

1 Authority in contemporary historiography

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We met recently with a colleague to discuss the central place that “authority” has found among explanations for the creation and dissemination of texts in Late Antiquity. As the conversation shifted to social theories of authority, our colleague commended Bruce Lincoln’s magisterial *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* as being particularly influential on his own thinking about the authority-as-motivation paradigm. In particular, he reflected on the central paradox of the book. According to Lincoln, authority is, at base, thinly veiled violence, or at least the implication thereof. Authority is compromised, however, whenever that violence is brought to fruition. “So, for instance, I don’t hit my children because in so doing, my authority would be brought into question.” He was referring to Lincoln’s contention that authority, when challenged, can be cashed out either in terms of persuasion or in terms of violence, though always with a loss of value in the process.¹

Our colleague paused for a moment, returning to reality from the realm of theory, and retorted to himself, “I don’t hit my kids for a *lot* of reasons – mostly moral and psychological. My own authority doesn’t have much to do with it.”

In his position as a parent, our colleague’s authority permeates every interaction he has with his children. To describe the relationship without reference to the structures of power that govern their interactions would be irresponsible, and myopic. Yet, to understand this parent-child relationship solely under the rubric of authority and (im)balances of power would be perilously reductive; the analysis would fail to grasp that the individuals under analysis are just that: people, with myriad interests and motivations. Our colleague does not hit his children because he loves them, and it is his duty to care for their well-being in a way that precludes any number of actions that would otherwise serve his purposes and reinforce his authority. Authority is a necessary touchstone in order to understand the parent-child relationship, but it is not sufficient. The central claim of this book is that “authority” is a necessary but ultimately insufficient category of analysis for the writing and understanding of ancient history. We begin by examining how and why authority has become part and parcel of contemporary historiography.

The problem

In the wake of the “linguistic turn” in late ancient studies, the truth, or the relative effectiveness of a historical claim has come to be considered in light of its

explanatory value regarding the question of *cui bono* – who benefits?² That is, a core feature of the historian’s task entails the unmasking of the systems of power that underlie our sources. A historian must not only analyze the content and context of ancient sources, but also the structures of power, authority, and political contingency that account for the transmission, preservation, and survival of these sources. Which is to say, in the wake of the linguistic turn, historiographically valid accounts of our ancient evidence must speak to the possibility that the text might just as easily have not survived. The fact that it did, and that we can engage in textual research whatsoever, must be understood in light of the fact that, in most cases, survival is no accident: our sources survive precisely because someone benefited from their preservation, and usually someone or some group in power. What we term a “reduction to authority” was born in this context: uncovering and acknowledging the structures of authority embedded within our sources became the hermeneutical key to unlocking a source’s meaning and import.

Understanding of the fragility and contingency of historical sources, and of the writing of history itself, constituted an advance in the field. Introductions both to granular and wide-ranging works of history in the past 25 years almost invariably bemoan the teleological certainty and framework of inevitability expressed in an earlier positivist historiography; a statement about the contingency and precariousness of historical development has become *de rigeur*. We hold these to be positive developments in historiographical method.

For instance, Hindy Najman’s rightfully influential *Seconding Sinai* was an early example of the enormous advances to be found in understanding the invocation of Moses and Sinaitic revelation by ancient Israelite and Second Temple sources as attempts at authorization. Najman demonstrated that, if we focus on discourse instead of authenticity, and thus authority as opposed to positivist historiography, we can understand later claims of Mosaic authorship not as pious forgery, but rather as attempts to establish membership in an already authoritative “founder discourse.” In the words of Najman, re-presentations of Sinai and Moses, “serve to authorize the re-introduction of Torah into the Jewish community at times of legal reform and of covenant renewal.”³

Historiography based on an authority-driven paradigm – a history written with the aim of explaining who were the winners, who were the losers, and whose voices are amplified or muffled by our sources – has become so well-integrated into current scholarship that it is often a challenge to look beyond or between “authority” as an explanatory paradigm. We have become so aware of the tautology of “power always wins out,” and the conviction that “history is written by the winners” that alternative factors, those which do not fit neatly into a paradigm aimed at explicating systems of power, are marginalized, deemed irrelevant, or considered beneath the task of the historian.⁴

History beyond authority

This book disturbs the centrality of the authority-driven paradigm of historiography, arguing that even as power and authority always influence our sources

and must be taken into consideration, there are other factors worth analyzing in our study of the production, preservation, and transmission of ancient texts and traditions. This exploration begins with a chapter by Hindy Najman, who builds a new theoretical framework for thinking about ancient sources by reflecting on the historiographical impact of *Seconding Sinai*, a milestone in the “authority-as-explanation” paradigm. She examines the Foucauldian underpinnings of *Seconding Sinai* and appeals to Nietzsche and Schlegel in order to develop new strategies for “reading beyond authority.” She argues that attention to the vitality of a tradition and fragmented reading allows for close analysis of Second Temple sources that does not reduce them to questions of authoritative practices, authoritative people, and expressions of power.

