

FROM CLAY TABLETS TO CANON: THE STORY OF THE FORMATION OF SCRIPTURE

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It is difficult for us, in the age of information, to appreciate the impact of both the sweeping movements and technical advances that allowed for the creation of the canonized book we call the Bible. We live in a time when we regularly turn to written documents for the “final word,” and we take for granted an astounding volume of written works and easy access to them. Indeed, it has been argued that U.S. culture has been the most textually oriented society in the history of the world.¹ In contrast, for most of biblical history, Israel lacked the ability to create and read texts widely enough to be turned to as *the* source of religious information. Perhaps more importantly, the Israelites generally lacked the cultural concept that such would be desirable. If we want to understand how we received the Bible as we have it—not the process of how certain books were chosen to be in the Bible, but instead how it was decided to *have* a Bible—then we must examine both changes in writing technology as well as cultural concepts of knowledge. These two components interact throughout history in a symbiotic cycle of influence

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and impact that eventually culminated in the desire and ability to create a Bible.

To truly appreciate this story, we must divest ourselves of our twenty-first-century worldview and instead enter an era in which authoritative knowledge originated from the spoken, not the written, word. While as Latter-day Saints we are somewhat unique in believing that keeping written records was an activity in Adam's day (see Moses 6:5), we can also acknowledge that this was not a widespread pattern and that the Bible was created in a post-Zion, post-Flood world wherein we are unable to trace the effects of these earliest writers. It is likely that early Israel was a largely illiterate group with little access to or inclination toward large-scale writing.² The Israelites learned the word of God as it was spoken to them by His prophets.³ They were not alone in this: cultural concepts of authoritative knowledge in Israel were indicative of parallel notions among her neighbors in the Near East. The mental framework underlying transmitting knowledge orally and the move toward the textuality that would eventuate in a canon can best be understood in light of the technical components of writing.

THE TECHNOLOGY OF WRITING

My intent is not to provide here a treatise on the development of writing. However, a few background details must be understood. First, the earliest writing systems, those developed in Mesopotamia and Egypt, were both based on *pictograms*: pictures that came to represent sounds (*phonograms*) and sometimes nonphonetic concepts (such as the Egyptian determinative, a *semagram*).⁴ In Mesopotamia, each picture became a stylized configuration of wedge-shaped impressions known as *cuneiform*. In Egypt, the pictograms maintained their pictographic nature throughout Egyptian history as *hieroglyphs* but also developed into a parallel tradition of stylized cursive representations. The development of the cuneiform and hieroglyphic traditions was likely influenced by the medium on which the representatives were inscribed.

In Mesopotamia, the primary writing material was the clay tablet. Probably the earliest attempts at writing were the use of fashioned lumps of clay on which marks were made to represent amounts of goods in accompanying commodity shipments.⁵ The need to keep track of

how many units were being shipped, as well as how many were received, seems to be the impetus for the creation of writing.⁶ As writing became more sophisticated, the writing material Mesopotamians used also advanced a little. Instead of roughly shaped clay lumps, they created regular rectangular tablets on which they could make wedgelike impressions with reeds.⁷ The ability to indent wet clay with reeds lent itself to the creation of the cuneiform script. If these clay tablets were fired, or were in a building that burned, they became hard enough that many of them survived throughout the millennia, giving modern philologists the opportunity to decipher the writing and learn of the culture.

Egypt was blessed with an abundance of a plant type that would dominate the world of writing west of the Himalayas for thousands of years—papyrus. The Nile and its delta naturally grew great quantities of papyrus. This plant could be interwoven, pressed, and dried into a resilient and supple writing material. The process is difficult, yet the ancient Egyptians mastered it in such a way that even today we cannot create papyrus rolls of such high quality as they did in the glory days of the plant.⁸ The strips could be grafted side by side for great length, making the creation of rolls a natural part of the papyrus-making process (the longest-known roll is about 133 feet long).⁹ Long rolls became the standard, and if a scribe wanted a small sheet, it seems he would just cut one from a roll.¹⁰ The papyrus roll became the primary writing medium of the ancient Mediterranean world for most of its history.

