

How We Got the Bible

Inspiration, Transmission, Selection, Canonization



Introduction:

The Bible did not drop out of heaven as a finished product. It did not originate in King James English. It was not written by God's own finger, yet for centuries people have recognized within its words a word from God. The history of the text is long and convoluted, but it starts with events of divine revelation, their transmission, preservation, and recounting. After a survey of some of these aspects, we will look at our concepts of inspiration to see how to better understand God's hand in this process.

Tradition and Oral Transmission:

The Bible comes to its present form through a rich history of preservation and transmission, including both written and oral forms of composition. (Certainly oral traditions were preserved for long periods before being entrusted predominantly to written form.)³

A people accustomed to oral tradition utilizes various resources to maintain the integrity of that tradition. Oral traditions are zealously guarded using various linguistic means to protect their integrity.

Even an uneducated but practicing Arab will easily know the Koran off by heart, and before the Nazi extermination of the Jews[†] in Eastern Europe it was easy to find people, often in menial occupations, who knew by heart not only the whole of the Old Testament but a large part of the Talmud!⁴

At some point, oral traditions were put into written form. It is doubtful that Biblical literature could have survived the catastrophes undergone by the Jews[†] in 587 BC and 70 AD,⁶ if it were not for their having been entrusted both to written forms and memory. This double form of transmission (oral and written) made possible its transmission until the present day. "...It had been zealously kept in the minds of those responsible for it, even if the material thus passed through a complex process of redaction,"⁷ until achieving the form we know today.

Authorship:

For many centuries it was almost uniformly affirmed that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch, though there were voices of dissent. As early as the second century, Irineus, one of the noted fathers of the Church, began to question the avowals of such authorship.⁸

“In the ancient Near East, ‘Literature’ was more community than private property,”⁹ especially in reference to the type of material found in the Old Testament.

Centuries after the writing of the majority of the books of the Old Testament, some concern arose with identifying the human sources behind these books. This concern, however, has not always existed.

I should point out that much more important than making a specific authorial designation is identifying the action and the Word of God within and behind the text. “For it matters not with what pen the King writes his letter, if it be true that he writ it.”¹¹

The earliest known statement of mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch is in the Talmud. In this Talmudic reference, Baba Bathra answers his own question regarding authorship of the Biblical books:

*Moses wrote his book and the section of Balaam (Num. xxiii. f.) and Job. Joshua wrote his book and the last eight verses of Deuteronomy (narrating the death of Moses). Samuel wrote his book, Judges and Ruth. David wrote the Psalms with the collaboration of ten elders, viz. Adam (Ps. cxxxix), Melchizedek (cx), Abraham (lxxxix), Moses (xc-c), Heman (lxxxviii), Jeduthun (xxxix, lxii, lxxvii), Asaph (l., lxxxvii f.). Jeremiah wrote his book, Kings, and Lamentations. Hezekiah and his associates wrote Isaiah, Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. The men of the Great Assembly wrote Ezekiel, the Twelve, Daniel, and Esther. Ezra wrote his book and the genealogy of Chronicles down to himself and Nehemiah completed it.*¹³

Price mentions various peculiarities in the citation, such as the death of Samuel in 1st Samuel 25, with the remaining chapters and the following volume yet to be written.¹⁴

It is customary to read the title of books that use the name of a prophet as a specific attribution of authorship, but this really does “not imply that they contain just the words of Amos and Hosea, but also words about, and in the tradition of, the prophet.”¹⁷ Identifying the Pentateuch with Moses would mean the transmission is coherent with what Moses had transmitted in his time. In other words, one affirms “that the participation of Moses in the production of the Pentateuch was highly formative, even though it is not probable that he wrote the Pentateuch *in the final form in which it now exists.*”²⁰

“The Pentateuch was not written by one person in a specific decade,” but was produced by a “community of faithful” through the centuries.²⁹

History:

The essential purpose of the Biblical text is theological.³⁴ It is worth mentioning as well that its purpose is not to point to all the details of the historical events, but to *YHWH* (יהוה) who is behind these events. “History is merely incidental to the writer’s real purpose.”³⁵