Hindy Najman’s chapter opens the door to reassessing types of historical contingency that have faded into the background as authority gained pride of place in the historiographical order of knowledge. By fixing our attention on authority, historians have obscured the possibility of accidental survival and the “super-added” extra beyond the authoritative facets of legal material; we have read the place of an author as the source of authority in a manner that is ahistorical, and obscures more than it enlightens. The present book focuses on three uses of “authority” in contemporary historical writing – authorship and authority, authority and the law, and un/authoritative transmission. Each chapter demonstrates the vitality of ancient Jewish and Christian traditions by supplementing our historiographical toolkit in ways that move beyond the authority paradigm.

The book concludes with an epilogue by C. M. Chin, who invites us to set aside, for a moment, human concerns for authorization and sense-making, with the promise that “we may find sensations, some human and some not, sitting a little askew from it.”⁵ Chin warns historians about the false security brought by familiarity and scholarly expertise, and encourages a return to our sources with a renewed sense of possibility, ready for a new “blow of encounter.”

Authorship and authority

Reading authorship as a function of authority seems eminently natural – the two English words themselves are cognates of the Latin root “auctor,” which means both “progenitor” and, in some instances, “power over another” (*auctoritas*). Viewing authorship as a creative process that results in the authority of the creator over her product opens a range of possibilities before the historian to create a genealogy from the originary moment of authorship forward through various, secondary stages of reception and interpretation.⁶ The notion of an author or “authorial voice” allows a trajectory to be traced from the text’s moment of creation through nodes of reception along a timeline that ends, inevitably, with the historian herself. We can see the whole history of the text because we have an idea both of where it began – with the author – and where it has ended up: in our own hands. There are many paradigms by which the relation of an author to his work may be understood. But scholars who wish to tell the story of a textual tradition as one of decline from an originary moment, through contamination of later less- or

un-authorized tradents require that the progenitor/*auktor*/author is coeval with the source of the text's authority. In this way, the author functions as a primary node through which all source and textual criticism flows, because the identification of the author allows historians to delve into a text beyond its final material form – say, the Teubner edition, or the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Because there are two ends of the discourse – the *auktor* and the contemporary reader/historian – the intervening time and space may be reconstructed as an evolutionary process. The concept of the “author” as “authority” allows historians to return to Eden and consider, if only for a moment, how far we have fallen.⁷

Beyond glimpses at a text's originary moment, the action of binding the progenitor of a text to its source of authority allows historians and readers to presume that the meaning of a text itself is singular, unified, and discoverable in the persona of the author.⁸ So, for instance, the names attached to gospel books allow for the idea of a person who can be known through analysis of his textual production, whether the named “person” is understood to represent a community or singular individual. The unification of a text under the authority of its progenitor in turn allows for the meaning of the work itself to be perceived as a single, unified, and discoverable entity. The text is presumed to cohere in some sense, with incongruities and fissures explained either as the intention of the author or as the result of contamination by later tradents whose own residuum is visible in the present state of the text. Thus, authorship-as-authority allows no contradiction except for that which is intended by the person who created the text – its author. As a tool of historiography, authorship-as-authority supposes that initial meaning can be extracted from a discourse, and that if one could perfectly reconstruct the originary moment and understand the habitus of the text's originator, one could tell an authoritative genealogical story of the discourse itself, from origination to the present.

The aim of our book, to move in some sense “beyond authority,” does not univocally dismiss the identification of an author with the authorization of a discourse. Contributors approach questions of authorship and authority from different angles, and each finds different uses for these categories in the analysis of Late Antiquity. Each contributor, however, points to the subtle and consequential distortions in our reading of late ancient sources occasioned by modern conceptions of authorship and contemporary notions of authority as a primary driver of composition and transmission.

Mark Letteney argues in Chapter 3 that scholarly discussions of composition, transmission, and canon formation in Late Antiquity have assumed a false and monolithic understanding of the correlation of authorship and authority, and that modern intuitions fail to account for the textual practice of late ancient Christians. He does so by adducing two opposite and complementary case studies: the case of 5th century church council documents, in which a text that is known to be forged is nevertheless considered wholly authoritative, and a corpus of letters between Jesus and King Abgar of Edessa, a tradition that is considered by its earliest source as unimpeachably authentic material authored by Jesus himself, but that is nevertheless contrasted explicitly with authorized, scriptural texts. This study argues that there is no necessary or predictive connection between the authorship of a text in Late Antiquity and its authority.