While clay and papyrus were the most common textual materials, other substances were employed as well. Writing occasionally took place on wood (somewhat commonly in the Hittite Empire),¹¹ or even linen.¹² Additionally, most ancient cultures used stone for monumental inscriptions. Treated animal skins were also used. From as early as Thutmose III (c. 1450 BC), we have record of a leather roll being deposited in a temple, but leather generally did not survive for long and was almost certainly an infrequent writing material.¹³ Broken potsherds, known as *ostraca*, served as the scratch paper of the ancients. From very early periods, we know of rare instances of Sumerian, Phoenician, Akkadian, Hittite, Egyptian, and Israelite writing on metal.¹⁴ In general, the preparation of all these writing materials was difficult and costly. However, despite the resource-intensive process of creating

writing materials, other factors proved to be even more limiting in the spread of writing.

The greatest prohibition in writing was the writing system itself. In order to write proficiently with either the hieroglyphic or cuneiform script, one had to master thousands of signs.¹⁵ In our age, when a four-year-old is able to learn to write all twenty-six simple English alphabetic characters in four months, it is hard to imagine how restrictive it was to employ more difficult writing systems consisting of thousands of symbols. We know much about the techniques used to train scribes in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Less is known of their neighbors, but we have enough evidence to be sure that the many cultures that lived between these great empires during their days of power had independent yet similar scribal-training processes. Ancient Near Eastern scribal schools were long and intense. Since the primary purpose of writing was to enable bureaucracy to function, and because training a scribe was so expensive, scribal schools were usually state sponsored. They focused not only on teaching the writing system but on producing scribes who could perform necessary mathematical and diplomatic functions. Thus, scribal schools usually contained the ancient equivalent of courses in distribution logistics, accounting, geometry, diplomatic letter writing, and literature.¹⁶ Much of the schooling process involved copying classic works from a variety of genres. Generally only the elite could afford to send their children to a scribal school, and many of these probably dropped out. The difficulty of the courses and the strictness of the instructors is reflected in an Egyptian text about schoolboys: "Do not spend a day in idleness or you will be beaten. The ear of a boy is on his back, he listens when he is beaten."¹⁷ All of these factors combined to severely limit the number of people who could read or write.

The primary purpose of a scribe was to keep records, not to create great literary works.¹⁸ While some certainly did create such works, the mindset of the societies and their schools was that scribes were primarily functional. In such societies, the locus of authoritative ideas lay in the spoken word, or oral tradition, not the written word.

As true as this mindset was in the great and wealthy societies that arose in the Nile Valley or in Mesopotamia, it was amplified in the Holy Land. There, resources were less plentiful, indigenous papyrus was

unavailable, and the inhabitants looked to their great neighbors for guidance in cultural prestige. Eventually, eastern Mediterranean Semitic groups used Egypt's writing system to develop the alphabet,¹⁹ which had the power to democratize literacy. Yet this revolutionary process had to wait for some time, for neither the cultural mindset nor the scarcity of writing materials lent themselves to widespread literacy; thus the idea of turning to texts for authority lay latent.

Here I wish to distinguish between textuality and literacy. While the two concepts certainly impact one another, they are not completely synonymous. *Literacy* has many definitions, but for our purposes we can agree that it means one has achieved a functioning ability to read and write. *Textuality* is a mental orientation toward texts as the most authoritative source of knowledge. While epistemology can take into account many sources of knowledge, we generally place textuality and orality on opposite ends of a continuum.²⁰ This is not to say that textuality and orality are mutually exclusive, as many assume. Many cultures, including Latter-day Saint culture, look to both oral and textual sources for authoritative knowledge. Yet in the end, one source or the other must gain primacy. For most of Israelite history, texts did not hold the primary position.

ORAL AND TEXTUAL AUTHORITY

Biblical evidence clearly points toward early Israel as a society that looked to oral tradition as its locus of authority.²¹ Solomon was said to have *spoken* his three thousand proverbs (see I Kings 4:32); he and David *sang* much of their teachings and wisdom (see I Kings 4:32 and many of the Psalms); the Lord continually calls for Israel to “*hear*” His word; the oldest texts in the Bible are actually *songs* or *poems*; the Lord *spoke* the Ten Commandments to all Israel before He wrote them (see Deuteronomy 5:22; the Exodus 19–20 account does not mention its being written, *only spoken*); and we could adduce many more examples. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew verb *qr'*, translated as “read,” originally meant “call out,” or “proclaim.”²² Eventually the word came to mean that a proclamation would be read out loud. It was only after a cultural shift toward textuality that later stages of Hebrew transformed the word to mean “read.”²³ Very few could read: scrolls were expensive, and only

