

Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Insert

Scripture: 1 hour



Completion of this study entitles the catechist to one hour of credit toward certification.

written form.

SCRIPTURE: Formation of the Oral Tradition in the Old Testament

THEME

Historical development of the oral and written traditions of the people of Israel

CATECHIST COMPETENCIES

As a result of this study, the catechist will be able to

1. articulate an understanding of the Bible's oral tradition
2. demonstrate how the Hebrew and Jewish people expressed the presence of God in their lives

CATECHISM REFERENCES: # 101-141

FOCUSING THE STUDY

In order to understand Scripture, it is crucial for the catechist to be aware of the manner through which Scripture took form beginning with an oral tradition that eventually led to a

INTRODUCTION

How do you read the Bible? Do you read it like you would a daily newspaper, a letter from a friend, a textbook, or an encyclopedia? The fact is, we approach different forms of literature in different ways. The same is true of the Bible which contains a variety of literary styles (poetry, narrative, correspondence, etc.), each requiring the reader to pause and ask, "What type of literature is this and how is this text best understood?" Today, we live in a culture formed and dependent upon written material. This has grown in importance from handwritten texts and legal documents through printed books to the information age. The people of Old Testament Israel, on the other hand, were an ancient nomadic people who depended upon a very different form of communication, namely oral tradition.

The purpose of the shared story in a nomadic community was less to give a chronological account (what and when) than to give a reason for the existence of the group (why). Memorization was the key to this oral process, but it was not rote memorization. The oral tradition relied upon a basic outline that was always the same and was usually related in a communal setting (such as the celebration of an important feast). As a result, ancient storytellers would stick to the familiar plot or the basic outline of the facts but would often re-arrange the details as well as the order of minor incidents. At times, they would even add extra episodes if the celebration were major enough to warrant it. The bottom line for the storyteller was to create the most pleasing effect for the audience and the best presentation for the occasion.

COMPARING ANCIENT AND MODERN TECHNIQUES FOR RECORDING EVENTS

The techniques of the ancient storyteller are a far cry from the techniques we use today to record events. Here is a comparison:

The Ancient technique...

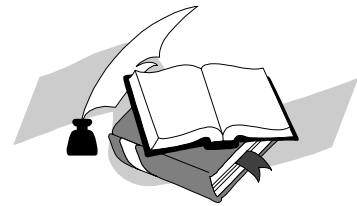
- while recording the tradition, interprets its meaning for the tribe.
- relies upon oral sources with few written documents or lists.
- can include several parallel versions of the same story.
- gives rough approximations of dates and places.
- relies on fixed types of literary descriptions or motifs.
- uses a "common-sense" approach that is not dependent on every fact.

The Modern technique...

- attempts to reconstruct past events objectively and accurately.
- relies on documents and written records.
- sorts out the conflicting accounts in order to find the single "right" one.
- carefully searches out the chronology and locations.
- tries to get "behind" the literary genres and narrative modes to find out what really happened.
- uses all the critical tools and means of information to check sources and their claims.

ORAL TRADITION AS AN OUTGROWTH OF EXPERIENCE

The beginnings of Israel's oral tradition described some amazing events: the formation of a people and the discovery of their relationship to YHWH (from the Hebrew, representing God's name, "I Am Who Am," never to be spoken aloud). The oral tradition was a reflection, in faith, of these formative experiences, not primarily a historical recording of events as we record events today.

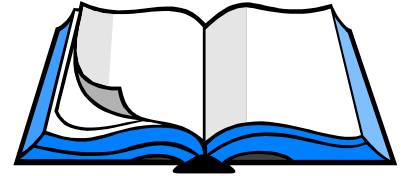


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The people of Israel reflected on the experience, saw the action of God in their experience, and told the story. The story was not as concerned with the factual *who* and *what*, but the all-important *why* and *how*. How did they become a people? How did they get saved from Egypt? How did they conquer Canaan? The answer in the Hebrew tradition was *through the action of YHWH in human history*.