“Although they were reporting on actual events, their chief interest concerned the significance of these facts to the individual and the race. Present historians report; Old Testament historians exhorted.”³⁶

Some Biblical texts are more clearly retouches of historical events as opposed to precise chronicles. Among these, Exodus 15.1-18 and Luke 1:46-55 stand out as recastings of speech, perceptible in the literary detail of the poetry. Instead of spontaneous expressions of rejoicing by Moses and the people,

and the spontaneous exclamation of Mary (a youth of about fourteen years of age³⁹), we encounter polished literary works.

Purpose of the Narratives:

The Biblical narratives were transmitted according to defined purposes, but not in accordance with the aims of historiography.

YHWH called the patriarchs, men who would have been insignificant in the ancient world, giving such value to them as to bless the nations through their lives and offspring.⁶⁶ The narratives do not simply present Israel as being the special people of YHWH, but YHWH as “the living and ever-active God of Israel, visible in history as its Savior and Redeemer as well as its Judge.”⁶⁷ The narratives seek, therefore to present this actor, revealing the identity and special interest of YHWH in creating a people for Himself.⁶⁸

Inspiration:

The concept of inspiration is rather complex. I will work with a definition that encompasses revelational events, transmission and retransmission of their accounting, alterations in the accounts, selection of oral and written records for exclusion or inclusion in retransmission efforts, along with the acceptance, protection, and retransmission of the inspired material expressing its revelational quality. “The entire process must be seen in light of the creative work of God among his people.”⁶⁹

In the words of this ‘Word,’ the voice of God was heard.”⁷¹

people ignored other accounts that did not reveal the intentions and actions of God as clearly as did the narratives preserved.⁷⁴

Biblical narratives preserve that which helps one understand the action of God in the midst of humanity.

The church has a canon due to recognition that the books in the Bible are truly God’s Word, as opposed to history or science.⁸⁰ This inspired word is theological, not scientific, nor historical. It is this theological center that exerts authority over the church.

2nd Timothy 3:16 [translates] as “All Scripture is divinely breathed and...”, as well as “All Scripture divinely breathed is...”, or yet “All Scripture divinely breathed and worthwhile for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for education in righteousness.” Another possibility would be to read the text in the sense of “All Scripture divinely breathed and divinely profitable for....” Beyond not knowing exactly how best to translate the verse, it is the only occurrence of the Greek term “divinely breathed” used in the Bible.

2nd Peter 1:20-21 “this first knowing that all prophecy written of particular interpretation does not come. For not of human will was brought prophecy ever, but under the Breath of the Holy One being guided, spoke from God men”).⁸⁶ The text is very intelligible; its only interpretational difficulty is that it does

not explain the form of inspiration to which it refers. The writer places the prophets in the role of spokespersons for the written prophecy, or that they were guided as a boat by the wind.⁸⁷

One's comprehension of the concept of inspiration should deal with issues such as Luke's research in seeking ocular witnesses to serve as oral sources for the writing of his gospel. It needs to account for oral traditions and other possible antecedents to the current form of the Old Testament, especially with regard to events before the time of Moses.

In theological practice, one deals with levels of inspiration, as is apparent in the elaboration or recognition of the canon of Scripture.⁹²

Traditions of the Hebrews[†] and Their Neighbors:

To some extent, "...the most adequate way to describe of inspiration in the Old Testament is probably that of asking: in what way does the Biblical narrative differ from the narratives of the same literary genre among neighboring peoples?"⁹⁵ Their narratives often deal with common motifs between themselves and their neighbors, but the Hebrew[†] treatment of these questions is different at many points.

The substance and the demystified quality of the Old Testament narrative react in perceptible contrast to the accounts of neighboring people.

As can be seen in the account of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:4a, the divergence introduces the concept of creation by an only God, [who is] distinct from creation and intentional in purpose.¹⁰⁴

Inspiration: Event or Process?