royal courts (when they existed) had the necessary infrastructure to support writing on a large-scale basis. Since frequently these courts were not looked to as the source of wisdom or inspiration, writing was not turned to as the primary source of valued knowledge. That source was oral tradition. This is not to say that writings and books were not important or sacred to the Israelites; they clearly possessed a long and rich tradition of writing and literary ability. Concomitantly, these early and beautiful texts that we value so highly were largely unavailable (both from lack of manuscripts and lack of literacy) to the average Israelite. It is not a question of whether or not any Israelites engaged in writing; rather, it is a matter of where the Israelites primarily turned for authoritative information. Those who would maintain that because Israel had sacred texts it was a textually based society misunderstand the issue; while Israel certainly had sacred texts demonstrating a sophisticated literary ability, these writings did not hold the same status for them that they do for us.

However, this would not always remain the case. Israel's cultural climate in regard to writing changed in a pattern parallel to the rest of its neighbors. While many minor shifts occurred along the way, some time periods proved to be watershed eras in the movement along the continuum towards textual primacy. One such era was the reign of Hezekiah (c. 725 BC). A brief perusal of Isaiah's writings makes it abundantly apparent that while Israel may have looked primarily to hearing the word of the Lord through His prophets as the source of divine revelation, it had certainly developed high levels of prophetic writing. Yet the presence of such an accomplished and inspired writer among the social elite was only part of the crucial setting of Hezekiah's time. It was during his day that Assyria systematically attacked both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. As refugees fled from both nations, they gathered to Jerusalem for safety. Both textual and archaeological evidence attest that Jerusalem grew rapidly during this time, nearly tripling in size.²⁴ The rapid growth carried with it an incumbent need for a larger textually active bureaucracy.²⁵ It has been said of this time period, "The small, isolated town of Jerusalem mushroomed into a large metropolis. Writing became part of the urban bureaucracy as well as a political extension of growing royal

power. These changes would be the catalyst for the collecting and composing of biblical literature."²⁶ This is not to suggest that no portions of the Bible had been written. Yet it would be simplistic to assume that because there had been writing since the time of Adam, the books of the Bible had been written and collected with focus on creating a canonized compilation. The substance of the Bible itself suggests a fundamental shift hinging on this time period.

It is within Isaiah's generation that we see the creation of the biblical books written by and named after prophets, such as Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, and Micah. Before this time, the biblical tradition knows of great prophets such as Elijah only from later records. A good share of the Bible as we now have it was written or collected at the time of Hezekiah and later. The textual revolution that began at this time was not the genesis of all biblical books, but it was truly the dawn of the concept of biblical literature that would guide Israel for years to come. Even the existing books were probably gathered and rewritten or redacted during this phase.²⁷ The mere existence of the book of Moses attests that at some point there was a substantial reworking and rewriting of extant books. Undoubtedly the rise of urbanization, and its demand for a literate bureaucracy, is not the sole factor behind the paradigm shift that Israel went through, but it is certainly a major factor.

The trend seems to have climbed steeply upward during the reign of Josiah (c. 640 BC). During this time, we find evidence of a sharp increase in literacy in Judah. While we have insufficient data to arrive at a quantitative assessment of the literacy rate, we can easily ascertain that relative to previous levels, the ability to read and write skyrocketed in Judah. Seal impressions (the marks imprinted in damp clay or wax in order to both seal something and identify it)²⁸ and official inscriptions attest to growth in official use of writing. Ubiquitous graffiti and ostraca demonstrate a more widespread ability to read and write.²⁹ Numerous signatures of people without title on various documents also illustrate this fact.³⁰ A letter found in the Judahite citadel of Lachish seems to indicate something of the status of literacy during this time period. Lachish Letter 3, known as the letter of the literate soldier, is from a junior officer protesting a superior's implication that he would need a scribe to read a letter to him.³¹ His protests make it clear that

even for a junior member of the military a social stigma would have been attached to illiteracy.³² A more widespread literacy eventuated in a shift of focus from an oral to a written locus of authority.³³ This is not to imply that the majority of Judahites became literate; such was surely not the case. Yet an increase in literacy created a more widespread use of texts, making them a more pervasive part of life.

