

## FIVE

# Getting to the Good Book: History of the Bible

This only is denied to God: the power to  
undo the past.

—AGATHON

The ancient Greek playwright Agathon observed the impossibility of rewinding history. Unable to delete the past, can God nevertheless *rewrite* it? To understand how the Bible came to be requires that we suspend nearly everything we know about authorship and the business of books today. The Bible is wildly unique, yet it sits on modern bookshelves mum to its extravagant dissimilarity, with its modest spine politely blending in—a book among other books. But it is not like those other books. In considering how ancient texts developed into the Bible as it appears today, here are a few crucial points to note or simply to recall from discussions above:

1. The Bible comprises texts from a variety of times and places. A conservative estimate for the Hebrew Bible is that it includes material from over 1,000 years, the earliest dating to around 1200 BCE (see

above concerning Judges 5) and the latest to about 165 BCE (the book of Daniel). Geographically, its sources are Mesopotamian (e.g., the Flood story), Canaanite (see especially Chapter 13, “God Names, Beings, and Doings”), and Egyptian (Prov 22–24 is nearly identical to the Instruction of Amenemope from 1100 BCE), spanning the Fertile Crescent of the ancient Near East. The New Testament is more limited, but not as limited as the few years and a single author that most books produced today involve. The texts of the New Testament concern events in the eastern Mediterranean and date from around 50 CE (Paul’s earliest letters) to around 150 CE (Jude and 2 Peter).

2. The Bible includes different kinds of literature. It includes origin myths, devotional poetry, legal texts, biographies, pithy aphorisms, philosophical treatises, and letters both to individuals and to groups. It has songs and instructional narratives, humorous anecdotes, and stern sermons. And none of these was composed with an eye to becoming biblical, *per se*. Rather, the contents assumed authority over time within communities of faith, which only later compiled them into the Bible that we have today.<sup>1</sup>
3. During the period of the Hebrew Bible’s development most people couldn’t read or write. Those texts, then, were the product of an elite few who wrote either for their small band of academic colleagues or in an “oral” style (i.e., a style that lent itself to oral recitation) that the masses could use. By New Testament times, literacy was more common. Thus just as orality shaped much of the Old Testament, literacy shaped much of the New.
4. Authorship during the period of biblical development seldom meant the creative endeavor of an individual, whose words once written remained immutable. Nearly all of the Bible’s literature is attributed to one person or another who did not actually write it. Most of the Bible (the Hebrew Bible in particular) is the product of the few, mostly anonymous people who could learn to read and write—scribes, schooled in the temple. They worked at least partly with existing traditions and

texts (e.g., oral narratives and poetry, royal annals and records, oracles preserved and passed down by a prophet's disciples), copying and editing as circumstances required and their theology dictated.

5. The literature that would come to be collected as “Bible” circulated in independent pieces, many of which took the form of scrolls, rather than in the page-bound codices that we think of as books today. One result is that their organization and order wasn’t fixed.

The previous chapter began by noting the tough-to-overstate influence of the Babylonian exile on the development of the Bible. Add to that the Persian emperor’s subsequent release of the exiles and encouragement for the returnees to codify a set of traditions and laws, and the Bible was off and running. Indeed, most scholars think that the first five books of the Bible took real shape during the exile and became truly authoritative among the Jewish community during the Persian period.

#### THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS

The idea that Moses wrote the Bible’s first five books has its roots in ancient traditions. Within the Hebrew Bible’s latest books, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles, and Daniel, as well as in New Testament texts, we read of the “*torah of Moses*” as God’s instructions to the Israelites mediated by Moses.<sup>2</sup> Some traditionalists continue to maintain that a historical Moses wrote the entire Pentateuch—on the basis of key texts from Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, in which God commands Moses to write what God dictates.<sup>3</sup>

Yet even a casual reading of these books indicates a layered composition, and for centuries people have noted problems with the traditional belief of Mosaic authorship, despite the danger to one’s reputation or even one’s person that such a claim could elicit. Rabbi Ibn Ezra (c. 1090–1164) delicately noted that anachronisms within the Pentateuch suggest that at least a few texts do not seem to have been written by Moses.<sup>4</sup> In the seventeenth century, the philosopher

Thomas Hobbes, the Roman Catholic scholar Richard Simon, and the Jewish philosopher Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza were more outspoken in calling into question whether Moses could have written the entire Pentateuch. Principles of the Enlightenment, with its championing of reason, launched a new era in biblical studies, granting such investigation more credibility.

