

Scribal Culture
and the Making of the Hebrew Bible

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INTRODUCTION

Who wrote the Bible? The question is nearly as old as the Bible itself. Jewish sages, quoted in the Talmud (*Baba Bathra*, 15a), were already asking it, and it still echoes today in the minds of scholars and in the titles of textbooks.¹ For as long as the Bible has had the status of sacred book, people have been intrigued by its origins.

The Bible that this book is concerned with is the Hebrew Bible, adopted by the Christian church as the Old Testament. Its origins go back to early Israel. It is something of a paradox that the Israelites, steeped as they were in an oral culture, should leave a book as their legacy to the world. Their own world was one without books. Reading and writing were restricted to a professional elite; the majority of the population was nonliterate. Even if this observation seems perfunctory, it needs to be made, since modern readers of the Bible are prone to project their own book culture on the people of the Bible. Though Judaism has been defined as a “religion of the book,” the book in question stems from a culture of the spoken word.

If we are to understand the making of the Hebrew Bible, we must familiarize ourselves with the scribal culture that produced it. That culture was the culture of a literate elite. The scribes who manufactured the Bible were professional writers affiliated to the temple of Jerusalem.

They practiced their craft in a time in which there was neither a trade in books nor a reading public of any substance. Scribes wrote for scribes. To the public at large, the books of the Bible were icons of a body of knowledge accessible only through the oral instruction presented by religious experts. The text of the Hebrew Bible was not part of the popular culture. The Bible was born and studied in the scribal workshop of the temple. In its fundamental essence, it was a book of the clergy.

Most of those involved in the making of the Bible left neither a name nor a biography. We do not know them individually. We can identify their milieu as that of the scribal elite, and it is that milieu that holds the key to the origins of the Bible. It can be circumscribed more narrowly as that of the scribal workshop of the Second Temple, active in the period between 500 and 200 B.C.E. The propagation of the books that were to constitute the Bible originates with the same institution. The scribes we will be looking at were scholars and teachers: they wrote, edited, copied, gave public readings, and interpreted. If the Bible became the Word of God, it was due to their presentation. Both the production and the promotion of the Hebrew Bible were the work of the scribes. The story of the making of the Bible is the story of the scribes behind the Bible.

Evidence: Internal, External, Comparative

The evidence on which the case for the Bible as a product of the scribal workshop must be built is of three kinds: some of it is internal, in the Bible itself; some external, illuminating the Bible from outside; and some comparative. It is essential to take these three types of evidence together. No one piece is by itself conclusive; in combination, their witness is compelling.

The *internal* evidence consists primarily in the unintentional traces of scribal involvement exhibited in the text of the Bible. Such evidence is to be sharply distinguished from the explicit references to authorship, textual fixation, and transmission. While the latter testimony deserves a careful assessment, it is intentional and therefore subject to caution.

Witnesses frame the truth as they see fit, and the same is true of superscriptions, colophons, and other text-related observations. Thus the data provided in superscriptions to the prophetic books are quite misleading if they are interpreted in terms of actual authorship; Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other prophets did not write the books that the superscriptions attribute to them. The clues we must look for are those traditionally associated with the redaction criticism of the Bible: editorial expansions, scribal annotations, seams and incongruities in the text, and the like.

When I speak of *external* evidence, I refer to extrabiblical material from the time of the Bible that has the potential to shed light on its making. This material is not comparative but has a direct bearing on the people of the Bible, their history and institutions, and the development of the biblical text. Oftentimes the information provided by epigraphic discoveries, such as the Samaria papyri or the texts from the Jewish colony in Elephantine (Egypt), illuminates the background of the Bible. At times the accounts of later writers, such as Josephus, add pertinent data to the picture. In some cases, most notably that of the scrolls from the caves near Qumran, the extrabiblical evidence throws into relief the history of the very text of the Bible. In the latter respect, the Greek translation of the Bible, traditionally known as the Septuagint, must also be taken into account. Parabiblical writings, known as the Apocrypha, are an important source of information as well.

If the present study distinguishes itself from most other contributions on the subject, it is mainly because of the extensive use it makes of the available *comparative* evidence. The Bible is not the only collection of writings from the ancient Near East. Babylonians, Egyptians, and Syrians produced a wealth of written texts as well, canonized by virtue of their secular transmission through schools and libraries. These texts are comparable to the Hebrew Bible in more than one respect. Many of them had the status of revelation transmitted by a god or a famous ancestor. They commanded the respect that written texts often command in oral cultures. The very notions of books and authorship were very different from what they are today. The writings of the ancient Near

East were created in a world in which there were neither books nor authors in the modern sense of those terms. Instead of books, there was the stream of tradition; instead of authors, there were scribes.

Once it is recognized that the Hebrew Bible is a product of the scribal workshop, the written evidence from the rest of the Near East becomes particularly significant on account of the vast amount of data on the scribal culture of the times. Two centuries of archaeology and deciphering have given us unprecedented access to the world of the Babylonian and Egyptian scribes. Their recruitment, training, career possibilities, social standing, professional identity, and the like can now be reconstructed in detail on the basis of reliable evidence. Such evidence is especially welcome in view of the dearth of data on the scribes of the Hebrew Bible. By good fortune, the scribal culture of the ancient Near East was anything but parochial: texts and traditions circulated internationally, scribes moved around; the scribal spirit was cosmopolitan. Evidence on scribal culture in Mesopotamia and Egypt, then, is often pertinent to scribal culture in Judah as well.

