

Who wrote the Old Testament?

While the New Testament covers about 50 years, the Old Testament covers over 1500 years. But can we have any confidence that what we read about in the Old Testament actually happened? Surely over so many hundreds of years, so many different authors, copied and re-copied countless times ... surely any actual history has been well worn away by time?

Let's answer this by going back a year or 2. How long have people been writing history down? The ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia (Iran & Iraq), Canaan (Israel) and Egypt have had written text for over 4,000 years, developing writing materials and forms of text. The early Israelites learned to read and write in Egypt 3 ½ millenia ago, and then went on to develop their own written language based on the Phoenician alphabet which was commonly used in the ancient world.

By the time we get to 1 Samuel (about 1,000 BC) the Hebrew language was being written on scrolls, and history was being recorded. Priests and scribes were trained in text, and it was a top priority for them to copy accurately.

Sure, some errors crept in over the centuries; there are minor variations between the ancient manuscripts, but the most astonishing thing is how similar they are, over centuries and even between translations (e.g. into Greek).

The first 8 books in the Bible cover about a thousand years, and for most of that time these were oral history, passed down and memorised, with bits and pieces written down as writing developed. Samuel comes when Israel's written language was established, and with the greater stability and prosperity gained by King David the stories and liturgies of their people were carefully written down. Samuel himself was a competent writer (1 Sam. 10:25), and may have himself begun this process of recording history, including the events he personally witnessed. Others wrote down what happened during David's kingship, and afterwards.

A collection of manuscripts grew over the years, but someone had to pull them together into a logical order. Who wrote the Old Testament as we have it now? Biblical scholars agree that this was done by a team of editors, and that some of this work was done during the exile in Babylon (roughly 600-540BC).

The Babylonians were the magpies of the ancient world; their library was the greatest collection of writings from everywhere. Some of the Jewish captives were employed by the Babylonians to write copies of Jewish history and poetry. So it is likely that 1 and 2 Samuel was finished off in its (more or less) current form then; an editing together of earlier manuscripts and remembered histories.

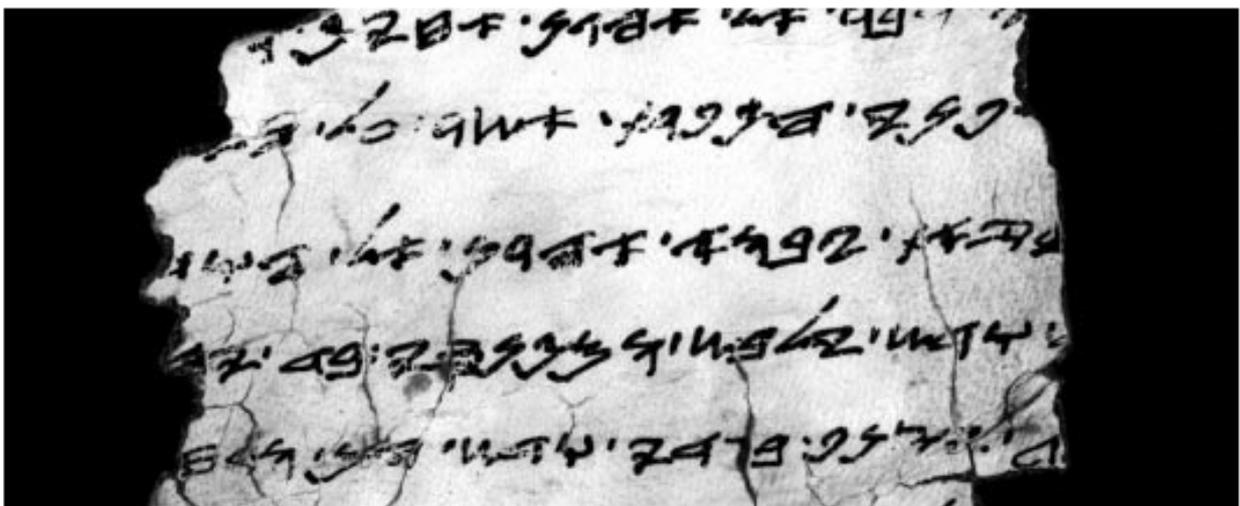
These editors often commented on the history as they worked, but with Samuel there is “a maximum of straight-forward narration and a minimum of interpreting or exhorting. Because the final author rarely intruded his own observations, the stories frequently have a remarkable firsthand freshness and often the unblurred perspective of an eyewitness.” (*Old Testament Survey*, by Lasor et.al.).

Through June and July we will be exploring 1 and 2 Samuel. I invite you to read these books like you would a novel. Refresh your memory of the great stories, the 3-dimensional people we meet, the dramatic events, personal heart-ache, victories and defeats.

If you are interested in ancient languages or Biblical authorship, find out more, read up on it.

I look forward to our 3,000-year-old journey together.

Silvia Purdie



A verse from Leviticus, written in ‘Paleo-Hebrew’ script which dates from the time of King David, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

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