Schniedewind, William M.

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


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The author of this book is not concerned with the processes of editing or of deciding on the selection and canonization of the biblical scrolls. Nor is he not concerned with those biblical books that all agree were written in the time of the Second Temple, from the fifth to the second centuries B.C.E. He is concerned primarily with what was written in the time of the First Temple, when the process of the textualization of ancient Israel took place. Schniedewind’s conclusion, stated in the beginning of the book (18–19), is: “Although the fragmentary beginnings of the Bible as written literature may date back to the days of kings David and Solomon (in the tenth century B.C.E.), the majority of the Bible was written a few centuries later, from the time of Isaiah the prophet (late eighth century B.C.E.) until the waning days of the monarchy and the time of the prophet Jeremiah (early sixth century B.C.E.).” In other words, Schniedewind argues that the Tetrateuch (Genesis to Numbers), the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy to Kings), and a significant part of the Latter Prophets were written in the eighth to the sixth centuries B.C.E.

To prove this conclusion, Schniedewind explores the nature of writing in the early societies of the Middle East, especially in ancient Israel. In the first chapter (1–23), the prologue, he presents his thesis and describes the book. Chapter 2 (24–34) deals with the numinous power of writing in ancient cultures, among them Israel. Chapter 3 (35–47),
emphasizes the connection between writing and the rise of the state and urbanization. Chapter 4 deals with the limited role of writing in the two early Israelite kingdoms (48–63), when the written word was limited mainly to the scribes of the palace and the temple. Chapter 5 (64–90) explains why and how in the days of Hezekiah, under the Assyrian occupying and massive influence, and after the fall of the northern Israelite kingdom, writing became part of everyday life in Judah and written texts acquired religious authority, thus enabling the beginning of biblical literature. Josiah’s reform and the text revolution, which continued the process, are the subject of chapter 6 (91–117). Chapter 7 (118–38) discusses how the Torah became a text even before the exile, while chapters 8 (139–64) and 9 (165–94) complete the description by explaining why the exile and the Persian period were not suitable for the writing of most of the biblical literature. The book ends with an epilogue (195–214) that deals with the relationship between oral tradition and written text in the formation of Judaism and Christianity.

The above summary reveals the disparity between the marketing title, *How the Bible Became a Book*, and the book’s actual contents, which are devoted to the phenomena of writing and creating sacred texts and to establishing the argument that most of the biblical literature was written in the eighth through the sixth centuries B.C.E. In other words, Schniedewind’s book does not answer the question of the title; what it does is answer the question: To what period do we date the writing of the Bible? The book’s purpose is to challenge the current trend, which delays the composition of the Bible as much as possible, that is, until late into the Persian and Hellenistic periods. The challenge is welcome indeed, but I am afraid this book does not give the decisive answer. Schniedewind’s attempt to ignore the question of who wrote this book that contains such disparate ideologies, to ignore the fact that writing down traditions is not the same as composing a work, and to ignore the complexity of every book in the Bible, remains unconvincing. Moreover, describing the four centuries of the exile, the Persian period, and the beginning of the Hellenistic as nonsuitable for the composition, as well as stating bluntly that only social and economic conditions of the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah favored the flourishing of biblical literature, is in fact quite strange, especially since we know about the literary products of those periods. In fact, the assumption that political, economic, or demographic circumstances can stop literary processes is opposed to what we know about human creativity.

To sum up, although I am not convinced by Schniedewind’s thesis, his book is an important contribution to the awareness of the process of writing in understanding biblical literature and to strengthening the conclusion that the creation of biblical literature began at the end of the eighth century B.C.E.