

Behind the Bible

How did the Bible get put together? What was included and what was left out? Why?

Authors of Biblical Books

- Umi ch'tavan?* And who are the writers [of the Scriptures]?
- Moshe katav sifro*, Moses wrote his book [the Torah, dictated by God], *uparshat Bilaam*, and the parts dealing with Bilaam [Num. 23-24] *v'lyyov*, and the Book of Job.
- Yehoshua katav sifro*, Joshua wrote his book, *ve-shmona f'sukim she-baTorah*, and [the last] eight verses of the Torah [dealing with the death of Moses].
- Samuel wrote his book and the Book of Judges and Ruth.
- [King] David wrote the Book of Psalms, including in it the work of the elders, namely, Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Yeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korach.
- Jeremiah wrote his book, the Book of Kings, and Lamentations.
- [King] Hezekiah and his colleagues wrote Isaiah, Proverbs, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes.
- The Men of the Great Assembly [*Anshei Knesset HaGedolah*] wrote Ezekiel, the Twelve Minor Prophets, Daniel and the Scroll of Esther. [120 sages between age of prophets and age of rabbis]
- Ezra wrote his book and the genealogies of the Book of Chronicles up to his own time. [That book was completed by the prophet] Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah.
[Talmud, Bava Batra 14b-15a]

➔ All books after Torah were written by inspired individuals.

Order of Biblical Books

- Our Rabbis taught: The order of the Prophets is, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the Twelve Minor Prophets.
- Let us examine this. Hosea came first, as it is written, "God spoke first to Hosea" [Hos. 1:2]. But did God [really] speak first to Hosea? Were there not many prophets between Moses and Hosea?
- R. Johanan, however, has explained that [what It means is that] he was the first of the four who prophesied at that period, namely, Hosea, Isaiah, Amos and Micah.
- Should not then Hosea come first? Since his prophecy is written along with those of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, and Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi came at the end of the prophets [among the 12 Minor Prophets], he is reckoned with them.
- But why should he not be written separately and placed first? Because his book is so small, it might be lost [if copied separately].
- Let us see again. Isaiah was before Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Then why should not Isaiah be placed first? Because the Book of Kings ends with a record of destruction, and Jeremiah speaks throughout of destruction, and Ezekiel starts with destruction and ends with consolation, and Isaiah is full of consolation; therefore we put destruction next to destruction and consolation next to consolation.

-The order of the Writings is Ruth, Psalms, Job, Prophets, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra and Chronicles. Now, on the view that Job lived in the days of Moses, should not the book of Job come first? We do not begin with a record of suffering. But Ruth also is a record of suffering? It is a suffering with a sequel [of happiness], as R. Johanan said... [King] David issued from her [and so will the Messiah]. [Talmud, Bava Batra 14b]

Order was later slightly changed by the Masoretes.

Controversial Books that Were Accepted

-Song of Songs (erotic) (no mention of God)

4:5. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies.

4:7. You are all beautiful, my love; there is no blemish in you.

[Understood to be a love poem between God and the Jews, not a man and a woman.]

-Ecclesiastes (pessimistic, self-contradictory, just one man's opinion)

1:1. Vanity of vanities, said Kohelet, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

1: 3. What does a man gain from all his labor under the sun?

1:9. Ve-en kol chadash tachat ha-shemesh – There is nothing new under the sun.

-Esther (no mention of God)

-Proverbs (self-contradictory)

-Job (fictional?)

-Ruth

Rationale: Many books had secular or Hellenistic tendencies, so the rabbis had to rule on their fitness, both for occasional reading and for inclusion in the canon.

Impact of decision to include:

-Rabbinical approval of contents

-Obligation to teach and study

-Obligation to reproduce

-Hand-written scroll were expensive. Many among those left out were lost, and some survive only in Greek translation, courtesy of Christians [Apocrypha].)

Note: When a book is deemed “holy” or “inspired”, Talmud says it “defiles the hands”, meaning it requires handwashing after handling the scroll.

