The Bible
as an Early Literary Text

The aim of this article is to question certainties about the act of writing, to consider the difficulties of representing ideas in writing, to ask what writing is good at and what it is bad at, what it means to write something down and the differences it makes to the 'message' when we do.

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As a writer of novels and short stories I am interested in how the foundation texts of civilisation and literary society came into being, and at the differences between an oral text and a written text. In this context we can look at connections between Creative Writing, oral storytelling and the Classics, and we can consider the origins of texts like *The Rigveda, The Bible, Koran, The Epic of Gilgamesh,* the *Iliad* and *Odyssey, Táin Bó Cúalnge, Mabinogion* and *Beowulf* – asking how they emerged from orality to become written texts and what signs they show of their origins.

When I look at these foundation texts, I try to see them from a writer's point of view and think about how they were made. And among many other questions, I focus on the following:

- What is writing and where does it come from?
- What does writing do?
- What are we doing when we write?
- What do writers do when they write?
- What can we expect of writing?
- What can writers expect to achieve in their writing?
- What does writing do well and what does it do badly?
- What are the effects (positive and negative) of writing?
- How effectively does writing record language?
- How effectively can we hope to capture in writing – even in a snapshot – a perfect version of a constantly mutating oral classic?
- What do we do to an oral creation when we write it down?
- In what ways is a world without writing different from a world with writing?

My intention is to persuade readers to reconsider the act of writing, to undermine the certainties readers assume about texts, and persuade them that all texts are provisional rather than 'given', that texts have unexpected 'back-stories'. Here I am interested in the writing of *The Bible*, literacy in *The Bible* and the idea of writing in *The Bible*: I am looking at *The Bible*, not as a religious text but as a founding literary text. I am particularly interested in the figures of Baruch and Jeremiah and what they can tell us about writing at the time of the prophets. I am also interested in the account of the siege of Jabesh-gilead in *1 Samuel* and what it can tell us about scribal errors and the problems of interpretation.

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It is thought the earliest references in *The Bible* are to a period of the early Middle East Bronze Age, c2250-2000BC.[1] Among the authors of *The Bible* are said to be Moses, Samuel, David, Solomon and the Prophets, but, close examination of the surviving texts reveals they were probably not 'written' by the people to whom they are attributed since these people often lived before the Jewish tribes began to keep written records. Also, in

[1] G. Steiner, 'Preface to the Hebrew Bible' (1966) in: *No Passion Spent* (Faber: London, 1996), 45.

the case of Samuel he dies before the end of the first book attributed to him, leaving the authorship of the end of that book and the whole of the Second Book of Samuel as a mystery. While oral tradition has much older roots than the texts, the earliest writing in *The Bible* seems to date from 950-725BC. Many Old Testament texts were written by 600BC; the first five books of the Old Testament were certainly in written form by about 400BC, though canonical acceptance came later.[2]

In English the tradition of treating *The Bible* as a work of literature goes back to roughly 1678, when the orator Richard Simon (1638-1712) published his *Critical History of the Old Testament,* questioning the integrity of the Biblical texts that had been handed down by history. On the continent, at almost the same time, Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), in his *Short Treatise on Hebrew Grammar,* which was incomplete and only appeared posthumously in 1677, took up a similar approach. Even before his writings had been published Spinoza's criticisms got him banned from his synagogue in Amsterdam. Their criticisms turned on the problem of that they called the 'repair of the text'. They both insisted that, because of the Hebrew script in which it was written which provided only skeletal guidance on pronunciation and punctuation, *The Bible* as a text was often badly flawed and open to error. Richard Simon also made the point that *The Bible* and its interpretation were 'authorised by custom' and handed down by scribal and rabbinical tradition, and that this over-rode the normal literary and legal 'rules of interpretation'.

