

“The ‘Great Synagogue of Ezra’ Baraita Baba Bathra 14a - 15a”

The “Great Synagogue of Ezra” theory is drawn from a text found in the *Babylonian Talmud* called the *Baraita Baba Bathra*. The dating of this text is uncertain, but it was probably written sometime in the second century AD.¹ The label *Baraita* is, “[a]n Aramaic term, meaning literally, ‘external’, ‘outside’, denoting the traditions of the Tannaim, i.e. authorities on the Oral Law from the time off the schools of Hillel and of Shammai to that of Judah ha-Nasi (ca. 50 B.C. – 200 A.D.) - not included in the *Mishna of Juda ha-Nasi*, but gathered in a separate collection.”² In other words, it is the recording of an oral Jewish tradition that did not find its way into the Jewish Mishnah. *Baba Bathra* reads:

“Who wrote the Holy Books? Moses wrote his book, the section concerning Bileam and Job. Jehoshua wrote his book and eight verses in the Law. Samuel wrote his book, the book of Judges and Ruth. David wrote the book of Psalms by means of ten Ancients, Adam, the first, Melchisedech, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Iduthun, Asaph and the three sons of Kore. Jeremias wrote his books, the Book of Kings and the Lamentations. Ezechias and his colleagues wrote Isaias, Proverbs, the Canticles of Canticles, and Ecclesiastes. The men of the Great Synagogue wrote Ezekiel, the twelve Prophets, Daniel, and the volume of Esther. Ezra wrote his book, and continued the genealogies of the Chronicles up to his time.”³

Objection #1: “Ezra and the ‘men of the Great Synagogue’ promulgated an authoritative canon of the Old Testament which is identical to the shorter Protestant canon. Therefore, Protestants have a divinely appointed authority that decreed which books are in the Old Testament canon.”

Answer: The theory that the *Men of the Great Synagogue* defined the canon of Scripture originated with a Jewish writer named Elias Levita in his book *Massoreth Ha Massoreth* (1538), Levita argued that Ezra and the Synagogue produced a corrected consonantal text of the Hebrew Scriptures and fixed the canon.⁴ Levita’s *Great Synagogue* theory became quite popular in sixteenth century especially among Reformed Protestants.⁵ This theory appealed to Protestants who wished to anchor the smaller Protestant canon on a divinely appointed authority. The *Men of the Great Synagogue* fit the bill.⁶

Today, this theory is no longer viable. The activities recorded in *Baba Bathra* are so utterly singular and devoid of any other independent witness that it has to be seen as an innovation.⁷ Had the *Men of the Great Synagogue* closed and fixing of the Hebrew canon, it is strange that the authors of the Book of Ezra,

¹ Strack places the completion of the Babylonian Talmud during the late Fifth to the mid-Sixth century A.D. (Hermann L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 5th ed., (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1931), 71). Arthur Jeffrey believes the tradition contained in the Baraita Baba Bathra may have originated as early as 180 AD (Arthur Jeffrey, “The Canon of the Old Testament,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, edited George A. Buttrick (New York, Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1962), 1.42). Beckwith argues for pre-70 AD, (Beckwith, 153); Childs places no later than 200 AD (Biblical Theology, 58), Cornelius Hagerty places it between 136-217 AD (*The Authenticity of the Sacred Scriptures*, (Houston, Texas: Lumen Christi Press, 1969), 112, Steinmueller argues that it was written after the second century, but that it reflects an earlier tradition (Companion to Scripture Studies, 1.58-59). Cox,

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² Robert and Tricot, 73 – See translator’s note.

³ As quoted in Breen, 46

⁴ The Hebrew language originally consisted of only of consonants without any vowels. For example, if English had this feature we would write the word “rock” as “rck.” Which vowels belonged to each word was transmitted through oral tradition until vowel points were added to the text to aid the reader in the Christian era.

⁵ Ryle, 261

⁶ See John Buxtorf’s (1664) comments as quoted in Ryle, 270

⁷ Ryle, 284

Nehemiah or Maccabees make no mention of it. Yet, these books record details about Ezra that are far less important than that given in *Baba Bathra*. The same is true for the works of Philo, Josephus and the New Testament.⁸ No rabbi appealed to this supposed authoritative body during the debates over the canonicity in the first few Christian centuries. McDonald believes that this silence indicates that the rabbis did not originally accept this story thus giving it the status of being “outside” [i.e. Baraith] of the Mishnah.⁹

Nevertheless, *Baba Bathra* is one of the earliest lists of the Old Testament canon extant; and although it is essentially identical to the Hebrew Text (MT – Massoretic Text), it does differ from it in the ordering of the books and how it divides them into sections.¹⁰ By all appearances the *Great Synagogue* was “only an invention of the Scribes, who were eager to link the institutions and practices of Judaism to the legislation of Moses and with the prophetic tradition.”¹¹ In other words, the *Great Synagogue* was really a projection of rabbinical Judaism back into time of Ezra. By doing this, the rabbis hoped to give their own institution a kind of prophetic legitimacy. Today, most scholars (Catholic, Protestant and Jewish) reject this theory.

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⁸ This is, of course, an argument from silence. However, the objector holds that the Great Synagogue made an authoritative decree that fixed the canon. The lack of any corroborating evidence is therefore worthy of note.

⁹ McDonald, 77

¹⁰ See Steinmuller, 1.55

¹¹ Robert and Tricot, 80