

Editorial

Fan fiction and ancient scribal cultures

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1. Introduction

[1.1] By filling Jerusalem with the blood of the innocent and promoting abominable idolatrous cults, King Manasse definitely was the worst of all rulers, according to 2 Kings 21:1–18. How can it be, then, that he, of all kings of Jerusalem, ruled for fifty-five prosperous and peaceful years—the longest rule of a king in the entire history of the kingdom? The biblical book of Chronicles, which is a later work based on the book of Kings, rectifies this gap between Manasse's behavior and his success as a king. According to 2 Chronicles 33:1–20, Manasse was indeed the worst of kings, but he came to regret his evil deeds and became a pious king, and he therefore eventually merited his long and peaceful reign. Readers familiar with the genres and techniques of fan fiction will not be surprised by this rewriting of Manasse's story in Chronicles and probably consider it as a piece of fix-it fic.

[1.2] This special issue of TWC explores the potential of fan fiction as an interpretative model to study ancient religious texts. Contemporary fan fiction offers particularly helpful perspectives for the engagement with creative literary production in relation to already existing corpora of material. As such, it can shed new light on the relationship between the reception of existing texts and new text production in early Judaism and Christianity. Moreover, fan studies provide excellent heuristic tools for exploring questions of textual authority and for foregrounding the role of the audience/fans in the production of texts and traditions.

[1.3] Readers of this issue might approach the articles from different backgrounds; perhaps they have a primary interest in fan studies or derivative/transformational works, or perhaps they have a primary interest in ancient textual traditions. The contributors to this issue on "Fan Fiction and Ancient Scribal Cultures" attempt to bridge gaps by explaining their technical

terminology. For biblical scholars approaching fan fiction for the first time, we point to Monika Amsler's contribution, "The Making of Ḥanina ben Dosa: Fan Fiction in the Babylonian Talmud," where some genres and technical terms are introduced. For scholars new to the field of biblical and related ancient religious texts, we next provide some background.

2. Ancient scribal practices

[2.1] The contributions in this issue draw analogies between the development of ancient religious texts and contemporary fan fiction, focusing in particular on ancient Jewish and Christian texts and traditions. While people nowadays tend to think of the Bible as a book, it is actually a collection of ancient texts; indeed, the word "Bible" is derived from the Greek *ta biblia*, meaning "the books" in the plural. The number of books contained in this collection varies. For example, the Jewish Bible has thirty-nine books; the Bible used by Catholics has seventy-three books; the Protestant Bible has sixty-six books; and the Ethiopian Orthodox Bible has eighty-one books. Moreover, each of these books has its own, sometimes complex history. The original texts were written in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, roughly between the eighth century BCE and the second century CE. Most of the biblical texts were produced in the ancient Levant (that is, the east coast of the Mediterranean), today's Israel, in the Greek-speaking Jewish community in Egypt and probably in ancient Babylonia. The biblical books were not written all at once by a single person. They do not have individual authors we could know by name. Rather, they are traditional literature, transmitted and copied over centuries by anonymous scribes (Breed, n.d.; van der Toorn 2007; Walker and Wright, n.d.). In the process of transmission, they were supplemented by comments and additions, which early readers added into the texts from the very beginning. In some cases, early readers produced their own version of a text. For instance, the book of Chronicles is based on the books of Samuel and Kings, and both became part of the biblical collection. Other examples include so-called rewritten biblical texts such as the *Book of Jubilees*, *1 Esdras*, the *Genesis Apocryphon*, or the *Temple Scroll* (Segal 2005). When speaking about biblical texts, it must be kept in mind that a fixed canon did not exist at the time some responses to the texts were created, so terms such as "rewritten bible" or "noncanonical writings" are anachronistic. Some of these texts may actually be contemporary to those we find in the biblical canon.

[2.2] Moreover, ancient manuscript finds (such as the Dead Sea Scrolls) attest to a diversity of coexisting versions of "biblical" texts in antiquity. Scholars therefore increasingly question the idea that the early Jewish and Christian religious texts constituted an immutable tradition handed down as unchanged. Instead, we are confronted with a fluid textual tradition with a high degree of continuity between production and reception. The ongoing production of texts enabled the constant reimagining of the textual tradition and a negotiation of this tradition's authority.

