

⁵⁴ So Sheridan (*Retelling Scripture*, 36): "the disciples' ongoing study of the Scriptures under the guidance of the Paraclete (cf. 20:9);" Hengel ("The Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel" in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*, 390): "This motif of post-Easter remembering, which according to the farewell speech is a work of the Spirit-Paraclete who 'reminds' the disciples of Jesus' words (and that means his interpretation of Scripture, as well), meets us again at the end of Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem." Judith Lieu ("Narrative Analysis and Scripture in John," 152) disagrees on this point, claiming that "neither Jesus nor the narrator relates the activity of the spirit to the interpretation of Scripture – this is not a spirit-inspired activity." In a footnote on the same page, Lieu goes on to say that "[t]his needs careful nuancing since many interpreters do

has pointed out that “[t]he similarity between Jesus’ words regarding what the Paraclete would do after his death and the allusions to what the Beloved Disciple did after Jesus’ death are suggestive.”⁵⁵ As the one whose “testimony” is the authority underlying the Fourth Gospel (21:24), this suggests an ongoing function of the written text of the Gospel itself as a scriptural source to be studied – a literary means of being “reminded” of the words of Jesus (14:26) – on an ongoing basis.⁵⁶ John’s Jesus says – again, from a post-resurrection perspective – “[b]lessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (20:29). Given that the subsequent verse proceeds to acknowledge explicitly the Fourth Gospel’s status as a written text (20:30-31), these words, placed by the evangelist on the lips of Jesus, can be understood to be addressing the audience of the written Gospel in reference to the purpose and reliability of John’s Gospel itself.⁵⁷

John 20:19-23 does not use the Matthean and rabbinic language of “binding and loosing” with its specific exegetical overtones, but numerous scholars see the Johannine Jesus’ granting of the authority to “forgive” or “retain” sins as analogous to the role depicted in Matt 16:19 and 18:18.⁵⁸ Significantly, in John’s Gospel this mandate replicates that of Jesus and the Paraclete (cf. 5:22; 16:7-11; 20:21-23), and is granted in a post-resurrection scene of re-creation,⁵⁹ in which the Holy Spirit is literally “breathed” upon the disciples (cf. Gen 2:7) in fulfillment of the promise in 14:16, 26; 15:26;

elide the remembering, the understanding of and in the light of Scripture, and the activity of the Paraclete.” I agree with her call for nuance on this point, and she is correct in noticing that neither 12:14-15 nor 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:14 explicitly link the Spirit-Paraclete and the activity of interpreting scripture. However, as I have shown, John’s Gospel does link the words of Jesus with the words of scripture at multiple points (eg: 2:17, 22; 5:46-47), and when we consider the effect of the “scripturalization” of Jesus’ own words in this Gospel (as Lieu herself points out on p. 153), then it is indeed appropriate to see the promise of the Paraclete as having a link to ongoing interpretive activity.

⁵⁵ See Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 122.

⁵⁶ Reinhartz (“Torah Reading,” 113) proposes precisely this: “that the Gospel of John itself, or portions thereof, may have been read aloud regularly in the community, in addition to the reading from the Torah.”

⁵⁷ So Reinhartz (Introduction to “The Gospel According to John” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 157).

⁵⁸ See Brant (*John*, 277); Keener (*Gospel of John*, 1208); Beasley-Murray (*John*, 382-382); Ernst Haenchen (*John 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 7-21*, Hermeneia, trans. Robert W. Funk [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984]), 211.

⁵⁹ Reinhartz, note on 20:22 in *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 194; Haenchen, *John*, 2:211; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1204.

16:7-11. Jesus' assertion that "as the Father has sent me, so I send you" (20:21; 17:18; cf. 14:12) points to the intention that Jesus' disciples continue his interpretive practices as well.⁶⁰ Thus I maintain that we see depicted in John's Gospel the mandate, empowerment and precedent for the ongoing interpretive activity and authority of the community of Jesus' followers.

