



Who Wrote The Bible?

Jim Willis

Considering the fact that the Bible is the bestselling book of all time, with several copies in many homes, you would probably get diverse responses to the question: Who wrote the Bible? Many Jews, Christians, and Muslims will answer, 'God'. Others will refer to unnamed, unknown authors of the distant past.



Some will attribute multiple authors, such as Moses, Daniel, Isaiah, or Ezekiel. Most will probably shake their heads, admit they don't know, and continue with their business of the moment. A few will say: "Who cares?" Despite the fact that it is the most popular book in the world, its contents and structure remain a mystery to a vast majority of those who swear by its supposed message. One is almost forced to wonder whether many people reverence their idea of what the Bible *should* be, rather than the Bible itself.

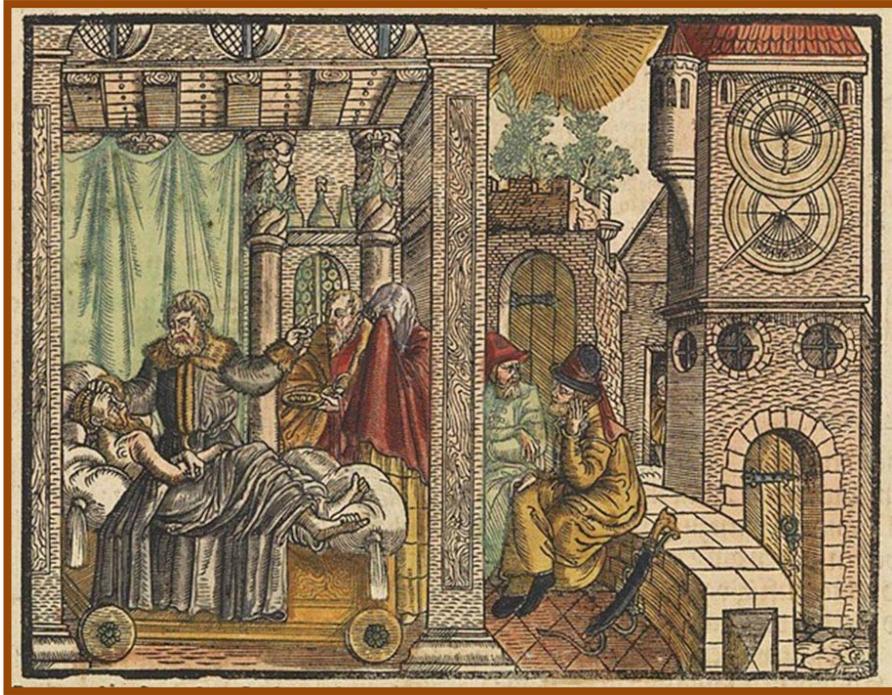


Reading the Bible by Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1755) Louvre Museum. (Public Domain)

Opiniated Scholars

The question remains: Who wrote the Bible? The study behind this question usually reigns in the rarified atmosphere of theological institutions, but has implications far beyond the halls of academia. The Bible and other sacred texts, which have profoundly shaped our world view in ways of which we are often not even aware, were all compiled by groups of men (never women) who had already formed and solidified their ideology. They had a fully formed point of view and an aggressive agenda. They really thought they knew best what should be released to the public and what should be discarded.

In other words, to be as brutally honest as possible, we very well might have been patronized by a religious establishment that long ago lost any claim to accurate historical relevancy. Religion as we know it, which comprises our search for meaning and purpose — the quest for what makes life important — was shaped by opinionated gatekeepers who sincerely claimed they were doing the work of God while secretly, and maybe not fully understanding what they were doing, sought to use religion for their own purposes. Their mission was one of power and control. Decisions about which texts to accept and which to destroy were slanted in a particular direction.



King Hezekiah on his sickbed
(Wellcome Images/ CC BY-SA
4.0)

So, in answer to the central question — Who wrote the Bible? — a simple answer is that the Bible is not a single book as much as it is a collection of books. Indeed, the very word ‘Bible’ is derived from the Latin phrase *biblia sacra*, which means "Sacred Books." In other

words, the Bible is not so much a single book as it is a library, or collection of books. As such there were multiple authors, spread out over many years and geographical locations. Tradition has it that during the time of King Hezekiah of Judah, in the eighth century BCE, royal scribes began to gather together what by then had become a large body of texts that included history, legends, proclamations, songs, poems, and wise sayings which had been assembled over a span of time that began as early as 1200 BCE. Some of them had been pressed into clay tablets, others were inscribed on long parchment scrolls. Legend has it that some, such as the original *Ten Commandments*, were even carved into stone by the very finger of God.

