WHY THE BIBLE BEGAN

Why did no other ancient society produce something like the Bible? That a tiny, out of the way community could have created a literary corpus so determinative for peoples across the globe seems improbable.

For Jacob Wright, the Bible is not only a testimony of survival, but also an unparalleled achievement in human history. Forged after Babylon's devastation of Jerusalem, it makes not victory but total humiliation the foundation of a new idea of belonging. Lamenting the destruction of their homeland, scribes who composed the Bible imagined a promise-filled past while reflecting deeply on abject failure. More than just religious scripture, the Bible began as a trailblazing blueprint for a new form of political community. Its response to catastrophe offers a powerful message of hope and restoration that is unique in the Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman worlds.

Wright's Bible is thus a social, political, and even economic roadmap – one that enabled a small and obscure community located on the periphery of leading civilizations and empires not just to come back from the brink, but ultimately to shape the world's destiny. The Bible speaks ultimately of being a united yet diverse people, and its pages present a manual of pragmatic survival strategies for communities confronting societal collapse.

Jacob L. Wright is a professor of Hebrew Bible at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University. His first book, *Rebuilding Identity: The Nehemiah Memoir and Its Earliest Readers* (de Gruyter, 2004), won the 2008 Templeton Prize for a first book in the field of religion. He is also the author of *David, King of Israel, and Caleb in Biblical Memory* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), which won the Nancy Lapp Popular Book Award from the American Schools of Oriental Research, and most recently, *War, Memory, and National Identity in the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

On *The New Yorker*'s list of **The Best Books We've Read in 2023.**

On *Publisher's Weekly*'s list of **Best books of 2023.**

"Wright's analysis is often brilliant and persuasive, leading us to see ideological fractures in texts that we thought we knew. And through much of the textual history will be familiar to scholars who have gone into the weeds, or the bulrushes, Wright does a terrific job of bringing it forward for his readers."

- Adam Gopnik, *The New Yorker*

" [a]landmark study…. Thought-provoking and scrupulously researched, this is a tour de force."

- *Publisher's Weekly* (Starred Review)

"A sweeping, and stunning, account of the making of the Bible — and of the "People of the Book." Writing with both vision and compassion, Wright explores how generations of scribes responded to collective trauma by inventing new roles for writing and reading. These counter-cultural thinkers not only placed scripture at the heart of religion; they also discovered how texts have the capacity to consolidate and shape robust reading-communities. *Why the Bible Began* is a majestic achievement, one worthy of wide attention!

- The Imam Abdullah Antepli, Vice-President and Provost, Duke University

"A revelation, even to those who have read the Bible for a lifetime! We witness how in the aftermath of catastrophic defeat and devastation, the biblical authors fashioned a new form of political community–one in which a shared body of texts provided common ground for deeply divided communities and the marginalized in their communities. At the heart of the Hebrew Bible is, as Wright shows, not a creed but a question: What does it mean to be a people? In our time of deepening divisions, both this question and the ways in which these ancient writers addressed it deserve renewed, and serious, attention."

- Robert M. Franklin, President Emeritus, Morehouse College

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An Alternative History of Scripture and Its Origins

Jacob L. Wright

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In memory of my mother, whose untimely death ten years ago left an unfillable void.

Die großen Worte aus den Zeiten, da
Geschehn noch sichtbar war, sind nicht für uns.
Wer spricht von Siegen? Überstehn ist alles.
– Rainer Maria Rilke, *Requiem,* 1908

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Acknowledgments

My objective in writing this book has been to demonstrate that the Bible's achievements as an innovative and ambitious "project of peoplehood" go unappreciated when readers reduce it to a moral guide (even for those who deem it a reliable one). I have many to thank for encouraging me to start the project and supporting me along the way. They include great mentors and colleagues such as Profs. Carol Newsom and Marc Brettler, and extraordinary students at the Candler School of Theology and Emory University. From the inception to the completion, the project owes much to the vision and wisdom of the indefatigable Beatrice Rehl of Cambridge University Press. Vinithan Sedumadhavan and his team, as well as Kaye Barbaro, provided excellent editorial oversight. The feedback from unnamed peer reviewers proved to be unusually rich and helpful. Likewise, the writings of Prof. Mark Brett have been productive stimulants for my thinking over the years. *Shukran* to "Abraham Kahn Amon," Thing Thing Lee, and Leslie Flores for their help in improving many chapters. Countless conversations with members from our Coursera course (www.coursera.org/learn/bible-history) have greatly enriched this work, and I look forward to learning from these new friends and acquaintances in the years ahead. Finally, it is a particular honor to acknowledge the contributions of Prof. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, whose courage and "stubborn hope" stand out in our cynical age. Few scholars can read biblical texts as brilliantly as Prof. Eskenazi, and much of what is found on the following pages is indebted directly to conversations with her and her work.

