

**WHY THE BIBLE BEGAN: AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF SCRIPTURE AND ITS ORIGINS**, by Jacob L. Wright, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 500 pages. \$34.95.

The Hebrew Bible (that is, the Old Testament) is an astonishingly complex collection of texts. Its many books contain diverse genres of literature written by multiple anonymous authors across several hundred years of ancient Israel's history. Ideas in any given book are often in conversation—or even at odds—with positions asserted in another. Biblical scholarship has provided many compelling reconstructions of *how* the Bible, with its remarkable diversity of texts, came into being. In this innovative book, Jacob Wright presents the best of that scholarship on *how* in service of an even more interesting question: *why* did the Bible begin? That is, what were the generations of scribes who wrote, edited, and compiled these texts trying to accomplish?

For Wright, the answer to this “why” is *peoplehood*. The scribes behind the Bible were constructing a vision of a unified nation from the unlikely of circumstances: division and defeat. The destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. sent some of its scribes to work in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, where the narratives of the two kingdoms collided. The North brought with it significant portions of what Wright calls “The Family Story” (accounts of Abraham et al.)

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and the “Exodus-Conquest Account,” which Northern scribes sculpted into Israel’s “pre-history of peoplehood,” a nation even before monarchy. The South contributed much of “The Palace History” and, after the fall of Judah to the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., its scribes eventually edited, joined together, and expanded all of these sections to form “The National Narrative” of Genesis-Kings. Rather than fading into obscurity or buckling under the shame of losing to imperial powers, the biblical scribes leaned in to their experience of defeat, using it to make sense of communal trauma, to restore pride, and to unify the two former kingdoms around a shared peoplehood.

That unity of purpose is not limited to the National Narrative, says Wright, but can be traced throughout the Hebrew Bible. Books like Ezra and Nehemiah depict restoration and establish the importance of written traditions as a “pedagogical project” for the nation. The prophetic books frame national disaster in terms of a break in the covenantal relationship between *Yhwh* and Israel. Later texts like Psalms, Esther, and the wisdom literature impart “survival strategies” while also inviting new generations to challenge and rethink older ideas. All of these elements and more work together to craft a past and delineate a future for a defeated and traumatized people.

Implicit to Wright’s study is the question of whether there is a particular theme or singular purpose that can be said to unite all the books of the Hebrew Bible. In much Christian theology of recent years, that unifying element is deemed “God’s story.” Despite the abundance of non-narrative texts, the disjointed chronology, and the varied viewpoints contained within the Bible, Christian theology has found in the Old Testament (and continuing in the New) a metanarrative that describes God’s ongoing relationship with humanity. Placing God at the center of biblical interpretation is a reasonable and appropriate thing to do for a theological reading; however, that theological emphasis can obscure the plentiful political elements of those texts.

*Why the Bible Began* is not at all a theological project, and that is precisely why I recommend it enthusiastically not only to all interested readers, but especially to readers who are accustomed to encountering faith-based perspectives on the Bible. This book provides something different. Like proponents of the idea of “God’s story,” Wright also finds an overarching narrative in the Hebrew Bible, but in his book the camera lens, as it were, focuses not on theology but on politics. That is not to say that Israel’s God is just a side-note in *Why the Bible Began*; as Wright emphasizes, “Throughout the biblical writings, *Yhwh* is the core

of Israel's identity as a nation" (384). Nevertheless, this focus on peoplehood empowers readers to think about the ways the Bible's descriptions of God are influenced by the shifting political fortunes of ancient Israel.

As a skeptic of any attempt to systematize the Bible into a metanarrative, I was heartened to see that Wright does not flatten the Bible's diversity to make it fit his schema. On the contrary, that diversity is precisely what Wright is trying to account for. The pedagogical program of the post-exilic era was manifested in many different types of texts, including laws, poems, and proverbs. The histories invoked in the National Narrative were subject to redaction and revision (e.g., in Chronicles) due to the community's shifting needs and authors' competing motivations. Crafting a peoplehood from defeat, argues Wright, requires the kind of multiplicity that the Bible showcases.

*Why the Bible Began* contains surprisingly little discussion of the Bible's stories of military victory, such as those found in the book of Joshua, which on their face are striking exceptions to the Bible's records of defeat. Doubtless this omission is in part because Wright has already written extensively on the conquest narratives as war commemoration, particularly in his book *War, Memory, and National Identity in the Hebrew Bible*—a book upon which *Why the Bible Began* builds and expands. Readers whose interest is piqued by Wright's discussion of Rahab, for instance, will find more detail in that earlier work. Additionally, because the book is pitched toward a general audience, Wright does not often "show his work" through detailed footnotes. Readers who would like to dig in to the scholarly underpinnings of his argument should read more widely in Wright's oeuvre. Overall, though, *Why the Bible Began* is a remarkable presentation of the complicated editorial history of the Hebrew Bible. In clear and inviting prose, Wright's book pushes back against the truism that "history is written by the victors," showing that nation-building is more than a military project: it is an act of storytelling that can triumph even in defeat.

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