

Did the Church Add Books to the Bible?

*How to Answer
Deuterocanonical Objections*



Catholic Answers

Answering the Most Common Objection to the Deuterocanonical Books

The Catholic Old Testament contains seven books that are not found in Protestant bibles (Tobit, Baruch, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, 1 and 2 Maccabees) as well as certain portions of the books of Daniel and Esther. The most common objection Protestants make to the authenticity of these “Apocrypha” or “deuterocanonical (i.e. second canon) books” is that Jesus and the Apostles never quoted from these books of Scripture.

For example, James McCarthy writes in *The Gospel According to Rome*, “Though the New Testament quotes virtually every book of the Old Testament, there is not a single quotation from the Apocrypha.” An article at the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministries (CARM) also lists this as their first and primary objection to the authenticity of the deuterocanonals.

The major problem with this objection, however, is that it also applies to nearly a dozen books in the Protestant Old Testament canon.

According to Protestant scholar Bruce Metzger,

Nowhere in the New Testament is there a direct quotation from the canonical books of Joshua, Judges, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, Obadiah, Zephaniah, and Nahum; and the New Testament allusions to them are few in number.

Since Protestants accept these books in spite of them not being cited in the New Testament, then they should accept the deuterocanonical books as well.

Some Protestant apologists object to this reply by saying a book in the Old Testament doesn't have to be cited in the New Testament in order to be considered Scripture; it just has to belong to a *collection* of books that is cited in the New Testament.

In Jesus' time, the Hebrew Bible was divided into “the Law” (the first five books of the Bible), “the Prophets” and “the Writings,” which included books like Psalms and Proverbs. So, while Obadiah may not be cited in the New Testament, Malachi is and that shows the biblical authors believed Obadiah was inspired because that book belonged to the collection of writings called “the Prophets.”

But this objection assumes what it tries to prove—that the deuterocanonical books belong to an uninspired collection of books and weren't considered to be part of the *Ketuvim*, or “the Writings.”

The authors of the deuterocanonical books did not believe the Hebrew canon was closed or that there was a set of books called “the Writings,” to which no more could be added. The prologue to Sirach only references “the law and the prophets and the others that followed them” and “the law itself, the prophecies, and the rest of the books.” Second

Maccabees describes Judas the Maccabee encouraging his troops only with words “from the law and the prophets” (15:9).

According to Old Testament scholar Otto Kaiser, the deuterocanonical books “presuppose the validity of the Law and the Prophets and also utilize the Ketubim, or ‘Writings’ collection, which was, at the time, still in the process of formation and not yet closed.” In fact, the Dead Sea Scrolls, which contain Jewish writings from the years 400 B.C. to A.D. 100, include copies of deuterocanonical books like Sirach, Tobit, and Baruch, which shows they were considered to be part of the Writings.

Protestant authors Norm Geisler and Ralph Mackenzie claim the absence of commentaries on these texts as well as their not being penned with special parchment or script “indicates that the Qumran community did not view the apocryphal books as canonical.” However, commentaries for most of the books in the Protestant Old Testament are absent from the Dead Sea scrolls and books like Sirach were penned in a special style that is unique to writings the Qumran community considered to be Scripture.

Scholar Emanuel Tov argues that this special style indicates which documents among the Dead Sea Scrolls were considered by their authors were considered to be biblical, like Sirach, and which were not: “There is a special layout for poetical units that is almost exclusive to biblical texts (including Ben Sira [Sirach]), and is not found in any of the non-biblical poetical compositions from the Judean desert.”

Another problem with this objection is that even if the New Testament authors directly quoted the deuterocanonicals, that would still not convince Protestant apologists that the books were inspired. They could simply say in response, “So what? The New Testament also quotes apocryphal works like the book of Enoch and even Greek poets like Menander. What *really* counts is if the author introduces the quotation by saying something like “It is written” or “The Lord says.” But according to Catholic apologist Gary Michuta, less than a third of the Protestant Old Testament is cited in the New Testament with this introductory formula.

There is also evidence that some of the deuterocanonical books are referenced in a way that shows the New Testament authors considered them to be inspired records of biblical events.

For example, Hebrews 11:35 describes people in the Old Testament who “were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they may rise again to a better life.” These people are only described in 2 Maccabees 7, which describes brothers who accept torture instead of eating pork and violating Jewish law. Since the context of Hebrews 11 includes “the men of old [who] received divine approval” (v. 2), this means the books describing the Maccabean martyrs were part of the Old Testament that was used by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews.

The idea that the early Church viewed the deuterocanonical books as Scripture is even more evident in the writings of early Church fathers like Clement of Rome, Irenaeus,

Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria, Methodius, Cyprian, and Origen. Moreover, these fathers cited these books as “Scripture” or “holy Scripture,” and none of the pre-Nicene Church fathers ever declares the deuterocanonical books to be uninspired or non-canonical. St. Jerome even tells us that at the Council of Nicaea the deuterocanonical work of Judith was considered to be a part of the canon of Scriptures.

