10. Do We Need the Apocrypha?

Is it just the First Testament and the New Testament that we need? From the second century A.D. onwards, churches in different areas treated as Scripture a broader collection of Jewish works as well as the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. The works that appear in most lists are:

Two wisdom books, The Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus (aka Ben Sira or Sirach)

Four Books of Maccabees, relating events in the third and second century B.C.

Two short stories, Judith and Tobit

Additional material relating to the books of Jeremiah, Esther, Daniel , and Ezra (aka 1 Esdras)

The Prayer of Manasseh and Psalm 151

Second Esdras, an apocalypse

The Ethiopian Church also accepts

Jubilees (a retelling of the story in Genesis and the first half of Exodus)

Enoch, a further apocalypse

Further additional material relating to the book of Jeremiah (aka 4 Baruch)

Three further Books of Maccabees in Ethiopic.

New Testament writers show a knowledge of some of the books and also sometimes quote from the translation of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings that appears in the Greek Bible, but they do not quote from any of the books in what became the more widely accepted broader canon, which are the ones that appear in modern Bible translations. Outside the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, Enoch is arguably the most important of all the Jewish works that constitute background to the New Testament. A formal indication of its importance is the fact that Jude 14-15 quotes Enoch as “prophesying”; Jude 9 also seems to quote from the Assumption of Moses, another Jewish work from just before or just after the time of Christ. But it would be hazardous to infer that Jude thinks of Enoch or the Assumption of Moses as Scripture.

Some questioning of these books’ status goes back to Jerome. Around A.D. 400, he produced a new translation of the First Testament for the church (the translation that came to be called the Vulgate) and noted that some books recognized by the church appear only in the Greek or Latin Bible, and not in the Hebrew Bible accepted by the Jewish community. The question of these books’ status became a formal issue only in the sixteenth century, when Martin Luther rejected their authority. In response, at the Council of Trent the Roman Catholic Church affirmed the authority of Wisdom, Ben Sira, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, and the additional Jeremiah, Esther and Daniel material. In 1563 the Church of England defined some of its theological convictions in Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion that were affirmed by the Episcopal Church in the United States in 1801. They include a statement that “the other Books (as Jerome saith) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine.” This Anglican position was thus similar to Luther’s. He included the books in his Bible translation but turned them into a separate section between the Testaments; Calvin’s position is similar. The Anglican version of the list includes the Prayer of Manasseh and 1 and 2 Esdras, though it calls the latter 3 and 4 Esdras. (Esdras is the Greek and Latin form of the name Ezra, and the difference in the numbering issues from the fact that the Latin Bible refers to Ezra and Nehemiah as 1 and 2 Esdras. If all this seems unnecessarily complicated, you have no idea how complicated it can become: for instance, the different parts of 2 Esdras can be referred to as 4, 5, and 6 Esdras, so just be wary when you see references to the Esdrases.) The King James Version of 1611 followed the Anglican list. In 1646, however, the Westminster Confession declared that “the books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the Canon of Scripture; and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.”

While the traditional title of this collection is “the Apocrypha,” the “hidden” books, nowadays their more appropriate formal title is “the Deutero-Canonical Writings.” In other words, they are the Second or Secondary Canon: the expression carries a nice ambiguity, since for the Roman Catholic Church they are just as canonical as the First Testament, but some other churches attach a secondary status to them (or some of them).

## The Canon

It is misleading to think of the Jewish community ever “closing the canon” or “excluding” the books in the Secondary Canon from its Scriptures. They were indeed “not included,” but that description applies to hundreds of books, and we know nothing of any process whereby the Jewish community asked, “Shall we include [say] 1 Maccabees in the Scriptures?” and decided not to do so. As far as we know, such questions never arose. Indeed, we know virtually nothing about the process whereby the scrolls that comprise the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings did come to be Scripture or what criteria led to their having this position. Evidently by the time of Jerome the Jewish community took for granted this collection of Scriptures, but we do not know when it came to be a collection that no one subsequently thought of expanding.

After A.D. 70, a group of leading Pharisees settled at Yavneh (Jamnia) near Jaffa, south of modern Tel Aviv, and held discussions over some decades concerning issues related to the future of Judaism in light of the destruction of the temple. We know something of these debates from comments in the collections of rabbinic discussions during the next several centuries recorded in the Mishnah and the Talmud. While one cannot exclude the possibility that the rabbis at Yavneh decided what counted as the Scriptures, they left no account of such a decision, and if they had made one, they would surely have mentioned it. The rabbinic material does include several observations on the status of individual scrolls such as Ezekiel and Ecclesiastes, but there is no doubt that in their day a prophetic scroll such as Ezekiel had counted as Scripture for centuries. Their observations on individual books thus look like comments that presuppose the existence of a set collection of Scriptures, like Luther’s comments, rather than part of a process that led to its establishment.

