

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lessons 53 & 54

The Apocrypha – Parts Two & Three

Last lesson, we discussed what the Apocrypha was and why some groups have felt it authoritative as scripture while other groups have not. People who may have missed that lesson are urged to get a copy. While our lecture will refresh people on those issues, this written lesson will assume the knowledge already given in the last lesson. The focus of this lesson will be on:

- (1) the historical context of the Apocryphal/inter-testamental time period with a view toward how this informs us about matters recorded in the New Testament; and
- (2) the types of materials and the general content in the Apocryphal books, as well as the uses of the Apocrypha in the New Testament.

I. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The books of the Apocrypha were written during the inter-testamental time period. This time period refers to the roughly 400-plus years between the Old Testament history and the events recorded in the New Testament. A number of the Apocryphal books relate the historical events that transpired during that time period. So, both by direct historical reference and by implication of the material, we can understand much of the religious, political, and social conditions in Judea following the close of the Old Testament.

There are several other sources that help finish the picture of this time period. One of the most important is from the works of Flavius Josephus, a first century A.D. Jewish historian who wrote histories of the Jewish people. We learn from these texts and others that after the death of Alexander the Great, his kingdom was divided into five provinces administered basically by his generals. Ruling from Alexandria, Egypt was Ptolemy I, who initially ruled as regent for the mentally infirmed half-brother of Alexander. Ptolemy and his offspring ruled from Egypt for over 100 years. Ptolemy II was the initial causative factor in the translating of Hebrew writings into Greek for use by dispersed yet devout Jews.

During the reign of Ptolemy III, there was considerable discontent between the Jews in Judea along with the High Priest power structure and the government of Ptolemy III. The Jews made efforts to move allegiance to another province that was carved out of Alexander's kingdom ruled from Syria by the Seleucid dynasty (named after Seleucus I).

A common name in the Seleucid regime was Antiochus. There were multiple rulers who carried that name. In the 200 B.C. era, Antiochus III occupied Judea and made it a part of the Syrian province. During this time, the Jews disputed as to whether to hope for being a part of the Seleucid province of Syria or the province of Egypt. A similar debate was raging over whether to "modernize" in the Greek manner or whether to keep the culture and traditions of the Hebrew fathers and the Hebrew faith.

Into this picture came Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Antiochus Epiphanes changes the High Priest in Jerusalem and orders the immediate Hellenization ("imposition of Greek culture") upon Judea and Jerusalem. Basically, Antiochus Epiphanes sought to extinguish Judaism as a belief or way of life. He even went so far as to set up Greek worship of Zeus in the Temple of Yahweh. People were ordered to worship and sacrifice to Zeus or to face the penalty of death.

Matthias was a man who became an activist leader in a rebellion against Antiochus. Matthias fought until his death in 167 B.C., whereupon his son Judas Maccabees succeeded him. Judas fought hard and was mostly successful. Ultimately, he forced a treaty that allowed Jews to restore orthodoxy as an accepted practice.

As the 2nd century B.C. came to a close, the Pharisees were first mentioned by name in extant writings. With their support largely from the artisans and middle class, the Pharisees were those Jews who were emphatic about maintaining the elements and rituals of Judaism untouched by any corruption of Greek influence.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, came predominantly from the priestly families and enjoyed support from the power structure. The interests of the Sadducees were much more on politics and power than piety and purity.

Not all the Apocryphal books focus on this time period, even though most were written in this era. As we turn to the content of the books, we see that many placed themselves in the historical context of much earlier times in the history of the Jews.

II. BOOK CONTENT

The First Book of Esdras

This is a historical book that largely recounts the historical data already contained in parts of the Old Testament. The events recount much of what is found in I and II Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, but with a twist. The historical information of I Esdras is inconsistent and divergent from much of the stories already given in the Old Testament. In addition to the recounting of other Old Testament material, I Esdras also contains a supplemental story of some interest. That story is known as the *Debate of the Three Soldiers*.

