



Final Written Form - what does that mean?

There are two things to keep in mind: (a) the people of the Old Testament relied on oral narratives and (b) even within the same “people” there were oral narratives told differently, e.g., the two stories of Creation in the beginning of the Book of Genesis. Over the course of time these narratives were written down on papyrus scrolls. The papyrus scrolls were made by gluing sheets of papyrus together and then winding the strips around a pole.

From the time of Abraham (~1800 BC) to the end of the Kings of Judah (~587 BC) there is evidence of scrolls being assembled, especially the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. But 587 BC was a pivotal date in history: the destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the beginning of the Babylonian Exile. It is during the exile that scholars hold and see evidence of many of the books beginning to reach “final written form.” It is held that this authoring and editing was done with a purpose: (a) to assemble the oral and written narratives into a cohesive pattern of a “meta-narrative” of God and the people of God, and (b) to describe what God asks of the people, how the people failed, and how the people ended up in Exile, and yet (c) God’s covenant and promises still hold true.

When Scripture scholars say that a book of the Old Testament “reached its final written form,” this reflects the scholarly consensus that the composition of many biblical texts, especially those in the Old Testament, was a complex and lengthy process involving multiple authors and editors. Here's what it signifies:

- **Inspiration:** the concept does not diminish the idea of divine inspiration. The Church holds that God played a role in guiding and inspiring the authors and editors in the formation of the text.
- **Multiple Authors and Editors:** The term "reached its final written form" suggests that the book underwent various stages of composition. Different authors, often from different time periods, contributed to the text. Additionally, there were editors or redactors who shaped and edited the material. Easily discernible examples include *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers*, *Dueteronomy*, *Isaiah*, *Ezra*, and *Nehemiah*.
- **Editorial Processes:** The phrase acknowledges that the text was subject to editorial work, which involved selecting, arranging, and revising the content. Editors may have woven together various sources or traditions to create the final version of the text.

- **Historical Development:** It implies that the book's content evolved over time. It may have started as oral traditions, stories, or documents that were eventually compiled and edited into the book as we know it. This recognizes the historical and literary development of the text.
- **Authorship Attribution:** The concept of "reached its final written form" does not necessarily imply that a single, specific author wrote the entire text. Instead, it acknowledges that authorship in the traditional sense may be challenging to determine. The focus shifts from identifying a single author to understanding the collective and evolving nature of the text's composition.