As the Protestant scholar J. N. D. Kelly said, for the great majority of the early Church Fathers, “the deuterocanonical writings ranked as Scripture in the fullest sense.”

The Book of Tobit

The book of Tobit together with Judith and Esther form a little group which Latin and Greek editions place among the historical books after Ezra and Nehemiah. It takes its name from its two main characters, father and son; the Septuagint, to distinguish them, calls the father Tobit and the son Tobias, the name being an abbreviation of the Hebrew title *tobhiyyahu* (= God is good).

The book which we have derives from a lost Semitic original. Jerome used a Chaldean (Aramaic) text, which also is no longer extant, to produce the Latin translation included in the Vulgate. The Qumran discoveries include a few Hebrew and Aramaic fragments of this book, but our main source for the text is the Greek Septuagint of which we have four separate recensions, which are divided into two groups—the Vatican and Alexandrian manuscripts on the one hand, and the Sinaitic Codex and the *Vetus latina* on the other.

Jews and Protestants regard the book of Tobit as apocryphal although they read it with respect and regard it as containing true history. The Catholic Church recognized it as an inspired book very early on, in the patristic period, placing it among the canonical books in the West from the 382 Roman synod forward, and in the East from the Council of Constantinople in 692. We do not have the name of the human author but he could well have been a Jew in the Diaspora and could have written it in Egypt, in Aramaic perhaps, in the third or fourth century B.C. The words of the angel at the end of his assignment (12:20)—“Write in a book everything that has happened”—or the fact that the first three chapters are written in the first person, are probably a literary device often found in narratives, used by someone writing in a later period, but still writing under divine inspiration.

The story given in Tobit is an episode of family history. All the indications are that the sacred writer is reporting something that really happened: He gives the family tree of the main people involved and is very precise about details of geography and historical chronology; however, we cannot exclude the possibility of some passages being fictitious, the writer’s purpose being one of spiritual and moral teaching rather than history proper.

Tobit, a Jew of the tribe of Naphtali who had been deported to Nineveh, was a man of exceptional piety and charity. He soon gained the trust of King Shalmaneser but he later got into trouble because he buried some Jews executed by the king. Everything goes

wrong for him: His property is confiscated, he loses his sight, his friends and even his wife taunt him. In a moment of severe tribulation he begs God to let him die because life holds no more for him.

At around the same time, Raguel, a relative of his in Ecbatana, is saddened to see his daughter Sarah reproached by her maids because her seven husbands have each died on their wedding night, slain they think by the evil demon Asmodeus. Like Tobit, Sarah also prays to God to end her life. But God listens to both their prayers and comes to their rescue, to turn their sorrow into joy.

He sends his angel Raphael, under the name of Azarias, to accompany and guide Tobit's son Tobias to the house of Raguel. This would be a stage on his journey because he was headed for Rages to collect money his father lent to a man called Gabriel. After being blessed by Tobit they start out; the angel saves Tobias from a dangerous fish and suggests that he marry Sarah. He also gives him the means to cure his father's blindness. Everything the angel predicts happens: Tobias marries Sarah, who is freed from demonic influence; the angel collects the money in Rages and returns with the young married couple to Nineveh, where Tobit miraculously recovers his sight.

The story told in Tobit contains a whole series of teachings which are useful for the education of conscience and also encourage people to practice virtue, especially virtues to do with the works of mercy. Parents feel urged to educate their children in the love of God and in the practice of prudence, generosity, etc. and themselves to imitate Tobit's patience when they encounter unforeseen difficulties in their family life, even to the point of their own relatives turning their backs on them.

The book also shows that things which we normally regard as difficulties or misfortunes can become blessings if accepted and appreciated as coming from God's hands. God is the Father who never abandons us; he is in fact watching over us night and day because he desires only our good.

Additionally, the book shows us that angels are the protectors of men. Raphael reveals this when he says: "I will not conceal anything from you. ... God sent me to heal you and your daughter-in-law Sarah. I am Raphael, one of the seven holy angels who present the prayers of the saints and enter into the presence of the glory of the Holy One. . . . Do not be afraid; you will be safe. But praise God for ever. For I did not come as a favor on my part, but by the will of our God. Therefore praise him forever. All these days I merely appeared to you and did not eat or drink, but you were seeing a vision. And now give thanks to God, for I am ascending to him who sent me" (Tob. 12:11-20).

Tobit's conversation with his son contains important teaching on marriage (4:12ff), stressing the purity of mind and heart with which a couple should approach marriage. Marriage, we know, is a lifelong union of one man and one woman; they become one (Matt. 19:15, 1 Cor. 6:16). Jesus will raise the marriage contract to the status of a sacrament (cf. Prov. 2:17, Mal. 2:14), thereby giving the true interpretation of what marriage was at the beginning of the human race (Matt. 19:4-8).