The Pentateuch

Many scholarly books have been written about how all this took place. Rather than try to reproduce the voluminous information in all of them, this article is confined to only the first five books of the Bible. Jews call them *Torah*, or the *Books of Moses*. Sometimes scholars refer to them as the *Pentateuch* — *penta* meaning five — or ‘five scrolls’.



Moses with the Tables of the Law by Guido Reni (1624)
Galleria Borghese (Public Domain)

Traditionally they are said to be the work of one author — Moses — who was thought to have lived somewhere between 1500 and 1300 BCE. Their story begins, quite literally, "*In the beginning*," and moves rapidly, in only 10 chapters, through creation, the great flood, the Tower of Babel and the birth of languages, the re-peopling of the earth, and the introduction of Abraham, who is said to be the patriarch of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — the three great monotheistic religions.

The departure of Abraham from Ur to Canaan by József Molnár (1850)
Hungarian National Gallery
(Public Domain)



Then the narrative slows down as it traces the foundation story of the Jewish race and nation through Isaac, the son of Abraham, his sons Jacob and Esau, and finally the 12 sons of Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel. One of those sons, Joseph, was led by fate to Egypt. His brothers eventually followed. Thus, it is that by the end of the first book of the Bible those who were to become the patriarchs of the 12 tribes of Israel are now living in Egypt.

At the beginning of the second book of the Bible, *Exodus*, the thread continues. The Jews are now enslaved. *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers*, and *Deuteronomy* tell the story of the exodus out of Egypt, the giving of the law that bound the nation together, the beginning of the traditions concerning the building of the Ark of the Covenant and the first tabernacle, or tent of meeting, the wilderness wanderings, and the final trek that brought them to the brink of the Promised Land. *Joshua*, the sixth book, begins the story of the final conquest of the land and the building of a nation. From there the narrative continues.

All this is traditionally attributed to the genius of one man — Moses. Indeed, any suggestions to the contrary are sometimes considered to be heresy of the first order. The *Pentateuch*, or *Torah*, is thus called collectively *The Books of Moses*, and is identified as such even in many modern Bibles used in Christian churches today.



Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur by Maurycy Gottlieb (1878) Tel Aviv Museum of Art. (Public Domain)

But can we say with certainty that the *Torah* was written by Moses? The answer is no. Over the years, beginning as far back as the late 17th century, many scholars, both Jewish and Christian, have developed what is now called the *Documentary Hypothesis*, or the *JEDP Model*. They suggest that at least four unknown authors, who were not even aware of each other, wrote these books. Their work was later cobbled together by a committee to reproduce what appears to be the unified work of one author.

In other words, the first five books of the Bible, attributed to one author and edited to

sound like one voice, could be thought of as, in one sense, a historical fraud perpetrated by a committee that may have, perhaps without even meaning to, censored what was destined to become a holy text.

The JEDP Model

The *JEDP Model* is based on the fact that various parts of the Torah use different names for God. These differences do not always show up in translation, so English versions of the Bible do not necessarily illustrate the nuances. But the basic idea is that there are parts of these texts that use the consonants *JHVH*, usually rendered *Jehovah*, to reference the name of God. Hence, the letter "J." These documents were written, it is said, between 900-850 BCE. Somewhere between 750-700 BCE, the name *Elohim* came into vogue. These are called the "E" Documents.

During the time of King Josiah's reforms in 621 BCE, meant to bring the nation of Judah back into God's good graces, it is suggested that the book of *Deuteronomy* was written and attributed to Moses to give it heft, substance, and status. The books of *Second Kings* and *Second Chronicles* tell the story of a group of priests who were cleaning out the back rooms of Solomon's temple and "discovered" the forgotten book of *Deuteronomy* which Moses had purportedly written centuries before. It claimed to be the final words of Moses before his death, and warned the people away from following the exact same path of disobedience they seem to have already followed, the path that led to the need for Josiah's reforms. Many scholars question such a convenient coincidence and suggest the book was more about marketing and religious/political persuasion than historical accuracy. In short, they claim it was written by at least one author, called "D," standing for *Deuteronomist*.



Joshua passing the River Jordan with the Ark of the Covenant (cropped) by Benjamin West (1800) Art Gallery of New South Wales (Public Domain)

The final letter, "P," stands for Priestly. This is a reference to laws defined and codified by priests who forged them to help the Jews maintain their separate and unique identity during the years of captivity in Babylon and Persia.

