

How the Bible Came About: Old and New Testaments

*Address by Fr Jerome Crowe CP
at the University of Papua New Guinea, October 3, 1989.*

Old Testament

I am honoured by the request to speak to you in the celebrations that mark the appearance of the Tok Pisin Bible. A little overwhelmed by the dimensions of the proposed topic – “How the Bible Came About: Old and New Testament” – no less!, but a little reassured by the organiser’s request (in a footnote, so to speak) “to give particular attention to the stage of oral history, and oral transmission”. So, I shall talk about oral tradition and the written scriptures, and try to say something about both Testaments.

It is very appropriate to approach the topic in that way, here in Papua New Guinea, where oral tradition has reigned, not for centuries, but for millennia, and where that oral culture is only now being gradually replaced by a culture of the written word and the visual image. The processes of oral tradition, with which this talk is concerned, are as close to you as your local oral history, tribal epics, and traditional customs and songs.

To me, the “resident alien” in your land, the publication of the Tok Pisin Bible is, first of all, a monument to the remarkable service of the written Word of God, that has produced so many translations in so many of your 800 languages. Few countries can boast such a devoted study of the Bible. But the Tok Pisin Bible is also a wonderful symbol of this moment in your national history. That book symbolises the remarkable effort of your young nation to achieve widespread literacy. It speaks of the unifying power of our shared faith in the life of the nation. Tok Pisin has become a sort of Pentecost language, a gift of the Spirit, permitting men and women of so many tribes, and clans, and *lains*, and *tok ples*, to hear the word of God in a common tongue.

I suppose there are elements in the youth of every nation that are similar to the situation of Israel in the era of new nationhood under David and Solomon. I am sure there are, in the life of Papua New Guinea. In any event, the time of David and Solomon is a good place to start thinking about

oral tradition and written culture. It was not until the time of David, and, more particularly, of Solomon, that there was a writing class in Israel. Everybody knew that the forefathers of the nation, the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, were leaders of nomadic, or semi-nomadic, groups, who belonged to a distinctly oral culture. Moses, of course, was reputed to be skilled in the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was even instructed by God to write (Ex 17:14; 34:28). People told a story about a lad, in the time of the Judges, who obligingly wrote down the names of the 77 officials and elders of Succoth for Gideon (Judges 8:14), but it was only with the Davidic monarchy, that Israel really moved into a writing culture.

Only under David had Israel become a nation. Prior to David, there were scattered tribes, each jealously preserving its tribal independence. David had succeeded in imposing a centralised, urban monarchy on that loose confederation of independent tribes. Then came the necessary bureaucrats: the scribes, to write the letters and keep the archives, and the administrations, to look after domestic and foreign affairs – not to mention taxation. Next came the schools, to train the officials and their children. Eventually, there were writers, who were able to tap the oral history of the tribes, and who were interested, at the same time, in discovering their roots, and the stages, by which God had led such a group of late starters to the wonderful position they had come to occupy on the international scene.

We are talking about the late-tenth century. So, anybody, who set out to write down, for the first time, the stories in oral circulation about the patriarchs, was writing about an era at least 700 years before, and to which, he had access only by way of oral tradition. If he wrote about the Exodus, and journey through the desert, he was writing about a time at least 300 years before. The events narrated in the stories of the conquest of the land by Joshua, and the heroic figures of the age of the judges, lay a similar distance in the past. For the story of Saul, the gap was only three or four generations, and David lay within range of living memory, but, only when we get to the story of the succession of Solomon to the throne, did the writer personally stand at all close to the events he writes of, or in contact with eye-witnesses of the events.

Not that the process of oral tradition stopped when there were enough people able to write, to put the items of oral tradition on paper, and shape them into something like a consecutive account. We know of collections of

oral traditions, made in the south in the 9th century, in the north a century later, and of another collection made as late as the 5th century, when a group of writers were still able to retrieve quite ancient elements from the continuing oral traditions of their people. Those 5th-century writers had simply tapped the tradition much further downstream.

What kinds of materials were there in these oral traditions, and where did they come from?

As we might expect they originated in many different places and groups, and they served a range of diverse needs. However proud they were of their newfound national unity, the different tribes, united under David, remained very conscious of their distinctive historical, geographical, and ethnic origins. Gen 38, for example, tells a story of the eponymous ancestor of the tribe of Judah. The stories of the battles in the book of Josh 2-9 are part of the heritage of the tribe of Benjamin. There were stories about famous places, like the burial ground of Sarah and Abraham (Gen 23), or stories connected with places, where one or other tribe had stayed. The great national shrines of old, like Bethel, had their traditions, stories about the way God had touched the lives of the patriarchs at those places. Shechem had been a rallying place of the tribes, and held memories of ceremonies of renewal of the covenant. The most recent shrine, Jerusalem, which came to house the Ark of the Covenant, had developed its traditions as well.