In light of the above discussion, inspiration becomes less of an event and more of a process. It is a process which includes not only the writing of the sacred text, but the very event of revelation and the preservation of the final text. Revelation and inspiration include all of those categories we described above: 1) events of revelation; 2) narrating the revelation; 3) preserving the narration; 4) recognizing revelation in the narration; 5) transmitting and redacting for future generations; 6) making judgments regarding inspiration and revelation; 7) selecting textual traditions for preservation.

In such a complex task, there is bound to be much material that is pushed aside to make room for that which is deemed of greater worth. Who made those selections, and how were they brought about?

Canonization:

The Bible did not drop out of the sky as a black, leather-bound book in King James English. The individual books that compose the Bible did not drop out of the sky, nor did any special list of books that

should be preserved and honored as special above and beyond others. How did our list of 66 books come to be? Who determined which texts were worthy of adoption and which should be ignored?

If the process from revelation to final redaction of the individual books is complex, the process of developing a canon is no less. We will look at this process in stages, according to different classes of the literature that made it into the canon. As such, we will look at the Old and New Testaments separately.

Old Testament Canon:

The Old Testament does not contain all of the ancient Hebrew texts that Jews have used as Scripture throughout history. There are some 24 texts mentioned in the Old Testament to which we no longer have access. Other texts were used by some and rejected by others. The Septuagint (the major Greek translation of Hebrew Scriptures, 250-150 B.C.E.) does not limit itself to the same list of books we accept, nor that the Jews accept today. For all practical purposes, we have adopted as Protestant Christians the Jewish canon of Hebrew Scriptures as our Old Testament canon. This follows the earliest Christian lists of Old Testament canon, such as that by Mellitus of Sardis around 160 C.E.¹⁰⁵

In Jesus' day, there were three groupings of sacred texts, looked upon as three levels of inspiration: law, prophets, and writings. Law referred to the Pentateuch, Prophets to the historical books as well as the Major and Minor Prophets, and writings referred to the poetic books. The Pentateuch and the Prophets were acclaimed by Jesus' day, probably achieving full acceptance between 180-132 B.C.E. The group called writings was somewhat under debate, especially Esther. Esther never mentions God, or refers to the Jews as the people of *Yahweh*. Of all the Old Testament books, it was the last one to gain acceptance within the canon.

The oldest complete copy of the Hebrew text dates from 1008 C.E. We do, however, have at least partial copies of all the Hebrew Scriptures in the Dead Sea Scrolls, dating from 200 to 70 B.C.E. Most of the textual differences are variances in spelling. The Apocrypha was included in the books translated in the Septuagint. This apparently was the result of attempts to preserve all writings relating to Jewish history, not with any specific designation that all were Scripture. While the Septuagint was in existence during Jesus' day and New Testament authors seem to quote mainly from this Greek-language source, there was yet no defined, closed canon of Hebrew Scriptures. The Jews made that definition standard at a council in Jamnia, around 90 C.E.

While the date of 90 C.E. gives us a fixed point to speak of a closed canon, it must be mentioned that there were still varying editions of the texts in circulation among various communities. The Samaritan community founded around 432 B.C.E. possessed its own version of the Pentateuch, whose archetype dates from about 722 B.C.E. There are some 6000 textual variants between this edition and the Masoretic Text we currently use. In about 1900 cases of these variants, the Samaritan Pentateuch agrees with the Greek Septuagint. The Septuagint also contains certain additions to Ezra, Esther, and Daniel which are included in the Apocrypha, along with the fully Apocryphal books.

Hidden in this process are the other books that were written but never accepted as Scripture. Some two dozen forgotten books are mentioned by name throughout the Old Testament, like the Book of Jashar in Joshua 10:13. Other books like Daniel passed through various revisions and what we now have is a received canonical edition.

