



The History of the Bible
Session 02: Topic 1.2
The Origins of the Old Testament: Moses to Jesus

Study by
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Overview of Session

1.2 Who wrote the documents in the OT?

- 1.2.1 Definitions
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Detailed Study

1.2 Who wrote the documents in the OT?

1.2.1 Definitions. When we say, “who wrote that book?” normally we have in mind the individual responsible for the composition of the content of a book. The Merriam-webster online dictionary defines “author” in one of two ways:

- “1 a : one that originates or creates : SOURCE <software authors> <film authors> <the author of this crime> b capitalized : GOD
- 2 : the writer of a literary work (as a book).”

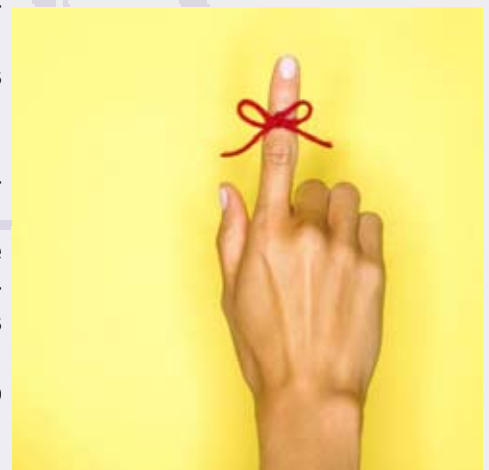
Very naturally then we are seeking a modern based answer when that question becomes “who wrote that book of the Bible?” The problem we encounter in trying to find an answer to this question is that the ancient world, especially the world of the Old Testament, didn’t think in the modern terms of author. Thus our question is attempting to press down onto the scripture a question that it isn’t prepared to answer.



Given this dilemma, how can we find an answer to the issue of where did these documents come from? Quite obviously someone had to do some writing at some point for this material to come into written expression. The challenge is to frame the question in such a way so that it fits the material we have to explore. Otherwise, no meaningful answer is possible. If the modern definition of “author” won’t work very well when probing ancient sources, then what term will work better? Probably, compositional history is the label that will enable us to find legitimate answers about the origin of the written documents in the Old Testament.

1.2.2 Compositional History. The assembling of the documents in the Old Testament into the Hebrew Bible occurred in phases. First was the oral stage; then the compositional stage; finally the collecting stage. As mentioned in topic 1.1.4, the ancient world was focused mostly on oral transmission of ideas. For us who live in the modern world after the invention of the printing press, the idea of preserving one’s heritage by passing it down orally from one generation to the next may seem somewhat strange, as well as risky. We have all played the game “gossip” where in a room of people sitting in a circle someone whispers something to the person sitting next to them. Once that process has gone around the circle, the fun is to see how much the original expression has changed by the time it gets to the end of the circle. But when scholars began studying oral traditions of various cultures, the realization came that the heart of that tradition remained very stable, although parts would undergo changes. Very importantly, when changes can be traced, one motivating factor for these was the sincere desire to adapt the tradition to fit the contemporary situation. Since God’s Word was seen as a “living word” with ongoing relevancy, modification of details to re-apply the tradition was a natural part of that preservation of the vital, dynamic aspect.

Another part of the orality pattern is the ability of an orally focused culture to memorize material. Anthropology has affirmed from modern, primitive tribal groups with no written language that such cultures have much greater ability to commit ideas to memory than folks in the modern world. We have become so dependent on visual sources of ideas in written form that our memorizing skills have significantly diminished. Just remember back to those teachers in school who “wanted you to memorize the whole book” for test day, and how hard it was to do that.

