

GRAMMARS OF AUTHORITY: AUTHORIAL STANCE AND
COMPETITION IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

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Introduction

In this paper, I argue that an “authoritative text” cannot be defined solely based on its later authoritative reception. On the contrary, I contend that the very acceptance of a text as authoritative necessarily presupposes the recognition of claims that the text, in most cases, explicitly or implicitly makes from the moment of its creation. For this reason, I propose a method by which it is possible to identify whether a given text was already striving for authoritative status during its production phase. This method is based on a comparative analysis of genre conventions and specific textual strategies,¹ with an emphasis on identifying a *tertium comparationis*, namely, a shared feature that enables meaningful comparison across diverse textual corpora. Following Bruce Lincoln, I do not consider authority as a static quality but regard it as an effect that arises from “the conjunction of a right speaker, a right speech and its delivery . . . , whose historically and culturally conditioned expectations establish the parameters of what is considered right in

1. While I frequently use the term “strategy” to refer to the textual means by which authors claim authority, it is worth clarifying that I do not necessarily assume full authorial intentionality behind every instance. Rather, I understand strategy as a culturally available repertoire of rhetorical, structural, and discursive conventions which may be consciously deployed or unconsciously activated. These strategies are shaped by—and shape—the expectations of the intended audience. In this sense, “strategy” should be understood both as a tool of persuasion and as a reflection of shared symbolic codes within a specific socio-literary context.

all these cases.”² The analysis of production thus becomes an analysis of the means by which authors attempt to create this conjunction and thereby influence their future reception.

First, I will analyze current approaches to the issue of authoritative texts, focusing on two specific historical areas—the Qumran texts and early Christianity. These areas serve primarily to illustrate my key argument: Contemporary scholars place too much emphasis on the criteria for identifying an authoritative text only in the context of its reception. In doing so, they overlook the fundamental question of whether authoritativeness is a characteristic already embedded in the text’s creation phase. It is generally assumed that a text’s authority arises retrospectively, that is, only when readers or users acknowledge its claims. This overlooks the possibility that the rhetorical goal of creating an authoritative text was already shaped during its creation process and is explicitly or implicitly inscribed in its textual strategies. Thus, research lacks a systematic perspective on the construction of authority not just as a list of means, but as a deliberate and contextually conditioned textual practice.

The urgency behind these authority-claiming strategies becomes clear when we consider the social position of early Christianity. For the majority of the Greco-Roman world, the Christian message was deeply unattractive.³ Its core tenets—a crucified Messiah, exclusive monotheism that demanded abandoning ancestral gods, and a radical ethic—were socially disruptive and often perceived as atheistic superstition. Furthermore, after the establishment of the *fiscus Judaicus* around 70 CE, gentile converts, in particular, faced legal and financial jeopardy for adopting a “Jewish way of life.”⁴ Lacking external social validation and facing significant barriers to conversion, the early Christian movement’s survival depended on its ability to forge powerful *internal* sources of legitimacy and authority. The textual “grammars of authority” explored in this article were therefore not mere literary exercises; they were essential tools for identity formation and community survival in a competitive and often hostile environment.

2. Lincoln, *Authority*.

3. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*. Harnett, for instance, estimates the Christian population at the turn of the second century to be around two thousand individuals (see “Diffusion”).

4. Heemstra, *Fiscus Judaicus*.

Authoritative Text

In the following sections, I identify three key problems in contemporary scholarship that my study addresses.

The Reception Perspective and its Problems

Current research represented, for example, by the works of Konrad Schmid or Jan Bremmer, has illuminated the role of the community in granting authoritative status to texts. However, this approach can be further supplemented by a perspective that focuses on the production of the text itself. My goal is to build on this discussion and move it a step back—to the question of what strategies texts use to claim authority for themselves and how these strategies actively shape the conditions for their own reception. In this way, we can better understand the dialogical relationship between the text and its readers, where the text is not just a passive object (as it might seem from the approaches of Schmid and Bremmer) but an active agent that shapes its own authority.

The most widespread approach is thus to understand authority as a status that a text acquires only as a result of its acceptance by a certain group. Authority is perceived as a consequence of reception, not as a characteristic that the text actively constructs during its creation. This view is aptly formulated by Schmid, who explicitly argues that texts become authoritative, not because they claim authority but only when a community retrospectively recognizes their claims.⁵ Similarly, Eugene Ulrich's definition, which is often adopted in scholarship, describes an authoritative text as one that a certain group "recognizes and accepts as determinative for its actions."⁶ Even in early Christian scholarship, the reception-based concept of authority is widespread. Bremmer, for example, defines as authoritative a text that "a certain community accepts,"⁷—where authority is again understood not as an inherent property of the text but as a matter of reception. This definition emphasizes that a text is not authoritative in itself but becomes so within a specific social context where it is read, interpreted, and ritually used.

Neglecting the dynamic interaction between the text's internal claims and its reception by the audience leads to an insufficient understanding of

5. Schmid, "Textual Authority," 5.

6. Ulrich, "Notion and Definition," 273–74.

7. Bremmer, "From Holy Books to Holy Bible," 328.

how textual strategies—whether intentional or unintentional—shape and influence readers and their subsequent reaction. Even scholar Katja Kujanpää, who deals with the authority of Scripture in First Clement, correctly points out that the authority of a text is actively constructed by the author. Yet she ultimately emphasizes that “it is the readers who will accept or reject these claims.”⁸ Although this dynamic is undeniable, it is necessary in the analysis of authoritative texts to place emphasis on the preceding step: It is precisely the specific and identifiable textual strategies that predetermine and evoke a certain type of reception. The goal of my method is to analyze this initial construction of the claim, which is what makes the subsequent readerly response possible. The textual characteristics and strategies present in the text evoke a certain type of reception and reaction, and this reception then retrospectively confirms, modifies, or even constitutes the text’s authority. It is not a one-way process where the activity is solely on the side of the community, or conversely, solely on the side of the text. The process of establishing authority is therefore dialogical and more complex.