[2.3] It is only in the first to fourth centuries CE that the selection of scriptures conventionally used in Jewish and Christian communities became the more or less stable collection known to us as the Bible. However, the increasing standardization of the biblical texts did not set an end to the literary production. When commentary, alternative traditions, and proliferation of stories were no longer directly incorporated into the texts and transmitted as part of the collection of scriptures, they continued to flourish as a separate genre. New texts and new stories were produced using biblical figures as protagonists (the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the books of *Enoch*) and/or as their fictive authors (pseudepigraphy, e.g., Testaments of the Patriarchs, *Book of Jubilees*). These writings from Hellenistic and Roman antiquity are known today as Jewish and Christian apocrypha. Because Hebrew was no longer a spoken language

in ancient Palestine, Aramaic translations (so-called Targums)—often including expansive interpretations—developed from the first century BCE onward. Early interpretations of biblical law texts were collected in the Mishnah (2nd–3rd cent. CE), which in turn was commented upon and amplified in the Tosefta (2nd–4th cent. CE) and the Talmud (Palestinian Talmud, ca. 4th–5th cent. CE, and Babylonian Talmud, ca. 6th cent. CE). These rabbinic writings even today comprise a part of the foundational traditions of Judaism.

[2.4] What we know today as the Bible was thus shaped in a continuous process of interpretation and use by a community, which led to the addition of variants and stories. This process continued in late antiquity with the production of texts based on biblical figures and traditions. Throughout the redaction of biblical texts up to the canon-based literary production in late antiquity, we can observe literary techniques and socioliterary phenomena that are comparable to the production of fan fiction. The contributions in this issue mainly deal with late antique religious texts. A number of ancient texts are addressed in this issue.

[2.5] The *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* is a second century CE text assuming the voice of characters from the earlier Jewish tradition and elaborating on the book of Genesis. Tom de Bruin explores how this text negotiates the relatively recent advent of a new Christian identity in the context of its rootedness in Jewish textual tradition.

[2.6] The *Apocryphon of John* is a Coptic text that draws on the biblical book of Genesis and probably originated in the second century CE. Kristine Rosland argues that this rewritten creation narrative uses canonical material to challenge and subvert canon.

[2.7] Late antique rabbinic writings are referred to in several essays. Monika Amsler ("Making") deals in particular with the Babylonian Talmud (approx. 6th cent. CE), which elaborates on traditions found in the Mishnah (2nd cent. CE) and the Tosefta (2nd–4th cent. CE). Rachel Barenblat's contribution deals with the Midrash Bereshit Rabbah (4th–5th cent. CE), a compilation of Jewish traditions that explain and explore the Hebrew Bible, and with the Alphabet of Ben Sira, a medieval Jewish collection of wisdom sayings and tales featuring the well-known character of the sage Ben Sira.

[2.8] Traditions about the queen of Sheba in the Qur'an, in the Targum, in the Alphabet of Ben Sira, and other medieval Muslim, Jewish, and Christian legends are the focus of Barbara Oudová Holcátová's contribution.

[2.9] The Psalm translations attributed to King Alfred of Wessex (849–899 CE) are themselves a response to the Latin translations of the biblical book of the Psalms. In her contribution, Martine Mussies examines their use and reinterpretation in twenty-first-century fan fiction.

[2.10] These ancient texts are brought into a relationship with contemporary fan fiction via a basic analogy: Both kind of texts respond to already existing texts and traditions, and they are "derivative... writing—that is, texts written based on another text" (Hellekson and Busse 2014, 5) ([note 1](#)) and can be described as "archontic" texts (Derecho 2006) that add to an existing text's archive.

[2.11] The development and nature of biblical and related literature highlight things such as collective authorship and the role of the community—ideas with parallels to fan fiction. It could even be argued that there is a continuous process of reception, from ancient religious texts and their ancient rewritings to modern fan fiction on ancient religious texts, as for

instance in Martine Mussies's examples of fannish reinterpretations of Alfredian Psalms. However, the articles in this issue demonstrate that although there are similarities, there are also significant differences between ancient scribal practice and fan fiction. By placing contemporary practices and ancient practices into dialogue, we hope to learn more about both.