Taken by itself, each type of evidence is lopsided and might give rise to biased reconstructions. When not informed by external data, the internal evidence may easily get caught up in the circular reasoning by which a given theory frames or even creates the evidence. External evidence, on the other hand, is by definition circumstantial. We cannot use data that are not available; the risk of general inferences from particular data that happen to be extant is real. And comparative evidence may be overrated and lead to a kind of blueprint thinking or “patternism” that does not respect the unique features of the scribal culture behind the Bible. It is necessary to be aware of the potential dangers of using one type of evidence in isolation from the others. If the reconstruction defended in this book is to stand, it needs to be based on the combined witness of the three different types of evidence.

Plan of the Book

My investigation in this volume will follow a trajectory of four successive stages. Starting with a reconnaissance of the role of writing and au-

thorship in antiquity, each stage builds on the outcome of the previous one, ending with an analysis of the historical process by which the books of the Bible were canonized as the Word of God.

Phase one of the investigation explores the place and function of written texts in the ancient Near East, and more specifically in Israel. Chapter 1 is devoted to the notion of books in antiquity, and Chapter 2 deals with the concept of authorship. An analysis of the available data leads me to conclude that the modern concept of books is unsuited to describe the written production from the ancient Near East. Prior to the Hellenistic era—that is, before ca. 300 B.C.E.—there were no books. There were documents, literary compilations, myths, collections of prayers, ritual prescriptions, chronicles, and the like, but no books, no trade in books, and no reading public of any substance. Written texts were the province of professionals. Insofar as literature reached a larger audience, it was by way of oral performance. To define the Bible as a collection of books, as implied in the Greek designation *biblia*, is an anachronism. The Bible is a repository of tradition, accumulated over time, that was preserved and studied by a small body of specialists.

Nor is the modern notion of authorship adequate to describe the realities of literary creation in antiquity. Books have authors, but the writers of texts of the ancient Near East are, as a rule, anonymous. That fact need not imply that there were no authors, simply that those who wrote the texts were not authors in our sense of the word. The authors of antiquity were artisans rather than artists. Our preoccupation with originality would have been foreign to them, nor did they care about intellectual property. What they admired was skill, technical mastery. The texts they produced were often coproductions—if not by a collective of scribes, then by means of a series of scribal redactions. In most cases, then, the quest for an individual author is pointless. The making of the Hebrew Bible is owed to the scribal class rather than a limited number of individuals. We should not be looking for authors but seeking to penetrate the mind-set of the scribal elite.

Phase two of the investigation takes its cue from the fact that all written records are scribal products. To discover the origins of the Bible, we

must therefore study the scribal milieu and its modes of text production. Three chapters deal with these matters. Two of them explore the world of the scribes: one on the basis of texts from Mesopotamia and Egypt, the other on the basis of the biblical material. The comparative evidence presented in Chapter 3 provides a quite detailed reconstruction of the scribal milieu. Recruited from the social upper class, scribes went through years of training before they exercised their profession. Those who followed an advanced training became the scholars of antiquity. They were responsible for the creation, preservation, and interpretation of the classic texts of their time. Their professional center, materially as well as spiritually, was the workshop of the temple.

Chapter 4, on the scribes behind the Bible, locates them primarily among the clergy of the time. This identification is important for various reasons. It connects the scribes responsible for the Bible with the temple, and indicates a specialization within the priesthood focusing on writing and scholarship. The flourishing of scribal culture that produced the Hebrew Bible occurred in Judah in the Second Temple period, more specifically in the Persian and the Hellenistic eras (ca. 500–200 B.C.E.). There was an intimate link between the scribal profession as it took shape in the Persian era and the application and interpretation of the written Law (the Torah). Scribes were more than lawyers, however. Their training familiarized them with the works known as the Prophets and with the Writings as well. The Jewish scribes developed into the scholars of the nation and the guardians of its literary heritage.

Scribes were craftsmen. In their dealings with texts, they applied the methods and techniques of their craft. Chapter 5 looks at the scribal modes of text production. Once again the comparative evidence is crucial for the recovery of scribal practices in Judah. The Hebrew Bible as we know it is the result of a series of scribal interventions; previous textual stages have not been preserved, with a few exceptions known mainly through the discoveries from Qumran. Matters present themselves differently for cuneiform literature. The textual history of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example, can be traced through copies from successive periods spanning altogether more than two millennia. Edito-

rial techniques such as expansion, conflation, substitution, resumption, and harmonization are all illustrated in the Mesopotamian texts. The inventory based on this evidence facilitates the understanding of similar procedures reflected in the text of the Hebrew Bible.

In phase three of the investigation, the insights gained in phase two are applied to the Hebrew Bible. Two case studies illuminate the way in which the books of the Hebrew Bible took shape: Chapter 6 is devoted to Deuteronomy, Chapter 7 to an analysis of the textual history of Jeremiah. Since these two textual bodies stand for the Law and the Prophets, respectively, they are well suited to illustrate the making of the Hebrew Bible as a whole. Both Deuteronomy and Jeremiah exhibit successive layers of scribal intervention. The final compositions reflect the involvement of generations of scribes. While displaying great respect for the text as they had received it, they added their interpretations, framework, and other textual expansions. Deuteronomy was one of the first books of the Hebrew Bible to reach its final editorial shape, in the early Persian period. The Jeremiah tradition, on the other hand, was still in a state of flux in the Hellenistic era.

