



# into the Melting Pot

*the question is more important than the answer*

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## **The Old Testament – who wrote it and when**

*The following is reproduced from the Good News Study Bible: the Introduction to the Old Testament (pages 3-6) and the Introduction to the Pentateuch (pages 9-10) © United Bible Societies 1997.*

### **What is the Old Testament?**

In one sense, the answer to this question is obvious. It is the first part of the Bible, slightly more than three times as long as the New Testament, the other main division of the Bible.

These divisions are called "testaments" from the Latin word *testamentum*, meaning covenant. The Old and New Testaments speak of God's old and new covenants with his people: Israel in the Old Testament, and the Christian community, the church, in the New Testament.

So far, so good. Things become a little more complicated when we remember that the Old Testament is considered as holy Scripture by both Christians and Jews, and that they view these writings in different ways. Christians generally consider the Old Testament as fulfilled in the New, and incomplete without it. Jews consider the Old Testament as complete in itself. Therefore, they prefer to speak of it as the Hebrew Scriptures or the Hebrew Bible, since (with the exception of parts of Daniel and Ezra, which were written in Aramaic) the books were written in Hebrew. For convenience, since the Good News Bible contains both the Old and New Testaments, we shall use the Christian title "Old Testament", without any disrespect to Jewish usage.

### **The Divisions of the Old Testament**

Jews and Christians also differ in the order in which they arrange and print the books of the Old Testament. Jews maintain the ancient Hebrew division into Law, Prophets, and Writings. The Prophets are further divided into the Former prophets (Joshua – 2 Kings) and the Latter Prophets (Isaiah - Malachi). Hosea - Malachi, sometimes called the Minor Prophets, are known, especially but not only among Jews, as The Book of the Twelve. These divisions correspond broadly to the historical order in which they came to be accepted as authoritative or Canonical in Israel. The Hebrew canon was virtually complete by the time of Jesus.

Christian Bibles usually follow a different arrangement, found in ancient Greek and Latin translations which were widely used in the early church. In these, the main divisions are between the Historical Books (Genesis - Esther), the Poetical Books (Job - Song of Songs), and the Prophetic Books (Isaiah - Malachi).

Ancient versions, such as the Septuagint and the Vulgate, include in the Old Testament a number of writings which are not found in the original Hebrew texts. They are recognized by Catholics as Deuterocanonical, that is, belonging to a second canon. This term is also often used by those Protestants who value these books but do not give them the same status as the Hebrew Scriptures. Protestants traditionally call them "the Apocrypha", meaning "the hidden (books)". Orthodox churches commonly use the Greek term

*anaginoskomena*, which means "(books) to be read", and indicates that they are worthy to be read in church. Those Bible editions published by the United Bible Societies containing the deuterocanonical books have, since 1968, included these books as a separate section before the New Testament. These books are especially valuable in helping the reader better understand the Jewish world portrayed in later parts of the Old Testament.

### **How the Old Testament Developed**

The 39 books of the Hebrew Old Testament developed over a period of more than a thousand years. Originally stories and other traditions were handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. In the course of time, they were written down and gathered into small collections. Some of these, such as the Book of Jasher (Josh 10:13; 2 Sam 1:18), The History of Solomon (1 Kgs 11:41), and especially The History of the Kings of Israel (1 Kgs 14:19, etc.) and The History of the Kings of Judah (1 Kgs 14:29, etc.), are mentioned in the Old Testament, but are now lost. Similar collections may form the basis for other parts of the Old Testament, such as the stories about Abraham (Gen 12-24), and about Jacob and his children (Gen 27-50). It is very probable that the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:3-17; Deut 5:7-71) existed as a separate unit long before being placed in their present contexts. The books of Psalms and Proverbs state clearly that they are each a collection of work by various writers, as are larger groups such as the Prophets and The Book of the Twelve.

### **The Question of Authorship**

It is important to bear in mind these centuries-long developments when considering the authorship of the Old Testament writings. Since the invention of printing, it has become normal for a single author to write a book; to give credit at places where he or she may have quoted or used the work of others; and to have their work protected by copyright. The situation in Old Testament times was quite different: the individual human author of a particular piece of writing was considered much less important than God, who was believed to be the divine author of the whole. In order for a writing to be considered sacred, it was not necessary to know who the original human author was. The major reason for preserving it would be that it was considered valuable for the community's understanding of its history. Moreover, most of the prophets, with the possible exception of Ezekiel, were preachers and speakers rather than writers.