Interestingly, while less explicit in its attribution of an ongoing interpretive function to Jesus' followers vis-à-vis the scriptures of Israel, the Fourth Gospel places a strong accent on the words that Jesus' disciples and future followers will speak. As we have seen, the concepts of "witness" and "testimony" are crucial for the Fourth Gospel, and in emphasizing Jesus' call to "keep my words" (which, the Johannine Jesus insists, are not merely his own words but the faithfully transmitted words of the Father), the Fourth Gospel is also emphatic about the authority and future function of the "word" of his disciples. This dynamic is particularly evident in Jesus' prayer in chapter 17, which exhibits an intricate interweaving and indeed identification of the revelatory ("exegetical" – 1:18) mission of Jesus with that of his disciples. Just as God "gave" his words to Jesus, and Jesus has "given" those words to his followers, so now those followers – it is assumed by Jesus – will in turn communicate an authoritative "word" to others, bringing them to faith in Jesus. The transmission of a decisive and authoritative "word" is at the core of Jesus' own identity and mission, and also extended to his disciples.

John's Jesus describes the purpose of his coming into the world as "to testify to the truth" (18:37), and he sends his disciples to do the same (15:27; 17:18-20; 20:21). In so doing, they are to join the already extensive list of those identified by Jesus who "testify" on his behalf: John (5:33; cf.

⁶⁰ In fact, as Myers (*Characterizing Jesus*, 145) has pointed out, the Fourth Gospel depicts the disciples doing precisely that, as in 2:17 "[t]he disciples place Jesus as the 'I' of Psalm 69(68), mimicking Jesus' action of placing himself in the scriptural story in Jn 1.50-51." As Myers (*Ibid.*) goes on to say, this move "continues Jesus' own practice and sanctions the evangelist's own use of this tool while simultaneously compelling the Gospel audience to do likewise." Hengel ("The OT in the Fourth Gospel," 391) makes a similar observation regarding the breathing of the Spirit on the disciples: "Only the Spirit renews and illuminates the uncomprehending, fearful hearts of the disciples, making them into new creatures born from above (3.3, 5), so that they can truly understand the words and work of Jesus, as well as the Word of Scripture."

1:7-8), Jesus himself (5:31), Jesus' works (5:36), the Father (5:37), the scriptures (5:39), and the Paraclete (15:26). Notable additions to this list, as we have identified previously, are the Samaritan woman (4:28-29, 39-42), Mary Magdalene (20:18), and "the beloved disciple" whose testimony authorizes the written Gospel itself (21:24). The followers of Jesus, according to the Fourth Gospel, are not only to carry out an ongoing interpretive function vis-à-vis the written scriptures of Israel and the scripturalized words of Jesus – they are also to produce their own authoritative utterances that serve precisely the same purpose: that others may "come to believe" in Jesus (17:20; 20:31). The words of scripture, the words of Jesus, the words of his disciples, and the words of the written Gospel itself are all to carry out the same function. The Johannine portrait of Jesus as interpreter of scripture turns out to be a portrait of his scripture-interpreting and truth-testifying disciples as well.

Summary: John's Portrayal of Jesus Among Other Portrayals of Scripture Interpreters in a Range of Literature from Jewish Antiquity

In chapter two of this study I utilized a five-part heuristic device as an aid for describing and analyzing key characteristics of the portrayals of scripture-interpreting characters in a range of literature from Jewish antiquity. In chapter three I worked through a series of passages in John's Gospel, offering an account of the portrayal of Jesus as scripture interpreter that emerges there. The present chapter has sought to bring the observations from both of those chapters together, comparing John's depiction of Jesus with other depictions of scripture interpreters in Early Judaism, utilizing the same five-part heuristic device. While I will not repeat the detailed observations that emerge from this comparative work, they can be broadly summarized as follows:

1. The depiction of a central character as an interpreter of scripture, in some kind of narrative form, is a common feature in this literature (with the notable observation that the *Commentary on Habakkuk* at Qumran provides an account of the Teacher of Righteousness in the context of an

explicitly exegetical document, rather than providing exegetical reflections in the context of a narrative account).

2. Each and every example that we have considered features a character or characters portrayed as authoritative in their interpretation of scripture. In some cases this includes an explicit sense of significant innovation in interpretation, while in other cases such innovation – while still demonstrably present – is denied or obscured by the text. A range of techniques is employed to ascribe status and authority to the various interpreters.