Prologue

After a long and brutal siege, Babylon's armies finally conquered Jerusalem in the summer of 586 BCE – some 2,600 years ago. The famine had become unbearable for the city's inhabitants, and when Judah's king attempted to escape, enemy forces seized and sent him to Babylon bound in bronze fetters. Having already devastated the countryside, they proceeded to plunder the palace, torch the temple, and demolish many private homes. Much of the population had died from starvation and disease, while many others had fled to neighboring lands. Among the few who remained, the Babylonians exiled the elites, while executing those who organized the resistance to their rule.

To all appearances this was the end of a people who had flourished for many centuries. And it should have been the end: after imperial forces ravaged the region, Judah was destined to perish, along with the many other kingdoms that surrounded it.

But something surprising happened. Instead of vanishing from history, the vanquished gradually returned to their homeland, and under conditions of foreign rule, reconstituted their collective life. Without a king of their own, they built a new temple, even if it was not as grand as the one before. They also repaired Jerusalem's ramparts, restoring some semblance of their pride.

Their society was not what it once was. Without much of an infrastructure, and with a meager population, there was only so much they could achieve. Their resilience was nevertheless remarkable.

Yet what makes this historical moment truly momentous is what some in their midst achieved. Beset with many obstacles, and living in subsistence conditions, circles of scribes came together and created the most

influential corpus of literature the world has ever known. Over the past two millennia, these writings have had an immeasurable impact in the realm of not only religion and theology but also politics, directly informing the way many communities across the globe think of themselves as "peoples" and "nations."

After being razed to the ground, Jerusalem joined a long line of conquered capitals. While some recovered from the destruction, many did not. But as far as we can tell, none responded by fashioning the kind of elaborate and enduring monument to *their own* downfall that Jews call the "Tanakh," Christians the "Old Testament," and academics the "Hebrew Bible."[1]

Most defeated populations viewed their subjugation as a source of shame; they consigned it to oblivion, opting instead to extol the golden ages of the past. In the biblical corpus, however, defeat's presence is all pervasive. The generations of anonymous scribes who curated these writings reflected, in various and sundry ways, upon their people's collective failures, gathering the fragments of their diverse pasts and weaving them into a sweeping story of one people. In this epic narrative, they embedded ideals and aspirations that could bring together rival groups and form from them vibrant, enduring communities. They also collected prophecies, songs, laments, and wisdom for the edification and instruction of all their members.

The thread that ties together this body of writings is a question that was trailblazing at the time: What does it mean to be a people? Not a kingdom, city, clan, empire, or ethnicity, but a people. In other words, a national community that embraces many different cities, clans, ethnicities, and so on, and that may have kingdoms in their collective past, but that now – thanks to a new self-understanding, survival strategies, and institutions – does not depend on territorial sovereignty or statehood.

Focused on this foundational question, the library of books that we know as the Bible stands apart from other ancient writings, and we are hard pressed to find anything similar even from later times. Moreover, in contrast to the archives that archeologists discover throughout ancient

[1] In what follows, I will usually refer to this corpus of writings simply as "the Bible." The best English rendering of this corpus is Robert Alter's three-volume *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*.

West Asia and North Africa, the biblical collection was transmitted from generation to generation for the past 2,500 years.

The Bible's extraordinary character and long history of transmission beg basic questions: To what end was this corpus created? And why does it have its origins in a remote region of the ancient world, rather than at the centers of civilization? After all, these world powers not only did much to develop systems of writing and techniques of text production, but also boasted a military superiority and administrative expertise that enabled them to establish world empires. How is it, then, that the literary legacies of these leading civilizations were completely forgotten, while a body of writings from a conquered and colonized community survived?