A. J. Berkovitz, in Chapter 4, moves from the dubious correlation of authorship and authority to the problematic connection that contemporary scholarship draws between attribution and authority. Through an examination of psalm superscriptions in rabbinic literature he argues that ancient rabbis did not invariably view textual attribution as constituting a claim to authority. Rather, attribution allowed late antique rabbis to interpret both the text of a psalm and its author in new light. It enabled questions regarding the identity of the Psalmist, the circumstances under which the Psalm was recited, and the historical implications of a psalm's composition. He argues that rabbis were interested in attribution not because of the authority that names confer, but rather because attributions are useful for interpretation; they answer both biographical and bibliographical questions. He concludes that ancient texts did not reduce attribution to authority in a simple or predictable manner, and nor should contemporary historians.

In Chapter 5, Matthew Larsen continues the work of reframing authorship and attribution. He turns our gaze to one of the most apparent instances of authorial ascription in the ancient world – the names attached to canonical gospels – in order to demonstrate that appearances can deceive when we import modern, western notions of authorship into foreign and ancient contexts. In fact, he disputes the scholarly consensus that the “Gospel according to [name]” formula in New Testament manuscripts and early Christian sources was used to denote authorship at all. He demonstrates that the formula “according to,” prior to late 2nd century Christian re-interpretation, was never used to denote the author of a book. Instead, the formula was used to refer to the corrector of a fluid, open tradition of stories, often one which lacks any single originary moment whatsoever. Thus, the interpretation of the “according to” formula as a denotation of authorship serves to import falsely the idea of an author into the early history of gospel texts, and to cast what was initially a fluid tradition of stories and their “correctors” into an authorized literary product with an originary moment and a unitary meaning. Gospel “titles” did not originate as authorizing formulae; scholars unduly bias their reading of the texts in favor of an “authorized” model of authorship and publication by reading gospel titles in an ahistorical manner.

Reading authorship beyond authority consists in destabilizing the connection between the two, and in being ever-vigilant against importing modern notions of each into the late ancient world. It also provides new directions of inquiry by paying attention to various and competing notions of what it means to be the progenitor of a text in antiquity – what is an “author?” Understanding authorship beyond authority, at base, involves a reaction against the flattening of complex negotiations of both authorship and authority themselves. Our intention is to make late antiquity look a little stranger, occupied by strangers who do not share contemporary values or sensibilities. In the words of L. P. Hartley, “the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”⁹

Authority and the law

Of all ancient literature extant today, none more clearly presupposes the connection between authorship and authorization than legal corpora, whose authority are

understood to flow directly from the authority of their promulgators. Laws are considered as such, and not merely “guidelines” or “suggestions,” because their source holds the authority to pronounce. Laws embody the authority of the law-giver, be that lawgiver god, the Roman Senate, Babylonian state courts, or revered patristic commentators of centuries past. If we are to demonstrate the virtue of a historiography that moves meaningfully beyond authority, we should be able to demonstrate that new insights and fresh readings are waiting even in sources whose explicit aim is the construction of their own authority. Maria E. Doerfler and Jonathan Pomeranz have each taken up this challenge in chapters considering the possibility of reading legal corpora beyond authority, with attention paid to surplus motivations underlying the law apart from bare expressions of power.

The use of authority as a lens through which to read late ancient legal material is of recent interest and has proven a useful framework. Before the law was read chiefly as an expression of authority – a wish on behalf of those in power – it was read in a less skeptical vein. Scholars often imagined legal statements as the product of “The Law”: an embodied agent conceived by people, but that acts upon its own volition and system of logic once instantiated.¹⁰ Thus conceived, “The Law” as an agent shares a conceptual framework with modern notions of a business corporation.¹¹ Like a modern business, the Law says, does, and demands; it has its own agency. Unlike corporations, however, the Law does not vie for power. Rather, it was imagined as an expression of power in its very nature.¹² Such a conception of “The Law” as an embodied entity, in turn, suggested a reading of legal sources as both descriptive and normative. In other words, the presumption is that legal statements reflect an embedded social reality, and that historians can use legal pronouncements to understand social history. This approach to legal sources we have termed “Law-centered.”

In recent years, attention to the place of power and authority in the creation of legal material has shifted the dynamics of scholarly readings of law. This “authority-centered” approach seeks to unmask the social-historical frameworks, systems, and mechanisms that underlie legal pronouncements, and as a result places the promulgators of legal material directly within the line of inquiry. Instead of asking questions regarding “How does the Law work?,” an approach sensitive to authority and authorization asks “Who created the law?” and “Why did they do so? What did they stand to gain?”

