

HOW WE GOT THE HEBREW BIBLE

2 Chronicles 34:14-30

By Raymond White

All Christians and Jews know of course that the Bible got its beginnings when God revealed the Torah to Moses. What's not so well known is that there was a time when the Torah's survival was at stake because there was only one copy of it, and no one knew it existed until someone found it by accident — so it was, for a time, lost. Here's the story.

[1] JOSIAH

Josiah, one of the good kings of Judah, commissioned a rehab project on the temple — it was time (and past time) to get it back in good shape. As the work was getting underway, the high priest, Hilkiah, found in the temple the book of the law, the only existing copy.

2 Kings 22:8 And Hilkiah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD. And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it.

That it was found means that it was lost, or at least misplaced. That it was *the* book means there was only one.

This is scary to think that all the history of God's dealing with the human race up to that point was one single copy and it was, for all they knew, nonexistent. No wonder they had so many bad kings. They had no revealed truth to turn to so they had to make up religion as best they could as they went along. When God instructed Israel to keep his law, that certainly implied having a copy *to* keep.

So it got found. Then it was brought to the king and the king took it seriously.

2 Kings 23:2 And [Josiah] read in their ears all the words of the book of the covenant which was found in the house of the LORD.

That's a proper response. They read it — all of it.

2 Chronicles 34:14 ... Hilkiah the priest found a book of the law of the LORD given by Moses. :19 And it came to pass, when the king [Josiah] had heard the words of the law, that he rent his clothes. :20 And the king commanded...:21 Go enquire of the LORD for me, for them that are left in Israel and in Judah, concerning the words of the book that is found: for great is the wrath of the LORD that is poured out upon us, because our fathers have not kept the word of the LORD, to do after all that is written in this book.

This book was vital and they knew it. Good kings and bad kings come and go, but the codified law was paramount.

2 Chronicles 34:30 And the king [Josiah] ...read in their ears all the words of the book of the covenant that was found in the house of the LORD.

They really took this to heart. We can scarcely imagine the exhilaration that Josiah and the rest must have felt upon recovering what they thought had been irretrievably lost.

What happened then? Unfortunately, Josiah died in battle. After Josiah was a string of bad kings that led the Jews off a moral cliff which finally caused God to bring the Babylonians down on them. Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, and the Jews were taken from their homeland into captivity thus beginning their 70 years of exile, of Diaspora.

[2] PERSIA

But the Torah survived all that, the destruction and the captivity, and we know it survived because when the Jews returned 70 years later, Ezra was an already able scribe of the law. Therefore there had to have been copies (a copy anyway) of the Torah in Persia. And there is biblical evidence of that.

Just prior to the Jews' return, there has to have been a copy of the Hebrew Bible (Torah plus prophets plus historic books) in the Persian archives. Why? Because those documents were found by enemies of the Jews who used those documents to try to persuade the Persian king that the Jews were not to be trusted and therefore should not be allowed to reestablish their nation. Those enemies failed of course, but the point is that such documents existed.

***Ezra 4:15** That search may be made in the book of the records of thy fathers [the Persian kings] so shalt thou find in the book of the records, and know that this city is a rebellious city [Jerusalem] and hurtful unto kings and provinces, and that they have moved sedition within the same of old time: for which cause was this city destroyed.*

Those historic documents found in the Persian archives have to have included the Bible because the story these enemies are telling is historically accurate — the Jews were indeed conquered by the Babylonians because of sedition. It is clear that Jewish history was common knowledge and books documenting their history were available even in Persia.

[3] EZRA

The exiled Jews had their Bible throughout their exile, and when the Jews did return, it was their God and their Torah that gave them their national identity. And their principle priest/scribe was Ezra.

***Ezra 7:6** This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses.:11 Now this is a copy of the letter that the king Artaxerxes gave unto Ezra the priest, the scribe, even a scribe of the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of his statutes to Israel.*

Obviously, Ezra could not be a scribe of the law if he did not have a copy of the law to be a scribe of. Therefore we must conclude that the law survived the Diaspora, and when Ezra and the rest returned to their homeland, they brought with them the Torah.

