

Dr. David deSilva, Apocrypha, Lecture 1, General Introduction

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This is Dr. David deSilva in his teaching on the Apocrypha. This is session 1, A General Introduction.

If you are Protestant and you clicked on this presentation, you are already to be congratulated.

Protestant Christians especially have to overcome a fair amount of prejudice to look into the Apocrypha and begin to see what is in there. First off, let me say that the Apocrypha, the books that make up the Apocrypha, are just a small sampling of Jewish literature written in the time, so to speak, between the Testaments, between about 400 BC and into the first century AD. Alongside the texts that we find in the Apocrypha are many other works, such as the dozens of books that go into the collection that are known in admittedly limited circles as the Pseudepigrapha, and also the books found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, particularly the non-biblical books among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Not to mention the writings of Josephus and Philo, among other such texts. So, there's a large corpus, a large body of Jewish literature coming from this period between the Testaments. And the Apocrypha are identifiable as a collection only because of the reading practices of Christians over the centuries.

It is the way these texts have been singled out by the Church over the centuries that enable us to talk about the Apocrypha at all. Now, in light of those practices, the term Apocrypha refers, from a Protestant point of view, to those books that are part of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian Old Testaments but are not regarded as part of the Old Testament by Protestants. The term Apocrypha comes from a Greek word meaning hidden things.

So obviously Apocrypha reflects the Protestant perspective on these texts. The same books would be called deuterocanonical books in the Roman Catholic or in Orthodox Christian communions, or simply they'd be referred to as part of the Old Testament. The word deuterocanonical, a second canon, would not be used to imply a second-rate canon but merely a canon that emerged after the books agreed upon by Jews, Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox as part of the Old Testament.

In other words, an admittedly later group of writings that nevertheless form part of the canon. Deuterocanon no more implies inferiority to other canonical books than Deuteronomy implies the inferiority of that statement of the law to the earlier statement of much of the same material in Exodus. Now, I've mentioned that

Protestants often have to overcome a fair amount of prejudice to even read these books or think that they ought to care about what's in these books.

Many of the people with whom I've dialogued about the Apocrypha seem to operate with this presupposition that these books have been tested by Christians, found wanting, and thrown out justifiably from the canon because they have no intrinsic value or because they're even harmful and will pervert and warp the reader's sense of the truth. Sometimes, it's just a result of the lingering prejudice that many Protestants might feel concerning Catholics and other Christian communions. Those books are what they read, not what we read.

My own experience of the Apocrypha is somewhat different. I was raised in the Episcopal Church, and in the Anglican communion worldwide, we're able to look at these books as not scripture but also as unscriptural at the same time. We might even hear some of these texts read in church, aware that they're not scripture but also aware that they're part and parcel of the tradition that the church has handed on.

And I, myself, have been surprised to find out the esteem with which the Protestant reformers embraced these books. Martin Luther and we will discuss this more fully in a later lecture, but Martin Luther thought highly enough of these books that when he produced his German Bible, he translated them. If your goal is to get your parishioners to stop reading texts, you don't translate them and make them available in their vernacular German.

Now, it's significant that when he published his German Bible, he separated out the books of the Apocrypha from the Old Testament and placed them in between the Old and the New Testaments. Signaling that they are not on par with scripture, but the very fact that he translated them and put them there also signaled that he thought they were, in his own words, useful and good to read. Similarly, the English Reformation took this kind of moderate position in regard to the Apocrypha.

In the 39 articles of religion that basically define the parameters of faith for the Anglican communion, the Apocryphal books are, on the one hand, clearly not to be held at the level of the canonical scriptures, but on the other hand, are promoted to be, quote, read for example of life and instruction of manners. Even the Swiss reformers Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin held these books in high regard, provided translations of these books in their vernacular Bibles, and commended them for containing, quote, but in translation, much that is true and useful. Not everything is true and useful, but much is true and useful.

So, on the one hand, they were promoted. On the other hand, with some caution. But let's be honest for a moment. Most of what we Christians read is non-canonical literature, and most of it probably has more errors than the Apocrypha.

I think of my last catalog from Christian book distributors, for example. There's a lot of stuff in there. Let's be honest. That departs much more, much further from the plain revelation of the books that we would call scriptural books than anything you will find in the Apocrypha.

