

Cambridge University Press

0521829461 - How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel

William M. Schniedewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## How the Bible Became a Book

For the past two hundred years biblical scholars have usually assumed that the Hebrew Bible was written and edited mostly in the Persian and Hellenistic periods (the fifth through second centuries B.C.E.). Recent archaeological evidence and insights from linguistic anthropology, however, point to the earlier era of the late Iron Age (eighth through sixth centuries B.C.E.) as the formative period for the writing of biblical literature. *How the Bible Became a Book* combines recent archaeological discoveries in the Middle East with insights culled from the history of writing to address how the Bible first came to be written down and then became sacred Scripture. This book, written for general readers and scholars alike, provides rich insight into why these texts came to have authority as Scripture and explores why ancient Israel, an oral culture, began to write literature. It describes an emerging literate society in ancient Israel that challenges the assertion that literacy first arose in Greece during the fifth century B.C.E.

William M. Schniedewind is a professor of biblical studies and Northwest Semitic languages and the chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has been a visiting scholar at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and a Fellow at the Albright Institute of Archeological Research. He is the author of *The Word of God in Transition* and *Society and the Promise to David*.

Cambridge University Press

0521829461 - How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel

William M. Schniedewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

# How the Bible Became a Book

## The Textualization of Ancient Israel

---

WILLIAM M. SCHNIEDEWIND

University of California, Los Angeles



Cambridge University Press

0521829461 - How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel

William M. Schniedewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© William M. Schniedewind 2004

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2004

Printed in the United States of America

*Typeface* Sabon 11/13 pt.      *System* L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X 2<sub>ε</sub> [TB]

*A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Schniedewind, William M.

How the Bible became a book : the textualization of ancient Israel /  
William M. Schniedewind.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-82946-1

1. Bible – History. I. Title.

BS445.S315 2004

220.1–dc22 2003063474

ISBN 0 521 82946 1 hardback

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xi
1 How the Bible Became a Book	1
2 The Numinous Power of Writing	24
3 Writing and the State	35
4 Writing in Early Israel	48
5 Hezekiah and the Beginning of Biblical Literature	64
6 Josiah and the Text Revolution	91
7 How the Torah Became a Text	118
8 Writing in Exile	139
9 Scripture in the Shadow of the Temple	165
10 Epilogue	195
<i>Suggested Further Reading</i>	215
<i>Notes</i>	217
<i>Index</i>	241

# List of Figures

2.1 Egyptian execration text	<i>page</i> 28
2.2 Special writing of God's name in a Dead Sea Scroll	32
3.1 The development of the cuneiform AN sign	36
3.2 First-known alphabetic writing from Wadi el-Hol, Egypt	39
3.3 Tel Dan (House of David) inscription	42
3.4 Royal scribe before Bar-Rakib on throne	44
4.1 Early Israelite village at Beersheba	51
4.2 The Hebrew alphabet from Izbet Sartah	52
4.3 The Gezer calendar	59
5.1 The growth of Jerusalem during the Judean monarchy	68
5.2 Royal storage jar and <i>Lemelek</i> stamp	71
6.1 A conjectural reconstruction of a sealed deed with Seal impression	99
6.2 A receipt for payment of silver with seventeen signatures	101
6.3 The earliest Biblical text: silver amulet II	105
8.1 Cuneiform tablet listing rations for Jehorachin	151
8.2 Home of the royal Judean family in Babylon	153
9.1 The size of Jerusalem	170
9.2 Some differences between Old Hebrew and Aramaic scripts	176

Cambridge University Press

0521829461 - How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel

William M. Schniedewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Preface

“There is no end to the making of books.” – Ecclesiastes

Heard across millennia of book making, these words from the preacher in Ecclesiastes ring true today. Recent technology, such as print-on-demand, e-books, e-mail, and the ubiquitous Internet, disseminate the written word more easily and more quickly than was possible in any previous era. Despite occasional laments from bibliophiles, the book is alive, well, and rapidly multiplying. Thus, the production of annual book titles in the United Kingdom rose by 72 percent during the 1990s, according to the International Publisher Association, and book production in Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Germany, the United States, and other countries also recorded significant increases.

But while books may now seem without end, they do have a more definite beginning, as the ancient preacher also may have known. His words serve as a general warning about the relatively new practice of book production. The preceding verse inveighs against any writings except the “sayings of the wise,” which invite interminable study and thus “weariness of the flesh.” A widespread concern for such weariness would have made sense only in a literate culture, or, more likely, in a society involved in the dangerous transition from an oral culture to a literate one. My study focuses on this transition in ancient Israel, the spread of literacy among the social classes of seventh-century Judean society. In doing so it looks at the beginnings of the making of one book – the Hebrew Bible. What follows is not an end to the question of how the Bible became a book. It does, however, offer a fresh perspective on the Bible by looking at important periods of its textualization – that is, when it was written down – alongside new ideas about the development of writing and literacy in ancient Israel.

The way the Bible emerges as a sacred text from such a context has profound implications for many religious traditions. It also has

Cambridge University Press

0521829461 - How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel

William M. Schniedewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

*Preface*

revolutionary implications for the scholarly study of biblical literature. But this book was written for a broader audience than simply biblical scholars. To this end, my technical engagement with biblical scholarship most often is relegated to the notes. I have tried to be careful, on the one hand, not to let my jousting with biblical scholarship intrude too much upon the general reader and, on the other hand, to provide enough notes to represent and engage some of the vast array of biblical scholarship. I alert the general reader to some modern biblical scholarship without burdening the book with arcane debates. Admittedly, I have simplified complex issues like the development and nature of literacy. Nor have I dealt with all the knotty issues of biblical criticism in any complete way. As a principle, I have allowed scholars to suffer at the expense of addressing a broader audience. I hope my colleagues can forgive me as the situation is usually reversed. Still, I hope that by bypassing some of the detailed scholarly issues, I can chart a general approach to biblical literature that is also useful to scholars.

