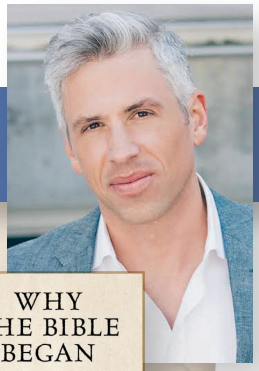
The tribe of scribes



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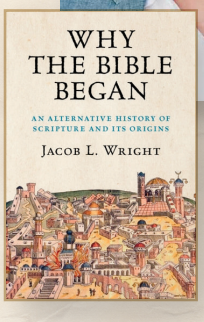

Dr. Jacob L. Wright and the cover of his book.

YOU NEED not be a learned scholar to realize that the Hebrew Bible is somewhat odd. God anoints the Israelites as His chosen people, entrusting them to follow His commandments, yet in the long run their chosenness seems to confer few benefits on them.

It starts off well enough, with God leading His enslaved people out of Egypt and aiding them in their conquest of a land He has promised them. There, under the divinely blessed reigns of David and Solomon, the Israelites thrive in a prosperous kingdom of their own. Yet no sooner does Solomon die, than his realm is torn asunder into two bickering kingdoms, both weakened by this sectarian and fratricidal split. It is pretty much downhill from there.

First, the northern Kingdom of Israel, the more affluent and powerful of the two, is devastated by invaders. Many of its people are enslaved and hauled off into foreign lands, never to be seen again. Then, the southern Kingdom of Judah too is laid waste, and even the Temple of God in Jerusalem is reduced to rubble. Fortuitously, the exiles are soon allowed to return from Babylon to their ancestral homeland, where they rebuild their homes and their Temple.

Yet even from thereon, their fortunes will continue to fluctuate, albeit unrecorded by the Tanach. Jews will remain at the mercy of powerful aggressors and capricious overlords until they are defeated twice by the Romans, who destroy their Second Temple in Jerusalem, exile the Jews of Judea again, this time for good, and spitefully rename their homeland Palestine after the Philistines, the bane of David and the Israelites.

What is one to make of this millennium-long series of national catastrophes?

One answer is that the Israelites misplaced their faith in God, for He would fail to protect them from calamity after calamity. That is a theologically untenable proposition, so ancient prophets, medieval exegetes, and modern rabbis have opted for an alternative: All these misfortunes befell the Jews because they failed to hold up their end of a covenant with God by keeping his commandments. In other words, it was their fault for reneging on the divine contract. This scripture-backed explanation, which is unfalsifiable, since not all Jews would ever be pious enough, has even been offered unconvincingly to account for the Holocaust.

Yet, if anything, what should surprise us is that for all their tribulations, the Jews of antiquity kept their faith so steadfastly in their protean God. Why?

One could posit, as biblical scholar Jacob L. Wright does, that it was scripture itself, based on oral traditions, ancient texts, and royal archives, that provided the people of Judah, after their return from exile in Babylon, with a strong sense of nationhood, which came to center, in an ingenious formulation, not around a strong state as in the past but around a people united by a common faith. This meant that Jews could remain a distinct people even without a state. A Judean used to be simply someone who resided in the Kingdom of Judah; now he was a Jew whether or not he lived in Judea so long as he abided by the Torah.

"Biblical writings represent one of the earliest and most elaborate projects of peoplehood. Working after the defeat of their kingdoms, their authors expanded inherited traditions with wider, and often competing, perspectives as they sought to consolidate what may be properly called a nation," Wright, a professor of the Hebrew Bible at Emory University, writes in *Why the Bible Began*.

This was revolutionary in the ancient world, where the vanquished invariably disappeared from history by assimilating into dominant cultures and renascent empires. Not so the Jews. In the face of their catastrophic defeats at the hands of their enemies, their newly minted scriptures and methodically revised older texts came to downplay the importance of territorial sovereignty in favor of a shared belief in their unique status as chosen by God, who was not just the only god that mattered but the only god that existed.

Their unitary belief, buttressed by sacred texts said to have been revealed directly by their singular deity to their ancestors in the distant past, would sustain Jews as a people for millennia, even as they found themselves dispersed throughout the world, where they faced endless calamities. These texts also recast old beliefs and traditions in the service of their new peoplehood by faith and scripture.

Take the Sabbath. Previously a lunar festival derived from a Babylonian practice, it was transmogrified into a weekly holy day that allowed Jews to share communally in a sanctified temporal ritual wherever they were. Time, not just space, now united them.

This transformation was achieved, Wright argues convincingly, by anonymous and inspired scribes in Judah who, relying on existing ur-texts from both North and South, created a foundational narrative for the Jewish nation, which became the Torah and the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. They then crafted this highly mythologized account onto an eschatological subtext that promised redemption by God's grace, which would one day reveal His chosen as a light unto all other nations. Jews could now have pride in their past and hope for their future, which fortified them spiritually, regardless of their circumstances.

"That Israel and Judah produced a Bible is not because an early form of monotheism or unique intuitions permeated these societies," the Jewish scholar theorizes. "The reason is rather that generations of anonymous, counter-cultural thinkers pushed against the status quo and sought real, pragmatic truths that could sustain their communities in a world governed by foreign powers. In grappling with the consequences of defeat, these thinkers resorted to something no army could conquer: language and the power of the written word."