Their questioning grew out of the fact that there was no Hebrew version of *The Bible* that had been 'constant through the centuries' and the cumulative effect of their thinking about the text was to see *The Bible* not particularly as the word of God, but as a book set down and transmitted, often faultily, by people who were inspired by the idea of the word of God.[3]

We know very little about the way the works of the prophets and other contributors passed from oral teaching and into written form. The Old Testament, though it is very conscious of the notion of 'the book', tells almost nothing about the process of its own formation and, for such a substantial work, seeking to establish the authority of its own written record, it gives us very little information about writing, reading or the life and work of the scribes.[4] How each of these texts first came into existence is probably a fascinating story – if only we knew it. Jeremiah (c605BC) is the only prophet who tells us that although he speaks in the first person he had a scribe called Baruch to write his words down. The employment of a scribe does not mean that Jeremiah could not write. Nor does it mean that all his prophecies were written down, or that all the prophecies were written down by Baruch alone. Nor does it mean that all the writing recorded under

[2] T. H. Lim, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP: Oxford, 2000); J. Riches, *The Bible: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP: Oxford, 2000); E. W. Heaton, *The Old Testament Prophets* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1966).

[3] M. Olender, *The Language of Paradise: Race, Religion and Philology in the Nineteenth Century* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge Mass., 1992), 21-36.

[4] In King James Bible concordances there are roughly 91 references to the word 'write'; 38 references to 'writing'; 69 references to the word 'read' and 6 to 'reading'; 54 references to the word 'scribe' and 188 references to the word 'book': www.biblestudytools.com.

his name is in fact from Jeremiah. Nor does it mean that the prophet is changing his traditional preaching or abandoning oral teaching in favour of writing. But all these things are possible.

The Book of Jeremiah is probably a mixture of Jeremiah's recorded words and the account of his activities provided by Baruch. Jeremiah is said to have been commanded by God:

> Thus speaketh the LORD God of Israel, saying, Write thee all the words that I have spoken unto thee in a book'. (*Jeremiah* 30:3)

This is the first mention in *The Bible* of a collection of writings made to a particular purpose. We know that this was a crucial period in Jewish history and that the military power of Babylon was on the rise – or as Jeremiah put it:

> Out of the north an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land'. (*Jeremiah* 1:14)

Jeremiah's prophecy - seventy years of enslavement to the Babylonians - was intended as a warning to the people of Judah about what would happen if they did not mend their ways.

> And Jeremiah commanded Baruch, saying, I am shut up: I cannot go into the house of the LORD: Therefore go thou, and read in the roll, which thou hast written from my mouth, the words of the LORD in the ears of the people in the LORD'S house upon the fasting day: and also thou shalt read them in the ears of all Judah that come out of their cities. (*Jeremiah* 36:5-6)

As Jeremiah was not allowed to go into the temple (we are never told why), the only way he could publish his ideas was by writing the prophecies down and asking Baruch to take the written scroll to the temple. Jeremiah's scroll was read to the people of Judah on a fast day in December. Gemariah, 'the son of Shaphan the scribe', was so impressed he invited other scribes and princes to a further reading in the scribes' chamber of the king's palace. However, things did not go to plan. The scribes understood the prophet's message as preaching against the city and the king. They put his scroll in the chamber of the scribe Elishama while they went to speak to King Jehoiakim. Not for the first time, it seems, Jeremiah and Baruch were warned to go into hiding.

Jeremiah's scroll was read to King Jehoiakim. He was not at all impressed by Jeremiah's message. Far from mending his ways, as the scroll was read to him, he slashed it away with a knife and threw it bit by bit onto the fire. Gemariah and the other scribes advised the king against burning the scroll, but without success. Jeremiah and Baruch remained in hiding and Jeremiah, we are told, was instructed by God to write a new scroll:

> Then took Jeremiah another roll, and gave it to Baruch the scribe, the son of Neriah: who wrote therein from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire: and there were added besides unto them many like words. (*Jeremiah* 36:32)

This second scroll is what we now know as the *Book of Jeremiah*. The role of the court scribes in these events indicates not only that they took an interest in prophesy for reasons of religion, but also for state security; but it also makes clear that even before the Jews were taken into captivity in Babylon, scribes and officials were writing down, sifting and collecting texts of legends, oracles, prophecies.

