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How the Bible Became a Book

When was the Bible written? Why was it written? These questions strike at the heart of the meaning of the Bible as literature. They also hint at a profound transition in human culture. The Bible is a book. That seems like an obvious statement, but it is also a profound development in religion. We may take books for granted, but the ancients did not.[1] The fact that a sacred, written text emerged from a pastoral, agricultural, and oral society is a watershed of Western civilization. In the pages that follow we will explore the movement from orality to textuality, from a pre-literate toward a literate society. Along the way we will need to trace the social history of ancient Israel and early Judaism as well as the formation of the Bible as written literature. The Bible itself will be an eyewitness to this epic shift in human consciousness, the shift from an oral world toward a textual world. Central to this shift will be the encroachment of the text upon the authority of the teacher.

How did the Bible become a book? This book – the book that you hold in your hands – gives a historical account of writing in ancient Israel and of writing's role in the formation of the Bible as a book. To answer this most basic question, we need to explore a number of related questions such as what function did writing serve in ancient Israelite society during different historical periods? How is the increasing importance of writing in ancient Israel reflected in the formation of biblical literature? How does the Bible itself view its own *textuality*? What is the relationship between oral tradition and written texts? When and how does the written word supplant the authority of the oral tradition and the living voice of the teacher? When we begin to understand the answers to these questions, then we shall begin to understand how the Bible itself became a book.

These questions can be related to three basic issues. The first is a critique of the question of *who* wrote the Bible. This book contends

that the question "*when* was the Bible written?" is more appropriate than an anachronistic interest in the Bible's authors. This question not only will give insight into the Bible as literature, it also will open a window into the uneasy transition of ancient Israel into a textual culture. This leads to a second issue: *how* is it that the Bible is written at all? Ancient Israel before the seventh century B.C.E. was largely nonliterate. How does an oral culture like ancient Israel come to express its identity through a written text? How does the basic orality of early Israel shape the Bible as a written text? How does the authority of the written word come to supplant the living voice of the teacher and the community? This leads us to a final issue: *what* were the particular historical circumstances under which the Bible becomes a text and then Scripture?

The role of writing in the development of Western civilization is not a new topic. A few decades ago, Jack Goody, a Cambridge University professor of social anthropology, wrote the first of several articles and books dealing with the "Consequences of Literacy." This research, now summed up in his recent book *The Power of the Written Tradition* (2000), has influenced a whole generation of scholars. Goody's work was complemented by Marshall McLuhan, a professor of English at the University of Toronto, who argued in *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of the Typographic Man* (1962) that the technological innovation of the printing press profoundly shaped modern humankind by bringing about the transition from an audile-tactile culture to the visually dominant age of print. Such studies have spawned scholarly work in many fields in the humanities and social sciences. For example, the linguist Walter Ong wrote *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), an influential outline of the impact of developments in writing upon the human consciousness. The importance of emergent literacy and the alphabet in ancient Greece during the fifth century B.C.E. was pointed out by Eric Havelock, a Yale professor of classics, in his book *Preface to Plato* (1963). Havelock argued that there was a literate revolution in ancient Greece that was inspired, at least in part, by the Greek invention of their alphabet. Havelock's research, which is summarized for the general reader in *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (1986), spawned vigorous debate in the field of classics. Although Havelock overstated both the significance of the Greek innovations in the alphabet and the extent and impact of literacy on Greek culture, he was certainly correct in pointing to the role of the

alphabet and the spread of literacy in causing fundamental changes in Greek culture. They had an important role in ancient Israel as well, emerging there a couple centuries earlier. The importance of writing in human history is laid out nicely in a survey by Professor Henri-Jean Martin from the Ecole des Chartes in France entitled *The History and Power of Writing* (1994). All these works (and many others) testify to the transformative power of the written word for human society.