Following quotes will simply say “holy”. *[Side controversy exists about whether “does not defile the hands” meant “should not be included in canon”.]*

Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes

-All the holy writings render the hands unclean. The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes [are holy].

-Rabbi Yehudah says: The Song of Songs [is holy], but there is a dispute about Ecclesiastes. [Shammai said it is not holy and Hillel said it is.]

-Rabbi Jose says: Ecclesiastes [is not holy], but there is a dispute about the Song of Songs.

-Rabbi Shim'on says: [The ruling about] Ecclesiastes is one of the leniencies of Beth Shammai [because you don't HAVE to study it] and one of the stringencies of Beth Hillel [because you do].

-Rabbi Shim'on ben Azzai said: I received a tradition from the seventy-two elders on the day when they appointed Rabbi Eleazar b. Azariah head of the academy [Ber. 27b] that the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes [are holy].

Rabbi Akiba said: Far be it! No man in Israel disagreed about the Song of Songs [by saying] that it [is not holy]. For the whole world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the writings are holy but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies. So that if they had a dispute, they had a dispute only about Ecclesiastes.

-Rabbi Johanan b. Yehoshua, the son of the father-in-law of Rabbi Akiba, said: In accordance with the words of Ben Azzai so they disputed, [about both the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes] and so they reached a decision [that they are both holy.]

[Mishna, Yadayim Chapter 3:5]

Ecclesiastes and Proverbs

-Rab Yehudah son of R. Samuel b. Shilath said in Rab's name: The Sages wished to hide the Book of Ecclesiastes, because its words are self-contradictory. Yet why did they not hide it? Because its beginning is religious teaching and its end is religious teaching.

-Its beginning is religious teaching, as it is written, "What profit does man have of all his labor under the sun?" [Eccl. 1:3]

-And the School of R. Jannai commented: *Under* the sun he has none, but he has [profit] *before* the sun. [I.e., one profits if he toils in the Torah, which existed before the sun [Pes. 54a; Ned. 39b]].

-The end [of Ecclesiastes] is religious teaching, as it is written, "Let us hear the conclusion of the matter, fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole of man" [Eccl. 12:13]

-What is meant by "for this is the whole of man"?

-Said R. Eleazar, The entire world was created only for the sake of this [type of] man.

-Simeon b. Azzai [says]: Others state, Simeon b. Zoma said: The entire world was created only to be a companion to this man.

-And how are its words self-contradictory? [Details at end.*]

-The Book of Proverbs too they desired to hide, because its statements are self-contradictory. Yet why did they not hide it? They said, Did we not examine the Book of Ecclesiastes and find a reconciliation? So here too let us make search. And how are its statements self-contradictory? It is written, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly" [Prov. 26: 4] yet it is also written, "Answer a fool according to his folly"? [Prov. 26: 5] There is no difficulty: One refers to matters of learning; [that is, Torah, -- then he may be answered] the other to general matters. [Talmud, Shabbat 30b]

Esther and Ecclesiastes

-Rab Yehudah said in the name of Samuel; [The scroll] of Esther [is not holy]. Are we to infer from this that Samuel was of opinion that Esther was not composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? How can this be, seeing that Samuel has said that Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit? It was composed to be recited [by heart], but not to be written.

-The following objection was raised: R. Meir says that Ecclesiastes [is not holy] and that about the Song of Songs there is a difference of opinion. R. Jose says that the Song of Songs [is holy] and about Ecclesiastes there is a difference of opinion. R. Simeon says that Ecclesiastes is one of those matters in regard to which Beth Shammai were more lenient and Beth Hillel more stringent, but Ruth and the Song of Songs and Esther [are certainly holy]! Samuel concurred with R. Joshua [that the Megillah was not meant to be written].

