THE ORIGINS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE: SOME NEW ANSWERS TO OLD QUESTIONS
PART TWO*

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In his book, Writing on the Tablet of the Heart, Carr, like Schniedewind, takes up the question of the “origins of Scripture” as directly related to the origins of Israelite literature.¹ In this he acknowledges some indebtedness to Schniedewind in stimulating him to focus on some of the basic issues concerning the relationship of orality and literacy in the origins of biblical literature. Carr’s own approach, however, is to take up the problem of scribal education as the key to the origin of Scripture, understood as a selected corpus of literary works used for the “enculturation” of the nation’s elite youth. This entails a study of how the peoples of antiquity actually learned to read and write and thus how the transition was made from orality to the literary formation of the Bible. The role of scribal education in this process was seriously overlooked by Schniedewind, and in his highly detailed and well-informed discussion Carr makes a significant contribution to our understanding of literacy in the ancient world. Carr is acutely aware of the dangers of anachronism in the discussion of ancient literacy and of the complexity of discussions about it and his extensive documentation tries to overcome this problem. Nevertheless, important issues remain that can perhaps receive sharper focus as a result of his work.

Carr begins his investigation by laying down some basic principles on the place of orality and literacy in the transmission of tradition within the educational systems of antiquity. He states:

The fundamental idea is the following: as we look at how key texts like the Bible and other classical literature functioned in ancient cultures, what was primary was not how such texts were inscribed on clay, parchment, or

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papyri. Rather, what was truly crucial was how those written media were part of a cultural project of incising key cultural-religious traditions—word for word—on people’s minds. Cultures like those in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Israel put a high value on preservation of ancient traditions, and they invested heavily in ensuring continuity across generations. One way of doing this was to use written texts as part of a larger educational project of ensuring stable transmission of key traditions across time (8).

The central thrust of Carr’s book is therefore about the educational systems of these ancient civilizations, and by this he means the elitist scribal education, and how such education was used as a means of “enculturation” of the traditions. As Carr attempts to demonstrate throughout the rest of his book, orality is important to this enculturation process because it is precisely through memorization and recitation that the curriculum of traditional texts are inscribed on the mind.

This model immediately raises some important questions. What exactly are we to understand by the content of this “cultural-religious tradition,” which is the curriculum of the elite scribal class? Carr answers this question by making a distinction between those kinds of texts that are particular to their special training as scribes and the “long-duration texts of the sort found in the Bible” that “were created as part of a broader use of texts to achieve cultural continuity in elite classes across space and time”(10). This suggests that literacy marks a more fundamental change between the period in which such traditions were orally transmitted by an educational means that was not elitist and the period in which a literate elite was educated through written means; the biblical tradition as we have it is the product of this later scribal elite. Carr’s notion of long-duration texts attempts to create some continuity with the oral past, but viewing them as a written creation for the education of this elitist class does little to overcome this difference. Moreover, his generalization of biblical literature as long-duration texts includes a wide range of different kinds of texts, which in their original composition may not have been “traditional” at all or may not have had any bureaucratic scribal elite in mind. The model, constructed primarily on evidence from Mesopotamia, may not work so well for Greece and Israel.

Furthermore, Carr treats the role of orality in the form of memorization and recitation of texts as typical of those cultures where literacy arises in largely oral societies and therefore as something quite foreign to modern education. This is undoubtedly true in present day educational practice, but as recently as the nineteenth