In the *Debate*, we find three soldiers passing the time by trying to answer a question of what is the most powerful thing in the world. The first soldier believes wine to be the most powerful. He argues that wine reduces all to the same level. The second soldier argues that the king was most powerful because armies of men would follow the command of the king. Indeed, the king passed laws that all people must obey. The third soldier started by suggesting that women were most powerful. The soldier notes that men spend their lives trying to make money, gain property, and find treasure. Ultimately, however, those men bring these things home to women. Though the third soldier made a compelling point on the women response, he shifts his ultimate opinion, opting instead for “truth” as the most powerful thing in the world. The soldier reasons that truth can never be denied, but manages to hold the world together. The third soldier wins.

Both I and II Esdras are the two books which Luther failed to include even in his Apocrypha because they contained nothing which Luther did not feel could be more easily found in Aesop’s fables.

The Second Book of Esdras

This book was most likely composed in sections. The core of the book contains apocalyptic visions about the future. These apocalyptic visions come complete with various animal and plant symbols for the events and coming Messiah. In addition to the apocalyptic visions, there is a two chapter preface that seems to

come from the middle of the second century A.D. and recounts certain matters from a Christian perspective. In this part of the book, Ezra sets forth his charge as convicting the Jews of their sin and announcing God's choice of the Gentiles to become believers and participate in the Savior.

The apocalyptic visions center on the following issues:

- (1) the problem of evil (where an angel Uriel explains that the human mind is too limited to fathom all God is about);
- (2) why unrighteous nations got to judge Israel (the answer being that the process of history is inscrutable, but that there are signs of the coming age where those who are faithful will be rewarded);
- (3) why the Jews had not yet inherited the earth (where Uriel again comes to discuss the number of those to be saved, explaining not only final judgment and the fate of the wicked, but also a 400 year reign of the Messiah before the day of judgment);
- (4) the coming punishment of Israel (with the promised vision of a coming New Jerusalem);
- (5) a vision of a three-headed/twelve-winged eagle that arose from the sea only to be confronted by a lion that terminates the eagle (symbolizing the Messiah who would punish the wicked at the end of the age);
- (6) a vision of a powerful man rising from the sea and destroying his enemies by fire (symbolizing the son of man, his undetermined arising, and his work); and
- (7) an explanation of how Ezra came to dictate the 24 books of the Old Testament along with 70 other spiritual books.

Tobit

Tobit is a book of what might be called pious fiction. Most likely written around 190 to 170 B.C., the book centers on a fellow named Tobit who lived in Galilee around 721 B.C., before being deported to Nineveh. Tobit was a holy fellow who sought to follow God and God's commands. Misfortune causes Tobit to become blind and to lose his ability to support his family. Tobit quarrels with his wife and prays for God to release him from his sufferings by taking his life.

Meanwhile, far away, a distant kinswoman of Tobit was also praying for death. This girl, Sarah, had been married seven times, but each husband died before the marriages could be consummated. Rather than kill either one, God sends his angel Raphael (meaning “God heals”) to aid the two.

Tobit believes he is about to die and gives his son Tobias some last instructions, including the reverse of the Golden Rule: “What you hate, do not do to anyone” (4:15). Tobias is then sent on an errand to the same distant land where Sarah lives. Through the unknown intervention and advice of Raphael, Tobias is given the means to drive away a demon or evil spirit that was molesting anyone. As Tobias neared the city of Sarah, word came to Tobias that Tobias was obligated to marry Sarah as the nearest kinsman. Tobias knew of the demise of the previous seven, and Tobias was NOT excited.

The angel Raphael, still in disguise, explained to Tobias a demon was responsible for the killings, and by following Raphael’s advice, Tobias could safely drive the demon away. Confident of this advice, Tobias makes his proposal and intention to marry known. Sarah’s father, who was not an optimist about the whole affair, digs a grave for Tobias on the night of the wedding. The grave is useless, however, because Tobias follows Raphael’s INSTRUCTIONS and the demon flees.