-It has been taught: R. Simeon b. Menasia said: Ecclesiastes [is not holy] because it contains only the wisdom of Solomon [i.e., no divine inspiration]. They said to him, Was this then all that he composed? Is it not stated elsewhere, "And he spoke 3000 proverbs", [1Kings, 5:12; Since these were not written and Ecclesiastes was, we may conclude that the latter was inspired] and it further says, "Do not add to his words"? [Prov. 30:6] Why this further quotation? In case you might object that he composed very much, and what it pleased him to write he wrote and what it did not please him he did not write. Therefore it says, Do not add to his words. [Which shows that whatever he wrote down was inspired.]

-It has been taught: R. Eleazar said: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, "And Haman said in his heart" [Esth. 6:6. How could the author know this if he was not inspired?]

-R. Akiba says: "Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, And Esther obtained favor in the eyes of all that looked upon her". [Esth. 2:15, same observation]

-R. Meir says: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, "And the thing became known to Mordecai." [Esth. 2:22. Who revealed it to him if not the holy spirit?]

R. Jose b. Durmaskith said: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, "But on the spoil they laid not their hands", [Esth. 9:10]

-Said Samuel: Had I been there [among the Tannaim who discussed this matter] I would have given a proof superior to all, namely, that it says, "They confirmed and took upon them" [to observe Purim], [Esth. 9:27] [which means] they confirmed [in heaven] what they took upon themselves below.

-Raba said: All the proofs can be refuted except that of Samuel, which cannot be refuted. [Detail omitted: Basically, all other cases are mere logical assumptions.]

-Against the proof of Samuel certainly no decisive objection can be brought.

-Said Rabina: This bears out the popular saying, Better is one grain of sharp pepper than a basket full of pumpkins.

-R. Joseph said: [That the Book of Esther is holy] can be proved from here: And these days of Purim shall not fail from among the Jews. [Esth. 9:28]

-R. Nahman b. Isaac said, From here: Nor the memorial of them perish from their seed. [i.e., the injunction is not for that generation only.]

[Talmud, Megillah 7a]

Job

-A certain Rabbi was sitting before R. Samuel b. Nahmani and in the course of his expositions remarked, Job never was and never existed, but is only a typical figure. [To teach men the virtue of resignation.]

-He replied: To refute the likes of you the text says, "There was a man in the land of Uz, Job was his name". [Job 1:1; i.e. his name and city are given. Why do that if it's only a parable?]

-But, he retorted, if that is so, what of the verse [of the prophet Nathan, in confronting King David on the matter of Bathsheba], "The poor man had nothing except one poor ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up" etc. [2Sam. 12:3] Is that anything but a parable? So this too is a parable.

-If so, said the other, why are his name and the name of his town mentioned?

[Talmud, Baba Batra 15a]

Controversial Books that Were Not Accepted

- Rejected by rabbis because of disagreements with some statements, or because fictional, or because not written in Hebrew, or because not Jewish, or because too late, or because don't add new teachings.
- Sometimes preserved by Christians in Greek translation [e.g., Septuagint], or Latin.
- Some Hebrew fragments later found.
- Best known are Apocrypha of King James Version:

1Esdras [Greek, Ezra plus 99 more verses]
 2Esdras [Hebrew; apocalyptic]
 Tobit [Hebrew fragments discovered at Qumran, fictional]
 Judith [Hebrew; fictional]
 Additions to Esther [Greek]
 Wisdom of Solomon [Greek]
 Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Ben Sira) [Hebrew]
 Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah [Hebrew]
 Song of the Three Children [Hebrew]
 Story of Susanna [Hebrew]
 The Idol Bel and the Dragon [Aramaic]
 Prayer of Manasseh [Hebrew]
 1Maccabees [Hebrew]
 2Maccabees [Greek]

Ecclesiasticus

- Ben Sira (2nd century BCE) is only apocryphal author who signed his work.
- Greater part of Hebrew original recovered from Cairo Genizah.
- Book was popular with Jews. Quoted by name in Talmud 17 times, Midrash Rabbah 8 times, Zohar 1 time. Example:

...it is written in the Book of Ben Sira [Ecclesiasticus 3:21-2] Do not seek things that are too hard for you, and do not search things that are hidden from you. Think about the things that have been permitted to you; you have no need of the things that are secret. [Talmud, Chagigah 13a]

