The Apocrypha, or Second Canon

From the second century A.D. onwards, churches in different areas treated as Scripture a broader collection of scrolls than the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. These included the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus or Ben Sira, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, and material relating to Jeremiah, Esther, and Daniel that does not come in the Hebrew Bible. In my view, there are two related reasons for not viewing them as having the same status as the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. As far as we know, the Jewish community did not recognize them as having that status, and Jesus and the NT authors do not refer to them; the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings are as near as we can get to the body of Scriptures they recognize.

Some questioning of these books’ status goes back to Jerome, who produced a new translation of the OT for the church (the translation that came to be called the Vulgate) around 400 A.D. and noted that these other books came only in the Greek or Latin Bible and not in the Hebrew Bible accepted by the Jewish community. But the questioning became a formal issue only in the sixteenth century, when Martin Luther rejected the authority of these books. In response, at the Council of Trent the Roman Catholic Church affirmed the authority of the extra books listed above. Other churches have accepted further works beyond that list, such as 1 and 2 Esdras, 3 and 4 Maccabees, the Prayer of Manasseh, and Psalm 151. NT writers show a knowledge of some of these books and sometimes quote from the Greek Bible’s version of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, but they do not quote any of those other works with phrases such as “It is written” (Jude 1:14-15 does quote Enoch as a “prophesying, but the NT also quotes other such inspired revelations without seeming to imply that they count as Scripture).

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 similar to that of Luther, who included the books in his Bible translation but turned them into a separate section between the Testaments, and of Calvin. The Anglican version of the list includes 1 and 2 Esdras (called 3 and 4 Esdras, since Ezra and Nehemiah are referred to as 1 and 2 Esdras) and the Prayer of Manasseh. The King James Version of 1611 followed this 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.” They are the Second or Secondary Canon: the expression carries an ambiguity, since for the Roman Catholic Church they are just as canonical as the OT, but for some other churches they have a secondary status. In keeping with their intermediate status, I do not treat them in the body of my *Introduction to the OT* but in this web material offer some introduction to them and some approaches to reading them.

It is misleading to think of the books in the Secondary Canon as having been “excluded” from the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings by the Jewish community. 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. Actually, we know virtually nothing about the process whereby the scrolls comprising the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings did come to be Scripture or what criteria led to their having this position. We know that 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 would think 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 recorded in the Mishnah and the Talmud, which comprise collections of rabbinic discussions during the next several centuries. This material includes several observations on the status of individual scrolls such as Ezekiel and Ecclesiastes. While it is possible that the rabbis at Yavneh decided what counted as the Scriptures, there is no evidence that they did so. They left no record of such a decision, and if they had made one, they would surely have done so. Further, there is no doubt that in their day a prophetic scroll such as Ezekiel already counted as Scripture, so their comments on individual books look more like discussions that presuppose the existence of a set collection of Scriptures 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 toward 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 (say, the Isaiah Scroll) was of such importance and insight that it should be given special status. 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 deliverance of the community and the downfall of Antiochus confirmed that they 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 add them

Suppose that it was by divine providence that the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings comprise the scrolls that they do, 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. It would then be possible to 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? There seems to be no way of answering that question.

It’s hard to make an argument for the secondary status of the Second Canon on the basis of the books’ origin or content. While most of them come from later than the books within the OT, 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. Many or most of the books were composed in Greek rather than Hebrew or Aramaic, but Ben Sira, again (for instance), was originally written in Hebrew. 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. But they do so no more than a number of books within the OT (and the NT). Likewise they contain historical and geographical oddities and stories that seem to us fanciful and grotesque; but so do the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings (not to say the NT). They don’t claim divine authority; but then, neither do many of the books in the OT (or the NT).

If we were a community trying to decide which books should be in the OT, it would not be obvious that we would include precisely the ones in the OT and exclude all the ones in the Second Canon. On the other hand, neither would it make any significant difference if we were to omit some of the books in the OT that many Western people dislike, such as Judges, Obadiah, or Esther, or if we were to add some of the Second 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 OT passed some time ago. And 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. It fits with this fact that the books in the OT are as near as we can get to the list of Scriptures that Jesus and the NT writers accepted. There is a theoretical possibility that they did not recognize one or two of the books in the Writings. There is no evidence that they would have accepted any of the books in the Second Canon.