When I pose these questions in churches and synagogues, the response I most frequently receive is: "The Bible exists because God wanted to reveal divine truth to us." My aim is not to challenge this conviction. But just as a wildlife biologist would not be satisfied with the response, "the leopard has spots because God wanted it that way," so as a historian, I want to know the more immediate reasons why the Bible was written at this particular time and place.

When I ask these same questions in non-confessional and secular settings, many assume that 1) the Bible originated as religious scripture and 2) most ancient religions required scriptures. Both assumptions are demonstrably false. Much of the Hebrew Bible has very little to do with religion or theology, and ancient religions managed very well without holy writ. Priests and temple musicians may have occasionally consulted manuals and compendia, yet a sacred text was rarely central to their rites and rituals. Thus, the New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman observes:

> For modern people intimately familiar with any of the major contemporary Western religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), it may be hard to imagine, but books played virtually no role in the polytheistic religions of the ancient Western world. These religions were almost exclusively concerned with honoring the gods through ritual acts of sacrifice. There were no doctrines to be learned, as explained in books, and almost no ethical principles to be followed, as laid out in books.[2]

[2] Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 2005, p. 19.

Ehrman points out that Christianity and Islam would not be "religions of the book" were it not for the Hebrew Bible. In view of the revolutionary changes that this corpus introduced to the practice of religion, the mystery of its why and wherefore becomes all the more crucial for us to explore.

Even if one is convinced that the biblical corpus was intended from the beginning to serve as sacred scripture for a religious community, there can be no denying a basic fact: no one produced something like it. Neither small kingdoms nor superpowers that conquered those kingdoms devoted their energies to composing a body of literature that asks what it means to be a people without a palace. The existence of the Bible, therefore, cannot to be taken for granted. It is a big riddle, and one that scholars have been reluctant to tackle.

I must confess that the Bible is not always to my liking. It is difficult to countenance a collection of writings that, in one of its laws, mandates capital punishment for a rebellious child (Deuteronomy 21:18–21). Even so, I cannot help but appreciate the thoroughgoing manner with which biblical authors responded to defeat and destruction by advancing a demotic agenda that gives power to the people.

These authors were professional scribes, and having devoted their lives to texts, they were convinced that a rich and often contradictory corpus of writings – which includes stories and songs, wisdom and laws – could attract a readership beyond their scribal circles. Experience and intuition told them that writing technologies had a yet unimagined political potential. Although they may not (always) have been conscious of what they were doing, their collaborative efforts produced a new, and enduring, form of community.

Without a doubt, this body of writings belongs to humanity's greatest achievements. In comparison to imposing cities and temples that celebrate military might, the Bible constitutes a "movable monument," one that foregrounds political failure and military defeat while simultaneously celebrating the lives of common folk and their families. Whereas cities and temples eventually disintegrated in the sands of time (if they were not first demolished by their enemies), this literary monument became the cornerstone for world religions and political communities that still shape the course of history. In responding to catastrophe and

rupture, its architects brought to light a new wisdom: the notion that a people is greater than the kings who govern it, and that a nation will survive conquest when all of its members can claim a piece of the pie and therefore have a reason to take an active part in its collective life.

Sixteen-hundred years before Edward Gibbon published *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the Syrian satirist Lucian was already contemplating the extinction of ancient civilizations. Referring to what was once the world's largest city, he wrote in the second century CE: "Nineveh has already perished, and not a trace of it now remains. As for Babylon, the city of the magnificent towers and the great circuit-wall, soon it too will be like Nineveh, and men will look for it in vain."[3]

Kingdoms and empires come and go, yet some communities have managed to survive. Their stories demand our attention just as much as, if not more than, the military powers that have long preoccupied Western historians. This book explores how one ancient community, in the aftermath of defeat and devastation, reinvented itself, and in the process, discovered many survival strategies that we take for granted today – and many more that we have yet to learn.

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[3] Lucian's *Charon* 23 quoted from Jack Finegan, *The Archaeology of the New Testament*, p. 21, with further references to Strabo and Pliny.