Essentially, then, the Old Testament canon was defined in two stages. The Jewish rabbis established the content of the basic canon at Jamnia, around 90 C.E. Later, the Roman Catholic Church incorporated the Apocryphal books into its canon officially in 1546 at the Council of Trent. Prior to that time, they were viewed as something between a second canon and truly canonical from the period of 393 C.E. onward. The Reformers of the 1500's rejected these Apocryphal books, though the original King James Version included them in its translation.

New Testament Canon:

The history of the New Testament canon is more complex, mainly due to the fact that we have more information about the process. We also have a more limited scope of time in which these books were written. Though we still have little information about specific authorship for many New Testament books, the accepted books were written within about the first 100 years after Jesus' earthly ministry.

For Jesus and the disciples, the accepted Bible was the Old Testament, though the canon was not considered closed, *per se*. The books that were eventually canonized as the Hebrew Scriptures were being used as Scripture by Jesus and the other New Testament writers. The major groupings of these texts were known, even if the group of writings was a little fuzzy around the edges.

Along with the Hebrew Scriptures, the early church began handing down oral traditions of Jesus' sayings and actions. These traditions formed part of the basis for the writing of the gospels, though there were oral traditions that were never incorporated in the canonical gospels. Paul mentions oral traditions he had received regarding the Lord's Supper,¹⁰⁶ as well as the phrase "It is more blessed to give than to receive."¹⁰⁷ Luke writes of researching with diligence in preparation for writing his gospel, most likely making use of both written and oral sources for his work.¹⁰⁸

Pauline Corpus:

Paul's letters were the first portion of the New Testament to be written. They were also being collected during Paul's lifetime. 2nd Peter 3:16 mentions such a collection, and Clement of Rome knew of 1st Corinthians and Hebrews in 95 C.E. Other collections of letters circulated in the second century, some by heretical leaders like Marcion, who rejected the Old Testament and the gospels other than parts of Luke with no Old Testament references.¹⁰⁹

In response to Marcion, the Muratorian canon circulated in 170 C. E., including the four gospels, 13 letters of Paul, three letters of John, Jude, and Revelation. Marcion's group of 10 letters circulated before the Muratorian list of 13. As a group, however, they were known and circulated during the second century, the group of 13 taking the place of the group of 10.¹¹⁰

Gospel Corpus:

The second group of writings to circulate was composed of gospels. While the gospels we have were written by the end of the first century, the oral gospel traditions were preferred in large part until about the middle of the second century. Other gospels continued to be written and circulated alongside the four we now know in our Bibles. As no one gospel contained the whole message of Jesus, gospels tended to circulate as collected resources, though certain communities preferred one over the others. One attempt

to weave Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John together with other elements of oral tradition circulated as the *Diatessaron* of Tatian (ca. 170).

Around the end of the second century, this collection of gospels was in circulation, though there was some distinction in order of the books. The four we know were in use in the Western Church, while in the Eastern Church the order was Matthew, John, Luke, Mark, and had a preference for the *Diatessaron*. By the middle of the third century, there was broad acceptance of the four gospels as we know them.

Catholic Corpus:

1st Peter and 1st John circulated well in the second and third centuries. The other general epistles (James, 2nd Peter, 2nd John, 3rd John, and Jude) were used in certain regions and ignored in others. They remained in a state of questionable use until the fourth century. As a corpus, they probably began circulating in the third century, though we have mention of them as a group of seven first from Eusebius at the turn of the fourth century.

Acts and Revelation:

Acts began to gain importance at the end of the second century. It was placed in various positions in the canon in different listings, but never before the gospels. Revelation's history was different between the Eastern and Western Churches. In the Western Church, it was widely acclaimed in the second century. Its full recognition did not come until the fourth century.

Other Writings:

The *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* were about as popular as Revelation in the second century. The *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Peter* were accepted by some as having equal authority with any of the other gospels. The letters of 1st Clement and *Barnabas* were often quoted as Scripture. The *Acts of Paul* and the *Didache* (Manual for Church Order) were also held in high esteem by many. Any of these might have been included in the canon, but for various reasons were not.

