

The Bible

The Composition of the Old Testament

John Rogerson

SCM

The Composition of the Old Testament

Reading and writing are things we take for granted. In the ancient world they were skills practised by very few people, and almost entirely in the service of two institutions, the royal court and the temple. These institutions needed scribes to enable them to be administered. The court had to engage in international diplomacy, keep records of land sales and treaties, and ensure that historical records legitimised the existence of whatever dynasty was in power. Temples owned land and some were used as banks. To train and work as a scribe meant becoming a loyal servant of the court or temple, learning in their schools and working in their service. The remarkable thing about the Old Testament is that much of its literature is unsympathetic to the court and temple or even downright hostile, yet it was produced by scribes trained in and working in these institutions. How did this come about?

The daily activities of scribes in the court and temple produced the material that later became part of the Old Testament. These included chronicles of the main achievements of kings, especially building works and battles, inventories of royal and temple treasures and records of their disbursement, proverbs which had international currency and were used as writing exercises for trainee scribes, and temple hymns. To these scribal activities must be added the contribution of oral storytellers, whose profession was to entertain at court or on special occasions in villages or larger communities. These oral storytellers preserved traditions about past heroes and heroines, and could hold their audiences spellbound as they performed the retelling of the past. There is also a third group that must be mentioned, namely prophets. This was a diverse group of people whose activities ranged from fortune-telling through dealing with sickness to political activity in the name of YHWH who was declared to be the supreme God. Some prophets worked alone as fortune-tellers or healers, others belonged to groups who lived on the margins of society and who championed the poor and opposed the powerful.

The first main catalyst in the production of the Old Testament was the destruction of the northern kingdom, Israel, by the Assyrians in 722/1. This kingdom had become a small super-power in the region of Syria/Palestine in the ninth century BCE under the leadership of King Omri (c.885–874) and his son

Ahab (c.874–853), but their reigns had also provoked fierce opposition from prophetic groups loyal to YHWH. Old traditions as preserved by the storytellers connected YHWH with a deliverance of Israelite slaves from Egypt, and the prophets strongly objected to the sponsoring of the fertility god Baal by Omri's dynasty. A coup d'état inspired by the prophets brought the Omri dynasty to an end in 841, and installed Jehu as king. However, in the following century under Jeroboam II (c.782–747) the northern kingdom enjoyed a period of relative peace and prosperity that led to lax religious observance, and the accumulation of power and land by the rich at the expense of the poor. The prophetic response led by people such as Amos and Hosea warned of imminent disaster resulting from the judgement of YHWH, disaster that finally occurred with Israel's demise in 722/1.

The consequences were far-reaching. Some Israelites were deported to Assyria, others made their way south to the much smaller, and agriculturally poorer, kingdom of Judah, whose capital was Jerusalem. Judah had often been a vassal state of Israel in the previous two centuries. Now, under king Hezekiah, (c.727–698) Judah took over the role and even the identity of Israel. This was done through popular story-telling and by scribal activity which produced the first parts of what would become the Old Testament. The materials to hand included the chronicles of the former northern kingdom, collections of laws and popular traditions from that area, and stories about prophetic groups and their leaders, men such as Samuel, Elijah and Elisha. Because Judah had assumed the role of Israel and indeed had hopes of expanding into the former northern kingdom, the story it began to fashion traced the origins of the two kingdoms to a united monarchy under David and Solomon, centred in Jerusalem. The founding of the northern kingdom was represented as an illegal rebellion against the house of David. In stories about the nation before the time of the monarchy, Abraham, the founding father of Judah, was represented as the grandfather of Jacob, the founder of Israel. By the end of the eighth century the main narratives of the books of Genesis and Exodus, parts of Joshua and Judges, and 1 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings had been produced by scribes working in the royal court who had sympathy with the ideals of the prophets.

Reading and writing are things we take for granted. In the ancient world they were skills practised by very few people, and almost entirely in the service of two institutions, the royal court and the temple. These institutions needed scribes to enable them to be administered. The court had to engage in international diplomacy, keep records of land sales and treaties, and ensure that historical records legitimised the existence of whatever dynasty was in power. Temples owned land and some were used as banks. To train and work as a scribe meant becoming a loyal servant of the court or temple, learning in their schools and working in their service. The remarkable thing about the Old Testament is that much of its literature is unsympathetic to the court and temple or even downright hostile, yet it was produced by scribes trained in and working in these institutions. How did this come about?

The daily activities of scribes in the court and temple produced the material that later became part of the Old Testament. These included chronicles of the main achievements of kings, especially building works and battles, inventories of royal and temple treasures and records of their disbursement, proverbs which had international currency and were used as writing exercises for trainee scribes, and temple hymns. To these scribal activities must be added the contribution of oral storytellers, whose profession was to entertain at court or on special occasions in villages or larger communities. These oral storytellers preserved traditions about past heroes and heroines, and could hold their audiences spellbound as they performed the retelling of the past. There is also a third group that must be mentioned, namely prophets. This was a diverse group of people whose activities ranged from fortune-telling through dealing with sickness to political activity in the name of YHWH who was declared to be the supreme God. Some prophets worked alone as fortune-tellers or healers, others belonged to groups who lived on the margins of society and who championed the poor and opposed the powerful.