For these reasons, it was not considered strange to include, in a collection known as "The Five Books of Moses", an account of Moses' death; or to speak of "The Psalms of David" and "The Proverbs of Solomon", even though some psalms and proverbs explicitly state that they were written by other people. Such titles must be understood as identifying the founders of the great traditions in which the writings emerged, rather than as naming authors in the modern sense. It is likely that the same is true of other parts of the Old Testament, such as the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

### **The Text of the Old Testament**

The very long time it took for the Old Testament to develop causes problems, both with the original texts, and in their translation.

First, as already mentioned, from an early date the various parts of the Old Testament were considered as holy Scripture. They were carefully conserved and copied, while practically all other Hebrew writing of the period was lost, so that Israel became in a strict sense "the People of the Book". In the process of conserving Scripture, suspect or inferior manuscripts were often destroyed with the result that very few ancient Old Testament manuscripts survive. Standardisation of the Hebrew text became virtually complete through the devoted work of the Masoretes, a school of scribes and scholars who ensured that very few changes were introduced into the text after about AD 100, and further changes were practically excluded after about AD 1000. (The standard Hebrew text of the Old Testament is thus known as the Masoretic Text).

No human scribe, however, is infallible. In the course of centuries, a large number of errors and obscurities crept into the text, and once this had happened, later scribes usually lacked the resources needed to check and correct the work of their predecessors. Inevitably, the errors themselves were faithfully copied and handed on, together with the rest of the text. That is why, in the GNB as in most other modern translations, there are a number of notes indicating that the Hebrew is unclear, or that the translation exceptionally follows an ancient version, such as the Septuagint, rather than the Hebrew. It should be emphasised, however, that such errors and obscurities make up a very small percentage of the text.

The history of the early transmission of the Hebrew text, and confirmation of its substantial accuracy, have been greatly assisted by the discoveries at Qumran, by the Dead Sea. Among these are scrolls and fragments of Jewish writings, including Isaiah and parts of other Old Testament books, which follow closely the surviving Hebrew tradition of the texts.

Quite apart from errors in copying, other problems in understanding the Hebrew Old Testament arise from its long history and unique status. Words in any language are liable to change their meaning over a period of a thousand years, and words in biblical Hebrew are no exception. There were also changes in spelling, in the way of forming letters, and in writing materials. The lack of other Hebrew writings from the Old Testament period means that a number of terms occur only once or twice, sometimes in contexts which leave their meaning unclear. For example, the word translated "monkey" in the Good News Bible at 1 Kgs 10:22 and 2 Chr 9:21 may also mean "peacock". In such cases, scholars, including translators, will use two kinds of supplementary evidence. On the one hand, they consult ancient translations, made at a time when the meaning of the Hebrew terms may have been better understood. On the other hand, scholars search for similar terms in languages related to Hebrew. Neither of these procedures leads to absolute certainty about the meaning of all Hebrew terms, but they are valuable as far as they go. There are places in the Old Testament where, despite all efforts, the meaning remains in doubt. In such cases, scholars are sometimes driven to conclude that the original Hebrew text has been altered, and that attempts must be made to correct it. This is the reason for notes such as that at Ps 22:15 - *throat* Probable text; Hebrew "strength". Most Old Testament scholars, however, change the text only as a last resort, and prefer to do so as little as possible; for example, where two Hebrew letters are similar in shape and easily confused.

### **Differences of Culture**

Another type of difficulty for the translator arises, not from the Hebrew text itself, but from differences of culture between Old Testament times and our own. A proverb may allude to a feature of daily life, or Israelite worship, which was well known to the first readers, but is obscure to us. Poetry in any language tends to use many figurative expressions, sometimes without specifying the literal meaning. The Old Testament contains many plays on words, and also deliberately enigmatic expressions intended (rather like Jesus' parables) to awaken the hearers' or readers' attention, and lead them to reflect on the meaning. Wherever possible, the notes and Word List in this Bible aim to help the modern reader to overcome such difficulties, though some will remain. Moreover, the Good News Bible translation itself is designed to clarify the meaning in places where a literal translation may not make this apparent to the modern reader. Compare, for example, literal translations of Is 11:1 and Jer 22:7 with the Good News Bible translations:

*Literal translation of Is 11:1* - And a rod proceeds from the stump of Jesse, and a branch will bear fruit out of his roots.

*GNB translation of Is 11:1* - The royal line of David is like a tree that has been cut down; but just as new branches sprout from a stump, so a new king will arise from among David's descendants.

*Literal translation of Jer 22:7* - And I will consecrate destroyers against you, each one with his weapons, and they will cut down your choice cedars and cast them into the fire.  
*GNB translation of Jer 22:7* - I am sending men to destroy it [Judah's royal palace]. They will all bring their axes, cut down its beautiful cedar pillars, and throw them into the fire.