One long-standing approach to understanding the development of the Pentateuch is called the “documentary hypothesis.” About 150 years ago, a German scholar, Julius Wellhausen, articulated an idea that had been hatching for some time. He posited four different literary sources (from different times and places) that were woven together over time to produce what we have today as the first five books of the Bible. Although details of the documentary hypothesis continue to be debated, its general ideas have stood the test of time. Observing different names for God and a constellation of vocabulary, perspective, and literary styles that attends those names gave the hypothesis its start.

For example, the first chapter of Genesis uses the name Elohim and portrays God as magnificently “other.” It relates a story of universal creation in poetic repetition and orderly progression over six days accomplished with ease by the speech of God. In it, human beings were created simultaneously “male and female” in the image of God, and the whole project is said to be “very good.”<sup>5</sup> By contrast, chapter 2 of Genesis uses the divine name Yahweh Elohim and portrays an earthly God who walks around and uses his hands to shape and plant a particular area and its creatures. In this story, God fashioned out of the soil a single human being. Then, judging that such solitude “isn’t good,” God divided the original human into “man” and “woman.”<sup>6</sup> In effect, then, in the first few chapters of Genesis, we have two very different images of God, and two very different narratives about the creation of human beings, in two very different literary styles, combined into a yet larger narrative. This combination invites readers to connect the stories, yielding yet other interpretations than either text bears alone.

The literary sources that compose the Pentateuch don’t appear in tidy and convenient blocks but are woven together, overlapping in some places and causing contradictions or disconnects in others.

Take a close look at the Flood story in Genesis 6:5–8:19. Just how many animals went on Noah’s ark—two of every kind (6:19; 7:15), or seven pairs of every clean animal and one pair of every unclean animal (7:2–3)? How did the Flood come—by rain from above (7:4), or by an upsurge of water from the deep, or both (7:11)? And how long did it last—forty days (7:17; 8:6), or 150 days (7:24)? As in the case of chapters 1 and 2, considering stories in their final form, as they appear in the Bible today, readers may conclude that one source adds to or elaborates on details from another, producing a yet richer story. The texts invite such layered reading.

None of the four hypothetical literary sources was likely composed by an individual person; rather, the four represent both oral traditions and the writing of several parties, probably not together in one sitting, but over time. That is, each of the sources is built on other sources and reflects a process of transmission that allowed editing and change all along. And the final form reflects an intentional combination of received texts.

According to the documentary hypothesis, the earliest (but not the first) literary source in the Pentateuch prefers to use the divine name Yahweh. For that reason, it’s called the Yahwist and abbreviated J (because Germans spell Yahweh with a J). It reflects especially the southern kingdom’s interests and may date back to the tenth century BCE. This is the source responsible for the Adam and Eve creation story that begins in Genesis chapter 2.

The temporally next literary source prefers the divine name Elohim, and so is called the Elohist and abbreviated E. That source reflects especially the northern kingdom’s interests and may date to the ninth century BCE. Together, J and E tell stories that may have been collected even before others began to write them down and add to them, editing or redacting along the way. That editorial group probably tweaked J and E or JE a bit while also adding its own material.

Contrary to what I wrote above, a third literary strand actually does appear as a block, according to this hypothesis. The Deuteronomist’s work (D) is specific to the book of Deuteronomy. But that book also probably reflects at least three literary stages (preexilic and

northern; seventh century BCE in the southern kingdom; and post-exilic).

Finally, according to the hypothesis, the group that edited J, E, and D worked during the period of exile to codify basics of belief and identity. They are called the Priestly writers (P) because they added material especially concerned with the workings of and reflecting ideas particular to the religious institution. The Priestly writers collected, arranged, and edited the material that we have fixed in the Pentateuch. They framed the work, adding new material as necessary.

