

## How Did It Come to Be? *The Formation of the Bible*

Most of us do not spend much time wondering how the books we read were put together. We are usually less interested in the authors' labors than in the results. Why should it be any different when it comes to the Bible? The reason is that in the case of the Bible, understanding the process is useful for understanding the outcome.

A modern book is typically produced by someone who can read and write. An individual author (possibly a team of authors) composes the manuscript in a fairly short period, usually less than a year. Customarily the author is identified by name. Although an editor makes changes, the book emerges from the press as an expression of the author's views. There is a strong interest in presenting something new—new information, new ideas, new approaches.

Sprinkle the words “not” and “not necessarily” throughout the preceding paragraph, and you will begin to get an idea of how the Bible was produced. That is to say:

- Some of the material in the Bible probably originated with people who did not read or write, for example, the families of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Some of it comes from literate people who preferred to express themselves orally, for example, Samuel and Jesus.
- Although some biblical books are the work of individual writers (the prophecy of Micah, Paul's letter to the Galatians), many reflect the efforts of multiple contributors (Exodus, Proverbs).

The contributors did not all necessarily work as a team; they may have lived in different places, even in different centuries (Genesis, Isaiah).

- A succession of people added to and reshaped the texts, blurring the distinction between writing and editing (Deuteronomy, perhaps John). These texts reflect not just the views of an individual but of a community.
- More often than not it is impossible to determine who the writers and editors were (Chronicles, Hebrews) or even when they lived (Ruth, Psalms). Authors may have deliberately hidden their identities because they were not seeking to promote their individual views but to hand on the traditions of their community.
- The authors and editors enlarged or revised the oral and written traditions they received, so that the traditions might speak afresh to their own times. Nevertheless, their intention was not to offer anything innovative but rather to pass on faithfully what they had received (see, for example, Luke 1:1-4; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; 15:1-7; 1 John 1:1-4).

Few of the books in the biblical library are books in the modern sense—writings that an individual composed in his or her own name, expressing his or her individual views. While many distinctive voices make themselves heard in the Bible, to some degree all the biblical books are the crystallizations of traditions. The Bible is the written form of the traditions of ancient Israel and the early Church.

## **From Oral Traditions to Finished Product**

The neatness of the Bible's table of contents contrasts with the sometimes untidy processes by which the book reached its final form. To bring these processes into view, let us take a quick walk through several historical periods to observe the Bible under construction. The point of this brief tour is not to investigate exactly when and how each of the biblical books was composed (in many cases, these questions are the subjects of complicated scholarly debates), but simply to get a feel for the length and complexity of the process. The rounded dates are approximations.

### **Undetermined Centuries Before 1250 B.C.**

God spoke to the ancestors of Israel—Abraham, Sarah, and others—promising them the blessings of offspring and land. They wrote nothing. For unknown numbers of generations, their descendants handed on traditions about these patriarchs and matriarchs by word of mouth.

### **1250 to 1200 B.C.: Exodus From Egypt, Covenant at Sinai, Settlement in Canaan**

The Israelites added their recollections of these great events to their growing stock of community lore. They may have written down short accounts in poetry or prose, but for the most part they probably continued to pass on their traditions in spoken form.

### **1200 to 1000 B.C.: Tribal Confederation**

Tales of God's action through leaders such as Deborah and Samson were added to the community's oral traditions (Judges 4–5; 13–16). A few of God's instructions for their way of life were put in writing by the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 10:25). But Samuel himself carried on a spoken ministry and left no written collection of prophecies.

### **1000 to 922 B.C.: Beginnings of the Monarchy**

Only now, centuries after the exodus from Egypt, did the process of committing oral traditions to papyrus get seriously underway. The royal court of David and Solomon, and the temple that Solomon built, provided educated men with the setting and resources for the task. What some scholars call the “primary history” of Israel—the great national history running from Genesis through 2 Kings—probably began to take shape as men transposed oral traditions into texts. Even so, the written output in this period may have been meager. In any case, the writing and rewriting, adding and subtracting, editing and rearranging of historical material that began in this period was to continue for centuries.

Although in this period various authors and editors may have worked on the narrative and legal material that eventually evolved into the Pentateuch, these first five books of the Bible became associated with Moses, since he had played the central role in leading the people from Egypt and mediating God’s covenant to them in the Sinai desert. In time, these books came to be called “the Books of Moses” and were thought to have flowed from his pen.