Five hundred years later, there were a great many more manuscripts in existence than at the time of Jeremiah, and Martin Jaffee has given us an imaginative reconstruction of scribal work in a Hebrew scriptorium c100BC:

> Imagine, if you will, a room containing twenty-two books. All of them are composed by anonymous authors, many of whom lived centuries apart. Most of the authors, moreover, are not creative writers. Their creativity consists of compiling into coherent compositions earlier literary traditions – some transmitted in writing and others by word of mouth, some of rather recent vintage and others centuries old. The books are issued on leather scrolls ranging from a few feet to many dozen….
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> These copies represent a major investment of labor by tanners who produce the writing surface of the scroll and scribes who laboriously copy the text. Sometimes, by error, whole lines are skipped or miscopied. If such scribal mistakes go undetected and uncorrected, later copyists will reproduce the error and transmit it as the genuine text…
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> Nearly all the people who see these books are governmental leaders and officials from the Ministry of Culture. While most people of the country are able to read in at least a rudimentary way, these books in particular are legible only with difficulty. In the first place, they are written in an ancient version of the national language, a version that is spoken, if at all, only by antiquarian scholars. There is also the matter of the copies themselves. The scribal handwriting is a specialised script difficult to decipher… But illegibility is not a serious problem for most people since few have looked inside any but the most famous of these scrolls…. What they know of most of the library's contents comes to them from hearing portions of some of the books read aloud by trained declaimers on national holidays, commemorative festivals, and other public occasions.[5]

While each prophet, historian and law giver may have had varying difficulties in getting their oral teachings written down, the problems did not cease with the creation of a text and what has come down to us is sometimes puzzling – and made more so because

[5] M. Jaffee 'The Hebrew Scriptures' in: J. M. Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 2002), 73.

until recently modern Biblical scholars had to content themselves with manuscripts the earliest of which dated only from the mediaeval period.

However, in 1947 shepherds at Qumran, in the hills of Judea above the Dead Sea, stumbled upon caves containing the remains of a library of religious texts from a small isolated Jewish sect called the Essenes. Many of the Essene texts dated from the period 250BC-100AD and, though damaged by time and climate, the remains of the scrolls, rolls and parchments allowed scholars to see what the many and various early Biblical texts must have been like before the canon was. The Qumran library texts also allowed scholars to see some of the problems that had developed not as a result of ambiguous vowels, but as a result of the way that documents had been handled, stored, edited, transcribed and passed down through generations of scribes.

One of the many variant readings to emerge from the documents found at Qumran is a good example of how scribes sometimes operate to leave for us a text that is assumed to be accurate, historically authentic, even sacred, but which in fact makes little sense. In the *First Book of Samuel*, some of which derives from the oral teachings of the prophet Samuel, we are told that Samuel had been told by God to appoint Saul as the first of the Hebrew kings. The people, however, had been reluctant to assent to his wishes. Saul seems to have been a very unpopular choice. We read:

> But the children of Belial said, How shall this man save us? And they despised him and brought Him no presents. But he held his peace. (1 *Samuel* 10:27)

This is the last verse in the chapter. The implication is that this clash will be picked up again in the next chapter. However, when the narrative resumes in chapter 11, instead of picking up the story and resolving the issue of Saul's kingship, verse 1 has a jarring and confusing change of direction:

> 1 Then Nahash the Ammonite came up, and encamped against Jabesh-gilead: and all the men of Jabesh said unto Nahash, make a covenant with us, and we will serve thee.
> 2 And Nahash the Ammonite answered them, On this *condition* will I make *a covenant* with you, that I may thrust out all your right eyes, and lay it *for* a reproach upon all Israel.
> 3 And the elders of Jabesh said unto him, Give us seven days' respite, that we may send messengers unto all the coasts of Israel: and then, if there be no man to save us, we will come out to thee.

Suddenly instead of resolving the problem of Saul's lack of popularity, and for no apparent reason, Nahash the Ammonite is busy laying siege to the Israelite town of Jabesh-gilead in Trans-Jordan.

Some commentators assumed that gouging out the right eye was a sign that Nahash was a barbarian; others thought it a traditional punishment for traitors, for the defeated enemy or for resisting a siege. But even so, it makes no sense for Nahash to threaten

disfigurement and then agree to wait seven days while the town leaders send out for reinforcements before they decide whether they will give battle or agree to have their eyes put out. Clearly the verses could, even at a very basic level, be interpreted in several ways. As the rest of the story unfolds we learn that when the town messengers reached Saul he raised an army, beat the Ammonites and proved himself a worthy leader. But one slightly desperate commentator, for example, glossed the passage thus:

> A king of Ammon, who, at the very beginning of Saul's reign, attacked Jabesh-gilead so successfully, that the inhabitants sued for peace at almost any cost, for they were willing to pay tribute and serve the Ammonites. The harsh king, not satisfied with tribute and slavery, demanded in addition that the right eye of every man should be put out, as 'a reproach upon Israel.' They were given seven days to comply with these cruel terms. Before the expiration of this time, Saul, the newly anointed king, appeared on the scene with an army which utterly routed the Ammonites.[6]

The Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37-c100AD) in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (VI, v, 3) which seems to have been written c93-94AD, mentioned the siege of Jabesh-gilead, and he seemed to have access to a source document that made a different sense of events. However, until recently scholars could only wonder what it might have been. It was only with the discovery of an early text of *The Book of Samuel* among the many other documents found in the caves at Qumran that the mystery of these verses with their abrupt change of narrative direction was clarified. In the Qumran text we can read a passage that was missed out of the version that came down to us. The passage, if fitted in between the end of 1 *Samuel* 10 and 1 *Samuel* 11, allows us access to a much more satisfactory narrative:

> 1. But the children of Belial said, How shall this man save us? And they despised him and brought Him no presents. But he held his peace.
> *Now Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had been grievously oppressing the Gaddites and Reubenites. He would gouge out the right eye of each of them and would not grant Israel a deliverer. No one was left of the Israelites across the Jordan whose right eye Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had not gouged out. But there were seven thousand men who had escaped from the Ammonites and who had entered Jabesh-gilead. About a month later Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh-gilead….*
> 2. Then Nahash the Ammonite came up, and encamped against Jabesh-gilead: and all the men of Jabesh said unto Nahash, make a Covenant with us, and we will serve thee. And Nahash the Ammonite answered them, On this *condition* will I make *a covenant* with you, that I may thrust out all your right eyes, and lay it *for* a reproach upon all Israel.
> 3. And the elders of Jabesh said unto him, Give us seven days' respite that we may send messengers unto all the coasts of Israel: and then, if there be no man to save us, we will come out to thee.

[6] 'The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia': www.searchgodsword.org.

In the Qumran version the narrative makes much better sense. Now we can clearly see that the brutal Nahash was intent on breaking into Jabesh-gilead because it harboured fugitives from his war against the people of Gad and Reuben, across the river Jordan and he intended to punish the people of Jabesh-gilead for sheltering them. Also, as we insert this passage we can see that up to the siege Saul has still not become king. It is only when he leads an army to scatter the Ammonites that he is acclaimed king.

It seems very likely that these lines did not figure in the Biblical text transmitted to us because, before a standard Hebrew canon was agreed, a scribe engaged in copying simply skipped a verse. His eye jumped from a verse paragraph beginning with the word 'Nahash' to the following verse paragraph which also began with the word 'Nahash'. The error went unchallenged, the original text was lost, and the corrupted text stood for centuries and was in turn copied on by other scribes. It is possible that Flavius Josephus had access to a very similar text to that discovered in Qumran.

This is perhaps the best known of the re-readings made available to Biblical scholars by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In 1999 this missing paragraph was re-inserted into the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*. It is only because a more complete, earlier variant script was preserved in the caves of Qumran that we know how the passage should read. Or do we? How many more puzzling passages are there in the Old Testament? What else is missing from this passage - and why? And what is missing from the thousands of fragments found in Qumran?[7]

What I hope students take from this meditation is that *The Bible* is an artefact: it was made. I hope they also learn that we cannot trust written texts to tell us the truth, let alone the whole truth; that we must take each text into our hands and study the writing as closely and carefully as we can for what it tells us about itself and the world it was made in, but also about the unpredictable and fragmentary way writing of all kinds represents our world.

I have been exploring these things in the context of re-asserting a basic truth – namely that Creative Writing as a subject of study has its roots in oral tradition, Biblical and Middle Eastern scribing, Medieval Scriptoria, the ancient schools of Rhetoric and of course the Classics. Seen in this context Creative Writing is not the newest university subject, but the oldest, the original subject, and without Creative Writing, represented in its earliest days by foundation texts like *The Bible*, we would have little to read, no universities, nothing to study and no sense of identity or our past…

[7] J. M. Allegro, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1956), 50-74.