The first main catalyst in the production of the Old Testament was the destruction of the northern kingdom, Israel, by the Assyrians in 722/1. This kingdom had become a small super-power in the region of Syria/Palestine in the ninth century BCE under the leadership of King Omri (c.885–874) and his son Ahab (c.874–853), but their reigns had also provoked fierce opposition from prophetic groups loyal to YHWH. Old traditions

as preserved by the storytellers connected YHWH with a deliverance of Israelite slaves from Egypt, and the prophets strongly objected to the sponsoring of the fertility god Baal by Omri's dynasty. A coup d'état inspired by the prophets brought the Omri dynasty to an end in 841, and installed Jehu as king. However, in the following century under Jeroboam II (c.782–747) the northern kingdom enjoyed a period of relative peace and prosperity that led to lax religious observance, and the accumulation of power and land by the rich at the expense of the poor. The prophetic response led by people such as Amos and Hosea warned of imminent disaster resulting from the judgement of YHWH, disaster that finally occurred with Israel's demise in 722/1.

The consequences were far-reaching. Some Israelites were deported to Assyria, others made their way south to the much smaller, and agriculturally poorer, kingdom of Judah, whose capital was Jerusalem. Judah had often been a vassal state of Israel in the previous two centuries. Now, under king Hezekiah, (c.727–698) Judah took over the role and even the identity of Israel. This was done through popular story-telling and by scribal activity which produced the first parts of what would become the Old Testament. The materials to hand included the chronicles of the former northern kingdom, collections of laws and popular traditions from that area, and stories about prophetic groups and their leaders, men such as Samuel, Elijah and Elisha. Because Judah had assumed the role of Israel and indeed had hopes of expanding into the former northern kingdom, the story it began to fashion traced the origins of the two kingdoms to a united monarchy under David and Solomon, centred in Jerusalem. The founding of the northern kingdom was represented as an illegal rebellion against the house of David. In stories about the nation before the time of the monarchy, Abraham, the founding father of Judah, was represented as the grandfather of Jacob, the founder of Israel. By the end of the eighth century the main narratives of the books of Genesis and Exodus, parts of Joshua and Judges, and 1 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings had been produced by scribes working in the royal court who had sympathy with the ideals of the prophets.

Hezekiah's reign ended in the disaster of an Assyrian invasion in 701, and for the next sixty years Judah was a vassal of Assyria. Those sympathetic to prophetic ideals kept a low profile but

were able to re-emerge when Assyrian power began to wane and Josiah (640–609) came to the throne. There was a brief period of religious reform curtailed by Josiah's death in battle and the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 597. The city was destroyed ten years later. The king and the cream of society had already been exiled to Babylon.

The destruction of Jerusalem was the second great catalyst in the production of the Old Testament. It ended the existence of the court and temple scribal schools but created a new alliance of scribes, priests and followers of prophets. They were convinced that YHWH had used the national catastrophes to judge the people, and that he had demonstrated that he was not merely a national, but the universal, God. Their activity during the following years, possibly in Babylon, led to revisions of existing material and to the beginning of the collection of prophetic books, including parts of Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah. Two prophets, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah (whose oracles are found in Isaiah 40–55) were active among the exiles in Babylon.

With the defeat of the Babylonians by Cyrus, king of Persia, in 540, the restoration of the Jewish community and its temple in Jerusalem became possible. The rebuilt temple was dedicated around 515 and Judah became a small province within the Persian empire, dominated by Jerusalem and the temple. This was the decisive period in the formation of the Old Testament. The name 'Israel' took on a new meaning. It designated not a political entity but a religious community, chosen by God to achieve his universal purposes. The books of Genesis to Numbers and Joshua to 2 Kings were edited to emphasise this perspective: to present the history of the people in terms of divine calling, human failure and the future hope of establishing God's universal rule. The books of the prophets, so fundamental to these convictions, continued to be written and edited. Also, collections of proverbs were edited to show that the beginning of wisdom was the fear of YHWH, and temple hymns were collected to form the basis of the psalter.

Two final catalysts were still to come: the aftermath of the victories of Alexander the Great in 333, and the 'Hellenisation crisis' of 169–164. Alexander's victories spread Greek language, culture and philosophy throughout the ancient world, and the worshippers of YHWH faced a new challenge, which was met

from an emerging class of literate aristocratic and wealthy men who could afford modest libraries.

It is to such people that we owe 'philosophical' compositions such as Job and Ecclesiastes, as well as the collection of love poems in the Song of Solomon. Religious observance became a more self-consciously individual matter, and this was reflected in the editing and use of the psalms, whereby compositions originally intended for public worship were adapted for individual meditation (see Psalm 1). The figure of King David was 'democratised' in that many of the psalms were given titles that associated them with personal crises in his life so that he became a man of faith rather than a man of war. The books of Chronicles, produced by scribes in the re-built temple, re-presented the history of 'Israel', centring its life on the temple and stressing the continuity between the Second Temple and that founded by David and Solomon.

The 'Hellenistic Crisis' of 169–164 resulted in the attempted suppression of the Jewish religion by Antiochus IV, the Greek ruler of Syria/Palestine. It resulted in considerable persecution of Jews, and the composition of the book of Daniel which, in chapters 8–12, allegorised recent history, and in the earlier chapters used popular stories to illustrate the universal power of YHWH, who was named as the most high God.

Writing in the ancient world was a complex process that embraced authorship, editing and copying. The Old Testament took around 800 years to be written, passing through stages that were profoundly affected by events such as the destruction of Jerusalem in 587. Older theories assume it to have been dictated by God to individuals such as Moses and Samuel. A consideration of the more 'everyday' processes by which it came to exist makes it even more remarkable as a witness to faith that still has power to challenge today's world.

John W. Rogerson is Professor of Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield.