

BOOK REVIEW

WRIGHT, Jacob L. 2023. *Why the Bible Began? An Alternative History of Scripture and its Origin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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The reader is confronted with an unusual history book. In *Why the Bible Began: An Alternative History of Scripture and Its Origins*, Jacob L. Wright raises fundamental questions and adopts an alternative methodological approach within biblical studies. Wright is Professor of Hebrew Bible and Old Testament at Emory University and previously taught at the University of Heidelberg. His scholarly work is marked by a sustained effort to rethink the relationship between biblical narrative, historical memory, and the formation of national identity. Strongly interdisciplinary in nature, his research enables readers to reflect on contemporary social and political questions through the lens of ancient civilizations. Deeply familiar with archaeological discoveries, Wright consistently integrates material culture into his interpretive framework. His primary scholarly concern lies in the social dynamics of ancient Israel and in the intellectual processes through which collective identities are constructed and preserved.

Wright's first monograph, *Rebuilding Identity: The Nehemiah Memoir and Its Earliest Readers* (De Gruyter, 2004), already demonstrated the distinctive features of his scholarly voice. In this study, Wright examines the Nehemiah memoir and the structural composition of the Book of Ezra–Nehemiah through the application of redaction-historical criticism. He identifies seven heterogeneous literary layers within Nehemiah 1–13, thereby challenging the notion of the text as a unified historical account. Rather than treating Ezra–Nehemiah as a transparent record of post-exilic events, Wright shows how its compositional complexity reflects competing ideological interests and evolving conceptions of community. The importance of Ezra–Nehemiah, he argues, lies in its articulation of a profound conceptual connection between the city of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Torah. This triad functions as a central axis in the construction of post-exilic identity and provides a framework through which social cohesion and religious authority are negotiated.

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This focus on political authority, memory, and identity continues in Wright's subsequent work, *King David and His Reign Revisited* (Aldina Media, 2013). Here Wright turns to the historical figure of King David, raising numerous questions concerning his life and legacy. He demonstrates how biblical texts portray David not primarily as an idealized monarch but as a 'warlord' whose rise to power was rooted in military leadership and political pragmatism. At the same time, Wright traces the ways in which later traditions, particularly legal and institutional developments, reshape David's character. Legislative authority and emerging norms of governance transform David from a charismatic military leader into a paradigmatic king whose reign serves as a model for later political reflection. In this way, Wright highlights the dynamic interplay between historical memory and ideological reinterpretation.

Wright further develops these themes in *David, King of Israel, and Caleb in Biblical Memory* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). In this volume, he explores the symbolic and ideological connections between David and Caleb, showing how biblical memory links these figures in order to articulate ideals of loyalty, faithfulness, and legitimate belonging. The association between David and Caleb is not grounded in historical proximity but in mnemonic strategy. By examining this connection, Wright offers insight into the mechanisms through which biblical texts construct exemplary figures and embed them within broader narratives of peoplehood. The study thus provides a clear illustration of Wright's socio-historical method, which prioritizes memory formation over historical reconstruction.

The theme of collective identity reaches a broader conceptual scope in *War, Memory, and National Identity in the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). In this work, Wright addresses the pervasive presence of warfare in biblical literature and asks why conflicts are described with such narrative intensity. He argues that these depictions should not be read primarily as endorsements of violence or as attempts to glorify conquest. Instead, warfare narratives function as instruments for shaping national identity. Through stories of conflict, loss, and survival, the biblical texts articulate a vision of peoplehood that is forged in moments of crisis. War, in this perspective, becomes a catalyst for political self-definition and social cohesion rather than a mere record of destruction.

Why the Bible Began continues and synthesizes these earlier lines of inquiry. The book situates itself explicitly within, and against, the tradition of scholarship that treats the Hebrew Bible as a source for reconstructing the history of ancient Israel. From Genesis to the end of 2 Kings, the biblical narrative was long regarded as a fundamentally historical account, prompting scholars to reconcile it with archaeological evidence and external sources from the ancient Near East. Classic works categorized as 'History of Israel', such as John Bright's *A History of Israel*, exemplify this approach. Although later scholars became increasingly cautious, the underlying assumption that the biblical text should be evaluated primarily in terms of historical reliability remained largely intact.

A significant shift occurred with Martin Noth's *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* (1943), which located the beginnings of national historiography in the period of Josiah's reform and linked it to political aspirations of independence from Assyrian domination. As a result, the historicity of the pre-monarchic narratives came under increasing scrutiny. Subsequent works, including J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes's *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, adopted a more critical and nuanced stance. Mario Liverani's *Israel's History and the History of Israel* went further by relegating the patriarchal narratives to a separate literary discussion. Wright

builds upon this scholarly trajectory by insisting that the history of Israel and the narrative about Israel are not identical. He conceptualizes this distinction as ‘the divergence of history and story’, a formulation that lies at the core of his argument.

