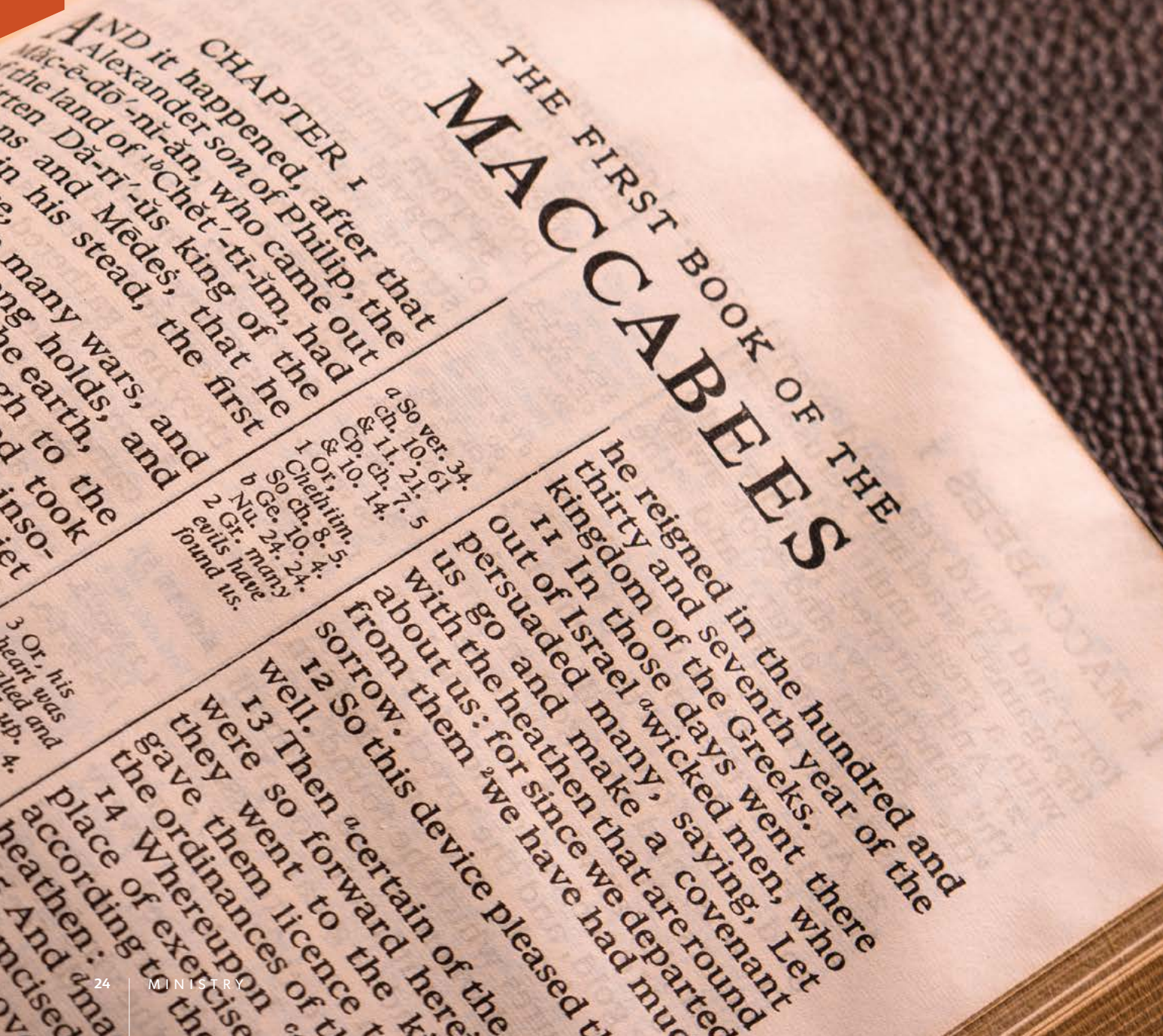


The Apocrypha:

Their relevance to biblical studies and pastoral ministry



THE FIRST BOOK OF THE MACCABEES

CHAPTER I
AND it happened, after that Alexander son of Philip, the

a So ver. 34.
ch. 10. 61.
& 11. 21.
Cp. ch. 7. 5
& 10. 14.
1 Or, Chelitim.
So ch. 8. 5.
2 Nu. 24. 24.
3 Gr. many
evils have
found us.

he reigned in the hundred and thirty and seventh year of the kingdom of the Greeks. Let us go and make a covenant with the heathen that are round about us: for since we departed from them we have had much sorrow.