The Problem of Single-Criterion Definitions

Further insight into the functioning of authority is offered by approaches that link it to specific cultural values, such as antiquity in the work of Mladen Popović.⁹ This view explains why texts referring to ancestral tradition held a strong position in Judaism. However, for the purposes of a broader comparative analysis that also includes new or polemical texts which cannot appeal to antiquity, it is useful to develop an analytical framework that is not tied to a single criterion. A more nuanced, but similarly focused approach is that of Arie van der Kooij, who connects the authoritative status of a text with its institutional embedding, exegesis, and above all, its perceived antiquity¹⁰—that is, not just with chronological age, but with a

8. Kujanpää, “Scriptural Authority.”

9. Popović, *Authoritative Scriptures*, 2. Popović considers the main sign of an authoritative text to be its antiquity and the fact that it represents the tradition of the ancestors. This is a definition from an emic perspective; in other words, it answers the question of why Jews considered some texts to be authoritative. Because this definition was created by generalizing the study of specifically Jewish texts, it cannot be applied to comparative work without further consideration.

10. van der Kooij, “Authoritative Scriptures.”

symbolic continuity with a “sacred” origin.¹¹ Here, antiquity functions as a cultural signifier of trustworthiness. The problem with these approaches is that the criteria for identifying authoritative texts are again derived independently of the form of the text itself. An authoritative text is then understood as one that was at some point accepted, cited, canonized, or institutionalized,¹² without again examining whether the author himself articulated a claim to authority, and in what way.

The Problem of Descriptive but Insufficiently Comparative Analyses

The third problem my study addresses is the fact that even scholars who analyze specific strategies for creating credibility often limit their approach to a descriptive level and lack a broader comparative framework. While individual studies identify the means by which texts claim authority—for example, through pseudo-epigraphy (Matthias Henze),¹³ a narrative of document discovery (Eva Mroczek), or the choice of genre (Maria E. Doerfler)¹⁴—they do not further investigate whether these strategies are unique or conventional in the given cultural context.

A prominent representative of this approach is Hindy Najman, who in her book *Past Renewals* offers an analysis of authorization strategies in Jewish literature of the Second Temple period.¹⁵ Her work is valuable in its detailed description of how texts like Jubilees legitimize themselves through reference to revelation or Moses. However, this approach has its limits: Najman does not engage in comparison across genres or with non-biblical traditions. Her interpretation thus remains introspective and limited to the internal logic of the selected texts. Without a comparative framework, it is impossible to answer, for example, whether the strategies she describes are

11. See also Tov, “From 4QReworked Pentateuch to 4QPentateuch.”

12. van der Kooij, “Authoritative Scriptures,” 57.

13. Henze, “2 Baruch,” 57.

14. Mroczek, “Truth and Doubt”; Doerfler, “Glimpses.”

15. A similar approach is taken by Henze (“2 Baruch”), who bases his work on the literary and historical analysis of specific texts (Fourth Ezra, Second Baruch), tracing their relationship to biblical figures, the language of inspiration, and their own narrative strategies of authority (e.g., through revelation and prophetic stylization).

specific to the given texts, or whether they are standard procedures widespread across different cultural environments.¹⁶

A similar problem, though from a different angle, can be found in the recent and otherwise stimulating work of Jacob A. Rodriguez. He focuses on how Gospel texts in the second century articulated their authority through mutual combination and interaction (juxtaposition, harmonization, and literary linking).¹⁷ Rodriguez, for example, identifies that the Gospel of Thomas strives for higher authority than the Synoptic Gospels by styling itself as a collection of “secret sayings” intended only for the initiated.¹⁸ Here, too, however, the weakness is the absence of a broader literary-comparative framework. Rodriguez does not go on to show that a similar strategy (emphasis on revealed origin, exclusivity of access to truth) is also characteristic of other literary production of the time, especially pseudo-epigraphic fiction.

A third example of an otherwise valuable is the work of Kujanpää on the authority of Scripture in First Clement. Her analysis of how Clement adapts a quotation from Isa 60:17 for his argumentative purposes to legitimize the position of bishops and deacons is detailed and convincing. Kujanpää shows that Clement replaces the original term (ἀρχοντες) with ecclesiastical titles (διακόνους), thereby proving the divine origin of these offices. However, her analysis remains within the framework of early Christian literature.¹⁹ Without a broader comparative framework, it is impossible to assess whether this strategy is typical only for intra-Christian polemics, or whether it is a standard rhetorical technique that we would also find, for example, in other literature. A comparison with non-Christian texts would allow us to better evaluate the cultural effectiveness and specificity of Clement’s procedure. The absence of this step thus makes it difficult to assess whether the given case represents a literarily exceptional phenomenon, or conversely, part of a broader repertoire of strategies for shaping authority.