3. Canon and authority

[3.1] One striking point of departure that enables a comparison between fan fiction and ancient scribal cultures might be the fact that the texts that are responded to have been called a canon. The Greek word *kanon* is derived from the Hebrew *qaneh*, "reed, cane, measuring rod." The term was first used in the fourth century CE to delimit a normative corpus of religious texts for the first time. This means that there was no concept of a canon at the time most ancient Jewish and Christian texts—some of which later ended up in a Bible—were produced. As in other ancient literary cultures, collecting authoritative writings was a dynamic process guided by use and transmission rather than by binding official decisions (Shupak 2001; Davies 1998). Scholars of ancient religious texts therefore nowadays tend to include more functional aspects in the concept of canonical writings, such as "a pool of literature that forms the centre of cultural identity" (Steins 2010, 15; cf. Stordalen 2012). Acknowledging the (Christian) notion of canon as "the definitive and authoritative list of the corpus of inspired books...officially determined by the leaders of a major religious community, and recognized and accepted as such by the community, as permanently determinative for belief and practice" (Ulrich 2012, 891) applies only to particular, much later historical contexts ([note 2](#)).

[3.2] The use of the term "canon" in fan fiction is most likely based on the religious use of the term. It is first attested in Sherlock Holmes fandom following a satirical lecture by Ronald A. Knox, in which he applied methods of biblical studies to Sherlock Holmes stories (Busse 2017; see Kristine Rosland's contribution in this issue). It commonly denotes "the collection of texts considered to be the authoritative source for fan creations" (Busse 2017, 101).

[3.3] The term is debated and contentious in both the fan fiction community and in scholarly communities investigating ancient texts. Several essays in this issue address the difficulties with defining and using the notion of a canon. Monika Amsler ("Martyrs, Athletes, and Transmedia Storytelling in Late Antiquity") points out differences between ancient and modern uses of the term. For instance, the use of the term in fan fiction is often tied to the (modern) idea of authorship and presupposes a stable form of the text (or medium). This is not the case in antiquity, when texts were often anonymous and not necessarily transmitted as books (Mroczek 2016). In some fannish definitions of canon, shifts between ancient and modern modes and contexts of literary production become even more apparent. Thus, to apply the term "canon" to "the source contents of franchised work...which are heavily protected by intellectual property law and the ruthless commercial practice of corporate multinationals" (Kahane 2016, ¶ 5.2) is far removed from ancient scribal cultures. Moreover, scholars both of ancient religious literature and of fan works have criticized the hierarchy implied in the notion of canonical material (Derecho 2006; Mroczek 2016). Monika Amsler ("Martyrs") thus proposes to abandon the biased notion of canon and instead uses the template of transmedia storytelling.

[3.4] In many cases, canonical material on which derivative writings are based cannot be identified with a single specific text. Rather, a fictional universe is constructed out of many texts, and a story used as canonical goes beyond a mere textual document (de Bruin, this issue). This applies particularly in the ancient context, where—at least before the Hellenistic

period—transmission of knowledge was based primarily on oral traditions. As Carr (2005, 4) writes, ancient texts functioned "more the way a musical score does for a musician who already knows the piece." They did not need to include all the information necessary for their understanding, and they allowed for extemporization. Even in later periods, we can observe that the textual tradition remains fluid and integrates and conserves a variety of readings (cf. Nihan 2013 on the example of David traditions).

[3.5] Contemporary fan and media studies provide analogies for the phenomenon of a fluid canonical story that cannot be identified with one particular (form of a) text. In the transmedia storytelling paradigm used by Monika Amsler ("Martyrs"), this is particularly obvious because the fictional universe is not based on a single specific text (or film) but rather is constructed from elements delivered via multiple channels.

[3.6] The term "canon" is thus potentially problematic both in fan fiction and in biblical studies; it cannot be used without qualification. Applied to ancient religious texts, the term is prone to anachronistic pitfalls. Ideally, therefore, a discussion of any derivative text—be it fan fiction, rewritten scripture, pseudepigraphy, or midrash—should take into account what canonical material its writers presuppose and are responding to, how they relate to a canon, and if there even was a canon or whether we are imposing that concept on the ancient world.