So, all that to say, it seems to me that the witness of the Church as a whole, by which I mean not only Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches but also even the classic reformers, is that, as Protestant readers, we should take the trouble to read the Apocrypha, and even to read it before the latest book by a Max Lucado, or a Joyce Myers, or a T.D. Jakes, or whomever. Now, let's think about, briefly together in this introductory lecture, where these books come from. They are all Jewish texts.

Some of them come from Judah, or Judea, being written between about 200 B.C. and 100 A.D. Some of the books, however, come from diaspora Jewish centers. Some are likely to have come from places like Alexandria or somewhere in the vicinity of Syria and Cilicia, in what is now kind of the south part of Turkey, and of course, still present-day Syria, where there were large Jewish communities. Some may have come from the Eastern diaspora as well.

All of them were written in either Hebrew or Greek. And so, what we have in this collection is kind of a representative sampling of voices from Jewish authors throughout the Jewish world. Be it what we might refer to as Israel-Palestine or the larger Mediterranean or Levantine area.

And I think we could say all of the books of the Apocrypha would come from a period between about 300 B.C., and that's being generous, maybe 250 B.C., and 100 A.D. So, we really have kind of a pastiche of representative windows into what Judaism was like throughout the then-Jewish world during this period between the Testaments. As I've mentioned before, the only reason we talk about the Apocrypha as a collection is because of the Christian church's reading practices throughout the centuries. These books and their place in the Christian church, as we'll explore more fully later, were always kind of a point of question.

Christians were always asking whether we should follow the Jewish canon, which Protestants do, the shorter canon of what first-century people would have enumerated as the 24 books, but we enumerate differently because we count all the minor prophets separately and what have you. Or should we include books that they don't but that early Christians have found useful? And have clearly drawn upon as resources. So, if anything, Christian reading practices, even if they were tensely debated, gave us this collection, and I would even say I selected these texts from that larger wealth of Jewish literature as particularly valuable for Christians to be aware of and to read.

What's in the Apocrypha? We find books that fall into a variety of genres and kinds of literature, and one particularly well-represented genre would be expansions and retellings of the biblical story. We will find a book, which is now known as First Esdras, which basically gives us another version, a retelling, of material that we could read at the tail end of Second Chronicles in Ezra and in one chapter of Nehemiah. So, a kind of another version of that story, and incidentally, retelling the biblical story, was a popular kind of literature during this period.

We'll also find different versions of books that we know from the Protestant canon. For example, there's a different version of Esther in the Apocrypha. The version that Protestants are familiar with is translated from Hebrew and is considerably shorter than the Greek version of Esther.

So, in some editions of the Apocrypha, we'll see this as additions to Esther, where that additional material has just been kind of pulled out and presented. But that's kind of misleading because the whole of Esther is different in Greek. You'd be surprised after reading Esther, with which Protestants are familiar, how religious a book Greek Esther is.

God, prayer, and marks of Jewish piety appear throughout Greek Esther and not merely in the additional sections. One would also find a fatter version of Daniel in the Apocrypha. That is to say, a version of Daniel with deleted scenes restored, if I could put it that way.

The story of Susanna, a Jewish maiden who is imperiled by corrupt judges, leads off the book. And the story of Daniel's debunking of two foreign cults, the cult of Bel and the cult of the dragon. That collection, as well as the story of Daniel three, the three young men in the furnace, is expanded with some beautiful liturgical poems.

First, a prayer of repentance was placed on the lips of Azariah, and then a lengthy psalm of thanksgiving was placed on the lips of all three. There are also some other expansions, or perhaps we should say, texts that are inspired by the story of scripture. For example, the prayer of Manasseh, which is a beautiful penitential psalm inspired by, of course, the story of Manasseh, the worst king in Judah's history.

Because of whose crimes, there was just no turning back from the curses of Deuteronomy falling upon Judah, manifested in Nebuchadnezzar's ravaging of Jerusalem and her temple. Then, a 151st psalm was added to the number of 150, in which other episodes of David's life receive their kind of liturgical moment, namely his selection over his brothers and his defeat of Goliath. There are two very important historical books included among the Apocrypha.