Phase four turns from the production process of the Hebrew Bible toward the factors that might explain its impact. Two concepts are of paramount importance in this connection: revelation and canon. Each is the subject of a separate chapter. In Chapter 8 the concept of revelation is shown to be as old as the Bible itself, harking back to the practices of divination and prophecy. What is new is the application of the concept to a collection of written texts. There are precedents for the phenomenon in Mesopotamia and Egypt, where the concept of revelation was invoked to buttress the authority of received texts. The Jewish scribes, too, used the concept as a means of persuasion, but it was not their only strategy. Texts might also be presented as a legacy from famous ancestors from a venerable past, to enhance their authority with an audience that might otherwise be reluctant to accept them.

The clinching factor in the transformation of the writings of the Hebrew scribes into the Word of God was the canonization of the biblical literature, described in Chapter 9. Canonization is an act of authority

by which a limited number of texts are imposed upon a particular community as binding for all members, for all times. The biblical canon is typically a list of works, as their combination into one volume (the one Bible) does not occur until the birth of the codex. This list is closed. It is comparable to the catalogue of a library or the curriculum of a school but is nonetheless a category in its own right.

Scribal Culture and the Bible

The impact of the Hebrew Bible in the history of Western civilization is a triumph of scribal culture. Scribal culture did not create the religious appetite, but it did find a way to cater to that appetite with the invention of a book. The successful promotion of the Bible as the Word of God changed the nature of religious devotion. Pilgrimage, fasting, and sacrifice were not abandoned but took their place alongside the chanting and studying of texts, as a major means of personal edification and of pleasing God. Reading became an act of devotion.

If the origins of the Bible cannot be solved in terms of authors, the story behind the Bible is not for that reason any less fascinating. The Bible is an exceptional book, not because of some exceptional minds that wrote it but because of the exceptional way in which it came into being. Being a product of the scribal workshop, the Bible owes its existence to generations of scribes, each new one continuing the work of previous ones. This study is dedicated to investigating the universe of those scribes: their social role and status, their training, the arts of their craft, their ways of thinking; in brief, scribal culture. Whereas the individual scribes made themselves invisible in the texts they wrote, the Hebrew Bible is both a witness and a monument to their collective work.

BOOKS THAT ARE NOT BOOKS

Writing in the World of the Bible

We commonly think of the Bible as a book or a collection of books—and naturally so, one might argue: the very name of the Bible goes back to the Greek word *biblia*, for “books.”¹ Jewish writers referred to the Hebrew scriptures as “the books” (Dan 9:2) or “the holy books” (1 Macc 12:9) from the second century B.C.E. onward.² This has since become the accepted view of the Bible. It informs rabbinical discussions on the order and the authors of the biblical books, and explains our custom of speaking of the “Book of Genesis,” the “Book of Isaiah,” and the “Book of Job.”

However old and widespread the notion of the Bible as a series of books may be, though, it is a misleading concept. The books of the Bible are not books in the modern sense of the word; to see them as such distorts the historical reality. There were no books in ancient Israel. Books are a Hellenistic invention, born in a time of increasing literacy as schools and libraries spread around the Mediterranean and in the Near East. Since the bulk of the Bible predates the Hellenistic era, calling it a collection of books is an anachronism.

If the books of the Bible are not books in the modern sense of the term, then what are they? To answer that question we must investigate the role of writing in early Israel and its Near Eastern context.³ In this

chapter, I propose to do just that. I will compare the practices of literary production in pre-Hellenistic Palestine with those that were current in ancient Mesopotamia. Historically, two factors have had a decisive impact on the nature of written documents in the ancient Near East: first, the fact that the civilizations of the time were at their core oral cultures, literacy being the prerogative of an elite; and second, the material conditions of writing in antiquity, meaning the writing materials that were used and the labor that was involved in the physical production of texts. We will see that neither the cultural nor the material conditions for writing were conducive to the development of a book culture, and that the first Jewish books date from the Hellenistic era.

Literacy in the Ancient Near East

The great civilizations of antiquity were oral cultures. Though the figures differ depending on place and period, literacy was always restricted to a small segment of society. The Mesopotamians were the first humans to write, but less than 5 percent of the population was actually literate.⁴ In Egypt the rate of literacy was slightly higher than in Mesopotamia, but even the most generous estimates put it at no more than 7 percent of the population.⁵ In the classical world the situation was not much different. Greece had an overall literacy rate of about 10 percent, yet it was still predominantly an oral culture, rhetoric being the foundation and eloquence the aim of education.⁶

Determining the level of literacy in the ancient Near East is not a matter of merely accumulating percentages and figures.⁷ In the absence of incontrovertible evidence, estimated literacy rates fluctuate according to the motives, bias, and personal assumptions of modern scholars. Some authors exaggerate the presumed level of literacy whereas others tend to underrate it. Partly out of a reaction to the minimizing tendencies of earlier scholars, there is a modest trend toward higher estimates of literacy in antiquity.⁸ However, even if basic reading skills were more common in certain places and periods than generally assumed, it is doubtful whether this constituted widespread literacy. The ability to

decipher a letter, for instance, does not amount to an active command of the written tradition of a culture. “High literacy” was confined to a small group. For the majority of the population, word of mouth remained the principal channel of communication.

Whether the rate of literacy was higher in Israel than it was in Mesopotamia or Egypt is a matter of debate. While some authors are confident that writing was common practice in the lives of the Israelites,⁹ others suggest that literacy was confined to a minority of scribes and priests.¹⁰ The ideological overtones of the debate are hard to ignore.¹¹ However, the evidence suggests that the role of writing in Israel was about the same as elsewhere in the ancient Near East; the literacy rate was presumably similar to that in surrounding civilizations as well.

