

THE BOOK OF JASHAR AND SCRIPTURE

Wyn Laidig

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There are a growing number of Messianic believers who are quoting a “Book of Jashar” (Sefer Ha Yashar) as though its contents are historical fact. Some believe, as the book itself claims, that this book is the same book referenced in Scripture (Josh 10:13 and 2 Samuel 1:17-18). Furthermore, some would even claim that this book carries the same authority as Scripture.

There are numerous totally-different manuscripts which over the past Centuries that have been called the Book of Jashar. Brandt in his book *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints* (1986) states that he has found ten different works in Hebrew all bearing the same name. They range from various collections of medieval Jewish midrash (such as the *Tosafot*) to more recent fictional writings that have been exposed as a fraud (*The Book of Jasher*. Bristol: Jacob Ilive. 1829). Most rabbinic references of the recent centuries refer to the Sefer Ha Yashar of the *Tosafot*, although it does not seem that anyone believes this work is the ancient book referred to in Scripture.

The text that is currently being quoted within some Messianic circles is an 1840 English translation titled “Book of Jasher,” reprinted in 1887 and numerous times thereafter by the Latter Day Saints. This book is an English translation by Moses Samuel of a Hebrew manuscript from Venice dated to 1625. There was also another English translation of the 1625 Hebrew text done by Edward Brown and published in 1876 by the New York United States Publishing Company, as well as subsequent translations into other languages.

The preface to the 1625 Hebrew text gives the supposed history of the document, stating that during the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70AD a Roman officer found a Jewish scholar hiding in a hidden library with ancient manuscripts. The officer took the Jewish scholar and the all the manuscripts to his home in Spain. Eventually the manuscript of the Book of Jashar was sold to the Jewish college in Cordova where it was preserved until it was printed in Naples in 1552 and then in Venice in 1625.

One major question surrounding this text is whether this story of its history is actually factual. A subsequent, perhaps more important question, is whether this text is same one referred to in Scripture (Joshua 10:13 and 2 Samuel 1:17-18). In spite of the fact that this document is enthusiastically embraced by some Messianic believers, there is absolutely *no evidence* that the answers to either of these questions is positive.

The 1625 text of the Book of Jashar is not in the same category of writings as the apocryphal books and pseudopigrapha. With apocryphal books and pseudopigraphal writings there are typically extant portions of historical manuscripts, or at the very least quotations from historians and sages that speak to the existence of the document in times past. There is clear evidence of ancient manuscripts for books like Enoch, Jubilees, Maccabees, etc. The questions surrounding apocryphal books and pseudopigrapha generally relate to questions about their historical accuracy and/or their agreement with Scripture. With this text of Jashar, however, that is not the case. The main question surrounding the text of Jashar is whether or not it existed prior to 1625.

To avoid confusion with the numerous other documents called the Book of Jashar / Jasher / Yashar, I will refer to this book as “Jashar-1625”, which will denote the 1625 Hebrew text, the English translation first published in 1840, as well as subsequent reprintings and other translations of the 1625 Hebrew text.

I will briefly outline my reasons for concluding that it is highly unlikely that Jashar-1625 can be the Sefer Ha Yashar referred to in Scripture.

1. **The manuscript can only be traced to 1625 AD.** The only extant manuscript related to Jashar-1625 is the Hebrew text of 1625, printed in Venice. The introduction of the Venice text refers to an earlier edition in Naples of 1552, however there is nothing to substantiate the claim that this 1552 edition actually existed.
2. **No surviving manuscript portions.** There is not a single ancient manuscript of Jashar-1625 prior to the 1625 text, nor is there even a portion of such a manuscript in existence. In other words,

there are no manuscript portions from any time in history to suggest that this text existed prior to 1625.

3. **No similar surviving manuscripts.** There are no traces of other similar manuscripts that may have come from a common source as Jashar-1625. With manuscripts of Scripture, the apocryphal books, as well as the pseudopigrapha, there are generally multiple copies of at least portions of the ancient manuscripts. When people recognized manuscripts as holy, valuable or useful, they tended to make and preserve copies of them. These copies are similar but typically show some scribal differences. In other words, there are multiple witnesses that a more ancient original text existed. This is not the case with Jashar-1625.
4. **No quotes from ancient authors.** There are no quotes from ancient historians, Jewish sages, or church fathers to indicate that they were even aware of the existence of a manuscript of Jashar-1625 or any other text referred to as the Book of Jashar. There is nothing at all from Josephus, Eusebius, Philo; nothing from ancient rabbinic sources; nothing from the vast writings of the early church fathers. With the books of the Maccabees, the book of Jubilees, the Apocrypha, and other pseudopigrapha texts, there are clear trails of multiple quotations and references throughout history that demonstrate these texts actually existed from ancient times. For these writings there are multiple witnesses, not just from different copies of manuscripts, but also in the form of quotations from one or more ancient authors that indicate their authenticity. This is not the case with Jashar-1625.