An authority-centered approach strips legal materials of both normative and descriptive status, and reads them as attempts by a particular social group to create a specific reality by exerting power in the form of legal discourse.¹³ For instance, the exemption of women from time-bound commandments in Mishnah Qiddushin 1:7 is not understood to reflect a reality in which most women abstain from time-bound commandments, as it might be read under a Law-centered hermeneutic. Rather, an authority-centered approach reads the statement “any time-bound commandment, men are required women are exempt” as an attempt to create the proposed reality by fiat. The legal statement, in truth, tells a story about male actors – rabbis – seeking to limit, control, and discipline women.¹⁴ At its core, the turn to authority restores a fragile and tempestuous form of human agency to legal

history by decentering the text and de-personifying the corpus in view of finding the people that lie behind it. An authority-centered approach encourages strategies of counter-reading: Did Jewish women keep time-bound commandments? Where? When? How? This reading against the grain, in turn, allows for a fuller and richer history of Late Antiquity.

Approaches that focus on the place of authority and authorization in the creation and promulgation of law have proven eminently useful in rereading late ancient sources, but they too have limits and drawbacks. Instead of providing insight into questions surrounding legal literature, they find answers mainly within domains of power: identifying winners and losers becomes the framework into which studies of law and legal promulgation fit. When the dominant explanatory framework for any legal pronouncement is cast primarily in the guise of authority,¹⁵ we have emulsified our sources, and caused them to lose their particular textures and flavors. The methodology which prioritizes counter-reading law with an eye toward understanding the material conditions of its production (an authority-centered approach) often obscures other approaches; the entirety of the literary product is reduced to its utility in propping up the authority of its promulgators. Thus, to return to Mishnah Qiddushin 1:7, the only profitable answer to questions of why time-bound commandments are incumbent upon men alone necessarily engages with questions of bodily autonomy, perceived and proposed realities, and to what extent such a pronouncement reflects a social history, or attempts to create one.¹⁶

When taken to an extreme, the reduction inherent in the authority-centered paradigm refuses law its own genre and form of reading. By reclassifying law solely under the rubric of authority, we obscure the contours of legal literature and what they can offer beyond prescriptive hopes and partisan politics. We would like to ask: What are promulgators doing beyond solidifying their own power? What are the unintended consequences of issuing laws? Legal sources are authoritative – that is their nature. But what are we missing when we focus exclusively on the source and expression of that authority?

Maria E. Doerfler, in Chapter 6, begins to grapple with these questions by re-envisioning the role of narrative in legal codes and by analyzing the non-legal stories found in two Syriac legal sources separated by a millennium: the *Didascalia* and the canonical writings of ‘Abdīshō’ bar Brīkhā. Her exploration of narratives embedded in prescriptive, legal sources resists the trend of scholarship that wishes to see narrative solely as an authorizing agent. Instead, she suggests that the combination of law and narrative serves to highlight the role of foundational narratives, reflecting and constructing a community’s sense of self. Doerfler advises that we need not jettison attention to authority entirely, especially when reading genres like law that place it at the center. Nonetheless, we should pay attention to the surplus of motivations beyond authority, allowing for a more vibrant conception of law as a genre.

Jonathan Pomeranz continues the reappraisal of legal authority as an explanatory device in Chapter 7 by examining the phenomenon of unpromulgated civil law in the Babylonian Talmud. Why would rabbis keep others in the dark about the legal system? Under modern jurisprudence, the dominant rationale for hiding

legal knowledge from the masses is to prevent them from abusing the system, or to allow for those “in the know” to use the system to their own advantage. In other words, esoteric legal knowledge serves to supplement the authority of specialists. Pomeranz argues that in Babylonia, while such a practice inevitably placed non-rabbis under rabbinic control, the practice ought not be conceptualized as an authorizing device. Rather, Babylonian rabbis followed in the footsteps of a long-standing Near Eastern tradition which left law unpromulgated, a type of jurisprudence that provided room for legal flexibility and prevented external manipulation. The rabbis themselves, according to Pomeranz, never thought of unpromulgated law as a source of authority. He suggests, instead, that the scholarly reduction of talmudic law to authority merely expresses contemporary scholars’ discomfort with the rabbinic legal system and its jurisprudential underpinnings.

The chapters by Doerfler and Pomeranz offer a similar argument, but from two distinct sets of literature, suggesting the interdisciplinary utility of re-examining our core presuppositions about authority and the law. Both advance the central argument of this book by demonstrating that authority is not a sufficient lens through which to examine legal materials. Together, they show that the narratives which surround the law, that are about the law, or are embedded in the law, afford glimpses into both the mechanics that produce legal knowledge as well as its early reception. These narratives do not understand the law they frame in terms of authority, and thus to read the narratives primarily as claims to authority is to misunderstand both the narrative and the law to which it is attached. Following the lead of Doerfler and Pomeranz, this book next addresses the methodological liability of reading reception itself as authority.