3. All of the works considered in this study exhibit a dynamic interplay between human and divine words in their depictions of scripture-interpreting characters. Human and divine words are both differentiated and identified in a variety of ways, with divine words communicated and at times embodied by human speakers/interpreters. While this dynamic interplay of human and divine words is a common feature in the surveyed works of Jewish antiquity, including the Fourth Gospel, John's depiction of Jesus pushes the boundaries of this dynamic in identifying Jesus both as authoritative speaker/interpreter of divine words and also as the very Word (Logos) of God incarnate. The degree to which the Jesus is declared to be (and declares himself to be) the referent and the hermeneutical key for the appropriate interpretation of scripture is unmatched by any of the other surveyed works of Jewish antiquity.

4. Another common feature in all of the works surveyed is the "contemporization" of scripture – various modes in which past events recounted in scripture are depicted and declared to be present-tense experiences. The Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus reading scripture in this way, boldly writing himself and others into the scriptural script, is not in itself unique in the literature of Early Judaism. In drawing upon scripture in these ways, Jesus is depicted as making use of a variety of known and accepted interpretive techniques. And yet the degree to which the Fourth Gospel and its protagonist appropriate scriptural narratives and imagery, applying them decisively to the person of

Jesus, pushes beyond these precedents. The degree to which the Fourth Gospel depicts all of scripture as finding its decisive contemporization and fulfillment in Jesus is, as far as I can see, unprecedented in the literature of Jewish antiquity.

5. The extension of interpretive responsibility and authority to others, beyond the primary scripture-interpreting protagonist, is also a common characteristic in the literary works of Jewish antiquity considered in this study. Some are more explicit and emphatic about this ongoing interpretive function and others are more understated, but continuing interpretive activity is presupposed and articulated in each case. The Fourth Gospel, at first glance, would appear to be among those that are more implicit and understated in its depiction of the ongoing interpretive function of Jesus' followers, providing several glimpses into the disciples' post-resurrection hermeneutical insights (2:22; 12:16; 20:9). When it is acknowledged that the words of Jesus are "scripturalized" in this Gospel, however, the responsibility, authority, and empowerment for ongoing interpretive activity becomes more prominent and emphatic.⁶¹ Strikingly, the words of scripture, the words of Jesus, the words of his disciples, and the words of the written Gospel itself are all to carry out the same function: "to testify to the truth" so that others may "come to believe"⁶² that Jesus is the Messiah" (18:37; 20:31; cf. 15:26-27; 1:7, 41; 4:28-30, 39-42). Thus, while a depiction of the extension of ongoing interpretive responsibility and authority is common to all of the works considered in this study, the Fourth Gospel's focus on such interpretive activity pointing to Jesus as Messiah is shared only by Matthew's Gospel among the surveyed works from Jewish antiquity.

Having completed the descriptive and comparative tasks with regard to the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture, it remains to articulate some conclusions and potential implications of these findings.

⁶¹ For example, see 8:51; 14:23-24, 26; 15:7, 10; 20:23.

⁶² Or, as some ancient manuscripts say, "continue to believe."

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Implications For Further Study

This study has shown that in many respects the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of scripture is right at home in the exegetical milieu of Jewish antiquity in and around the Second Temple period. As is evident from the descriptive and comparative work above, there is little in Jesus' use of scripture as depicted in the Fourth Gospel that cannot also be found in other literature from this era. Jesus draws upon scripture constantly and creatively, at times citing directly and often evoking and reworking scriptural imagery without directly quoting scripture at all. He is an authoritative and at times surprisingly revisionary interpreter of scripture (certainly a number of his interpretive moves are perceived that way). He utilizes familiar Jewish exegetical techniques and available interpretive options. He enacts and embodies the words of scripture. He draws upon a variety of scriptural passages and images and communicates them in rhetorically powerful ways. He appropriates scriptural narratives and images and uses them to explain and describe his own identity and mission. He contemporizes scripture and boldly writes himself and others into the scriptural narratives. He claims to function as God's authorized agent, insisting that he does not speak of his own accord but says the words and does the works that God has given him to say/do. He claims continuity with Moses and critiques his opponents for their unfaithfulness to Mosaic law. He extends ongoing interpretive responsibility and authority to his followers. None of these characteristics, taken individually, are unique to Jesus when compared to depictions of other scripture-interpreting characters in the literature of Jewish antiquity.