These are 1 and 2 Maccabees. These are probably our most, well, these are easily our most important witnesses to the tumultuous and epic making events of 175 through

141 BC in Judea. This was a period in which the very question of Jewish identity was on the table.

Would we continue to remain Torah observant, distinct, different, and in the eyes of our overlord's backward people? Or would we assimilate and put ourselves on the international map by becoming like the nations? This is also the period in which, after roughly 400 years of foreign domination, Israel became an independent state once again for a brief period of about 80 years under the Hasmonean dynasty, more famous for their role in the leadership of the Maccabean revolt. So, the events in these two books really have a lasting impact on Jewish identity. Those challenges and options that come up in that story repeat themselves throughout the rest of the Intertestamental and the New Testament period in interesting ways.

The Zealots, for example, with which you might be familiar from 1st-century Jewish history, trace their roots back to the kind of zeal for the Torah that the violent resistance movement, the Maccabean revolt, manifested, for example. There are also a number of wisdom books in this collection, or if we were to broaden that out, we could also say instructional books. Perhaps one of the most impactful and important books in the Apocrypha is the Wisdom of Ben Sira, which is also known sometimes as Sirach or Ecclesiasticus.

This is a very lengthy collection of material that closely resembles Proverbs in the Old Testament but in a clearly much more developed way. For example, while Proverbs, while much of Proverbs consists of discrete maxims, Ben Sira consists mostly of five to ten verse blocks of instruction developed, many of which, however, have their kernel in the Book of Proverbs. And so, the Wisdom of Ben Sira kind of gives us a later development of what the wisdom tradition in Israel looked like around about 200 BC.

There is another book called Wisdom of Solomon. Now, while the Wisdom of Ben Sira shows us Jerusalem-based wisdom in 200 BC, the Wisdom of Solomon shows us Diaspora Jewish-based wisdom, maybe around 50 BC to somewhere around 30 AD. It's harder to date that particular book.

Many scholars will say that the Wisdom of Solomon shows us the wisdom of Egyptian Jewry, perhaps even the Jewish community living in Alexandria. We also find a book called Baruch, which is attributed to Jeremiah's scribe by that name. And Baruch is an interesting pastiche of genres.

Part of it is penitential liturgy, part of it is wisdom poem, part of it is a prophecy about the ways in which the plight of Zion, the plight of Jerusalem will be reversed in God's good future. We have a very short book called The Letter of Jeremiah, which in older collections of the Apocrypha is simply the last chapter of Baruch. And The Letter of Jeremiah is basically a tirade against idolatrous religion.

Its goal is simple: to keep those Jews living in the midst of people who worship idols immune from the effects of seeing the majority of the people around them engaging in this kind of worship and maybe being drawn to join them in it. Maybe I am wondering, do they have something there that I should be more tolerant toward or even embrace? And we would also find what probably is best described as a philosophical treatise. Perhaps even the technical term is a protreptic discourse, which means a discourse promoting a particular philosophy promoting a particular way of life.

In this case, promoting the Jewish way of life in terms that would be readily intelligible by Greek philosophical discourse. We also find a number of works that I might call inspirational fiction. These would be the books of Tobit, Judith, and Second Maccabees.

Tobit tells the story of a diaspora Jew who was carted off to Nineveh as part of the Assyrian conquest and gives us a window into some of the challenges that he faced. But even more than that, provides a story in which pious lifestyles result in timely divine help and deliverance. It's also, incidentally, a wonderful window into the ethics of the period.

Judith is a story of a different kind. Judith is a story of a woman who uses her particular charms to deliver her village from a siege by one of Nebuchadnezzar's generals, General Holofernes. It's full of historical errors, which almost scream out to the ancient reader that this is fiction.

This is fiction. But even within the fiction, the story is given that God's honor will be vindicated by God through whatever vehicle presents itself as a vehicle for God to use. And sexist, though it is to say, even the hand of a woman.

And that seems to be the last word of the book. God will deliver even by the hand of a woman. Third, Maccabees takes us back to the Diaspora, specifically to the plight of Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, after the Greek king of the Egyptian territory, the Ptolemy of the time, was rebuffed in Jerusalem.