Tobit also stresses the importance of love of one's neighbor, which should lead us to act justly: "What you hate, do not do to any one" (4:15); to accept the advice of prudent people; and to praise God always and ask him to keep us on the right road. It also emphasizes the essential need for works of mercy, especially alms giving. Tobias learned from his father to lead a life of service and to be appreciative to God for everything. He is an example to Christian families, especially those concerned about the religious or spiritual education of their children.

The Book of Judith

Like the book of Tobit, that of Judith was also written in a Semitic language—probably Hebrew—but the original text was lost early on. There are now a number of Latin and Greek texts which can be used as controls on one another. Jerome made a free translation of an Aramaic text, cutting it down to approximately a fifth of its size, and this is the Latin version in the Vulgate, which the New Vulgate has corrected and expanded.

It is not known who the author was, but he very likely was a post-exilic Jew who probably lived around the third century B.C.. The text presupposes the repatriation of the Jews from Babylon; Palestine is depicted having a sizable population and the Temple being fully operational.

The book of Judith was excluded from the Jewish canon by Pharisees around the first century A.D. on very arbitrary grounds. Nor is it accepted by Protestants (who describe these deuterocanonical books as "apocryphal"). The Catholic Church has always regarded them as inspired. They are often quoted by the Fathers, and the Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397) included them among the Sacred Scriptures.

It is important to bear in mind, that this is a free narrative of a historical event, written with a teaching, moralizing purpose in mind. This explains, for example, why Nebuchadnezzar (604-562 B.C.), is described as king of Nineveh, whereas Nineveh is known to have been destroyed in 612. According to the narrative itself we are in the post-exilic period, after the rebuilding of the Temple (4:3-13; 5:18). There are no signs of idolatry (8:18), and the Law is being rigorously observed (12:2-9). All this suggests that the sacred writer, for some reason of symbolism, wanted to give fictitious names to people and places. His contemporaries would have had no difficulty in working out what the characters' real names were, whereas we have the greatest difficulty.

What can be said is that here is a book built on a nucleus of historical fact but developed without paying much attention to historical detail: It was written in order to get across a message, that faithfulness to Yahweh saves Israel from every danger (8:11-27; 16:1-7).

Danger appears on the horizon when King Holofernes reaches the plains of Esdraelon, after crushing the cities of the Phoenician and Jewish coast, bent on destroying all forms of worship incompatible with the quasi-divine aspirations of Nebuchadnezzar. When they

hear the news, the Jews get ready to fight him, even though they have very limited resources, which both surprises and annoys Holofernes.

The leader of the Ammonites, Achior, advises him to act prudently because whenever Israel is faithful to its God, he tells him, it has no reason to be afraid of anyone (5:1-21). The Jews are based in Bethulia. The Assyrians manage to cut off their water supply, and their situation becomes so desperate that they eventually decide that they will surrender in five days' time unless God comes to their rescue (ch. 7)—a sensible decision, given their plight. Just at this point Judith, a young widow, comes in, beautifully prudent, devout. “Who are you,” she asks the rulers, “that have put God to the test?” They give their approval to the daring plan she proposes.

After doing penance (ch. 9) she dresses in her finery and jewelry, and, accompanied by her maid, she leaves the city and goes to Holofernes, whom she captivates with her beauty and intelligence. Holofernes invites her to attend a banquet, in the course of which he drinks too much. Judith is left alone with him and grasps her opportunity (ch. 13). She calls on God to strengthen her and cuts off his head with two blows. As soon as she gets back to Bethulia she displays the head; all the people praise God for the great miracle. The Assyrians flee in panic, and the Jews sack their camp (ch. 14-15).

Judith spends the rest of her long life in peace and honor. She declines all offers of marriage. Before she dies she distributes her property to her relatives. When she dies she is buried with her husband and mourned for seven days by a grateful people.

The book of Judith is a well-told story in a literary form reminiscent of apocalyptic writing. Holofernes is shown as the epitome of the power of evil. Judith, whose name means “the Jewish woman,” represents God’s cause and symbolizes the Jewish people which wishes to stay faithful to their covenant with Yahweh.

Just when everything seems lost, God, who is ever faithful to his promises, causes the very weakness of his people to produce strength, in the form of a woman, who in this instance will be the instrument of his justice. Judith’s victory represents the just reward of her trusting prayer and exemplary life of penance.

The deception which Judith uses was of a type regarded as licit in a war against an invader. Judith did not seek or even fear Holofernes’ lust. God led her to act in the way she did (13:16-19). By beheading him without her honor being damaged in any way, she achieves a double victory, moral and patriotic. This is why Catholic piety sees in Judith a symbol of Mary Immaculate who, without being affected by the promptings of the tempter, crushes the head of the infernal serpent.

