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INTRODUCTION

A New Approach to the Bible

This book proposes a different way of understanding the formation of the Hebrew Bible based on apprenticeship learning and scribal communities.¹ Over the past forty years I have studied biblical literature, ancient inscriptions, and archaeology. From these studies grew the realization that communities, and not so much individuals, are central to the formation of the Bible. To be specific, I am speaking of scribal communities. These are the people who wrote, copied, collected, collated, edited, and preserved biblical literature. In order to understand the Bible, we need to understand the people who wrote it and the communities in which they worked.

In proposing an apprenticeship model for the formation of biblical literature, I am taking aim at the individualistic model of biblical authorship. The view of biblical *authors* is anachronistic. It transports modern views of writing and authorship back into the distant past.² It assumes the conveniences of modern technologies like printing presses and the industrial production of paper that make writing and books a much easier, more accessible, and more private enterprise. But producing and distributing literature in antiquity relied heavily on scribal communities and social infrastructure. A scribe could not just sit and write and then distribute their work. Writing and literature as well as their distribution and dissemination relied on communities.

In this book, I will emphasize the communities, not the individuals. I do not mean to completely dismiss individual authors, and we will find

a few of them along the way. Rather, I believe we need to acknowledge that scribal communities were the primary setting for the creation, preservation, and transmission of literature. We have a tendency to interject our own worldview into the formation of the Bible, in other words, a worldview of authors and individuals. Scribal communities are a sharply different model of biblical authorship than assumed by the old question: Who wrote the Bible?³ That question looked to individuals. Moses wrote the Pentateuch; Ezra edited it. David wrote Psalms. Solomon wrote Proverbs. The need to assign authors to ancient Israelite literature first began in the Hellenistic period. The Greeks had their authors—Homer, Herodotus, Plato, Aristotle—and as classical Jewish literature entered a Hellenistic world, Jews began to feel the need to assign authors to their literature. But authors were not part of the ancient near eastern context of the Bible. Rather, it was a Hellenistic idea that was injected into the history of the Bible in its reception rather than its production. A book like Genesis, for example, gives no hint of an author. And this is true for most other biblical books. Even the books of the prophets, like the Book of Isaiah, actually do not ascribe authorship to the prophet. The prophet is a character in the book, not the author. Thus, the book is introduced as “the vision that *Isaiah* saw” and not “the words that *I* wrote” (Isa 1:1). Likewise, books like Samuel are named after characters in the story rather than the authors of the texts. But we will get to this part of the story of the scribes later. For now, it is enough to point out that contrary to our expectations, the Bible itself is not a book that usually names authors. This is almost certainly because it was collected and produced by communities.

The emphasis on communities, as opposed to authors, fits well with the increasing dissatisfaction with the Documentary Hypothesis among biblical scholars.⁴ For more than a century, the Documentary Hypothesis, which envisioned four documents (and by extension four authors) to the Pentateuch—J, E, D, and P for the Yahwistic, Elohist, Deuteronomistic, and Priestly authors—reigned supreme. In 1977, a German professor, Rolf Rendtorff, wrote a critique of the hypothesis, suggesting that instead of *documents*, we should think about the *processes* and *traditions* that created the Pentateuch.⁵ His work was largely responsible for

introducing significant cracks into the old scholarly consensus, but a new consensus has not yet emerged.⁶ Even as the influence of the Documentary Hypothesis has waned, the framework of authors and their documents still influences the field. It is not only a Hellenistic way of thinking about literature and authorship; it is the way that we operate in the modern world. But the world of ancient Israel was quite different—it was a world inhabited more by scribal communities and less by authors.

To be fair, the Documentary Hypothesis always recognized the problem with authors.⁷ For example, in Julius Wellhausen's seminal work, *Die Composition des Hexateuch*, he suggested a long history of composition among the different sources—for example, J¹, J², J³ and an E¹, E², and E³—each of which reflected a stage in the composition of the sources that implied an ongoing scribal community as opposed to a series of different authors. Hermann Gunkel summarized it nicely in suggesting that “J and E are not individual writers but rather schools of narrators.”⁸ Unfortunately, biblical scholarship has tended to fall back into the convenient concept and terminology of individual authors.

This book also reflects my own personal journey with the biblical text. I was especially influenced by studying archaeology, geography, and languages in Jerusalem. I came to Israel fresh out of college, just twenty-one years old. I was particularly struck by one teacher who repeatedly admonished me, “Bill, you’ve got to think with your feet on the ground.” It was his way of telling me to get out of my ivory tower. Part of this meant that I spent many days wandering around in an old Land Rover, hiking along wadis, and climbing up and down tells (artificial mounds of biblical cities). Today, in my air-conditioned university office in front of my laptop and surrounded by books, it is easy to lose perspective. But the ancient Israelites did not live in books, they lived along the dusty highways and byways of the land. Digging into the archaeology of places, walking the geography of the land, and reading the inscriptions of the ancients began to put my feet on the ground and helped me to think practically about how biblical literature came to be.

