

HOMEWORK for JANUARY 23



FOR NEXT WEEK: The “Intertestamental” period

The Apocrypha, from the Greek *apokryphos* for ‘hidden’, refers to a number of books written by Jewish authors that were widely read by Jews and Christians, but were regarded as of questionable authorship or having dubious origins. This is why Jews omitted them from their canon and why Christians eventually assigned them secondary status.

The books called by us ‘apocrypha’ were widely read and used by Christians in the early centuries and only gradually were siloed away from the Old and New Testaments. The Apocrypha provides a glimpse into the world of Second Temple Judaism (that is, Judaism from the time of the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem after the return from Babylonian exile) and is helpful for understanding the backdrop to the New Testament period.

While the Apocrypha has been read and studied throughout church history, Christian churches differ among themselves when it comes to the status and extent of the Apocrypha.

Bibles printed today typically contain the Old Testament (39 books, the whole Jewish Bible) and the New Testament (27 books about Jesus and the birth of Christianity). The Apocrypha consists of Jewish texts written in the years between the Old and New Testaments, that is, between approx 400 BC and the advent of Jesus. For this reason, the apocryphal books are often printed together as a collection between the Old and New Testament, though some Bibles disperse them throughout the other Old Testament books.

Many of the Bibles we see today do not contain the Apocrypha, especially those produced in Protestant contexts. However, throughout the history of Christianity, this is a relatively new development— it is only in the last 300 years or so that it has become common for these books to be omitted from printings of the Bible.

What’s it about?

The apocryphal books concern the time between the Jewish return from Babylonian exile under the Persian ruler, Cyrus, through to the time of the Greco-Roman empire. Through much of this intertestamental period the Jews were under various iterations of Greek rule. The Greek Empire had arrived with the conquests of Alexander the Great, but he died in 323 BCE, not long after establishing his vast empire. This was then divided between his generals. Jerusalem was located between the two most powerful of these divisions (Ptolemies and Seleucids) and was often caught up in their struggles for dominance.

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The Jews were largely allowed to continue their religious and cultural life without hindrance until Antiochus IV Epiphanes came to power. From 169 BCE he persecuted the Jews with increasing ferocity, forbidding Jewish religious practices like sabbath-keeping and circumcision on pain of death, and desecrating the temple. Jewish resistance to this culminated in the Maccabean revolt (167-164 BCE), which ultimately won the Jews a period of largely autonomous governance from 140 BCE until Jerusalem was placed under the rule of Herod the Great in 37 BCE. The Roman Empire had by this time become dominant, and Herod the Great was the Herod who, in time, was threatened by news of the birth of Jesus (Matthew 2). There are a variety of genres among the apocryphal books, including history (e.g. 1 & 2 Maccabees); wisdom (e.g. Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach); stories (e.g. Tobit and Judith); and apocalyptic (e.g. 2 Esdras, Enoch). They, along with the books of the Old Testament, formed the Jewish body of writings that constituted the theological world of Jesus—a world that included demons (references first appear in Tobit), the presence of Greek ideas and values in Jewish thought (e.g. in Sirach), Pharisees, Sadducees, and debates about the resurrection and afterlife.

A key theme throughout the Apocrypha is the importance of maintaining Jewish identity and purity in a Gentile—in this case, Hellenistic—context. Sometimes the pressure to compromise took the form of ‘soft power’, for Greek culture was appealing to many Jews. At other times it involved overt force and persecution. Related to this is the recurring discussion of why God’s people were suffering and under foreign rule, especially as the Gentile sinners around them were flourishing. Parallels are drawn between their current situation and their years of exile in Babylon: distresses are attributed to faithlessness among the people, and they are encouraged to stand firm and trust God who will ultimately bring salvation to the faithful. Stories like Judith and Tobit are added to those of Daniel and Esther—Jews who remained heroically faithful under persecution and were vindicated by God and provided encouragement in this context. Although not directly quoted by Jesus or the New Testament authors, many ideas and passages present in the apocryphal books are echoed in its pages. They were clearly part of the mental furniture of faithful first century Jews—the first Christians— and Christians have been encouraged to read them ever since for a deeper understanding of the world of the New Testament.