Meanwhile, Tobit and his wife are worried sick that something has happened to their son on his journey. The son’s return with a wife is marked with great happiness. The son then uses another potion/prescription of the angel in disguise to cure Tobit’s blindness. Tobit and Tobias then find out that this helpful stranger was in fact an angel of God. And, they all lived happily ever after!

Two matters of note beyond the story line itself. First, in Christian history, this story has formed the basis of a number of different marriage matters. For a long time in the middle ages, couples in an effort to keep piety would wait four nights to consummate their marriages as Tobias and Sarah did. The first three nights were dedicated to prayer. (King Louis IX of France – later canonized as St. Louis – followed the three-night wait for his marriage in 1234). Even the Amish Minister’s Manual instructs the preacher of weddings to relate the story of Tobit.

The second matter of note concerns the issues this story tells us about Jewish life in the second century B.C. Piety that centered on prayer, fasting, and almsgiving is underscored throughout the text. The importance of giving an honorable burial to one killed for no good reason is also taught. Also, important in the text is the prevalence of angels and demons interacting in the world in manners and amounts not set forward in any Old Testament book; yet, such demonic and angelic activity is almost taken for granted in the New Testament.

Judith

While some support the historicity of Judith, most see it as a religious allegory. The history of the book itself has a number of glaring inaccuracies to both Biblical texts and historical texts. The book centers on the cunning and clever acts of a Jewess named Judith who manages to single handedly overthrow the forces of Nebuchadnezzar. Judith dolls herself up and goes into the camp of Nebuchadnezzar's General Holofernes and gains the general's confidence that Judith can help the General conquer Judea. The General begins to entertain lustful thoughts about Judith, which gives her an opportunity to catch the general unaware and behead him. The result of this action caused the enemy to flee in confusion.

The thrust of the book was to edify folks into not submitting to enemies, but to trust in God and his power to rescue.

Esther

The Apocrypha adds a number of passages to the Esther story to bring in elements of prayer, devotion, and faith in God that are otherwise missing from the Hebrew text of Esther.

The Wisdom of Solomon

This is a wisdom book that claims to be the wisdom of Solomon, although no scholar or church father that studied the book carefully has claimed that Solomon actually wrote it. A considerable amount of the teaching in the book sets out a distinctly Platonic view of life. This view teaches about matter as eternal, the pre-existence of the soul, and the temporary imprisonment of the body in the soul. The book, as noted in the last lecture, also on its own terms, seems to repudiate the doctrine of Purgatory.

It seems most probable that Paul, among others in the New Testament, had a good awareness of the writings in this book. Some of the ideas and language of Paul echo the words contained in wisdom. A comparison of Romans 1: 20 to Wisdom 13:5-8; 1:21 to 13:1; 1:22 to 12:24; 1:26-31 to 14:24-27 are striking in the similarities (*see also* Rom 9:20-23 compared to Wisdom 12:12; 15:7; and 12:20). Similar apt comparisons can be made between passages in John, Hebrews, James, Ephesians, and Corinthians.

Ecclisiasticus also known as *The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach*

Like the Wisdom of Solomon, this book falls into the genre of wisdom literature. The author, commonly called Ben Sira (meaning “Son of Sirach”) was evidently a scribe (10:5; 38:24f; 44:4). It seems from reading the text a fair assumption that Ben Sira ran a “school” in Jerusalem where he taught moral and religious precepts to young people. The book was most likely written around 180 B.C. and uses the book of Proverbs as a model of how it presents its material.

Baruch

This short book is named after Baruch, the secretary to Jeremiah. The short 5-chapter book contains an amalgam of verses largely from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job, and Daniel. The book is put together around a confession of sin, prayers for mercy and pardon, a discussion of wisdom, and words of assurance and consolation for the Jewish exiles.

