

Introduction to the Old Testament, submitted by Ray Woo

6 Stages of Formation in the Hebrew Scriptures

The formation of the Bible is a long process. It is...

- A. Inspired by God and written by humans. So it is a **joint effort between God and humans**.
- B. The Bible was **NOT** dictated by God word for word.
- C. It went through a very long process of formation.

The 6 stages of formation of the Hebrew Scriptures:

- Stage 1, **The Divine Revelation through Human Experience Stage:**

Humans have been experiencing God through nature, communal and personal events, interpersonal relationships, dreams, etc. All these are part of the “Divine Revelation”. This stage went on for millions of years **before history and Scriptures were written down**.

- Stage 2, **The Oral Stage:**

Before the Hebrews invented their writing around 3000 BCE, tribal and communal elders shared oral stories of meaningful events and experiences of God with people in their community. Grandparents and parents shared these stories with their children and grandchildren. These important oral stories were passed down from generation to generation by **words of mouth and the power of memory**.

- Stage 3, **The Written Stage:**

Remember most people did NOT know how to read or write in ancient times. **Around 1000 BCE**, the scribes of the Royal Court of King David probably wrote down some history of their kingdom. But a **major part of the Hebrew Scriptures** were written by learned community elders and priests **in exile** (after the Fall of the Southern Kingdom, Judah, around 587 BCE) during the 50 year period of the Israelites in exile in Babylon (587 BCE to 537 BCE). Other writings in the Hebrew Scriptures were written down after the Babylonian Exile from the 6th century BCE onward.

- Stage 4, **The Editing Stage:**

Later generations of community elders and scribes **edited (added, subtracted, changed, improved, embellished)** writings from the previous generations to make them more accurate or more **theologically meaningful and relevant according to their theological perspectives**.

- Stage 5, **The Canon Stage:**

Community elders (priests, rabbis, scribes) met and discussed for a long time before they eventually agreed on which writings were accepted into **the Canon (official list)** of the Hebrew Scriptures **after the Diaspora** (beginning around 70 CE) in the **late second century to early third century CE**.

- **Stage 6, The Translation Stage:** From Hebrew to Greek (the “Septuagint”) around 100 BCE. Together with the New Testament that was mainly written in Greek, the Bible was translated into old Latin in the 2nd century CE. **St. Jerome** devoted his entire life to translate the Bible from Hebrew, Greek, old Latin to scholarly Latin in the 4th century CE. His Latin Bible is called the “Vulgate”. The first English translation probably took place in the 1300’s CE. Gutenberg printed the Vulgate Bible in 1452. Later, the Bible was translated into German, French, Flemish, Russian. The King James Version was done in 1611. The Revised Standard Version was done in 1952.

II. **4 major parts of the Old Testament** (Testament means “Covenant”, a sacred pact from God to the people):

1. **The Pentateuch** (Greek for “The 5 Books”) or **the Torah** (the Law or the Teaching of God):

- (1) **Genesis**: Creation, the Call of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs: Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, Jacob (whose name was changed to “Israel”), Rachel, Leah, Joseph, etc.

(Aram or Abraham was called by God to move from Ur which is now modern day Iraq around 1850 BCE.)

- (2) **Exodus**: The epic account of God calling Moses (around 1280 BCE) to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.

- (3) **Leviticus**: The Book of the tribe of Levi (the Levites are called to become priests and priest-assistants for the community). Rule, regulations, guidelines for the Covenantal Community. These need to be interpreted within their historical & cultural contexts.

- (4) **Numbers**: So named because of the 2 population censuses of the community, one at the beginning of the Exodus and one near the end as the people came to the Promised Land (Canaan: present day Israel-Palestine).

- (5) **Deuteronomy**: The name of the Book means “Second Law” (or teaching the Law the second time). It gives the account of Moses teaching the Commandments to the Israelites at Mount Sinai. The book ends with a blessing from Moses for the entire community before his passing and a moving tribute to Moses. The book was actually written centuries later after the Israelites had settled in Canaan. The second time teaching was for the descendants of the Covenantal Community.

2. **The Historical Books**: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I and II Books of Samuel, I and II Books of Kings, I and II Books of Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, (Tobit), (Judith), Esther, (I and II Books of Maccabees). These books are about the history and theology of the people entering into the Promised Land, the rise and fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (fell to Assyria in 722 BCE) and of the Southern Kingdom of Judah (fell to Babylon in 587 BCE). We read about the famous Joshua, Samuel, Kings Saul, David, Solomon, Queen Esther, etc. here.

3. **The Books of the Prophets:** Writings mainly by the disciples of the Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, the Book of Lamentation, (Baruch), Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. Prophets channel and speak the Word of God to challenge the kings, the corrupt social, political, and religious systems, and the people, and remind them to be faithful and loyal to God and one another.
4. **The Wisdom Books (Sometimes called the “Sapiential Books”:** Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, (The Book of Wisdom), (Sirach). The Wisdom Books offer a cornucopia of wisdom not only from the Covenantal Community but also from their Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Canaanite, and later on Greek neighbors. These books reflect on the perplexity of the meaning of life and offer timeless wisdom (but not easy answers) to life’s many vexing problems. The goal is to for the formation and transformation of character leading a virtuous life of holiness and faithfulness.

*In Judaism, the Hebrew Scriptures are divided into 3 major parts rather than 4 parts:

1. The Torah (the Teaching), 2. Nevi’im (the Prophets, & the Historical Books) 3. Ketuvim: the Writings (the Wisdom Books)

III. **Some key points to consider when we read and pray with the Bible:**

1. **Text and context:** The Old Testament was written at least 2500 years ago within the context of the ancient Mesopotamian world. It is important to pay attention to the specific historical and cultural context of the ancient near East. It is not advisable to take any text out of context and to take a strictly literal approach when we read and interpret the Bible. One should consult scholarly biblical commentaries to seek a deeper theological meaning of the texts.
2. **The Bible is a document of Faith rather than exact history:** The Bible went through a long formation process. The writers and editors were not as concerned with history as it happened as to the theological meaning they gleaned from history. There are embellishments and conflicting theology within the Bible.
3. **Important questions to keep in mind:** Who gets to tell the narratives in the Covenantal community? Who has the voice & holds the authority? Who can read and write? Who gets to write the narratives? For whom? For what purpose? Who are left out of the texts? Why?
4. **God is For us, With us, and In us** (from Great Themes of the Old Testament by Richard Rohr and Joseph Martos): **God is for us** (Exodus theme). **God is with us** (looking ahead to the New Testament in the person of Jesus). **God is in us** (the gift of the Holy Spirit for all). God calls each and all of us to covenant with God. God calls us to a life of faith, hope, love, and service of peace and justice.
5. **Praying with the Scriptures:** The people in the Bible can be archetypal characters worthy of our reflection & meditation. Relish a word, a phrase that speaks to you in your prayerful reading. Let us be inspired, consoled, surprised, challenged, and nourished by the Scriptures.