Transmission beyond authority

The fact is so obvious that it hardly warrants the ink: no process more dramatically shapes the way that scholars conceive of and construct the past than transmission. Without a transhistorical network of tradents, we would possess no physical literary evidence beyond the few cases of accidental preservation: texts found in hidden jars, graves, city dumps. Historians who use sources that claim to be earlier than their earliest physical witnesses have no choice but to trust the relative fidelity of transmission through time. In the realm of ancient studies, it is not uncommon that the first extant witness to a source postdates the text’s composition by several centuries. The oldest complete physical copy of the Mishnah (redacted ca. 200 CE) is found in an 10th or 11th century hand; the only extant copy of Tacitus’s *Annales* 1–6 (composed ca. 115 CE) are found in a 9th century manuscript; the first complete copy of the Hebrew Bible is the 11th century Leningrad Codex, produced at least a millennium after the last of its contents were composed. There is simply no way around the fact that we are continually indebted to traditory processes that are all too human, and that we rely on the way that our ancient sources represent their own transmission for information about the path that led from ancient composition to contemporary consumption.

Scholars have undertaken a variety of strategies to interpret the very fact that ancient literary material survives. Relative to the current authority-focused

paradigm, older traditions of scholarship have more often accepted as uncontroversial that transmission of most ancient texts occurs in a generally faithful process, occasionally disrupted by the errant and eager scribe; our ancient sources, when they discuss transmission, can be believed about what they transmitted and how they did so. Thus, if rabbinic sources declare that Oral Torah was transmitted only orally, what evidence can we bring to suggest otherwise? More importantly, transmitted content has been assumed to reflect more or less accurately the voice of the tradent. Thus, when the Babylonian Talmud (redacted ca. 500 CE) cites a statement of a tannaitic rabbi (living ca. 70–200 CE), we may assume that at least the core of that saying is historically attributable to the named sage, or at minimum, to someone from his school.

More recently, a critical hermeneutic with an eye toward authority has unsettled many of these assumptions about transmission with two key questions: “By whose authority, and through what processes, did transmission occur?” An approach to antiquity that is sensitive to authority must situate a source not only within its most immediate historical context, but must also ask more fundamental questions regarding the availability of the material in the first place.¹⁷ The very fact that sources survive from antiquity has been reformulated in light of radical contingency – the admission that our sources might just as well have not survived – and led to new questions, generally based on the presumption that transmission itself is an expression of power, and that the ability to pass down texts and traditions is always inflected by political, social, and technological factors. Canons, especially scriptural canons, have come to be viewed as contrivances born out of controversy, rather than objects of consensus or simple conglomerations of material.

In a scholarly environment where the very existence of literary sources has come to be understood in light of social groups vying for power in antiquity, the act of transmission has become intimately associated with authority. The fact that the writings of so-called “proto-Orthodox” Christians remain,¹⁸ while those of Valentinus and his school do not has been rightly understood as no accident – the group that “won out” resigned opposing voices, in most cases, to the dustbin of history; the literary remains of Late Antiquity were intentionally curated by victorious social groups to tell a history of their inevitable rise and success. Some of the great material discoveries of the 20th century have served to drive this point home. The chance survivals of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Nag Hammadi codices, and many of the Oxyrhynchus papyri shed significant light on heretofore unknown or scarcely documented movements. The groups presumed to be represented by these improbably surviving texts have been traditionally understood in oppositional terms: “heresy” or “apocrypha” versus the “orthodoxy” witnessed not by chance finds, but by scribes in scriptoria, and other transhistorical institutions of transmission. To scholars of ancient history, the great textual discoveries of the 20th century demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt that we are not only working with a half-full deck, but one stacked in favor of the house.

All of these insights have been facilitated by a strong theoretical connection between authority, power, and the act of transmission. And the insights have been staggering. Ultimately, putting transmission-as-authority on display has allowed for the daunting but liberating question to be asked of bishops and rabbis alike:

What if the “powerful majority” that we read from traditionally surviving materials were, in actuality, an embattled minority?¹⁹ How does this affect the way that we read heresiography, scriptural interpretation, law codes, and the act of transmission itself? If acts of transmission are intimately connected with authorizing processes, then historians can no longer assume that transmission was the faithful act of passing along traditions of earlier authorities unchanged. Particular attention must be paid to the way later tradents reworked earlier ones. ‘How did Rufinus translate Origen, why did he do so, and what purposes did it serve?’²⁰ ‘Is the Babylonian Talmud transmitting a false tannaitic statement in order to authorize a particular opinion?’²¹ Even authorizing figures themselves were understood as a product of the authorizing process. Thus, ‘should every rabbinic attribution be assumed false until proven otherwise?’²² ‘When Basil quotes Jerome does he actually have an authentic work of Jerome in front of him?’ Variation, likewise, is no longer conceived to be the sole province of scribal variation or oral parallels, but rather the product of traditory agents. ‘Does the Talmud rework an earlier tradition to suit its own narrative?’