The absence of any record concerning the Jewish community’s deciding on the bounds of the canon points towards the conclusion that it never did so. The canon just happened. Over the centuries, from time to time a consensus would develop in the community that some scroll was of such importance and insight that it should be given special status. The Isaiah scroll might be an example. And/or, from time to time some leader would declare that the community should accept some scroll, and would prevail upon it do so. Ezra’s bringing the Torah Scroll from Babylon (see Ezra 7) might be an example. Eventually that process stopped, and the canon froze in the form represented by the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. The last context to which any of the scrolls explicitly refers is the crisis in Jerusalem brought about by Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 B.C., from which the visions in Daniel promise God’s deliverance. My guess is that the fulfillment of these visions in the community’s deliverance and the downfall of Antiochus confirmed that these visions came from God, and led to the acceptance of the Daniel Scroll into the Scriptures, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it was the last time such a development took place. *De facto* the Scriptures therefore reached their final form at that moment. But the implication is not that anyone ever decided not to add scrolls such as 1 Maccabees. It was simply that no one ever felt similarly compelled to do so.

In light of the attitude that the Jewish community came to take to the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, and its coherence with the indications that Jesus and the New Testament writers took the same attitude, I am willing to assume that it was by divine providence that the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings comprise the recognized pre-Christian Scriptures, or at least that God was willing to go along with the results of the untraceable process whereby the Scriptures came to comprise these scrolls.

One could then in theory ask what were the characteristics of the books in the Secondary Canon that made God see to it that they did not make it into the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, or breathe a sigh of relief that the process had that result. To put the question in more traditional terms, what marks out the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings as inspired and authoritative in a way that the Secondary Canon is not?

For better or for worse, there seems to be no way of answering that question. It’s hard to make an argument for the secondary status of these books on the basis of their origin or content. While most of them come from later than the books within the First Testament, Ben Sira (for instance) comes from the early second century B.C, which makes it older than Daniel, which comes from the middle of that century. While works such as the additional material linked with Jeremiah were not written by the people whose names are attached to them, the same is true of Daniel. While many or most of the books were composed in Greek rather than Hebrew or Aramaic, Ben Sira, again (for instance) was originally written in Hebrew. While a number of them raise ethical and theological questions (for instance, prayer for the dead and Purgatory in 2 Maccabees 12:38-45, salvation through almsgiving in Tobit 12:8-9, and violence in Judith), they do so no more than a number of books within the First Testament and the New Testament. While they contain historical and geographical oddities and stories that seem to modern Westerners fanciful and grotesque, so do the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, not to say the New Testament. While they don’t claim divine authority or inspiration, neither do many of the books in the First Testament or the New Testament.

If we were a community trying to decide which books should be in the First Testament, it would not be obvious that we would include precisely the ones in the First Testament and exclude all the ones in the Secondary Canon, as is perhaps hinted by the fact that different churches have different versions of the Secondary Canon. On the other hand, neither would it make any significant difference if we were to omit some of the books in the First Testament that many Westerners dislike, such as Judges, Obadiah, or Esther, or if we were to add some of the Secondary Canon, such as 1 Maccabees, Tobit, or the Prayer of Manasseh. It is in any case a purely theoretical question. The days of deciding which books should be in the First Testament passed some time ago. Arguably that fact reflects some theological realities. As Christians we come to belong to Israel, and deciding on what constituted the Jewish Scriptures was Israel’s responsibility; we go with their decision.[[1]](#footnote-1) It fits with this fact that the books in the First Testament are as near as we can get to the list of Scriptures that Jesus and the New Testament writers accepted. There is a theoretical possibility that they did not recognize one or two of the books in the Writings. Beyond Jude’s references to Enoch and the Assumption of Moses, there is no evidence that they would have accepted any of the books in the Secondary Canon.