We can see evidence of this movement in the book of Jeremiah. His is the first prophetic work which self-referentially describes the creation of the text. Jeremiah was commanded by the Lord to take a roll of a book and record all the words that had been spoken to him (see Jeremiah 36:2). Jeremiah employed a scribe, Baruch, who not only wrote these words but had them read to the king, who burned them. Jeremiah again recited them to Baruch, who rewrote the scroll (from its description of being cut and burned, this was probably a papyrus roll; see Jeremiah 36). From this point forward, the manner in which the Lord's words actually became a text was of increasing concern in Judah.

Another example of the importance placed on sacred texts comes from just before the time of Jeremiah. During Josiah's reign, a "book of the law" was found in the temple (2 Kings 22:8). This book, coming from an earlier time and often identified with parts of the book of Deuteronomy, was deemed so important that Josiah read the book—this time called "the book of the covenant" (2 Kings 23:2)—to all of Judah. Everyone present covenanted to obey that which was written in the book. Here we see Judah turning to a text to know how to keep the law and as a focus of the covenant. Lehi was likely a youth when this book was found and read. He and his descendants seem to reflect this view of the importance of sacred texts as the source of authority on the law and the covenant. The literacy of Lehi and his children also reflects the growing importance of literacy in their generation.

It was shortly after Josiah and Lehi that Jerusalem was destroyed and its inhabitants carried away by the Babylonians (c. 586 BC). The Jews were greatly affected by the Exile in many ways. The loss of their promised land and their captivity in Babylon incontrovertibly created a desire to preserve tradition, and part of the process of preserving tradition was to freeze that tradition in a text. The desire to create, compile, and preserve sacred texts, then, was greatly enhanced by the

Exile. Yet this could not have been the sole cause of the Jews' increasing textuality. In many ways the captive Jews were merely mirroring the Mediterranean world. This axial age was a time of textual turning in many civilizations.³⁴ It is the era in which we see the rise of the Ionian philosophers in Greece. It is the age of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, writers who convey a focus on texts. Egypt also experienced a resurgence of placing primacy on the written text at this time.³⁵ In some way, the Mediterranean world during this era was transforming its views on the relative weight of the text, and Judah was caught up in the transition.³⁶ Clearly, the written word was taking a new cultural place. Evidence for this is seen in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah (c. 450 BC), where scribes and the text hold a primary position. Ezra's authority is not prophetic but rather seems to derive from his position as a preeminent scribe. The later invention of the *genizah*, a place where sacred books could be respectfully buried because nothing so sacred could be destroyed in good conscience, indicates the status the sacred text had assumed. We also find an architectural expression of this shift in attitude. While early synagogues did not have a Torah shrine, they eventually adopted this structural proclamation of the importance of text.³⁷ Hearing the word of God had been and would remain part of worship, yet this structural creation is likely indicative of the practice of reading from scriptural texts as part of the worship process. Whether one was personally literate or not, all would hear in the synagogue not just the *spoken* word of God but also the *written* word of God. (The public reading of scriptural texts as part of worship services is also a practice that manifests the textuality of Christianity, regardless of the literacy of the individuals in the congregation).³⁸

Under the Hellenistic influence as experienced by Jews both in Ptolemaic Egypt and in Judea under Ptolemaic control, this movement pressed further forward. Papyrus achieved an apex of availability. The Ptolemies created the great library of Alexandria as part of their push toward literary supremacy.³⁹ Sacred Jewish texts and Jewish views on textual authority both informed and were informed by these perspectives.⁴⁰ We must not oversimplify the issue, though. While Jews, and the ancient world in general, were becoming much more textually oriented, the importance of the spoken word had not disappeared. Oral

teachings and traditions continued, and the written and spoken word would jockey for prime position for millennia to come.⁴¹

ALTERNATIVE WRITING MEDIA

Even though papyrus became generally more accessible during the Hellenistic era, Jewish scribes began to turn to an alternative writing medium. This may have been driven by the sporadic availability of papyrus, which hinged on an ever-changing status as to which great power controlled the Holy Land. When the Ptolemies lost control of the area to the Seleucid Empire, which was often (intermittently from c. 300–80 BC), they may well have cut off the papyrus supply. Whether this is the case or not, the Jews began writing their sacred texts on parchment. Parchment is specially prepared animal skin made suitable for writing. While parchment enjoyed an advantage over papyrus in that animal skins could be obtained anywhere, it was at a disadvantage in that the preparation of parchment was more time consuming, and the papyrus industry was thousands of years old and held a position of cultural prestige. Still, parchment rolls became somewhat common by the third century BC.⁴²

