

How Did the Bible Come to Be?

by Margaret Nutting Ralph

Have you ever asked yourself how the Bible as we know it today came into existence? Did God cause certain individuals to go into a trance during which their hands moved across a scroll so that they wrote God's own words? Did someone simply dig the Bible up out of the earth in its finished form? Far from that, the Bible we have today is the end product of a five-step process.

Event. The first step of the process is that God revealed God's self through events in human history. The events that gave rise to our Bible began about four thousand years ago with our ancestors in faith, Abraham and Sarah, and continued for about two thousand years, through the events of the life of Jesus and the deeds of his first-century apostles and disciples. Through these revelatory events the Hebrew people came to understand that the one and eternal God was present with them in their history. These events and the insights that flowed from them occurred in the midst of the community.

Oral Tradition. No story about a biblical event is contemporary with the event. All of the stories took shape over a period of time. Accounts of events were passed on in the community by word of mouth, sometimes for many generations. Those who passed on the oral tradition were not trying to tell their audiences exactly what happened, but to tell them the significance of the events for their own lives. Therefore, the accounts were molded to meet each community's needs so that the community would appreciate their importance. Those who told the stories were passing on the community's beliefs about God's role in the events that had occurred.

Written Tradition. As time went on, the oral tradition gave birth to a variety of kinds of writing including parables, miracle stories, legends, creeds, laws, and poetry. In each case, the motive of the writer was not to report all that had occurred, but to pass on to the generation contemporary with the writer how God had

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acted through events in the past, and to help them see how God was still acting in their own lives. For example, the earliest writings in our New

Testament are Paul's letters.

Paul used the oral traditions about Jesus to help various communities integrate the facts of Jesus' Resurrection and presence in their midst into their daily lives.

Edited Tradition. At various times in history, inspired individuals went over the inherited oral and written traditions about events and wrote ordered, edited accounts of all that had occurred. The first five books of the Old Testament were edited a number of times—during the time of King David, and after the Babylonian

exile, to name two. Accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were edited to produce the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

Canon. Not all accounts of revelatory events that passed through oral and written tradition are in the Bible. Some texts did not pass the test of time. They were not experienced by the communities as truthfully representing their faith experiences and nourishing them spiritually. Those texts which are in the Bible are called canonical. When we say that a text is canonical we are making two claims: that it contains Revelation and that those who passed it on to us were inspired to hand on to us what God intended to communicate through them.

For Reflection

- What insights did you gain from this article about the formation of the Scriptures?
- What area in the formation of the Scriptures would you like to know more about?