There were significant groups, who conserved important traditions. One of the most important of these groups was the priestly circle. The priests had been associated, for a long time, with the various sanctuaries, and naturally assumed the role of custodians of old and sacred traditions about sacrifices and offerings, rubrics for cultic practices, details of priestly equipment and activity (Ex 35-40; Num 1:1-10:10).

Other traditions explained the how and why of different customs, such as the rite of the Paschal lamb (Ex 12:26f), or why a place got its name (e.g., Judges 2:1-5), or the current state of various tribes (e.g., the blessing of Jacob, Gen 49). Some traditions explain the origin of groups, institutions, trades (Gen 4:20). Sometimes they provide rules of conduct, by justifying a ritual prescription (Gen 32:32), or spell out a clear moral lesson, as in the story of Joseph.

We should beware of simply attaching our label “history” to these traditions. Often, it is true, they originate in the great deeds of the heroes of those times – warrior heroes, like the Judges, religious heroes, like Samuel, or Moses, founder and legislator of the nation, even of the forefathers of the race, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, remembered especially in the places where they lived.

At other times, however, the story of the ancestor is really the story of the groups sprung from him, as in the story of the two brothers Jacob and Esau, or the revenge of Jacob on the men of Shechem (Gen 34). Oral tradition was always more interested in the religious significance of the remembered past, what it shows of God’s providential guidance of His people, than in exactness of circumstantial detail. The stories of the plagues of Egypt are a good example.

Group memory is selective. It sorts out the important events and highlights them. Persons and events of importance to the tribe come up in sharpest focus, the background is usually hazy. When the group recalls its past, it both seeks the reason for the present, and tends to project its present back onto the past.

These oral traditions (and, in due course, the written texts, too) underwent development over the centuries. They were taken up and transposed into fresh settings, with changing social, religious, and tribal circumstances. And, in time, similar traditions were brought together, and organised into groups or cycles. So, there came into being, collections, or cycles, of traditions about the patriarchs, the Exodus, the desert journey, the conquest, Judges, and Saul. Others were clustered around place (Beersheba, Shechem, Kadesh, Bethel), which were usually famous sites or sanctuaries.

Most of us are familiar with the story of the patriarch Jacob. We remember the stories of the birth of the twin sons to Isaac and Rebecca, the trickery of Jacob, the younger, who extorts his older brother’s birth right, and his father’s blessing, how he flees to Mesopotamia to Laban, and is tricked in his turn, marries Laban’s two daughters, suffers greatly, and prospers, has his 12 sons, and then returns to a final, peaceful meeting with his brother Esau.

Scholars show that what looks like a continuous story is really woven of three strands, or cycles, of stories or traditions. There are stories

concerned with the rivalry of Esau and Jacob, a cycle of stories concerning Jacob in Mesopotamia, and a third group of divine appearances at Bethel, Penuel, and Mahanaim. Each of these cycles is made up of units that were originally independent of one another. Over the centuries, then, individual traditions, preserved by this or that group, or, in particular places, were brought together into a cycle, and, in due course, those cycles were welded together to form a continuous story. They give a picture of a process, guided by the God of Israel, through which the father of the 12 tribes was saved from harm, to struggle with God to gain his blessing, and found the tribes that become the nation.

Scholars attempt to re-establish the way the units grew into cycles, and the process of the fusion of the cycles into the continuous story we now have. This kind of work is detailed and painstaking, and I cannot hope to rehearse it now. I hope I have suggested something of the way that the Bible, we have and hold, as inspired by God, originated in the life of our forebears, and how the same processes, as are in action in oral tradition in Papua New Guinea to this day played their part in the origins of the Bible. It becomes clear, though, that when we talk of God's inspiration, we cannot confine it to one writer, as if one writer sat down and wrote those books. We will have to think, first of all, about the way the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, guided the history of His people, how He helped them to give utterance to their faith, in many ways, and how He directed story tellers, collectors, and all who had a part in the collective production.

New Testament

So far, we have been talking, with desperate brevity, about the oral processes that lie behind the books of the Old Testament. What was happening in the study of the New Testament, while all these advances were being made in penetrating into the lives, situations, and worlds that gave birth to the oral traditions, of which those books were composed?

It is obvious, when we read the earliest written books of the New Testament, that they, too, emerge out of a line of oral tradition, by which the gospel was communicated to its first adherents. Paul's epistles make this very clear. They were all written in the decade from 50-60 CE, hence, less than 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Though he is a great pains to claim the authenticity and divine origin of what he calls "my

gospel”, Paul, himself, makes it clear that he is using oral traditions he has learnt from others. Think, for example, of 1 Cor 7, where he distinguishes very carefully his own personal advice from the “words of the Lord”, or of the passages, where he invokes the very language of tradition in the phrase “I handed on to you what was also handed on to me”.