The creation of parchment was made yet more difficult because of Israel's purity laws. While parchment was used for sacred texts, it could only be created by coming into contact with dead animals, which made a person ritually unclean. Hence the tanner, someone absolutely necessary for parchment creation, was looked down upon. One example of this view comes from the Talmud, which records, "The world cannot do without a perfume maker and without a tanner. Happy is he whose trade is perfume making, and woe to him who is a tanner."⁴³ Most texts could be written on parchment derived from the skin of any animal. But because of their special nature, sacred texts were only to be written on parchment made from clean beasts. Thus, parchment intended for sacred texts could be purchased only from specifically designated, reliable tanners.⁴⁴

As long as sacred texts were written on scrolls of papyrus or parchment, the modern notion of a canon was not completely able to gel. Scroll library decisions regarding which texts were sacred could remain somewhat fluid; changes in views of authoritativeness could easily be

accommodated by moving a roll from one shelf or room to another. Since each “book” was its own separate scroll, the idea of putting the books in a certain order had no meaning. Scrolls were stacked in jars or on shelves, sometimes labeled and sometimes not. As Latter-day Saints, we are aware of a rare exception to the use of scrolls: the brass plates. However, variations between the books of the brass plates and the Old Testament (such as the books of Zenock and Zenos), and the variations between readings of texts that the two hold in common, as well as the same set of variations in the Dead Sea Scrolls, clearly indicate that there was neither a set canon nor a standard text. Additionally, New Testament writers made reference to texts that they apparently considered authoritative but which did not make it into the canon (see Jude 1:9–16; Hebrews 11:5–27). Undoubtedly there was some consensus on which texts were authoritative, but these were not yet fully fixed. Scroll collections do not lend themselves to the creation of a Bible. Another technological innovation had to come about to foster the worldview that allowed such a collection.

As early as the fourteenth century BC, Mesopotamia and Egypt sporadically used wooden tablets hinged together with cords.⁴⁵ These usually consisted of two tablets tied together and treated with wax, thus creating four smooth writing surfaces that could be leafed through and erased with relative ease. Wooden writing tablets were meant only for temporary writing and thus never became a preferred medium for writings intended for perpetuity. As late as AD 50, Pliny the Elder was using waxed wooden tablets as notebooks for ideas, which were then expounded upon and fully written on papyrus rolls. Afterward the notebooks were erased and used again in brainstorming for the next section of his extensive works.⁴⁶ But before the end of the first century AD, the idea arose of replacing the wooden tablets with groups of papyrus or parchment sheets bound together in a fashion similar to the wooden tablets.⁴⁷ The tradition of sewing together sheets, especially sheets of papyri, gained impetus, and this invention was called the codex. Just before the close of the first century, the codex had become more than a tablet but was not yet a book. While the technology necessary for making books soon followed, cultural concepts regarding the scroll as the proper place for writing serious works yielded less quickly.

When examining Greek literary texts, the use of the codex seems to have shifted toward the end of the third century AD. In the mid-third century, only about 4.5 percent of known Greek, non-Christian texts were written on a codex; the rest were on papyrus scrolls. However, by the end of the third century, 18.5 percent were on codices, and one hundred years later, 73.5 percent were.⁴⁸ Christians, however, adopted the codex much more quickly. Of the eleven Christian documents which seem to be from the second century AD, all are in codex form.⁴⁹ While there is some doubt as to the exact dating of some of these papyri, and the numbers are not always this one-sided in regard to Christian texts, Christians clearly preferred and adopted the codex long before the rest of society.⁵⁰ A number of reasons for this have been put forth.⁵¹ These arguments need not derail us here; for our current purposes, all we need to understand is that from Christianity's early stages, its adherents used the codex for their sacred texts. Eventually the parchment codex would become the standard textual format.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE CANON