[3.7] If used in such a nuanced way, the concept of a canon can still be heuristically useful. Several essays in this issue distinguish between earlier canonical material and interpretive traditions that developed later as conventional readings of the canon. For instance, Barbara Oudová Holcátová provides examples of how many developments and conventions in later traditions are not drawn from canonical material. Such conventional elements—like the queen of Sheba's hairy legs—can be discussed in terms of cultural meme. Using terminology from fan studies, they can be described as part of fanon as opposed to canon. Monika Amsler ("Making," ¶ 3.7) defines "fanon" as "agreed-upon extracanonical knowledge by the fan community resulting from their shared interpretations" ([note 3](#)). Amsler applies the concept of fanon as a new tool for the analysis of ancient religious traditions. Her use of the concept of fanon to distinguish between interpretive communities illustrates well how the conceptual toolbox of fan studies can generate new insights in the field of ancient religious traditions.

[3.8] As with the contentious term "canon," which is one site where one might drill deeper into the differences and discontinuities between ancient writings and fan fiction, the related concept of authorship warrants some preliminary discussion. Writing fan fiction can be regarded as an act of appropriation, as illustrated by one fan fiction writer's remark: "This is my story and this is how I wanted to write it" (Herzog 2012). In contrast, the ancient scribes do not highlight the "I" of the writer. Individuality or novelty are not desirable in ancient religious writings; rather, they foreground the tradition. De Bruin points out the difference in concepts of authorship, noting, "There is a significant difference between fan fiction, which is overtly framed as secondary to a source text or famous person" and ancient writings such as the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* "which claims to be primary" (¶ 1.4). De Bruin's contribution also compares differences in the paratext—that is, the information surrounding a text. Author's notes in fan fiction, which may specify the relation of the fannish writing to the canonical material, show a concept of authorship quite different from the concept underlying the title and author attributions in the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, which place the work within traditional material. Other examples of ancient paratexts show that the attribution of texts to an authoritative figure from the past was a common practice. In some cases, paratexts attributing a text to a well-known biblical figure were added to existing texts at a later stage of their transmission—for example, superscriptions attributing psalms to King

David (Mroczek 2016) ([note 4](#)). In other cases, newly written texts were written in the name of a well-known biblical figure—that is, pseudepigraphy. For instance, the opening statement of the Letter of Jeremiah (3rd–2nd cent. BCE) attributes this text to the sixth-century prophet and places it within this prophet's story: "A copy of a letter that Jeremiah sent to those who were to be taken to Babylon as exiles by the king of the Babylonians, to give them the message that God had commanded him" (Letter of Jeremiah 1, New Revised Standard Version).

[3.9] Such superscriptions emphasize the continuity with the traditional material. This practice raises the question of how anonymous writers of ancient religious texts conceived the relation of their writings to earlier traditional or canonical material. Biblical scholars investigating rewritten scripture often wonder about the purpose of rewriting. Was the rewritten text intended to replace the earlier text? Or do authors of rewritten texts strategically draw on the authority of the earlier text to pass on their own message? What canon may have meant to ancient commentators and rewriters is not as clearly defined as in fan fiction; therefore, it is possible that a writer of a derivative work "attempts to portray this writing as superior to canon itself," as de Bruin (§ 3.11) argues for the *Testaments*. In ancient rewritings, we can observe various strategies to substantiate their authority, such as pseudepigraphy, where the historical author recedes behind a pseudo author, most often a well-known figure attributed with significant authority; special revelation, where a text is framed as a (secret) message not (yet) revealed in the traditional material (cf. Kristine Rosland's contribution); or prophecy, whereby a writer substantiates the authority of characters of the past by putting in their mouth predictions about events the writer already knew would occur (cf. de Bruin).

[3.10] A dichotomy has often been assumed in the relation between rewritten texts and canonical material. An ancient religious text written in response to canonical material could constitute a subversion of the canonical material, or it could build on its authority. De Bruin discusses this issue in his contribution; using the continuum of nostalgia and novelty, he argues that fan fiction shows that the two strategies are not in contradiction with each other. Rather than either undermining or substantiating its authority, a text written in response to canonical material could have been intended as a supplement, a clarification, or a guideline for the interpretation of the earlier text (Collins 2011).

