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WHAT'S IN THE APOCRYPHA?

By David Phillips

The order and names are those given in our Articles followed in parenthesis by other names by which they are sometimes known.

The Third Book of Esdras (1 Esdras, 2 Esdras)

Esdras is the Latin for Ezra and the 9 chapters of the book consist mostly of regurgitation of parts of 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. The one unique part (3.1-5.6) contains an account of how Zerubabel persuaded King Darius to allow the exiles to return and rebuild the city and temple and take the items looted by Cyrus.

The Fourth Book of Esdras (3 Esdras)

This book consists of seven visions given to Ezra whilst he was in Babylon. It has similarities to the book of Daniel and is sometimes called 'The Apocalypse' of Ezra.

These two books are in the Latin Vulgate but not counted as canonical Scripture by Rome. They are called 3&4 Esdras, whilst 1&2 Esdras are Ezra & Nehemiah. The Greek has only 1 Esdras, and the Slavonic calls them 2 & 3 Esdras (combining Ezra & Nehemiah as 1 Esdras).

The Book of Tobias (Tobit)

Tobit was a member of the tribe of Naphtali who was taken as a captive to Nineveh when the Assyrians destroyed the northern tribes of Israel. The book recounts his life in exile including his romance with Sarah, another exile. It appears to have been written in at least 150BC in Hebrew or Aramaic. There are two quotations from Tobit in the BCP Communion service (the verses before the offertory) and the book has more ethical and moral example than most.

The Book of Judith

Judith was a widow in the city Behulia when it was besieged by the Assyrians. After atrocities were committed by the conquerors Judith assassinated their leader Holofernes. Judith appears to be another old book, written in Hebrew or Aramaic but usually considered to be historical fiction.

The rest of the Book of Esther (Additions to Esther)

The canonical book of Esther cries out at every turn to mention the LORD but never does. This feature drives home the reality of the exile – the people of God seem separated from God, and yet His hand of providence is always at work. In the Greek and Latin texts there are three extra sections most of which appear intended to provide what is deemed lacking in the canonical text but therefore destroy something of the character of the original. This does not mean the other incidents were not genuine, it is just that Scripture was written as it is for a purpose.

The Book of Wisdom (Wisdom of Solomon)

Wisdom consists of sayings akin to Proverbs and parts of Ecclesiastes. Whilst the book is not quoted in the New Testament there are a number of instances of very similar ideas. For example compare Romans 1.20ff with

Wis. 13:1,8 For all people who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know the one who exists Yet again, not even they are to be excused;

The book is reckoned to show how Jewish understanding of the Old Testament was developing in preparation for the coming of Christ. It is well written in Greek whilst showing familiarity with

Hebrew style. Though the title seems to imply association with Solomon the text itself does not claim this directly.

Jesus the Son of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus or Sirach)

The Joshua (Jesus) of the title wrote down some of the sayings of his father Sirach, fifty one chapters of them and a prologue. It has been widely used by Christians through the ages and earned the name 'ecclesiasticus' because it was widely read in the early Church. It is an ancient book, written in Hebrew or Aramaic and was apparently well known by pre-Christian sources too. There are a number of places where verses in the New Testament are similar to those in Sirach, but no actual quotation. It seems most likely that some of the sayings were in common currency at that time. Compare James 1.19 with

Sir 5:1 Be quick to hear, but deliberate in answering.

Baruch the Prophet

Baruch was one of the exiles, and a friend of Jeremiah. There are four distinct parts and some consider that these had separate origins not least because of differences in style. The first part is an exhortation to the exiles in the light of the judgement of God. The second is a praise of Wisdom and was seen by many church fathers as a direct prophecy of Christ. The third part is a lament followed by further exhortation. The fourth part, chapter six, is a letter from Jeremiah to the exiles and is often cited a separate book in the Apocrypha called, not surprisingly 'The Letter of Jeremiah'.

Additions to the Book of Daniel

The next three books in the Apocrypha are additions to the canonical book of Daniel and, like the additions to Esther, they are included in the main text in most Greek and Latin Bibles though not in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Song of the Three Children (Azariah)

This consists of two parts both of which are inserted between verse 23 and 24 of Daniel chapter 3. First is a Prayer of Azariah (Abednego) after he and his friends survived the fiery furnace. Second is the Song of the Three in which they praise God for their deliverance. This is better known to us as *Benedicite, Omnia Opera* one of the Canticles for Morning Prayer. (When I was a curate, not as long ago as it sounds, we used to sing a good version of this - '*Angels praise Him! Spirits praise Him! Something something. La de da da...*' - that's about as much as I can remember).

The Story of Susanna

Susanna was a beautiful, god-fearing and married woman blackmailed by two Jewish elders. They gave her the choice of committing adultery with them or they would accuse her publicly of adultery. Susanna chose purity and to trust in God but was convicted and condemned to death. The Lord spoke to the young Daniel who quickly re-called the court and exposed the deceit through his questioning with the result that Susanna was saved and her accusers executed. Susanna is a clear example of faithfulness and purity and the name Susan appears to take its origin and popularity from the book. This is chapter 13 in the Septuagint.

Of Bel and the Dragon

Bel was a statue who was not only worshipped by the Babylon but also ate their offerings. Daniel ridiculed this (no doubt he would have been convicted of religious hatred today) and in a test conducted by the King caught the priests and their families red handed as they stole the food away. The dragon was also worshipped as a god and this time Daniel demonstrated that it was only flesh and blood by poisoning it. For this he was cast to the lions at which point there is a peculiar guest appearance by the prophet Habakkuk transported there by an Angel and Daniel is kept secure.

These two stories are old and were well known in the pre-Christian era. They form chapter 14 of Daniel in the Septuagint.

The Prayer of Manasses

This eloquent prayer asserts to be that mentioned in 2 Chronicles 23.18, a penitential prayer of Manasseh, King of Judah. It was used in the Churches and is in the appendix to Latin Bibles, but is not held canonical by Rome.

The First Book of Maccabees

This book contains a long and detailed account of the Maccabean revolt from roughly 175BC to 134BC. During this time Judea was under constant threat and persecution and the Maccabees, in particular Judas Maccabeus, spearheaded the Jewish resistance. The book was written in Hebrew not long after the events it describes and is generally held in high regard as a piece of history.

The Second Book of Maccabees

This is less highly regarded as history but its two parts do apparently give more details of the Maccabean period. The book was popular with early Christians because of its accounts of martyrdoms which are alluded to in Hebrews 11.35. Unlike the canonical scriptures this one book supports the idea of prayer for the dead.

There are two other books of the Maccabees which do not appear in the Latin Vulgate although 3 Maccabees was included in the Greek Apocrypha and 4 Maccabees as an appendix.