***Nehemiah 8:8** So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.*

A principle duty (perhaps *the* principle duty) of the scribes was to determine exactly what the Torah was. And so Ezra and his team of priestly scribes, the Sopherim (from saphar, to count or number) set the text in order; that is, they revised and corrected the sacred text. Basically, they canonized it. Their work took 110 years, from Nehemiah to Simon the first, 410-300 B.C.

[4] MASORITES

Once the work of the Sopherim had been completed and the text was fixed, the work then fell to the Masorites, the authorized custodians, to preserve it. Their name Masorites derives from the Hebrew word “macoreth” (maw-so’-reth) which means “to fetter” (*Ezekiel 20:37 ...into the bond...*), then later to “hand down,” and finally to “tradition.”

The Masorites did their work from the 7th to the 10th centuries (Ben Asher and Ben Naphtali), and corrections were made even to the 14th century (later Masorites).

What the Masorites did was to precisely document numerical information about the text, such as the number of words, the middle words, the middle verse, combinations of words, and other such things for the single purpose of preserving the exact integrity of the Bible text.

This was not at all frivolous but was necessary to preserve the accuracy of the transmitted text — difficult work without computers.

Speaking of computers, today in the age of computers we do the very same sorts of things to ensure the integrity of transmitted data. Someone sends you data and you receive it. How do you know that you received exactly what was sent?

The schemes that computer people have devised to insure data integrity are elaborate and many, and are disciplines all of their own. For instance, hash totals is just one such scheme. If you transmit a stream of checks, for example, you can separate the stream into batches, each batch followed by a batch trailer which has a total, the hash total, of all the dollar amounts. The receiving system receives the stream and verifies its correctness by recalculating all the hash totals, and they had better agree with the incoming hash totals or something when wrong in transmission. If the hash totals don’t match, the stream, or at least that batch, must be resent and re-verified.

That’s exactly the work that the Masorites did. They used statistical means to guarantee the transmission of God’s word from ancient times down to us. In retrospect, they were the forerunners of modern data security. Pretty good, I’d say, for people that didn’t have calculators.

The result of their work is the Masorah (their statistical data about the Bible) and the Masoretic text; or more specifically, Ben Asher’s codex which is the Hebrew Bible today which Christians call the Old Testament.

There were other competing authorities and versions, but the Masorites built their reputations and in the end, it was their version that won out and was generally accepted as the authoritative version of the Bible.

That the Masorites did their work well is evidenced by the Dead Sea Scrolls which are in agreement much more with the Masoretic manuscript (and therefore our Bible) than with any competing version. And that gives us confidence that what’s in our Bibles really is God’s word and not a hodge-podge of transmission errors.

Thank God for the Masorites, and Gutenberg, and computers. Now the Bible will never be lost, as once upon a time it almost was — (unless courts order every copy burned because of the Bible’s “intolerant” views on sin. Don’t laugh. It’s been done.)

[5] THE PROPHETS

How did the prophets get into this? Afterall, the Torah was intended to be final —

Deuteronomy 4:2 *Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.*

God was demanding that there must be no amendments, no modifications, and no legislating from the bench.

So, how did the prophets get to be part of the Bible? How did they achieve a status on a par with the law? Apparently what God seems to be saying is: *you* can't change it but *I can!*

That the prophets had equal status with the law is evident from Jesus.

Matthew 7:12 *... for this is the law and the prophets.*

So, the prophets did have a privileged position in the Bible equal to the Torah. But how did it happen? When did the prophets receive that similar high status? Isaiah gives us the answer.

Isaiah 59:21 *As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the LORD; My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the LORD, from henceforth and for ever.*

This really puts Isaiah up there. It not only gives Isaiah absolute authority but requires that his words be remembered from generation to generation. That puts Isaiah's words on a par with the Mosaic Law. It also creates a similar status for any prophet who truly speaks for God, and they, all of them, deserve to be in the Bible.