Like other Jewish writings from the period, these books are important as historical background to the Judaism of NT times. They are also foreground to the OT—that is, they illustrate ways in which the faith expressed in the books within the OT was being affirmed and developed. That fact suggests to a further theological possibility. While their not counting as Scripture for the Jewish community and the NT 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 the OT and the NT. So in reading each of the books one might ask:

1. How does it compare with the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings? What happens when we look at them through its eyes? What does it enable us to see about the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings?
2. What happens when we look at the Second Canon through the eyes of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings? Are there ways in which it contrasts with aspects of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, which might have led to hesitation about including it in the scriptures?
3. What happens when we look at the NT through its eyes? What does it enable us to see about the NT?
4. Conversely, what kind of perspective does the NT suggest on the Second Canon?
5. What are the particular ways in which it offers examples of life and instruction of manners?
6. Does it imply any doctrines that do not fit in with OT and NT?

We might begin by asking such questions in general terms. First, what genres of material do they comprise? The Second Canon parallels the OT in including 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 NT then has the Gospels. It includes extensive narratives about historical events in which there is more attempt to edify, such as 2 Maccabees, which compare with 1 and 2 Chronicles, and with John in the NT. It includes substantial Wisdom books, Wisdom and Ben Sira, which compare with the OT Wisdom books. It includes books that expand on or otherwise rework material in the OT, Esther, Daniel, and Jeremiah (also Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah in 1 Esdras, and Genesis in Jubilees). There are no further apocalypses in the Council of Trent’s canonical list, but in other lists there are 2 Esdras and Enoch, which compare with Daniel; and in the NT there is Revelation. Likewise there are no psalms, but in the wider lists there are the Prayer of Manasseh and Psalm 151.

There is thus nothing equivalent to the Prophets either in the Second Canon or in the NT, notwithstanding the description of Revelation as a prophecy. The NT refers to the activity of prophets, and not only the John of Revelation but also Jesus and Paul act like prophets and exercise prophetic gifts. The Epistles are a little like prophetic books, but the NT has nothing quite the same as the prophetic books. The Second Canon has nothing by way of instructions material that appears in the Torah; it thus contrasts with the Qumran Scrolls, which include several such works, and with the NT, which includes teaching by Jesus and by Paul. It seems that the Second Canon is satisfied with the Torah and does not feel either the need or the freedom to add to it. 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 OT.

Theologically, three features stand out in the Second Canon. One is that it talks more about what happens after death than the OT, and in this sense it parallels the NT. The account of martyrdoms in 2 Maccabees 7 emphasizes the resurrection of the martyrs, and the theme recurs in 2 Maccabees 12:39-45, where Judas’s faith 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 Second Canon stick in Luther’s gullet). Wisdom, too, takes up the theme of eternal life (3:1-9). A second feature is the way Wisdom and Ben Sira bring together Wisdom and Torah, whereas the OT Wisdom books keep them separate. The third is the Second Canon’s assumption that the story of the Maccabean crisis, of the Jews’ resistance to it, of God’s delivering them, and of events in the decades that followed, belongs in the context of the Scriptures that tell 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 of it that runs out altogether after another century or so, in the mid-fifth century. The Books of Maccabees take up the story again three centuries later. The Second Canon thus again compares with the NT, which generates narrative about historical events and implies the conviction that God has again acted in a way that takes up Israel’s story.

While the Ethiopian Church also accepts Enoch, Jubilees, 4 Baruch, and three further Books of Maccabees in Ethiopic, I here comment only on the works that commonly appear in Western editions of the Second Canon and that thus sometimes get read in church.

# 1 Maccabees

The Maccabees were members of the family of Judas Mattathias, a priest in 167 B.C. when Antiochus Epiphanes banned worship offered in accordance with the Torah. 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 in 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.

## Reading 1 Maccabees

1. What insight does the story offer on the nature of a superpower’s rule?
2. What was the challenge and what was the temptation to the Jewish people and how did it respond to them?
3. What was the nature of Antiochus’s wrongdoing?
4. Mattathias’s action is compared with that of Phinehas in Numbers 25 (one could add Elijah in 1 Kings 18). How does the story invite us to commend him for his action? How do you evaluate his view that Jews must be prepared to fight on the Sabbath?
5. Similarly, how does the story commend the action of Judas and his brothers?
6. Some Jews might be uneasy about fighting on any day of the weak in the way Mattathias and Judas do. What do the stories imply might be said to help people overcomes their unease?
7. In what ways does the story relate how Daniel’s visions were fulfilled?

## Reflecting on 1 Maccabees

The story recapitulates much of the OT 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, live in ongoing faithfulness to the Torah, and turn to God in prayer and in praise. The story takes the Judahite people from oppression through deliverance into an ongoing regular life of conflict, intrigue, and political engagement. Eventually it simply stops rather than comes to an end.

The inclusion of 1 Maccabees in the Scriptures would raise the question how the story of Israel after the Maccabean crisis is significant theologically. In the OT, the final scene of Israel’s history is the deliverance from Antiochus itself, which is the harbinger of the final end of history. While the OT 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.

# 2 Maccabees

Second Maccabees has a narrower time frame than 1 Maccabees; it covers the period from 180 to 161. 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 written in regular Greek, which is thus likely its original language. It was presumably written in the decades soon after 161. But it begins with letters to urge the Jews in Egypt to join in the celebrating of the deliverance and the rededication of the temple, at least one of which is dated some decades later.

## Reading 2 Maccabees

1. What do we learn from the introduction in chapters 1—2?
2. What do we learn from the way the crisis erupted in Jerusalem, the way people coped with it, and the author’s comments in chapters 3:1—6:17 (especially compared with the account in 1 Maccabees)?
3. What is particularly striking about the account of the martyrdom in 6:18—7:42?
4. What are your reflections on the account of the successful rebellion in 8:1—10:9 (especially compared with the account in 1 Maccabees)?
5. What is the importance of the continuing narrative in 10:10—15:39 (especially compared with the account in 1 Maccabees)?

## Reflecting on 2 Maccabees

The provision of an alternative version of the story to the version in 1 Maccabees compares with the provision in Chronicles of an alternative version of the history in Samuel-Kings, and in both cases the new version is designed to be more encouraging or inspiring. The description in 2 Maccabees 7 of the martyrdom of seven faithful Jews, with the compliance of their mother, is a noteworthy example. All eight accept this event 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 men 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.

# 3 Maccabees

Third Maccabees gives an account of the 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 an experience that was similar to the experiences 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.

## Reading 1 Maccabees

1. How does the Jewish community relate to God and to Ptolemy in the story?
2. How do people pray?
3. What does the story imply about kings and about God’s involvement with them?
4. What might be its message to its readers?

## Reflecting on 3 Maccabees

The story makes for a contrast with OT stories where Israelite kings and foreign kings are willing to desecrate the temple. 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 God’s involvement.

# 4 Maccabees

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 in 2 Maccabees 7. But it appeals to these events in order to support an exhortation to live by reason rather than emotion.

## Reading 4 Maccabees

1. What is the nature of the reason or clear thinking in light of which 4 Maccabees urges people to live?
2. What are its arguments for its thesis?
3. Are you convinced? Why or why not?

## Reflecting on 4 Maccabees

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 OT. 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.

# The Wisdom of Solomon

As its name implies, Wisdom belongs in the tradition of wisdom books such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. It is known as the Wisdom of Solomon 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.

## Reading Wisdom

1. What is the nature of wisdom according to this book?
2. How does it compare with the wisdom of Proverbs?
3. How do its comments on death and eternal life compare with Genesis and Ecclesiastes?
4. How does its telling of the OT story compare with that in the OT itself?

## Reflecting on Wisdom

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 OT 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 then drawing the inference that Ecclesiastes does not draw, that we might as well live for ourselves, cheat, lie, and indulge ourselves 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.

Wisdom thus draws attention to some distinctive features of the OT. There, wisdom on one hand, and Israel’s story and the Torah on the other, remain separate. In the OT there is virtually no appeal to the prospect of immortality to answer questions about the reason for living a faithful life; one lives a faithful life because it is the right thing even though there is much evidence that things do not work out well for faithful people.

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

# Ecclesiasticus or Ben Sira

Ecclesiasticus is another wisdom book, not to be confused with Ecclesiastes. The title comes from the fact that it is a book that was recognized by the church but not by the Jewish community; it is the ecclesiastical book. The author was Joshua, son of Eleazar, son of Sira (50:27); it is often referred to as Ben Sira or as Sirach. 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 Proverbs, the book does not arrange the material in any obvious order.

## Reading Ben Sira

1. What are the book’s key emphases in portraying or discussing
2. The nature and importance of wisdom?
3. The dynamics of the life of faith?
4. Testing?
5. Prayer and worship?
6. Living in awe of God?
7. Creation?
8. Relationships with other people?
9. Marriage and sex?
10. Family relationships?
11. Money and possessions?
12. Confidence or pride and humility or self-effacement?
13. Speech?
14. Etiquette?
15. Sickness and death?
16. What other topics did you notice that are not covered by that list of questions?
17. What does Ben Sira learn from the story of Israel’s heroes, according to 44:1—50:24?
18. What emphases in the book stand in greatest contrast with attitudes usually taken in your circle of friends?

## Reflecting on Ben Sira

As a wisdom book, its distinctive theological feature is its emphasis on keeping God’s commandments and its identification of Wisdom and Torah (e.g., 24:23; 35:1-2; 42:2). It thus shares with the Wisdom of Solomon the bringing together of Wisdom and Torah.

# Judith

Judith tells the story of a Jewish widow who beheads one of Nebuchadnezzar’s generals, Holofernes (whose name seems Persian), during his siege of a Judahite city. Its story 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.

## Reading Judith

1. Read chapters 1—7.
2. What are the dynamics of the empire’s attitude to God and to other peoples?
3. What are the dynamics of the way Judea copes with the crisis?
4. How do you see the characters of Nebuchadnezzar, Holofernes, and Achior?
5. Read chapters 8—16. What are the dynamics of Judith’s relationship with God and of her action?

## Reflecting on Judith

Judith is a short story with parallels to Esther and to Judges. It affirms OT assumptions about the way foreigners may be expected to recognize Yahweh and 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 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 some features of the OT that have often been missed, particularly the value of a fictional story, its emphasis on the activity of a brave woman, and the unimportance of some traditional values such as telling the truth in all circumstances.

# Tobit

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 concerning for giving 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 but who then marries his 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.

## Reading Tobit

1. Read the story and describe the characters and experiences of
2. Tobit
3. Tobias
4. Sarah
5. Any of the other characters that strike you
6. How do they encourage us in our faith and faithfulness?
7. What do we learn about God from the story?

## Reflecting on Tobit

Tobit is a short story with parallels to Ruth, Esther, and Daniel 1—6. It has a historical setting in the history of the empires but the 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 OT that link with the destiny of Israel. It is an edifying story that sets before us a man with a commitment to faithfulness that meets the expectations of the Torah and goes beyond them, and who maintains his faithfulness despite significant reversals. It is an encouraging one in its portrayal of the way God grants healing to Tobit, a good marriage to his son, and deliverance to Sarah. While some aspects of the story may strike Western readers as grotesque, they are no more so than stories in the OT itself, and it is a touching and entertaining tale. The chief motifs it adds to the OT are the theme of oppression by a demon and deliverance through an angel. These are themes that anticipate the NT, though (like other aspects of the story) they manifest a more exotic panache than either the OT or the NT (like Daniel). A question they raise is whether readers of the NT sidestep too easily its emphasis on demons and its recognition that we can have dealings with angels without recognizing it.

# Greek Esther

The version of Esther in the Deutero-canonical Writings is 50% longer than the Hebrew version. It is assumed to come from the second or first century B.C.

## Reading Greek Esther

Read the long story in an edition that distinguishes between the Hebrew version and the sections that are present only in the Greek. What differences from the Hebrew version do you see in the sections that appear only in the Greek version? What insight do these sections offer on

1. the way God related to his people and was involved in events.
2. the empire’s attitude to the Jewish people
3. the proper way to exercise political authority
4. the way Mordecai coped with the crisis and the kind of character he shows
5. the way Esther coped with the crisis and the kind of character she shows
6. the way they Mordecai and Esther prayed and related to God

## Reflecting on Greek Esther

The paradoxical feature of this study is that Greek Esther is more the kind of story one would expect to find in the Bible than is Hebrew Esther. Greek Esther draws our attention to the emphasis in the OT version 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 that God’s hand is not overt. The eyes of faith may perceive God’s hand in events, but they do so speculatively, provisionally, and humbly. The OT version 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, but it draws attention to how Hebrew Esther is edifying in its way and brings its distinctive challenge.

# Greek Daniel

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.

## Reading Greek Daniel

Read the stories.