Detailed philological and historical analyses, such as those presented by Najman, Rodriguez, or Kujanpää, are important for understanding authority-building strategies. Their work provides a description of how specific texts build their legitimacy. These key insights can be built upon with a further

16. Najman, *Past Renewals*.

17. Rodriguez, *Combining Gospels*.

18. Rodriguez, *Combining Gospels*, 43.

19. Kujanpää, “Scriptural Authority.”

step: placing these strategies within a broader comparative framework. This step can help us better assess their cultural effectiveness and specificity. It will allow us to answer questions that naturally arise from their analyses: For example, was Clement's use of quotations from Isaiah conventional in the ancient world, or was it innovative? To what extent was the strategy of the Gospel of Thomas, which styles itself as a collection of secret sayings, unique compared to other literature of the time? The method I propose does not aim to replace these detailed analyses, but to supplement them with a comparative perspective that will allow us to better understand the cultural logic and *repertoire* of authority-building strategies available in antiquity. These three issues—the dominance of reception, the reliance on single criteria, and the lack of comparative analysis—all stem from a common methodological oversight: a failure to systematically analyze the strategies texts themselves deploy to construct their own authority. The following section proposes a framework to correct this.

Towards the Study of Authority

Defining Authority as a Textual Practice

It is notable that, in contemporary scholarship on Judaism and early Christianity, an explicit and analytically precise definition of what makes a text authoritative is not always provided. While many studies explore the functions of authoritative texts—through their use, reception, interpretation, or physical production—the foundational term “authoritative text” itself is paradoxically seldom defined.²⁰ The result is that different authors often implicitly operate with different ideas about what constitutes the authority of a text,²¹ which complicates comparative analysis across different religious traditions, genres, and contexts.

20. The current research trend emphasizes that the transmission of authoritative texts may not only be conservative in nature, but also innovative. See Dušek and Roskovec, “Authority.”

21. This absence of a theoretical framework is also evident in an edited volume that deals with the question of textual authority from a wide range of approaches—from exegetical and literary to material and receptional. Yet only Schmid formulates a certain criterion (authority as a result of recognition), but without a systematic definition. Most other authors (e.g., Henze, Nicklas, Roth, Schröter) trace the ways in which a text claims or acquires authority without defin-

Common scholarly practice often separates the question of text production from the question of its reception, as if they were two unrelated spheres. However, it is precisely the connection of these two dimensions that is key: The way a text presents itself, stylizes itself, and builds its credibility has a direct impact on whether and how it will later be accepted as authoritative. If a text does not construct its credibility and authority but was simultaneously accepted by someone as authoritative, it is necessary to ask whether the text was associated with authority outside the text—such as with priests, scribes, or a king. Production and reception are thus not two phases that can be analyzed separately but form a dynamic whole—a text becomes authoritative precisely by being able to effectively articulate its own claims in a literary and cultural context that allows for their acceptance. Here, it is useful to theoretically distinguish between credibility and authority. Credibility is primarily a textually constructed quality that encourages the audience to regard the text's representation as corresponding to reality. Authority, by contrast, emerges through a dialogical process in which an audience accepts and confirms the text's claim to normative force. Credibility is therefore often a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for authority.

As I have repeated several times, texts are not passive recipients of authority but actively use strategies to build and assert their own authority. In this section, I will focus on the analysis of these textual strategies and their function in the process of creating an authoritative claim. Understanding textual authority requires a shift from an exclusive focus on reception to an analysis of how texts construct themselves as authoritative. As I stated above, I consider an authoritative text to be one that makes a claim to normative force²²—seeks to be regarded as determinative for human action and/or knowledge—and is recognized as such within a given context.²³

ing the term “authoritative text” as an analytical category. See Nicklas and Schröter, eds., *Authoritative Writings*.

22. The normative nature is highlighted by Hyldahl, “Normativity.”

23. Although the authors of authoritative texts generally strive to norm human action and knowledge, the actual degree of effectiveness of these prescriptions depends on how they are received and interpreted by the recipient. In other words, the authority of a text is not given solely by the author's intention but is established only in relation to the audience, its attitudes, and its willingness to subordinate its life, practice, or thought to the text. A text can be written with a strong normative claim, but this claim becomes effective only if it is shared, repeated, and embodied in

This can include works with a limited scope of claim (e.g., a description of a single battle) as well as texts with a totalizing claim (e.g., religious writings, philosophical treatises).²⁴ In many cases—especially with biblical and other ancient religious texts—it is not possible to clearly distinguish between prescriptive and descriptive aspects, as these levels often intertwine and mutually condition each other. Purely descriptive texts, such as popular literature intended for entertainment or aesthetic experience, usually aim to depict reality or to create imaginary or fantastic worlds, without explicitly prescribing to readers how they should act or think. Their main intention is representation, description, or narration, not the norming or changing of social behavior.²⁵

Prescriptive (authoritative) literature, on the other hand, is based on the conviction—implicit or explicit—that its description of the world is not only true but also binding or exemplary. This type of literature does not only show the world as it currently exists but also presents an ideal or normative state towards which readers or listeners should strive. A typical example of such an overlap is found in biblical texts—for example, stories from the Old Testament or the canonical Gospels. Although they are primarily narrative and descriptive (describing historical events, actions of characters, dialogues, or miracles), they also function prescriptively by implicitly or explicitly showing readers how they should behave, what values they should adopt, and how to interpret the surrounding reality.

This prescriptive-descriptive aspect is strongly present, for example, in the genre of ancient biography,²⁶ which depicts specific persons and events (descriptive level), but at the same time encourages the imitation of the pre-

practice. A typical example of this dynamic is the book of Ezekiel. Although it was considered a prophetic, and therefore authoritative text already in antiquity, and its visions had interpretative and theological significance, its specific requirements—primarily the reformation of temple and priestly law—were never systematically implemented. Ezekiel's proposal for a new order for the temple, priests, and sacrificial system (chs. 40–48) remained largely unrealized in the history of Judaism. See Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 15.