And it's just another story of divine deliverance of those who show themselves faithful to the covenant, even when it's precisely fidelity to the covenant that gets them into a jam with the secular authorities. The collection of the Apocrypha, as it tends to be printed now, also includes one apocalypse, which is known as Second Esdras. And, of course, we'll talk more about this in a future lecture.

But Second Esdras is actually a composite text of three different books. The core of it is a Jewish apocalypse, also known as Fourth Esdras, that is written after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, wrestling with all manner of questions of how

meaningful it is to be a law observant when God has allowed Israel, Jerusalem and its temple, to be destroyed by those who are far less concerned about God and his law than the Jews were. It's a sort of argument that says, I know we were bad, but they were so much worse.

How could you let them trample us? And how could you let them, the Romans, continue to flourish? And so, in a dialogue between Ezra and an angel named Uriel, these questions are worked out with the result that Torah observance as a meaningful way of life and as the way to enter into life eternal reemerges as the only sensible way forward, despite the national misfortunes. Now, I would say that the Apocrypha collection is a very valuable collection for all Christians to read, become familiar with, and even study in some depth. It's not a long collection.

It is no longer than the New Testament. So realistically, one could read through the Apocrypha in under 30 hours, or if one were to take 40 hours, one could read it slowly and quite thoughtfully. It's not a huge investment in one's life.

But if nothing else, we can say that the Apocrypha offers us valuable windows into intertestamental Judaism. And this is, I think, of paramount importance for people who are studying the New Testament. One analogy might be this.

If you were an expert in church history, from its beginnings up to the Reformation, and knew nothing else after that, how would you make sense of the modern church scene? You could, kind of. But if all you had to go on was church history up to 1500, you would make a lot of mistakes. You would make a lot of assumptions about what suddenly happened in the 21st century.

But if you knew the stuff that happened between 1500 and 2000, you would see much more clearly where 21st-century Christianity came from, what it was drawing on, what was new, and what turned out to be not so new afterward, after all, and what have you. You'd understand, and you'd have a basis for understanding many of the tensions that you see in 21st-century Christianity that you just didn't have prior to 1500. All that to say, I think the Apocrypha, and really Second Temple Judaism even more broadly, fills in that essential gap that allows us, if we're studying the New Testament, really to see the full picture of how Judaism got to this point out of which the church grew, and also what early Christians were drawing on as they were wrestling with and seeking how to motivate a faithful response to the challenges of the first century.

So, windows into intertestamental Judaism, not least of which is the history of the period. I'd mentioned First and Second Maccabees in that regard. Windows into the development of the theology of law and covenant.

It's really quite amazing to see how the theology of the covenant, already articulated in the Old Testament, is adapted, maintained, and, in the face of certain experiences, shored up so that the theology of the covenant could continue. For example, what happens when covenant obedience really seems to lead to experiencing the curses of the covenant? Not long life and blessing, but short life and death by torture. How do we still affirm Deuteronomy and its promises when that's the experience of Jews? The Apocrypha gives us windows into how Jews made sense of that and were able to answer those challenges so as to reaffirm Deuteronomy and its view of history as a meaningful framework for life and decision-making.

We get some very useful windows into Jewish-Gentile relations in this literature that, just frankly, are far more relevant for the first century than Jew-Gentile relations in the conquest of Canaan, for example. We get to see why Greeks and Romans looked askance at Jews, how they thought about the Jewish communities in their midst, and how those Jewish communities dealt with those prejudices and were able to push against the pressures that were inflicted upon them so as to remain faithful to their ancestral ways. And also, perhaps not incidentally, but very importantly, the kinds of tensions that existed within the Jewish community because of various impetuses to respond to the outside world in different ways, assimilation versus maintaining our ancestral identity and boundaries despite the disadvantages that might incur.

We find some very helpful windows into basic social practices and facets of the cultural context of these centuries between the return from exile and the birth of the early church. We find, for example, just to throw out, in Ben Sira, a lot of windows into friendships and patron-client relations and things like that that represent a real development upon and shift from what we might encounter in the Old Testament. So, we learn a lot about the everyday context of Jews in Israel and Palestine during this period, for example.