### **Ancient Translations of the Old Testament**

Nowadays, all serious translations of the Old Testament are based on the original Hebrew or Aramaic text. For long periods and in large areas, however, Christian communities have depended on ancient translations' such as the Septuagint in eastern Europe and the Vulgate in the west. The Septuagint was the translation most used by the New Testament writers, so that a number of Old Testament texts are quoted in the New Testament in a form different from the Hebrew. These old translations were themselves translated into other languages' from Greek into Slavonic, for example, thus increasing the possibility of inaccuracies. Yet the ancient versions sustained the faith of generations of Christians, so that some of them came themselves to be considered as directly inspired.

However, despite the long and widespread respect for these old translations, there is also a long tradition of translating the Old Testament directly from the Hebrew. A pioneer in this respect was the great Christian scholar St Jerome (probably 341-420), who learned Hebrew from a Jewish teacher, and revised existing Latin translations on the basis of the Hebrew. In so doing he laid the foundation of the Vulgate (or "Popular") Latin version. In a similar way, the Protestant Reformation led to the making of Old Testament translations from Hebrew into the emerging national languages of Europe. Here the pioneering influence was that of Martin Luther (1483-1546), whose German translation of the New Testament was first published in 1522, and of the complete Bible in 1534. Luther, and some of his associates and successors' were able to draw on the work of Jewish biblical scholars.

### **Reading the Old Testament Today**

How, then, should we read the Old Testament today? There is no single method; Bible societies, churches, and Bible reading organisations publish various reading guides which many people have found helpful. For Christians and Jews alike, however, there is an underlying principle that Scripture should be interpreted by Scripture; that is, that difficult passages should be understood in the light of their wider context, which is ultimately the entire canon. For Christians, there is also a tension between two sayings of Jesus, both found in the Sermon on the Mount. On the one hand, Jesus says that the Old Testament remains an authoritative part of Scripture: "Do not think that I have come to do away with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets. I have not come to do away with them, but to make their teachings come true." (Mt 5:17).

On the other hand, Jesus adds to the Old Testament something radically new; for example: "You have heard that it was said' 'Love your friends, hate your enemies'. But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the children of your Father in heaven." (Mt 5:43-44)

The Old Testament nowhere precisely says, "hate your enemies", although these words are a fair summary of one strain of Israelite thought and practice, as they are of the ancient Near East in general. But Jesus' command to love and pray for one's enemies goes far beyond anything in the Old Testament.

As Christians read the Old Testament, they should try to have the same attitude that Jesus had towards his Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures, and to read them in the light of Jesus' understanding of them.

## **Introduction to the Pentateuch**

The name "Pentateuch", given to the first five books of the Bible, comes from a Greek word meaning "five scrolls". Also called "The Five Books of Moses", these books are, for the Jewish community, the first and most important division of the Hebrew Scriptures. In Hebrew, they are called "Torah", which is traditionally translated as "Law". This translation reflects the Greek use of the word in the Septuagint, the principal Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The same word is used in the Greek New Testament to refer to these books (see Mt 5:17; Lk 24:14; Jn 1:45). But the Hebrew term has a broader meaning, and is sometimes translated as "instruction" or even "revelation", when it is used of God's instructions to the people of Israel.

## **Contents**

- These five books include not only rules and regulations, but narratives as well, telling the
- story of the Hebrew people from creation to the death of Moses. The material may be divided as follows:
- From creation to the scattering of the human race (Gen 1:1-11:9)
- The founding ancestors of the Hebrew people: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph (Gen 11:10-50:25)
- The departure of the Hebrew people from Egypt (Ex 1-15)
- From the Red Sea to Mount Sinai (Ex 16-18)
- The people of Israel at Mount Sinai (Ex 19:1-Num 10:10)
- From Sinai to the plains of Moab (Num 10:11-21:35)
- The people of Israel in Moab (Num 22:1-36:13)
- Moses tells the people of God's deeds and his laws (Deut 1-33)
- The death of Moses (Deut 34)