On the plain of Esdraelon, near that other plain of Armageddon, where John places the battle at the end of the world on the great day of God the Almighty (Rev. 16:15-16), the book of Judith exhorts us to be vigilant, through prayer and good works, so as not to lose faith or hope. The story is a simple one, told with a certain naiveté, but it carries a message for all individuals and all nations. Jerome in fact in his preface to Zephaniah proposes

Judith as a figure of the Church of Jesus Christ: Her personal qualities—of beauty, wealth, good repute, and public spirit—seem to reflect the Spouse of Christ, all beauty, without stain or wrinkle, adorned with the finest of gifts and prerogatives. She it is who defends us, despite our weaknesses, from the attacks of God's enemies in this world.

The Books of 1st and 2nd Maccabees

The title of 1 and 2 Maccabees is taken from the surname of Judas (1 Mace. 2:4), the third son of Mattathias, the hero of the war of Jewish independence against Syria. The origin of the word "maccabee" is unclear; it may derive from the Hebrew word *maqabi* (= hammer)—a reference to Judas' physical strength and exploits. As a surname it was also applied to his brothers and, by extension, to the seven martyred brothers (2 Macc.7).

The books had separate authors. Given its exactness of dates, places and documents and its enthusiasm for the Jewish cause, 1 Maccabees must have been written by a Palestinian Jew who witnessed the events he describes; the author of 2 Maccabees was more likely an Alexandrian Jew and a Pharisee, given what he has to say about resurrection. The first book was written in Hebrew, although what we have is only a Greek translation; the second, written in Greek, shows that the author had a good grasp of Greek rhetoric and the Greek language, which suggests he may have been from Alexandria.

As far as the dates of composition are concerned, these can be taken as approximately 100 B.C. for the first and 124 B.C. for the second, on the basis of the information given in the first letter they refer to (2 Mace. 1:9).

Both books, which Protestants regard as apocryphal, were recognized by the Fathers as inspired [and canonical at the Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397, 419)] and were later [again] defined as canonical by the Council of Trent (1546).

After the death of Alexander the Great (323 B.C.) two main dynasties established themselves in the territories of his huge empire—the Ptolemies, who controlled Egypt and also Palestine up to 200 B.C.; and the Seleucids, who took over large parts of the Middle East and moved into Palestine in 200 B.C.

The Ptolemy kingdom was founded by Ptolemy I, the son of a Macedonian nobleman. Ptolemy, a loyal general of Alexander's, was made satrap of Egypt in 323 when Alexander died, and in 304 he assumed the title of king, annexing Cyprus, Palestine, and the Lebanon. In 285 he abdicated in favor of his son Ptolemy II, who became involved in a struggle with the Seleucid kings. Ptolemy II's court at Alexandria was famed for its learning. His son, Ptolemy III Euergetes, extended his empire into Persia.

The kingdom began to decline under Ptolemy IV Philopator, who was a bad administrator and led a dissolute life. From the time of Alexander onward Greek culture spread throughout the Middle East. The early Seleucid rulers were tolerant of the political and religious cultures of the territories they controlled, but things changed when Antiochus IV Epiphanes came to power, and the scene in Palestine became one of persecution and war. Antiochus was determined to impose hellenic religion and civilization in Palestine as elsewhere, and naturally this was anathema to the Jews, who at this time were quite faithful to the Covenant with Yahweh.

First Maccabees gives a detailed account of the struggle in Palestine over a period of fifty years, from the time Antiochus IV Epiphanes came to the throne up to the death of Simon, the last of the Maccabee brothers (134 B.C.).

After a short introduction the book describes the Jewish uprising against Antiochus, whose persecution led to the desecration of the Temple. Mattathias proclaimed a holy war; Jewish armed resistance operated from the wilderness with great success under the successive leadership of three of Mattathias' sons—Judas Maccabeus, the undisputed leader of the Jews (3:1-9); Jonathan (9:28-12:53), and Simon (chap. 13-16). When Simon died he was succeeded by his son John Hyrcanus, who became the founder of the Hasmonean dynasty. At this point the book ends.

The second book overlaps with the first, starting earlier. It runs from the end of the reign of Seleucus IV, the predecessor of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, up to the defeat of Nicanor, shortly before the death of Judas Maccabeus—that is, a period of fifteen years (176-161), which are covered in chapters 1-7 of the first book.

The sacred writer's purpose is to build up the morale of the Jews. Naturally, any account of the war of liberation led by Judas Maccabeus would have this effect and would show that victory was due to God's powerful aid (2:19-22). But he also wants to show that God's purpose in permitting persecution is to discipline the Jews "in order that he may not take vengeance on us afterwards when our sins have reached their height" (6:12-17). After the episode of Heliodorus (3:1-40), the writer lays great emphasis on the inviolate sanctity of the Temple and implies that Antiochus suffers the terrible death he does suffer because of his profanation of it. The same fate overtakes another persecutor, Nicanor, who dies because he threatened to destroy the Temple. Judas' victory over Nicanor ensures the liberation of the Jewish people and guarantees the proper worship of the true God.