Some authors hold that the literacy rate in Palestine was higher than elsewhere because the Israelites used the alphabet. While it is true that the alphabetic script is considerably easier to learn than cuneiform or hieroglyphs, modern studies show that there is not an absolute correlation between the simplicity of the script and the level of literacy. If reading requires the mastery of some 3,000 signs, as in some logographic systems, the script is indeed an obstacle to popular literacy; but phonetic scripts, as once used in Mesopotamia and now in Japan, are not per se a greater deterrent to literacy than the alphabet.¹² The level of literacy depends on cultural values, social customs, and access to schooling more than on the ease with which a script can be mastered. The culture of the Israelites was predominantly oral. The ability to write down a name (Judg 8:14) or to read a letter (Lachish Letter 3) may have been quite common, but that does not mean Israel was a literate society. The transmission of cultural lore—stories of origins, legends of ancestors and heroes, dos and don’ts, professional skills and wisdom—was nearly always accomplished by word of mouth.

Written Texts for Oral Performance

The fact that the civilizations of antiquity were oral cultures had an impact on the texts that were committed to writing. In Babylonia and Is-

rael, writing was mostly used to support an oral performance.¹³ The native verbs for “reading” literally mean “to cry, to speak out loud” (Hebrew *qārāʾ*, Akkadian *šasû* and its by-form *šitassû*).¹⁴ These verbs reflect the way texts were used. Written documents were read aloud, either to an audience or to oneself. Silent reading was highly unusual. Even the student who read in solitude “muttered” his text (Ps 1:2; compare Acts 8:30). So when someone was urged to read something assiduously, the phrase was that he should not allow the text “to depart from his mouth” (Josh 1:8).¹⁵ Reading, in other words, was an oral activity.

Writing is a means of communication. In order for the message to reach its destination, however, the written text needed a voice. Texts were for the ears rather than the eyes; Isa 29:18 predicts a time in which also “the deaf will hear the words of a scroll [*sēper*].” Even such a mundane form of written communication as the letter usually required the intervention of someone who read its contents to the addressee. A messenger did not deliver the letter like a mailman; he announced its message, and the written letter served as aide-mémoire and means of verification. That is why Babylonian letters open with a formula addressed to the messenger: “To So-and-so speak as follows.” For the few nonprofessionals who were able to read, the effort would be such that they would memorize a letter. As a military commander from Lachish observes, not without some pride, “Also, when I get a letter, once I have read it, then I can recite it back in its entirety.”¹⁶

Other forms of communication in writing also needed the voice of a reader. For instance, in Mesopotamia and Egypt royal laws and decrees were promulgated through written texts. The reference to “those who write out evil decrees and compose iniquitous writings” in Isa 10:1 reflects this practice for Israel. Decrees were produced in numerous copies to be displayed in public places throughout the land, at city gates and temple gates, so as to inform the population. However, this alone would not have reached the general public. Dissemination was achieved through formal oral proclamation of these texts by appointed readers.¹⁷ Thus, in Israel, the royal decision to prohibit sacrifice in local temples in order to centralize worship in Jerusalem was communicated

to the population through copies of the decree that were posted at the gates and read out loud by public readers.¹⁸

The examples show that the invention of writing and the emergence of a written literature did not transform an oral culture overnight into a literate one. Writing has a profound impact on the intellectual development of a civilization, but so long as there is no industrial production of written texts, the spoken word remains the main channel of communication. Even the classic texts from Mesopotamia, familiar from the scribal curriculum, were designed for oral performance. The Old Babylonian tale of the Flood known as *Atrahasis* is not a book or an essay but a “song” (*zamāru*).

This my song is for your [i.e., the god Ea’s] praise.
May the Igigi-gods hear [it] and extol your greatness to one another.
I have sung of the Flood to all peoples: Hear!¹⁹

Almost a thousand years later, myths newly written still referred to themselves as “songs.” The epilogue to the *Song of Erra* specifies the rewards for those who promote the new composition:

In the sanctuary of the god who honors this song,
Abundance shall accumulate . . .
The singer who chants it shall not die from pestilence,
But his performance will be pleasing to king and prince.²⁰

Atrahasis and *Erra* illustrate that in Babylonia the products of creative writing could reach an audience only if a singer was willing to include them in his repertoire. Who but a few would have read the *Gilgamesh Epic*? The common people knew this work because they had heard it from the mouths of bards and singers.²¹

In Israel, written compositions were not produced for private reading either. Written texts reached their audience through oral delivery by a speaker. If prophets wrote—or had a secretary write—their message reached its audience through public readings. Habakkuk was ordered

to write his prophecy down so that a herald might broadcast his message.

Write down the prophecy,
And inscribe it clearly on the tablets,
So that a [town] crier may run with it.

Hab 2:2²²

Other instances of written prophecy had a similar goal. According to a narrative designed to authenticate the scroll of Jeremiah, Baruch the scribe wrote down the collected oracles of Jeremiah on a scroll. On a fast day, Baruch went to the temple and read these prophecies to the crowd of worshippers (Jer 36:1–10). Whether the narrative is historically accurate or not is beside the point; what matters is that it describes the custom of writing down texts with the intention of using them to give an oral performance.