## The Role of the Secondary Canon

Like other Jewish writings from the period, these books are important as background to the Judaism of New Testament times.[[2]](#footnote-2) They help us understand Jesus and understand the New Testament. They are also foreground to the First Testament—that is, they illustrate ways in which the faith expressed in the books within the First Testament was being affirmed and developed. That fact suggests a further theological possibility. While their not counting as Scripture for the Jewish community and the New Testament suggests that they do not have the same status as the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, the church’s giving them a distinctive status over other Jewish religious writings of the period might mean they could have a special role in connection with our reading of both the First Testament and the New Testament. So in reading the books one might ask:

1. What happens when we look at the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings through the eyes of the Secondary Canon? What does it enable us to see about them?
2. What happens when we look at the Secondary Canon through the eyes of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings? What do they enable us to see about the Secondary Canon?
3. What happens when we look at the New Testament through its eyes? What does it enable us to see about the New Testament?
4. Conversely, what kind of perspective does the New Testament suggest on the Secondary Canon?
5. In light of the Reformation formulations concerning the Secondary Canon’s status, what are the ways in which it offers examples of life and instruction of manners?
6. Likewise, are there ways in which it would be hazardous to establish doctrines on it? Does it imply any doctrines that do not fit with the First Testament and New Testament?

In terms of genre, the Secondary Canon parallels the First Testament in including two short stories, Tobit and Judith, which compare with Ruth and Esther. It includes an extended narrative about historical events, 1 Maccabees, which compares with 1 and 2 Kings; the New Testament then has the Gospels. It includes extensive narratives about historical events in which there is more attempt to edify, notably 2 Maccabees, which compares with 1 and 2 Chronicles, and with John in the New Testament. It includes substantial Wisdom books, Wisdom and Ben Sira, which compare with the First Testament Wisdom books. It includes books that expand on or otherwise rework material in the First Testament, Esther, Daniel, and Jeremiah (also Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah in 1 Esdras, and Genesis and Exodus in Jubilees). The Secondary Canon includes a further apocalypse, 2 Esdras (also Enoch), which compares with Daniel; and in the New Testament there is Revelation. It includes further psalm-like works, the Prayer of Manasseh and Psalm 151.

There is nothing equivalent to the Prophets either in the Secondary Canon or in the New Testament, notwithstanding the description of Revelation as a prophecy. The New Testament refers to the activity of prophets, and not only John of Patmos but also Jesus and Paul act like prophets and exercise prophetic gifts. The Epistles are a little like prophetic books, but the New Testament has nothing quite the same as the prophetic books. The Secondary Canon also has nothing by way of instruction material such as appears prominently in the Torah; it thus contrasts with the Qumran Scrolls, which include several such works, and with the New Testament, which includes teaching by Jesus and by Paul. It seems that the Secondary Canon is satisfied with the Torah and does not feel the need or the freedom to add to it. In contrast, the Qumran community and the followers of Jesus had a sense that they were caught up in something new that generated and/or required new teaching to add to that in the Torah, as they added to the narratives in the First Testament.

## Maccabees

The Maccabees were members of the family of Judas Mattathias, a priest in 167 B.C. when Antiochus Epiphanes banned the observance of the Torah’s prescriptions for worship. When one of Antiochus’s staff tried to compel Jews to sacrifice to a pagan god, Mattathias killed both him and the Jew who yielded to the pressure, and initiated a rebellion against Antiochus. Mattathias thus became known as “the Maccabee,” “the hammer.” First Maccabees relates the story of events from 175 to 134 and thus its opening part gives a detailed account of the incidents related in the vision in Daniel 11. It tells the story in a way that recalls the great victories God gave Israel in the time of Moses, Joshua, David, and succeeding kings, and the accounts of such victories in books such as Chronicles and Esther. It was perhaps written soon after 134. Our copies are in Greek, but the language contains Hebrew expressions suggesting that it is a translation from a Hebrew original.

The story recapitulates the arc of much of the First Testament story. Foreign overlords attack Israel and many Israelites give into pressure to compromise their commitment to the Torah. Other Israelites stand firm and act in judgment on the people who compromise, commit themselves to ongoing faithfulness to the Torah, and turn to God in prayer and in praise. Such faithful Israelites have no hesitation about resisting the Seleucid forces, but the situation involves them in deciding whether it is okay to fight on the Sabbath; they determine to do so. The story takes the Judahite people from oppression through deliverance into an ongoing regular life of conflict, intrigue, and political engagement. Eventually it does not really come to an end; it simply stops.

One imagines that Western Christians would be unenthusiastic about examples of godly living such as Mattathias’s emulating of Phinehas (1 Macc 2), even though it takes up an example from the Torah. His needing to decide whether it was legitimate to fight on the Sabbath (1 Macc 2) offers a parallel to the discussions concerning the interpretation of the Torah that appear within the Torah itself in the story of Zelophehad’s daughters (Num 27) and the questioning within the Gospels over whether it is legitimate to pluck wheat or to heal on the Sabbath (e.g., Mk 2:23—3:6). All these examples warn against too tight an interpretation of the Torah, yet Mattathias’s story makes clear that his action is set in the context of a commitment to the Torah, a commitment that was prepared for martyrdom.

