

The bible: an eternal canon



When one thinks of the word Bible, it evokes images of revelation at Sinai, full of lightning and thunder, where an awestruck nation received the ten commandments. It conjures images of Isaiah's soaring prophecies, the anguish of Esther, and the courage of Daniel. However, despite the history within it, the Bible is not a history book. One who turns the pages and reads the ancient words will find promises of the rewards that await those who do good and the punishments that come in the wake of evil. The Bible is a roadmap to living life wisely; it gives advice and guidance, comforts the aggrieved and inspires the crestfallen. It illuminates events and helps place them in perspective. It is not an old storybook and not just a book of law but rather a compilation of the periods and people whose actions hold relevant lessons to be learned, even thousands of years later.

When they compiled and finalized which books would be included in the biblical canon, it was understood by the ancient Jewish authorities that it was to be a guide for generations on how to live life. A central part of Judaism is the study of Torah in order to learn and adhere to the laws and way of life that is expected by God, as it says in the book of Joshua " this book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success"[1], meaning that one who studied the Bible would glean from it what the correct thing to do in their own life was and therefore, would find success. As such, while there were likely other books written, and certainly there were many other prophets and prophecies experienced, before the redaction of the biblical canon began, not everything was worthy of eternal

inclusion. A criterion for inclusion was that each book chosen by the ancient Jewish authorities was a selection which provided teachings, be they ethical or moral, that would be applicable and relevant for all future generations, regardless of time and place. If the Jewish authorities did not feel that it would still be relevant to be studied by future generations, regardless of how interesting it may have been, they did not include it.

The biblical canon is meant to shape people. It is logical to believe that the Creator of the Universe provided man with a code of conduct, as it says God “insist[s] that His worshippers live up to strict standards of ethics and morality”[2]. God, through His actions, displayed the moral and ethical path that one should strive to emulate. When the ancient Jewish authorities compiled the biblical canon, it was clear that they were including the books that presented examples of upright and holy behaviour that future generations should strive to emulate. The biblical canon also endeavours to bring people who read its ancient pages closer to God. The books included in the biblical canon were selected with the intention that these timeless words would have an impact on all future generations and would still create a framework for a relationship with God, even thousands of years later.

Another of the criteria for being included in the bible was “that the works be composed during the era of prophetic revelation; that is, no later than the time of the building of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the returned exiles from Babylonia”[3]. Books and prophecies that emerged after this cut-off date were not included in the biblical canon. It is for this reason that the Books of the Maccabees were not considered for biblical inclusion, since they were written after the period of prophetic revelation had ended. An opinion

as to why this was the cut-off date for inclusions is that it was believed that no addition would be on the holy level of the books originally included in the bible. This is because the era of divine prophecy had concluded. There was also a feeling of being post-biblical Jews, meaning they felt that no matter how good a proposed new book for the Bible was, it did not matter since the Bible was closed for new additions.

However, there is evidence that as late as the second century CE there was an ongoing debate occurring regarding certain books that had originally been included in the biblical canon that some rabbis believed should be removed. This debate is displayed in a Mishnah where the books Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs are discussed with the concept of one's hands becoming impure following contact with these holy books.[4]A difficult concept to understand, the essence of the idea is that if holy books make one's hands impure, they would be handled more delicately, and the very few hand-written copies in circulation at the time would be protected from too much use. An additional explanation for this idea, is that there was holy bread that people would place next to the holy books, thinking that since both were considered holy it was an appropriate thing to do. However, it was found that rodents nibbling on the food would also gnaw on the scrolls, thereby damaging them. Therefore, the rule was put in place to prevent damage to the books. The debate regarding this rule with respect to Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs in this Mishnah is whether the two books mentioned render one's hands impure, meaning are they considered holy like the other books that compile the biblical canon. The Mishnah brings several differing opinions on the subject, and it is clear that while both books remain in the Biblical

Canon and are considered holy like all the others, there was, at some point, a debate about whether they should have continued to be included.

It is evident that the ancient Jewish authorities recognized the centrality of the biblical canon to Judaism and took the task of compiling which books were appropriate for inclusion very seriously. Working with an understanding that the collection of books they were putting together would be studied intimately and thoroughly for thousands of years, they made the decision that only those books whose stories had applicable lessons for future generations would be included. Potential volumes that told of times where no lasting life instruction could be gleaned were dismissed. Materials that did not help to further one's relationship with God were also dismissed, since a key component of the biblical canon is to bring individuals closer to God as well as to teach individuals what God expects from them, ethically and morally, through God's actions in the bible. A final criterion for inclusion in the biblical canon was the time in which an event happened. If the book was written after the era of revelation had stopped, it was automatically disregarded since the biblical canon was closed to new additions that were not divinely inspired. The ancient Jewish authorities and their rabbinic heirs did not subscribe to the New Testament or the Koran because they did not agree with the belief that those books were of divine inspiration. Thus, their criteria for inclusion was intended as a protection against future man-made and human-inspired works that potentially negated or contradicted the precepts of the Torah.

In sum, the ancient Jewish authorities were aware of the tremendous responsibility of compiling a canon of books that would be relevant for future

generations and would hold strong the ideal of emulating God's ways with fealty and steadfast allegiance. With that in mind, they established detailed criteria to follow to ensure that even thousands of years later, an individual could open these books to look in the creased pages of time to reveal eternal knowledge and wisdom of how one can transform their experience of life today.

References

Segal, Eliezer. *Introducing Judaism* . Vol. 4. Routledge, 2009

[1]Joshua 1: 8 Bible RSV

[2]Segal, Eliezer. *Introducing Judaism* . Vol. 4. Routledge, 2009, 147.

[3]Ibid. 15

[4]Mishnah Yadayim 3: 5