



# *Is There an Orthodox Bible?*

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My experiences as a parish priest were very short at St. Mary's Orthodox Church of Valanjavattom (East). It was my second parish and I worked there only for three months in the latter half of 1989. Three months might be a negligible period for a priest who has completed seventeen years of service and for a parish which celebrates its silver jubilee, but it is not the case here. In those three months, I learned how a parish priest could be loved by the people. Even though my approach is quite different from that of the late Mathai Achen of Parumala, who served in the parish for decades, the people accepted me very quickly. I am thankful for this generosity of the parish. Also I can understand what a young priest can learn from a priest of the yester years. So, I dedicate the following article to his memory along with my best wishes for the jubilee celebrations of St. Gregorios Church.

## **Is there an Orthodox Bible?**

Many people do not know that there is an essential difference between the Protestant Churches and the Orthodox Church concerning the Bible. This is not only in the attitude towards the Bible and the way of interpreting individual texts of it, but also in the number of books contained in the Bible. The contents of the Bible are known as the Canon, in its technical sense. As far as the canon of the New Testament is concerned, all the Churches in the West and East follow the list prepared by St. Athanasius of Alexandria, the stalwart of the Council of Nicea, in his Easter Letter of AD 327. It put an end to the disputes between Eastern and Western Churches concerning the content of the New Testament and it established that 27 books from St. Matthew to the Book of Revelation make the New Testament.

However, the canon of the Old Testament is still disputed among the Churches; while the Protestant Churches take only 39 books in it, the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches include another seven books to it. Even though the Syriac Peshitta Bible of the Syrian Orthodox Church of the Early Middle Ages had these seven books in its Old Testament section, the Roman Catholic Church included them only after the Council of Trent in AD 1564. These books are called Deuterocanonical Books by the latter because of its late arrival in the canon of the Old Testament. The Protestants do not give them the canonical status and they call them Apocryphal Books, even though Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Movement, recommended the books for meditations.

## **Why are there some additions to the Bible?**

Actually, the term 'Old Testament' is coined by the Christians and they mean by it the Bible of the Jews. During the time of Jesus there were two types of Jews according to their cultural heritage. One group was concentrated in Palestine and they used the Hebrew Bible. A Council of Rabbis held in a place called Jamnia closed the canon of this Bible only in AD 90. This Bible had 39 books only and that is the reason why the Bible used by the Protestants does not include the seven books mentioned above.

However, a great number of Jews lived in different parts of the Roman Empire outside of Palestine. Alexandria was their cultural centre and they used Greek as their language for communication. It was just like the new generations of the Malankara Orthodox Church that use English instead of Malayalam. The Bible of these people was prepared in Greek language during the reign of King Ptolemy II (285-247 BCE). This was called the Septuagint, which means 'seventy' in Greek, because about seventy people were engaged in its formation.

The Septuagint was not merely a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, but it had three changes in comparison with the Hebrew Bible:

- a) It contained seven additional books, namely, 1-2 Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, Baruch, Bara Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon.
- b) There were some additions and changes in the books like Esther and Daniel.



c) The order of the books in the Septuagint was different from that of the Hebrew Bible. For example, II Chronicles was the last book of the Hebrew Bible. The numbering of Psalms was also different in the Septuagint.

Now the most important question is: what was the Bible used by Jesus and his disciples? None of the books of the New Testament were written during the time of Jesus; the Bible, which he used, was that of the Jews. Since the Canon of the Hebrew Bible was finalised only in 90 AD there is every reason to conclude that Septuagint was used during that time. Moreover, the modern researches have proved that the New Testament writers like St. Matthew and St. Paul quoted not from any Hebrew Bible but from the Septuagint. The Church called this the Old Testament when new scriptures were written by the Early Christians. Since we want to follow the Old Testament of the Early Church rather than the Hebrew Bible of the Palestinian Jews we consider the seven books mentioned above as scriptural texts.

There is also another reason for this consideration. Recently Kumaru Nadesan wrote in his book *Apocrypha: Can it be a part of the Bible?* the following comment: "the divine Revelation came to a stand still for a period of 400 years, from Malachi (400 BCE) the last prophetic voice of the Old Testament to John the Baptist who broke the prophetic silence" (Page 151). Our problem is: Can this be true? If our Bible should contain the unbroken Word of God from the Beginning of the World (Genesis) towards the End of the World (Book of Revelation) how can then there be a silence for 400 years as Nadesan assumes above? Nevertheless, if we take the Deuterocanonical books as the Word of God then there is no break at all. They tell us how God interacted with His people during the Intertestamental period of 400 years. Thus the Deuterocanonical books make a good bridge between the Old and the New Testament period. We also understand the Judaism of the time of Jesus in a better way if we read those books.