Asking how 1 Maccabees as a whole relates to the Scriptures raises the question of how the story of Israel after the Maccabean crisis is significant theologically. In the First Testament, the final scene of Israel’s history is the deliverance from Antiochus, which is the harbinger of the final end of history (see Dan 7—12). Indeed, while the First Testament includes an episodic account of the rebuilding of the temple and the action of Ezra and Nehemiah, it preserves no connected history of the period from 587 B.C. onwards. The visions in Daniel make more explicit that in itself, the history of Persian and Greek times has no theological significance, and even the Jews’ own history has no such significance. One might draw a parallel between the way 1 Maccabees continues Israel’s story and the way Luke within the New Testament adds a second volume to the story of Jesus. Yet Acts portrays its story more tightly as the continuation of Jesus’ story, as it relates the proclamation of the gospel around the Mediterranean world and as far as Rome. The subsequent story of the church is not part of the Scriptures; and one might see 1 Maccabees as more a Jewish equivalent to Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History than to Acts.

Second Maccabees has a narrower time frame than 1 Maccabees; it covers the period from 180 to 161 B.C. It describes itself as an abridgment of a longer work by Jason of Cyrene, of whom nothing else is known and of whose work no copy survives. While Jason may have written in Hebrew, 2 Maccabees is in regular Greek, which is thus likely its original language. While it presumably dates from the decades soon after 161, it begins with letters urging Jews in Egypt to join in the celebrating of the deliverance from Antiochus and the rededication of the temple, at least one of which is dated some decades later.

We have noted that the provision of an alternative version of the story compares with the provision in Chronicles of an alternative version of the history in Samuel-Kings. In both cases the new version is designed to be more encouraging or inspiring. The description in 2 Maccabees 7 of the horrific martyrdom of seven faithful Jews, with the compliance of their mother, is a noteworthy example of its inspirational aim; all eight accept what happens with equanimity on the basis of the fact that God will raise the seven to resurrection life. The chapter also sees the suffering of the seven as an offering to God that might prevail upon God to cease being angry with the community’s waywardness, which is receiving its just punishment. The belief in resurrection contrasts with the general First Testament attitude to Sheol outside Daniel 12, but corresponds with the prospect of resurrection affirmed in the New Testament, though the nature and basis of this belief in Daniel/2 Maccabees and in the New Testament are different. In Daniel/2 Maccabees the necessity of resurrection derives from the necessity that God should be faithful to people who are faithful to him (to put it in Western terms, it relates to theodicy), and the books do not indicate that all Israelites get raised to eternal life. In the New Testament, the inevitability of resurrection generally derives from the fact of Jesus’ resurrection and thus it applies to all who associate themselves with him.

Third Maccabees gives an account of the earlier persecution and deliverance of Jews in Egypt by Ptolemy IV at the end of the third century B.C. It is thus not about the Maccabees but about a sequence of events that were similar to those related in 1 and 2 Maccabees. It was written in Greek, maybe just before the time of Christ; it seems likely to be largely fictional. The story makes for a contrast with First Testament stories where Israelite kings and foreign kings desecrate the temple; here the king fails to do so, fails in his attempts to slaughter many Jews, eventually revokes his instructions concerning this slaughter, but authorizes the execution of Jews who are unfaithful to the Torah. It recalls Esther in relating the way the community stands firm and experiences God’s deliverance, but it is more explicit in its account of their prayer and of God’s involvement.

Like 3 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees is a Greek document, maybe written in Egypt just before the time of Christ, and like 1 and 2 Maccabees it refers to events associated with the persecution of Jews in Jerusalem in the second century. It focuses on a detailed account of the torture of the seven brothers related in 2 Maccabees 7, but it appeals to these events in order to support an exhortation to live by reason rather than emotion. The book’s argument parallels the commendation of wisdom in Proverbs and Proverbs’ warnings about emotions such as anger, though it rather contrasts with the positive stance towards such emotions that appear elsewhere in the First Testament. Its unsympathetic attitude to emotion corresponds to the uneasy attitude to the emotion and to the idea of God’s having emotions that appears in some Western theology and spirituality.

