

The Apocrypha Revised and Introduced

Why revise the Apocrypha? What value does it have for the evangelical Christian?

F.F. Bruce

[p.18]

Five years exactly after the publication of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the Revised Standard Version of the Apocrypha has appeared (September 30, 1957).¹ The translation of the Apocrypha will probably not cause such heartburning as was aroused by the translation of the canonical books; for most of the severest critics of the R.S.V. hold, with the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, that the apocryphal books, "not being of divine inspiration, are of no part of the Canon of the Scripture." No matters of theological moment, therefore, hang upon a decision to translate a verse of the Apocrypha this way or that. It may, of course, be counted by some to the revisers for unrighteousness that they undertook a translation of the Apocrypha at all; but surely some provision has to be made for those churches, undoubtedly Reformed, which read the Apocrypha "for example of life and instruction of manners," although they do not "apply them to establish any doctrine."

Even those Christians who do not make even this limited use of the Apocrypha in their church services know the value of these books for the light they throw on the political and religious developments in Israel in the period between the Old and New Testaments. Just how great that value is may be appreciated all the more if one reads *An Introduction to the Apocrypha*,² by Professor Bruce M. Metzger of Princeton Theological Seminary, which has been published on the same day as the new revision. Professor Metzger is a member of the committee of scholars which was entrusted with the preparation of the Apocrypha in the R.S.V., and in his Introduction he has combined the advantages gained from this inside knowledge with his high gifts of accurate scholarship and his rare capacity for making the fruits of that scholarship intelligible and interesting to the lay reader.

The writings included in this edition of the Apocrypha are those that appear in the Old Testament section of Jerome's Latin Vulgate, either in the body of the work or in an appendix, but are not found in the Hebrew Bible.

All of these, with the exception of II Esdras, appear in the Septuagint. Jerome himself had a clear appreciation of the inferior canonical status of these books over against those found in the Hebrew Bible, but in the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent, declaring the Vulgate to be the one authentic Latin version of the Scriptures, ignored Jerome's distinction and pronounced the Apocrypha to be "sacred and canonical"—on the same footing, apparently, as the books of the Hebrew canon. In more recent times, however,

¹ "The Apocrypha." *Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament*. Translated from the Greek and Latin Tongues. Being the version set forth A.D. 1611, revised A.D. 1694, compared with the most ancient authorities and revised A.D. 1957. Thomas Nelson and Sons, New York. 250 pp. \$2.50.

² "An Introduction to the Apocrypha." By Bruce M. Metzger. Oxford University Press, New York. \$4.00.

Roman Catholic scholars have shown a tendency to acknowledge Jerome's distinction and to denote the books of the Apocrypha as "deuterocanonical."

When the English Revisers in 1894 added a version of the Apocrypha to the Revised Version of the New Testament and Old Testament which had appeared in 1881 and 1885 respectively, they were following a tradition that went back to the earliest days of English Bible translation. The earliest English versions have the apocryphal books interspersed among the Old Testament books, following the practice of the Septuagint and the Vulgate, which is still adopted by Roman Catholic versions of the Bible. Coverdale's Bible of 1535, taking its cue from a Zürich Bible of 1524-29, separated the apocryphal books from the canonical writings and grouped them together in an appendix to the Old Testament, following Malachi; this practice has persisted ever since in Protestant English versions, including the King James and Revised Versions.

The American Standard Version of 1901, unlike the English Revised Version, did not include the Apocrypha. It may be owing to the Puritan origins of American Protestantism that it has tended to disregard the Apocrypha more than English Protestantism has done. The first English Bible printed in America (1782-3) lacked the apocryphal books; on the other hand, a German Bible printed at Germantown, Pa., in 1743 (the first American impression of the Bible in a European language), included them.

As might be expected, the R.S.V. has based its rendering of the Apocrypha on the best and most up-to-date material available. For most of the work Rahlfs' edition of the Septuagint has been taken as the basic text. For II Esdras, the Aramaic and Greek texts of which have been lost (apart from a few Greek verses preserved in a papyrus from Oxy-

[p.19]

rhyinchus Bensly's edition of the Old Latin version has served as the basic text, supplemented by ancient versions in a number of other languages. As for Ecclesiasticus—or Sirach, to use the short title given to the book in the R.S.V.—constant reference has been made to the Hebrew fragments, amounting to about two-thirds of the whole, which have come from the *genizah* or storeroom of the synagogue in Old Cairo. Among the improvements made possible by this reference to the Hebrew text is one in Chapter 47:23, where the meaningless phrase, "the foolishness of the people," used with regard to Rehoboam in the Greek text, can now be replaced by the words, "ample in folly" (which in Hebrew represent a play on Rehoboam's name). One might have expected some account to be taken—in a footnote if not in the text—of the attractive variant, "he acknowledged him as his firstborn," given as a marginal reading in a Hebrew fragment at Chapter 44:23, in place of, "he acknowledged him with his blessings"; but no mention is made of it. Neither do we find the hymn of thanksgiving which the Hebrew text of Chapter 51 inserts between verses 12 and 13.

