

Non-canonical Additions to Esther

By James M. Rochford

Unless otherwise noted, all citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

The biblical book of Esther (see “Introduction to Esther”) has several additional verses in the Apocrypha. The apocryphal version of Esther contains an additional 107 verses to the Hebrew text. Modern translations categorize these verses into six major additions.

When Jerome translated the Apocrypha (against his will), he placed these additional verses at the end of the text. DeSilva writes, “These additions came, therefore, to be enumerated as 10:4-16:24 and appear as such in the KJV Apocrypha and its derivatives. Read in this order, of course, the book makes no sense. The RSV and NRSV, along with most other recent translations that include the Apocrypha, have remedied this deficiency by restoring the additions to their proper order within complete translations of Greek Esther.”[1] Metzger explains the history of these additions to Esther:

Sometime in the second or first century before Christ a certain Lysimachus (11:1) translated the Hebrew text of the Book of Esther in the Old Testament into Greek. At six different places in the Greek narrative he or someone else added substantial episodes not in the Hebrew, totally one hundred and seven verses. The elaborated form of the book subsequently passed from Greek into an Old Latin version. Later, when Jerome, who had been commissioned by Pope Damasus at the close of the fourth century to prepare a standard Latin version of the Bible, came to the Book of Esther he translated the Hebrew form of the book as it stands. Then, having gathered together the several additions found in Latin copies, he added them at the close of his rendered of the Hebrew, attaching notes to indicate where each addition belonged within the canonical book. But in the course of the subsequent transmission of Jerome’s Vulgate, in manuscript form, careless scribes would frequently omit these explanatory notes, resulting in a meaningless amalgam of separate portions. The final confusing step came in the Middle Ages when Stephen Langton, archbishop of Canterbury (died 1228), having divided the Latin Bible into chapters to facilitate its citation, numbered the chapters of the canonical and the apocryphal material of Esther consecutively as though all the latter material formed a direct continuation of the former.”[2]

Scholars “universally recognize” that Additions B and E were originally written in Greek. This is because of the “rhetorically florid” Greek language used, and their similarity with 3 Maccabees 3:11-29.[3]

Authorship

We are not sure who included these additions to the book of Esther. More important than the authorship of these texts is their date.

Date

DeSilva notes that the evolution of Esther “from its original Hebrew form to the text as it stands in the Septuagint took place over a considerable span of time.”[4] He points out that Josephus paraphrases Additions B through E, so these portions must have been created before AD 90. The mention of Dositheus bringing the scroll to Alexandria in the “fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra” (Esther 11:1) could date the book to roughly 78 BC (if Ptolemy XII) or 114 BC (if Ptolemy VIII).[5]

Historical difficulties or internal contradictions

The canonical version of Esther is a coherent story without the additions, but an incoherent story with the additions. DeSilva writes, “Without [the additions], the story is a coherent whole; with them, contradictions are unnecessarily introduced into a formerly consistent narrative.”[6]

Historical anachronisms. Esther 11:2-12:6 places Mordecai serving in the court of Artaxerxes, but also as a captive coming from Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar (about 112 years earlier).[7]

The death of Haman and his sons. The Hebrew text of Esther states that Haman was hanged on a pole and his sons were killed in the riots (Esther 7:9-10; 9:6-19). But the non-canonical Esther (16:17-18) states that Haman and his sons were all hanged on the city gate. Moreover, the Hebrew text states Haman and his sons died on the thirteenth of Adar (9:1, 13-14), while the non-canonical additions state they died before Adar (16:17-18).[8]

The date of Mordecai’s discovery of the plot. The canonical Esther places this in the 7th year of Artaxerxes (2:16-21), while the non-canonical Esther places this in the 2nd year of reek addition A puts it in the 2nd year of Artaxerxes (11:1).

Haman’s ethnicity. The canonical Esther calls Haman an “Agagite” (3:1). The non-canonical Esther calls Haman “a Macedonian... an alien to the Persian blood, and quite devoid of our kindliness” (16:10).

[1] David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 115.

[2] Bruce M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 55-56.

[3] David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 116.

[4] David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 116.

[5] David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 117.

[6] David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 115.

[7] David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 110-111.

[8] David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 115.

[9] David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 126.