Thus, was developed the *JEDP Documentary Hypothesis*. Its discovery goes back at least as far as the late 17th century, but it was Dr. Julius Wellhausen who cemented the theory together in 1895. He believed

that all four sources were written sometime after 900 BCE. In the words of the noted Old Testament scholar Gleason Archer: "Although Dr. Wellhausen contributed no innovations to speak of, he restated the Documentary Theory with great skill and persuasiveness, supporting the JEDP sequence upon an evolutionary basis."



Discussion théologique by Edouard Moyse (Gustave flaubert 64/ CC BY-SA 4.0)

Over the years the editors began to be called 'redactors', but the JEPD theory is now commonly taught at most seminaries and is widely believed, if not expressly taught, by liberal scholars the world over. Such luminaries as the 12th-century's Rabbi Ibn Ezra and the influential philosopher Baruch Spinoza were members of the long line of scholars who at least raised the possibility of multiple authorship. Conservatives, of course, stick to the traditional *Books of Moses* even to this day. In some circles, the very mention of multiple authorship of the *Pentateuch*, the book of *Isaiah*, and the book of *Daniel*, for instance, are enough to get one kicked out of some Protestant churches.

The Tanach

The complete Hebrew Scriptures, called *Tanach* by Jews and the *Old Testament* by Christians, were written in Hebrew and Aramaic. But the final book, attributed to Malachi, ushered in a period of time lasting 500 years in which no other books were added to the canon. The word "canon" indicates a set of texts, usually called books, that a particular religious community regards as authoritative scripture. It comes from the Greek word κανών, meaning either "ruler" or "measuring stick." During this time Alexander the Great conquered much of his known world and superimposed the Greek language everywhere he went, a political/social technique called Hellenism. Greek became the language of the realm. The Scriptures were translated into Greek in a version called the *Septuagint*, or *Work of the Seventy Scholars*.

Once again, a committee enters the picture. What many Christians often overlook is the fact that the *Old Testament*, said to be the *Bible of Jesus of Nazareth*, did not exist as such in his day. The texts were compiled and collected, of course, but their inclusion and arrangement were not finalized until, the traditional story goes, the Council of Jamnia, which was held near the end of the first century, more than 60 years after Jesus died. The Jamnia theory has been disputed ever since the late 1960s, but for much of the 20th century it was believed that the Hebrew Bible wasn't fully formed until the Jewish authorities became alarmed at the number of Jews who were leaving their heritage behind to join the new Jesus cult that is now called Christianity.



Jesus and the doctors of the Faith by Circle of Jusepe de Ribera (1630) Kunsthistorisches Museum (Public Domain)

If this was the case, however, there is at least a possibility that Jesus himself may have never read from the Hebrew Scriptures as they are known today. Instead, he and his contemporaries would have had access only to whatever scrolls their local religious authorities were able to compile. One assembly might have had access to a particular limited boxed set, their neighbors another. Perhaps they even exchanged collections from time to time.

The Dubious Westminster Confession

All this raises serious questions. If we don't know for sure who wrote the Bible, and can't even be sure when, where, and by whom it was compiled and codified, can we say with any authority, as many do, that it is the "*only infallible rule of faith and practice*," as the famous Westminster Confession proposes? Or was it instead assembled by various and forgotten committees, each of whom had their own agenda, sometimes political, sometimes religious, sometimes personal?

The only way to claim with any kind of historical certainty that the Bible as it is read today came only from God is to hold firmly to a faith statement. We must choose to believe God directed and safeguarded the whole redaction process. If you are a believer, maybe that is enough. If not, no doubt you will have questions. It does not help that in many religious communities those questions are deliberately covered over and never brought up, lest the faith of the congregation were to falter. One of the most frightening questions a religious leader faces is, "Who wrote the Bible?" It can open a Pandora's box of problems.

Jim Willis is author of several books on religion and spirituality, he has been an ordained minister for over forty years while working part-time as a carpenter, the host of his own drive-time radio show, an arts council director and adjunct college professor in the fields of World Religions and Instrumental Music. He is the author of Faith, Trust, & Belief: A Trilogy of the Spirit,

Top Image: Still life with Bible by Vincent van Gogh (1885) Van Gogh Museum (Public Domain)

References

Harper, T. 2004. *The Pagan Christ*. Toronto, Canada: Thomas Allen Publishers.

Hick, J. 1964. *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*. Edgewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentiss Hall, Inc.

The Lost Books of the Bible and The Forgotten Books of Eden. New York, NY: The World Syndicate Publishing Co., 1926.

Willis, J. 2004. *The Religion Book: Places, Prophets, Saints and Seers*. Detroit, MI: Visible Ink Press.