- Excerpted from author Michael F. Bird, case.edu.au (website)

Apocryphal Books:

- Additions to the Book of Esther
- Baruch
- Bel and the Dragon
- Ecclesiasticus (or Ben Sira)
- 1 Esdras
- 2 Esdras
- Judith
- Letter of Jeremiah
- 1 Maccabees
- 2 Maccabees
- 3 Maccabees
- 4 Maccabees
- The Prayer of Azariah
- Prayer of Manasseh
- Psalm 151
- Susanna
- Tobit
- Wisdom of Solomon

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As the titles suggest, many of these books take the Old Testament as their starting point. Since Esther never explicitly mentions the God of Israel, Additions to Esther includes phrases or verses that describe God's sovereign action and oversight of the story. Baruch was Jeremiah's beloved secretary ([Jeremiah 36:26](#)). With only 150 psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures, Psalm 151 is added. Manasseh was a wicked king over the southern kingdom ([2 Kings 21:1-9](#)) who repented after being imprisoned in Babylon ([2 Chronicles 33:10-13](#)). His prayer of repentance, according to [2 Chronicles 33:18-19](#), can be found in the lost Chronicles of the Kings of Israel. The Prayer of Manasseh claims to be that ancient prayer. And The Prayer of Azariah (Daniel's friend, also known as Abednego; [Daniel 1:6](#)), Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon expound on the Daniel narrative in significant ways.

All of these books fall under different categories of genre: historiography (1 Esdras, 1-3 Maccabees), wisdom (Ben Sira, Wisdom of Solomon, Baruch), historical romance (Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther and Daniel), and liturgical pieces (Psalm 151, Prayer of Manasseh, Prayer of Azariah, Song of the Three Young Men in the Addition to Daniel).

- Excerpted from author David Briones, desiringgod.org (website)

A Summary of some of the Apocryphal Books

Tobit: A short story/folk tale about a pious Jew named Tobit living in exile in Assyria. When Tobit falls ill with blindness, he sends his son Tobias to settle a debt with a distant relative. Tobias is unknowingly accompanied by the archangel Raphael in disguise, who leads him on a quest to save the pious maiden Sarah from the demon Asmodeus. Tobias succeeds and marries Sarah, settles his father's debt, and returns home, where Raphael reveals himself and Tobit pronounces a blessing on his children before passing away in peace. Likely composed sometime between 300 and 175 BC, Tobit seems to have been written both to entertain readers and to inspire respect for traditional Jewish values in the midst of life in exile: family, marrying within the covenant race, respecting the dead, and especially almsgiving. The book's emphasis on giving alms as a way of ensuring blessing for oneself is paralleled in Dan 4:27, and later echoed in Sirach, the NT (Luke 12:33-34; Acts 10:4; 1 Tim 6:18-19), and early Christian literature like the Didache, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Epistle of Barnabas. Tobit also displays developments in Jewish angelology in the intertestamental period.

Judith: A short story in which the land of Judah is besieged by Nebuchadnezzar's army and its commander, Holofernes, but is saved when the pious widow Judith manages to insinuate herself into Holofernes' company and behead him while his guard is down. The story, which was probably composed sometime after the Maccabean revolt (167-160 BC), is filled with dramatic irony and clever remixes of earlier biblical stories (such as Jael's defeat of Sisera in Judges 4). The presence of these riffs on other stories, as well as the many anachronisms in the

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book (like calling Nebuchadnezzar the king of Assyria rather than Babylon), suggest that it was meant to be read as a historical fiction or parable, perhaps to promote support for the Hasmonean party (the successors of Judas Maccabeus) in Judah against their Gentile enemies. It also promotes the Jewish faith by lampooning the Gentiles (and their gods), who are overthrown in the story by a lowly widow known only for her faithfulness in prayer and her observance of Torah.