12 So this device pleased them well.

13 Then certain of the elders went forward to the king, and gave them licence that they should have leave to give the ordinances of the law. And when they heard that the king had given licence to the Jews, they rejoiced exceedingly.

14 Whereupon they came to the king, and stood before him, and said, We have heard that thou hast given licence to the Jews, that they should have leave to observe the law of their fathers. And we marvel that thou hast done so.

15 And the king answered them, and said, I have done so, because I have heard that ye are just men, and that ye observe the law of your fathers.

16 And the Jews answered the king, and said, We have observed the law of our fathers, because we have heard that thou hast given licence to the Jews.

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SCAN FOR AUDIO

Many Christians, including clergy, may not know the Apocrypha—the writings of the Second Temple period. Even if they do, the writings are often brushed aside. This article assesses the value and use of the Apocrypha in biblical studies and pastoral ministry.

New Testament scholar Craig A. Evans says: “If one is to do competent NT [New Testament] exegesis, one must know something of these writings [the Apocrypha] and of their relevance for the nt.” Rightly so, since “some of these writings are vital for understanding the NT.”¹

Bruce D. Chilton, scholar of early Christianity and Judaism, argues that “Christian theology shares its origins with early Judaism. Therefore, it cannot be fully appreciated without reference to its matrix.”² The New Testament was not born in a vacuum, and its writers should be placed within their Jewish milieu. By doing this, the one who knows “all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews” (Acts 26:3, NKJV) will certainly appreciate and understand better the New Testament and, as a Bible interpreter, will find such knowledge useful in his/her task.

In the process of understanding the Apocrypha, the following literature needs to be noted:

- Greek Version of the OT: The Septuagint (LXX) is the Greek translation of the Old Testament (OT) in the third century BC, the version used by Christians in the diaspora, and it is quoted in the NT along with the Hebrew Bible. Both the LXX and the NT use the same Greek language, *koinē* Greek.
- OT Apocrypha: The major apocryphal books are Tobit, Judith, Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees. Since there is an ongoing debate in the church concerning the use of the Apocrypha, a brief discussion on it is important.

According to Jewish tradition, after the cessation of prophecy, its “cessation” is connected with the departure of God’s presence [Shekinah] from the temple, which presages its doom and destruction. Jeremiah is identified as the last of the prophets (*Pesikta Rab Kahana* 13:14).³ Elsewhere, it is reported that the Holy Spirit ceased after Malachi (Tosefta, Sotah 13:2).⁴ In other words, the death of Malachi signaled the

end of prophecy, and any subsequent writings would not be inspired and thus not accepted as part of the Jewish canon. The abundant testimonies from Jewish writings themselves attest that apocryphal books were not part of the Jewish canon (Sirach Prologue; Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 1:37–44; 4 Ezra 14:44–47; Tosefta, Yadayim 2:5; Talmud, *Bava Batra* 14b–15a). Apocryphal books were preserved by the church, not by the synagogue.⁵

Ellen G. White, only once in her writings, mentions these writings: “I saw that the Apocrypha was the hidden book, and that the wise of these last days should understand it. I saw that the Bible was the standard book.”⁶ While the debate is ongoing about what she exactly meant by that statement,⁷ it is clear that, like her many other allusions to passages found in the canonical Scripture, these allusions to Apocrypha may only “reflect her familiarity with these apocryphal texts” found in her Bible and do not mean “she considered them as inspired.”⁸ Nevertheless, nowhere is she against reading or understanding these writings.