Literary Style in Oral Cultures

Written for individual consumption by a solitary reader, books do not have to be read in one go. Their style and form allow the reader to take a break and then continue or to turn back and reread a few pages if he loses track. A book of this kind is not suitable for an oral performance. A story, a philosophical argument, or even a set of agricultural guidelines—any text with a linear plot and few redundancies—requires the kind of sustained attention an audience in an oral setting is unlikely to muster. Oral cultures dictate a particular style in written texts.²³

In Israel and Babylonia, texts were an extension, so to speak, of the oral performers.²⁴ This is not to say that all texts were in origin oral artifacts, but that the oral delivery of the texts determined their style, even if they had originated in writing. The traditional texts from Israel and Mesopotamia are full of the stylistic devices of oral performance such as rhythm, repetition, stock epithets, standard phrases, and plots consisting of interrelated but relatively independent episodes. This holds true for narrative texts as well as exhortatory texts. The pa-

triarchal stories in Genesis, just as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in Babylonian literature, consist of a string of episodes owing their unity to the principal protagonists of the various stories. Their disposition is paratactic rather than hypotactic; the style is “additive rather than subordinative.”²⁵

Exhortatory texts are similar. Both in the Bible and in Babylonia, moral instruction preserved the oral form of proverbs or succinct observations, collected into larger literary units on the basis of catchwords or subject matter. The style is “aggregative rather than analytic.”²⁶ Even Ben Sira, living in the second century B.C.E., continued to write like this. More philosophical works, such as Job and the *Babylonian Theodicy*, are not linear either; they progress by examining one issue from different angles.²⁷ Modern readers of these works, accustomed to the narrative structures of contemporary novels or the argumentative patterns of philosophical essays, are often left with the impression that no progress is being made at all.

Oral performance was not the only function of written texts in Israel and Babylonia. Writing also developed an archival function. Being first an aide-mémoire for messengers, heralds, and bards, texts came to be used secondarily as an extension or even a substitute for memory. Written texts could be used “for consultation,” to quote an expression frequently found in Babylonian colophons.²⁸ What you do not remember, you can look up in your text. The use of writing for reference is especially prominent in texts that have an encyclopedic character, as is the case with law codes and handbooks. Thus the epilogue to the *Laws of Hammurabi* describes the wronged citizen coming to Hammurabi’s stele to hear—from the mouth of a professional reader, presumably—his lawsuit and to examine his case.²⁹ In the reign of Esarhaddon, the exorcist Adadšumušur consulted his house library before communicating the significance of a particular omen to the king.³⁰

Law codes and handbooks have a common characteristic in that they are both compilations: the former of legal cases, the latter of omens, symptoms, formulas, and the like. Such biblical books as Leviticus, Psalms, and Proverbs have a similar structure: they are compilations,

respectively, of rules and rituals, hymns and prayers, and pithy sayings. The separate literary units are strung together like beads on the single thread of genre, purpose, protagonist, or presumed author. The historical books are collections of episodes, while the prophetic books are collections of oracles and supporting narratives. They are less obviously anthological than Proverbs, Psalms, or the books of laws and ritual prescriptions, yet they are as composite as those latter genres.

These observations challenge the assumption that each book of the Bible should be considered a carefully crafted whole with a plan that is reflected in all its parts. The books of the Bible were not designed to be read as unities. They rather compare to archives. A biblical book is often like a box containing heterogeneous materials brought together on the assumption of common authorship, subject matter, or chronology. Whatever literary unity these books possess was imposed by the editors and is, to some extent, artificial. The editors could rearrange, expand, or conflate the separate units at their disposal in such a way as to achieve the illusion of a single book with a single message.³¹

The Cost of Written Texts

The question this chapter seeks to answer is whether the early Israelites, and more generally the inhabitants of the Near East in pre-Hellenistic times, were familiar with books as we know them. Addressing the issue from a cultural perspective, we have to conclude that this cannot have been the case. So long as oral transmission dominated communication, there was no place for books.

It is also interesting to explore this issue by looking at the material aspects of text production. To most modern-day readers, a book is a physical object that you buy in a bookstore, carry home in a bag, read, and put on a bookshelf together with your other books. A book can cost less than a good meal and be manageable enough to hold in one hand, even if it is 500 pages long. The differences between books nowadays and writing in antiquity are important to identify because they affect our idea of the Bible as a book. Two differences are particularly im-

portant: the first concerns the labor involved in text production; the second pertains to the nature of the writing materials.

The origins of the modern book culture go back to the advent of the printing press. Until then, books were made by hand; the process was labor intensive, so the production costs were high. Since writing materials were expensive too, books were beyond the reach of an ordinary individual reader. Only when books came to be mass produced did they become a relatively cheap commodity. Affordable, available books created demand and triggered the development of a new reading culture. So long as written texts were relatively rare, there was little incentive for literacy.

On the situation before the invention of the printing press, the production circumstances of medieval books are quite instructive.³² A copyist in Paris needed, as a rule, one day for every two pages (or four columns) he wrote, which meant it took about four months to copy a substantial book.³³ Book prices varied widely, depending on the manuscript in question: the richly illuminated luxury books were at the one end of the continuum; excerpts for the use of students at the other. By modern standards, however, prices were often prohibitive; a book was indeed a treasure. While the costs of books did not prevent the existence of a robust and flourishing trade, it was confined to the upper classes. The possession of manuscripts was a sign of affluence and learning.

Compared with the prices of medieval books, the cuneiform tablets from Mesopotamia were relatively cheap. The clay the scribes wrote on was free; the production costs for works like *Gilgamesh* were simply labor costs. In the ancient Near East there were no books as we know them today, but scribes did produce book-length texts. The standard version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is about 3,000 lines long. Modern experiments by Assyriologists who have tried writing cuneiform themselves suggest that the ancient scribes would have needed less than a minute per line. This means that writing out the whole of *Gilgamesh* would have taken no more than fifty working hours—probably less.