Thinking with your feet on the ground may upset some religious approaches to the Bible, which take it as the “word of God”—not of

scribes. I didn't intend this book to be a broadside against a religious reading of the text—against divine inspiration, if one believes. Rather, I merely intend to take the human side of scripture quite seriously. Only the most conservative religious traditions adhere to a “dictation theory” of scripture and thereby eliminate any human agency. This book is interested in the human agency of those who created and preserved biblical literature.

Thinking with your feet on the ground will also upend some popular scholarly conceptions. For example, scholars often write about and refer to a “wisdom school.”⁹ But there was no such thing. It projects ourselves—us scholars and our experiences—onto ancient Israel. This vision of ancient scribes started by identifying a genre of literature, wisdom literature, and then conjured a school of sages that created the literature.¹⁰ Sounds like a bunch of university professors wrote the Bible! In this instance, I do not think that I am misguided in suggesting that we often project ourselves onto the ancient world. Scribal communities must have social locations, but there was no social institution akin to a university for the “sages” of ancient Israel. A wisdom *school of sages* has no practical grounding in ancient Israelite society. Wisdom literature is merely a genre of curriculum studied by all scribes. There were no formal “schools.” There were no classrooms. Fledgling scribes learned in apprenticeships. Scribes were attached to one another, and they were attached to institutions like the palace or the temple or to social groups like the military, merchants, or landowners.

Scribes were not venerable wise men hanging out with their books. Everyone needs to “pay the rent,” and scribes were no exception. Learning to write was a skill associated with professions, not sages in ivory towers. Sometimes scholarly descriptions of these sages are almost comical. For example, Gunkel described the sages as men with long beards who sat together at the town gate exchanging the proverbial sayings from their youth surrounded by eager young people.¹¹ And yet we now know that wisdom and proverbial sayings were a fundamental genre of educational literature used in training all scribes.¹² Perhaps old men did sit at the town gate holding forth. But “the Sage” was not a title in ancient Israel in the way that “the Priest,” “the Prophet,” or “the Scribe”

could be used as a title.¹³ Priests and prophets were professions, but sage was not. All scribes, whether they were royal, military, temple, or mercantile, studied and learned proverbial sayings as part of the standard early scribal curricula; there were no “wisdom” scribes. There were no sages wandering around independent of social institutions like the court, the bureaucracy, the market, or the temple.

If we want to understand the formation of biblical literature, we need to think about the locations where scribes actually worked in ancient Jerusalem, Judah, and Israel. It is important to distinguish these three terms and locations—Jerusalem, Judah, and Israel. Jerusalem is where biblical literature was ultimately collected, edited, and preserved. But Hebrew literature made its way to Jerusalem from other locations in Israel and Judah. Although the term “Israel” became a general term to refer to both the northern and southern kingdoms—to a united people—it originally referred more specifically to the northern kingdom with its capital in Samaria (and earlier with capitals in Shechem and Tirzah). In this book, I use “Israel” to refer more narrowly to the northern kingdom, and “Judah” to refer to the southern kingdom. Literature comes to Jerusalem from Samaria and perhaps Bethel in the north as well as from the countryside of Judah, cities like Lachish as well as smaller villages. Literature also came back from exile and diaspora, from places in Babylonia and Egypt, to Jerusalem, where it gets collected and edited in the Jerusalem Temple. Finally, we should not forget that the Pentateuch also went out from Jerusalem to the north, where it became a foundation document for the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim when it was built in the fifth century BCE.

We also need to think practically about how scribes actually learned and worked. This began with relationships—master scribes and their apprentices. These master scribes were first employees of the government bureaucracy. They had official positions. They trained their apprentices—junior scribes. And while learning and working together, they created tight-knit communities. We can call them *guilds*, but that term can regrettably conjure up medieval associations (more on this in the next chapter). Although I do not mean to equate the medieval *guilds* with ancient scribal *communities*, the term *guild* is a useful

synonym. In fact, I like scribal *guild* because it has more of a tangible sense than *community*. Scribes did form tangible associations while being apprenticed together and then sharing a vocation.

There were no schools in ancient Israel, at least not in the formal sense. Schools have buildings. Schools are public and institutional. In ancient Israel, however, learning was more like home schooling, to use a useful, if inexact, modern comparison. Scribes learned their trade through apprenticeships, and a master scribe could take on several apprentices. In the Book of Isaiah, the prophet refers to them as *limmûdim*, which can be translated as “students” or “disciples.” These communities of scribal disciples grew out of the apprenticeship learning model employed in ancient scribal education. Thus, the Bible was formed and passed along on a collaborative model rather than on an individualistic model of learning and knowledge transfer. This has profound implications, as this model of learning created communities that created the literature of ancient Israel.