But Paul also offers us samples of the prayers, the hymns, the confessions of faith of Christians before him, and there is immense profit in studying these relics of Christians before Paul. We can admire their struggle to express, in teaching and prophecy, in prayer and song, the mystery of God’s action in the life, death, resurrection, and continuing presence of Jesus. The letters themselves are one written form of communication of the gospel, but they also show how the early Christians communicated the gospel in other oral ways: professions of faith, hymns, moral exhortation, and their way of life (1Thess 1:8). Paul’s letters are a window onto the oral world of the first two Christian decades.

In the 19th century, scholars had devoted their energies to applying the newly-developed methods of critical history to the life of Jesus. In this “quest for the historical Jesus”, the four gospels were subjected to the same sort of critical scrutiny as other written witnesses of the past. Mark was recognised as the first gospel to be written. By comparison, Matthew and Luke were secondary compositions. They were judged to have derived their information from Mark, and from a collection of saying of Jesus labelled Q (probably from the German word for “source”). It was recognised that Matthew and Luke also drew materials from sources available only to the individual evangelists. As far as history was concerned – the record of “what actually happened” – the fourth gospel was regarded as too manifestly a vehicle of its author’s conception of Jesus – the theology of a late age of the church, to be a reliable source for a knowledge of events that happened, perhaps as much as a century before it was written.

Then, in 1903, the German scholar, Wilhelm Wrede, showed that the earliest of the gospels, Mark, which had been regarded as the surest historical source, and the one that stands closest to eye-witness testimony, was itself directed, not by the historical concerns of the scholars, but by the theological concerns of its author. In its own way, the gospel of Mark was as much a vehicle of its author’s conception of Jesus as John, even though those conceptions differed. There was not a single gospel that was not a

faith document, written to communicate the belief of the writer and his community.

If the quest for the historical Jesus was to continue, then a way had to be found to get behind the gospel of Mark. In 1920, Karl Ludwig Schmidt showed that gospel was compiled by gathering together a lot of small units, which were strung together, like beads in necklace. Take away the connecting pieces, and all that is left is a jumble of individual beads. The beads were connected by passages that were the work of Mark himself. Now, it is precisely in these connecting passages, that we get anything like a geography, or chronology, of Jesus. So, it is to Mark that we owe the movement of the story from the baptism to the arrest of Jesus.

This set the scene for the rise of what came to be called form criticism. By this, was meant the study of the separate units of the oral tradition. That study was associated, principally, with the names of Martin Dibelius and Rudolph Bultmann. In effect, they dismantled the necklace, to study the individual beads. They compared them with one another, and sorted them by literary shape and colour into so many categories, or “forms” – basically, deeds or sayings, which were subdivided into a number of characteristic “forms”. Every one of them, they claimed, had served a particular purpose in the communication of the gospel, and each was born to serve a particular need, or answer a particular question, important to those early Christians. They tried established where each of those beads had come from, and what it was used for. What interested them most, was what had happened to the bead, as it moved from one place to another, before being incorporated in a written gospel.

When stories about the life of Jesus were first told, they were shaped to meet the purpose they were to serve, to show, for example, that the long-expected salvation had come to pass in the events of the life of Jesus amongst the Jewish people. The scholars were convinced that careful study would show what function a given form served in the communication of the gospel. Dibelius claimed that the kind of brief, simple story, such as the story of the tribute money (Mark 12:13-17), was used as an example, by the preachers, to illustrate the preached message of salvation. So, the words of Jesus are made to stand out very clearly, there is a concluding thought, or phrase, of use for preaching a word or act of Jesus, or a response from his hearers. There are longer stories, like the story of the Gerasene demoniac

(Mark 5:1-20), which Dibelius claimed originated in the work of a class of story-tellers in the community, who enriched the miracle content, and enlivened the story with their story-telling ability to make it more lively and memorable.

The sayings of Jesus were divided into their different forms. The parables and proverbs, we are familiar with, show Jesus as a teacher of wisdom, comparable with teachers of wisdom in Israel, Judaism, and throughout the Orient. Prophetic and apocalyptic sayings call to repentance, and offer salvation (Mark 1:15; Luke 10:23-24). There are controversial sayings, or dialogues, shaped in discussions that communities held amongst themselves, or with adversaries, on questions of Law. A well-known succession of such controversies is Mark 2:1-3:6, which answers questions, such as “where does our community get its power to forgive sin?”, “why do we fast – Jesus didn’t?”, “why does our attitude to the Sabbath differ from that of Jesus’ own people?”.