## Wisdom Books

The Wisdom of Solomon belongs in the tradition of wisdom books such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes; it is named on the basis of a passage where the author speaks as if he were Solomon. This feature follows the tradition of those earlier wisdom books, particularly Ecclesiastes; it is a way of saying “Pay attention to this Solomonic wisdom, this wisdom worthy of Solomon.” The book is written in Greek and reflects the language and thinking of Alexandria in Egypt just before (or just after) the time of Christ. It makes a bridge between the thinking and language of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, and the thinking and language of the Greek context in which the Jewish community lived, perhaps both to open up ways for the community to hold onto its faith without becoming totally alienated from its culture, and to provide Gentiles with a way into Jewish faith.

Wisdom shares the emphases on wise and proper living that appear in Proverbs and on the way wise and proper living finds its reward even in this life, on the importance of seeking wisdom and praying for this gift, and on Wisdom as almost a person. The book integrates a stress on such wisdom with more mainstream features of First Testament faith, such as the story of God’s involvement with Israel, the revelation in the Torah, and the silliness of making divine images. It opens with a distinctive emphasis on death and eternal life. In effect it describes the wicked as people who share Ecclesiastes’ conviction that this life is all we have but as then drawing the inference that Ecclesiastes does not draw, that we might as well live for ourselves, cheat, lie, and indulge our instincts at the expense of others. Wisdom’s response is that a life of holiness finds the reward of eternal life, while the wicked will then see that they were wrong about themselves and about the folly of the faithful. Along with its stress on eternal life goes an inclination to separate body from soul more sharply than the First Testament does; “a perishable body weighs down the soul” (Wisdom 9:15).

Wisdom thus draws attention to some distinctive features of the First Testament. There, wisdom on one hand, and Israel’s story and the Torah on the other, remain separate. In the First Testament there is no appeal to the prospect of immortality as a reason for living a faithful life; one lives a faithful life because it is the right way even though there is much evidence that things do not work out well for faithful people. Wisdom’s stance does compare with an attitude that appears in popular Christianity, that one lives a faithful life because it pays. On the other hand, Wisdom compares with the New Testament in the way it seeks to build a bridge between the world of Judaism (including the story of Jesus) and the Greek world.

Not least in light of its stress on eternal life, there is some appropriateness in the fact that the earliest known account of the New Testament canon (the Muratorian canon, named after the historian who discovered it), from the late second century A.D., includes Wisdom among the New Testament writings. Yet Wisdom’s emphasis on immortality or eternal life as opposed to resurrection contrasts with Daniel and with the New Testament.

The other wisdom book in the Secondary Canon is variously known as Ben Sira or Sirach or Ecclesiasticus The last title perhaps reflects the fact that it was recognized by the church but not by the Jewish community; it is the ecclesiastical book (but it then needs not to be confused with Ecclesiastes). The author was Joshua, son of Eleazar, son of Sira (Ben Sira 50:27). It was written in Hebrew in the early second century and translated into Greek—we have the complete text only in the Greek translation. It has a prologue by Ben Sira’s grandson, dating from 132 B.C. Like Wisdom, Ben Sira seeks to bring together the Greek thinking of the culture in which its prospective readers live, and the scriptural culture that is the heritage of the Jewish community in a city such as Alexandria. It covers many of the same topics as Proverbs, such as the nature and importance of wisdom, marriage and sex, family relationships, money and possessions, and speech. It also covers other subjects that are not prominent in Proverbs, such as prayer and worship, etiquette, and sickness and death. Like Proverbs, it does not arrange the material in any obvious order.

It shares with the Wisdom of Solomon the bringing together of Wisdom and Torah, though alongside its personification of Ms. Wisdom it manifests a jaundiced attitude towards actual women. Its noteworthy theological feature over against Proverbs is thus its emphasis on keeping God’s commandments and its identification of Wisdom and Torah (e.g., Ben Sira 24:23; 35:1-2; 42:2). Like the Wisdom of Solomon, it thus marks a theological step forward that nevertheless involves surrendering the advantages of letting revealed wisdom and empirical wisdom stand in mutual independence.

## Stories

Judith tells the story of a Jewish widow who beheads one of Nebuchadnezzar’s generals during his siege of a Judahite city. It conflates Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian features, but the story itself belongs to the second or first century B.C., the period following the Maccabean rebellion. Its mixed historical references suggest it is fictional, or largely so. Our version of Judith is in Greek, but it may be a translation of a Hebrew original.