And also witnesses to the piety and religious practice of the period. It's one thing to look at Torah observance or to look at the temple cult and sacrifices through the lens of the New Testament that largely rejects all of it. It's another thing to look at it through the lens of pious Jews who find it all very meaningful, very enriching.

We can better appreciate what's happening in the New Testament if we do not have a caricatured view of Torah observance or temple sacrifices or what you have, but we have an insider's view as to how those things are meaningful. Why, what's at stake when the question is, should we let Jews and Gentiles eat together, as in Antioch, for example, or not? So aside from the ways in which the Apocrypha opens up the world of intertestamental Judaism to us, I think it's also essential reading for Christians, for all Christians, because it provides an essential background for the teaching of Jesus and for the writers of the New Testament. Now, it is true that there is no explicit recitation of a passage from an apocryphal book in the New Testament.

However, there are a lot of resonances between what we find in the New Testament and what we find in the Apocrypha. Even material that couldn't come from the Old Testament. It's clearly a new development since the close of the Old Testament.

Enough resonances that suggest that even if a New Testament author didn't directly read any of the books of the Apocrypha, the Apocrypha provide us with our way into that broader pool of cultural knowledge, religious knowledge, ethical knowledge that New Testament authors also drew upon. Also, I always recommend reading the Apocrypha to my own students because it is a resource that the Christian church, in its most formative centuries, found valuable for some very important facets of its development and existence. Irrespective of our position on the canonical status of the Apocrypha today, it is beyond dispute that texts from the Apocrypha played a large role, a significant role, in the development of early Christology or the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

So, to understand some of these essential developments of early Christian theology, one might even say core, one should also have access to those texts that the early Christian theologians were bringing out as they talked about who Jesus was prior to the Incarnation. Also, one finds that Christians draw upon texts from the Apocrypha in their work of apologetics, not so much apologetics directed toward non-Christian Jews but apologetics directed toward non-Christian Gentiles. The anti-idolatry polemic that one finds in Letter of Jeremiah and Wisdom of Solomon, for example, shows up again in the defense speeches, the apologies, as they're called, of second-century Christians like Justin Martyr and Athenagoras and others.

So, it was a useful tool, at least in that regard. Christians faced martyrdom increasingly moving into the second and third centuries. And so perhaps it is not surprising to find that Christians during that period, facing persecution, looked to stories of Jewish martyrdom for their inspiration.

Those stories of Jewish martyrdom are not found in the Old Testament. They're found in the Apocrypha, most particularly in 2 and 4 Maccabees. So those two books emerge as very important resources in, for example, Cyprian or Origen's exhortations to martyrdom, helping Christians make the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of piety to God and witness to God.

Finally, one can see a fair amount of influence on the part of the Apocrypha that developed early Christian liturgy. This is especially true in Eastern Orthodox communions. The impact of Wisdom of Solomon, for example, is quite remarkable there.

But also, the prayers and psalms that one finds within the Apocrypha, some of them I should say, become staples of early Christian liturgical practice from a very early point on. I would suggest, finally, that the Apocrypha provides us with ethical and

devotional literature of value in its own right. In these books, we find answers to the questions of, for example, what it means to live with a view to eternity rather than this life only.

That's a perennial problem. I'm referring here to the Wisdom of Solomon, for example, above all the others. We, as Christians, need to make decisions on a regular basis.

Are we going to live for our gratification in the now or for our vindication by God in the then, in the future? And the Apocrypha books wrestle with this question and help us wrestle with it as well. We find in the Apocrypha books that help reinforce for us the value of taming and overcoming our impulses and desires rather than gratifying them so that we can commit ourselves more wholeheartedly and with greater integrity to living out those practices and those virtues that God approves and wants to see in us. We have texts that help nurture forgiveness, generosity, and other such relational graces, as well as some fine examples of personal prayer, confession, repentance, praise, and petition.

For all these reasons, Christians of any kind have good reason to delve into the Apocrypha, not fearing what we'll find there but reading it simply with the same judicious discernment that we would apply to anything we read outside of our scriptural canon. If we engage it, we will certainly be enriched thereby in many, many ways, historical, ethical, devotional, and also our recognition of where our forebears in the faith, starting with the authors of the New Testament, drew some of their inspiration and material.

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