24. Bremmer, "From Holy Books to Holy Bible," 328; Popović, "Prophet, Books and Texts," 249.

25. On the novel, see Hägg, *Novel*.

26. Bonazzi and Schorn, eds., *Bios Philosophos*; Mansfeld, *Prolegomena*; Pelling, "Biography"; Hägg, *Art of Biography*.

sented virtues or attitudes (prescriptive level). Similarly, biblical texts that describe historical events or prophetic visions often fulfill the role of moral, theological, and social models. Historical stories are presented not only as true but also as a model worthy of imitation, which makes the descriptive account simultaneously an ethical and religious ideal. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that the boundary between description and prescription is often very permeable, especially in ancient religious texts—these levels support and reinforce each other, thus helping to shape the authoritative status of the given text.²⁷

It is possible to distinguish two types of authoritative texts: (a) those that were intentionally written with an authoritative claim and (b) those that became authoritative only secondarily. Regarding (a), if an author writes a work that is intended to be an authoritative description of knowledge (a description of an event, the life of a personality, or a natural phenomenon), they choose literary strategies that are meant to convince the reader that their account corresponds to reality (that it is credible). Regarding (b), in some cases, even a text whose original author did not have such a claim can become authoritative. In that case, the authority of the text is constructed retroactively through an external authoritative context, for example, by its inclusion in a binding collection or by attributing its authorship to a significant figure.²⁸

A central characteristic of authoritative texts is their normative dimension, as this is precisely what distinguishes them from merely popular texts.²⁹ Popular texts are those that are well-liked or materially well-attested and live on in cultural consciousness or within various communities. They are (re)produced primarily for pleasure or entertainment. In contrast, authoritative texts do not necessarily have to be widespread and do not have to be intended for entertainment—e.g., canon law. Although it is useful for analytical purposes to distinguish between an authoritative (prescriptive) text and a popular one (intended for pleasure), in practice these functions often overlapped. Texts like the Psalms or First Enoch undoubtedly had the character of popular literature as they were widely known and popular.³⁰ At

27. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “Präskriptive Texte.”

28. See, e.g., Kim, “Authorizing Interpretation.”

29. An example of an author who does not sufficiently distinguish between an authoritative, popular, and canonical text is Frey, “Authority.”

30. Mroczek, *Literary Imagination*, 19–50; Asale, *1 Enoch*.

the same time, however, in certain communities, they fulfilled a normative function and acted as a source of theological authority.

The Significance of Genre in Communication

The analysis of a text's claims to authority requires a two-step approach. The first step is the identification and analysis of the chosen genre, and the second is the examination of the specific textual strategies that the author uses within that genre to build credibility and assert authority. When examining texts such as those from Qumran or early Christianity, genre analysis is the first and most crucial step. The original neoclassical or formalist approaches, which understood genres as a priori classification categories,³¹ prove to be insufficient for studying the dynamics of authority. They focused more on description than on the social function and genesis of texts, which is key to understanding how a text acts and persuades. Contemporary scholarship on genre therefore leans towards an inductive approach to genres, emphasizing their social conditioning and dynamic nature. Genres are not mere abstract containers but are collectively and individually experienced, constructed, and mutable. It is this perspective that allows us to better understand how genres relate to power, ideology, and processes of inclusion or exclusion—aspects directly linked to the construction of authority.³² Useful in this regard is the perspective of rhetorical genre studies (also known as the New Rhetoric),³³ as developed by Carolyn R. Miller.³⁴ The central argument of this approach is that genres should be understood not as groups of texts defined by formal-content similarities but as typified forms

31. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*.

32. Devitt, "Genre Performances."

33. Rhetorical genre studies share basic premises with applied linguistics and systemic functional linguistics.

34. Miller draws mainly from Karlyn K. Campbell and Kathleen H. Jamieson. Her rhetorical approach has clear Aristotelian origins, as Aristotle already linked specific forms of rhetoric with specific situations. In her emphasis on the recurring rhetorical situation, Miller directly follows Lloyd Bitzer and Alan Brinton although unlike these authors who conceive a situation as a material and objective event, Miller defines it as a social phenomenon created by interpretation. See Miller, "Genre"; Miller et al., "Genre."

of action and response to recurring social situations.³⁵ John Swales then characterizes genres as “communicative vehicles for the achievement of goals.”³⁶ The pragmatic dimension of genre—the emphasis on social action and recurring situations—becomes its privileged feature.³⁷ Recurring situations, however, cannot be understood as material or objective events, but as a human-made social construct.³⁸

Why is genre analysis essential for the analysis of authority? If certain groups, whether in Qumran or among early Christians, used a specific genre (e.g., apocalypse, commentary-pesher, or biography) for a certain type of social action—for example, for mobilization, for the normative interpretation of Scripture, for establishing group identity, or for transmitting binding teaching—then that genre became the most suitable means for shaping or eliciting the expected response and thus for building authority. If, for example, apocalypticism in first-century Palestine was a means of social mobilization and critique of the ruling ideology,³⁹ then those who called for resistance or radical change chose precisely this genre because it was associated with such action. If they had used, for instance, a hymn associated with a different social action (i.e., praising god [Plato, *Rep.* 10.607a]), their intention might have been misunderstood, and the authoritative claim weakened. Genres are thus recognizable within specific societies or groups and are associated with specific actions and intentions.⁴⁰

I therefore consider the identification of genre to be a fundamental starting point in the study of the authority of texts. Each historical period operates with its own system of genres, which relate in various ways to the dominant cultural and ideological norms of the given society.⁴¹ Like any insti-

35. Typified patterns of language used to achieve rhetorical goals in regularly recurring situations. See Miller, “Genre,” 151, 159. See also Swales, *Genre Analysis*, 46. Most theories of rhetorical genre theory are based on Bitzer’s concept of rhetorical situations. See Bitzer, “Rhetorical Situation.”