This book owes much to many. In the words of the same biblical sage, “there is nothing new under the sun,” and it might be said that I have not so much written this book as I have borrowed it from my teachers, friends, and colleagues. What I have borrowed, I give back in the form of this book. I hope it has come back in as good condition as what was taken. I want to especially thank Ben Sommer, who read the manuscript so carefully and improved it in so many ways. (My apologies, Ben, for being too thick to take all your suggestions to heart.) Although I am now long gone from Brandeis University, the debt to my teachers there – particularly Marc Brettler, Michael Fishbane, and Stephen Geller – lingers on in this book. Many others have read and discussed parts of the manuscript with me, including Carol Bakhos, Scott Bartchy, Tamara Eskenazi, Adriane Leveen, Bernie Levinson, Antonio Loprieno, John Monson, Michael Rosenbaum, Joachim Schaper, Tammi Schneider, Daniel Smith-Christopher, Marv Sweeney, and Ed Wright. Chapter 7 on the Torah was first presented to my friends and colleagues at UCLA’s Center for Jewish Studies, and I am profoundly grateful to them for their comments, criticism, and encouragement. All these individuals showed me true friendship by patiently bearing with me while I was absorbed with this project and contributed to it in ways that the written word cannot adequately express. I wish to thank my students who patiently endured my musings and contributed much to the fermentation of this project in classes

Cambridge University Press

0521829461 - How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel

William M. Schniedewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

ix

and seminars. I wish to extend thanks to Bobby Duke and Moise Isaac, who worked as my research assistants during the writing of this book. Finally, I wish to thank UCLA, which has provided me with such a stimulating place in which to engage in these intellectual pursuits. In addition, the university's Academic Senate awarded me research grants, and the dean of humanities, Pauline Yu, has also supported my research. My editor at Cambridge University Press, Andy Beck, has been one of this book's chief assets. Whatever deficiencies remain in my writing, it cannot be the fault of the living voices that have helped me along the way.

In order to make this book accessible to the general reader, I have adopted a very simplified modern Hebrew system for transcribing Hebrew words. I cite the text and versification of the English Bible (usually following the *New Revised Standard Version* or the *New Jewish Publication Society*, but sometimes adopting my own translation and adding emphasis to highlight my argument).

Although it is customary to thank one's family last, it is certainly not least that I thank my patient wife, Jeanne, and my two lovely daughters, Tori and Mikaela. They put all things in perspective and help me realize that indeed the living voice is better than written words.



# Abbreviations

AB	<i>Anchor Bible</i>
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</i> , 3rd ed. Edited by J. Pritchard. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
AO	<i>Der Alte Orient</i>
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeological Review</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin of Biblical Research</i>
BethM	<i>Beth Mikra</i> [Hebrew]
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BJS	<i>Brown Judaic Studies</i>
BN	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
BWANT	<i>Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament</i>
BZAW	<i>Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CD	<i>Cairo Geniza, Damascus Document</i>
CTM	<i>Concordia Theological Monthly</i>
DJD	<i>Discoveries in the Judaean Desert</i>
DSD	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
EI	<i>Eretz Israel</i>
EJL	<i>Early Judaism and Its Literature</i>
ESI	<i>Excavations and Surveys in Israel</i>
FOTL	<i>Forms of Old Testament Literature</i>
HSM	<i>Harvard Semitic Monographs</i>
HSS	<i>Harvard Semitic Studies</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
ICC	<i>International Critical Commentary</i>

Cambridge University Press

0521829461 - How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel

William M. Schniedewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

*Abbreviations*

<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JESHO</i>	<i>Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JNWSL</i>	<i>Journal of the Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
<i>JSNTSS</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSS</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series</i>
<i>JSP</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha</i>
<i>JSPSS</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series</i>
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>NCBC</i>	New Century Bible Commentary
<i>NEAEHL</i>	<i>New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land</i> , edited by E. Stern. Jerusalem/New York: Israel Exploration Society/Carta/Simon & Schuster, 1993.
<i>OBO</i>	<i>Orbis biblicus et orientalis</i>
<i>OTL</i>	<i>Old Testament Library</i>
<i>OTS</i>	<i>Oudtestamentische Studiën</i>
<i>PEQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
<i>RQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>RSR</i>	<i>Religious Studies Review</i>
<i>SBL</i>	<i>Society of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>SBLDS</i>	<i>Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series</i>
<i>SBLMS</i>	<i>Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series</i>
<i>SBTSS</i>	<i>Studies of Biblical Theology Supplement Series</i>
<i>ScrHier</i>	<i>Scripta Hierosolymitana</i>
<i>SHANE</i>	<i>Studies in the History of the Ancient Near East</i>
<i>SJOT</i>	<i>Scandinavian Journal for the Old Testament</i>
<i>TA</i>	<i>Tel Aviv</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>UF</i>	<i>Ugarit Forschungen</i>

Cambridge University Press  
0521829461 - How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel  
William M. Schniedewind  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

*Abbreviations* xiii

VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	<i>Supplements to Vetus Testamentum</i>
WTJ	<i>Westminister Theological Journal</i>
ZA	<i>Zeitschrift für Assyriologie</i>
ZAH	<i>Zeitschrift für Althebraistik</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für Alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft</i>