[3.11] In discussing the issue of textual authority, it can thus be fruitful to consider the interaction with canonical material as similar in fan fiction and in ancient religious writings—at least in some respects. The relation of ancient religious writings to authoritative tradition actually provides a better analogy to the idea of canon in fan fiction than certain contemporary ideas of canonical authority of religious texts. Thus, we could question Herzog's (2012, § 3.2) use of the term "bible" when she writes that fan fiction writers can relegate canonical material to "a reference work that one might consult for character names and general ideas instead of being considered a bible that needs to be treated with reverence and awe and would conventionally represent the only valid text." The fannish use of canonical material she describes should probably not be seen in opposition to "reverence and awe" (cf. de Bruin, § 2.4). The history of the transmission of biblical texts indicates that in antiquity, reverence for an authoritative tradition does not mean it should be transmitted unaltered. Rather, it seems that ancient scribes took care to transmit (what they assumed to be) the correct meaning of a text, updating and changing its wording where necessary. Moreover, the texts discussed in this issue show that creative rewritings of revered texts flourished not only in the very early period before an increasing standardization of authoritative scriptures, but also throughout late antiquity. The biblical texts must have been open (and open to interpretation) to sprout such a wealth of creative extension, subversion, and commentary. We should therefore avoid

unhelpful assumptions such as the idea that "authoritative" means "untouchable." To love a text and to take it seriously have always meant to use it.

4. The role of the fan communities, or Who makes the rules?

[4.1] The ancient scribes who produced, transmitted, and altered ancient religious texts were at the same time their most attentive readers. Additions, corrections, and rewritings are traces of their reading and use of the texts. We can apply the recent portmanteaux "prodsumers" (Jenkins) or "producers" (Axel Bruns) (Jenkins quoted in Amsler, "Making," ¶ 3.1) to writers of fan fiction and the writers of ancient transformative works: readers and fans are at the same time authors, contributing both to reception and redaction. No text can exist without an audience. In this respect, the comparison of transformative writings in fandoms and in ancient religious communities draws our attention to two aspects in particular. First is the influence of the audience on the development of texts and stories. In oral cultures, but also in contemporary media operating under commercial pressure, the audience's feedback affects the way a story is told. Moreover, both in antiquity and in contemporary fandom, the audience refuses the role of passive consumer and instead takes an active role by creatively engaging with the texts. This leads us to the second aspect. In fan fiction and ancient transformative writings, we are dealing with a particular kind of audience. These producers are active, creative, often rebellious, educated stakeholders. Engaging with the texts in a transformative, responsive way requires and presupposes prior knowledge and in-depth familiarity with the canonical material. As Amsler puts it, in both contexts, "the audience is made of like-minded experts" ("Making," ¶ 2.2). Some scholars believe that the circle among which biblical texts were written, read, interpreted, and rewritten in antiquity comprised a relatively small group of literati (Ben Zvi 2012)—quite comparable to fan communities of preinternet times.

[4.2] The heuristic analogy between fan fiction and ancient scribal cultures therefore goes beyond mere literary phenomena and techniques of rewriting. As many of our contributors show (Barenblat, Oudová Holcátová, Rosland), fan fiction is not just produced in the dialogue of a fan with the canonical material but also in dialogue with the community of fans. Anna Wilson points out that when "venerable literary traditions" (the Aeneid, in Wilson's passage) and fan fiction are compared, there is a risk of "neglect[ing] one of the defining characteristics of fan fiction: its creation and circulation within communities of fans" (2016, ¶ 1.2). Fan fiction is essentially a social practice (Busse 2017; Coppa 2017; Larsen 2019). Francesca Coppa spells out the implications of this observation: "Fanfiction is not just any continuation or interpretation of a story, but one that happens within, because of, and for a particular community. This isn't a simple matter of fandom being the audience or the marketplace for the work; rather, the key point is that fanfiction is shaped to the literary conventions, expectations, and desires of that community, and is written in genres developed by and in community" (2017, 9). The same is true for the rewriting of ancient religious texts. Like the issue of canon, ancient religious texts were produced within and for a community. This community not only determines which texts are read and used but also which rules apply for the interpretation and rewriting of texts. Both fan fiction and the rewriting of ancient religious texts can therefore be studied as socioliterary practices. From this perspective, we can observe continuities as well as discontinuities in several aspects.