What I shall argue here is that one of the most central moments in the history of the written word occurred in ancient Israel when the written word spread from the narrow confines of palace or temple scribes to the broader society. Writing became part of the fabric of everyday life. Most importantly, written texts for the first time in human history began to have religious and cultural authority. This transference of authority from oral to written is what I refer to in the subtitle of this book, "the textualization of ancient Israel."

The Problem of Who Wrote the Bible

We tend to read the Bible through the lens of modernity. This is to say, we read the Bible as a book. Not only do we tend to think of the Bible as a single book, but we also read the Bible as if it came from a world of texts, books, and authors. We read the Bible from our own perspective of a highly literate world. Yet, the Bible was written before there were books. Let us think of this in another way. The modern "book" (in the narrow sense of that word as the pages bound between two covers) follows the invention of the codex, which had leaves of pages with writing on both sides. The replacement of the traditional scroll by the codex was a major technological development in the history of writing. Codices appeared in the first century C.E. and became common by the fourth century C.E.[2] The codex could encompass a much more extensive series of texts than a single scroll could contain and made "the Bible" as a book – the Bible as we conceive of it – a possibility. In bringing together a collection of scrolls, the codex also defined a set and order of books and made possible a more defined canon. With the codex, the Bible could be a book.[3]

But the Bible was written before there were such codices. It is helpful to remember that the Bible itself is actually a collection of books or scrolls. The English word *bible* derives from the Greek *biblia*, which may be translated as "books" or "scrolls." As a result, when we ask how the Bible became a book we are asking, in part, about a

collection of books that compose our Bible. The Hebrew word *sefer*, usually translated as "book," means literally "text, letter, or scroll." In early biblical literature *sefer* could refer to any written text, although as writing became more common in later periods a more developed vocabulary begins to distinguish between different kinds of written documents.[4] A reader may remark that the title *How the Bible Became a Book* doesn't refer to a "book" as he or she recognizes it – that is, as a codex. This is true, but as the reader will discover in my second chapter, the almost magical power many continue to associate with books today is not unrelated to ancient Israel's conception of the numinous effects of writing. I chose my title because I wanted to preserve for modern readers the sense of awe and reverence that this transformation from the oral to the textual could generate. Biblical scholars, who invariably translate the Hebrew word *sefer* as "book," recognize the much broader semantic range of this word than the word "codex." It is in this broader sense of "book" as the written word and as a source of cultural authority that I speak of *How the Bible Became a Book*.

Who wrote the Bible is a fascinating question, though of debatable value. The ability of this question to captivate our attention is underscored by Richard Elliot Friedman's best-selling book, *Who Wrote the Bible?* This popular and lucidly written account of biblical criticism actually did quite a bit more than answer the facile question of who wrote the Bible, but the popularity of the work no doubt profited from being couched in this simple question and the simple answers that can be given to it. So, for example, Jeremiah is the Deuteronomist (i.e., he "wrote" Deuteronomy); or, an Aaronid priest wrote the priestly document (e.g., Leviticus).[5] Friedman suggested that biblical literature often cannot be understood without knowing something about its authors, but then he gives the sample question: "Did the author of a particular biblical story live in the eighth century B.C. or the fifth?"[6] The real import of this question is not *who* is the author, but rather *when* was the text written. Friedman actually gives rich insight into biblical literature through his adroit historical contextualization. In some ways, it is unfortunate that the book is reduced to the facile question of who wrote the Bible. Yet, it is exactly this question that captures the modern fancy.