Canon Definitions:

The fourth century was the period in which serious attempts were made to evaluate early Christian writings as a whole in order to determine which ones should have authority in the church. Various lists like those of Marcion, and the Muratorian Canon circulated. Eusebius classed books in categories of acknowledged, disputed, and heretical. He did not have a firm list of the acknowledged, uncertain as to how to classify Revelation. Other lists included such books as *Barnabas*, *Acts of Paul*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, and *Apocalypse of Peter*. Listings varied from 22 to 30 accepted books.

Athanasius happened to be the first to circulate a list of our current canon. This listing was simply a note of which books were used as authoritative in the churches of Alexandria. It was only in the ecclesiastical councils of the late fourth and early fifth centuries that a resolution on the issue was reached. This listing was not a decree by a small group, however, so much as a reflection of the usage of texts among the believing communities. In fact, "no ecumenical council of the ancient church ever undertook to define the scope of the canon."¹¹¹

Conclusion:

As was fact for the church's use and acceptance of the gospels, the literature in the Bible was canonized as a range of viewpoints. In principle, the material accepted as the Bible is somewhat pluralistic. Rather than presenting one single viewpoint, the various documents work together to present a composite picture from varying perspectives. Unlike the *Diatessaron*, which chose to harmonize four gospel strands, the church chose to retain four gospel presentations to be held together in tension. Each one is a perspective and an interpretation of the gospel. Neither is complete in itself. They work together like the fabric of a cloth to weave a larger picture than any one can present on its own.

The Bible is a collection of writings in which people have heard the Word of God through the centuries. It is in this composite collection that God's message has been heard and ratified.

New Testament writings were collected not by bishops and councils, but by individuals and groups who chose to preserve various letters or gospels in collections, sharing them with others. Church councils then looked at all the material being circulated and used, describing the listing of documents the believing community had determined spoke credibly for God. Other texts might have been included, yet these were deemed sufficient. Some texts were written off completely.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*

³ CROSS 30n e 35.

⁴ SOGGIN, 61. The Talmud is basically a compendium of Jewish commentaries on the Old Testament (See DOUGLAS, 1162-1163).

⁶ In 587 BC, the Jews were deported into exile and the temple destroyed. In 70 AD, the reconstructed temple was destroyed in the fall of Jerusalem under the Romans. See GONZÁLEZ, 58 for more details on the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

⁷ SOGGIN, 61.

⁸ ALLEN, 102.

⁹ LASOR, 9.

¹¹ C. A. BRIGGS, cited in ALLEN, 105.

¹³ Baba Bathra 14b *et seq*, cited in COHEN, 142-143.

¹⁴ PRICE, 33.

¹⁷ BONDT, 14 original emphasis.

²⁰ LASOR, 10 emphasis as in the original.

²⁹ LASOR, 14.

³⁴ FRANCISCO in ALLEN, 57.

³⁵ PRICE, 34.

³⁶ FRANCISCO, 39.

³⁹ Victor P. Hamilton in FREEDMAN, "Marriage: Old Testament and Near Eastern Civilization."

⁶⁶ WENHAM, G., 10.

⁶⁷ ROBINSON, 31.

⁶⁸ HARBIN, *NTH*, 28-37.

⁶⁹ FRANCISCO in ALLEN, 120.

⁷¹ MULDER in WOUDE, 3.

⁷⁴ SCALISE, 44-46.

⁸⁰ SCALISE, 50.

⁸⁶ 2nd Peter 1:20-21.

⁸⁷ RIENECKER, 574.

⁹² HARBIN, *NTH*, 44-45.

⁹⁵ SOGGIN, 43.

¹⁰⁴ HARBIN, *NTH*, 62-64.

¹⁰⁵ HARBIN, LB, *COT*, 2.

¹⁰⁶ 1st Corinthians 15:3-5.

¹⁰⁷ Acts 20:25.

¹⁰⁸ Luke 1:1-3.

¹⁰⁹ STUBBLEFIELD, 3.

¹¹⁰ FREEDMAN, Canon, NT.

¹¹¹ *ibid*.