Although the author of the first book devotes a lot of space to wars and political intrigues extending over a period of forty years, his primary purpose is a religious one. He reports the calamities the Jewish people experience on account of their sins, while also stressing the role played by God in his providence, who watches over them as he promised he would (cf. Ps 119:89-90). The success of the Jewish campaigns he attributes to God's protection, but he makes it clear that faithfulness to the Covenant is, as was the case with their forebears, the ground on which Israel must totally rely. From this it follows that, for the just man, supreme glory consists in being ready to give one's life, if necessary, to defend God's interests—the Law, which every Jew must strictly obey.

The second book is even more important from the doctrinal point of view. It aims at bringing out even more strongly the religious lessons of the time, and the story is written more like a sermon than a history. It includes such fundamental texts as that which states that God created all things *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, not out of things which existed (7:28), and those which make it clear that the sacrifice of martyrs is a voluntary form of atonement which placates God's anger (7:36, 8:5).

In this connection it gives a very moving account of the martyrdom of seven brothers, whose names are unknown but who are popularly called "the Maccabees" (2 Mac 7:1 ff). Their faith in the resurrection, which they explicitly assert (v. 11), gives them the courage to undergo terrible sufferings to keep the holy Law of God, sufferings in which they are also supported by their mother's faith. She, having offered God the lives of her sons, then offers herself in sacrifice, giving an example of fortitude and also of that faith in which she had reared her children. Christian tradition venerates these seven brothers as martyrs, and churches were dedicated to them in Antioch, Rome, Lyons, and Vienne.

Other texts lay stress on the intercession of the saints and the value of prayers for the dead (12:43-46), which are the basis of the dogma of the communion of saints. As we know, those who have left this world and enjoy the beatific vision, in the same act of charity in which they love God, are also praying for their brothers, who are members of the Church like themselves. After Jesus redeemed mankind by dying on the cross, the just of the Old Testament were enabled to enter heaven, and thus the ancient people of God became the new Israel, which is the Church.

This book also tells us more about atonement beyond the grave by asserting the existence of purgatory (12:38ff). It also asserts the resurrection of the just and tells us what we need to know about the fate of the unjust (7:9, 14,23,29; 14:46). Thus, for example, in 2 Maccabees 12:43 there is Judas' act of faith in the resurrection and salvation of his fallen soldiers, but he realizes that they must atone for their sins in the next life, and he wishes to help them in this and asks for prayers from the living. This text explicitly states that there is an interim stage where souls are purified and that they can be helped by suffrages offered by the living.

All this shows that these inspired books are well worth prayerful reading, particularly the second, which provides us with many edifying examples – especially the humility which leads its protagonists to trust in God, their fortitude in defending their faith, their patience in dealing with obstacles to observance of the Law, and their deep piety, as shown in their prayer for their dead comrades.

First and Second Maccabees help us to realize that God watches over his own, and they show that Israel always wins victory over its enemies when it stays true to the Covenant.

The history of the Maccabee family given in these books ends with the death of Simon and the succession of his son, John Hyrcanus. Flavius Josephus, the first century Jewish

historian, carries the story forward; only he gives the surname Hasmoneus, which applies to the successors of the early Maccabees up to Aristobulus II.

Aristobulus I, the son of John Hyrcanus, was the first to add the title of king to that of chief priest. When he died his widow, Alexandra, married his elder brother, Alexander Janneus, and she remained on the throne while her son Hyrcanus II was high priest.

Alexandra was succeeded by another son, Aristobulus II. When war broke out between these two brothers the Romans intervened, took Jerusalem and brought the monarchy to an end.

The Book of Wisdom

This book, which the Vulgate calls Wisdom and the Septuagint Greek calls the Wisdom of Solomon, is one of the most typical books of wisdom literature. Its literary beauty and particularly its depth of doctrine brings us to the threshold of New Testament revelation.

Although the book itself claims that it was written by Solomon, it must be pointed out that here as in the case of Ecclesiastes we have an example of recourse to pseudonymity, a device often used in the ancient world to highlight the importance of a literary work; here the author used the prestige of Solomon, the greatest of the wise men of Israel.

The inspired writer wrote the entire book in Greek, including the first five chapters, which were once taken to have been originally in Hebrew. This is demonstrated by the language used, which is elegant and cultured, by its thematic unity, and even by its consistency of style. We can therefore say that he was a Hellenist Jew who wrote out of his great faith in God (9:1). He abominates any kind of polytheism and is proud to belong to a "holy and blameless race" (10:15). In view of his many references to Egypt, he probably wrote in Alexandria, the capital of Hellenism in the Ptolemy period and the cultural focus of the Jews in the Diaspora.

