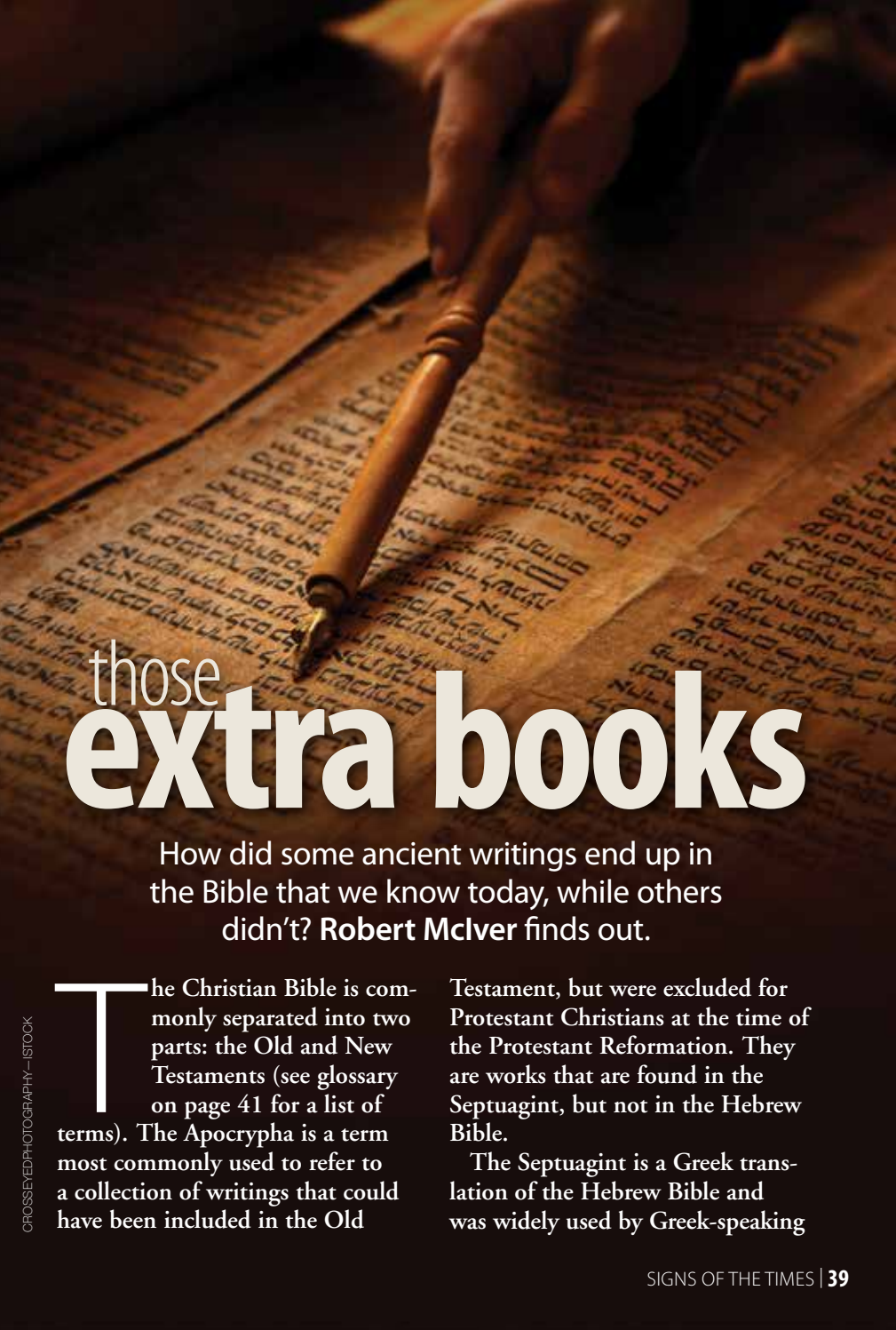




those extra books

How did some ancient writings end up in the Bible that we know today, while others didn't? **Robert McIver** finds out.

The Christian Bible is commonly separated into two parts: the Old and New Testaments (see glossary on page 41 for a list of terms). The Apocrypha is a term most commonly used to refer to a collection of writings that could have been included in the Old

Testament, but were excluded for Protestant Christians at the time of the Protestant Reformation. They are works that are found in the Septuagint, but not in the Hebrew Bible.