I will note here that there is a letter dated 1037 AD, from Haya Gaon, the head of the Jewish school in Babylon who was writing about magical incantations and formulas including mystical names. He states that they have works containing such things at his college in Babylon, and specifically names "The Sword of Moses" and "Sefer Ha Yashar" as two such works. However, no quotations from Sefer Ha Yashar are given, and based on the discussion of the content (magic formulas, incantations, and mystic names) the Babylonian document to which Haya Gaon refers does not seem to bear any relationship with Jashar-1625.

5. **No discussions regarding Canonization of Scripture.** There is no mention of the Book of Jashar in the writings documenting which books were to be accepted into the canon of Scripture, either by the Jewish sages or by the early Christian church fathers. There are various published lists and discussions written by many authors regarding whether to include the books of Scripture we now have, as well as numerous apocryphal and pseudopigraphal writings which were not included -- but not one mention of any text called the Book of Jashar.
6. **The Talmud indicates Jewish sages were not aware of Jashar-1625.** In the Talmud's only discussion of the Book of Jashar, it is clear that the Jewish sages had no oral or written traditions passed down to them concerning the book. When discussing the passage in Joshua which refers to the Book of Jashar, the Rabbis are asked the question in the Talmud, "What is the Book of Jashar?" In reply, one Rabbi states it is the book of Genesis, another Rabbi states it is the book of Deuteronomy, and a third Rabbi states that is the Book of Judges. If the Jashar-1625 were truly the Book of Jashar found in Jewish hands in AD 70, one would certainly expect the Rabbinic sages to have had at least some awareness of its existence. But they did not.
7. **Book of the upright person.** The Hebrew word "yashar" literally means "upright" or "one who is upright". Thus, Sefer Ha Yashar can just as correctly be translated as "Writing of the upright". Thus, it could be a reference to the writings of an upright person or to writings for an upright person. Some Jewish sages have therefore taken Sefer Ha Yashar to be a reference to the Torah itself rather than to a separate text. This would also be in harmony with the discussion in the Talmud regarding the Book of Jashar referring to Genesis, Deuteronomy, or Joshua.
8. **The 1625 Hebrew text was denounced by Jewish scholars at the time.** The well-known Jewish historian and scholar, Rabbi Leon (Yehuda Aryeh) of Modena, Italy, in about 1645 denounced the text as being a forgery, in a critical review of the Zohar and other Jewish mystic works of Kabbalah. He said, "*Behold, it [the Zohar] is like Sefer ha-Yashar, which they printed (without my knowledge and without the knowledge of the sages here in Venice, about twenty years ago). Although I removed the fantasies and falsehoods from it, [eg.] that it is the Sefer ha-Yashar*

mentioned in Scripture, there are still those who claim that it was discovered during the time of the destruction [of the temple]. But who can stop those who imagine in their minds whatever they wish."