One interesting question posed in literary circles is whether the author makes a difference in the meaning of the literature. In an enormously influential book called *Is There a Text in This Class?* Stanley

Fish argued that the interpretative community was ultimately more important than the author because the reader – much to some authors' chagrin – ultimately defines the meaning of a text.[7] The problem is quite stark in the case of biblical literature. The Bible is really a collection of books and not the product of an individual author. Moreover, what a hypothetical author intended to say often is difficult (if not impossible) to recover for an ancient text like the Bible. More accessible (and perhaps more important) is understanding what the text meant to its ancient readers, which does not necessarily resemble an author's intent. For example, what the U.S. Constitution means is usually more a reflection of its readers than its authors. Consequently, the meaning of the Constitution keeps changing along with the changing generations of its readers. Although the framers' intent is certainly important, from a practical standpoint it has been the historical moment when our society read the Constitution that has shaped the history of its interpretation. In the same way, biblical meaning has reflected its readers more than its writers. More than this, the community's role in the reading is even justified because the Constitution (as well as the Bible) is the product and property of the community more than of an individual.

When a text is central to a people or a nation, like the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution is, the history of its interpretation can serve as a window into the history of that people. One socially charged analogy in American history can illustrate. The landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) overturned "separate, but equal" (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896) educational facilities for races as a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that guarantees all citizens "equal protection of the laws." This corresponded to a changing American social landscape more than it did the intent of the authors.[8] The different interpretations of the Constitution in 1896 and 1954 reflected the changing social context of the interpreters. The text had not changed, but the readers and their social context had. Similarly, the meaning of the Bible will be imbedded in the history of the people who wrote it, read it, passed it on, rewrote it, and read it again. It is closely tied to when the traditions were collected, written down, edited, rewritten, and finally coalesced into the book we call the Bible.

In an earlier book, I took one example, the Promise to David in 2 Samuel 7, and showed how it functioned as a constitutional text in ancient Israel.[9] This text promised King David and his sons that

they would forever reign on the throne of Israel. I illustrated how the interpretation of this text over the course of a millennium was closely associated with the social, religious, and political events and contexts of the Jewish people. The text had its origins in the tenth century B.C.E., during the transition of semi-nomadic pastoralists toward an urban state. The Promise to David served as a common ideology giving divine sanction to the politics of a new monarchic state. Later, under changes brought about by the emergence of the Assyrian Empire in the eighth century B.C.E., the Promise to David would give rise to rather unrealistic religious rhetoric that deluded itself into thinking that God "had promised a lamp for David forever" (1 Kgs 11:36, 15:4; 2 Kgs 8:19). In the religious reforms of the seventh century B.C.E., the Promise was applied both to the king and to the Temple, which was supposed to last forever as God's dwelling place on earth. The Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C.E. thrust the Promise into crisis. The Promise had failed; David's sons were no longer on the throne, and the Temple had been destroyed. By reinterpreting the Promise, new readers were able to relocate the God of Israel as the God of the whole earth and to apply the Promise even to foreign kings (not from the line of David). The connection between the social setting of the readers and the interpretation was especially clear in the readings given to the Promise to David by different Jewish communities in the late Second Temple period. Early Christianity, of course, read in the Promise a final fulfillment in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The interpretation of the Promise to David began within the Bible itself, but it would continue after the Bible became Scripture – that is, after the text became sacred writ.

The question about who wrote the Bible is also misguided because it emphasizes the individuality of the author. The emphasis on individual expression is not a universal cultural value, even if it is a god of modern American culture. In some cultures, the group takes precedence over the individual. In folk literature, for instance, the literature belongs to the group that shares the tradition. The meaning of the text is not tied to the singer of the tale. The concept of communal authorship is also reflected in the transmission of texts of oral tradition like the Talmud among certain Jewish communities.[10] Early Israel and its literature certainly reflect this emphasis on the group rather than the individual. So, for example, when we read a story like the sin of Achan recounted in Joshua 7, our modern sensibilities may be jarred by the fact that all Israel is punished for the individual Achan's stealing of

booty dedicated to God. God says, "Israel [not Achan] has sinned" (Josh 7:11–12). Moreover, not only Achan is stoned for this sin but also his sons and daughters and "his whole tent" (as the Bible suggests in Josh 7:24). This is a strikingly different cultural system than our Western cultures. The individual is submerged into the group. On the whole, Israel's literature is not merely the expression of an individual, it is also a collective tradition.