It has not been possible yet to make use of the Hebrew fragments of Ecclesiasticus and the Hebrew and Aramaic fragments of Tobit found in the Qumran caves.

The general principles of the revision are the same as those followed in the Old Testament and New Testament; the revisers have clone their work well, introducing greater accuracy and modernizing the English. It may be, as Dr. Metzger suggests in his book, that the men responsible for producing the Revised Apocrypha in 1894 found their energy and interest flagging after their greater labors of the preceding years; there are no such signs of falling off in this new revision. Conjecture has been resorted to sparingly; it was certainly a step in the right direction to replace the absurd reading, "Her temple is become as a man that was glorious," in I Macc. 2:8, by, "Her temple has become like a man without honor"; but even this improvement does not adequately convey what to the reviewer's mind is a moral certainty—that the lost Hebrew original used the term "Ichabod" (applied to the desolation of an earlier sanctuary in I Sam. 4:21).

We are greatly mistaken if this revision will not quickly take its place on both sides of the Atlantic as the best English edition of the Apocrypha.

Professor Metzger's book begins with a brief account of the meaning and use of the term "Apocrypha" in relation to the Old Testament canon. The stages by which the successive books or groups of books in the Hebrew Bible received canonical recognition cannot be determined with as much certainty as we might desire, but it is clear that the Synod of Jamnia at the end of the first century A.D. did not introduce innovations in this matter but "merely ratified what the most spiritually sensitive souls in Judaism had been accustomed to regard as holy Scripture."

Then follows the main part of the book, a detailed and reliable account of the books of the Apocrypha one by one. Professor Metzger is writing for the interested Bible reader rather than for the specialist Bible student; but, the latter as well as the former will find much of value in his work. On disputed points he exhibits characteristic scholarly reserve; for example, the Book of Wisdom "appears to have been composed in Greek some time between about 100 B.C. and 40 A.D.": closer precision is not yet attainable. When he says that the narrative of I Maccabees "is told in a sim-

[p.42]

ple and unadorned style, obviously the work of a plain and honest chronicler who set down the facts in their historical sequence, with scarcely any attempt to theorize upon them or to emphasize their significance," the ordinary reader may not realize that the narrator's sympathies are completely engaged on one side of the conflict (not that he should be criticized for this); that he is not above sup pressing inconvenient episodes in the story, such as Antiochus' second invasion of Egypt (mentioned in Dan. 11:29; II Macc. 5:1); that he anticipates the modern device of identifying those who support the approved side with "the People" and stigmatizing the others as "the ungodly" or the like; and that his purpose of exalting the prestige- and interests of the Hasmonean family is all the more effective for the unobtrusiveness with which it is carried out.

Then come chapters on the importance of the Apocrypha for New Testament study (while the New Testament writers do not accord canonical authority to these books, some of them show that they were acquainted with them), on the history of the Apocrypha in the

Christian Church, and on the pervasive influence of the Apocrypha in literature and other forms of art. It makes amusing reading for a Scottish reviewer to be reminded that the chorus, "See, the Conquering Hero Comes," was transferred from the oratorio Joshua to Judas Maccabaeus when the latter work was composed to celebrate the Duke of Cumberland's victorious return from Culloden in 1746.

Among the works inspired by apocryphal narratives may be added James Bridie's plays, *Tobias and the Angel* and *Susanna and the Elders*, and *The Book of Joachim of Babylon*, by the Flemish author Marnix Gijssen.

The whole volume is written in a most interesting style; every now and then Dr. Metzger brings to light some extremely odd incidents bearing on his theme. One of the oddest relates to William Whiston's espousal of the claim that a Surrey woman produced a monstrous birth in 1726, in which he saw a fulfilment of the prediction of II Esdras 5:8, that in the last days "women shall bring forth monsters." This is almost worthy to stand alongside the story of St. Paul and the Baptized Lion, which finds a place in the discussion of New Testament Apocrypha.

Many readers who could not bring themselves to read the more technical Introductions to the Apocrypha that are used in the study and classroom will find Professor Metzger's book the very thing they want as a companion to the R.S.V. Apocrypha

© 1957 F.F. Bruce. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in February 2008 by Robert I Bradshaw. Photocopies kindly provided by Rich Poll (<http://www.apologia.org/>)

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