- OT Pseudepigrapha: These writings are numerous and diverse, among which are Jubilees, Testament of Twelve Patriarchs, Letter of Aristeas, Enoch, Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah, Assumption of Moses, and Jannes and Jambres.
- Dead Sea Scrolls: The Dead Sea Scrolls comprise about 900 scrolls, of which about 220 are Bible scrolls.⁹ The Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit a variety of writings: rules of the community, *halakhic* texts, eschatological writings, exegetical literature, parabiblical literature, poetic texts, liturgical texts, and astronomical texts.¹⁰
- Philo was a Jewish philosopher living in Alexandria at the beginning of the first century.
- Josephus was a priest, a Pharisee, and a Jewish historian who narrated the war between Jews and Romans, which led to the destruction of the temple in AD 70.
- Targumim: Targums are the rendering of the OT into Aramaic for the Jewish worshippers after the Babylonian exile.¹¹ Well-known Targums to the Pentateuch are those of Onkelos and Pseudo-Jonathan. Jonathan also wrote Targums to the Prophets, and there are Targums to the Writings.

- Rabbinic literature (Mishnah and Talmud): It is important to mention that rabbinic literature does not chronologically fall under Second Temple literature. The Mishnah was compiled about ad 200; the Talmud, about ad 500.¹² The corpus was shaped by Hillelites.¹³ Even though it was compiled after the time of the NT, it contains traditions in existence around the time of the NT.¹⁴

Use of the Apocrypha in the NT

As pointed out earlier, apocryphal books were not part of the Jewish canon. The Jews in the NT time did not recognize them as authoritative. Neither did the NT writers; if ever they used them, they referred to them as scriptures using the formula “it is written in the book of ” or “thus says the Lord.”

There is no hard evidence apocryphal books were included in the LXX in the NT time. But undoubtedly, early Christians, especially those in the diaspora, were familiar with them. They were part of Jewish tradition and heritage, and it is not surprising they were aware of and used them.¹⁵ In John 10:22, John mentions the annual Jewish feast of dedication (*egkainia*) in Jerusalem, which Jesus attended, a tradition that is recorded and enjoined in 1 Maccabees 4:59.

As much as we are cautioned against “paral-
lelomania,”¹⁶ there is no doubt that Paul was well versed in Jewish traditions and writings available in his time. Governor Festus recognized Paul’s great learning (Acts 26:24), thus implying that Paul read the Second Temple literature too. Thus, Paul used non-biblical literature to make his points in his speech and writings.¹⁷ It is logical to say that Paul refers to the tradition relating to Jannes and Jambres in 2 Timothy 3:8.¹⁸ Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah 5:11–14 is used in Hebrews 11:37, making reference to those who “were sawn in two.” Aside from Paul, we may mention Jude (Jude 9), who used the Assumption of Moses when he talked about the devil’s dispute of the body of Moses.¹⁹

Apocrypha in pastoral ministry

Ellen G. White encourages pastors to become intellectual giants through continuous study for great success in their ministry.²⁰ Leadership

professor Alain Coralie affirms that “mental culture is important to an effective ministry.”²¹

One of the main reasons ministers despise the study of this body of literature is that they have a wrong understanding of *sola Scriptura*. *Sola Scriptura* does not exclude the help of useful resources in the task of interpretation (biblical lexicons, dictionaries, concordances, commentaries, and other books such as the Second Temple literature).²²

Concomitant with a need to critically assess these resources, ministers should also keep in mind that there are teachings that are not biblically sound in these writings. Examples include salvation by works (almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin; Tobit 12:9) and purgatory and intercession of/for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:41–45; Baruch 3:4). It is likely that the Jews continued to hold, even cherish, such beliefs in the NT time. Again, the fact that apocryphal books were preserved by the church, not by the synagogue, is significant. They are preserved because justification for these doctrines is readily found in those writings. In their teaching and preaching, ministers can inform the members where these non-biblical doctrines originate.