All of these questions are pivotal to our understanding of ancient sources. The methodological lens that authority provides for analyzing processes of transmission, however, obscures just as much as it enlightens. At its core, it contends that all acts of transmission – from translating the Bible to passing a note – are carried out under the guise of gaining, exerting, or resisting authority; that is to say, under the guise of a particular form of interpersonal power relations that is ultimately reductive. This form of reductionism stretches the bounds of history. It suggests a certain kind of intentionality behind the movement of any tradition, and it erases the potential for accidents, for surplus or competing motivations, and for vitality in history.²³ It reduces our ability to appreciate, among other things, whimsy. And if our lenses have blinded us to whimsy, have we really succeeded in glimpsing the human lives that lie behind our sources?

Combining transmission and authority into one episteme does not only affect the ways in which we think about transmission, but also the ways that we construct the analytical category of “authority.” The fundamental insight that transmission is often carried out by authorized tradents has caused scholars to turn the paradigm around, and understand that transmission implies some sort of authoritative status. An authority-centered paradigm demonstrates that the texts of the Nag Hammadi codices index pluriform Christianities, often with rival or contradictory claims to sources that are extant through more traditional processes of transmission in ancient scriptoria. But the authority paradigm smuggles in another set of assumptions about the Nag Hammadi material that is neither necessary nor obvious: it simultaneously posits that those texts carried some form of authority in the communities that created and transmitted them. Consider, for instance, the appellation of “gospel”²⁴ or “Scripture”²⁵ to texts from Nag Hammadi, and the initial presumption that the Coptic codices comprised a counter-canon of authoritative Scriptures intended to rival that of the contemporaneous (4th century) “Catholic” movement.²⁶ In this instance, the fact of that the Nag Hammadi codices were transmitted is used as a justification for presuming that they were authoritative

to their users. While more recent studies have argued plausibly for an Egyptian monastic provenance of the codices, the authority paradigm remains intact in so far as interpretation of what the Nag Hammadi texts “meant” to ancient tradents is still adjudicated in light of the manuscript’s (now monastic) origins.²⁷ We have simply shifted the blame for heterodoxy from heretics to the marginally orthodox; we have not overturned the connection between the transmission of a text and what we suppose the fact of transmission says about its tradents.

The reduction of transmission to authority may be no more evident than in the widespread scholarly practice of reading manuscript discovery narratives as devices that authorize transmission. Eva Mroczek’s chapter in this book questions the common assumption that manuscript discovery narratives act primarily or merely as paratexts that authorize the text discovered, or as simple data points that allow scholars to follow a text’s transmission. Instead, she suggests reading them as a literary tradition. Through a focus on the familiar story of “books hidden in caves,” which comprises both ancient and modern exempla, Mroczek explores ways in which theological expectations about what Scripture is are embedded in manuscript discovery narratives. Her model of transmission, in this case the transmission of a discovery narrative, focuses our gaze on the ways in which the passing along of text teaches us about the transmitters quite apart from questions of their authority to say, to write, or to pass down. Embedded in these ancient and modern manuscript discovery narratives are not merely claims to authority, but also theologies of space, time, and knowledge. In this sense, dichotomies of Jewish/Christian, true/fabricated, and even primary/secondary obscure our understanding of transmission in Late Antiquity. Mroczek commends attention to the same “super-added extra” in find stories, beyond questions of authorization, as Doerfler and Pomeranz demonstrate in their re-reading of the law. Each finds new insights and fresh angles on well-worked material by asking questions of their sources quite apart from “who benefits?”

It is clear that late ancient people composed and transmitted texts for reasons apart from or beyond concerns of authority. The authority paradigm, however, has so thoroughly taken hold that we have lost sight of what those motivations might be. And we have reduced all instances of transmission – those known to us by purposeful tradition and accidental discovery alike – to the purview of authority. It is for these reasons that we must move beyond self-satisfaction with explanations of transmission and composition that attend only to questions of authority. It is for these reasons that we must move beyond authority as a central paradigm.

