

## Chapter Eight

# The Apocrypha and Post-Exilic Literature

### *Introduction*

The biblical books known as the “Apocrypha” have a distinctive place in the Bible. “Apocrypha” literally means “hidden things” in Greek, and the term links these books with the myriad gospels, histories, prophetic, and apocalyptic works produced between the third century BCE and the second century CE by different belief communities. Gnostic Christians in particular valued the notion of secret or occult (hidden) knowledge available only to truly dedicated seekers of truth. Some writings we now call apocryphal were originally included in the earliest Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint (third century BCE), versions of which have been found at Qumran.

In English, however, “apocryphal” has come to mean unreliable. Likewise, “Apocryphal,” or “Deuterocanonical” works have ambiguous canonical status. Still, before the Christian canon of the “Old Testament” was established in the fourth century CE, many Christian writers freely cited these texts as scripture.

The Hebrew Bible eventually excluded these “apocryphal” books. St. Jerome, the fourth century CE translator of the Latin Vulgate Bible, therefore, believed that because these works were not included in the Hebrew Bible, Christians should not consider apocryphal works as scripture with the same status as the books admitted to the Hebrew Bible. Jerome’s contemporary, St. Augustine of Hippo, however, insisted upon retaining some apocryphal books, and his argument carried the day until the Protestant Reformation, when some reformers rejected their scriptural status while other confessions retained them. Greek and Russian Orthodox Bibles include a greater number of apocryphal texts than does the Latin Vulgate. (For a comparison, see Fig. 2 in “Composition, Editing, and Transmission.”)

Apocryphal books of the Bible include Tobit; Judith; the Wisdom of Solomon; Ecclesiasticus (also called the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach); Baruch; First, Second, Third, and Fourth Maccabees; First and Second Esdras; the Prayer of Manasseh; the Letter of Jeremiah (Baruch ch. 6); and Psalm 151. Composed in Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic (and sometimes even a combination of these languages), apocryphal scripture often exhibits Hellenistic influence both in terms of genre and of philosophy. Other apocryphal books, like some canonical books, make use of Mesopotamian references and lore, or mix

together different times and historical characters, as the Book of Judith does in making the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar an Assyrian. In addition to these complete books of apocryphal scripture, apocryphal additions have been made to certain texts in the official canon. The Greek versions of Esther and Daniel feature material not included in the Masoretic Hebrew edition (Coogan et al, xvi).

Modern Bible scholars agree that the books of the Apocrypha were probably composed following the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem and the subsequent deportation of Judeans to Babylon in 586 BCE. When Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BCE, he extended to the Jews of Babylon the opportunity to return to their homeland, now a Persian province called “Yehud.” During the two hundred years after the Assyrians conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel, and the almost fifty years since the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem’s first temple, Judeans and Israelites had relocated all over the Mediterranean, by force and by choice. Major populations had settled in Egypt and Mesopotamia. One consequence of this diaspora meant that large communities were unfamiliar with Hebrew and came into intimate contact with other cultures.

Exiled Judeans who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon were concerned to retain their distinct identity as the people of Israel, of YHWH, and so they began to collect and preserve the scrolls of legend, history, prophecy, and lore that reminded Judeans not only of who they were but also of how they were different from other peoples. Persian-era Babylonian Judeans were empowered by Cyrus to rebuild the temple Nebuchadnezzar’s forces had destroyed, and so this era is sometimes called the “Second Temple period,” ending with the Roman destruction of this temple in 70 CE. Ezra and Nehemiah were apparently commissioned by Cyrus to recover the law of Israel and see that it was followed in the land. Ezra and Nehemiah may have overseen the beginnings of the lengthy compilation and redaction of Hebrew scriptures that eventually resulted in the canonical Hebrew Bible. During this Second Temple Period (538 BCE -70 CE) the temple “became a nucleus of the restored community, and consequently a focus of conflict (Isa 56-66; Mal)” (Coogan et al xvi).