For generations before the monarchy, priests and people had been singing prayers at regional shrines. Now some leaders, probably at the temple in Jerusalem, began to gather these prayer songs, or “psalms.” The collection became associated with David, possibly because he gave an initial impetus to the project. Exactly how the Book of Psalms (the “Psalter”) developed is a matter of much scholarly discussion. But it certainly grew incrementally over centuries. Even by Jesus’ day, a millennium after David, the collection had not quite reached its final form, as can be seen in first-century scrolls found near the Dead Sea, in which the exact number and order of the psalms varies slightly from one copy to another.

Also during the period of Solomon, learned people in Jerusalem began to collect wise sayings. Probably over a period of centuries, this collection evolved into the Book of Proverbs. The collection came to be associated with its early patron, Solomon, as did some later “wisdom” books (Ecclesiastes, Wisdom, Song of Songs).

### **922 to 721 B.C.: From the Dividing of the Kingdom to the Fall of the Northern Kingdom**

Drawing on oral traditions, religious leaders in the northern kingdom of Israel, and perhaps also in the southern kingdom of Judah, wrote portions of the book we now call Deuteronomy (possibly chapters 5–11, 28). These writings, which took shape more than three centuries after Moses’ death, contain instructions that he laid out on behalf of God for his people.

At the same time, new material was entering the community’s tradition in oral form, in the prophecies of men such as Amos, Hosea, and Micah. Although their disciples preserved their words in writing, the prophets themselves continued to exercise mainly oral ministries. This is evident in accounts of two especially notable prophets, Elijah and Elisha, who did not leave behind any written works of their own (1 Kings 17–19, 21; 2 Kings 1–2, 4–8, 13).

### **721 to 587 B.C.: From the Fall of the Northern Kingdom to the Fall of the Southern Kingdom**

At some unknown time, the portion of Deuteronomy written before 721 B.C. had been filed away and forgotten. Its later unexpected discovery in Jerusalem caused a great deal of public soul-searching (2 Kings 22:3–20). This may have been the first time in Israelite history that God’s word in *written* form played a decisive role in events. The draft of Deuteronomy confronted Israel with a stark choice

between obedience to God, leading to blessing, or disobedience to God, leading to destruction.

The outlook of Deuteronomy seems to have made an impact on the authors who were then at work on the “primary history” of Israel. Deuteronomy inspired them to highlight the dynamics of faithfulness-leading-to-blessing and unfaithfulness-leading-to-destruction in the history of Israel’s relationship with God. Because of this influence of Deuteronomy on the ancient historians, modern scholars refer to the historical books from Joshua to 2 Kings as the “deuteronomist” history.

Despite this compositional activity, the spoken word continued to be the preeminent vehicle of God’s communication with the people of Israel. In oral proclamation, prophets brought God’s word to bear on the declining fortunes of the southern kingdom, although their prophecies were soon written down (Isaiah of Jerusalem—Isaiah 1–39; the prophet Jeremiah).

### **587 to 539 B.C.: Exile in Babylon**

The conquered Israelites’ period of suffering far from home bore fruit in a profound revitalization of their relationship with God. Prophecies delivered by Ezekiel and by an anonymous prophet whose words were added to those of Isaiah (Isaiah 40–55) spurred repentance and hope among the exiles.

More than *seven centuries* after the exodus from Egypt, authors and editors working during the exile brought the Pentateuch close to completion. Perhaps at this stage, while the Israelite authors were living in Mesopotamia, they added the accounts of creation and the primeval stories at the beginning of Genesis (Genesis 1–11). In composing these prehistoric accounts, they seem to have drawn on material that belonged to the general cultural heritage of Mesopotamia.

The biblical authors may also have refashioned the patriarchal

narratives (Genesis 12–50) in such a way as to give the exiles in Babylon confidence that God's promises of land and blessing to their ancestors would yet be fulfilled in their own lives. The authors revised the laws of the Pentateuch to make a workable constitution for their renewed community, if and when they were allowed to return to their homeland. With a chastened view of Israel's failure to heed God's word, editors completed the historical books from Joshua to 2 Kings, bringing out the lessons to be learned from the moral and spiritual failures of the past.

### **539 to 333 B.C.: Reestablishment in the Land of Israel Under Persian Rule**

In all the literary activity mentioned above we can see the increasing emphasis that the Israelites were placing on God's word in written form. But after the exile in Babylon, the prophets Haggai and Malachi communicated God's word in spoken form.

In this period, a prophet or prophets whose names are unknown spoke words of encouragement that were preserved at the end of the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 56–66). Thus the book of Isaiah contains a tradition spanning some two hundred years, from the mid-eighth to the mid-sixth centuries.