The pervasiveness of the paradigm means that it is exceedingly difficult conceptually to unbind authority from transmission. Thus, even the transmission of a non-authoritative text, like the quotation of “heretical” material within “orthodox” heresiological sources, has traditionally been read as an expression of doctrinal and scholastic authority. This approach is unsatisfactory.²⁸

Winrich Löhr turns to orthodox transmitters of “heretical” texts in Chapter 9, which considers the Christian heresiologists of the 2nd through 5th centuries. He disputes the scholarly consensus that the inclusion of “heretical” texts in heresiological sources had the intention or effect of bolstering the authority of the

heresiographer, arguing rather that a variety of motivations and concerns are visible among the sources. Heresiologists like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyon, for instance, took modes of argument current in the schools of Greek philosophy as a model, combining dialectics and doxography into a new, Christian form whose purpose moved far beyond the merely polemical. On the other hand, bishops such as Epiphanius of Salamis and Augustine of Hippo published heretical texts in order to unmask and embarrass their opponents, with less concern paid to what has been traditionally considered as the heresiographer's prime motivation: nailing down doctrinal error. He argues that the transmission of "heresy" among the orthodox of Late Antiquity was fraught, and that the authority model of transmission has obscured the varying motivations of heresiologists.

Finally, focusing solely on authorized forms of transmission, and assuming that transmission in material or oral form implies some sort of authority, blinds our gaze to types of transmission that occur through what may be conceived as "unauthorized" channels. That is to say, acts of transmission that do not bolster authority are not viewed as acts of transmission at all. For ancient Judaism and Christianity this particularly affects the way scholars describe the passing on of traditions by any historical actor beyond the elite male. When a mother teaches her daughter Torah or a rabbinic religious practice, can we ignore the fact that this is an act of transmitting tradition, even if it occurs outside of the channels that historians are accustomed to monitor?

Sarit Kattan Gribetz takes up these questions in Chapter 10, where she examines how historians might move beyond an authority-centered model of transmission by paying closer attention to both audience and gender as operative categories. Her chapter involves two central claims: first, transmission necessarily involves both a transmitter and a receiver. Kattan Gribetz demonstrates that the authority model, by focusing on the transmitter alone, overlooks the many examples of "unauthorized" recipients (and, in turn, transmitters) of rabbinic and Christian traditions. Second, she examines the central role of embodiment for women's transmission, pointing to the fact that women tend to be cast as transmitters of authoritative texts with their bodies: consuming texts and preparing them for others' consumption. This reframing of transmission and displacement of authority opens up the possibility of recovering instances of unauthorized transmission. Ultimately, Kattan Gribetz allows historians to include voices beyond those of male elites in the process of transmission.

These three authors invite historians to step back for a moment and imagine a new paradigm that puts authority in its place – as one among a variety of competing motivations and explanations for the fact of textual transmission.

Conclusion

C. M. Chin's epilogue reflects on what he terms "the vitality of words" – the ability of texts and traditions to inspire and induce awe, to ward off demons and to punish the wicked. Instead of putting the vitality of words to use in understanding hierarchical structures of authority, Chin invites historians to

linger on the “blow of encounter, in which the reader is moved by the motions of the text.” He considers, as well, notions of familiarity with and affection for texts, as well as anxiety over textual “loss” as motivating factors that must be understood as part of the process of composition and transmission. Chin’s reflections conclude the book by asking what the scholarly expertise looks like “beyond authority,” and he commends that we return to our texts as historians with a renewed commitment to letting the sources surprise and confound our expectations.

This book is not intended as a call to arms against the analysis of structures of power and authority which underlie authorship, law, or transmission. Rather, each contributor attempts to rethink and reframe the place of authority, and the value that is assigned to it as an explanatory device in the writing of history. We present a polite but persistent revisionism, a call to a new form of sensitivity to competing, contravening, and seemingly contradictory motivations behind the composition and transmission of our sources from Late Antiquity. A similar argument could be made regarding the authority paradigm and potential supplements or alternatives in the study of Classical Antiquity, Medieval history, and beyond.

Notes

- 1 Lincoln, *Authority*, 6. “The fact that force is implicit within authority, however, and that authority may deploy force rather than argumentation in response to anything it regards – or chooses to regard – as a challenge is something known to all who are involved in the asymmetric relations constitutive of authority: ruler and ruled, officer and private, teacher and student, parent and child. But if force is actually used, or if threats of force are made with anything less than extreme delicacy (a delicacy that insures deniability), authority risks being perceived as a fig leaf of legitimacy that conceals the embarrassment of naked force. And when authority operates (and is seen to operate) on pain and fear rather than on trust and respect, it ceases to be authority and becomes an attempt at coercion.”
- 2 An account of the “linguistic turn” may be found in Elizabeth A. Clark’s magisterial *History Theory Text*.
- 3 Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 36.
- 4 See, for instance, Eva Mroczek’s chapter in this book, which engages and reads theology in a manner that bridges the divide between traditionally secular historians and those more attuned to constructive theological projects.
- 5 Chin, *Epilogue: Reading Without Authority*, 207.
- 6 In this sense, “authorship” is meant to be broadly conceived, denoting creation of a text or discourse. Thus, the term “text” employed here should be understood as a product of discourse, and not necessarily one that has found a written, material form.
- 7 Our thinking on the function of an author is indebted to Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 141–60.
- 8 For more see Larsen, *Gospels Before the Book*.
- 9 Hartley, *The Go-Between*, 1.
- 10 See Safrai, “Halakha,” 121–210. For an attempt to historicize law but nonetheless views it a corporate entity with its own exclusive internal logic, see Urbach, *The Law*. For a critique of this approach, see Schäfer, “Research into Rabbinic Literature: an Attempt to Define the *Status Quaestionis*,” 139–40.
- 11 This is especially the case in the United States, as made clear in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* 558 U.S. 310 (2010).