For example, determined to address those questions that the exile posed, the Priestly writers, as a group or school, are thought to have composed the seven-day creation story that appears in Genesis chapter 1. With it, they demonstrated that God was not killed or defeated by the Babylonian god but rather is the creator of the entire universe. Not only that, but they described a God who has no image that could be manipulated or hurt but elegantly speaks an orderly world into being, and declares that it is good. This God, the story tells, is not bound by nation or temple but existed long before Israel and Israelite religion and is of cosmic proportion. The conclusion, and grand finale, is not the creation of human beings (simultaneously male and female in the image of God), but the creation of the Sabbath, a day dear to the Priestly writers as both sacred and an agent for maintaining the order of time.

According to the documentary hypothesis, the Adam and Eve story that begins in chapter 2 actually dates to an earlier time than the story in chapter 1. This can be confusing because modern readers are familiar with books composed as a single piece. Further complicating things, the content of the stories in the Pentateuch follows a chronological order, which is misleading because the beginning was not composed first, nor was the end composed last.

Finally, the documentary hypothesis is just that—a hypothesis. We do not have in a vault somewhere four disparate, individual documents signed by the Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly writers that we can compare with the Pentateuch. The image of four

discrete documents cut and pasted together is probably not entirely accurate, either, since there was a process of transmission and editing that made the traditions quite fluid over time—though not forever.

### DATING TANAKH

The Babylonian exile prompted scribes not only to collect and codify oral and literary traditions but also to rework them in light of the theological challenges posed by the nation's spectacular destruction. When the Persian king Cyrus II conquered Babylon and allowed the exiles to return home, those traditions underwent yet further development.

Around 450 BCE, it appears that a learned priest and scribe by the name of Ezra was instructed by the Persian authorities to help his native people in Judah articulate the core of their beliefs and establish the law of the land.<sup>7</sup> This is the period most scholars assign to the finalization of the Pentateuch, when the “five books of Moses” became fixed and authoritative.

Finalization of the second section, the books of the prophets (including the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings), probably took place around 200 BCE, when the project of translating those Hebrew scriptures into Greek was under way. By around 100 BCE, the Septuagint was the Greek-speaking people’s version of the Hebrew scriptures. Consequently, this was the Bible familiar to that Jewish sect of Jesus followers who would become the early Christian church, and its version served as the foundation for the New Testament.<sup>8</sup> Partly because of the Septuagint’s growing popularity among Christians who continued to distance and distinguish themselves, traditional Jews abandoned this Greek rendering of the Hebrew Bible and renewed their commitment to a Hebrew version.

Following the Romans’ destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, Jews finalized their (Hebrew) Bible, ordering its books in a predominantly chronological manner, and setting Cyrus’s call to return to Jerusalem and rebuild its temple as the final word. The third, “Writings,” section and full canon of the Hebrew Bible was set around

130 CE,<sup>9</sup> but only books that met the criteria of having been composed by important people before about 450 BCE were included. Nothing deemed to postdate Ezra and Nehemiah was admitted as Bible into the Hebrew canon after that time. (Biblical books that were indeed composed later were admitted under the auspices of earlier authorship by important people—e.g., Daniel is set in the Babylonian period even though it was composed in the second century BCE; Ecclesiastes is attributed to Solomon, though it appears to come from the Hellenistic period following Alexander’s conquest.) The books that were included had gained a standing and reputation of importance, and their traditions of authorship and antiquity made them eligible.

### THE CHRISTIAN CANON

Development of the Christian canon is another story. Although its historical trajectory is much shorter than that of the Hebrew Bible (spanning a couple of hundred rather than a thousand years), its historical development has gotten a lot more attention lately, thanks in part to titillating stories of intrigue and power such as *The Da Vinci Code*. Indeed, understanding how the Christian bible took shape isn’t as simple as tacking on to the standing Hebrew Bible a comprehensive collection of books about Jesus. For one thing, the Hebrew Bible that most of Jesus’ followers used was neither Hebrew nor a Bible. They worked with Greek translations of Hebrew scrolls that hadn’t yet achieved the status of an absolutely closed canon.

Furthermore, the early followers of Jesus were not all of one mind about who Jesus was, what he said and did, or the implications of his life. Jesus didn’t write anything himself—at least nothing that we have. Rather, his followers and people who were convinced of his extraordinary nature wrote in his voice and about him. In the first couple of centuries, many people who identified themselves as Christian wrote texts that would be unrecognizable as Christian to us today.

Which books represented best the life, teachings, and implications of Jesus and what it meant to be a true Christian were hotly debated.