The Letter of Jeremiah

This book gets placed in various places in the Apocrypha. Some put it by itself, others as a part of Baruch. The original writing appears to have been a pamphlet written to demonstrate the powerlessness of idols and the foolish uselessness in worshipping them.

The Additions to the Book of Daniel

The Apocrypha has three major additions to the Book of Daniel: (1) The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men; (2) Susanna; and (3) Bel and the Dragon. Generally these stories were incorporated into the text of the Old Testament book of Daniel.

(1) Azariah

Azariah was the Hebrew name of Abednego, one of Daniel's three companions who eventually went into the fiery furnace. This passage contains his prayer followed by some details of God's deliverance for the three men. The passage concludes with a prayer of praise from the three.

(2) Susanna

Susanna is a short story about the beautiful wife of a prominent Jew. Two of the elders/judges get carried away with lust for Susanna and plot to molest her. As they attempt to molest Susanna, she is coerced with the threat that refusal on her part will result in the men accusing her of committing adultery with another. Based on their dual testimony, they assure her that she will lose and be stoned. Rather than submit to their lechery, Susanna screams for help. At her subsequent trial where the elders unjustly accuse her, Susanna loudly protests her innocence until a young Daniel hears her. Daniel steps in with a brilliant cross examination of the witnesses causing their story to crumble. Susanna is saved, and the false witnesses are killed.

(3) Bel and the Dragon

This insert is two different tales: one involving Bel and the second a dragon. Bel was the Babylonian cult god also known as Marduk. In this Apocryphal story, Daniel proves that Bel is not all that King Darius thought he was. By showing that Bel was not really eating the nightly sacrifices, Daniel is ultimately permitted to destroy Bel's image and the associated temple. The dragon was another recipient of the king's worship which Daniel destroys by feeding it a concoction of hair, tar, and fat. The dragon explodes, much to the chagrin of the people. The people insist that Daniel be thrown in the lion's den. After spending the better part of a week in the lion's den, Daniel is brought out unharmed.

The Prayer of Manasseh

This beautiful and heartfelt prayer is set out in the Apocrypha as the prayer of evil and wicked King Manasseh who sought God late in his life living as a captive in Babylon (see 2 Chronicles 33:11ff). The prayer begins with praise to God Almighty who manifests his glory in creation and in the granting of a sinner's repentance. Manasseh then prays with confession for his personal sins with a request for God's forgiveness. The Prayer ends with an appropriate doxology.

1 and 2 Maccabees

These are history books that relate much of the inter-testamental history discussed earlier in this outline. 1 Maccabees was most likely written around 134 to 110 B.C. It seems an attempt to chronicle the life of the Jewish people under the Greek period (in much the same manner that Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles set out the Persian period). Most scholars believe the accounts to be reasonably accurate in their historical portrayal of the events covered by the book.

1 Maccabees gives a chronological discourse of the Jews from the struggle under Antiochus Epiphanes in 175 B.C. to the death of Simon Maccabaeus in 134 B.C. Antiochus is vividly shown to be a sadistic, egocentric ruler who sought to impose Greek culture upon everyone in his jurisdiction by any means necessary. The resistance to this imposed idolatry comes from a fellow named Mattathias and his five sons. These men are able over time to regain control of Jerusalem, rededicate the defiled Temple, and restore the sacrificial system.

2 Maccabees is a bit different. Rather than give a near clinical, news reporting, historical picture of the times and events, 2 Maccabees gives a more "National Enquirer" write up of about 15 years leading up to 160 B.C. 2 Maccabees is not in any way a continuation of 1 Maccabees. It seems to derive its title from the fact that it is a SECOND book about the time of the Maccabees.

2 Maccabees emphasized life after death for the righteous (7:36) as well as a restored physical body (7:11ff; 14:26).

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Scripture gives us all we need for salvation.
2. There are good reasons for believing in our scriptures.
3. Enjoy your honeymoon; never mind the Apocrypha!
4. God's timing will produce God's Messiah.