[4.3] One aspect is access. The social groups sharing fan fiction and ancient religious texts are both formed around the authoritative and/or canonical texts they relate to. In the ancient context, the notion of textual community has been applied to such groups. The concept of textual communities was popularized by Brian Stock and applied to ancient contexts by Jan Assmann, Judith Lieu, Guy Stroumsa, and others. A textual community is a community

whose identity is defined by the use of an authoritative text. Within a textual community, defined as such, specialists handle and interpret the text, and the rest of the community is socialized in the education about the text. The central role of a text creating social coherence might be considered similar to fan communities. However, when we imagine ancient textual communities of rewriting, we must keep in mind the issue of authority that comes with the term "specialists." A specialist with authority and access to interpretation of this text, to which the rest of the community is socialized, used to be a privileged and potentially powerful figure. Depending on the historical context, literacy would have been rare, and only a small elite would have had access to the texts. Fan communities, in contrast, have a far different social structure. In the age of the internet, fan communities are more diverse; the access and education required to be able to contribute is available to many, though certainly not universal. The creation of fan works in modern times is more open to the self-educated, self-appointed expert than ancient responses to texts were. This in turn affects how many fan works were produced, transmitted, and archived.

[4.4] Another aspect comprises rules and conventions. Today, fan fiction exists within copyright constraints as a derivative or parodic work. The ancient texts our contributors discuss were created before the existence of concepts like copyright or intellectual property, so they wrote and re(d)acted without those particular constraints. However, we can mitigate this discontinuity by discussing a continuity that occurs alongside it. In addition to constraints placed on creation by copyright laws, the fan community has its own conventions of what can and cannot be done when responding to a canonical text. Such constraints of the system (Farley 2016)—the "contextual expectations and norms" (Rosland, ¶ 3.6)—influence the rewriting. Copyright laws are comparatively recent, but ancient rewritings were also governed by rules and conventions, whether they were stated explicitly or adhered to implicitly. One example of an explicit set of rules governing the interpretive response to biblical texts in the Jewish tradition were the hermeneutic rules attributed to the sage Hillel. The seven rules of Hillel are a list of logical operations (such as concluding from the general to the particular) that are deemed valid in biblical interpretation. Yet although the rules were authoritative, they were not written in stone: there are also the thirteen rules of Rabbi Ishmael and the thirty-two rules of Rabbi Eliezer ben Jose ha-Gelili (Stemberger 1996).

[4.5] A third aspect relates to commercial and technological aspects. This discontinuity does not remain so clear cut upon closer examination, so we must also address the commercial aspect and the technological possibilities of contemporary fandom. Contemporary technology allows for new forms of storytelling that were not possible in antiquity (Amsler, "Martyrs"), but stories did spread widely (as Oudová Holcátová shows in her contribution), and certain elements could go viral (as Hugh Pyper pointed out in one of our conference sessions), even in a mainly oral culture.

[4.6] Nowadays, for better or for worse, the internet serves as a vast archive. When we consider ancient texts, we should reckon with a much broader oral and written tradition of ancient religious texts than we are aware of today, most of which have been lost because they were not archived or transmitted, as Oudová Holcátová points out ([note 5](#)). The situation is different for contemporary fan fiction; everything is preserved if it is published online.

[4.7] As Amsler ("Martyrs") shows, producers of contemporary media use conscious mechanisms to trigger fandom, but there may have been pecuniary aspects to ancient fandoms too. Amsler argues that these aspects should also be considered when we look at the ancient contexts: "Fandom can be exploited profitably, and so we also find in late antiquity that smart businessmen and women quickly understood how to make money from people's affection and

passion for the saints" (§ 5.9). To us, the insight that fandom was already exploited for financial gain in antiquity was a direction of inquiry we had not foreseen—and one of the surprising insights that our research group discovered by applying fan fiction as a heuristic lens to address ancient religious texts.

[4.8] We will encounter similarities and differences like the ones mentioned above everywhere we look when attempting to compare ancient transformative works to contemporary ones. This fact points us ever more certainly to one of our larger, overarching conclusions: discussing these literatures using either/or dichotomies is not a constructive approach.

5. Playful writing and deep emotions

[5.1] In August 2019, the Archive of Our Own (AO3; <https://archiveofourown.org/>) was awarded the Hugo award in the category Best Related Work. As Casey Fiesler (2019) writes,

[5.2] So AO3's nomination for the prestigious award—both for the platform itself and for the platform as a proxy for the very concept of fan fiction—is a big deal. Many, both inside and outside the sci-fi and fantasy community, deride fan fiction as mostly clumsy amateur works of sexual fantasy—critiques that, as those who have looked at them closely have pointed out, have a glaringly gendered component....[Fan fiction is] also about critiquing source texts, pushing back against harmful narratives, and adding and correcting certain types of representation (including the ways women and LGBTQ people are portrayed in these genres).

