

M. R. JAMES

HOLY BIBLE

***OLD TESTAMENT
LEGENDS***

M. R. James

Old Testament Legends

**Being stories out of some of the less-known
apocryphal books of the Old Testament**

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PREFACE

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If you read the title-page of this book—a thing which young persons very seldom do—you will see that it (the book) contains stories taken "out of some of the less-known apocryphal books of the Old Testament." You will very possibly not understand what that means; but if you will read this preface—another thing which young persons do even seldomer than they read a title-page—you will find the best explanation that I can give.

I have to begin by talking about the word apocryphal. The newspapers are fond of saying that a statement made by the Prime Minister (or the leader of the Opposition, according to which side in politics the newspaper takes) is apocryphal. By this, the newspaper means to say that the statement was untrue. Or, you will read that someone obtained money or goods by saying that he possessed large estates abroad; and that the estates turned out to be apocryphal. By this is meant that they did not exist. But when you read of a book being apocryphal, something rather different is meant: either that it is "spurious," i.e. that it pretends to be written by someone who did not write it; or that what is in it is fabulous and untrue, like the stories of King Arthur; or both.

Now this word apocryphal is specially used, and perhaps most often used, in connection with the Bible. Probably you

have at least heard of something called "the Apocrypha," even if you have not read it, and even if you have mixed it up in your mind with another word, Apocalypse, which has nothing whatever to do with it. Well, what is "the Apocrypha"? It is to be found in many Bibles, bound up between the Old and the New Testaments. It is a set of books, looking just like the other books of the Bible, with chapters and verses. Some of it is read in church as weekday lessons in the months of October and November, as you may see by looking at the Table of Lessons in any Prayer Book. Now, are all these books of "the Apocrypha" fabulous or spurious? No. Some of them are. The Second Book of Esdras (that is, Ezra) was not written by Ezra; The Book of Baruch (the companion of the prophet Jeremiah) was not written by Baruch; The Wisdom of Solomon was not written by Solomon. These and some others are spurious. Also, the books of Tobit and of Judith are fabulous stories. On the other hand, the book Ecclesiasticus was really written by Sirach (who is mentioned in the Preface), and The First Book of Maccabees is a true and valuable history.

Then why, if apocryphal means fabulous or spurious, or both, are these books, some of which are true and genuine, lumped all together and called "Apocrypha"? I am sorry to disappoint you, but I cannot go through the whole history. It is long, it is difficult, and though it interests me, I am inclined to think it would not interest you unless I spread it over a great many pages, and filled it out with stories; and for this I have no time. Let me tell you what strikes me as being the important thing to bear in mind. Nearly all of these books have been at some time or another read in

church and treated as Scripture. Nearly all of them are now treated as Scripture by the Roman Church, but not by most of the Protestant, or Reformed, Churches. They are on the borderland of the Bible. From having been so long kept together in a group by themselves, they have come to be thought of as being all of one uniform kind. But they are not so; they are of very different sorts and merits.

Let us keep the old name for them and call them "the Apocrypha." It will be convenient to do so, because I have now to speak of other apocryphal books, which have never been bound up in our Bibles, but in older times, before Bibles were printed, were (some of them at least) read in churches and thought to be sacred books. There are a great many of these: perhaps, if they were all put together, they would make up a volume as large as the Old Testament itself; but at present there is no book in which they are all printed together. Some are stories, others are visions like those in the Revelation of St. John, others are psalms and prophecies. But all of them, I think, may fairly be called either fabulous or spurious, or both.

I can give you an example from the Bible itself to show that there were such books as long ago as the times of the Apostles, and that they were read and valued. In the 9th verse of the Epistle of Jude, you read something very curious about Satan contending with Michael about the body of Moses. Ancient writers whom we may trust tell us that this is taken from a book called The Assumption of Moses (that is, the story of Moses being taken up out of this world at the end of his life).