The above are the two most important reasons why the Deuterocanonical books could be considered as scriptural texts. The Orthodox Church of India considers the Syriac Peshitta version as its Bible. This was originated in the Aramaic-speaking world of the Jews in the dawn of the modern age. The word Peshitta means "simple" and the version was more or less the same as Septuagint in content. That is why we teach that there are 46 Old Testament books and why we include the seven books in our liturgical life.

### Which are the Deuterocanonical Books?

Now let us examine the contents of Deuterocanonical books. At first we take the additions to some of the 39 books. The Greek version of the book of Esther has some changes and it has a stronger religious tone in comparison with its Hebrew counterpart. In the book of Daniel there are three additions: In the beginning of the book there is a story of Susanna in 64 verses; after Dan. 3:23 we see the Prayer of Azariah and the three Young Men, who were put in the fire by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar; then at the end of the book is what we call The Bel and the Dragon, another beautiful story.

The above are additions to the universally accepted books, the following are the new books, which are absent in the Hebrew Bible.

#### a) 1-2 Maccabees

These books contain the history of the Jews in the second century BCE and they depict the Jewish struggle against the Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes. They contain the spiritual resources of Jews after a period of religious oppression. These books are to be read like other historical books of the Old Testament like 1-2 Kings and 1-2 Chronicles. The central figures of the books are five sons of Mattathias, the priest of a place called Modein. These people were the leaders of Jews in their fight against Antiochus Epiphanes and the Greek invaders who captured the land of Jews and installed the idol of a pagan god in the Holy of Holies of the Jerusalem Temple. This history is from a period when Judaism was threatened by Greek culture and religion. The observance of the Law of Moses is a characteristic of the people of these books and they believed that God puts them in safety against their opponents because of the obedience to the Law of Moses. The resurrection of the righteous is an important theme of 2 Maccabees, where we see the people praying for the departed souls (2 Macc. 12:38-45).

#### b) Tobit

The 14 chapters of this book describe the story of Tobit and his family. Tobit was a devout Jew who prayed to God "to treat him with kindness" and "not to punish him for his sins, not even the sins of which he was unaware" (Tob. 3:3).



Tobit's life shows us how pious he was and how faithful would be the Lord to his devotees. Most interesting is the description of the marriage of his son Tobias with Sara, the daughter of Raguel. As in the case of the marriage of Joseph and Asneth, as depicted in a Jewish novel of the time, Raphael the angel of God mediates the marriage. Sarah was a beautiful girl, but she was cursed by a demon called Asmodeus. Therefore seven young men were killed by the demon before their marriage with Sarah was consummated. She was very unhappy and prayed to God about her virginity and innocence (Tob. 3:12-15). Then there came Tobias, who was searching for a bride. His concern was not beauty, wealth or career, as is the case of modern youth, but to live with his wife till their old age (Tob. 8:7). As a result, their marriage became an eternal bond. This was a sign for the Jews of that time for their protection by God against all demonic powers.

#### c) Judith

This is a story about a brave woman of Israel called Judith. She was the daughter of a man called Merari and the widow of Manasseh. She was rich, beautiful and religious. She lived in a time when Holofernes, the chief general of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar persecuted the Israelites. She was disturbed much when Holofernes killed her people and destroyed their cities. During her prayer to God she found comfort in Simeon, the second son of Jacob who avenged the Shechemites for the rape of his sister Dinah (Jud. 9:1-3). Judith prayed to God like Esther to empower her with the courage and guile to fight against the wicked Holofernes, who planned to destroy Jerusalem, the city of God and its people (Jud. 9:9-14). Impressed by her beauty Holofernes didn't find her as an enemy and he served a banquet for her. There he was killed by Judith (Jud. 13:4-10). The high priest Joakim and all Israelites who were afraid of the attacks of Holofernes were happy and they praised the Lord for using Judith as an instrument for his success over the unbelieving Babylonian general. Her contemporaries considered Judith, not only as a brave woman like Deborah of the book of Judges, but also as a saint.

#### d) Wisdom of Solomon

Many of the books of the Intertestamental period belong to the category called Wisdom Literature; e.g: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. These books tried to reflect upon the place of the individual in the experience of the Israelite community. They contain loan ideas from places outside of Israel, like Greece for example. Wisdom of Solomon is a collection of wisdom sayings and teachings like the book of Proverbs. This was written by a Jew trained in Greek language in the second half of the first century BCE. He wrote it to encourage the people to resist attacks on the Jewish faith from outsiders.