Scribal communities were related to professions, and writing was a skill learned for these professions. Learning to read and write was a trade, like being a potter learning to throw pots or a metalsmith crafting jewelry, tools, or weapons. There were many trades that used writing, including government bureaucrats, soldiers, priests, prophets, artisans, and merchants. These communities transmitted learning and knowledge, replicating themselves and transferring traditions and skills to the next generation. The scribal communities who wrote the Bible were no exception.

This book is the story of the ancient Hebrew scribal communities that gave us the Bible. It charts the emergence, development, multiplication, survival, and adaptation among the communities that produced the Hebrew Bible. Herein I unabashedly try to simplify the formation of the Bible by viewing it through the lens of scribal communities. Of course, everything is more complex and nuanced in real life, but it helps to have a working model. Scribal communities will be a way of simplifying the formation of biblical literature. The temptation will be to multiply and fragment the scribal communities themselves—in other words, to individualize them. However, the anthropological literature

on “communities of practice,” together with the archaeological and epigraphic evidence, should serve as a hedge against this temptation. I will insist that every scribal community has to have a tangible social context. Scholars are wont to endlessly multiply the “sources” and “redactions” of biblical literature, but the scribal community model requires tangible social contexts that will rein in this inclination. As a result, we will be able to weave together the story of the various communities of ancient scribes that should serve as a transformative template for the composition of biblical literature.

The apprenticeship model was certainly not unique to ancient Israel or Hebrew scribes. Scholars readily acknowledge that ancient near eastern scribes learned in apprenticeship-type learning contexts. For example, Dominique Charpin’s *Reading and Writing in Babylon* outlines the extensive evidence for “apprenticeships in the art of the scribe.”¹⁴ Likewise, Niv Allon and Hana Navrátilová’s book *Ancient Egyptian Scribes* details case studies of different types of Egyptian scribes that provide a window into how apprenticeship worked in the education of different types of Egyptian scribes.¹⁵ Studies of ancient Israelite scribes like Christopher Rollston’s *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel* also acknowledge the role of apprenticeship in the education of scribes, but the observation is made in passing.¹⁶ In James Crenshaw’s study on *Education in Ancient Israel*, he actually misrepresents scribal education when he writes, “In Egypt and Mesopotamia, where complex writing systems existed, scribal training occurred in official schools.”¹⁷ The word “schools” is problematic even in Egypt and Mesopotamia. It tends to give us misleading mental images based on our own current educational experiences. To be fair, Crenshaw was using this statement to contrast the lack of evidence for “schools” in ancient Israel as well as to discuss two different periods for the development of Hebrew “schools”—the days of David and Solomon (tenth century BCE) or the times of Hezekiah and Isaiah (eighth century BCE). But there were no “schools” in our sense of the word in ancient Israel at any time. Nor is it a useful model elsewhere in the near east. Moreover, as I have shown in my book *The Finger of the Scribe*, the Hebrew scribal curriculum was already developing in the early Iron Age (that is, by the eleventh century

BCE). This curriculum for scribal communities served fledgling scribes who learned with masters as apprentices, not in schools as students.

This book will streamline the story of scribal communities into a simple narrative. First of all, I narrow the story by focusing on the emergence and history of Hebrew language scribal communities. In addition, my interest in the formation of biblical literature will keep my focus on Jerusalem and Judah because that is where biblical literature coalesced over the years. Although my interest is in the formation of biblical literature, I think it is useful to approach the question from the outside looking in—that is, from external evidence gleaned from Hebrew inscriptions, comparative evidence, and archaeology. The working model for this streamlined story comes from anthropological theory about education, especially the apprenticeship model of education. Although my use of this model will focus on the external archaeological, inscriptional, and comparative evidence, I will supplement and illustrate it through the Hebrew Bible.

The rise of new scribal communities is one of the most important developments for the formation of biblical literature discussed in this book. Up until the eighth century, the state was the main patron for scribes. But in the wake of the Assyrian empire, urbanization and globalization encouraged the spread of writing to different sectors of society. Writing became more than just an administrative tool; it also developed as a political, economic, and religious tool. Various sectors of society took advantage of this developing tool. New scribal communities developed and cultivated their own literatures, traditions, and forms of propaganda. Eventually, the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and Judah curtailed these other scribal communities. In the wake of destruction and rebuilding, the priests and the temple emerged as the leaders of a restored Judean scribal community in Jerusalem. They collected and preserved the written traditions from the Iron Age, but their own writings focused on the temple and on the reshaping of Jewish identity and community in their Persian and Hellenistic context, bringing us to the end of the narrative account of Hebrew scribal communities. By focusing on these scribal communities, I offer a simple and powerful framework for understanding the formation of biblical literature.

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