

# Scriptural Commentary

## SCRIPTURAL RECESS

During the fall months of 1981 gospel doctrine attendees will begin shifting away from a consistent study of the Old Testament to refresh themselves on some of the basic principles of the gospel. Old Testament study will resume again in January of 1982.

During this brief interlude members may wish to pursue additional areas of interest during their individual studies. For that reason Commentary will contribute items of interest in biblical as well as doctrinal areas. Watch for the following columns; some will appear in the magazine and some in THE SUNSTONE REVIEW.

September: "Accepting Change With Doctrinal Development" (Review)

October: "Priesthood as it Relates to Women, Power, and Materialism (Magazine)

November: "Versions and Transmissions of the Bible (Review)

December: "Temple Ordinances" (Magazine)

January: "The Authorship of Isaiah" (Review)

### Apocryphal Scriptures

This issue of Commentary will highlight various items relating to a group of works general referred to as the Apocrypha. Numerous editions of the Bible contain this collection of usually fourteen books which are most commonly found between the Old and New Testaments.

In the spring of 1833, Joseph Smith himself engaged in reading the apocrypha. In probable response to questioned asked, he received a revelation concerning the apocrypha as follows:

Verily thus saith the Lord unto you concerning the Apocrypha—There are many things contained therein that are true, and it is mostly translated correctly;

There are many things contained therein that are not true, which are interpolations by the hands of men.

Verily, I say unto you, that it is not needful that the Apocrypha should be translated.

Therefore, whoso readeth it, let him understand, for the Spirit manifesteth truth;

And whoso is enlightened by the Spirit shall obtain benefit therefrom;

And whoso receiveth not by the Spirit, cannot be benefited. Therefore it is not needful that it should be translated. Amen. (D&C 91:1-6.)

It is interesting to note that while "it is mostly translated correctly" much may be the "interpolations" of men—hence the counsel to study the apocrypha by the spirit if one is looking for scripture. Following are many interesting items relating to the apocrypha; however, none should be understood as scripture merely because they are included here.

### Meaning and Use of Term Apocrypha

One of the difficulties in explaining the meaning and use of the word apocrypha arises from the circumstance that this term has signified different things to different people throughout the centuries. As commonly defined, and as used generally in this volume, it refers to a nucleus of fourteen or fifteen documents, written during the last two centuries before Christ and the first century of the Christian era. The following are the titles of these books as given in the Revised Standard Version (1957): The First Book of Esdras; The Second Book of Esdras; Tobit; Judith; The Additions to the Book of Esther; The Wisdom of Solomon; Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach; Baruch; The Letter of Jeremiah; The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men; Susanna; Bel and the Dragon; The Prayer of Manasseh; The First Book of the Maccabees; and The Second Book of the Maccabees.

In most of the previous English editions of the Apocrypha the Letter of Jeremiah is incorporated into the book of Baruch, which stands immediately before it, as the final chapter of that book. In these editions, therefore, there are fourteen books of the Apocrypha.

An idea of the length of the Apocrypha, in comparison with the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, may be gained from the following statistics, which are based on the King James Version: Old Testament, 929 chapters, 23,214 verses, 592,439 words; New Testament, 260 chapters, 7,959 verses, 181,253 words; Apocrypha, 183 chapters, 6,081 verses, 152,185 words.

The books of the Apocrypha belong to varied literary genres, which include historical, romantic, didactic, devotional, and apocalyptic types. I Esdras, I Maccabees, and, to a less extent, II Maccabees belong to the historical genre. Ostensibly historical but actually quite imaginative are the books of Tobit, Judith, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon, which

may be called moralistic novels. Of a serious and didactic nature are two treatises on wisdom, one circulating under the title of the Wisdom of Solomon and the other commonly called Ecclesiasticus (abbreviated Ecclus). The Prayer of Manasseh takes its place with devotional literature of a relatively high order. Finally, II Esdras, a book which attempts to unveil the future, is a specimen of the type of literature known as apocalyptic, similar in intent to the last six chapters of Daniel in the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation in the New Testament.

Etymologically, the word *apocrypha* is of Greek derivation and signifies books that are "hidden away." (Like the word *data* it is plural number; the singular is *apocryphon*.) From the point of view of those who approved of these books, they were "hidden" or withdrawn from common use because they were regarded as containing mysterious or esoteric lore, too profound to be communicated to any except the initiated. From another point of view, however, it was held that such books deserved to be "hidden" because they were spurious or heretical. Thus, the term has had an honorable significance as well as a derogatory one, depending upon those who made use of the word.