We have pieces of this book still, but we have not got the whole story of the dispute between Satan and Michael. However, we know that it was represented as having taken place when Michael and the other angels were burying the body of Moses among the mountains in a place which was kept secret from all men, and that Satan said that though the soul of Moses might belong to God, the body belonged to him; and, moreover, that Moses was a murderer, because, long before, he had killed an Egyptian (as we read in Exodus ii. 12); whereupon Michael answered Satan in the words, "The Lord rebuke thee," and Satan fled. That is one example. Another is in the 14th verse of the same Epistle, where it is said that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of the coming of the Lord to judge sinners. This verse is taken out of a long book of prophecies and visions called The Book of Enoch, which still exists, and we may read the very words in it.

In this present book, I am only concerned with the apocryphal stories; with the prophecies and visions and psalms I have nothing to do. Now, how and why did the stories come to be written?

It is likely enough that after reading some history in the Bible you may have wondered whether there was anything more to be known about the people of whom it told you. You would have liked to find out what happened to Adam, or Joseph, or David, besides the things which are written in the Bible. It was just so in ancient times —the times when our Lord was on earth, and even long before that. The Jews naturally thought a great deal about the people who are mentioned in the Old Testament; and just as there are a

great many stories about the heroes of English history—such as that of King Alfred and the cakes—which, we are told now, are not true, so stories grew up about the great men of the Bible. Perhaps they were invented, some of them, in answer to questions which had been asked. Some of them were certainly made up in order to explain parts of the Bible which were difficult to understand. I will give an example of this. In the Book of Genesis (iv. 23, 24) you are told how the patriarch Lamech spoke to his wives and said, "I have slain a man to my wounding, and a young man to my hurt." Nothing is said in explanation of this; we are not told whom Lamech had killed. So a story was made up—no one knows when—which gives this explanation: Lamech was blind, and he used to amuse himself by shooting birds and beasts with bow and arrow. When he went out shooting, he used to take with him his young nephew Tubal; and Tubal used to spy the game for him and guide his hands that he might aim his arrow right. One day, when they were out together, Tubal saw, as he thought, a beast moving in the thicket; and he told Lamech, and made him aim at it, and Lamech's arrow smote the beast and killed it. But when Tubal ran to see what kind of beast it was, he found that it was not a wild beast at all. It was his ancestor Cain. For after Cain had killed Abel, and God had pronounced a curse upon him, he wandered about the earth, never able to remain in one place; and a great horn grew out of his head, and his body was covered with hair; so that Tubal, seeing him in the distance among the trunks of the trees and the brushwood, was deceived, and mistook him for a beast of chase. But when Tubal saw what had happened, he was terrified, and

ran back to Lamech, crying out, "You have slain our forefather Cain!" And Lamech also was struck with horror, and raised his hands and smote them together with a mighty blow. And in so doing he struck the head of Tubal with his full strength, and Tubal fell down dead. Then Lamech returned to his house, and spoke to his wives the words that are written in the Book of Genesis. This story, a very ancient one, as I said, was invented by the Jews to explain the difficult passage in Genesis; and the early Christian writers learnt it from the Jews, and it passed into many commentaries which were written in later times; so that you may still see representations of it carved in stone in churches, both in England and elsewhere. In England it may be seen on the inside of the stone roof of Norwich Cathedral, and on the west front of Wells Cathedral; but you have to look carefully before you can find it.

There are other stories which pretend to explain texts that do not seem so difficult. For instance, in the 18th Psalm there is a verse, "Thou hast made room enough under me for to go." And about this there is a long tale of how King David went to fight the giant Ishbi-benob, and was nearly killed by him; for the giant took David and cast him to the ground, and put a heavy wine-press upon him, which would have crushed him, but that the earth beneath him suddenly became soft and yielded room for his body, and thus room was made under him.

Then again, there are others which are like parables.

At this point I will put in two short stories of the parable-kind, neither of which I think you are likely to have seen. One of them is certainly taken from an apocryphal book

which is lost; and the other I suspect to have been taken either from the same book or from one like it.