36. Swales, *Genre Analysis*, 46.

37. Swales, *Genre Analysis*, 52.

38. Miller, “Genre,” 157.

39. Keddie, *Revelations of Ideology*, 76.

40. Tardy, “Genre Analysis,” 54.

41. This characteristic can be illustrated by the example of the development of biography in antiquity. It is no coincidence that biography (a text focused on the life of one person) gained greater importance in the Roman Empire, when personal

tution or convention, literary genres reflect the basic features of the society in which they arise and are reproduced.⁴² From the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu, we can say that these genres operate within a specific “literary field” (*champ littéraire*).⁴³ This field constitutes a structured social space governed by specific rules, forms of recognition, and symbolic capital. The author’s choice of genre is thus not just a formal decision but a strategic act by which the author positions themselves in this field and competes with other actors for legitimacy and symbolic capital. Understanding the rules and conventions of a given genre is therefore key to understanding the author’s strategic action. By comparing with other texts of the same time and culture, we can then determine whether the given genre was generally perceived as a carrier of authority, or whether it had to earn this authority through specific strategies.

Comparative analysis of genre conventions thus allows us to assess whether the author adheres to the expected mode of social action associated with the given genre, whether they innovate it, or even subversively violate it to achieve a specific rhetorical and authoritative effect. If a given genre can be associated with the intention to norm, question, or redefine, the next step is to examine what specific strategies the author uses to build credibility. The textual strategies I analyze are therefore tools to evoke and maintain this trust in the audience. These strategies—narrative strategies, tone, authorial stance—are again socially and culturally conditioned, and their effec-

charisma and imperial power were closely linked, and not in the time of the collectively oriented republic. Similarly, it is not surprising that biography found its place especially in philosophical schools, where emphasis was placed on the imitation of the founder—e.g., in the Socratic, Cynic, or Pythagorean traditions. Biography here served as a tool for moral formation and as a means of anchoring the school’s identity. Conversely, the absence of biographies in Rabbinic Judaism can be interpreted as a conscious distance from the Greco-Roman model of individuality and at the same time as an emphasis on the authority of a collective tradition, which is mediated by anonymous transmissions, commentaries, and halakhic interpretation. The expression of Jewish identity in the time of exile becomes prophetic literature and later midrash—genres that accentuate community memory, exegesis, and reinterpretation rather than narration about an individual. See, e.g., Zvi, “Prophetic Book,” 296.

42. Duff, ed., *Modern Genre Theory*, 200.

43. Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*, 215–23.

tiveness can only be assessed in comparison with contemporary customs. This comparison is primarily analogical, meaning it will look for similar patterns of functions and forms of textual strategies in different, albeit related, contexts, as a response to a similar need for legitimization.

Intra-Textual Strategies

The second step in analyzing the formation of authority is the study of strategies that the author uses within the text to build credibility and authority. While the chosen genre predetermines a certain repertoire of expectations, the specific ways in which the author presents themselves, handles sources, and presents information differ. This level is key because authority is never formed in a vacuum—it is always shaped in relation to the audience's expectations, cultural tradition, and social context. Through systematic comparison, it is possible to distinguish conventional strategies (practices that were widespread and generally accepted in a given cultural circle), innovative strategies (new or unusual ways of claiming authority that may have appeared in response to specific historical circumstances or, for example, theological challenges), and hybrid strategies (a combination of conventional and innovative elements, where authors could use familiar forms but fill them with new content or adapt them to new goals).

A comparative emphasis can thus move the study of textual authority from a collection of case studies to a more systematic understanding of the repertoire of strategies for the construction of authority available in antiquity. At the same time, this can answer some questions—e.g., Are there common *grammars* for asserting authority? Are certain strategies tied to specific socio-religious needs (e.g., claims to new revelation in times of crisis versus claims to traditional continuity in times of stability)? This can shift the inquiry from mere description to explanation. In this comparison, however, it is necessary to pay attention to the contextual analysis of each strategy before the comparison itself, to avoid the risk of decontextualization or the assumption of identical function across different cultural or textual environments. Each strategy acquires its full meaning only in its specific discursive world.

To capture these differences, I propose a basic typology of approaches to authority, based on the way the author presents themselves in the text and legitimizes their message: (1) the researcher, (2) the personality, and (3) the mediator. It is important to emphasize that these types are not rigid and im-

mutable. Authors could strategically combine them or switch between them even within a single work to achieve different rhetorical goals.

The Researcher. Researchers build credibility directly within the text. By using explicit strategies such as citing sources and comparing different versions, they demonstrate their diligence and transparency.⁴⁴ Based on the credibility thus built, they can claim authority for their prescriptive interpretation of events. The pressure on the audience here is continuous and lower, as readers are provided with an ongoing overview of sources, problematic aspects of the text, and possible deviations from other authors. The author is presented as the creator of a work that is the result of their own effort, judgments, and research of various materials, thereby creating a relatively symmetrical relationship with the audience, as credibility is built continuously and is the result of the reader's decision-making. Typical genres for the researcher are Greek historiography, Greek and Latin biography, and scientific texts. Examples are the works of Plutarch and Suetonius, who often refer to sources, sometimes even to rumors, or relativize disputed information—for example, when Plutarch in the introduction to the *Life of Lycurgus* (*Lyc.* 1.1) admits that nothing certain can be said about this figure, thereby implicitly strengthening the impression of his diligence and credibility in other parts of his work. They may also confirm information, refute it, or refer to alternative versions of events.