As with the Hebrew Bible, qualifying texts had to be old (the closer to Jesus the better) and attributed to Jesus' apostles or their close associates. Also as with the Hebrew Bible, the gradual process of a text's wide acceptance and use on the one hand, or neglect and attrition on the other (rather than definitive action by a single convening group of decision makers), accounts for what made it into the Bible and what did not. Other criteria for inclusion were that the texts needed to have broad application or relevance rather than be limited only to a particular individual or congregation and that they conform to accepted beliefs. It wasn't until 367 CE that we have the first mention of the definitive Christian canon.<sup>10</sup> That is a full 250 years after the latest of the books in the New Testament was written.

Many gospels were composed and circulated in the centuries after Jesus' death by his followers both before and after the New Testament was firmly established. Only four are included in the Bible. Of the others, some, such as the gospel of Thomas and the gospel of Peter, probably contain very early material (possibly from Jesus' time), even if their final form was later. The gospel of Thomas, consisting entirely of Jesus' sayings, may preserve some things that Jesus actually said, and may or may not predate similar sayings that appear in the canonical gospels. Scholars think that it dates to the end of the first century or the beginning of the second century CE. The gospel of Peter, from the mid-first century, concentrates its attention on the passion narrative, empty tomb and resurrection. It may actually have served as a source for the canonical gospels.

Among the many gospels other than the four that made it into the New Testament, several were produced late in the game—in the third and fourth centuries (and some even later than that). For this reason alone they would not have been eligible for inclusion. Some also reflected a particularly popular school of early Christian thought called gnosticism (because its adherents claim to have secret or special knowledge—Greek, *gnosis*), which was later deemed heretical (i.e., promoting false doctrine). The gospel of Judas is one such gnostic text. Discovered in the late twentieth century in Egypt, it seems to come from the fourth century CE but is probably a copy of a text

originally from the second century CE. It relates in dialogues between Judas and Jesus a more sympathetic portrait of the infamous disciple than do the canonical gospels.<sup>11</sup> The third-century gnostic Gospel of Mary concerns Mary Magdalene and portrays her as a leader among the disciples, while the Gospel of the Birth of Mary, from the eighth or ninth century CE, tells about Mary the mother of Jesus. These and other noncanonical gospels provide a glimpse of the diverse faces of Christian belief and the variety of ways that Jesus and his inner circle were remembered in the light of disparate theologies.

As Jesus' followers accepted that his return might take a while, and as they coalesced into a community, they turned to literary traditions for worship, direction, and identity. Paul's letters were probably the earliest of the New Testament texts to be treated as authoritative. They were composed for particular congregations, so no single one was originally intended for every early Christian community; but with Paul's great reputation, the books quickly gained distinction as authoritative texts. The author of 2 Peter, probably writing around 150 CE, referred to them as scripture.<sup>12</sup> The church's earliest theologians and apologists (including Ignatius and Polycarp, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Irenaeus in the second century) also mention Paul's letters as normative Christian literature.

Matthew and Luke share a number of popular texts in common. Because of this, and a number of other stylistic indicators, biblical scholars have long supposed that Matthew and Luke appealed to a common source, besides the gospel of Mark, when developing their accounts of Jesus. We don't have a copy of that other source, and in scholarly lingo it is simply called Q, short for *Quelle*, which means "source" in German (German scholars proposed it). The theory is that Q was composed mostly of sayings of Jesus. Both Matthew and Luke drew from Q, drew from their precursor Mark, added some unique elements of their own, and voilà!—the canonical, synoptic gospels. Actually, they probably went through several permutations before arriving at the forms that we have today.

Because the ultimate authority among early Christians was not a body of texts but rather the person of Jesus, the gospels with their

biographical information were very popular. Likely built in part on oral traditions, the written gospels weren't uniformly considered authoritative scripture until around 180 CE, when Irenaeus promoted the four canonical gospels as a group.<sup>13</sup> It seems, then, that by the second century CE, collections of Paul's letters were widely accepted, the four gospels were gaining in status, 1 Peter and 1 John were well known (though independent of any collection), and a number of other texts enjoyed a strong reputation among Christian communities. The so-called catholic epistles weren't widely adopted until the 300s CE; and it seems that Acts and Revelation, each of which was popular and widespread among early Christian communities, nevertheless also had to wait until the fourth century to achieve canonical status.