Leaders of the returning exiles composed accounts of contemporary events (the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah). In Nehemiah we read of a significant occasion on which God's written word played a key role in events, when Ezra's reading aloud to the people from the Pentateuch brought them to the point of tears (Nehemiah 8). The same circle of religious leaders produced a revised history of the preexilic period (1 and 2 Chronicles) designed to steer the community toward trust in God and a life centered on worship in the temple.

### **333 to 100 B.C.: Greek-Speaking Emperors, Jewish Revolt, and Autonomy**

This period spans roughly the time between the conquest of Alexander the Great and the arrival of the Romans in Palestine. Sometime during these years, two authors produced works that probed the unpredictability and injustices of life (Ecclesiastes, Job). These authors used traditional proverbs and wise sayings to produce critiques of traditional views.

As pagan Greek culture spread throughout the Near East, other Jewish authors drew from Israelite traditions to reassure their readers that the God of Israel and his law, not the religious culture of Greece or Egypt, was the basis of a truly successful life (Wisdom, Sirach). Using background and characters from oral traditions, other authors wrote stories that gave beleaguered Jews courage and hope and provided examples of upright living (Esther, Judith, Tobit).

When Greek-speaking emperors in Syria began to persecute the Jews, devout persons elaborated on legends about a wise man named Daniel, supplementing these stories with prophetic visions to strengthen the Jews' faithfulness to God. The result was the Book of Daniel. The successful Jewish revolt, launched at about this time, was recorded in two somewhat parallel accounts (1 and 2 Maccabees).

### **5 B.C. to A.D. 30: The Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth**

It is a fact of immense significance that Jesus, the central actor in the entire sweep of biblical events, did not leave any writings. He communicated his message entirely through spoken words and actions. Jesus drew men and women around himself so that they could observe his preaching and healings, his manner of life, his death and resurrection. He left the writing entirely to them.

### **A.D. 30 to 66: From Jesus' Ascension to the Death of the Apostles Peter and Paul**

This was a phase of both oral and written communication about Jesus. After Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers focused not on writing about him but on making him known through preaching and personal contact. Thus the reports of Jesus' life and message passed through a short but crucial period of oral tradition. During this period, which lasted for some three or four decades, the apostles constantly shaped their reminiscences of Jesus to serve the purpose of helping men and women believe in him and follow him.

At the same time, it may well be that some Christians began to put Jesus' words and deeds into writing. As early as the first decade after Jesus' ascension, it seems, a written collection of his sayings began to develop. Many scholars refer to this no-longer-extant document as *Q*—from the German word *Quelle*, meaning “source.” Some scholars think there was also a draft of some narrative material about Jesus written in Aramaic that was later enlarged into Matthew's or Mark's Gospel.

Meanwhile, Paul and other Christian leaders wrote letters to communities and individuals. Often these writers made references to the gospel preaching that had already become traditional in the early Church (1 Corinthians 2:1-5; 11:23-26; Galatians 1:6-9; 2:1-2; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5; Titus 1:9). They incorporated material from the Christian communities' oral traditions: hymns (Philemon 2:6-11), confessions of faith (1 Corinthians 15:3-7), baptismal sermons (1 Peter 1), and moral instruction (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8).

### **A.D. 66 to the End of the First Century**

Finally, the apostolic traditions about Jesus were put into definite written form. The recollections of Jesus by his first followers had been

sharpened by their use in preaching and enriched by reflection. Now, with the help of early written documents such as *Q*, several authors composed narratives of Jesus' public activity, death, and resurrection. These are the written Gospels. They are the early Church's preaching about Jesus in written form.

It seems that associates of Peter and Paul applied these apostles' teaching to new circumstances a generation or so after their deaths (2 Peter, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus). These letters were further crystallizations of the apostolic traditions.

In the closing years of the first century, a visionary named John wrote a vivid, symbolic portrayal of the conflict between the kingdom of God and the forces of evil during the period from Jesus' resurrection until his return (the Book of Revelation). This book draws together numerous historical and prophetic traditions in the Bible to show that God will ultimately fulfill his purposes for the human race through Jesus Christ.

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### **What Languages Was the Bible Written In?**

The Old Testament was composed in Hebrew, with a few exceptions. Part of Ezra, the book of Tobit, and part of Daniel were written in Aramaic. Judith, parts of Esther, the books of 2 Maccabees and Wisdom, and other parts of Daniel were written in Greek.

Some books were written in Hebrew or Aramaic but are preserved today only in Greek: parts of Tobit, the books of 1 Maccabees and Baruch, and parts of Sirach. The New Testament was written entirely in Greek.

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