- Commentators: Excluded because of epicurean and Sadducean tendencies. But Talmud says:

R. Joseph said: [We may ban the book, yet still] we may expound to [the masses] the good things that the book contains. [Sanhedrin 100b] [Also Bava Kama 92b]

Additions to Book of Esther

- These additions mention God abundantly, as counterweight to fact that basic Book of Esther does not mention God:

AddEsth 14:15. [Esther:] You know all things, O Lord; you know that I... abhor the bed of the uncircumcised, and of all the heathen.

AddEsth 13:8-15. Then Mordecai thought about all the works of the Lord, and prayed to Him, saying, O Lord, Lord, the King Almighty, the whole world is in your power, and if you have appointed to save Israel, there is no man that can contradict you. For you have made heaven and earth, and all the wondrous things under the heaven. You are Lord of all things, and and there is no man that can resist you, who are the Lord. You know all things, and you know, Lord, that it was neither in contempt nor pride, nor for any desire of glory, that I did not bow down to proud Haman. For I could have been content with good will for the salvation of Israel to kiss the soles of his feet. But I did this, that I might not prefer the glory of man above the glory of God: neither will I worship any but you, O God, neither will I do it in pride. And now, O Lord God and King, spare your people: for [our enemies'] eyes are upon us to bring us to nought; yea, they desire to destroy the inheritance, that has been Yours from the beginning.

Are these Books Banned in Judaism?

All Israel have a portion in the world to come...[except] he who maintains that resurrection is not a biblical doctrine [such as the Sadducees and Samaritans], that the Torah was not divinely revealed, and an apikoros [one who leads a licentious life]. Rabbi Akiba added: One who reads outside books... [Mishna; Sanhedrin 90a]

-Commentators: What is meant is a ban on reading them publicly as if they were holy books. Private reading is allowed. Jerusalem Talmud (Sanh. 28a) says "the reading of Homer and all subsequent books is as the reading of a letter." Nevertheless, Midrash says:

And furthermore, my son, be admonished: Of making many books there is no end [but] whoever brings into his house more than the twenty-four books [of the Bible] introduces confusion into his house, as, e.g., the book of Ben Sira and the book of Ben Tagla. [The latter is lost.] [Midrash, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 12:11]

Maimonides (Hilkot Ab. Zarah 2:2): Rabbi Akiba's expression, "outside books," refers to idolatrous, non-Jewish books.

* It is written, "anger is better than play" [Eccl. 7:3] but it is written, "I said of laughter, It is to be praised". [Eccl. 2:2] It is written, "Then I commended joy" [Eccl. 8:15] but it is written, "and of joy [I said] What does it?"

-There is no difficulty: Anger is better than laughter: the anger which the Holy One, blessed be He, displays to the righteous in this world is better than the laughter which the Holy One, blessed be He, laughs with the wicked in this world. [The latter is an idiom for prosperity and well being: the sufferings inflicted upon the righteous are preferable to the prosperity conferred upon the wicked.] And I said of laughter, it is to be praised: that refers to the laughter which the Holy One, blessed be He, laughs with the righteous in the world to come. ‘

Then I commended joy: This refers to the joy of a precept. [The celebrations of such, e.g., a marriage.] And of joy [I said], what does it': this refers to joy [which is] not in connection with a precept.

[Commentator: The Rabbis frowned upon this. But this probably does not apply to a simple and harmless gathering, but to attendance at theatres and circuses, at which the Jewish authorities

looked askance, perhaps because they originated in idolatry and also because images of royalty were placed there. (Lev. R. 34)]

-This teaches you that the Divine Presence rests [upon] man] neither through gloom, [Judaism does not encourage asceticism; cf. Ned. 10a.] nor through sloth, nor through frivolity, nor through levity, nor through talk, nor through idle chatter, [or, vain pursuits] -- only through a matter of joy in connection with a precept...