And yet the cumulative impact of *all* of these features, when concentrated on and applied to the person of Jesus, is indeed unique in its rhetorical force and in its hermeneutical implications. According to this Gospel, not only does Jesus function as an authoritative and radically revisionary interpreter of scripture; he *is* the incarnate Logos/Wisdom of God. Scripture testifies to and about

Jesus. Moses wrote about Jesus, as did Isaiah, and Abraham “rejoiced to see his day.” Belief in Jesus is decisive for appropriate hermeneutics, and personal encounter with Jesus is decisive for hermeneutical transformation (although not all who encounter Jesus undergo such transformation). Jesus claims a kind of unity with God¹ and takes on divine prerogatives that are shocking for many of his hearers. The words of Jesus are treated as having the kind of status and authority normally accorded the words of scripture. Indeed, the words of scripture, of Jesus, of Jesus’ followers, and of the written Gospel itself are all portrayed as sharing the same essential purpose, as articulated in 20:31: “... so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

One of the implications arising out of this study, with its demonstration that the Fourth Gospel’s portrayal of Jesus is firmly situated in the exegetical milieu of Jewish antiquity, is simply to affirm the significance of the fact that the Fourth Gospel portrays Jesus as an interpreter of the scriptures of Israel. John’s Gospel has long been considered a “spiritual gospel”² noted for its high Christology and emphasis on the divinity of Jesus. Much less attention has been paid to the characterization of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel as a Jewish interpreter of scripture in dialogue and debate with other (mostly) Jewish interpreters. The current study has demonstrated not only that John’s Gospel makes extensive use of scripture in its characterization of Jesus, but that the character of Jesus himself is consistently and emphatically portrayed, throughout this Gospel, as an interpreter of scripture. This portrayal is not peripheral or tangential for the Fourth Gospel; it is significant that Jesus is portrayed in this way. More scholarly attention could be fruitfully paid to this largely overlooked aspect of the Fourth Gospel’s account.

¹ A unity that, significantly, is extended to his disciples (10:30; 17:20-25).

² A famous phrase attributed to Clement of Alexandria, who died circa 215 CE, as cited by Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.7. See Brant, *John*, 10.

A second and related implication has to do with the value and applicability of Najman's concept of "Mosaic Discourse" in connection with John's Gospel. I have drawn upon Najman's articulation of the four features of Mosaic Discourse at work in various literary works of the Second Temple period,³ and I have adapted them in the formulation of the second, third, and fourth parts of the five-part heuristic device that has provided a structure for my comparative analysis.⁴ As such, my thesis has not been structured in such a way as to seek to demonstrate conclusively that the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus coheres with Najman's account of Mosaic Discourse. However, such a study could be readily undertaken, and it is evident that my work goes a long way in supporting the suggestion that the Fourth Gospel's depiction of Jesus as interpreter of scripture can indeed be fruitfully considered a participant in Mosaic Discourse along the lines discerned by Najman. John 5 depicts Jesus himself, as a scripture-interpreting character, explicitly articulating a foundational hermeneutical posture and claim: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?" (5:46-47). The parallels between that statement and Najman's description of the features Mosaic Discourse are readily apparent.⁵ Further exploration and analysis of the concept and practice of Mosaic Discourse, specifically in relation to the Fourth Gospel and its depiction of Jesus, would be a fruitful avenue for future study.

This leads to a third potential implication of the present study. By situating the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus within the interpretive milieu of Jewish antiquity, and by attending to the dynamics of the hermeneutical options and controversies at play in the late Second Temple period, new insights and possibilities might also be gleaned for the ongoing scholarly debates about "the

³ See page 5 in chapter one above, and Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 16-17.

⁴ See page 10 in chapter two above.