We do not know exactly when the book was written, but we can say that it was written later than the Septuagint translation of the Bible and before Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C.-54 B.C.), with whom the author is not acquainted. The references to the persecution undergone by the Jews (2:1-20, 15:14) lead us to suggest that the most likely date of composition was around the last years of the reign of Ptolemy Dionysius (80-52 B.C.), very close to the Christian period but before the Roman conquest, to which no reference is made.

The book can be divided into three parts. The first part (chap. 1-5) is prophetic in style and somewhat Hebraic in the concepts it uses. It exhorts people to practice righteousness and sincerely seek God. As a first step toward this it stresses the need for a pure and upright heart and for avoidance of all sin. Against this background it contrasts the reward that ultimately awaits those who are faithful to God with the punishment that evildoers will receive and their unhappy fate after death.

The second part (chap. 6-9) concentrates on the source of wisdom and the need to obtain wisdom. Speaking as Solomon, the sacred writer explains what he means by wisdom:

“For in her there is a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, everseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent and pure and most subtle. For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” (Wis. 7:22-25).

It is this wisdom that lies at the basis of all other good things. The author stresses that it is something to be sought through prayer, because we cannot attain it by our own efforts:

“O God of my fathers and Lord of mercy, who has made all things by thy word and by thy wisdom hast formed man to have dominion over the creatures thou hast made, and rule the world in holiness and righteousness, and pronounce judgment in uprightness of soul, give me the wisdom that sits by thy throne, and do not reject me from among thy servants. . . . For even if one is perfect among the sons of men, yet without the wisdom that comes from thee he will be regarded as nothing” (Wis. 9:1-6).

The third part (chap. 10-19), written in a very original style, speaks of the magnificence of wisdom as demonstrated by the history of the chosen people. In contrast to this it describes the origin of polytheism and the moral consequences of idolatry:

“For all men who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know him who exists, nor did they recognize the craftsman while paying heed to his works, but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or the luminaries of heaven were the god that rule the world. . . . Afterward it was nor enough for them to err about the knowledge of God, but they live in great strife due to ignorance, and they call such great evils peace...They no longer keep either their lives or their marriages pure, but they either treacherously kill one another or grieve one another by adultery. . . . For the worship of idols that should not even be named is the beginning and cause and end of every evil” (13:1-3, 14:22-27).

By natural reason they could have discovered that the universe is not the result of chance; it could not cause its own existence or keep itself in being, because it needs—as pagan philosophers like Plato and Aristotle realized—a first principle or cause which would give every existing thing its being and which does not depend on any other cause for its own being or activity. But they, who considered themselves to be so wise, failed to grasp the truth because of their moral corruption, which led them finally to idolatry. This is true not only of pagans, but also of members of the chosen people and of many Christians when they idolize created things. Immediate consequences follow:

“Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, in the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:24-25).

It is easy to conclude, as the writer does, that revealed wisdom is far superior to pagan wisdom—which is what he is trying to do in the three parts of the book which we have outlined. In each he deals with wisdom from a different angle: In the first he shows wisdom as a moral virtue, identifying it with the pursuit of righteousness; in the second, as the mother of all virtues, personifying it as a divine attribute; in the third he emphasizes the objective character of wisdom, which is the source of riches for those who attain it.

The whole background of this book is profoundly religious. God wished to put the Jews of the first century B.C. on their guard against the temptation they might experience in Egyptian culture—an attractive culture, but one which inevitably deflected man from his ultimate goal. Instead of giving them genuine knowledge, it would woo them away from the faith and from true wisdom. Therefore, the sacred text is continually exhorting the reader to search for higher knowledge which comes from God, not from man; God is the source of all good things. Wisdom, as we have seen, is a “reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness” (7:25-26). It is God himself who, in an act of his mercy, gives wisdom to men, made in his image and likeness.

With Daniel and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom provides an adequate answer to the problem of the reward of the righteous. All the pains and sufferings a man experiences in this life find their explanation in the revelation of the immortality of the soul:

“But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be an affliction and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of men they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them. In the time of their visitation they will shine forth and will run like sparks through the stubble. They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will reign over them forever” (Wis. 3:1-8).

This is the answer to the great questions posed in Job and Ecclesiastes. On the one hand it explains why the just man suffers; on the other, it points up the inadequacy of earthly things to satisfy man’s yearnings for happiness. In other words, everything that happens to man in this life needs to be seen through the prism of eternal life, where the just man will be forever happy, whereas the ungodly will suffer the punishment their sins deserve (3:9-10).