[5.3] Fan fiction is indeed a way of responding to a text in an emotionally engaged way, often with particularly gendered components. Yet it is not clumsy, amateurish, or just for fun (although even if it were, it wouldn't matter). Fan fiction engages and critiques source texts in light of important cultural shifts. We, as historians of the ancient, see tremendous potential for using fan fiction and ancient texts to investigate topics such as the development of religious movements and cultural identity negotiation in the ancient world.

[5.4] When organizing conference sessions on the topic of fan fiction and ancient scribal cultures, specifically in the context of academic biblical studies, we encountered one particularly strong reaction against our research group at the European Association of Biblical Studies (EABS). Surely, we were told, it was a fallacy to draw an analogy between fan fiction and ancient religious texts because the latter were not written just for fun.

[5.5] As we learned more about fan fiction and its producers, we began to realize that calling fan fiction "just for fun," thereby dismissing its significance, is a prejudice against the practice and the art form. It undermines its heuristic potential. We point to Wilson (2016), for whom critical (as taught and endorsed at universities) and affective (as often hidden, practiced only secretly) readings are juxtaposed. Wilson writes, "The affective quality of fan fiction—and its implications—could potentially be overlooked or erased through scholarship that identifies it too readily with classical literature, which has—correctly or not—so long been associated with western high culture and the literary canon of Great Books on which the university rests" (§ 2.10). In our case, the situation might be different because we are comparing fan fiction to responses to religious texts, which are perceived by some to be sacred. It is possible that the affective approach of fan fiction is actually similar to the affective approach of religious, sacred, and metaphysical texts. Although we might not have to fight a dismissal of affective reading, we still encounter the accusation that fan fiction is just for fun, whereas the interpretation of sacred texts is a serious business.

[5.6] If one listens to even one episode of the podcast, *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* (<http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/>), discussed in Cheshire's contribution to this issue, one immediately realizes that the contemporary practice of reacting to a modern canon with one's chosen textual community is a deeply committed, serious process ([note 6](#)).

[5.7] Perusing comments on AO3, one finds incredibly supportive statements, sometimes thanking authors for helping a reader through a difficult time. Serious commitment, a firm rooting in contemporary life, and passionate discussion do not preclude fun and playfulness. Indeed, a deep emotional commitment to canon is actually another trait shared by ancient and modern practices. Let us state it plainly: although fan fiction is at times playful, it demonstrates an affective and critical involvement in contemporary society. Responses to ancient sacred/religious literature—possibly not yet affected by the affective-versus-critical dichotomy at the time of its creation—can do the same.

[5.8] Seriousness and playfulness are not mutually exclusive; likewise, a text can be approached with both attitudes, even simultaneously. Fan fiction can teach us to accept another interesting apparent dichotomy: both positive and negative feelings toward the canon generate the writing of fan fiction. An intriguing psychological question is this: what kind of unwavering commitment is it that enables readers to push back, to critique something that does not sit comfortably with them, even while committing enough time to the canon to become an expert on it? Fans are and stay committed to a text or fandom, even if they do not agree with decisions made by an author, showrunner, or ancient writer. In an interview we prepared for our first Fan Fiction and Ancient Scribal Cultures workshop in Córdoba in 2015, fan fiction writer Solveig Grebe compared the canon to a mother: "But still—it is the canon. It's like when you are angry with your mum—but you know still she's your mum, and you wouldn't say: You're not my mum anymore because you've done something I didn't like." Even though Grebe might dislike certain features of the canonical material, just like she might get angry at her mother (or fight with her, or rebel against her), she would stick to her canon and keep writing fan fiction.