In short, for Hebrew Scriptures (and Christian Scriptures as well), the process which led up to the written form looks like this:

1. the people **experience** the event;
2. the event **forms** a community;
3. the community **reflects** on the event;
4. the oral tradition **transmits** the reflection by telling the story



For the Hebrew people, this experience was highlighted by the following realities:

- The primary social structure in the nomadic ancient Near East was first and foremost tribal. Abraham was the leader of a tribe. This became more explicit in the story of Jacob (Israel), who became the father of twelve sons, each the leader of a tribe. It is important to remember that although blood relationship was somewhat significant, it was not essential for membership in the tribe. Others could be adopted / incorporated into the tribe. Sometimes this happened when captives were taken, became slaves, and over a generation or two, full members of the tribe. (Slavery was not the permanent, inherited condition that we associate with the American ante-bellum South.)
- Each tribe had a god or gods. The descendants of Abraham knew that YHWH (from the Hebrew, representing God's name, "I Am Who Am," never to be spoken aloud) had chosen them. *I will be your God and you will be my people*.
- Israel's original idea of God was not that there were no other gods. They believed that each people/tribe/nation had their own "god." For Israel, however, YHWH was *their* god, and more powerful than all of the others. Over a long period of time, this evolved into our idea of monotheism or the belief that there is only one God.
- For the people of Israel, YHWH's power was manifested definitively in the Exodus experience. The events of the Exodus did two things:
 1. The experience of being led from slavery to freedom solidified Israel's notion that they were indeed a people. Historical evidence indicates that as a result of the Exodus event, miscellaneous nomadic groups joined together to form the Hebrew people. The Hebrew tradition grew out of this experience of a people, not of individual persons.
 2. The experience of being saved from the bonds of slavery solidified Israel's belief that YHWH was a powerful, saving God. The escape from Egypt is the formative experience of the Hebrew people. They were a people because they had a god who had made good on the promises of salvation. The formation of the Mosaic covenant in the desert was a natural response to the experience of this event.

THE ORAL TRADITION'S TRANSITION INTO SCRIPTURE (WRITTEN FORM)

Oral Tradition: In an oral tradition, the easiest things to remember are songs. Considered among the oldest examples in Scripture are the *Song of Miriam* in Exodus 15 and the *Song of Deborah* in Judges 5 (commemorating an event of about 1125 BCE). Interestingly, in a highly patriarchal tradition, these earliest pieces are both in the voices of women, one a prophet and the other a judge.

Early Writing: Some early writing of the Law may have happened during the period before the people of Israel entered Canaan. Recall that they were coming from an experience of slavery in a literate culture in Egypt. Likewise, they also had contact with the Canaanites, otherwise known to us as the Phoenicians, who developed the first alphabet.

Writing During the Monarchy: In the period of the monarchy (1000 to 587 BCE), when a previously nomadic people built a temple and a city around it, some "official documents", e.g. historical writings, began to be collected. Also, the Yahwist account of the foundation of the people began to be written. Pieces of the temple liturgy began to be collected, which eventually became the foundation for the Psalms.

Writings After the Division of the Kingdom: After the division into the northern and southern kingdoms, about the 9th century BCE, the *Elohistic* writer also told the foundational story, concentrating on the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. Prior to the Exile (587 BCE), the *Priestly* and *Deuteronomic* traditions were written down. Prophetic preaching was transcribed and collected by disciples of the prophets.

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CHRONOLOGY OF HOW THE PENTATEUCH MOVED FROM AN ORAL TRADITION TO A WRITTEN TEXT

BCE (most appropriately “Before the Common Era” also referred to as BC “Before Christ”)

- 1800 to 1300 - *Patriarchal period (Abraham and after)* - Beginning of the oral tradition
- 1300 to 1250 - *Mosaic Period*
- 1250 to 1000 - *Israelite Confederacy (Joshua & Judges)* - Israelite story shaped orally
- 1000 to 587 - *Period of the Monarchy (David to the Exile)* - Beginning of written Pentateuchal tradition
- 587 to 400 - *Period of Exile and restoration (to Ezra)* - Completion of the Pentateuchal canon

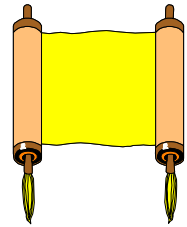
THE FOUR SOURCES OF THE TORAH

As the Tradition of Israel came to be recorded in written form over many centuries, many styles and authors influenced the final written outcome that we have today. Scholars have come to describe these influences as attributed to four sources:

J or Yawhist

This is the oldest material in the Torah dating to the ninth or tenth century BCE. It originated in Jerusalem and frequently depicts God in anthropomorphic terms while always referring to God as “YHWH.” Its main themes are

- the divine promise of the land including the area west of the Jordan
- descendants unified in the twelve-tribe nation of greater Israel
- blessing and fulfillment
- focus on land later controlled by Judah
- only the grace of God secures humanity’s future continued existence.