⁵ See note 20 on pages 5-6 in chapter one above, and Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 16-17.

parting(s) of the ways” between what became Judaism and Christianity.⁶ Some streams of scholarship have seen in John’s Gospel evidence for a clear and decisive split between the Johannine community and the synagogue, understanding John’s Gospel as an identity document for Jesus-followers with a self-understanding over-against “Judaism.”⁷ This view has come under serious question in more recent scholarship, with greater emphasis on the diversity within Judaism (or multiple “Judaisms”) and the discrediting of the theory that the *Birchat ha-minim* (“blessing against the heretics”) represented an event prior to the writing of John’s Gospel that essentially marked the expulsion of “Christians” from the synagogue.⁸ By tracing the Fourth Gospel’s depiction of Jesus as both at home in the Jewish exegetical milieu of the late Second Temple period while also espousing a hermeneutical option that was rejected by many, the present study contributes further evidence for a more nuanced view of the complex relationships between various groups within the Judaism or “Judaisms” of the 1st century. While this has not been the focus of the present study, my findings may be suggestive for those pursuing such historical matters.

Finally, a fourth set of potential implications arising from this study has to do with the ongoing interpretive task for followers of Jesus for whom the Fourth Gospel itself has the status of scripture and among whom I count myself. As we have seen, John’s Gospel provides evidence that ongoing interpretive work vis-à-vis the scriptures of Israel was indeed undertaken by the followers of Jesus (2:22; 12:16; 20:9), including the one(s) responsible for the final form of the Gospel narrative which draws upon scripture so artfully and persistently. This study has also identified the manner in

⁶ For a taste of the vigour with which these debates are being conducted, see James D.G. Dunn (*The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity*, 2nd ed. [London: SCM Press, 2006]) and *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007).

⁷ This stream of scholarship is especially associated with the work of J. Louis Martyn (*History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*) and Raymond E. Brown (*The Community of the Beloved Disciple*).

⁸ See Reinhartz (“The Gospel According to John” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 153) for a brief critique of the expulsion theory as an explanation for the origins of John’s Gospel. See also Kysar (*Voyages With John*, 237-245) for his chapter-length “Tale of A Theory” (again, the “theory” being that of the expulsion of Christians from the synagogue as the occasion for the composition of the Fourth Gospel).

which Jesus' words and Jesus himself come to be "scripturalized" in the Fourth Gospel. That is, Jesus' words are treated with the kind of status and authority granted to the words of scripture within the Gospel narrative (e.g. 2:22; 18:9; 14:23-26; 15:10-12); Jesus himself is portrayed as the very Word of God made flesh (1:14) whose words and actions are to be remembered and interpreted/understood, "kept" and imitated (14:12, 15-29); and the Fourth Gospel presents itself, as a literary production, in the role of reliable testimony/scripture for the believing community (20:31; 21:24-25).⁹

What are the implications, for the contemporary interpreter, of entering the "hermeneutical loop"¹⁰ depicted in the Fourth Gospel, and accepting the claims of the controversial and innovative interpreter of scripture depicted there? What are the implications – as Reinhartz highlights in her scholarship¹¹ – of reading and interpreting this Gospel without assenting to those claims? What are the implications of adopting – or not – the Jesus/Moses time-collapsing hermeneutical move of understanding ourselves to be present with the manna-eating people in the wilderness (6:32-33) and at Sinai (Deut 5:1-4); or, for that matter, fearfully behind locked doors, receiving the Spirit-breath and the Johannine great commission (20:21-22), with its attendant authority and responsibility (20:23)? What are the implications, for our own interpretive practices, of words such as these: "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these..." (14:12)?

Such questions, while necessarily raised by the present study, are beyond its scope to address. The hermeneutic of Jesus, as depicted in John's Gospel, is undeniably a disputed and disputatious one. As "many of his disciples" express it in 6:60, in response to some of Jesus' radical interpretive

⁹ So Moloney ("The Gospel of John: The 'End' of Scripture," 360-366; "The Gospel of John as Scripture," 454-468), Keith ("The Competitive Textualization of the Jesus Tradition," 321-337), and Reinhartz ("Torah Reading," 111-116).

¹⁰ This term drawn from Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 77.

¹¹ See Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John* (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2001).

moves: “[t]his teaching [ὁ λόγος οὗτος] is difficult: who can accept it?” Peter’s reply stands as the intended response of the Gospel’s ideal reader: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life” (6:68). And it must not be overlooked that, according to the Fourth Gospel and its scripture-interpreting protagonist, ongoing interpretive work – and guidance and empowerment for that ongoing interpretive work – is still to come. “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth...” (16:12-13). The interpretive process depicted in John’s Gospel is not finished yet.

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