## **The Formation of the Pentateuch**

Traditionally, many Jews and Christians believed that these five books were written by Moses. A number of factors, however, make it very difficult, if not impossible, to maintain this position. For example, there are often two or more different accounts of the same event or teaching. This implies, if it does not prove, two different sources. In Gen 5:19 Noah is commanded to take one pair of all animals into the boat with him; but in Gen 7:2-3 he is commanded to take one pair of some animals and seven pairs of other animals. Hagar, the concubine of Abraham, is sent away twice (Gen 16 & 21:9-21). Twice Abraham, in order to save his own life, presents his wife Sarah as his sister (Gen 12:10-20 & Gen 20). His son Isaac does the same with his wife Rebecca (Gen 26:6-11). The two accounts are almost identical and, despite the passage of time, both father and son attempt to trick the same king, Abimelech of Gerar. There are also several accounts of the same religious festivals (Ex 23:14-19 & 34:18-26 & Lev 23; Deut 16:17), and two accounts of the receiving of the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:2-17 & Deut 5:6-21). In addition to this, a number of texts refer to places or institutions that actually came into existence hundreds of years after the period in which the narratives are set (see Gen 47:11n for one example; another is Gen 36:31 which speaks of kings although the first Israelite king came to power about 250 years after the time of Moses). Therefore these narratives could not have been written close to the time at which the events occurred.

These and other factors have led many to believe that the Pentateuch is the end result of a process that lasted hundreds of years, from the time when the separate stories were handed on by word of mouth to the final edition of the Pentateuch in the fifth century BC.

For example, Gen 1-2 has two stories of creation: in the first one (1:1-2:4a) the Creator is called "Elohim", the common name meaning "GOD"; in the second account (2:4b-23) he is called "Yahweh [or "Jehovah"] God" which is usually translated as "the LORD God". This and other such passages throughout the Pentateuch have led many to suggest two early sources for the material: the older source, called "J" (for "Jehovah" or "Judah"), is believed to have been compiled in Jerusalem in the tenth century BC, during the time of

Kings David and Solomon. The second source, called "E" (for "Elohim" or "Ephraim"), is believed to come from the ninth century BC and from the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The two were eventually combined, and later material, mainly concerned with Priests, the Sanctuary, liturgy, worship, and sacrifices, was added to the combined account. This additional material is named "P", since it is believed to have been written by priests. Finally, the book of Deuteronomy, as a separate volume, was added to the material after the return of the Israelites in 538 BC from captivity in Babylon.

Not all biblical scholars accept this view, and some questions still remain unanswered. At the present time, however, it is the most widely accepted explanation of this complex subject.

### **The Significance of the Pentateuch**

The Pentateuch is at once the record and the source of the life of the people of Israel. As the Israelites recited and read these ancient stories they were not merely recounting their history, remembering things of long ago and far away. Rather, they were testifying to their own experience: in the recital they were drawn into those great events and became not spectators but participants. As a people they had been in bondage in Egypt, but with a strong hand God had delivered them from Pharaoh's army, divided the waters, and led his people safely into the promised land (Deut 26:1-11). This was not dead history: it was their own story, their living legacy.

The same holds true for Christians, who read these books not merely for information about the distant past, but to learn of God's dealings with his people; a God who again and again renews his promises and calls his people to confess: "The LORD - and the LORD alone - is our God" (Deut 5:1).

### **The Message of the Pentateuch**

The one thing that binds together all God's varied dealings with his people is the Covenant that God made with them. So important is this that, from the corresponding Latin word *testamentum*, come the names that Christians gave to the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures, the Old Testament and the New Testament.

This one central theme begins when God makes a covenant with Abraham (Gen 15 & 17). He later renews the covenant with Isaac (Gen 26:1-5), and with Jacob (Gen 28:10-22; see also Ex 2:24 & 6:2-5). At Mount Sinai God makes a covenant with all the people, by means of which they become his people and he becomes their God (Ex 24:3-8). This covenant is renewed in the plains of Moab, as the people get ready to enter the promised land (Deut 29:10-15). Through the covenant God binds himself to them, promising to be with them and bless them. Time and again the Israelites are unfaithful to the covenant and rebel against God, but he remains faithful and brings his people back to him. In time the prophet Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant that God will make with his people (Jer 31:31-34). For Christians this promise was fulfilled when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper (Mk 14:22-26 & 1 Cor 11:23-25).

As part of the covenant, God promises Abraham that his descendants will have a land of their own, where they will live as God's people. This subject constantly appears in Numbers and Deuteronomy. This land will be a holy land, because there the holy God will dwell with his people. Without the land, the Israelites would not be a people. For Christians this note is struck again, though in a different way, in the promise of a new heaven and a new earth, and a new Jerusalem, where God himself will for ever dwell with his people and be their God (Rev 21:1-4).

Finally, the covenant ensures that God's people are to be holy, as God is holy (Lev 20:26 & 22:31-33). This means that they are to be specially dedicated to the exclusive worship and service of God. But this special role is not for their benefit alone: by means of them God will bless all the peoples of the world (Gen 12:1-3). This theme is picked up also by Christian writers the followers of Christ are to be a priesthood, a holy nation, a people dedicated to God (1 Pet 2:9).