The Persian conquerors of Babylon were in their turn conquered, 200 years later, by Alexander the Great. With his subjugation of the Southern Mediterranean in 333-323 BCE, and the establishment of the Seleucid and Ptolemaic dynasties in Mesopotamia and Egypt respectively, Greek influence pervaded the region, and Greek ideas began to inform traditional exegetical practice and writings, enriching them with new ideas. “Because this was a period of self-conscious reconstruction, it was also a time of immense literary activity, as traditional materials were collected, revised, and edited, and new works

composed” (Coogan et al xvii). As biblical and talmudic scholar Shaye Cohen describes it, the literature of Greece stimulated Jewish writers to express their history and thought in new genres, such as the romance, the novel, the drama, and the philosophical treatise (Cohen 43-44), as well as making use of older genres. Ezekielus wrote a play based on Exodus, according to Clement of Alexandria. The philosopher Philo of Alexandria (15 BCE-50 CE) attempted to align the God of Israel with the God of Plato (Cohen 44). But Greek, or “Hellenistic,” cultural practices also threatened Judean identity, a conflict that erupted during the era chronicled by 1 and 2 Maccabees.

### ***Wisdom Literature***

As with the canonical Bible, apocryphal books comprise a variety of genres, including wisdom, history, apocalypse, and even what we might call the novel. Many of the books of the Apocrypha were written in Greek or Aramaic, a lingua franca related to Hebrew and used from the sixth century BCE until it was supplanted by Arabic in the seventh century CE. The canonical books of Ecclesiastes, Daniel, Ruth, and Esther were also written during this time, and resemble apocryphal texts in genre and content (Barton 4-5).

Wisdom literature, popular during this period, has a moral, exhortatory orientation, sometimes making use of Greek rhetorical modes and philosophies. The apocryphal wisdom books, *Wisdom of Solomon* and *Ecclesiasticus*, are important contributions to the genre. (*Ecclesiasticus* should not be confused with *Ecclesiastes*; this is one of the few biblical books with a named author, Jesus Son of Sirach, also known as Ben Sira, or Sirach. *Ecclesiasticus* is its Latin name, meaning “church book,” probably meant to validate it for use as a Christian text.)

### ***Tobit and Judith***

*Tobit*, *Judith*, and the apocryphal additions to *Esther* and *Daniel* employ folkloric structures and shared narrative strategies and preoccupations with the Greek romances also being written during this time. The apocryphal texts reference canonical Hebrew scriptures to provide context and justification.

The book of *Tobit*, for example, alludes to canonical scripture when, in his role as officer to a foreign king, Tobit recalls his compatriots Joseph and Daniel, who also served foreign kings. In his search for a bride from his own people, and in his intimacy with the angel Raphael, Tobit is like the Patriarchs (Levine 10). But the book also makes use of well-

known folkloric conventions such as the “dangerous bride, the monster in the nuptial chamber, the supernatural being in disguise, the miraculous animal, and the grateful dead” (Levine 11). In keeping with the syncretistic aspects of some scripture, Tobit also references an Assyrian official, Ahikar, from a tale broadly known in antiquity (Levine 11).

The book of Judith, like the canonical books Ruth and Esther, focuses on the resolve and bravery of a woman. Judith is obviously fictional: though the story is set during the Assyrian period, it names Nebuchadnezzar, a Babylonian, as king and employs anachronistic Persian details. It recapitulates themes of beauty, allurement, bravery, and piety displayed by the canonical heroines Tamar, Rahab, Jael, Ruth, and Esther. Like Greek romances, it features “a heroine in distress, narrow escapes, and a happy ending” (Cohen 43). In the apocryphal sections of Daniel, stories about Susannah and Bel highlight Daniel’s role as wise man and almost read like detective stories, while the third apocryphal Daniel story about the dragon condemns pagan worship as irrational and introduces another episode of Daniel imprisoned in a den of hungry lions, as in Daniel 6:16-24. (The Septuagint and the Vulgate place Susannah’s story after Daniel 13.)