An actual indication of the time involved in writing cuneiform tab-

lets can be gleaned from the colophons of the Old Babylonian copies of *Atrahasis* from Sippar. One Nūr-Aya copied the tablets while he was a junior scribe: tablet two on Shebat 28 in the eleventh year of Ammišaduqa; tablet one on Nisan 21, the next year; and tablet three in the month Iyyar of that same year.³⁴ He probably wrote the copies in his spare time, since the twenty-first and the twenty-eighth were holidays.³⁵ This demonstrates that a single day was all that was needed to produce a tablet of more than 400 lines.³⁶ Based on this evidence, a copy of *Gilgamesh* would require less than two weeks of work.

Since colophons often indicate the total number of lines on a tablet, it has been speculated that copyists were paid by the line.³⁷ However, there is no attendant evidence to support this assumption. In the third millennium, scribes received the same monthly wages as other male workers. By the first millennium their social status had risen and their remuneration was above average. Assuming a scribe was paid about twice as much as those in most other professions, a complete copy of *Gilgamesh* would cost a month's wages for an average worker. The fact that scribes sometimes donated a copy of a work to the temple library as a votive gift indicates that these tablets were regarded as valuable. However, these tablets were apparently not beyond the means of a well-to-do citizen.

It may come as somewhat of a surprise, therefore, to find that the Babylonians were unfamiliar with the phenomenon of a trade in books—or a trade in written tablets, if we want to avoid anachronistic terms. Some scribes did have their private libraries, but they acquired their texts by copying them from mother copies in the temple library. Such copying was traditionally left to the younger members of scribal families. Tablet collectors did not purchase texts for money. The case of Nūr-Aya, patiently copying *Atrahasis* tablets in his spare time, is exemplary. Even Assurbanipal, to whom we owe the largest cuneiform library of the past, did not accumulate his tablets by purely commercial means. He had his servants confiscate tablets and ordered copies from his scribes.³⁸ The latter acquisition method might be called a form of

buying—after all, scribes were entitled to an income—but the tablet production was on command. A free market in cuneiform tablets did not exist.

The earliest references to the buying and selling of Hebrew scrolls are from the Roman period.³⁹ Price is rarely mentioned. However, one rabbinic tractate from the late Second Temple period states that the price of a Torah scroll was 100 mineh, which equals 10,000 pieces of silver.⁴⁰ Considering the fact that the average laborer earned one piece of silver a day, this price is exorbitant.⁴¹ This could just be an exaggeration, as in the Book of Acts where the author values the books of the magicians at Ephesus at 50,000 pieces of silver (Acts 19:19).

Reference to a more reasonable price for a written scroll is found in the Talmud story about a widow whose only possessions were “a woolen blanket, one Psalms scroll, and a tattered scroll with Job and Proverbs” (*b. Git.* 35a). Estimated value: 5 mineh, which equals 500 pieces of silver. Judging by this anecdote, a brand-new scroll of Isaiah would have cost about 200 pieces of silver—more than six months’ income. Another Talmudic tale tells about a thief selling a stolen Torah (referred to in the story as “the book,” *spr*) for 80 pieces of silver; the receiver sells it to a third party for 120 pieces, thus pocketing a profit of more than 30 percent (*b. B. Qam.* 115a). This price seems realistic.

If the rabbinic references are of limited value in determining the price of written scrolls, they do show that there was a modest trade in written texts by the beginning of the Common Era. Because Jewish scribes used leather, papyrus, or parchment as writing material, those scrolls were liable to be more costly than cuneiform tablets. Papyrus was the least expensive material, although the practice of recycling written scrolls indicates that none of the writing materials was cheap.⁴² The cost of a papyrus scroll in antiquity is estimated to have been equivalent to one to two weeks’ wages for an ordinary worker.⁴³ This means that the costs of the writing materials were higher than the costs of writing.⁴⁴ In Roman times, the price of papyrus fell after the state monopoly on papyrus ended and Palestine was able to control its

own papyrus production.⁴⁵ On the other hand, the Qumran scrolls show that, for the classic texts, scribes would use the more expensive parchment.

The income of a Jewish copyist was above average. In *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* (*Midr. Qoh.* 2.17), Rabbi Meir states that a good scribe could earn two pieces of silver a day, which was twice the average wage of an ordinary worker. Add to this the cost of the writing material, previously estimated at two weeks' wages, and the production costs of an Isaiah scroll would have been about a month's wages (30 pieces of silver)—assuming a trained scribe would need one week to copy the text. Thirty pieces is considerably less than the 200 pieces of silver estimated on the basis of the Talmud passage, as discussed earlier. Is the difference to be explained by the use of a more costly writing material? We know nothing of the margins of profit, but it may have constituted a considerable part of the price. The eunuch reading Isaiah on his way back to Ethiopia probably purchased the scroll during his visit to Jerusalem (Acts 8:26–40); what he paid, we do not know.

