SOMEWHAT IRREVERENT D’VAR TORAH TO START DBB’S SHABBATON ON *THE APOCRYPHA* TO ADATH SHALOM (JUNE 2020)

VIRTUAL PRESENTATION BECAUSE OF COVID-19

 Version 08 May 2020

Approximately 20 minutes in length

It is the 1st or 2nd century BCE, and I want to be chutzpadik enough to imagine myself as the former senior editor of “The Bible Project.” (There was no need to specify *Hebrew* Bible at that time.) Though retired for a few years, it seems that I had been asked by my former employers, the Men of the Great Assembly, to review the Septuagint, which was a translation of our Bible into Greek in the last couple of centuries BCE.

*To start, I will explain one aid for you and some terms that I will use:*

* *The aid is the Contents page from the 1938 American translation of The Apocrypha, and that I will ask Paul to put up on the screen as I talk.*
* *As I said a minute ago, the Septuagint is a translation of the Bible into Greek, but not just our Bible. It also contained 14 additional chapters that are not and never were in our Bible. They later became part of the Catholic Bible and were also published separately but you will have to come on Sunday to learn about those steps in their history.*
* *The Men of the Great Assembly consisted of 120 scribes and sages that came into being under Ezra’s leadership to manage Jewish affairs early in the 2nd Temple Period. Among other things, they put the Bible into some-thing very close to its final form, a process very relevant to my d’var.*

The Bible as we know it was still somewhat fluid in form, and, in my little play, I assume that the Men of the Great Assembly were trying to evaluate whether some of those additional 14 chapters should be incorporated into our Bible. I do not have the least shred of evidence for that assumption. That and the following come straight from my imagination. It seems that modern excavations in Jerusalem have turned up an ancient letter from me—my name back then was David ben Avraham--to the Men of the Great Assembly. As indicated at the start, I was a professional editor who had, fortunately, been born into a well-to-do family in Jerusalem with Greek house slaves, so I grew up speaking Greek at home, Aramaic in the street, and Hebrew in school and synagogue. Fortunately for you, the people who found my letter written in about 100 BCE translated it into English, and here it is:

* My dear colleagues: It is a pleasure to confer with you once again on this great Bible project of ours. You have asked that I put my editorial skills back to work in order to review the additional chapters in the Septuagint, and more specifically to evaluate their literary and religious merits. Those skills, such as they are, have been dormant for the past couple of years, so please excuse my impiety when I say that I feel rather like the witch of Endor must have felt when Saul asked her to bring Samuel back from the dead.
* What follows is my summary report from which you can learn my conclusions. The full report with a chapter-by-chapter review and the usual notes and citations will not be available for another couple of weeks. */Note to readers: The full report has never been found./* First, I will present my general conclusions. Second, I will cite those chapters with literary and religious merit strong enough to consider inclusion in our current draft of the Bible. And, third I will cite several chapters that should never in my opinion be so considered.
* In a sentence, only a few of the new chapters in the Septuagint meet the quality of literary and religious merits found in the existing draft of our Bible. Most lack one or the other quality, and many lack both qualities. Further, a number of those new chapters contain idolatrous materials. For example, *The Second Book* of *Esdras* makes explicit reference to the “Son of God” (with capital letters) and implicit reference to original sin, concepts promoted by those Judeo-something cults in Jerusalem but that have no place in our Bible.
* Among the 14 new chapters, I can only fully recommend two: *Tobit* and *Judith*. The former will balance those priests who ask whether bad things happen to good people. Of course they do, but equally good things happen to good people, and *Tobit* makes that point clearly. *Judith* is not a likely scenario, but it is a great story about a Jewish heroine, and, as we have discussed in the past, we do need to decrease the gender gap in the Bible. You may object that Yael, who is noted in *Judges*, also assassinates a foreign general. However, she did so from the security of her own tent and when he was no threat to her. Judith not only took action while in the camp of the general, but she offered her own body as temptation—it is not clear what really did happen at that point in the text--and even then she had to ask God to give her the strength to cut off his head.
* I could also be persuaded to suggest that *Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jeshua ben Sirach* be included in our Bible, but there is a difficulty. It is more wisdom literature, as good as, but not better than, *Ecclesiastes,* which is already there. You must be the judges on whether or not to lengthen the text (and make it even heavier) with more scrolls. Apropos, some Greek publishers are using a new form of binding pages that they call a codex or a book. You may want to look at this option to avoid increasingly heavy scrolls.
* Finally, there are several chapters that I must recommend against. I will start with the *First Book of Maccabees*, about which I really have mixed feelings. Do we really need this holiday called Chanukah so soon after Sukkot? True, it does cover some important history that does not otherwise appear in our Bible. On the other hand, it is very recent history, right up to and including the current Hasmo-nean king. It risks getting you embroiled in politics that will be anything but holy.
* A second paper that I recommend against is entitled *The Prayer of Manasseh.* As you know, Manasseh was one of, if not *the*, most evil of all the Israelite kings. In this chapter, while confined in a Babylonian prison, he asks G-d for forgiveness. If this prayer were inserted into our Bible, it would surely imply that G-d *may* possibly respond favourably, and therefore that even the most idolatrous of individuals can be forgiven if only they repent just with words. Any implication of this kind is just not acceptable.
* Equally dangerous is *The Additions to the Book of Esther*, which are not just additions but a complete revision of the text. As the former editor-in-chief, I am well aware of problems with the existing text, and there are innumerable places where I wish we had written this or that more carefully. (You will remember that I was home with the flu when we were dealing with the Ten Commandments, and I was so busy when I got back that I failed to adjust the second version in *D’varim* so it was identical with the first version in *Shemot*.) However, if we permit revisions in one book, we open the door to revision and even rejection of everything that we have tried to make holy, so I say No, No, No!
* Thank you for your attention to my concerns, so let me close by saying that, if you conclude to make no changes at all in the existing text—to leave the Bible just as it was when I finished my editorial work--you shall hear no complaint from me.

*This is the end of text of that letter that never was, and the end of my d’var as the first part of my shabbaton. The next two parts will, I assure you, be much more serious. The history of what happened to those 14 chapters is fascinating and instructive. They did not deserve to be part of the Hebrew Bible, but neither did they deserve to be forgotten. As a final comment, I will quote directly from* The Second Book of Maccabees *with what are almost the very last of the nearly 200 thousand in* The Apocrypha:

“I will here conclude my account. If it has been well and pointedly written, that is what I wanted, but if it is poor, mediocre work, that was all I could do.”

Shabbat shalom, and I hope to see many of you on Sunday morning at 11am for 60 to 80 minutes.

THE APOCRYPHA

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1. The First Book of Esdras
2. The Second Book of Esdras
3. The Book of [Tobit](https://www.surreyhillsuniting.org/NRSV/TOB/TOB1.HTM)
4. The Book of Judith
5. [The Additions to the Book of Esther](https://www.surreyhillsuniting.org/NRSV/ES2/ES21.HTM)
6. The [Wisdom of Solomon](https://www.surreyhillsuniting.org/NRSV/WIS/WIS1.HTM)
7. [Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jeshua the Son of Sirach](https://www.surreyhillsuniting.org/NRSV/SIR/SIR1.HTM)
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9. The Story of Susanna\*\*
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11. The Story of [Bel and the Dragon](https://www.surreyhillsuniting.org/NRSV/BEL/BEL1.HTM)\*\*
12. The Prayer of Manasseh
13. [The First Book of Maccabees](https://www.surreyhillsuniting.org/NRSV/1MA/1MA1.HTM)
14. The Second Book of Maccabees

\*Edgar J. Goodspeed, An American Translation (1938), page xi.

\*\* In some versions these three chapters are grouped into one book entitled *The Additions to Daniel*