The Authority of the Author?

Why are we so concerned with *who* wrote the Bible? That question did not become important until after the rise of Greek civilization in the fourth century B.C.E. – well after most of the books of the Bible had been written. In contrast, the importance of authorship was largely an unknown concept in the ancient Semitic world.[11] The famous Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Babylonian creation myth known as *The Enuma Elish*, the Egyptian tale *The Shipwrecked Sailor*, and the Canaanite epic literary account of the battle between the gods, *Baal and Mot*, have no authors. They have scribes who pass along the tradition. The scribes were first of all administrators or bureaucrats; they were not authors. The Classical Hebrew language does not even have a word that means "author." The nearest term would be *sofer*, "scribe," who was a transmitter of tradition and text rather than an author. Authorship is a concept that derives from a predominantly *written* culture, whereas ancient Israelite society was largely an *oral* culture. Traditions and stories were passed on orally from one generation to the next. They had their authority from the *community* that passed on the tradition rather than from an *author* who wrote a text. These stories and traditions were the things that fathers and mothers were obliged to teach their children, as Deuteronomy 6:6-7 commands, "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away."

The fall of the Persian Empire to Alexander the Great ushered in profound changes in the Near East. The age of Hellenism – that is, the spread of Greek language, culture, and values – brought with it the concept of authorship. The authority of a text came to be associated with its author. Jewish tradition naturally felt compelled to find authors for its literature in this age, although there was little explicit evidence about authorship in the Bible. The earliest Jewish text that

identifies its author is the Wisdom of Ben-Sira, dating from the early second century B.C.E. In some places, the Bible indirectly would contradict later ascription of authorship. This is clear, for example, in the Book of Deuteronomy, which is framed as a third-person report of a speech by Moses and not as something that Moses himself wrote, "These are the things Moses *said* to all Israel . . ." (Deut 1:1). In the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, Moses is a character, not an author. Genesis does not mention Moses in any capacity. In spite of this, Deuteronomy, along with the other four books of the Torah, has usually been ascribed to the pen of Moses rather than being understood as traditions passed down from Moses or more generally as traditions of the Israelite people.

A most remarkable attempt to address the authority of the Torah is found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were discovered in 1947. The Temple Scroll, one of the longest and most complete of the scrolls belonging to an Essene sect of Jews living on the shore of the Dead Sea, rewrites the Torah and particularly the Book of Deuteronomy. Although the first columns of the scroll are missing and hence it is difficult to say precisely how it begins, it fundamentally addresses the problem of authorship and authority by changing the voice from Moses to God. The scroll exchanges the third-person voice of Moses for the first-person voice of God. The change can be seen throughout the scroll, but one example will suffice:

Deuteronomy 17:14. When you have come into the land that *YHWH your God* is giving you,[12] and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me," 15 you may indeed appoint a king whom *YHWH your God* will choose. From one of your brethren you shall set a king over you. . . .

Temple Scroll (11QT[a]) 56:12. When you have come into the land that *I* am giving you, and have taken possession and settled in it, 13 and you say, "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me," 14 you may indeed set a king over yourselves – one whom *I* will choose. From one of your brethren you shall set a king over you. . . .

The change in voice makes a rather startling claim for authority. God is the author of the Temple Scroll. The issue of the authority of a text comes to the fore in this striking transformation of Deuteronomy. To be sure, the claim that God was the actual author becomes an increasingly prevalent view through history among certain religious groups. Here, however, this claim for the text's authority is imbedded

within the text itself. It addresses the need of this new and important cultural artifact – the written text – to stake its claim as the bearer of orthodoxy.