We should also understand that early Christians looked to written texts as their source of authority. This was not necessarily a forgone conclusion. The backdrop of Christianity was both the Greco-Roman world and Judaism. Greco-Roman religions are largely nontextual.⁵² Indeed, while the Greek and Roman literati demonstrated a great affinity for and ability with texts, they also expressed ambivalence toward them. Ironically, the record we have of their textual reservations is preserved in texts, such as when Plato wrote, "No man of intelligence will venture to express his philosophical views in language, especially not in language that is unchangeable, which is true of that which is set down in written characters."⁵³ Moreover, Christianity sprang from a society dominated by the Pharisees, a group which had been shifting emphasis back toward oral authority.⁵⁴ However, Jewish society concomitantly placed a great deal of emphasis on memorizing and reciting sacred texts.⁵⁵

We can turn to the New Testament text itself for evidence regarding early Christianity's degree of textuality. John the Beloved conveys a

mixed message regarding textualization. He begins his Gospel by noting that the Word was not a text but Christ Himself (see John 1:1–14). He closes his book by saying, “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written” (John 21:25). Here John implies that no written text could suffice in comparison with that which the Word did and which those who were with Him were able to teach. In short, while John had just written a text, he closed it by indicating that the text is a poor substitute for all that he really could tell were he not so restricted by the medium of written communication. This is reminiscent of Moroni’s reservations as he finished the Book of Mormon text (see Ether 12:23). Yet not only does John write a sacred document, but texts are an integral part of his great Revelation. Here he was given a book (scroll) by an angel and was commanded to eat it (see Revelation 10:2–10) and to write his revelation in a book (scroll), which he clearly regarded as sacral (see Revelation 22:18–20). He also saw the “book [scroll] of life” (Revelation 3:5)⁵⁶ and viewed holy books being opened and read (see Revelation 5:1–9). Non-apostolic early Christian writers also displayed some misgivings about the written word, such as when Papias notes that he preferred to learn from those who had learned from the Apostles themselves, “for I did not think that information from books would help me as much as the word of a living, surviving voice.”⁵⁷

Other writers conveyed more uniformly positive views of textuality. Luke begins his Gospel by informing Theophilus that his intention in committing the events of the Savior’s life to writing was to create a more authoritative and certain account (see Luke 1:1–4). Paul extols the virtues of knowing the scriptures (see 2 Timothy 3:15–16). The Savior Himself refers to the “book of Moses” (Mark 12:26) and announces His messiahship by reading from the “book of the prophet Esaias [Isaiah]” (Luke 4:17). Scriptural books and writings were often referred to by New Testament authors, indicating a high degree of reliance upon texts. Interestingly, Paul, while imprisoned in Rome, calls for parchment tablets/codex to be brought to him (see 2 Timothy 4:13).⁵⁸ Perhaps it was Paul’s proclivity for the codex that spurred early Christians to adopt it as the primary medium for written materials.

Whatever the cause, clearly the Christians turned to the codex as they compiled sacred texts. Whereas even long scrolls could only contain one large text—the great Isaiah scroll is about twenty-eight feet long—codices could be expanded to hold a number of texts.

Undoubtedly the idea of choosing some texts as sacred and authoritative had been in place long before this time. However, during the early Christian era, Jewish debates centered on exactly which books were sacred.⁵⁹ Additionally, different canonical traditions were developing in Judea than in the diaspora, most notably in Alexandria.⁶⁰ As mentioned above, as long as sacred texts were written on scrolls, it was much easier to change ideas as to which texts had achieved authoritative status, and there was no concept of a correct order (other than dividing the texts into the genres of Law, Prophets, and Writings). The codex allowed Christians to carry their sacred texts in one convenient place. The portability and ensuing availability of scriptures was revolutionized by the codex. The incredibly rapid spread of Christian literature attests to the textuality of Christianity.⁶¹ Unquestionably, a cycle of causation took place as Christian textuality affected its adoption of the codex, while simultaneously the use of the codex raised Christian textuality to new heights. The very concept of scripture was greatly affected by the codex; if one is to put sacred texts in one convenient place, one must choose which texts should be included and the order in which they would be arranged. The medium of the codex has a greater ability to freeze the form of sacred texts.⁶² In the codex we see the culmination of the process of textualization that would result in the concept of creating the Bible.