Additions to Esther: The Greek translation of Esther found in the Septuagint texts contains several additional chapters not found in the Hebrew text tradition. These expansions do not change the core story much, but instead serve to make the book more explicitly religious through mentions of God and of the Torah. There are also several places where ancient “historical documents” are added into the text to bolster its historicity. Most of these additional scenes appear to have been composed later than the Hebrew version, and may have been motivated by efforts to secure the book of Esther’s canonical status. (There’s also a cool dream sequence where the struggle between Mordecai and Haman is represented by two dueling dragons. So that’s fun.)

Wisdom of Solomon: A theological reflection in the form of a fictional address from King Solomon to the rulers of the Gentile world. “Solomon” exhorts them to submit to God’s wisdom, abandon idolatry, and live righteously, or else they will face punishment at the final judgment. The second half of the book uses the plagues of the exodus as an example of the sovereign God’s ability to punish the wicked with the very things they worship, while delivering the righteous. Scholars generally hold that Wisdom of Solomon was composed in the first century BC in Alexandria, Egypt, which had a substantial Jewish population struggling to live amidst their pagan neighbors. This would explain the book’s denunciation of creature worship and its use of Exodus themes. By presenting itself as the testimony of Solomon from beyond the grave, it also ties itself to Israel’s other wisdom literature, such as the Psalms and Proverbs. Wisdom of Solomon significantly develops the concept of a judgment after death more than the OT did, and its depiction of a personified, heavenly Wisdom would later play a role in the church fathers’ explanations of Christ and the Trinity. Wisdom’s presentation of idolatry and God’s general revelation in nature appears to have had a large influence on Paul’s thought in Romans 1-3.

Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira): A sequel of sorts to the wisdom literature in the Old Testament, such as Proverbs (which Ben Sira obviously drew heavily from and modeled his work after) and Ecclesiastes. The author of the book was a Jewish sage named Yeshua ben Sira, and the book itself is a compilation and translation of his work into Greek by his grandson. Ben Sira was probably active around 196-175 BC, meaning that his work reflects the period shortly before the Maccabean crisis in Judea. The translation was probably produced between 132-115 BC. Sirach may have served as a curriculum of sorts for Jewish students to learn traditional wisdom rooted in Jewish piety during a time when there was pressure to conform to encroaching Greek culture and values. Many of the ethical teachings in Sirach are echoed in the NT (especially in Matt 6-7 and James 1). However, while much of the advice in Sirach is still quite helpful even today, it does sport a few intensely

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misogynistic passages (25:13-26; 26:10-12; 42:9-14), which played a role in later Jewish and Christian interpreters downplaying the book's authority as a sacred writing, or at least seeking to find its worth in its other passages.

Baruch (and The Letter of Jeremiah): This document purports to be an epistle from Baruch (Jeremiah's scribe and assistant) to the Jewish people living in exile in Babylon. It divides into three parts: the first section (1:1-3:8) reflects on the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile and includes a prayer of confession affirming God's covenant justice as prophesied in Deut 28-30. The second section (3:9-4:4) is a poem encouraging the Jewish people to seek the wisdom found in God's Torah. In the final section (4:5-5:9), a personified Jerusalem gives a poetic lament over her people's exile but predicts their eventual gathering and return from the east. A sixth chapter, often printed separately as The Letter of Jeremiah, is a scathing denunciation of Gentile idolatry, much like what is found in Jer 10:2-15. Both documents display how Jews in the Second Temple period reflected on their experience of exile and subjugation under the Gentiles in light of biblical prophecy.

The Prayer of Azariah & the Song of the Three: The first of three apocryphal Greek additions to the book of Daniel, inserted between Daniel 3:23 and 3:24 (the story of the Hebrew youths being thrown into the fiery furnace). This prayer and the following hymn were probably originally composed as separate liturgical pieces to be used in Jewish temple worship, but were placed into the mouths of the three Hebrew men in the fiery furnace, where they take on added theological significance – affirming God's justice and glory even in the midst of (literal!) fiery trials. The Song of the Three is still used to this day as a canticle (hymn) in the Anglican daily prayer office.