The Hellenistic age produced a myriad of literary works that claimed to date back to the "golden age" of ancient Israel. These works, known as the pseudepigrapha, included books such as *Enoch*, the *Apocalypse of Moses*, and the *Life of Adam and Eve*. Often they addressed the issues of authority and authorship in strikingly direct ways. The Book of Jubilees, for example, begins in its very first verse with the gift of "two tablets of stone of the law and of the commandment, which I [i.e., God] have written." Jubilees further addresses the need for a written text in its fifth verse, where God enjoins Moses: "Incline your heart to every word which I shall speak to you on this mount, and write them in a book." Later, an angel is employed to help Moses with the writing. Throughout, the Book of Jubilees is preoccupied with its own textuality and its attribution to the figure of Moses. The term for such works, *pseudepigrapha*, derives from the Greek *pseudonymous*, which means "under a false name." They attempted to derive authority from their attribution to figures of classical antiquity. More than this, these works are self-conscious about the whole process of writing. By the third century B.C.E., pseudepigraphy was a norm for writing in Jewish religious literature. Whereas a few literary works were anonymous, many others were pseudonymous or incorrectly attributed to someone.

The Bible, in contrast, shows a distressing disinterest in who wrote it. It was distressing, that is, to Jewish readers living in a Hellenistic society where the authority of literature was closely tied to its author. It continues to be distressing to many pious modern readers who have inherited the Hellenistic emphasis that associates authority with authors. To these ancient and modern readers, the Book of Deuteronomy derives much of its sacred power from the presumption that Moses penned it. Or, the authority of the Book of Isaiah depends on the prophet actually having shaped the final text of the entire canonical book known under his name.

Dogmas have arisen concerning the authorship of all biblical literature. It was assumed that such prophets as Samuel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah sat down and composed their books. Ezra, the priest, then collected and edited these books into the shape we now know as the Bible. Very rarely, however, does the Bible itself ever point to *authors*,

although it often attributes traditions to biblical characters. So, for example, the Book of Isaiah begins with the pronouncement that "These are the prophecies of Isaiah son of Amoz, who prophesied concerning Judah and Jerusalem" (Isa 1:1). Although this ascribes the traditions to Isaiah, it does not explicitly make him the author of the book itself. And, in fact, the Book of Isaiah suggests that Isaiah's disciples collected his teachings (Isa 8:16). The prophets are generally commanded to *speak* the words of God, not to *write* them. The example of Jeremiah may serve to highlight this. Writing comes to play a more central role in the Book of Jeremiah. Prophecies, for example, are for the first time explicitly written from a prophet to the king. Yet, Jeremiah himself does not write; rather, the scribe Baruch serves as Jeremiah's secretary (Jer 36:32). Indeed, until the later periods there was little reason to write things down. Few could read, and writing materials and the production of scrolls were expensive. There was no social infrastructure for book learning. The traditions of Israel were largely oral unless they dealt with the royal court or the temple, which had the economic resources and social infrastructures to have the traditions written down.

The Enlightenment period in the eighteenth century C.E. brought some questions to the conventional religious traditions concerning authorship. A French physician, Jean Astruc (1684–1766), accepted Mosaic authorship but argued that Moses had originally composed Genesis and Exodus in four columns and that two distinct documents were characterized by the use of the names of God (*Jahweh* and *Elohim*); it was only later scribes who carelessly combined the parts to make the canonical books. Several German scholars developed Astruc's observations. Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827), for example, proposed that the Pentateuch was compiled from literary sources long after Moses' death. Wilhelm M. L. de Wette (1780–1849) connected the writing of Deuteronomy with Josiah's reform in the late seventh century B.C.E. These ideas received their crowning articulation by Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918). Simply put, Wellhausen argued that two original sources, J(ahwist) and E(lohist), were combined to make one document, which he labeled JE. D(euteronomy) was later attached; and, finally, the P(riestly Document) was added in the post-exilic period to JE + D to create our Pentateuch.[13] Such documentary theories begin with the worldview of a textual culture; that is, they begin with the worldview of modern critics, not ancient cultures.