The Personality. A second strategy is particularly characteristic of Latin literature influenced by Roman political culture.⁴⁵ Here, credibility is located outside the text, anchored in the author's personal authority (*auctoritas*), their social status, and qualities. Bourdieu's concept can be usefully applied here.⁴⁶ Authorial *auctoritas* can be understood as a form of symbolic capital—that is, accumulated prestige, honor, and social recognition that the author possessed even before writing the text. The author then *invests* this cap-

44. For instance, Plutarch famously begins his *Life of Lycurgus* by admitting that “concerning Lycurgus the lawgiver, in general, nothing can be said that is not disputed,” thereby highlighting the conflicting nature of his sources (*Lyc.* 1.1). This act of scholarly transparency in one area implicitly builds the reader's trust in the author's credibility elsewhere.

45. Kennedy, *Comparative Rhetoric*, 98; Alston, *Aspects of Roman History*, 35.

46. Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*.

ital in their work, thereby lending it credibility without having to present evidence in the style of a *researcher* in the text itself.

Although I associate this type primarily with the Roman concept of *auctoritas*, it is possible—thanks also to Bourdieu’s concept—to examine its cultural analogies, for example, the authority of the philosopher as the founder of a school in Greece, which also influenced textual self-presentation, but with different emphases and legitimizing mechanisms. The pressure on the audience is high and one-off, as the audience is expected to accept the author’s credibility in advance. The author is still the creator of the text, but their personality is the primary source of credibility. The relationship with the audience is asymmetrical, as it relies on prior acceptance of the author’s authority, which reinforces the social hierarchy between the author and the audience. Characteristic of this type is the absence of verification strategies used by researchers; instead, trust in the author’s pre-existing authority is expected. Authors often explicitly emphasized their ancestors or social status, such as Appian or his modesty as Livy.⁴⁷

A crucial parallel, albeit with a different foundation, exists in the Hebrew Bible. As scholars like William M. Schniedewind and Karel van der Toorn have shown, the authority of historical texts like First and Second Kings was not built through intra-textual verification but was derived from the institutional function of their authors.⁴⁸ These texts were produced by an elite class of scribes and priests associated with the temple or royal court. The absence of authorial intrusion and verification strategies in these works is not a sign of naivety but a rhetoric of institutional confidence; their authority was guaranteed by the institution they represented. This highlights a crucial distinction: while Roman *auctoritas* was grounded in *individual* prestige, the authority of Hebrew Bible authors was derived from their *collective, institutional* identity.

The Mediator. A hallmark of the mediator stance is its frequent adoption as a powerful counter-cultural or oppositional strategy. This authorial position is often chosen by those who seek not merely to contribute to an existing tradition but to fundamentally challenge or displace it. When faced with a deeply entrenched authority—be it a foundational text like Homer, a dominant institution like the Jerusalem temple, or an established group of leaders

47. On *auctoritas*, see Schofield, “Cicero on *Auctoritas*.”

48. Schniedewind, *Who Really Wrote the Bible*; van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*.

like the first apostles—a conventional, evidence-based argument is often insufficient. To subvert a prevailing narrative, a more radical claim is required. The mediator strategy provides precisely this radical tool. It allows an author to bypass the established rules of discourse and claim access to a higher, older, or purer source of truth that trumps the dominant one. This rhetorical move is evident across different traditions.

In Greco-Roman literature, pseudo-documentary fiction like the *Diary of the Trojan War* did not merely offer a new interpretation of Homer; it sought to invalidate him entirely by claiming to be an older, eyewitness account.⁴⁹ This was a direct assault on the cornerstone of Hellenic culture, legitimized by the radical claim of a discovered artifact.⁵⁰ In Second Temple Judaism, texts like Jubilees presented an alternative calendar and legal tradition to that of the temple establishment.⁵¹ To authorize this challenge, the author did not engage in scribal debate but claimed a higher authority that bypassed the priestly institution altogether: a direct angelic dictation to Moses on Sinai. In early Christianity, the apostle Paul masterfully employed this strategy to defend his controversial mission to the gentiles. Lacking the authority of having been a disciple of the historical Jesus, he countered the Jerusalem-based apostles by claiming his gospel came not from human transmission but from a direct, personal revelation of the resurrected Christ.

In this dynamic, the author's self-effacement is not a sign of modesty but a crucial part of the strategy. The author *must* disappear so that the authority

49. Mheallaigh, "Pseudo-Documentarism"; "Phoenician Letters." See also Cameron, *Greek Mythography*.

50. Perhaps the most explicit example of the *mediator* stance is the apostle Paul. In his letters, particularly First Corinthians, he programmatically rejects the standard tools of Greco-Roman rhetoric and persuasion. He insists that his message did not rely on "plausible words of wisdom" but "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor 2:4 ESV). By presenting himself as weak and his speech as plain, he argues that the faith of his audience should not rest on his rhetorical skill but solely on the power of God. His authority is thus derived entirely from his role as a direct conduit for a divine message, a "word of God," not "as the word of men" (1 Thess 2:13 ESV). This self-presentation as a passive channel for a higher power is a hallmark of the mediator strategy, where the credibility of the message is guaranteed by its divine, unverifiable source rather than by the author's own craft or status.

51. Najman, "Interpretation."

of the claimed source can emerge in its full, unmediated power. By presenting themselves as a mere conduit—a scribe, a channel for the Spirit, a translator of an ancient text—the author frames their work not as a human opinion subject to debate, but as an incontestable truth from a higher realm. The radical means of the mediator are therefore a direct function of their radical goal: to de-legitimize an existing center of authority and establish a new one in its place.