E or Elohist

This source originated in the northern Kingdom in the ninth or eighth century BCE before D (Deuteronomistic source) insisted on only one sanctuary. The term is derived from *elohim*, a Hebrew word for God which is the most common name for God in this source. Some characteristics of E are

- use of the same material in different versions called doublets
- giving the same material that appears in J a stronger theological and ethical meaning
- a northern setting for most of its narratives in Genesis (e.g. linking all the patriarchs with Beersheba) and stress on northern people and shrines
- God keeping his divine distance, communicating through dreams, visions, and angels.
- tending to be suspicious of authorities who claim too much power and is instead more respectful of the people’s authority as well as that of the prophets.

P or Priestly

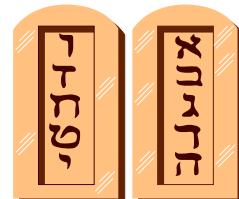
This source was created during the exile or shortly after (sixth or fifth century BCE). It’s characteristics:

- It stresses Israelite ritual and religious observance, offering examples for such observances as the Sabbath (Gen 2:2-3), circumcision (Gen. 17:9-14) and dietary laws (Gen. 9:4).
- As a priestly tradition, it describes in detail the passover ritual, the ordination ceremonies, vestments of the high priest, the tabernacle and its furnishings.
- It never mentions the revelation of the law on Sinai. Prominence is given to Aaron over Moses.
- It unites the older material (J and E) through genealogies and a series of covenants with Noah, Abraham, and all of Israel at Sinai.
- P’s god is more transcendent and less anthropomorphic than J’s.
- It is P that has given the Torah its present shape, beginning with creation and ending with the death of Moses.

D or Deuteronomic

This stands for the author of the book of Deuteronomy and means “second law” in Greek, a mistranslation of the Hebrew words that mean “copy of the Law.” D’s characteristics include

- a mandate to centralize the cult of YHWH and the suppression of all Cananite cults which other sources are more accepting of
- obedience to the Law which brings reward, while disobedience results in adversity.
- worship of God in one shrine (which eventually becomes Jerusalem).
- sermons and hortatory (exhorting) phrases as its literary style.
- a strong moral tone.
- Israel’s election because of God’s overwhelming love.
- identification with the book of the Law discovered in 2Kings 22:8 in 621 BCE.



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CONCLUSION

Understanding this process of how Scripture evolved from an oral tradition to its written form brings us to a new understanding of what we mean when we say that Scripture is the **inspired** Word of God. Today, we understand that the entire process (the experience, the formation of community, reflection on the experience, transmission of the story orally and then written/edited) is inspired by God, not just the moment of putting pen to paper. Through this understanding, we come to recognize that God is intimately involved in the shaping of human events as they unfold and are proclaimed.

REVIEW/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In order to complete this study and earn one hour of credit toward catechist certification, you must respond to the reflection/discussion questions in either of the following ways:

1. Write/type your responses (20-40 words each) and submit them to your catechetical leader;
2. Engage in a formal discussion of the questions (at least 30 minutes) in some forum approved by your catechetical leader; e.g. a catechist meeting, level meetings, team meetings, catechist pairings, etc.

Review Questions

1. How was communication different for the people of the Old Testament than it is for us today? Describe.
2. What was the purpose of the shared story in a nomadic community? What role did memorization play?
3. What freedom did oral storytellers have that modern communication lacks? Compare and contrast ancient and modern techniques of recording events. What are at least 3 major contrasts?
4. How long did it take for the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible) to move from an oral to a written form? When and how did the written tradition begin to take hold for the people of Israel?
5. How did the Exodus event shape the various tribes into “a people?” What role did the oral tradition play in the Exodus experience?
6. What does it mean that “the story was not as concerned with the factual who and what but the all-important *why* and *how*?”
7. How is this oral tradition also found in the formation of the Gospels?
8. Read Gen 15:20-21 (The Song of Miriam) and Judges 5:1-31 (The Song of Deborah). Why would *songs* play a crucial role in an oral tradition?
9. What do we mean by “the 4 sources of the Torah” (i.e. Yawhist, Elohist, Priestly, and Deuteronomic)? What are some characteristics of each?

Practical Applications/Critical Thinking

1. Discuss the following quote from the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*:
2. “It is not sufficient to translate a text word for word in order to obtain its literal sense. One must understand the text according to the literary conventions of the time.”
3. How would you respond to someone who erroneously concludes: “That means that some parts of the Bible aren’t true then, right?” or “Then I guess I can interpret the Bible any way I want since we’re not supposed to take it literally.”
4. How can you incorporate Biblical storytelling into your teaching? Which stories of the Old Testament would you consider “required reading” for Christians?

About the authors...

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