The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible and was widely used by Greek-speaking

Christians. The New Testament itself is written in Greek, and when it quotes from the Old Testament, it usually does so from the Septuagint, or uses a translation that derives directly from a Hebrew manuscript. The origins of the Septuagint are lost in time, but most scholars would agree that the translation was produced in Egypt, sometime between the third and first centuries B.C.

establishing set texts

Like the Hebrew Bible, for a long time, the individual works that made up the Septuagint were copied as scrolls, but sometime in the first few centuries A.D., Christians began to keep their Old Testament and New Testament in the form of a codex (another name for a book). In other words, it is a series of single sheets bound together between two covers. When this happened, in Christian circles there arose the need to decide which works should be included in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

A parallel process happened within Judaism, although there the works to be included were kept in a list and the Hebrew Scriptures continued to be copied into scrolls. Even today, the Scriptures are read in most synagogues from hand-copied scrolls. The end result, though, was that the list of authoritative works in the Hebrew Scriptures was different from a list of those that ended up in the Septuagint.

It was the works in the Septuagint that were translated into Latin and widely used across Europe in the Roman Catholic Church during the mediaeval period.

the excluded books

What works were included in the Septuagint, and not in the Hebrew Bible? They include 1 Esdras, Judith, Tobit, 1, 2, 3, and 4 Maccabees, the Prayer of Manasseh, Ecclesiasticus, Letter of Jeremiah, plus some differences between what is included in Jeremiah and Daniel. The following is a summary of their contents:

- ▶ 1 Esdras: a short history of the fall and restoration of the temple. It begins with King Josiah celebrating Passover in Jerusalem, traces the destruction of the temple at the time of Zedekiah and thereafter, and traces the events associated with the return of the Jews to Jerusalem after their long exile in Babylonia. It records the correspondence, the decrees and even lists the various returnees.
- ▶ Judith: describes a daring widow called Judith, who delivers Israel from peril, by ingratiating herself with the general commanding the Assyrian army and when he is drunk, decapitating him.
- ▶ Tobit: records the story of a righteous Israelite called Tobit, who lived in Nineveh after being exiled there. His son, Tobiah, is sent to collect a sum of money in Media and on the way, kills a fish, whose heart, liver

and gall bladder are used to cast out demons from Sarah, who lived in Media, and who Tobit married. The entrails were later used to cure Tobit of blindness. Another character in the story is the angel Raphael, who accompanied Tobiah.

▶ The 1, 2, 3 and 4 Maccabees: deal with a very important period in the history of the Jews. In the time of the Persian Empire they had been allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, and establish their religion in a province of the Persian Empire that had fallen to the armies of Alexander the Great.

At Alexander's death, his empire was divided into four parts, which soon became three. Judah was on the land-bridge between two of these empires: those of the Ptolemies and the Seleucids. The Ptolemies were

based in Egypt and the Seleucids in Mesopotamia.

One of the Seleucid rulers, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, took it upon himself to bring Greek culture to Judea, forbidding circumcision, insisting that "sabbaths and feast days were to be profaned . . . swine and other unclean beasts to be offered in sacrifice" (1 Maccabees 1:46–48). The penalty for disobedience was death and so most obeyed the new laws. Some wished to adopt Greek culture and welcomed the changes; others did so only out of compulsion.

Officials visited every village to ensure compliance, but when some of them arrived at a village called Modin, they were slaughtered by a priest called Mattathias, who had five sons. This family raised up an

glossary

- ▶ **Apocrypha:** A collection of ancient books found in some editions of the Bible. While rejected by most Protestant Christians, Catholic and Orthodox Christians accept the Apocrypha, although not with the same authority as the other works in the Old Testament.
- ▶ **Hebrew Bible:** Used by the Jews, also typically referred to as the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. Texts are composed mainly in Hebrew, with some passages in Aramaic.
- ▶ **Old Testament:** A collection of religious writings by ancient Israelites that forms the first section of the Christian Bible and is largely synonymous with the Hebrew Bible (see above).
- ▶ **New Testament:** Found in the second section of the Christian Bible, it is a collection of works written in Greek by the disciples of Jesus.
- ▶ **Septuagint:** A translation of the Hebrew Bible (and the Apocrypha) into Greek.

army in revolt against the Seleucid Empire and while the father and several of the sons died in the resulting battles, they were finally successful in gaining independence from the Seleucids and restoring the worship of the One God to the land in their control. These actual events are known in history as the Maccabean Revolt.