As was hinted in the opening paragraph, besides the fourteen or fifteen books of the Apocrypha in the narrower sense of the word, there are other books which also are classified as apocryphal. During the early centuries of the Christian Church various Gnostic and Jewish sects produced dozens of Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses in competition with those of our New Testament. . . .

In addition to those which are enumerated above, a score or more of other apocryphal writings of Jewish or, occasionally, Christian authorship, dating approximately from the same period, were accorded a certain measure of respect among various groups of Jews and Christians. Thus the book of Jude in the New Testament quotes (verse 14) a passage from the book of Enoch (1:4). This latter book, as well as others, such as the Psalms of Solomon, the books of Adam and Eve, the Martyrdom of Isaiah, and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, belongs to what are usually called Pseudepigrapha, or writings which circulated under false titles. This term, however, is far from being satisfactory, for it is applied arbitrarily to only certain Apocryphal books and not to others which are equally deserving of the name.

Still another difficulty of definition emerges when one compares Protestant usage with Roman Catholic usage. In 1546 the Roman Church officially declared Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Barush, I and II Maccabees, and certain supplementary parts of Esther and Daniel to be inspired and on a par with the books of the Old Testament, among which these are interspersed. Some Catholic scholars have designated these disputed books as deutero-canonical, meaning thereby canonical books that are of a later date than the others, which are termed proto-canonical. It is usual among Roman Catholics to apply the term *Apocrypha* to the books which others commonly designate as pseudepigrapha.

From what has been said thus far it will be seen that the definition and indeed the limits of the Apocrypha are both confused and confusing. To some it may appear strange that there could ever have been any doubt as to whether a given book was or was not part of the Bible. But the recognition of the canon of the Old Testament and of the New Testament is the result of a long process that went through many stages, and at critical junctures of many of those stages we lack the information which is necessary if a full picture is to be formed. Furthermore, at certain stages there is conflicting testimony as to whether a given book should or should not be regarded as inspired. The criteria for discriminating between canonical and Apocryphal documents may appear to be less than satisfactory, and at times the application of these criteria may seem to have been almost haphazard. Nevertheless, in the winnowing process, which extended over centuries, a certain degree of unanimity has been attained despite a marginal residuum of controversy.

From Bruce M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 3-7.

### Bel and the Serpent

One of the more interesting books of the Apocrypha is *Bel and the Serpent* (or *Dragon*). Following is a modern rendition of the events described in this small account.

There was a priest called Daniel, son of Abal, who was a confidant of the king of Babylon. The Babylonians worshipped an idol called Bel, and every day they offered him eighteen bushels of fine wheat flour, forty sheep, and fifty gallons of wine. The king revered him and went every day to worship, but Daniel worshipped the Lord.

One day the king asked Daniel why he did not worship Bel.

"Because I do not believe in man-made gods," Daniel replied. "I worship the Lord God who created heaven and earth and is king of all men."

"Isn't Bel a god?" said the king. "Haven't you seen how much he eats and drinks every day?"

Daniel laughed and said, "Don't you believe it. Your idol is made of clay on the inside and bronze on the outside. It has never eaten anything."

At this the king was angry, and he summoned the priests. "If you do not tell me who eats all this food I'll have you put to death," he said. "But if you can prove to me that Bel eats it then Daniel will be killed because he has blasphemed against Bel."

Daniel agreed to a test, and the priests accompanied Daniel and the king to the temple. There the food and mixed wine were set out for Bel in their presence.

Daniel said, "Now that everything has been properly laid out, Your Majesty, have the temple closed and seal the locks."

The king agreed. Daniel then told his servants to see all the others out of the temple and then to sprinkle the floor with ashes without their knowledge. After that he closed the door of the temple and had it

sealed with the king's signet ring.

Next morning they all assembled again, but in the meantime the priests had come in through a secret entrance and eaten all the food and drunk the wine.

Daniel said, "Is everything in order? Are the seals intact?"

They found that the seals were intact, and broke them and opened the door. When they saw that the food which had been laid out for Bel had been eaten and the table was bare, the king was delighted and said to Daniel, "Great is Bel. There is no deception in him."

Daniel burst out laughing and said to the king, "No, but come and see the priests' deception! Whose footprints are these?"

"Men, women, and children," said the king.