First I will tell the one about the source of which I am not certain.

In the days of King Hezekiah there was in Israel a rich man who was a miser and gave nothing to the poor. But one day it happened that he took up the book of the proverbs of King Solomon; and his eye fell upon the place where it is said, "He that hath pity upon the poor, lendeth unto the Lord; and look what he layeth out, it shall be paid him again." "So," thought he to himself, "this is a good security!" And forthwith he sold all that he had, and distributed the price among the poor, keeping for himself only two pieces of money. But, to his disappointment, he did not only become poor himself by this means, but he remained poor. The money he had given away did not come back, and no one else would give him any. So he was reduced to despair, and said, "I will go straight to Jerusalem, and demand of God why He has deceived me, and induced me to give away all my possessions by promises that are false." And he set forth. And on his way, not far from Jerusalem, he saw two men fighting, and said to them, "Brethren, what is your quarrel?" And one said, "We were journeying together, and I saw a shining stone lying in the road, and pointed it out to this man; and because he was swifter on his feet than I, he got to it first. And now he says he will keep it for himself, but I say it belongs to me, for I saw it first." Then said the traveller, "What is the value of the stone?" They said, "We do not know." And he said, "Will you take these two pieces of money for it and let me have it?" And to this they

consented. So when the man got to Jerusalem, he took the stone to a jeweller and showed it to him; and no sooner had the jeweller seen it than he fell on his face and gave thanks to God. And then he said to the man, "Where did you find this? For three whole years all Jerusalem has been ransacked for this stone. Go quickly to the High Priest and give it to him, and see what he will give you!" At the same hour there came an angel to the High Priest, and said to him, "Within a few moments there will come to you a man bringing the gem which three years ago was lost out of the breastplate of Aaron the priest. Receive it at his hands, and give him for it a great sum of gold; and when you have given it, smite him lightly upon the cheek and say, 'Be not distrustful in thy heart, and slow to believe the word which says, 'He that hath pity upon the poor, lendeth unto the Lord.' For thus saith the Lord, 'Have I not now in this present world repaid thee many times over that which thou didst lend to Me? And, if thou have faith, thou shalt in the world to come receive a recompense yet many times greater than this.'" And when the man came, the High Priest did and said as he had been commanded; and the man's heart was moved, and he left in the temple all that great sum which had been given him, and for the rest of his life put his whole trust in the promises of God.

The other short story is taken out of an apocryphal book under the name of the prophet Ezekiel, and is a parable of the soul and the body of man at the day of judgment.

There was a certain king, it says, who made a marriage feast for his eldest son, and invited all his soldiers to his palace to share it. Now every one of his subjects was a

soldier and served in his army, except only two, one of whom was blind and the other lame; and these two were not invited to the feast, but remained in their huts—which were near to one another—very angry and disappointed. After a while the blind man called to the lame man, "It is a shame that we are not sitting down to the feast along with the rest! I should like to treat the king as ill as he has treated us." "How can we?" said the lame man. "You know his garden," said the other; "let us go and spoil it!" "All very well," said the lame man, "but how are we to get there? I cannot walk." "Neither can I see; but we will contrive a way." So they devised a plan. The lame man plucked the grass that he could reach, and plaited it into a string, and threw one end to the blind man, who guided himself by it to the lame man. Then he took the lame man on his back, and carried him to the king's garden, and there they did all the mischief they could, trampling down and tearing up plants and flowers; and they went back to their houses and remained there. When the rest of the people came out from the banquet into the garden, they were appalled at the sight of the damage, and were much perplexed, saying, "Were not all the soldiers of the king bidden to the feast? and is not every man in the kingdom a soldier? Whence then are these tracks in the garden, and who has wrought this mischief?" After a while the king bethought him of the blind and the lame man; they were brought before him, and he said to the blind man, "Have you been into my garden?" He answered, "Alas, sire! you see my infirmity, and that I have no eyes wherewith to find my way!" Then said the king to the lame man, "And you, have you been into my garden?" And he answered,