- 12 In the sources considered here, the deity is often the ultimate source of authorization for law. For a recent exploration of the relationship of God, revelation and law in ancient Judaism, see Hayes, *What Is Divine about Divine Law*.
- 13 See most recently Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law* and Mokhtarian, *Rabbis, Sorcerers, Kings and Priests*.
- 14 For some recent advances see especially Rosen-Zvi, *The Mishnaic Sotah Ritual*, and Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*. For gender and time-bound commandments see Alexander, *Gender and Timebound Commandments in Judaism*.
- 15 To wit, "This law was enacted to promote or undermine [insert person or social group's] authority."
- 16 See especially Jonathan A. Pomeranz's chapter in this book, 123–36.
- 17 For a compelling revisionist historiography of rabbinic Judaism that pays attention to the location of evidence, see Schwartz, *Imperialism*. See especially his statement of method on pp. 2–3: "The realization that the evidence is socially specific leads to self-consciousness about the act of generalization. Thus, a positive statement in an ancient Jewish literary text cannot be taken without further argumentation as evidence for what "the Jews" thought or did. Rather, it is a nugget of ideology, telling us what some limited (perhaps more or less elite) group of Jews considered worth committing to writing at a specific time, which is in itself nothing to sneeze at. We may then ask, Did its authors have the means to impose their view on others? Are others likely to have agreed with them for other reasons? Thus, it may indeed correspond to what other classes of Jews, or Jews living at other times, thought or did, but this needs to be demonstrated."
- 18 And have been codified in the modern era to form what might be considered a second canon. Anderson, "Canonizing the Apostolic Fathers in Modern Publication Practices."
- 19 In this sense, the great textual discoveries of the mid-20th century bore out what Walter Bauer scandalously claimed in 1934. Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*. On the marginal place of the rabbis, see Schwartz, *Imperialism*, 103–28.
- 20 Chin, "Rufinus of Aquileia and Alexandrian Afterlives: Translation as Origenism," 617–47.
- 21 See Jacobs, "How Much of the Babylonian Talmud is Pseudepigraphic," 46–59. It must be noted that false tannaitic statements captured scholarly attention before the rise and prominence of authority-centered discourse. How to explain these false statements, however, is often inflected by contemporary historiography.
- 22 For a position that treats named tradents with a high degree of skepticism, see Neusner, *The Documentary Foundation of Rabbinic Culture*, and Kraemer, "On the Reliability of Attributions in the Babylonian Talmud," 175–90. For a more accepting position, see Elman, "How Should a Talmudic Intellectual History Be Written? A Response to David Kraemer's 'Responses,'" 361–86. For a middle-ground approach, see Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, 10–11.
- 23 On this, see both Hindy Najman's chapter and C. M. Chin's conclusion in this book.
- 24 Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*.
- 25 Layton *The Gnostic Scriptures*.
- 26 Initially suggested by Doresse, *Les livres secrets des gnostiques d'Égypte*, and restated by Robinson, "The Nag Hammadi Gospels and the Fourfold Gospel," 71: "it is almost as if the Nag Hammadi Codices were prepared as a kind of countercanon, an alternative to the New Testament, or at least claiming equal status." For analysis and critique of the counter-canon paradigm, see especially Lundhaug and Jenott, *The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices*, 80ff.
- 27 Lundhaug and Jenott, *The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices*.
- 28 Todd Berzon has argued as much in his recent treatment of the early heresiographers: "I am not arguing that the heresiologists, by demonstrating their detailed knowledge of and ability to refute the heretics, amassed for themselves some vague notion of

scholastic or ecclesiastical authority. Instead, I am claiming that the heresiologists' stated understanding of the heretics cut in precisely the opposite direction. Heresiologies were not texts of control and totalization but catalogues marked by vulnerability, hazard, and fissure" Berzon, *Classifying Christians*, 10.

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