### ***Maccabees***

The last genre represented in the Apocrypha is history. Though there are four books called “Maccabees,” only the First and Second Maccabees offer historical accounts of the experience of Jews in Jerusalem during the years of the Maccabean revolt (167-164 BCE). A priestly family, the Hasmoneans—Mattathias and his sons Judas, Jonathan, and Simon—led a revolt against the idolatry and persecution of the Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV (also called Antiochus Epiphanes). The Hasmoneans’ combination of guerrilla warfare and diplomacy succeeded in establishing Jewish control over Judea until the Roman conquest of the area in 63 BCE. The books received their name from a nickname given to the heroic Judas, who was called the “Hammer,” or *maqabi* in Hebrew.

First Maccabees was originally written in Hebrew, though it is now known only in Greek and Latin translations. Its account of the purification of the desecrated Temple inspired the festival of Chanukah. Second Maccabees was composed in the literary Greek of the second century BCE, and combines Hellenistic elements with Hebrew elements in a distinctive fashion. According to Daniel R. Schwartz, though the Maccabees display the virtues of Hellenized gentlemen (for example, moderation and modesty), they are unquestionably zealous advocates for Jewish independence from Hellenistic norms and practices. Second Maccabees is addressed more clearly to Jews of the Hellenistic Diaspora, given its emphasis on God’s residence in Heaven (rather than in the Temple),

its praise for martyrs, and its making people rather than place the locus of God's action on earth (2 Macc. 5: 19). According to Shaye Cohen, the Maccabean revolt responds one of the first recorded instances of specifically religious persecution in the program of forced "Hellenization" by Antiochus Epiphanes of Syria (Cohen 30). In this context, religious faithfulness in the face of gruesome persecution was particularly valued, and a new genre, of martyrology, was founded. This new genre highlighted individual conscience and divine reward in the afterlife, a doctrine that became even more important in early Christianity (Cohen 92).

### ***Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion***

#### Tobit

1. Amy-Jill Levine points out that Tobit seems geared towards diaspora communities in its thematizing the maintenance of Israelite identity through means other than temple worship. How do Tobit's and Sarah's families establish and maintain their status as people of YHWH?
2. What role does the supernatural play in the story? Examine the characters and roles of Raphael and Asmodeus.
3. How does the Book of Tobit use Hebrew scripture as a guide? Is it similar to or different from the religious guiding principles found in the Torah?
4. Does Tobit's story conform to the shape of the Patriarchal stories it references (e.g., Isaac, Jacob)? What do its common and divergent elements convey about the writer's orientation and purpose?

#### Judith

1. Judith has been a favorite heroine in both Jewish and Christian traditions. How is her character established and developed so that we praise her actions rather than condemning her for immodesty and stepping out of women's designated roles?
2. Judith's narrative may be divided into 2 parts: chs 1-7 describe the might of Nebuchadnezzar and other Mesopotamian rulers, and thematize the fear, conquest, and submission of many peoples. How does Judith's story (chapters 8-16) address these themes?

3. Further exploration: search for images of Judith; she has long been a favorite topic for painters. What is the most striking image, and why? How does the portrait comment on Judith's character, interpret her story?

### Daniel: Susanna, Bel and the Dragon

1. What are Daniel's chief traits in each of these stories? How do they compare to the Daniel of the canonical Bible?
2. As with the story of Judith, Susanna's story has been a popular one with painters. What can the artistic popularity of her story—especially the scenes most typically rendered—tell us about cultural values and preoccupations over time?
3. How do the stories of Bel and the Dragon convey pagan worship? Are they similar to or different from analogous stories in 1 and 2 Samuel or some of the other historical books of the Bible?

### Maccabees

1. How does the Hasmonean rebellion against Antiochus compare with the conflicts described in 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings?
2. Compare the account of Antiochus' actions and the faithful opposition in 1 Maccabees 1:54-2:41 with 2 Maccabees 6, 7, the story of the martyrdoms of Eleazer and the seven brothers. How do their rhetorical appeals differ? What changes do you see in each history's approach to death and dying?

### ***Works Cited and Further Reading***

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