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**deSilva, David A.**

***Introducing the Apocrypha: Message, Context, and Significance***

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The last two decades have seen a revival of interest in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, especially since James H. Charlesworth published the two volumes of his collection. This surely has its grounds not only in the growing acknowledgement of the importance of the Dead Sea Scrolls but also in the fact that more and more scholars have begun to take seriously the fact that Jesus was a real Jew of his time. This new trend reevaluates the time of Jesus, and the study of the Apocrypha (and the Pseudepigrapha) is central in the new picture that is beginning to take shape. This explains why so many new introductions to this corpus of writings, canonical for both Orthodox and Catholics, have been produced in recent years. Some of these introductions are of very high value, such as this one by David deSilva, probably the best published thus far, surely by far the most complete.

The presentation follows a traditional pattern: first an overview of the apocryphal writings and their significance for today's reader, where the author focuses on their place in Christian Bibles; then a historical survey, from Samaria's destruction in 721 B.C. to the Jewish wars against Rome, which ended with the destructions of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and 135. The next sixteen chapters are dedicated to the analysis of single apocryphal books, in the following order (including the titles of the chapters given by the author):

Tobit: "Better Is Almsgiving with Justice"  
Judith: "Hear Me Also, a Widow"  
Additions to Esther: "The Aid of the All-Seeing God and Saviour"  
Wisdom of Solomon: "The Righteous Live Forever"  
Wisdom of Ben Sira: "In All Wisdom There is Doing of Torah"  
Baruch: "Return with Tenfold Zeal to Seek God"  
Letter of Jeremiah: "They Are Not Gods, So Do Not Fear Them"  
Additions to Daniel: "Let Them Know That You Alone Are God"  
1 Maccabees: "The Family through Which Deliverance Was Given"  
2 Maccabees: "There Is Some Power of God about the Place"  
1 Esdras: "Leave to Us a Root and a Name"  
Prayer of Manasseh: "The God of Those Who Repent"  
Psalm 151: "He Made Me Shepherd of His Flock"  
3 Maccabees: "Blessed Be the Deliverer of Israel"  
2 Esdras: "The Mighty One Has Not Forgotten"  
4 Maccabees: "Noble Is the Contest"

A reference list and indexes of authors, subjects, and scripture and other ancient writings close the volume.

For each book, deSilva typically provides discussions of its content and structure; textual transmission; author, date, and setting; genre and purpose; formative influence; theological value, especially in the context of middle Judaism; and, finally, its influence on other successive writings. Dedicating a fair amount of pages to each writing, DeSilva offers the space necessary to deepen the study of every single work. Further, his introduction is an in-depth study, to my knowledge the most complete. The reader finds all the information needed to understand these ancient books and their value and to have an idea of the advancement of the debate among the scholars

Since it is impossible to analyze all the issues posed by deSilva in the eighteen chapters of this volume, I will point to a few characteristics that, I think, merit attention. First, in light of the fact that there is no official list of the Apocrypha (each of the great manuscripts of the past has its own selection), it is interesting to note how deSilva chose which books to include in his collection:

The present volume adopts the widest delineation of Apocrypha for three reasons. First, it allows this book to be used effectively as a companion to those texts included as the "apocrypha-Deuterocanonical Books" in the New Revised Standard Version. Second, it is in keeping with the ecumenical scope of biblical scholarship at the turn of the millennium. Third, it would be a shame to miss what

some of the more marginal texts have to offer, especially in a context where our primary goal is to gain as much an immersion as possible into the world of intertestamental Judaism and the matrix of early Christianity. (19)

This statement is important also because deSilva summarizes here the reasons why he wrote his book; I will address his third reason later on.

Second, one should note that deSilva's historical reconstruction in chapter 2 provides one of the clearest picture of the events of the second century B.C. that preceded the Maccabean wars.

The third issue to mention is the question of the canon. Among the Protestant churches one notes a renewed interest in the Apocrypha, namely, those "mysterious books" that church members begin to find in new ecumenical versions of the Bible. This interest is legitimate and must be supported, but it raises the question of the borders of the Christian canon of the Bible. Surely, as deSilva rightly points out in his introduction, it is not a question of reopening the canon. However, why should we assign special importance to these books and not, for instance, pseudepigraphal books such as *Jubilees* and *1 Enoch*, which are, after all, also part of the Ethiopic Bible? According to deSilva, the Apocrypha is important for many historical reasons, such as to understand the church fathers who used them and sometimes considered them canonical. But is it just a historical interest, or do these books have a theological value even for today's theological thinking? According to Martin Luther, these were edifying books, good for the believer. Is this suggestion still valid? DeSilva offers beautiful words about the problem:

These texts have not only informed people of faith but also have inspired them throughout the millennia. Many of the ethical ideals taken up by Jesus and his disciples and promoted in the New Testament find their roots here and so are reinforced and strengthened by the reading of them. But even more, these texts add fuel to the fire in the soul sparked and fed by the canon shared by all Christians. The zeal to walk faithfully before God in the face of adversity, the commitment to choose obedience to God over the succumbing to the passions or weakness of the flesh, the experience of God's forgiveness and expectation of God's deliverance—all these are strengthened by these texts, which one can approach with confidence at least as the best devotional literature to have withstood the test of the time.

Thus DeSilva opens a question that it was not his task to develop in depth but that must be present and clear to the reader in all its theological importance.

Fourth, according to deSilva, the main value of these books is historical: they introduce us to the time of Jesus and allow a better understanding of the New Testament. Although I agree with this, I do not understand why the apocryphal books should take precedence over the pseudepigraphal ones. I think deSilva's choice has its ground in a still-to-be-solved problem in the approach to the Middle Jewish literature. We should take more seriously the advice of those who try to push scholarship to abandon the "canonical approach" in order to begin studying all these ancient documents freed from the corpora in which history has imprisoned them. If the aim is to understand Jesus' time, deSilva's book gives too partial of a picture, because of the "canonical" selection of the writings. For instance, all the documents belonging to "Enochic Judaism" are missing, in spite of the fact that they are important for understanding the beginnings of Christianity. We need more guidebooks to Middle Jewish literature that cover, even if in a brief and introductory form, all the writings and authors of that period. Focusing just on the apocryphal books is insufficient.

In conclusion, deSilva perfectly reaches his aim of providing "an aid to reading those primary texts" (13). My observations above are nothing more than marginal comments on the general context of the book and some of its basic choices, not intended to diminish the value of this volume, which on the whole is valuable for everyone interested in deepening his or her reading and study of the Apocrypha. The book's pleasant style makes it inviting and accessible to everyone.