In addition to the three ideal types I have outlined—researcher, personality, and mediator—it is helpful to acknowledge hybrid or transitional stances. For instance, an exegetical teacher may begin by adopting the voice of a careful researcher, citing Scripture and explicating meanings, yet at certain rhetorical peaks shift to the stance of a mediator, speaking *through the Spirit* or on behalf of divine authority. Such fluidity is not a flaw but a feature of ancient persuasive discourse. Identifying these transitions is essential for understanding how authors navigate different registers of authority within a single text.

Extra-Textual Authority

As I have shown in the previous analysis, it is crucial for my method to examine the strategies by which an author constructs authority *within* the text. However, the absence of common legitimizing strategies, such as citing sources or relativizing information, does not necessarily mean that the text had no authoritative claims or was not meant to be credibility. On the contrary, it is precisely this absence that should lead us to question whether the text's authority was intentionally anchored elsewhere—outside the text itself. If we encounter a text that presents itself with absolute validity without bothering to explicitly convince the audience of its credibility, we must ask whether its authority lies in an external source, for example, in an institution, the person of the author, or in a culturally shared assumption of divine inspiration.

A characteristic example is the Roman literary tradition, where I identified the authorial type *personality*. Here, credibility was not primarily built continuously within the text but was derived from an extra-textual reality: from the personal authority, social status, and moral qualities of the author himself. The audience was not expected to verify individual pieces of information but to accept the author as a credible guarantor in a single act. The texts of authors like Cato the Elder or Appian thus relied on the fact that their name and position were sufficient in themselves to legitimize the con-

tent. The absence of intra-textual strategies is therefore compensated by a strong authority that lies outside the text—in the person of the author.

A similar principle, albeit with a different source of authority, can be found in the Old Testament tradition, on which both Qumranic and early Christian texts built. Here, too, authors did not present themselves as *re-searchers* referring to sources, which is evident, for example, in the historical books or prophetic writings. Their authority was not primarily constructed in the text but was derived from their function or position within society. The texts were produced by an elite—scribes, priests, prophets—and their validity was anchored in an institutional framework, such as the temple, the royal court, or the prophetic office.⁵² The authority of such texts stemmed from a divine commission or from the role of an interpreter of the Law, not from presented evidence. The scene from Neh 8, where the priest Ezra reads the law to the assembled people, is a good illustration: the authority of the text is here inseparably linked to the authority of the person and the institutional (liturgical) scene that confirms it.

This understanding of the extra-textual anchoring of authority is key to the analysis of Qumranic and early Christian writings. These new religious movements often stood in opposition to established institutions (e.g., the Jerusalem temple) and therefore had to establish their own, alternative sources of extra-textual authority.⁵³ While in centralized systems the *institution* was clearly defined, in non-centralized communities, such as early Christianity, its function could be fulfilled by alternative forms of social organization, such as the authority of the apostles, a connection to

52. See, e.g., Schniedewind, *Who Really Wrote the Bible*.

53. Lincoln (*Authority*, 7) describes this aspect through the concepts of authorized and authorizing places (such as a temple or a court of law) and objects (such as the Homeric scepter). Holding the scepter in the Homeric assembly or Ezra's reading of the law in a liturgical assembly are performative acts where the authority of the person, place, and text merge. For groups that do not have access to these institutional sources of authority (e.g., early Christians in opposition to the temple), corrosive discourse becomes a key counterstrategy. Slander, rumors, curses, or parodies do not serve to build one's own authority, but to "corrode" the authority of the opponent. By attacking the moral integrity of the established elites (priests, rulers), they try to question their extra-textual authority and thus create space for their own, alternative claims. The analysis of authority must therefore examine not only strategies of self-presentation but also strategies of discrediting the opponent.

Jerusalem, or local assemblies. A comparative approach thus allows us to examine how, for example, the figure of the “Teacher of Righteousness” in Qumran or the figures of Jesus and the apostles in early Christianity functioned as new focal points of authority that legitimized entire sets of texts which in themselves lacked traditional verification strategies. The analysis thus asks not only “What strategies does the text use?” but also “To what extra-textual authority does the text (implicitly or explicitly) appeal, so that it does not have to use these strategies?”

In addition to institutions and personalities, the very materiality and physical form of texts also contributed to the extra-textual anchoring of authority, although this aspect can rarely be examined. The choice of writing material (luxurious parchment versus cheap papyrus), the type of script (e.g., the archaizing paleo-Hebrew script in Qumran), or the format (scroll versus codex among early Christians) are in themselves powerful authority-building gestures.⁵⁴

Application

Having established a theoretical framework based on genre as social action and a typology of authorial stances, we can now put this method into practice. The Synoptic Gospels offer a perfect case study, as they represent three distinct, competing attempts to construct the definitive, authoritative *biography* of Jesus within the same literary tradition. The analytical framework of genre and authorial stance reveals the distinct and competing authority-claiming strategies of the Synoptic evangelists. While all operate within the genre of biography, they adopt different authorial positions to legitimize their normative portrayal of Jesus.⁵⁵ Mark’s Gospel is character-

54. See Hamidović, “Living Serakhim”; Oerter, “Form.”

55. The Gospels are singularly focused on Jesus, characterizing him through his deeds and words to present him as the ultimate model for discipleship (e.g., Mark 8:34). Therefore, the Evangelists’ choice of the biography was their first and most fundamental authority-claiming move. By selecting a genre whose social purpose was moral and ethical formation, they immediately signaled to their audience that the text carried a prescriptive, life-shaping claim before a single verse was even read. For more on the Gospels as biographies, see BurrIDGE, *What Are the Gospels?*; Bond, *First Biography*; Shuler, *Genre*. The genre of Luke is a much-debated

ized by its absence of *researcher* strategies; the author never cites sources (save for a theological citation in 1:2) or relativizes information. Nor does he explicitly claim to be a mediator of divine revelation. Instead, his authority corresponds to the personality type. It is extra-textual, grounded in his social and relational capital within the early church. The Papias tradition, which identifies him as Peter's "interpreter" (ἐρμηνευτής), confirms this: His credibility stems not from his own inspiration but from his trusted connection to the chief apostle.⁵⁶ As a literate member of the Jerusalem church and a collaborator with both Peter and Paul (1 Pet 5:13; Phil 23; 2 Tim 4:11),⁵⁷ Mark possessed the necessary symbolic capital to write the foundational *biography* of Jesus and expect it to be accepted based on who he was and his proximity to the movement's founders.