Early Judaism was the religious matrix of Christianity. This body of literature informs us of the Jewish world during the intertestamental period. It provides valuable backgrounds that enlighten us in our biblical studies. Indeed, background study is an essential step in exegesis and biblical interpretation. This is likely the reason why Ellen G. White said we should understand these writings. They have an exegetical value for biblical studies because they help us to discern the historical, religious, political, cultural, social, and literary contexts of the Bible. Pastoral ministry will be enhanced by such scholarship and commitment.

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➤ Value of Second Temple Jewish literature in biblical studies



1 Craig A. Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 1.
2 Bruce D. Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum: Introduction, Translation and Notes, The Aramaic Bible*, vol. 11 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987), xxvii.

3 The midrashic statement is from “Pesikta DeRav Kahanna 13,” Sefaria, https://www.sefaria.org/Pesikta_D'Rav_Kahanna.13?lang=bi. The statement is confirmed by Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Meridian, 1957), 403, 404.
4 Parallels of this statement are found elsewhere (Sanh. 11a; Yoma 21b), attesting its widespread notion and acceptance.

- 5 Solomon Zeitlin, "The Apocrypha," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 37, no. 3 (1947): 219.
- 6 Ellen G. White, Ms. 4, 1850.
- 7 Ronald Graybill, "Under the Triple Eagle: Early Adventist Use of the Apocrypha," *Adventist Heritage* 12 (Winter 1987): 25–32; Dennis Fortin, "Sixty-Six Books or Eighty-One? Did Ellen White Recommend the Apocrypha?," *Adventist Review* 179, no. 13 (2002): 12; Donald E. Casebolt, "It Was Not Taught Me by Man," *Spectrum* 46, no. 1 (2018): 70; Matthew J. Korpman, "Adventism's Hidden Book: A Brief History of the Apocrypha," *Spectrum* 46, no. 1 (2018): 56–65.
- 8 Denis Fortin, "Apocrypha, Ellen G. White's Use of the," in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, 2nd ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), 605, 606 (emphasis added).
- 9 Evans, *Ancient Texts*, 81.
- 10 For Dead Sea Scrolls texts in English, see Florentino Garcia-Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1994).
- 11 D. F. Payne, "Targum," *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academics, 1996), 1152.
- 12 Jerusalem Talmud was compiled earlier (ca. AD 400), but it is said to be less authoritative for Jewish studies than its Babylonian counterpart.
- 13 Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 491. Hillel died in AD 10.
- 14 Ferguson, 497.
- 15 For a suggestive list of quotations, allusions, or ideas/parallels of these writings in the New Testament, see "Index of Allusions and Verbal Parallels," in *The Greek New Testament*, 5th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014), 882, 883, and Evans, *Ancient Texts*, 342–409.
- 16 Samuel Sandmel, "Paralleomania," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81, no. 1 (1962): 1–13.
- 17 Paul's use of classical Greek authors in his speech/writings: Epimenides, *De Oraculis* in Titus 1:12, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons"; Aratus, *Phaenomena* 5 in Acts 17:28, "for we are also his offspring." Paul is said to have cited Menander in 1 Cor. 15:33 ("evil company corrupts good habits").
- 18 The tradition about Jannes and Jambres was known by the second century BC, while the book was written probably in the early second century AD, as Origen was aware of and referred to it. Albert Pietersma, "Jannes and Jambres," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freeman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 3:640. The tradition is well attested and mentioned in Tg. Pseudo-Jonathan Exodus 1:15; 7:11 and Numbers 22:22. It is also referred to in CD 5.17–20 and 6Q Damascus Document frag. 3.1, 2.
- 19 This is well attested by some church fathers (Clement, Origen, Didymus).
- 20 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1923), 194.
- 21 Alain Coralie, "Empty-Headed Ministry," *Ministry*, August 2021, 4.
- 22 Frank M. Hasel, "Presuppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. G. W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2005), 36.

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