We owe a great deal to the work of the form critics. They showed us how deeply rooted in the lives of the communities are those sayings and stories of Jesus that have been treasured by Christians for centuries. Their studies on the parables have been particularly helpful in showing the way that later generations took up a parable of Jesus, spoken to His fellow Jews in the critical situation produced by His ministry, and showed Christians of a later generation the kind of response it called for in their culture.

An example that comes to mind, is the parable of the great supper, where Matthew and Luke draw distinctive lessons from the story Jesus had told to show the importance of responding to God’s invitation to the Kingdom that had drawn near in His ministry.

Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24

The major criticisms addressed to the form critics were that they exaggerated the creative powers of the early Christian communities, by saying that they really manufactured many of those stories and sayings. Again, they have been judged to attribute altogether too much importance to the influence of the Hellenistic world, in shaping the stories about Jesus, especially the miracles. And they have produced very limited results in establishing the picture of the Jesus of history.

Their most obvious weakness, however, was the way they limited the function of the gospel writers to stringing together a heap of beads, shaped by others, and developed in their passage from mouth to mouth. So, when the next wave of scriptural scholarship fetched up on the shore, it firmly re-established the position of the gospel writers as authors. Attention shifted from the individual units to the final product, from the individual bead to the necklace, and its pattern. The study came to be called redaction criticism.

In this study, they were very much helped by the known dependence of Matthew and Luke on Mark. Simply to study the differences in a story told originally by Mark, but used again by Matthew and Luke, is to become aware of the creative liberty of those later writers with the tradition they are drawing on. In this case, they are drawing on a written source, and already-existing, written gospel.

I know of no finer example of this kind of study than the story of the storm at sea (Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25, Matt 8:18, 23-27). In Mark, this is a recognisable miracle story. It shows Jesus as sharer in the divine rule over wind and waves. In Luke, the story remains in the same context, and conveys the same message. But Matthew completely rearranges its setting, and changes the order of events, to offer a beautiful example of what happens to the disciple, who sets out to follow Jesus, and ends up in the same boat as him.

For at least the next 25 years, say from about 1950 to 1975, scholars were exploiting that insight, namely, that the gospel writer was not simply repeating the oral or written tradition he drew on, but adapting or interpreting it with the needs of his own community in mind. Books and writings on the theme of “tradition and interpretation” multiplied. The distinctive approaches of the writers were studied closely, as were the situations of the community, which they addressed. The writers came to be seen as involved in the same process as the oral tradition before them, that of communicating the gospel to new communities, in different times, places, and cultures.

Two remarks before concluding. Just as the stream of oral tradition kept flowing after the appearance of written books in Old Testament time, so, too, with the writing of the gospels. Stories about Jesus, and sayings of Jesus, continued to be handed-on orally. Luke talks about writers engaged in the task before him – there were many others to follow. We can watch the

process in the literature of the second and third centuries. The Gospel of Thomas, for example, relatively recently discovered, consists of a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus, many of them comparable to those we know from the four gospels, some of them perhaps of equal antiquity.

Secondly, in recent times, much of the attention of the scholars has moved away from the more-historical approach we have been considering – how the text came to be, and the world in which, and for which, it was written. There has been an increasing concentration on the text, as a finished product, with a life of its own, like that of any other masterpiece.

Conclusion

Let me offer some general remarks, by way of conclusion.

Our Bible, with its books, sacred to Jews and to Christians, we believe to be a written form of the Word of God. Before the writing, that Word was being communicated to His people, in many ways, and, after the writing, God continues to speak to His people in other ways – in their teaching and worship, and in their whole range of their lives. The written books are enshrined within that people, as expressions of God's call and its response.

Our four gospels are four distinctive written forms of the one gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is communicated to each generation of Christians, in the total life of the Christian community. To each, that gospel comes as something, which we receive as God's gift, something that is to grow within us, and something to be communicated to others.

We have seen that the way the gospel was communicated, in the early Christian communities, and by the writers of the four gospels, was not a literal repetition of words so sacred that they could not be changed (not even the words of Jesus were treated this way), or a repetition of events, with photographic or video-tape accuracy. Christians do look back to the past to "remember" the words and deeds of Jesus.

To "remember" them, means to let them shape our responses to God in the details of our present, our history, and our culture.

When, finally, we communicate the gospel to others, we do it by offering them, not only our words, but also our lives, as a kind of translation of the gospel into the realities of their culture.

The Bible in Tok Pisin translates the written Word of God into the realities of the culture of Papua New Guinea. But it stands as a symbol for the lives of God's people, because it is there that the living translation is happening.