► Prayer of Manasseh is a very short work of 15 verses, which is said to be the prayer of repentance from King Manasseh. The Bible has little good to say about Manasseh. Amongst other things, it says, “He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practised divination, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, arousing his anger” (2 Kings 21:6).

► Ecclesiasticus: the most esteemed of the Apocryphal books. It was originally written in Hebrew, probably around 180 B.C., and then translated into Greek. It contains many wise sayings and proverbs, like the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament.

► Letter of Jeremiah: claims to have been written by Jeremiah the prophet and urges those exiled in Babylon not to worship the Babylonian gods, but to remain faithful to the One God.

► The Septuagint also has several extra chapters in Daniel, which recount adventures that Daniel experienced at court not found in the Hebrew Bible.

reasons for exclusion

It is not entirely clear why the early Jewish leaders decided to exclude these books from the Hebrew Bible, but in general it seems that they were believed to come from a period after the rest of the works were accepted. The extra chapters in Daniel, for example, were written in Greek, not Hebrew, and were therefore thought to come from a time period after that of Daniel himself.

The history recounted in 1–4 Maccabees, while remarkable and important to the nation, also falls outside of the period of the rest of the documents from the Hebrew Bible, and Ecclesiasticus was written after that period as well.

What is remarkable is that these works were found within Bibles used in Christian worship for centuries, but there was not a great deal of controversy about their exclusion from the Bible thereafter.

The emphasis placed on the Bible by the Protestant Reformers had led people to inquire more carefully as to why the Apocrypha was not included in the Hebrew Bible used by the Jews. In the end, the Protestants reached the same conclusion as the Jews—they did not really belong.

Within Roman Catholic circles, these works are often described as *deuteron-canonical*. They are considered to be in the canon (that is, in the list of books that should be included in the Bible), but not

of the same authority as the other works in the Old Testament.

making the decision

Bibles translations that include the Apocrypha are readily available. The best way to check whether Protestant Reformers made the right decision to exclude these books from the Bible is to sit down and read one of these translations for yourself.

Those who do so usually conclude that the first-century rabbis and the Protestant Reformers were correct in excluding them, and that Roman Catholics are correct in describing them as *deuteron-canonical*.

After all, they do come from a period later than other books of the Old Testament and almost all of them are written in Greek, while the Old Testament is written in Hebrew or Aramaic. Even the writings themselves do not claim the same authority as the works traditionally included in the Old Testament.

For example, after the Maccabean rebels retook Jerusalem, they realised that they had to dismantle the old Alter of Burnt Offerings and replace it. They carefully took the stones and put them in a safe place, “until a prophet should appear and decide what to do with them” (1 Maccabees 4:44–46). In other words, they were conscious of the fact that they did not have a prophet available for consultation. Thus 1 Maccabees considered itself to be the work of a historian rather than that of a prophet.

putting it into context

Though it is not part of the Bible, the Apocrypha can help us to better understand the Bible. As most of its works come from the time period between the writings of the Hebrew Bible and those of the New Testament, they give us context and a glimpse into the thinking and interests of those among whom Jesus lived a short time later.

Of particular importance are the books of the Maccabees. These are the primary source for much of the very important history that took place during the Maccabean revolt. They reveal the religious motivation of that revolt and provide the background for the conservative religious values that dominated the areas of Judea and Galilee at the time of Jesus.

While there were cities near these territories that were significantly influenced by Greco-Roman thinking and practices (such as Caesarea Maritima), almost all of the villages in Galilee were established during or subsequent to the time of the Hasmoneans (the dynasty that ruled as a result of the Maccabean revolt). Such villages were dominated by the religious viewpoint of the Hasmonean rulers.

Thus one could conclude, the Maccabean revolt had a significant influence in shaping the religious environment in which Jesus grew up, something that would not be so readily discerned or understood but for the Apocrypha. ➡