9. **The primary modern scholarly study of the 1625 text concluded it was fiction.** The primary modern-day scholarly study of the 1625 Hebrew text was done by a French team led by Genot-Bismuth, who published their findings in French in 1986. They concluded that there was a total lack of evidence of the text's existence prior to 1625 and that the text was "a work of fiction".
10. **Scholarly publication of the 1840 version was rejected.** Moses Samuel, the translator of Jashar-1625 tried to publish his translation with the scholarly Royal Asiatic Society, but it was rejected. Generally the reason a work would be rejected for scholarly publication is that the claims being made in that work or about that work can not be justified.
11. **Denounced as a fraud by scholars in the 1840s.** At the time the English translation was actually published in 1840 by Mordecai Noah, a newspaper publisher, the book was denounced as a fraud by scholars who rejected its claims of authenticity.
12. **Embraced by Joseph Smith, creator of the Book of Mormon.** Shortly after Jashar-1625 was first published, Joseph Smith embraced the book and incorporated it into his Mormon lore. This is the same Joseph Smith who discovered an ancient Egyptian funerary document which he also embraced and then "divinely translated" into the Book of Mormon.
13. **Mormon scholar concludes not the lost book of Scripture.** Edward J. Brandt, a member of the Latter Day Saints, completed his PhD dissertation in 1976 at Brigham Young University, titled, "*The History, Content, and Latter-day Saint Use of the Book of Jasher*". His conclusion is "It is my belief that the Jewish *Sefer Hayashar*, translated and published in English as *The Book of Jasher* (1840/1877), is not the lost scriptural book mentioned in the Old Testament."
14. **No reference to 2 Samuel 1:18.** Of the two references in Scripture to the Book of Jashar, Joshua 10:13 and 2 Samuel 1:18, the latter passage is nowhere mentioned in Jashar-1625. If this were the true Book of Jashar mentioned in Scripture, then it should at least include the only two passages that Scripture refers to. Pratt indicates that Jashar 56:9 which claims to be the words of Jacob to Judah refers to the Samuel passage, however a comparison of the context of the two passages (Jashar 56:9 and 2 Samuel 1:18ff) makes this doubtful. Taking the text of 2 Samuel 1:18 at face value, it seems to indicate that the poetic verses which follow, that is 2 Samuel 1:19-27, should be what is included in the Book of Jashar referred to by Scripture. That is not the case with Jashar-1625.
15. **Jashar-1625 contains numerous contradictions with Scripture.** The fact that Jashar-1625 has contradictions to Scripture does not mean it cannot be from an ancient source, since many ancient manuscripts have value as historical works even if not in harmony with Scriptures. But it is yet another factor that detracts from the credibility of the book. In addition to the contradiction to Scripture relating the 2 Samuel 1:18 stated above, a few more contradictions are listed here:
 - a. Jashar 80:1 "and at the end of two years the Lord sent Moses to Pharaoh." Exodus 7:14-15 "The Lord said unto Moses... go to Pharaoh in the morning."
 - b. Jashar 71 states that Moses was 18 years old when he left Egypt, and he then went to Cush and became king of Cush for forty years before going to Midian. So Moses would have been 58 before going to Midian. Scripture, in Acts 7:23-30, states that Moses was in Egypt for 40 years before going to Midian.
 - c. Jashar 81:3-4 claims that the Israelites sojourned in Egypt for 210 years. Scripture, in Exodus 12:40-41, states that it was 430 years.
 - d. Jashar 81:40-41 says that all but Pharaoh perished in the Red Sea. Pharaoh thanks the Lord and the Lord sends an angel who casts him upon the land of Nineveh where Pharaoh reigned for a long time. Scripture, in Exodus 14:23-28, states that all the Egyptians perished. All would include Pharaoh.

- e. Jashar 43:35 claims that Isaac left Hebron to comfort Jacob when they thought Joseph was dead. Isaac dies much later, according to Jashar 47:9. Scripture, in Gen. 35:27-29, shows that Isaac died before Joseph even dreamed his dreams.
- f. Jashar 51:37 claims that Simeon was to powerful to be bound by Joseph. Scripture, in Genesis. 42:24, states that Joseph bound Simeon before the eyes of their brothers.

16. **Jashar-1625 contains numerous seemingly-fictional stories.** Several accounts in the text read like unbelievable myths and legends rather than plausible factual accounts. This alone does not mean Jashar-1625 cannot be from an ancient document, since ancient documents can have value as fictional or mythical accounts, but it is yet another factor that detracts from the credibility of the book.

For example, consider the half-man-half-animal beasts that seem to resemble Greek mythology more than Scripture; or the magic garments of skin from Adam and Eve that were passed down to Nimrod and gave him all his mighty powers; or the magic sapphire wand of God with which He created the universe and which was then passed down to Joseph and eventually Moses:

- a. Jashar 36:31-32 And afterward about one hundred and twenty great and terrible animals came out from the wilderness at the other side of the sea, and they all came to the place where the asses were, and they placed themselves there. And those animals, from their middle downward, were in the shape of the children of men, and from their middle upward, some had the likeness of bears, and some the likeness of the keephas, with tails behind them from between their shoulders reaching down to the earth, like the tails of the ducheephath, and these animals came and mounted and rode upon these asses, and led them away, and they went away unto this day.
- b. Jashar 61:14-15. And it was one day that Zepho lost a young heifer, and he went to seek it, and he heard it lowing round about the mountain. And Zepho went and he saw and behold there was a large cave at the bottom of the mountain, and there was a great stone there at the entrance of the cave, and Zepho split the stone and he came into the cave and he looked and behold, a large animal was devouring the ox; from the middle upward it resembled a man, and from the middle downward it resembled an animal, and Zepho rose up against the animal and slew it with his swords.
- c. Jashar 7:24-30. “And the garments of skin which God made for Adam and his wife, when they went out of the garden, were given to Cush. For after the death of Adam and his wife, the garments were given to Enoch, the son of Jared, and when Enoch was taken up to God, he gave them to Methuselah, his son. And at the death of Methuselah, Noah took them and brought them to the ark, and they were with him until he went out of the ark. And in their going out, Ham stole those garments from Noah his father, and he took them and hid them from his brothers. And when Ham begat his first born Cush, he gave him the garments in secret, and they were with Cush many days. And Cush also concealed them from his sons and brothers, and when Cush had begotten Nimrod, he gave him those garments through his love for him, and Nimrod grew up, and when he was twenty years old he put on those garments. And Nimrod became strong when he put on the garments, and God gave him might and strength, and he was a mighty hunter in the earth, yea, he was a mighty hunter in the field, and he hunted the animals and he built altars, and he offered upon them the animals before the Lord.”

Eventually these magic garments were stolen by Esau:

Jashar 27:7-12 “And Nimrod and two of his men that were with him came to the place where they were, when Esau started suddenly from his lurking place, and drew his sword, and hastened and ran to Nimrod and cut off his head. And Esau fought a desperate fight with the two men that were with Nimrod, and when they called out to him, Esau turned to them and smote them to death with his sword. And all the mighty men of Nimrod, who had left him to go to the wilderness, heard the cry at a distance, and they knew the voices

of those two men, and they ran to know the cause of it, when they found their king and the two men that were with him lying dead in the wilderness. And when Esau saw the mighty men of Nimrod coming at a distance, he fled, and thereby escaped; and Esau took the valuable garments of Nimrod, which Nimrod's father had bequeathed to Nimrod, and with which Nimrod prevailed over the whole land, and he ran and concealed them in his house. And Esau took those garments and ran into the city on account of Nimrod's men, and he came unto his father's house wearied and exhausted from fight, and he was ready to die through grief when he approached his brother Jacob and sat before him. And he said unto his brother Jacob, Behold I shall die this day, and wherefore then do I want the birthright? And Jacob acted wisely with Esau in this matter, and Esau sold his birthright to Jacob, for it was so brought about by the Lord.

- d. Jashar 77:38-50. "And afterward Moses went into the garden of Reuel which was behind the house, and he there prayed to the Lord his God, who had done mighty wonders for him. And it was that whilst he prayed he looked opposite to him, and behold a sapphire stick was placed in the ground, which was planted in the midst of the garden. And he approached the stick and he looked, and behold the name of the Lord God of hosts was engraved thereon, written and developed upon the stick. And he read it and stretched forth his hand and he plucked it like a forest tree from the thicket, and the stick was in his hand. And this is the stick with which all the works of our God were performed, after he had created heaven and earth, and all the host of them, seas, rivers and all their fishes. And when God had driven Adam from the garden of Eden, he took the stick in his hand and went and tilled the ground from which he was taken. And the stick came down to Noah and was given to Shem and his descendants, until it came into the hand of Abraham the Hebrew. And when Abraham had given all he had to his son Isaac, he also gave to him this stick. And when Jacob had fled to Padan-aram, he took it into his hand, and when he returned to his father he had not left it behind him. Also when he went down to Egypt he took it into his hand and gave it to Joseph, one portion above his brethren, for Jacob had taken it by force from his brother Esau. And after the death of Joseph, the nobles of Egypt came into the house of Joseph, and the stick came into the hand of Reuel the Midianite, and when he went out of Egypt, he took it in his hand and planted it in his garden. And all the mighty men of the Kinities tried to pluck it when they endeavored to get Zipporah his daughter, but they were unsuccessful. So that stick remained planted in the garden of Reuel, until he came who had a right to it and took it. And when Reuel saw the stick in the hand of Moses, he wondered at it, and he gave him his daughter Zipporah for a wife."

My conclusion, based on all the above, is that it is highly unlikely that Jashar-1625 is the translation of an ancient document. And it is even more unlikely that it is a credible source of truth or historical information. It is therefore extremely unlikely that it is the Sefer Ha Yashar referred to in Scripture. All indications are that the 1625 Hebrew text was written earlier in the 17th Century as fanciful Jewish midrash in the author's attempt to creatively "fill in the gaps" of Scripture. That was one of the common purposes of Jewish midrash. It was an attempt to read between the lines of Scripture and contemplate or postulate what may have taken place to result in the Scriptures we have been given.