Much debate has been spawned regarding the process by which the Savior's teachings came to their textual home. While the only record we have of Jesus' writing was in the dirt (see John 8:6), we have numerous accounts of His teaching orally. Much has been made of this, with some reaching the conclusion that few of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Bible were actually His, because He focused on oral teachings and His words were not written down as He spoke them.⁶³ To argue this would be to ignore the developed ability to hear, memorize, and pass on sayings of respected teachers that was part of Jewish culture at the time,⁶⁴ as well as to be blind to the developing tendency to carry and

use small notebooks (probably waxed wood) by many in the working class that were part of the Savior's listeners.⁶⁵ It should be noted that Jews at the time were a more broadly literate society than most.⁶⁶ We must admit that we do not know the exact process of how the Savior's words arrived in the textual form we now have. At the same time, we can readily affirm that He pronounced divine teachings and that He did so in an age when respect was concurrently given to the spoken word and written texts. A cultural willingness to freeze the sacred in textual form existed in his day, and the technical ability to easily create written texts was also present. These two facts would combine, shortly after the Savior's life, within the Christian community to lead to the adoption of recording the teachings of Christ and His Apostles in codex form. This form would demand a defined set of texts and a specified order to those texts. Hence we find both the written and spoken teachings of the Lord and His chosen representatives eventually arriving in the Christian canon we revere today.

NOTES

1. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 31–34.
2. See Klaas A. D. Smelik, *Writings from Ancient Israel: A Handbook of Historical and Religious Documents* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 2.
3. William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2, 10–14.
4. See J. D. Hawkins, "The Origin and Dissemination of Writing in Western Asia," in *The Origins of Civilization*, ed. P. R. S. Moorey (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 131. See also Antonio Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian: A Linguistic Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 12–13.
5. See Denise Schmandt-Besserat, "From Tokens to Tablets," *Visible Language* 15 (1981): 321, 324–25.
6. Schmandt-Besserat, "From Tokens to Tablets," 322–23.
7. John Huehnergard, *A Grammar of Akkadian*, volume 45 of the Harvard Semitic Studies Series (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), xxii.
8. J. A. Black and W. J. Tait, "Archives and Libraries in the Ancient Near East," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 2201.
9. James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1906), 87–206.

10. See Black and Tait, "Archives and Libraries," 2201; see also Bridget Leach and John Tait, "Papyrus," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Donald Redford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3:23.

11. See Dorit Symington, "Late Bronze Age Writing-Boards and Their Uses: Textual Evidence from Anatolia and Syria," *Anatolian Studies* 41 (1991): 111–12, 116–19.

12. For example, the Cairo Linen, CG 25975. For the text, see Edward Wente, trans., "Letters from Ancient Egypt," *Writings from the Ancient World* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 211.

13. See Black and Tait, "Archives and Libraries," 2200.

14. John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book* (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone, 1999), 26–27.

15. In Egyptian the number of signs commonly employed ranged from about 750 to a few thousand, depending upon the time period. See Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian*, 12. Cuneiform writing employed from around 800 to 1,500 signs, depending on the time and place. See Henri-Jean Martin, *The History and Power of Writing*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 10–11.

16. See Frederick James Mabie, "Ancient Near Eastern Scribes and the Mark(s) They Left" (PhD diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 2004), 346, 355, 375; see also Appendix A, "The Ancient Near Eastern Scribe."

17. P. Anastasi V, 8:1–9. A printed translation of the entire text is available in Adolf Erman, ed., *The Ancient Egyptians: A Sourcebook of Their Writings* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 189.

18. Mabie, "Ancient Near Eastern Scribes," 340.

19. See Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian*, 11. For the date being pushed even earlier, see Steven Feldman, "Not as Simple as A–B–C," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 26, no. 1 (2000): 12.

20. Jack Goody has written about the importance of this concept (see Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977]; Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986]; and Jack Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition* [Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2000]). His critics have pointed out, validly, that he overemphasized the dichotomy between orality and textuality (see, for example, Deborah Tannen, ed., *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy* [Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1982]). While these critics understand that oral tradition and well-developed literature can coexist, they miss the point that these are two polarized centers of authority, and that a societal mindset had to turn to one or the other as the primary source of authority. It should also be noted that one can go too far in making the case for orality at the expense of textuality, as in Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

21. For a good explanation of the difference between orally oriented cultures vis-à-vis textually oriented, see Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 16–27.