1. What are the features of the prayer and the praise?
2. How do the stories and Daniel’s action in them compare with those in the OT?

## Reflecting on Greek Daniel

The additions to the OT text underscore the trust of the three friends and further enhance the portrait of Daniel’s own character.

# Greek Jeremiah

The version of the Book of Jeremiah in the Greek Bible is about one-eighth shorter than that in the Hebrew Bible (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 text, though some of this difference may result from accidental abbreviation. There is also a major difference in order: the prophecies about foreign nations come in the middle of the Greek version and near the end of the Hebrew version. There is some ambiguity about whether Greek Jeremiah counts as the scriptural version of the book for communities that accept the Second Canon.

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 latter is often treated as a continuation of the former, 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. Then 3:9—4:4 is a poem in praise of Wisdom. Third, 4:5—5:9 is an encouragement to expect God’s restoration. Finally, the Letter of Jeremiah is presented as an exhortation to the exiles. The books are assumed to come from the last two centuries B.C. They may have been written in Hebrew but they survive only in Greek. Much of them comprises a re-preaching of material in Isaiah 40—66 and Daniel.

## Reading Greek Jeremiah

1. Read Baruch 1:1—3:8. What is Baruch urging?
2. Read Baruch 3:9—4:4. What is the nature of the wisdom Baruch commends?
3. Read Baruch 4:5—5:9. What is the content of Baruch’s encouragement?
4. Read the Letter of Jeremiah. What is the letter urging?

## Reflecting on Greek Jeremiah

Locating the foreign nations prophecies in the middle of the book makes Greek Jeremiah more like Ezekiel, while reading them near the end of the book gives them more emphasis in Hebrew Jeremiah 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 also more emphasis on hope for Israel.

Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah take up material in the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings and reapply them to their context. The fact that we cannot establish the nature of that context makes this feature more interesting and significant. The dynamics of the sixth century continue in its day. The Jewish community continues to live in exile and in need of repentance and to live in hope of restoration. It continues to need to resist idolatry and to recognize the way Wisdom is embodied in the Torah.

# First Esdras

The works which the Articles call 3 and 4 Esdras appear in modern translations as 1 and 2 Esdras, and I shall use this numbering here. 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.)

First Esdras, then, here refers to a Greek version of material from the last chapters of Chronicles, the Book of Ezra, and from 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.

## Reading First Esdras

1. As a new work created from Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, what is its nature, theme, and message?
2. What is the message of the extra material in chapter 4?

## Reflecting on First Esdras

First Esdras focuses on the story of the Jerusalem temple from Josiah via Zerubbabel to Ezra. It thus 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.

# Second Esdras

Second Esdras here refers to an apocalypse that presents itself as a revelation to Esdras in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. but actually comes from after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. 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, and 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 and followed by a later epilogue that may also be of Christian origin, though it is less explicitly so.

## Reading Second Esdras

1. What is the message of 2 Esdras 1—2?
2. What is the message of 2 Esdras 3—14?
3. What is the message of 2 Esdras 15—16?

## Reflecting on Second Esdras

The heart of 2 Esdras is an apocalypse that emerged from the Jewish community after Jesus’ day and after the fall of Jerusalem. While one can easily see earlier Jewish writings as part of the process whereby God was fulfilling a purpose that comes to 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 70 A.D., an event on which the NT has its own take. The issues raised by this question are underscored in a paradoxical way if it is a Christian frame into which the main body of the work has been set, 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 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 OT and the NT in a way that contrasts with the kind of commitment that God makes to the Jewish people in both OT and NT. So this prologue both corresponds to the questions just raised about the theological status of chapters 3—14 and answers them to unequivocally.

# The Prayer of Manasseh and Psalm 151

Manasseh’s Prayer is an expression of penitence designed to suggest the appropriate expression of his 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

## Reading the Prayer of Manasseh and Psalm 151

1. What does the Prayer of Manasseh suggest is the appropriate way to express penitence?
2. How does Psalm 151 correspond to the stories in 1 Samuel 16—17?

## Reflecting the Prayer of Manasseh and Psalm 151

The prayer and the psalm recall the links with the life of David 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 OT examples seem more problematic than the Prayer of Manasseh and Psalm 151, since Psalm 51 and 2 Samuel 22 both raise questions about the insight of David (as portrayed) into his life and his actions.