Wisdom, then, brings us to the threshold of the gospel message. Therefore, it comes as no surprise to find the apostles quoting it often in their preaching. To describe the work of the Word of God incarnate, Paul refers to wisdom as a divine attribute (Wis. 9:11-19, 1 Cor. 2:7-16), as does John in the prologue to his Gospel (John 1:1ff). The same thing

happens in other places in the New Testament dealing with the eternal life of the just (Rom. 8:18, 1 Cor. 6:2). The New Testament asserts that man, by the use of natural reason alone, can from evidence of created things come to discover the existence of God (Rom. 1:20, Wis. 13:4-9) and of divine mercy and providence (Rom. 9:19-23, Wis. 12:12-15).

In view of all this and because of the ground it lays for the revelation of the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, the book of Wisdom offers the Christian spiritual and doctrinal material of the first order, which the Church in its liturgy uses as an unequivocal announcement of the messianic era, which from this point onward was seen as imminent.

The Book of Sirach

In the Greek version of the Bible, the first title of this book was “The Wisdom of Ben Sirach,” but from the time of Cyprian (early third century) the Latin title, *Ecclesiasticus*, was used. It received this name from the fact that, after the Psalms, it was the book most used in the liturgy; in fact, in the early Church it was a kind of official catechism used in the catechumenate.

Sirach was originally written in Hebrew, as the Greek translator says in the prologue. Jerome was acquainted with the Hebrew text, which was used up to the Middle Ages. In the eleventh century the Hebrew disappeared and could not be used again until about two-thirds of it was discovered in an old synagogue in Cairo in 1896. The archaeological evidence given by that manuscript, together with the portions of the same which survive in rabbinical literature, proves that the Hebrew text dates from before 132 B.C. The New Vulgate conserves the Old Latin text, which was made from a Greek codex containing some interpolations, to which certain glosses and retouches were added.

According to the prologue and other passages in the book, the inspired author was a learned scribe, a humble and zealous man, who lived in Jerusalem. Through application and response to grace, from an early age he had meditated deeply on sacred Scripture. As an adult he was an indefatigable traveler and always kept his eyes and his soul open to test “the good and the evil among men” (34:12, 39:5). He eventually settled in Jerusalem, where he opened a school to give moral and civic education to all comers; there, under the inspiration of God, he wrote this book. His grandson—the Greek translator—arrived in Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Ptolemy Euergetes (170-116 B.C.). He began on his translation in the year 132, working on the Hebrew text, which probably was written prior to 170 B.C., since it contains no reference to the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

Like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, this book has no particular structure. Subjects arise in delightful and even planned disorder—praise of wisdom, fortitude in temptation, filial piety, praise of parents, friendships; he parades before the reader a whole series of themes taken from the world around him, in a period on the threshold of the heroic age of the Maccabees—things to do with family life, with work, situations affecting old people, the

rich, people in power, parents and children. Alongside this Sirach also deals with typical wisdom themes—the origin of evil, human freedom, creation, sin, penance. In treating each of these he uses the classical sapiential form of the *mashal*—numerical (25:7-11), parallel (21:16- 19) and anaphoristic (2; 4; 7:20-16).

The book closes with hymns giving thanks to God the Creator, who has arranged things in the best possible way to benefit the just and punish the evildoer; these are followed by a hymn praising the patriarchs for having lived in accordance with the laws God gave them, from Adam up to Simon, the son of Onias, the high priest in Ben Sirach's time.

As happened with all the wisdom books of the Bible, the Greek translator puts special emphasis on the practical purpose of Sirach. First, he advises everyone to live in accordance with divine Law, which should be the highest rule and main aspiration of man's behavior. But as he says in the prologue, Ben Sirach wanted to write this book for those living abroad "who wished to gain learning, being prepared in character to live according to the law."

This book played an important part in shaping the faith of the Jewish people to equip them to cope with the imminent menace of Hellenism, which ran completely counter to the monotheism of the people of the Old Covenant. At the basis of his teaching Ben Sirach puts fear of God. In concrete terms this means fleeing from sin, as a first step on the road to virtue, and then walking that way in humility, which is the basis of all the other virtues; through humility a person accepts himself and recognizes his defects, while also respecting his neighbor and never engaging in defamation and calumny (7:12-17). This follows logically from obedience to God's commandments and implies total trust in God's power and majesty. This sense of trust grows the more a person is tested and tempted—an experience he needs if he is to develop a strong character and temper his spirit.

The main enemy which people encounter—an enemy which is an ally of Hellenism—does not come from outside. This enemy is to be found in easygoingness and a lack of moral vigilance, in indolence and neglect of the duties the Law imposes. Ben Sirach, therefore, argues energetically in favor of pursuit of righteousness and consideration for others. He asks people to aim at consistency between their faith and their everyday actions and to give special attention to things to do with the worship of God.