[5.9] Moments in a source text where one might perceive a flaw or a gap are precisely the ones that spark especially intense affective engagement. Wilson calls this engagement with the gaps in a text erotic: "Silences and absences in the source text act as barriers to intimacy, and fan fiction writers fill these silences with their imaginative activity, enabling their own deeper understanding of the world and characters of the source text" (2016, ¶ 1.4) Similarly, it has often been noted that the discrepancies in the biblical text inspired intense engagement from Jewish commentators in particular. The reasoning behind this may have to do with the early Jewish understanding of the source text as written by a single divinely inspired author. Barenblat writes: "Although contemporary scholarly reading of the Jewish scriptural canon presumes that Torah is an anthology of texts written by different authors at different times and stitched together by an editor with human biases and blind spots, early rabbinic Judaism presumed a text with a single Author, which meant that for the sages of the classical rabbinic period, every apparent 'flaw' in the text could (arguably must) be a locus of meaning" (¶ 5). For this specific group of commentators, the text's inconsistencies—its difficulties, its edges that inspired commentary—inspire, via gaps, disagreeableness, and discrepancies, fan writers today.

[5.10] Fan fiction may be read as a critique of contemporary canons, and ancient rewritings/reworkings are responses to ancient canons. Both can be combined. Ancient canons or dogma can be critiqued in an interplay of dogma, contemporary work, and fan fiction about this contemporary work. We have already discussed the ideas of a sacred text, canon, and

bible as well as their roles as tools to shape discourse about contemporaneous issues. Textual authority does not mean that the text has to be transmitted without any change or creative extensions. In the present context, when discussing the difficulties and clashes caused by a sacred base text, we may refer to Griffin's contribution, which discusses attitudes toward queerness and the Catholic church as "storified" in *Daredevil* (2015–18) fan fiction: "Fan works are also a site for thinking through issues of religion and sexuality, and people use *Daredevil* fan works as a way to interrogate the intersections of queerness and Catholicism in particular" (§ 3). Through the base texts—*Daredevil*, the teachings of the Catholic church—a high-stakes issue is explored through storytelling, particularly by locating and engaging with an intersectional moment of tension.

[5.11] These examples show that both fan fiction and ancient rewritings demonstrate their producers' commitment and grit, especially when faced with discomfort or opposition. Both have enormous subversive and empowering potential, and neither precludes the possibility to be playful or fun even while being deeply affected and committed.

6. Outlook

[6.1] Using fan fiction as a heuristic lens for analyzing ancient religious texts has been a fascinating and fruitful research perspective for us as biblical scholars. We hope fan fiction scholars will also find, from their perspective, inspiring elements in this cross-disciplinary conversation. Cheshire shows how ancient religious traditions and their techniques of transformation can enrich fannish works and scholarship: her case study, the podcast *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* (2016–), is one example of how even a commercially successful canon can carry deep meaning and inspire ethically sound choices in everyday life.

[6.2] The authors of this themed issue put phenomena observed in fan fiction in a broad historical perspective. From this vantage point, the transformative practice of fan fiction may seem neither new nor surprising because it "does what literature has always done: it adapts, rewrites, and transforms older stories, characters, and plots" (Rosland, ¶ 1.3). And, as Rachel Barenblat writes, "Fans who grapple with inconsistent or contradictory canon can take comfort in the knowledge that those engaged with Jewish textual tradition have participated in that same struggle for millennia" (§ 1).

[6.3] We would be happy if this special issue stimulates further exchange and keeps this fruitful conversation between scholars of fan fiction and of ancient religious texts going.

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8. Notes

[1.](#) We cut the quotation to keep the elements shared by ancient religious texts and contemporary fan fiction; the full definition of fan fiction points toward possible differences related to amateur versus professional writing: "Derivative amateur writing—that is, texts written based on another text, and not for professional publication" (Hellekson and Busse 2014, 5).

[2.](#) The first official decree fixing the canon of Scriptures in the Roman Catholic Church was established at the Tridentine Council in 1546 in reaction to the challenge of the Reformation movements.

[3.](#) Compare for a definition from a more fannish perspective Hellekson and Busse (2006, 9) who define "fanon" as "the events created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively throughout the fantext," adding that "fanon often creates particular details or character readings even though canon does not fully support it—or, at times, outright contradicts it."

[4.](#) Another example would be the heading of the Greek translation of the book of Lamentations, in which the book is attributed to the prophet Jeremiah.

[5.](#) This is also illustrated, for instance, by the text Kristine Rosland's contribution deals with, which has been (re)discovered only in the nineteenth century.

[6.](#) For a moving example, see the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* episode "Being a Stranger: Diagon Alley" (book 1, chapter 5; <https://soundcloud.com/hpsacredtext/being-a-stranger>), in which the hosts react to the Orlando nightclub shooting.

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