The book goes through the history of Israel, the people who worshipped the living God. It depicts the futility of idolatry (Wis. 14:1-31) and the success of the believers in God. The author supports the view that the God will bless the righteous and the wicked will be punished (e.g.: Wis. 3:1-5). The unrighteous will receive their punishment even after death. The remarkable characteristic of the people of God is their thirst for the divine wisdom. Even though King Solomon is the patron of wisdom in Israel (Wis. 9:1-18), the author of the present work sees enough personalities in history prior to Solomon who sought the divine wisdom (Wis. 10:1-21). Wisdom is personified in the book and a section of the book describes her glories. Wisdom is the perfect image of God (Wis. 7:25-26) and a gift available to those that want her (Wis. 6:13) and she is more valuable than anything else (Wis. 7:7-11).

#### e) Bara Sirach

The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach is also known as Ecclesiasticus. This book was written around 180 BCE in Hebrew language and then translated into Greek. The 51 chapters of the book contain many sayings of religious, moral and practical nature. Like the Wisdom of Solomon this book upholds the merits of searching for the wisdom of God.

However, wisdom is shown not only in fearing God (Sir. 3:3-16), but also in honouring parents (Sir. 3:17-23), caring for the poor (Sir. 4:1-10) and avoiding sin (Sir. 21:1-3). The characteristics of a wise man are seen in his choice of friends (Sir. 11:29-34), responsible use of wealth (Wis. 14:3-19), possession of self-control (Wis. 18:30), knowledge of avoiding loose talk (Wis. 19:6-19) and learning appropriate talk (Wis. 20:18-26) and prayer for forgiveness of sins (Wis. 21:1-10). While hypocrisy, resentment and vicious talk are to be avoided (Wis. 27:22-28:26), generosity and hospitality are to be nurtured in one's character (Wis. 29:8-28). In our social life the jobs of a physician, farmer, artisan, smith, potter and a scribe are honourable professions (Wis. 38:1-39:11). However, the greatest thing a man can attain is undoubtedly the divine wisdom.



#### **f) Baruch**

This is the shortest among the Deuterocanonical books, with five chapters. It contains four discourses attributed to Baruch, the secretary of prophet Jeremiah. It was written five years after the Babylonians captured Jerusalem. When Baruch read the book aloud to Jehoiachin everyone cried, fasted and prayed to the Lord (Bar. 1:5). The prayer of the Israelites included a confession of their sins (Bar. 1:15-2:10) and an appeal for deliverance from their captivity (Bar. 2:11-3:8). The latter half of the book comforts the Israelites because Jerusalem is assured of God's help (Bar. 4:30-37).

#### **Where can we find these books?**

Thus we come to know that our Old Testament contains 46 books instead of the 39 books of the Protestant Churches. Many youngsters of the dioceses outside of Kerala dioceses are interested to read the above books, but they don't know where they can find them. The New Revised Standard Version published by the Roman Catholic Church is a good translation and it has the 46 books in its Old Testament section. The Bible published by the Bible Society of India didn't contain them earlier. But the Jubilee edition of the Good News Bible has the seven books, which we discussed above along with the additions to some other books like Jeremiah and Daniel. It contains also the books of Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh, which the Orthodox Church does not consider as scriptural texts.

The so-called Deuterocanonical books have been available in Malayalam since 1935 with the Malayalam translation of Peshitta by Mani Kathanar of Mannanam. The recent publications of the Deuterocanonical books begin with the so-called Hosanna Bible published by Joseph Pulikunnel in 1983 with the assistance of a number of scholars from all the Churches of Kerala. In 1995, Very Rev. Kaniamparampil Kurian Cor-Episcopa translated single-handedly the Syriac Peshitta Bible with the name Visuddha Grandham. The Bible published in Malayalam by the Catholic Bishop's Conference also contains the books. Last, but not least, is the Peshitta Bible published by Rev. Mathew Uppani in 1997. This has a merit above the others mentioned in that it lists the Deuterocanonical books, not under a separate heading, but in between the 39 books, as per the nature of the books.

It is high time that the Malankara Orthodox Church publishes a Malayalam version of the Bible with the above books. Anyway, I hope the readers may understand now at least why the Orthodox Church says that the Bible contains 73 books and what the contents of their Old Testament are.