Then he went to the priests' house and found the remains of Bel's food and wine. Daniel also showed him the secret entrance through which the priests used to go into the temple to take the food. So the king killed the priests, destroyed the idol, and gave Daniel the rest of the food and drink which he had provided for Bel.

There was also a great serpent which the Babylonians worshipped. The king said to Daniel, "You wouldn't say that this was made of bronze, would you? He is alive, and eats and drinks. You ought to worship him."

"With Your Majesty's permission," Daniel said, "I shall destroy the snake without using a sword or a stick."

The king gave his consent, and Daniel took some pitch and fat and hair, boiled them up together and threw lumps of the mixture into the snake's mouth. The snake swallowed them and burst. Daniel showed the pieces to the king and said, "Are these the gods you worship?"

The Babylonians, when they heard about all this, said, "The king has become a Jew. He has killed the priests and destroyed Bel and killed the serpent." So they planned a revolution against him.

When the king saw the mob rebelling, he summoned his Friends and announced that Daniel was to be handed over to be killed.

Now there was a pit of lions where they used to throw anyone who plotted against the king. There were seven lions in it, and every day two condemned prisoners were thrown in. The mob threw Daniel into the pit to be eaten by the lions, and he stayed there unharmed for six days.

Meanwhile in Judea, the prophet Habakkuk had prepared a meal and was taking it with a plate of bread and a jug of wine to the harvesters in the field. But an angel of God came to him and said, "Take the food you are carrying and give it to Daniel, in the lion pit in Babylon."

"Lord God," Habakkuk said, "I have never been to Babylon and I don't know where the lion pit is."

So the angel of God picked Habakkuk up by his hair, carried him to Babylon, and held him up over the lion pit. "Daniel," he called out, "take the food which God has sent you."

Then Daniel said, "God has remembered me. He does not abandon those who love him"

Daniel ate the food, and the angel

immediately put Habakkuk back in his place.

Next day the king went to mourn for Daniel, but when he looked into the pit he saw him sitting there. "Great is the Lord God," the king shouted aloud. "There is no other god but him!"

He had Daniel lifted out of the pit and threw the men who had tried to kill him down instead, and they were eaten in a moment while Daniel looked on.

From Nicholas de Lange, *Apocrypha, Jewish Literature of the Hellenistic Age*. (New York, N.Y.: Viking Press, 1978), pp. 99-101.

### The Apocrypha and Columbus

That a passage from the Apocrypha encouraged Christopher Columbus in the enterprise which resulted in his discovery of the New World, is a little-known but quite authentic fact. To be sure, the verse in the Apocrypha is an erroneous comment upon the Genesis narrative of creation, and Columbus was in error in attributing its authority to the prophet Ezra of the Old Testament, but—for all that—it played a notable part in pushing back the earth's horizons, both literally and figuratively. The details are as follows.

Near the beginning of the fifteenth century, Pierre d'Ailly, that indefatigable scholar and churchman who was Archbishop of Cambrai and was soon to be appointed cardinal, published a collection of geographical essays with the title *Ymago Mundi* (1410). Though denying the existence of the antipodes, d'Ailly—like most educated men of his day—firmly believed in the sphericity of the earth. In Chapter VIII of this book, entitled "De quantitate terrae habitabilis," he develops the idea that the habitable earth is of great extent in comparison with the amount covered by water. He argues that only one-seventh of the earth's surface is covered with water and that, therefore, the ocean between the west coast of Europe and the east coast of Asia is "of no great width" and could be navigated in a few days with a fair wind. As "proof" for this opinion regarding the proportion of water to land he had no less authority than Ezra "the prophet," who had commented on God's work of creation in the following words: "On the third day thou didst command the waters to be gathered together in the seventh part of the earth; six parts thou didst dry up and keep, so that some of them, being both planted and cultivated, might be of service before thee" (II Esdras 6:42; compare verses 47, 50, and 52).

A copy of d'Ailly's book was in Columbus's library, and nothing is more interesting than to observe the handwritten notations which the explorer entered into the margins of the page on which d'Ailly discusses the implications of the passage in Esdras relating to the relatively small extent of the sea. Obviously he had been thinking about the feasibility of a westward voyage, and d'Ailly's appeal to what was popularly regarded as a quasi-canonical book was bound to exercise much influence upon his reasoning. In fact, it was partly by quoting this verse to the doubting and hesitant sovereigns of his day that Columbus finally secured the necessary financial support for his several voyages.

Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha*, pp. 232-34.

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