

Study Helps

Bible Dictionary

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Apocrypha

Secret or hidden. By this word is generally meant those sacred books of the Jewish people that were not included in the Hebrew Bible (see *Canon*). They are valuable as forming a link connecting the Old and New Testaments and are regarded in the Church as useful reading, although not all the books are of equal value. They are the subject of a revelation recorded in **D&C 91**, in which it is stated that the contents are mostly correct but with many interpolations by man. Among these books the following are of special value:

The First Book of Esdras. Contains an account of Josiah's religious reforms and the subsequent history down to the destruction of the Temple 588 B.C. It then describes the return under Zerubbabel and the events that followed, of which we have another account in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Esdras is another form of the name Ezra.

In Esdras 3:1–5:6 is a story that tells how Zerubbabel by his wisdom as page of Darius won the king's favor and obtained permission to restore the captive Jews to their own country. This section is entirely independent of the canonical scriptures.

Of the date of the compilation of the book we know nothing save that its contents were known to Josephus (born A.D. 38).

The Second Book of Esdras. Contains seven visions or revelations made to Ezra, who is represented as grieving over the afflictions of his people and perplexed at the triumph of gentile sinners. The book is marked by a tone of deep melancholy. The only note of consolation is presented in the thought of the retribution that is to fall upon the heads of the Gentiles who have crushed the Jews. The references to the Messiah (7:28–29; 12:32; 13:32, 37, 52) deserve special notice. Many scholars feel the book was composed in the 1st century A.D.

The Book of Tobit. The story is briefly as follows: Tobit is a Jew of the tribe of Naphtali, living in Nineveh, a pious God-fearing man and very strict in the observance of the Jewish law. Trouble comes upon him, and he loses his eyesight. He sends his son Tobias to fetch ten talents of silver, which he had left in the hands of his kinsman Gabael who dwelt at Rages in Media. Tobias takes a traveling companion with him, who is in reality the angel Raphael. On the way they stop at Ecbatana and lodge at the house of one Raguel, whose daughter Sara has through the evil spirit Asmodeus been seven times deprived of husbands on the night of wedlock. Tobias on the ground of kinship claims her in marriage, and her parents grant consent. By supernatural means, with which Raphael had supplied him, he is able to expel the demon Asmodeus. During the marriage festivities the angel journeys to Rages and obtains the money from Gabael. Tobias and his wife then return to Nineveh; and by further application of supernatural means Tobias is able to restore his father's sight. Raphael, having revealed his true nature, disappears. Tobit breaks forth into a song of thanksgiving. He and his family end their days in prosperity. The work's general character seems to show that it was written in praise of a life spent in devout consistency with the Jewish law, even in a strange land.

The Book of Judith. Purports to describe a romantic event in the history of the Jews, that is, the murder of the Assyrian general Holofernes by Judith, a rich and beautiful widow of Betulia. The historical contradictions in the story, as well as its general character, leave us no reason to doubt that it is a work of fiction, in which perhaps some traditional deed of heroism in early days has been worked up.

The rest of the chapters of the Book of Esther. These chapters expand in greater detail the narrative of the canonical book. Their object is to illustrate the hearing of prayer and the deliverances from the Gentiles that God wrought for His people the Jews.

The Book of the Wisdom of Solomon. Written in praise of "Wisdom" and in condemnation of those who willfully rejected her. It purports to be addressed by the Israelite king Solomon to the kings and rulers of the earth. Many scholars feel it is of 1st century A.D. origin, in the Greek language. It shows traces of the influence of Greek philosophy. The most famous passages are those containing the description of "the righteous man" (4:7–18) and the picture of "Wisdom" (Wisdom 7–9).

The object of the book is to warn Alexandrian Jews against abandoning the religion of their fathers. The "Wisdom" of the book of Proverbs, "the fear of the Lord," is asserted to be the basis of all true happiness.

The Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus. This is the only book in the Apocrypha to which the name of the author can be assigned. In Ecclesiasticus 50:27 he speaks of himself as "Jesus the son of Sirach of Jerusalem." We know nothing of him beyond what is told in the prologue to the book.

In style and character the book resembles the canonical book of Proverbs. The greater part is occupied with questions of practical morality. Some of the subjects discussed are friendship, old age, women, avarice, health, wisdom, anger, servants. The Song of Praise of the works of Creation (42:15–43:33) is a very powerful and beautiful composition, and the eulogy of the nation's great men covers all of the Old Testament heroes, the omission of Ezra, Daniel, and Mordecai being remarkable.

The book was originally written in Hebrew and has come down to us in a Greek translation made by the author's grandson, who prefixed to it a preface. This preface deserves special notice for its reference to the Jewish scriptures under the threefold title of "the Law, the Prophets, and the rest of the writings." Some leaves containing about 23 chapters in Hebrew were discovered at Cairo in 1896.

The name *Ecclesiasticus* dates from the time of Cyprian (Bishop of Carthage, A.D. 248–58). It has no connection with Ecclesiastes.

The Book of Baruch. So called because it purports to contain a work written by Baruch, the prophet, in Babylon, in the fifth year after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Chaldeans. Most scholars feel that it was probably composed at a later date.

Attached to the Book of Baruch is the so-called *Epistle of Jeremy*, purporting to be a letter written by the prophet Jeremiah to the Jews who were being carried away captive to Babylon.

The Song of the Three Children. Purports to be the song sung by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego (they are called Ananias, Azarias, and Misael in verse 66) in the midst of the burning, fiery furnace.

The History of Susanna. This story describes how Daniel as a young man procured the vindication of Susanna from a shameful charge, and the condemnation of the two elders who had borne false witness against her.

Bel and the Dragon. In this fragment we have two more anecdotes related of Daniel. In the first, Daniel discovers for King Cyrus the frauds practiced by the priests of Bel in connection with the pretended banquets of that idol. In the second we have the story of his destruction of the sacred dragon that was worshipped at Babylon. Both stories serve the purpose of bringing idolatry into ridicule.

The Prayer of Manasses, king of Judah. This is a penitential prayer built up, for the most part, of sentences and phrases taken from the canonical scriptures. There is little reason for giving it the title that it bears.

The First Book of the Maccabees. (See *Maccabees*.) The importance of this work for our knowledge of Jewish history in the 2nd century B.C. can hardly be surpassed. It recounts with great minuteness the whole narrative of the Maccabean movement from the accession of Antiochus Epiphanes (175) to the death of Simon (135). The persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes and the national rising led by the aged priest Mattathias, the heroic war of independence under the lead of Judas the Maccabee, and the recovery of religious freedom and political independence under Jonathan (160–143) and Simon (143–135) mark the chief divisions of the stirring period that the book chronicles.

The Second Book of the Maccabees. Deals with the history of the Jews during 15 years (175–160) and therefore goes over part of the period described in 1 Maccabees. It is inferior to that book both in simplicity and in accuracy because legends are introduced with great freedom. However, the doctrine of the Resurrection is strongly affirmed.

The books mentioned above taken together make up what is generally known as the Apocrypha. They are frequently printed along with the canonical scriptures. The Roman Church regards as part of the canon the books of Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and the additions to Daniel and Esther. Besides these books, there are other Jewish apocryphal writings. The chief are the Psalms of Solomon, the Book of Enoch, the Apocalypse of Baruch, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Assumption of Moses, the Book of Jubilees, and the Sibylline Oracles.