It is a short story with parallels to Esther and to Judges. It affirms First Testament assumptions about the way foreigners may be expected to recognize Yahweh and to recognize what he has done for his people, about the attitude an emperor may be expected to take to Yahweh, about the way an individual may be expected to act in the face of the arrogance and hostility of an oppressor, about the propriety of using deceit and violence in this connection, and about the possibility of a woman using her wiles to be the means of delivering her people. It develops, heightens, and thereby underscores features of the First Testament that have often been missed, particularly the value of a fictional story, its emphasis on the activity of a brave woman, and the insignificance of some traditional values such as telling the truth in all circumstances.

Tobit is a story about an exiled Ephraimite in Nineveh after the downfall of Ephraim in 721, though it is usually thought to have been written about 200 B.C., originally in Hebrew or Aramaic. It tells of Tobit’s faithfulness to the Torah, in Israel and then in exile, and in particular his concern to give the dead proper burial. Tobit went blind but in due course an angel, Raphael, came to restore him and also to restore a woman called Sarah who was oppressed by a demon; she marries Tobit’s son Tobias. The background to these events then follows: after giving Tobias a lengthy exhortation about faithful living, Tobit sends him off on an errand, on which he is accompanied by the angel, pretending to be a human being. It is the course of this errand that the angel brings about his meeting with Sarah and his finding a cure for his father’s blindness. They return home to great rejoicing. The story closes by summarizing the end of Tobit’s life.

Tobit is a short story with parallels to Ruth, Esther, and Daniel 1—6. It has a setting in the history of the empires but this setting is simply the backdrop to episodes from the life of an individual and his family, and this feature distinguishes it from the short stories within the First Testament that link with the destiny of Israel. It is an edifying story that sets before us a man committed to a faithfulness that meets the expectations of the Torah and goes beyond them, who maintains his faithfulness despite significant reversals. It is an encouraging story in its portrayal of the way God gives healing to Tobit, a good marriage to his son, and deliverance to Sarah. It thus encourages ordinary people to stay faithful despite the tough things that happen to them. While some aspects may strike Western readers as grotesque, they are no more so than stories in the First Testament itself, and it is a touching and entertaining tale, marked by humor and irony. The chief motifs it adds to the First Testament are the theme of oppression by a demon and deliverance through an angel. These themes anticipate the New Testament, though (like other aspects of the story) they manifest a more exotic panache than either the First Testament or the New Testament (as does Daniel). A question Tobit raises is whether readers of the New Testament sidestep too easily its emphasis on demons and its recognition that we can have dealings with angels without recognizing it.

## Alternative Versions of First Testament Works

The Secondary Canon includes alternative versions of several First Testament works. Its version of Esther is fifty percent longer than the one in the Writings. It is assumed to come from the second or first century B.C. Paradoxically, Greek Esther is more the kind of story one would expect to find in the Bible. It thus indirectly draws our attention to the Hebrew version’s emphasis on the way deliverance comes about through a series of coincidences and through human beings acting boldly when they are in situations of weakness. It draws attention to the way God’s hand may not be visible in events, but with the implication not that God is uninvolved but simply that God’s involvement is not overt. The eyes of faith may perceive God’s hand in events, but they do so speculatively, provisionally, and humbly. It draws attention to the way God’s people may be challenged by circumstances to take bold and resolute action as if everything depends on them, even though they are in a position of powerlessness. The eyes of faith may hope to see good fruit coming out of such action, but they do so without the support of a promise from God, and aware of vulnerability and of the risk they take. Thus Greek Esther is edifying in its way, in its overt stress on prayer and on God’s involvement, but it draws attention to how Hebrew Esther is edifying in its way and brings its distinctive challenge.

The version of Daniel in the Greek Bible has several amplifications and extra stories: Azariah’s prayer in the furnace, the three men’s hymn of praise after their rescue, Daniel’s rescue of Susanna when she is falsely accused, his exposure of Bel and the Bel priests, his killing the snake, and his rescue from the lion pit. They may go back to Hebrew or Aramaic originals but we have only the Greek versions, assumed to date from the second or first century B.C. The additions to the First Testament text underscore the trust of the three friends and further enhance the portrait of Daniel’s own character.

Jeremiah in the Greek Bible is one-eighth shorter than the version in the Hebrew Bible; there is some ambiguity about which version counts as the scriptural edition of the book, for communities that accept the Secondary Canon. There is a Qumran Hebrew text of Jeremiah resembling the Septuagint text, so the abbreviation was not done by the translators; the usual scholarly view is that the shorter text is earlier than the longer one, which often clarifies the shorter version, though some of the difference may result from accidental abbreviation. There is also a major difference in order: the prophecies about foreign nations come near the end of the Hebrew version but in the middle of the Greek version, which makes Greek Jeremiah more like Ezekiel. Reading them near the end of the book gives them more emphasis and broadens the book’s horizon, as happens with the structure of Isaiah 1—27. There are more notes of hope for the nations in the Hebrew version, and there is also more emphasis on hope for Israel.