22. See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (London: Oxford University Press, 1906), 894–97.

23. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 48–49.

24. William M. Schniedewind, *Society and the Promise to David: The Reception History of 2 Samuel 7:1–17* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 51–58.

25. See David Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah: A Socio-Archaeological Approach* (Sheffield: Almond, 1991), 79–80.

26. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 64.

27. As Latter-day Saints, we know that these books went through a revision/redaction process. This is why Joseph Smith would say that he believed the Bible “as it came from the pen of the original writers” (Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* [Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980], 256). Of course, many of those who collected and redacted the sacred texts had good intentions (see 2 Nephi 29:4–5). The salient point is that Latter-day Saints have reason to believe that the books of the Bible went through a revision process at some point, no matter how early they were written. This revision process was probably part of a larger movement of collecting and preserving texts, an element of the textualization we are discussing.

28. See Dana M. Pike, “Seals and Sealing Among Ancient and Latter-day Israelites,” in *Thy People Shall Be My People and Thy God My God: The 22nd Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium on the Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 101–10.

29. See Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 98, 104.

30. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 100.

31. See H. Torczyner, *Lachish I. The Lachish Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938).

32. William M. Schniedewind, “Sociolinguistic Reflections on the Letter of a ‘Literate’ Soldier (Lachish 3),” *Zeitschrift für Althebraistik* 13 (2000): 157–67, especially 162–63.

33. See also William M. Schniedewind, “Orality and Literacy in Ancient Israel,” *Religious Studies Review* 26, no. 4 (October 2000): 327–32.

34. *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986). On the rise of literacy and the increased use of writing in the Greek world, see William Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 65–70, 90–95.

35. Antonio Loprieno, “Le Pharaon reconstruit. La figure du roi dans la littérature égyptienne au Ier millénaire avant J.C.” *Bulletin de la société Française d'égyptologie* 142 (June 1998): 8, 14–16, 23–24.

36. Peter R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration: A Study of Hebrew Thought of the Sixth Century B.C.* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 7–8. See also Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 140.

37. See Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 198.

38. Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 8.

39. See Alan B. Lloyd, "The Ptolemaic Period," in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 404–6.

40. See, for example, Joseph Meleze Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt from Rameses II to Emperor Hadrian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 99–106.

41. Even today the television competes with the Internet and newspapers, and we both hear and read church talks, while many alternate between reading the scriptures and listening to them on tape, CD, or in MP3 format.

42. J. B. Poole and R. Reed, "The Preparation of Leather and Parchment by the Dead Sea Scrolls Community," *Technology and Culture* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1962): 14.

43. *Tractate Kiddushin* in *The Babylonian Talmud in Selection*, trans. and ed. Leo Auerbach (New York: Bell, 1944), 204.

44. Poole and Reed, "The Preparation of Leather and Parchment," 17.

45. Black and Tait, "Archives and Libraries," 2199.

46. Colin H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex* (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), 12.

47. There is not a full agreement as to how the first codices were originally assembled. See Roberts and Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex*, 26–29; Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 68; and Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 53–54.

48. Roberts and Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex*, 37.

49. Roberts and Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex*, 40.

50. See Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 54.

51. For a summary of many of these ideas, see Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*, 74–76; and Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 54–64.

52. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 18.

53. Plato, *Seventh Letter*.

54. See Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 204–6.

55. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 19.

56. My gratitude to Frank Judd for help with the Greek text in these passages.

57. Papias, as quoted in Paul L. Maier, *Eusebius—The Church History: A New Translation with Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), 127.

58. While the KJV translates only "parchment," the term *membranae* generally refers to parchment in a codex form. There is not complete agreement whether this would refer to a few tablets or an early form of the codex. Roberts and Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex*, 63, translate it as "codex," as does Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 52–53.

59. Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 162.

60. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 196.

61. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 82.

62. Some have used the idea of a non-frozen canon to argue that early Israel did not exist, such as in Philip Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1988). This connection is untenable. Concomitantly, we should not allow our distaste for this particular argument to cause us to reject the idea of a non-frozen canon altogether.

63. For example, Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

64. See Harald Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings: A Study in the Limits of "Formgeschichte"* (London: Mowbray, 1957); and Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, volume 22 of *Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsalensis* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1964); and Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*, 188.

65. Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*, 176–82, 204, 210, 223, 225–28; and Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 23–24.

66. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 18–20, 29.