It seems highly improbable that there should have been a trade in scrolls before the Hellenistic era. The evidence at our disposal documents a book trade only from the Roman period onward. Even then, though, written scrolls were not cheap. The duty for each Jewish man to own a Torah copy was a stimulus to the process of copying, but it did not lead to the widespread acquisition of texts; it was not until the third century C.E. that private possession of a Torah became common among Jews. For most of them, a Torah scroll was the only written text they possessed—and it was acquired at considerable cost. The trade in texts other than the Torah was confined to scribal circles and to the upper strata of society in which literacy had become a matter of course.⁴⁶

The Codex and the Scroll

There is another aspect of writing in ancient Israel that illustrates that the books of the Bible cannot be seen as books in the modern sense of

the word. The format of the modern book goes back to the codex. A codex consists of a group of papyrus or parchment sheets, folded in the middle, and stitched together at the back. It was invented in late antiquity; the first example is from the late first century C.E.⁴⁷ By 300 C.E. the codex had become as common as the scroll, and then the format took over as the use of scrolls rapidly diminished.⁴⁸

Modern editions of the Hebrew Bible are in the form of a book and thus display the format of a codex. In fact, the success of the codex was due in large part to its use in recording the sacred scriptures of Christianity.⁴⁹ In the period of the Second Temple, however, the Bible was still a collection of scrolls—not a codex. One might conceivably argue that the difference is merely one of physical format. Although the Bible started as a series of scrolls it could still be considered a single book with regard to its content. But was it? This immediately raises the problem of the order of the books of the Bible. If the books were originally scrolls, their order in the codex is arbitrary to some degree. Unless their sequence was indicated by the use of catch-lines, in conformity with Mesopotamian practice, the decision to put Lamentations right after Jeremiah or to relegate it to the Writings pertains to the editors of a particular codex.⁵⁰

More important perhaps than the sequence of the scrolls are the constraints imposed by the use of papyrus and scrolls on writers, editors, and readers. Three observations are in order; the first concerns the writers of the time; the second, the editors; and the third, the readers and users of the text.

First, among modern writers we can distinguish those who conceive their text while writing from those who write only once they have their text in mind. The former category has increased since the introduction of the electronic word processor. In antiquity, authors normally composed their text before they wrote it down. There is evidence of the use by Hebrew scribes of potsherds for making notes and rough drafts.⁵¹ Mesopotamian scribes used clay tablets and wax-covered boards for a similar purpose.⁵² On the whole, scribes were trained to produce stock phrases from memory and to compose their text before they committed

it to papyrus. The scroll served as the repository of a completed text. The composition of a text normally preceded its fixation in writing.⁵³

Second, the use of papyrus scrolls as writing material has yet another consequence for its written content. If the codex corresponds to a book, the scroll corresponds to a storage room. In the first case, the length of the composition determines the size of the book; in the second, the volume of the scroll sets limits on the amount of text that can be accommodated. The standard scroll had twenty sheets of papyrus, which meant an average length of 340 centimeters. A longer scroll required forty, sixty, or even more sheets, but the gain in volume went to the detriment of user-friendliness. A scroll of 10 meters (sixty sheets) was at the limit of practicability.⁵⁴ A scroll of that size was not long enough for Samuel, Kings, or Chronicles, however. The reason that we now have a first and second book of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, respectively, is because those texts were too long for a single scroll. Conceptually, Samuel and Kings belong together as one work—or a single collection. Their division into four scrolls—or four “books” in our Bible—is directly related to the constraints of the writing material. The same is true for Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.⁵⁵

While the division of a larger work over two or more scrolls is one consequence of the size of a scroll, the reverse also applies. Scribes used to write down a number of smaller compositions on one scroll for purposes of economy. A case in point is the scroll of the Twelve Minor Prophets; in the rabbinic tradition the twelve compositions came to be known as one book rather than as twelve (although they kept being referred to as “the Twelve”). These examples of division and combination illustrate scribal procedures that may lie behind other books of the Bible as well. Thus the conjunction of the First and the Second Isaiah (conventionally referred to as “Deutero-Isaiah”), could be inspired by reasons of economy more than by putative authorship. The boundaries of the literary composition are not by definition coterminous with the boundaries of the scroll. A scroll is not a book.

Third, the scroll differs from the book in yet another sense. To us, books are not only works of entertainment, instruction, and medita-

tion, but also works of reference. We are accustomed to quotations that are precise—with reference to author, title, and page. Scrolls do not easily lend themselves to such references. Unwinding a whole scroll to find a single passage is cumbersome and accelerates the process of deterioration. That is why quotations in biblical literature, as among Greek and Roman authors, are often from memory. Inaccuracies are not uncommon, and the reference to the author or the scroll—assuming the two are distinguished—is very general.⁵⁶ The scroll served as a deposit box for the text; for daily use, people consulted their memory.

To speak about the books of the Bible is misleading on more than one account. Historically, the Hebrew Bible is a collection of scrolls, and scrolls cannot be simply equated with books. The difference between the two is not merely a matter of form; it affects the mode of writing, editorial strategies, and the way in which readers use the text.

Hellenistic Culture and the First Jewish Books

The first Jewish books in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek were written in the Hellenistic era. All books written before that time were not books in the modern sense of the term. The Jewish books that began to appear after 300 B.C.E. differ from earlier texts inasmuch as they do seem to resemble the concept of a book as a single work by a single author, aimed at a particular audience. Hellenism created the conditions under which this new phenomenon could occur. Among the many aspects of this new cultural climate, three have a special bearing on the birth of the Jewish book: the emergence of schools, the foundation of libraries, and the growth of a reading public.

The presence of schools in pre-Hellenistic Palestine has been as vigorously asserted as it has been contested. It is, in some measure, a matter of definition. Nobody doubts that in the time of the monarchy both the palace and the temple employed scribes. Since there can be no scribes without education, some form of scribal training must have existed at the time. The Hellenistic period, however, saw the emergence of schools for purposes other than training scribes or copyists. The first

mention of a school (*bêt midrāš*) is in Ben Sira, ca. 180 B.C.E. (Sir 51:23). According to Talmudic tradition, there were 480 schools in Jerusalem (*j. Meg.* 73b), though that figure is exaggerated even for a much later date. Nevertheless, we can assume that the school of Ben Sira was one of many. These Jewish schools arose in part in response to the Hellenistic policy of establishing Greek schools in conquered territories.⁵⁷ As the tuition fee for schools was substantial (Sir 51:28), formal education was restricted to the well-to-do. Under the guidance of their teachers, students could familiarize themselves with the classics—Homer in the Greek schools; the Law and the Prophets in Ben Sira’s *bêt midrāš* (Sir 39:1–3).