While Greek Jeremiah is shorter than the Hebrew version, the Greek Bible also includes two extra sections, the Book of Baruch (Jeremiah’s scribe) and the Letter of Jeremiah. The Letter of Jeremiah is often treated as a continuation of Baruch, while Baruch itself comprises three rather independent parts. So the additional material as a whole comprises four units. Baruch 1:1—3:8 is presented as a letter from Babylon to the Jerusalem community. Baruch 3:9—4:4 is a poem in praise of Wisdom. Baruch 4:5—5:9 is an encouragement to expect God’s restoration. The Letter of Jeremiah is presented as an exhortation to the exiles warning them about revering idols by scorning the idea that such gods can do anything. The whole may have been written in Hebrew but it survives only in Greek. Much of it comprises re-preaching of material in Isaiah 40—66 and Daniel; it also takes up other material in the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings and reapplies them to its context. It is assumed to come from the last two centuries B.C., but we cannot establish the nature of its context, and this fact makes the way it is taking up material more interesting and significant. It implies that the dynamics of the sixth century are continuing. The Jewish community continues to live in exile and in hope of restoration. It continues to be needing to repent, to resist idolatry, and to recognize the way Wisdom is embodied in the Torah.

By 1 Esdras, I here refer to a Greek version of material from the last chapters of Chronicles, the Book of Ezra, and the Book of Nehemiah, with a substantial extra section telling a story about an argument between three of King Darius’s bodyguards concerning what is the most powerful thing in the world. The man who wins the argument is none other than Zerubbabel, who thus also wins a commission to rebuild the temple, so that this story fills out the story in Ezra itself. It is assumed to date from the second or first century B.C. It would not be surprising if the background to its origin was the conflict over the temple, its desecration, and its rededication in the second century. First Esdras thus relates the story of the Jerusalem temple from Josiah via Zerubbabel to Ezra. It shows how the process whereby Chronicles reworked Genesis to Kings, abbreviating it and expanding it in light of the community’s needs in the Persian period, continues in the way 1 Esdras reworks Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah, reworking and expanding it in light of the community’s needs in the Greek period.

## Apocalypse and Prayers

By 2 Esdras, I here refer to an apocalypse that presents itself as a revelation to Esdras in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. but that comes from after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. We have only a Latin text, but the heart of it, at least, may well be a translation of a Hebrew original. Chapters 3—14 comprises a series of visions reflecting Jewish agonizing over that event, and God’s revelations by way of response in which God promises that things will in due course be put right. God also enables Ezra to restore the Torah by dictating twenty-four books (presumably the books comprising the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings) and seventy other books (whose identity is uncertain). Chapters 3-14 are preceded by a later Christian prologue declaring that God has rejected the Jewish people. They are followed by an epilogue that may also be of Christian origin, though it is less explicitly so.

The heart of 2 Esdras is thus an apocalypse that emerged from the Jewish community after Jesus’ day and after the fall of Jerusalem. Second Esdras 12 includes a reinterpretation of Daniel 7 applying it to Rome rather than Greece, and it also refers to a coming anointed one from David’s line, who will put down Rome and liberate the surviving members of God’s people. Second Esdras is the only work in the Secondary Canon that refers to the Messiah.[[3]](#footnote-3)

While one can see earlier Jewish writings as part of the process whereby God was fulfilling the purpose that reaches a climax with Jesus, it is harder to look in the same way at a book from after Jesus’ day that comes from part of the Jewish community that has not recognized Jesus. The difficulty is underscored by the fact that it focuses on an attempt to understand the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, an event on which the New Testament has its own take. The issues raised by this question are further underscored in a paradoxical way by the setting of the main body of the work in a Christian frame, particularly as the first part of the frame declares God’s rejection of the Jewish people and the passing over of Jerusalem to a new people of God. This rejection compares with warnings in the Prophets and in the words of Jesus but it is here more unequivocal and it seems to offer an alternative interpretation of the fall of Jerusalem to the one(s) offered by chapters 3—14. Its theology corresponds to the one found in Justin Martyr that the church is the new Israel that has replaced the old Israel. This theology resolves a tension that is allowed to stand unresolved within the First Testament and the New Testament. It contrasts with the commitment God makes to the Jewish people in both First Testament and New Testament. So this prologue both corresponds to the questions just raised about the theological status of chapters 3—14 and answers them unequivocally.