Chapter 24 marks a high point in the book's teaching. It presents wisdom in the form of an actual person who is ever alongside God, man's Creator and supreme lawgiver. Now, in his infinite goodness and mercy, wisdom speaks directly to the people of Israel; he speaks like a person, as befits the personification of a divine attribute:

"I came forth from the mouth of the Most High and covered the earth like a mist. . . . Then the Creator of all things gave me a commandment, and the one who created me assigned a place for my tent. And he said, 'Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance.' From eternity, in the beginning, he created me, and for eternity I shall not cease to exist."

This text clearly represent a development of the revelation given in earlier books: Wisdom is shown as intimately united to God, though distinct from him, and has characteristics which will later be attributed to the Person of the Word. Once the eternal Word of God becomes man it will be much easier to understand what this book as yet only hints at. It was this text which led the liturgy to describe our Lady—in an allegorical, spiritual sense—as “the seat of wisdom,” a wisdom which God communicates to all men, but to Mary in a very special way.

Finally, Sirach prepared the way, a short while before the schism between the Sadducees and the Pharisees, for a devout and faithful people to accept the revelation which Jesus Christ would bring. Although the book is doctrinally a considerable distance from the Sermon on the Mount, it does contain features which are later to be found fully formed in the New Testament—as, for example, when Ben Sirach, for the first time in Old Testament tradition, addresses his prayer to God, calling him Father: “O Lord, Father and Ruler of my life, do not abandon me to their counsel, and let me not fall because of them! . . . O Lord, Father and God of my life, do not give me haughty eyes, and remove from me evil desire” (Sir. 23:14). He even says that this Father will not pardon our sins unless we first pardon those who offend us: “Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. Does a man harbor anger against another and yet seek for healing from the Lord? Does he have no mercy toward a man like himself and yet pray for his own sins?” (Sir. 28:24).

The Book of Baruch

The book of Baruch, a deuterocanonical book of the Old Testament, comes after Lamentations in the Vulgate, but the Septuagint puts it after Jeremiah because of its obviously close connection. Although it is not part of the Hebrew canon, it was read in the synagogue, like Lamentations. The Fathers of the Church (Athenagoras, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria, among others) considered Baruch to be an inspired book. This is the official position of the Church, which ever since the Council of Trent lists it in the canon of Scripture.

Baruch (= blessed) was the secretary and disciple of Jeremiah (Jer. 32: 12ft). After the assassination of Gedaliah he was forcibly taken, with Jeremiah, to Egypt (Jer. 43). Later, as he himself tells us, he left Egypt (1: 12) and joined the Jewish exiles in Babylon, where he wrote his book and gave a public reading of it on the fifth anniversary of the destruction of Jerusalem (581).

He returned to Jerusalem that same year with monies collected for those remaining in the city, for burnt offerings and sin offerings; he brought with him some of the sacred vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had plundered from the Temple and must surely have read out the book on the occasion of the feast of Tabernacles (1:6-14).

The book consists of six chapters, the last of which gives the text of the Letter of Jeremiah. After a short historical introduction (1: 1-14), there are three fairly distinct parts to the book:

The first (1: 15-3:8) consists of a long prayer in which the people confess their sin and beg God's mercy and forgiveness; the second (3:9-4:4) is a hymn of praise to divine wisdom, an attribute of God which is inaccessible to man unless-as is the case with Israel-God makes his mind known in the form of his eternal law, the source of life; the third part (4:5-5:9) is an exhortation in which Jerusalem, cast in the role of a good mother, invites her children to have hope and confidence in God and in which the enemies of Israel are threatened with dire punishment. The book ends with a passage announcing the end of the exile and the return to Jerusalem.

The Letter of Jeremiah (this is the name given to chapter 6), whose original text according to scholars was in Hebrew, is, Jerome thinks, psuedoepigraphic, since he assigns it a date much later than that for the editing of the writings of that prophet. It probably comes from the third century B.C., when the worship of the gods was being re-established in all its ancient splendor at Babylon. This, though, does not mean that chapter 6 is not an inspired text: The Fathers recognized it as such and it is in the Church's canon.

This sixth chapter, which is very beautifully written, is an argument in popular language in favor of the one true God. It ridicules idolatrous worship as vain and empty; the exiles have no need to fear it, no matter how decked out in gold or silver these idols are; they are only pieces of wood which cannot move and can do nothing to help themselves. The prophet cleverly proves that the gods the Babylonians adore are idols, on which no one can rely:

"They cannot save a man from death or rescue the weak from the strong. They cannot restore sight to a blind man; they cannot rescue a man who is in distress. They cannot take pity on a widow or do good to an orphan. These things that are made of wood and overlaid with gold and silver are like stones from the mountain, and those who serve them will be put to shame. Why then must anyone think that they are gods or call them gods?" (Bar. 6:36-40).

The teaching contained in this letter is in line with the prophetic writings we have already seen, even if it is of a later date. The only one in whom they should place their trust is the God of Israel, transcendent, eternal, unique-not the idols of Babylon, which people were trying to enthrone once again.

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