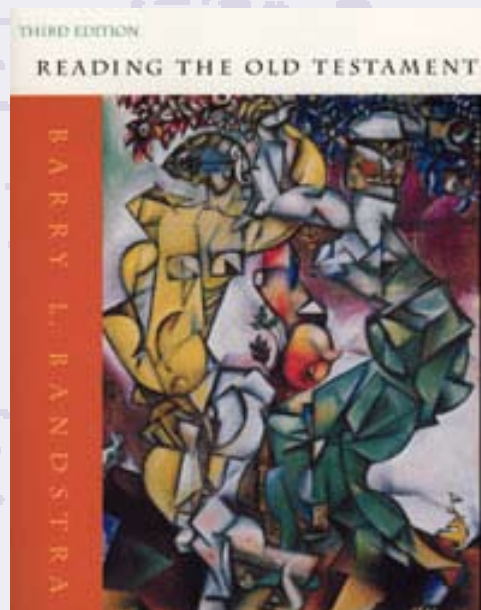


One of the requirements for a first century Pharisee was to commit to memory the entire text of the Old Testament! But not only that, he had to add to it the oral body of scribal interpretation of that OT text as well. This material had to be so deeply embedded in his memory that he could recall from memory as part of it and correctly quote it orally. And then offer a persuasive oral interpretation of it.

Barry Bandstra (Reading the Old Testament) provides a helpful summary of this process for the Old Testament:

Many groups and individuals were responsible for handing down the material contained in the Old Testament and for giving the individual books their final shape. Most remain nameless to this day. Even the books of identifiable prophets such as Isaiah and Amos were not entirely written by those men. The books are collections of their sayings, which anonymous editors gathered together and annotated.

Much of the material that eventually was included in the Hebrew Bible started out as folktales, songs, and religious liturgies. The common people inherited these stories and passed them on from one generation to the next by word of mouth. Oral tradition, as it is called, was the source of many of the stories that have survived about Israel's ancestors and early history. Priests and highly trained scribes, typically employed by the king, were virtually the only ones able to read and write. They were responsible for gathering materials from oral and written sources, organizing them, and compiling them into books. Probably the earliest that any books were written down was around 950 B.C.E. during the reign of Solomon, the king of Israel at its golden age.



This is not to say that written materials didn't exist during the early periods of the Old Testament. Various segments of material were put into written form, although no book of the Old Testament achieved such written expression in its entirety before the end of the OT era. A careful reading of most any book of the Old Testament will reflect this composite nature. Virtually no OT document has a clearly defined progression of thought that consistently moves from "point A" to "point B" to "point C" etc. Most are comparable to a mosaic with pieces inserted that typically have little direct connection to the material on either side. But once the entire document is laid on the table, a cohesive holistic picture will emerge. The collection phase of the content of the Old Testament falls during the latter part of the historical spectrum of the Old Testament. Again, Prof. Bandstra (Reading the Old Testament) provides a helpful summary of this:

The Hebrew Bible took centuries to shape. After individual books were completed, they were joined into collections of books. The earliest collection was the Torah. It was given its overall shape sometime during the Babylonian exile and was accepted as authoritative by 400 B.C.E. The Torah was followed by the Prophets, which was finalized around 200 B.C.E. After the Writings were added to these, the Tanak was completed around 100 C.E., as reflected in a conference of rabbis meeting at Jamnia. Though the process was in fact much more complicated than the above summary implies, the Hebrew Bible as we know it today became a fixed collection after a long period of growth and development.

1.2.3 Writers. Those who were responsible for composing, and those who compiled the material into collections, remain anonymous, for the most part. At the end of the Old Testament era the concept of "scribe" begins to surface in Jewish tradition in regard to the composition and collection of OT documents. They became the "editors" of the religious traditions that had evolved over the centuries.

Scribes held various important offices in the public affairs of the nation in ancient times. The Hebrew word so rendered (*sopher*) is first used to designate the holder of some military office (Judges 5:14; A.V., "pen of the writer;" R.V., "the marshal's staff;" marg., "the staff of the scribe"). The scribes acted as secretaries of state, whose business it was to prepare and issue decrees in the name of the king (2 Sam. 8:17; 20:25; 1 Chr. 18:16; 24:6; 1 Kings 4:3; 2 Kings 12:9-11; 18:18-37, etc.). They discharged various other important public duties as men of high authority and influence in the affairs of state. There was also a subordinate class of scribes, most of whom were Levites. They were engaged in various ways as writers. Such, for example, was Baruch, who "wrote