Susanna: The second addition to Daniel is a short story in which two wicked Jewish elders attempt to trap the beautiful Susanna to have an affair with her, but when she refuses they accuse her of adultery and attempt to have her executed. However, the wise youth Daniel manages to deduce the elders' trickery and thwart their wicked plot. Susanna has been called the world's first detective story. Susanna's decision to obey God even at the risk of her own life continues that central theme of the book of the Daniel, while Daniel's cleverness highlights the need for discernment even in court cases that seem black-and-white.

Bel and the Dragon: The third addition to Daniel, in which Daniel uses his wisdom to prove the falseness of Babylon's idols. In the first scene, he refutes the claim that the statue of Bel is able to eat its sacrifices. In the second, he proves that the king's "dragon" (or large snake) is not immortal when he manages to kill it. And in the final scene, Daniel in the lion's den is miraculously fed by the prophet Habakkuk.

The Prayer of Manasseh: A psalm of confession and repentance associated with Judah's king Manasseh (ruled 687-642 BC). While 2 Kings 21 presents Manasseh as the most wicked of all Judah's kings, whose idolatry eventually sealed the nation's doom, the version of his story told in 2 Chronicles 33 adds that he eventually repented. The idea of God's mercy being available to

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even the most wicked sinner in history is highlighted in this beautiful hymn, which praises the Lord as not only the God of the righteous, but “the God of those who repent.”

1 Maccabees: An account of the Maccabean revolt and the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty in Jerusalem. When Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes mandates Greek religion and culture in Judah and defiles the Temple, Judas Maccabeus and his brothers wage a guerrilla war for Judean independence and retake Jerusalem. One by one Judas and his brothers give their lives for the cause until the last one standing, Simon, establishes peace and becomes king and high priest of Judah. 1 Maccabees contains many echoes of the OT historical books, indicating that its author believed Simon’s line was providentially given victory in keeping with God’s covenant. It covers the period from 175 BC to around 104 BC, and so was likely written sometime around 100 BC, likely to encourage support of the Hasmonean priestly line. This was in the days of the Greek empire when Alexander the Great’s successors, the Seleucids in Palestine and the Ptolemies in Egypt, were fighting for power, and Rome was flourishing as a republic in the west. Many of these international intrigues play a role in 1 Maccabees.

2 Maccabees: While its title might suggest that this is a sequel to 1 Maccabees, this work was in fact likely written earlier and thus functions more as a prequel. It gives more detail and embellishment to the stories of Antiochus Epiphanes’ assault on Jerusalem and Judas Maccabeus’ liberation efforts (175 to 167 BC). 2 Maccabees is an abbreviation of a longer account that is lost to history, and its author chooses to highlight the sacredness of the Jerusalem Temple and the bravery of those who died as martyrs rather than assimilate to Greek religion. The account of Judas’ purification of the Temple is the historical basis behind the holiday of Hanukkah (or the “Feast of Dedication” – see John 10:22).

The Books of Esdras: What is sometimes referred to as 3 Esdras (but in the NRSV and many other editions is called 1 Esdras) is a retelling of the biblical book of Ezra, but with a few additional scenes (including a famous scene where the Jewish leader Zerubbabel wins a contest of wits in the court of King Darius). The book sometimes called 4 Esdras (but often printed as 2 Esdras) is a composite work, most of which dates to the end of the first century AD (contemporaneous with some of the NT). In it, Ezra receives apocalyptic visions of the end of the world and the arrival of the “Son of Man.” It is essentially a Jewish parallel to the NT book of Revelation, which shares similar themes but identifies the Son of Man as Jesus. Thus 4 Esdras, while written too late to have been a direct influence on the NT, nonetheless serves as an example of the kinds of apocalyptic themes and ideas that were circulating among Jews in the first century AD.

- Excerpted from author Derek Demars, “Theology Pathfinder” website

If your study Bible does not contain the Apocrypha, you can access it online at www.biblestudytools.com

FOR JANUARY 23 READ: 1 Maccabees 1-2, 8; 2 Maccabees 10