Each chapter of *Why the Bible Began* offers a fresh interpretation of historical thinking in ancient Israel. Wright engages not only with current biblical scholarship but also with broader debates in intellectual history. He revisits questions posed by nineteenth-century scholars such as Franz Delitzsch, particularly the problem of the Bible’s endurance. Why did this collection of texts survive and shape Western culture, while the literary traditions of surrounding civilizations did not? Wright seeks to answer this question by integrating modern historiographical approaches with intellectual history, in a manner reminiscent of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*.

Wright’s work begins by examining how the Bible intersects with scientific inquiry. Although the author offers a novel approach, a traditional historical perspective is evident both in the opening chapter and throughout the work as a whole. It is important to note that biblical studies did not develop solely out of scientific interest but were closely intertwined with the imperial political ambitions of England and France. Napoleon, for instance, sought to occupy the region and establish a French presence, while the British Empire likewise invested considerable effort in the Middle East, particularly in the territory of ancient Mesopotamia. Wright refers to examples such as Professor Layard’s excavations, the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, and the unearthing of the Library of Ashurbanipal. These archaeological investigations are of fundamental importance for understanding the cultures of the ancient Near East.

For Wright, history is not merely a sequence of events arranged in chronological order. It is an authoritative interpretive framework through which communities understand themselves and their past. Intellectual or constructed history plays a role equal to that of empirical chronology. Wright therefore presents the emergence of Israelite history alongside its narrative formation, tracing biblical origins back to the story of Abraham and Sarah. Crucially, he does not attempt to determine whether Abraham was a historical individual. The significance of Abraham lies in his function as an ancestral figure through whom a family becomes a nation. The narrative of Abraham and Sarah thus marks the beginning of Israel not as a political entity but as a conceptual community.

Wright emphasizes that events and their remembrance are not identical. Interpretation reveals as much about those who remember the past as about the past itself. This distinction between history and narrative allows Wright to analyse how a relatively small region produced one of the most influential texts in world culture: the Bible. Central to this process is the role of biblical scribes. Wright portrays these scribes as intellectual agents who repeatedly reinterpreted inherited traditions in response to changing political circumstances. Through their efforts, rival populations from the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were gradually integrated into a shared vision of peoplehood.

Prophetic discourse plays a decisive role in this development. According to Wright, prophetic messages undermined existing political structures by challenging royal authority and imperial ideology. These critiques laid the groundwork for a covenantal system centred on ethical responsibility and communal accountability. The incorporation of legal texts further transformed descriptive narratives into prescriptive frameworks for the future. In this way, historical memory acquired normative force, and narrative tradition became authoritative scripture.

One of Wright's central aims is to demonstrate how this historical process continues to shape contemporary society. *Why the Bible Began* is therefore not a conventional 'history of Israel' but a reflection on the formation of national consciousness. The book qualifies as an alternative history precisely because it treats history and narrative in parallel. Wright begins with Abraham and Sarah not to resolve questions of historicity, but because their story exemplifies how collective identity is constructed. The Hebrew Bible, in this sense, is not history in the strict modern sense but a powerful synthesis of memory, interpretation, and ideology.

The originality of Wright's work lies in its ability to connect multiple disciplines—history, sociology, political theory, and biblical studies—into a coherent meta-historical narrative. The book functions not only as a scholarly monograph but also as an excellent course text, offering readers comprehensive material for understanding the Bible within its historical and intellectual context. Each chapter includes bibliographical guidance that encourages further exploration.

As Wright himself concludes, the Bible would not exist without the interaction between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. It emerged not from innate religious superiority or early monotheism, but from generations of critical thinkers who challenged the status quo and sought practical truths that would enable survival under foreign domination. In this sense, the Bible ultimately teaches 'the power of the written word' (Wright 2023: 467).

Although firmly grounded in the study of ancient Israel, Wright's argument resonates powerfully with modern concerns. His analysis of scribal activity, prophetic critique, and legal codification reveals mechanisms of identity formation that are strikingly familiar in contemporary nation-states. The processes through which narratives are curated, authorized, and transformed into normative frameworks invite comparison with modern debates over national memory, constitutional authority, and the role of intellectual elites in times of crisis. In this respect, *Why the Bible Began* offers not only an alternative history of scripture but also a lens through which to examine the politics of memory in the present.

In sum, *Why the Bible Began* is a substantial and thought-provoking contribution to contemporary scholarship. Its interdisciplinary methodology, historiographical sophistication, and conceptual clarity distinguish it from traditional histories of Israel. While some readers may question the extent to which Wright downplays archaeological reconstruction, the book's primary achievement lies in reframing the problem of biblical origins. By shifting attention from factual reconstruction to narrative formation, Wright provides a compelling account of how the Hebrew Bible came into being and why it continues to shape modern understandings of history, nationhood, and collective memory.

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