There is nothing wrong with reading Jashar-1625, but it should be read with the understanding that it is most likely the fictional account of one Jewish person in the early 1600's attempting to fill in the gaps of Scripture. Those who choose to read more authenticity into this book should only make that choice with a clear understanding that there is not one piece of actual evidence showing that the text originated any earlier than the 17th Century.

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- "Perhaps the most conspicuous weakness of this *Book of Jasher* is that, although it contains a parallel account of Joshua 10:13, the promised additional information—as well as the account mentioned in 2 Samuel 1:18—does not even appear in its pages. Furthermore, it contains numerous contradictions to the standard works of the Church.[59] It is my belief that the Jewish *Sefer Hayashar*, translated and published in English as *The Book of Jasher* (1840/1877), is not the lost scriptural book mentioned in the Old Testament."
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- Mordecai Noah was not unaware of the Mormon activities in building a temporary city of refuge at Kirtland in the 1830s. In a late 1835 issue of his *Evening Star*, Noah protested the Mormons' calling their nearly finished house of worship at Kirtland the "Temple of the Lord." The Jewish editor and would-be American Zionist seemingly had no patience with what he termed the Mormons' "unhallowed purposes" in gathering around a "heathen temple."⁷ The Mormons never quite lost sight of Mordecai Noah's work, though they have long since forgotten his name. In 1840 the Jewish scholar obtained an English translation and published the extracanonical *Book of Jasher*. The Mormons became fascinated with the book and have kept it in print and circulation wherever they congregate. The first of their reprintings of this strange volume was published by J. H. Parry & Co. of Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1887 and modern printings are generally kept in stock at the LDS Church's Deseret Book Stores.
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- "R. Ashi taught the saying of R. Itz'hak to [Numb. 10:35]: "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward that Moses said," etc. And what did Israel say? The above that R. Itz'hak said: It reads [Jos. 10:13]: "And the sun stood still ... written in the book of Yashar." What is the book of Yashar? Said R. Hyya b. Aba in the name of R. Johanan: The book in which the birth of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who are named Josharim (the upright) is meant, as it reads [Numb 23:10]: "May my soul die the death of the righteous." And where is the hint to be found there [Gen. 48:19]: "And his seed shall become a multitude of nations." This occurred when Jehoshua "stopped the

sun.” [Jos. 10:13]: “And the sun stood still in the midst of the heavens, and hastened not to go down about a whole day.”...

It reads [2 Sam. 1:18]: “The bow, behold it is written in the book of Yashar.” (What does Yashar mean? Said R. Hyie b. Aba in the name of R., Johanan: “Genesis” as said above.) And where the allusion? [Gen. 49:8]: “Thy hand shall be on the neck of thy enemies.” Which is the weapon that needs the hand against the neck? It is the bow. R. Eliezer, however, maintains that the book of Yashar means Deuteronomy. And why is it named Yashar? Because there is written [6:18]: “And thou shalt do that which is right (Yashar) and good in the eyes of the Lord.” And where is the allusion? [33:7]: “Let the power of his hands.” And which is the weapon to which both hands are needed? The bow. R. Samuel b. Na’hmani said: It is the book of Judges in which [17:6]: “Everyman did what seemed right (Yashar) in his eyes.”

Singer, I. (Ed.). (1901–1906). In *The Jewish Encyclopedia: A Descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, 12 Volumes (Vol. 8, pp. 5–6). New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls.

“[Leon of Modena] criticizes rabbinical interpretation of the Law. He contends that, like the Karaites, the Rabbis often followed the letter of the Law to the neglect of its spirit. He... enumerates the laws which must be reformed in order to bring the later Judaism into harmony with the Law, and render it spiritual and Biblical.”

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“Samuel also translated into English the pseudo-biblical ‘Book of Jasher’, a supposedly ancient Hebrew text which Samuel convinced himself was authentic. After failing to persuade the Royal Asiatic Society to publish it, he sold his translation for £150 in 1839 to the American Jewish newspaper-owner and philanthropist Mordecai M. Noah. It appeared in New York the following year but with Noah’s name and not Samuel’s on the title page. ‘I did not put my name to it as my Patron and myself differed about its authenticity’, Samuel later explained.’ This was odd since Noah seems to have had a lower opinion of the work’s authenticity than Samuel. The translation was accepted as accurate, but the publication provoked criticism by scholars who rejected the claims made on behalf of the text. It won acceptance, however, by the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith.”