That is to say, the true founders of the Jewish nation were not divinely anointed patriarchs, prophets, and potentates but lowly scribes who turned military defeats and foreign subjugation into victory by refocusing their attention on what they knew best: education and communal learning. Through these, they decoupled peoplehood from nation building in the traditional sense. Mastery of scripture became a laudable pursuit, replacing martial feats on a battlefield.

A reed pen was now indeed mightier than a sword of iron.

Wright detects evidence of this seminal transition in the eponymous Book of Ezra, which is relayed partly in the first person. In it, Ezra the scribe reads the Torah by popular demand to a large gathering of commoners in Jerusalem. Whereas this scene is likely fictitious, it testifies to an aspirational project on the part of scribes like Ezra, an otherwise obscure character, to expand learning far beyond the confines of their rarefied profession.

They sprinkled their emphasis on the importance of learning throughout their revised biblical corpus with *Proverbs* (4:7), spelling it out explicitly: "The beginnings of wisdom is this: Acquire wisdom, and whatever else you acquire, acquire insight." This scripturally ordained focus on learning would serve Jews well in centuries to come and still does.

But these scribes did more than just create a new theological and epistemological worldview. They also engaged in revisionist legerdemain by retroactively altering the histories of both Israel and Judah. To elevate the importance of the latter, they denigrated the former. Until Israel's destruction in 722 BCE, Judah played second fiddle to the richer and stronger northern kingdom, whose halcyon days were under the Omride dynasty, which the authors, editors, and redactors of the Bible would later unfairly malign.

The Judean scribes, we can surmise, castigated Omrides like Ahab for two reasons. One was to provide a rationale for the destruction of Israel by rampaging Assyrians, despite a state-sponsored cult of Yahweh in Israel. This they did by depicting the northern kingdom's monarchs and people as wicked and wayward, with their many sins duly incurring condign divine retribution. The second reason was to exalt King David as God's anointed, and hence center the worship of Yahweh (God) solely in Judah's capital of Jerusalem, thereby delegitimizing Samaria with its rival cultic traditions.

Ironically, Wright notes, it was the northern scribes who, after their kingdom's downfall, had first authored "a corpus of texts that emphasize the role of the people and its direct relationship to Yhwh," which included the stories of the Exodus and the conquest of the Promised Land. Once Judah too fell to foreign invaders, southern scribes set about reworking these stories into their own national epic, with the Davidic dynasty and its capital of Jerusalem at its heart.

To do this, they stitched two separate accounts together. One involved the Jewish people's collective origin myths, including their covenant with Yahweh; the other comprised the annals of kings in Judah. They couldn't combine them seamlessly, however, and careful analysis can still unravel various threads of often conflicting narratives, which Wright does at length.

Presumably, the authors of the Bible had no qualms about reworking older material, since they were not writing history as we understand it but rather creating a national epic. "Many of the historical factors that shaped Israel's and Judah's formation find no mention in the Bible, while much of what the Bible portrays in considerable detail is far removed from history," Wright points out.

In the same way, these scribes turned King David into an all too human character with his manifest failings, his philandering with Bathsheba being one famous example, by "reworking older texts and composing new ones that provide behind-the-scenes glimpses of [him] in action," the scholar posits. "In their account, venerated heroes like David bring security to the nation but also inflict unprecedented bloodshed on it. The scribes who created these memories were not denying the legitimacy or importance of the monarchy; their objective was rather to cut it down to size and subject it to scrutiny."

We might add that writing in a post-monarchic period as they did, they also had a good reason to take the shine off the kings of old in order to show that even they had failed to live up to God's expectations, thereby dooming the institution of the monarchy from the start by falling out of favor with Him. This then portended catastrophe for their kingdoms as the prophets had foretold. The Bible's fire-and-brimstone prophets may have been based on actual individuals, but their prophecies were likely ascribed to them retroactively after the fact.

Be that as it may, the fruits of these inventive biblical authors' literary labors would prove momentous. "Without a doubt, [their] 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," Wright writes.

"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," he elucidates. "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... have a reason to take an active part in its collective life."

Although *Why the Bible Began* is unlikely to be the last word on the genesis of the biblical corpus, Wright propounds a plausible hypothesis with plenty of evidence marshaled in support of it. By necessity, biblical study is fraught with conjecture, but his book is secular scholarship at its best, as it methodically illuminates the possible motives of creative authors in composing a body of work that has stood the test of time and remains as relevant as ever for billions of people: Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Through its influence on the birth of both Christianity and Islam, the Hebrew Bible has changed history (for better and for worse) and without it, we would live in a very different world. This other world we could hardly begin to fathom, so influential has the Bible been in shaping Judeo-Christian and Islamic values, ideas, and beliefs over the past two millennia.

Back in the day, anonymous scribes in Judah, if Wright is right, sought simply to empower their beleaguered people to prevail in spite of their adversities. At this, these unhailed writers, editors, and redactors succeeded beyond their wildest dreams because their people, albeit still beleaguered, continue to survive and thrive in the Jewish Diaspora and the State of Israel. ■