How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel

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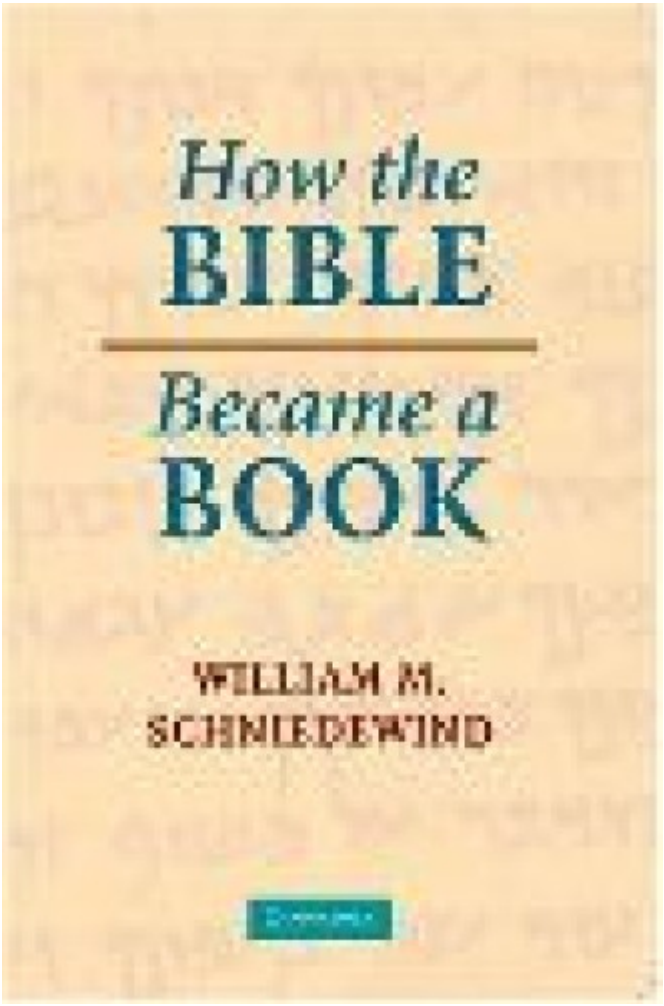
In Review



How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel

William M. Schniedewind
Cambridge University Press

It is easy for us to underestimate the aura that surrounded a written text in the ancient world. As you read this review, you are performing something that once seemed like magic: converting signs on a printed page into human speech. Most ancient people did not have that capacity, even those living in societies like Mesopotamia, Egypt or Greece, societies that created famous texts. Most people could live well without recourse to written documents. And when “nonliterates” did encounter a scribe or priest who could read a scroll, they were awestruck. Writing was seen as a god-given way of having the age-old words of the gods and of long-dead people speak in the present.

How, then, did ancient Israel (and later Judaism and Christianity as well) end up with a religion focused on the reading and study of holy texts? When and how did the Israelites start to write down their central traditions? Why did they make the move from a mostly oral world to one that featured such a widespread focus on the written text? Remarkably few scholars have asked these sorts of questions. William Schniedewind aims to fill this gap.

He is well equipped for the task. A rising and respected scholar, Schniedewind is professor of biblical studies and chair of the department of Near Eastern languages and cultures at the University of California, Los Angeles. In this and previous publications he demonstrates a thorough grasp of the archaeology of ancient Israel, the history of the Hebrew language, and the development of biblical historical literature. Here he synthesizes the research of many others to develop a comprehensive story of the writing of the Old Testament.

The result is a grand narrative of the development of scripture in Israel. Schniedewind argues that past scholarship was mistaken in assigning massive parts of the biblical histories to the time of David and Solomon. Writing did not become prominent in Judah until 200 years later, in the eighth-century setting of Isaiah and Hezekiah, a time when cities like Jerusalem were expanding rapidly and writing had become more widespread throughout the Near East. At this point ancient Israel first wrote down its central traditions, starting with priestly and wisdom texts (e.g., Prov. 25:1), an early version of biblical history (extending to Hezekiah), and parts of what later became the books of Isaiah, Micah, Hosea and Amos.

The next century, the time of Josiah and Jeremiah, was even more critical. Building on archaeological evidence, Schniedewind argues that “writing spread throughout

society," and this enabled "one of the most profound cultural revolutions in human history," a new "orthodoxy of the text" that would significantly shape Western civilization. Starting with the book of Deuteronomy, ancient Israel emphasized the authority of texts as opposed to the authority of the priests or the—soon to be destroyed—monarchy. Priests and court officials continued to influence the writing and shaping of texts even when Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylonia and its elite carried into exile. Nevertheless, a crucial shift had occurred. Holy scripture achieved an authority in Israel that would persist in its spiritual heirs, even amidst the resurgence of oral authority in both early Christianity and early Judaism.

Schneidewind's argument amounts to a significant rewriting of the history of the development of the Bible. Certain aspects of his book are already controversial. For example, some—including this reviewer—argue that Schniedewind overemphasizes the shift from the oral to the written, since the sorts of written documents found in the Bible were often also performed, taught and even preserved orally in ancient cultures. They were both oral *and* written documents.

Moreover, Schniedewind's dramatic reference to a "profound cultural revolution" can obscure the fact that literacy remained highly limited in ancient Israel, even if a wider spectrum of officials learned to read in the late pre-exilic period on which he focuses. Even then most ancient Israelites would only have experienced the Bible orally. Finally, though Schniedewind is persuasive in critiquing the excessive emphasis on dating the Bible to early or late periods, he is not as convincing in locating the vast bulk of the composition in a single, two-century period. The debate about the origins of the Bible has taken an interesting turn, and Schniedewind's book represents an accessible entry point for listening in on the debate.