While adopting Mark's genre, Matthew shifts the strategy entirely. His authority is not extra-textual but is actively constructed *intra-textually* through his distinctive use of fulfillment citations ("All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet" [1:22 ESV]). This technique positions him not as a researcher, but as a mediator of the true, divinely intended meaning of Scripture. His stance is analogous to the Qumran *peshet* commentator, who possesses an exclusive, inspired key to unlock the mysteries of the prophets. Matthew implicitly claims that his ability to interpret Scripture correctly comes from the same divine revelation granted to Peter (Matt 16:17), thereby identifying himself as the ideal "scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven" who brings forth "new" Christological interpretations from the "old" treasury of Scripture (Matt 13:52). Luke employs the most complex, hybrid strategy. His prologue (1:1–4) is a typical stance of a researcher. He references his predecessors, emphasizes his meticulous investigation ("traced all things accurately from the beginning"), and addresses a patron, Theophilus, thereby adopting the conventions of Greco-Roman historiography to establish his credibility with an educated audience. However, having established his authorial ethos, he immediately shifts his narrative voice.⁵⁸ For the remainder of the Gospel, he

issue; however, this study argues that it is best understood as a biography. For a criticism of this idea, see Pitts, "Fowler Fallacy," 341; *History*.

56. According to Bauckham (*Jesus*, 223), the term should be translated as "translator."

57. For more, see Black, *Mark*.

58. Alexander, *Acts*; *Preface*.

largely adopts the absolute, omniscient style of his primary source, Mark, where the author's presence disappears behind the story. Luke strategically combines authorial stances: He begins as a credible historian to win the reader's trust and then proceeds with the absolute authority of the tradition he presents. However, having established his authorial ethos, he immediately shifts his narrative voice. For the remainder of the Gospel, he largely abandons the researcher strategies announced in the prologue and adopts an absolute narrative voice. Luke thus presents a particularly revealing case: the researcher stance is programmatically announced but not consistently implemented throughout the narrative.

Conclusion

In this study, I have argued that a full understanding of authoritative texts in ancient Judaism and early Christianity requires moving beyond the prevailing emphasis on their later reception and canonization. I have argued that texts, from the moment of their creation, actively strove for authoritative status through deliberate textual strategies and the choice of genre. Ignoring this authorial intention and focusing only on how the text was received leads to an incomplete and sometimes distorted picture of the dynamics of authority formation. I have proposed an analytical method that allows for the identification and analysis of these authority-building strategies already in the text's production phase. This method consists of two key steps: (1) analysis of the choice of genre, which I understand not merely as a formal category but as a typified form of social action and communication that carries certain expectations regarding authority; (2) examination of the specific textual strategies that the text's producer uses to build credibility and assert a claim to authority. For this purpose, I have introduced a basic typology of authorial stances—researcher, personality, and mediator—which reflect different ways an author presents themselves in the text and legitimizes their message. I have also emphasized the necessity of a comparative approach. By comparing strategies across different texts, genres, and cultural contexts, we can better identify conventional, innovative, or hybrid methods of building authority and understand their cultural logic and effectiveness, which are then crucial in the text's reception. Furthermore, I have argued for a more precise terminology, especially the distinction between a text's claim to authority and its actual reception as authoritative, and finally, between an

authoritative (prescriptive) text and a popular or purely descriptive text. This study thus offers a systematic view of the construction of authority not just as a result of reception, but as a deliberate and contextually conditioned textual practice present already in the very process of text creation. An open area for further research remains the application of my proposed methodology to a broader spectrum of ancient texts and further refinement of the typology of authority-building strategies. A deeper understanding of how texts claim authority can contribute to the reconstruction of the intellectual, religious, and social history of the periods under study and illuminate the processes by which certain texts became formative for the further development of Judaism and Christianity. The analysis of a text's active claims to authority should always precede the question of its canonization and should also take into account the possibility of an extra-textual anchoring of authority, for example, in the institutional power of temple, royal, or scribal circles.

Finally, this framework not only allows for a synchronic comparison of different texts but also reveals a diachronic evolution of authority-claiming strategies within the Synoptic tradition itself. Mark, as the personality, established the biography as the foundational genre for the Jesus story, grounding its authority in the extra-textual credibility of the apostolic circle. Matthew, in a move of both affirmation and competition, adopted Mark's genre but shifted the basis of authority inward, becoming a mediator of inspired exegesis whose credibility rests on his demonstrated mastery of Scripture. His goal was to supersede Mark by creating a more textually and theologically definitive version. Luke then represents a further strategic refinement. His hybrid persona—beginning as a researcher and shifting to an absolute narrator—cloaks the tradition in the respectable mantle of Greco-Roman historiography, making it more palatable and credible for a broader, educated audience. This trajectory reveals a dynamic *battle for authority* fought through increasingly sophisticated literary and rhetorical means, a process which the typology presented here helps to illuminate.

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