In conjunction with the spread of schools, libraries began to develop.⁵⁸ In a letter to the Jewish author Aristobulus from Alexandria, a Judean official boasts of the well-stocked library in the temple in Jerusalem. Allegedly founded by Nehemiah, this library owed its prestigious collection to Judas the Maccabee. He had accumulated this collection of previously “scattered” books (2 Macc 2:13–14).⁵⁹ The collection in Jerusalem was not the only library in Judah. The Dead Sea Scrolls can also be viewed as a library.⁶⁰ At least some of the manuscripts are known not to have been written at Qumran, since they have been dated, on paleographic grounds, to 250 B.C.E., which is more than half a century earlier than Qumran.⁶¹ Text acquisition, conceivably by purchase, was instrumental in creating the collection.

Through the education they offered, the schools created a growing public of readers, and the libraries are testimony to this. In the oral culture of pre-Hellenistic times, readers used to be speakers who read texts out loud to others. Now a new type of reader was emerging. The new reader read alone. Perhaps he was a scholar consulting sacred texts (Dan 9:2) in order to penetrate their subtleties and hidden meanings (Sir 39:1–3); he may also have been an educated layman who read for his personal edification (Acts 8:26–40). Individuals began to buy their own private copy of the Torah (1 Macc 1:56–57). As the reading public grew in size, a book market of sorts developed. The Mishnah explicitly permits the purchase of a Torah scroll from a non-Jew “at its market

value” (*m. Git.* 4:6). Scrolls began to circulate in increasing numbers. Local papyrus plantations were developed to meet the attendant demand for writing material.⁶²

The Jewish texts produced in the Hellenistic period attest to the presence of a public for books. New genres developed in response to a growing number of people who wanted to read these texts for themselves. Scholars such as Qohelet and Ben Sira put their teachings into writing as a kind of spiritual testament. Their texts reflect a personal approach not seen before in Hebrew literature. Ben Sira even signs his book with his own name (*Sir* 50:27).

Another genre that emerged was the adventure story, although it always remained within the scope of historical fiction. It was written for entertainment as well as for educational purposes. The books of Ruth, Esther, Judith, and Tobit, as well as chapters one through six of Daniel, are examples in point.

Apocalyptic literature, written under the name of a famous sage from antiquity, such as Daniel or Enoch, abounds in the Hellenistic era. Its style supports the idea that it was composed while writing, unlike the way scribes transcribed collections of the prophets’ oracles.

All of the new genres can be traced back to earlier genres: Qohelet and Ben Sira to Proverbs; the adventure stories to the historical narratives of Genesis, Samuel, and Kings; the apocalyptic literature to the scrolls of the prophets. Yet there can be no mistaking that these works from the Hellenistic era represent something distinctively new. The content and style define them as the first real Jewish books.

The Stream of Tradition

In his *Introduction to the Greek Tragedy*, Ulrich von Wilamowitz defines a book as a text published by its author through the medium of an organized book trade for the benefit of an expectant public.⁶³ By this definition, the term *book* is an anachronism when applied to the written documents from the ancient Near East.

Prior to the advent of Hellenism, the only text that was disseminated

by means of “an organized book trade” was the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. This text, however, was not written by a single author. Moreover, to speak of “an expectant public” is something of a euphemism. A copy of the *Book of the Dead* was purchased to be placed in a tomb alongside the mummified deceased, so that the latter might be protected from harm and reach the hereafter unscathed. This so-called book was not meant for reading. In other words, the only ancient Near Eastern “book” for which there was a real market, in fact served as an amulet.⁶⁴ In this respect it compares to the *Song of Erra*, which served a somewhat similar purpose in warding off pestilence. No other text from Mesopotamia was copied as often as the *Song of Erra*. Not because it was in demand by a reading public, but because a carefully positioned copy would keep all sorts of evil at bay.⁶⁵

Aside from the *Book of the Dead*, then, there was no book trade per se in the ancient Near East; nor was there a reading public of any substance; nor were there books as we know them. One might, for the sake of argument, qualify *Gilgamesh* and Isaiah as the books of antiquity, but they are books only in a manner of speaking. Not only are the tablets of *Gilgamesh* and the scroll of Isaiah dissimilar to a book in form, but the text they contain does not conform to the concept of literature that is implied by the modern notion of a book. These book-length texts come from an oral culture and retain the characteristics of that culture. No one wrote books the way people write books in the modern age. The first books did not appear until the Hellenistic era.⁶⁶

To avoid the misleading association of the term *books*, it is preferable to speak instead of the “stream of tradition.” When A. Leo Oppenheim coined the phrase, he was referring to the cuneiform literature of Mesopotamia as it was studied and transmitted in the scribal schools.⁶⁷ By analogy, the Hebrew Bible is the collection of texts written, studied, and copied over the centuries by scribes in the Jewish centers of scholarship. They are the collective property of the scribal community; the Hebrew Bible is their legacy. To appreciate that legacy at its proper value, it is necessary to understand the scribal culture in which the stream of tradition found its bedding.