The Prayer of Manasseh is an expression of penitence designed to suggest the appropriate expression of the repentance reported in 2 Chronicles 33. Psalm 151 combines two pieces of testimony attributed to David in connection with his anointing and his defeat of Goliath. The prayer and the psalm recall the links with David’s life made in the introductions to some Psalms and also the incorporation of psalms into the text of Samuel and Chronicles. Psalm 51 is a noteworthy example as it is also an expression of penitence, like the Prayer of Manasseh; 2 Samuel 22 is an example of the second process. Such prayers answer the question, “How might or should someone in David or Manasseh’s position pray in such a situation? Oddly, the particular First Testament examples seem more problematic than the Prayer of Manasseh and Psalm 151. Both Psalm 51 and 2 Samuel 22 raise questions about the insight of David (as portrayed) into his life and his actions.

## So Do We Need the Secondary Canon?

Theologically, three features stand out in the Secondary Canon. First, it talks more about what happens after death than the First Testament, and in this sense it parallels the New Testament. The account of martyrdoms in 2 Maccabees 7 emphasizes the resurrection of the martyrs, and the theme recurs in 2 Maccabees 12:39-45. The faith of Judas the Maccabee in the resurrection makes him want to pray for God to forgive men who have died in battle on whose bodies Judas found sacred charms of a kind that were forbidden by the Torah (this passage about prayer for the dead was one that made the Secondary Canon stick in Luther’s gullet). Wisdom, too, takes up the theme of eternal life (Wisdom 3:1-9). The Secondary Canon thus highlights questions about the nature of any afterlife we may experience (Sheol, a more positive immortality, bodily resurrection, judgment) and questions about the basis for believing we may experience it (God’s original purpose, God’s relationship with people, God’s obligation to be fair to martyrs, God’s raising Jesus as the firstfruits of human resurrection).

Second, Ben Sira and Wisdom bring together Wisdom and Torah, whereas the First Testament Wisdom books keep them separate; the New Testament identifies Jesus as God’s Wisdom. The First Testament thus encourages Israel to affirm the distinctiveness of the revelation Yahweh has given it and to affirm the intrinsic link between this revelation and Yahweh’s activity in its own story. While also affirming the (limited) truth to be gained from ordinary human experience, it holds people back from identifying natural revelation/general revelation and special revelation. Wisdom and Ben Sira draw our attention to the way the Torah does embody insight gained from ordinary human experience. Like the New Testament, it thus encourages people to reflect on the interrelationship between these two sources of insight.

Third, the Books of Maccabees assume that the story of the Maccabean crisis, of the Jews’ resistance, of God’s delivering them, and of events in the decades that followed, belongs with the scriptural story that tells of God’s activity from the beginning through to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Genesis to Kings and then Chronicles give fairly continuous accounts of this story; Ezra-Nehemiah is a more episodic continuation that runs out altogether in the mid-fifth century. The Books of Maccabees take up the story again three centuries later. The Secondary Canon thus again compares with the New Testament, which generates narrative about historical events and implies the conviction that God has again acted in a way that takes up Israel’s story. The theological question it raises is whether the events from 164 B.C. onwards have the same theological significance as the events related in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings or whether they, too, simply form part of a history that is going nowhere, a tale “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Reformation formulation that the church reads the works in the Secondary Canon for example of life and instruction of manners but does not apply them to establish any doctrine looks like one designed to speak to issues of its day. Half a millennium later, I would say we need the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings (even when we don’t like them) because they were the Scriptures for the Jewish people and for Jesus, and we need the New Testament (even when we don’t like it) because it tells us about Jesus and the implications of his coming. We don’t need the Secondary Canon in the same way, but we profit from it historically, hermeneutically, theologically, and religiously, and the fact that many churches through the centuries have given it a special status might make us properly think twice before simply ignoring it.

1. Cf. James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) = *Explorations in Theology 7* (London: SCM, 1980), pp. 14-17; Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster/London: SCM, 1979), pp. 665-66; *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis Fortress/London: SCM, 1992), p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See e.g., Larry R. Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See further Michael E. Stone (“The Concept of the Messiah in IV Ezra,” in J. Neusner (ed.), *Religions in Antiquity* (E. R. Goodenough Memorial; Leiden: Brill, 1968), pp. 295-312. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See the section on Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah and Daniel in chapter 4 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)