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Outside the Bible

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Edited by Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, and Lawrence H. Schiffman

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JAMES L. KUGEL is professor of Bible at Bar-Ilan University in Israel and the former Starr Professor of Hebrew Literature at Harvard University. Kugel specializes in the Hebrew Bible, the history of biblical exegesis, and the study of ancient Judaism. His many books include How to Read the Bible; The God of Old; and The Bible as It Was.

LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN is professor of Judaic studies and vice provost of undergraduate education at Yeshiva University. Schiffman is former chair of New York University’s Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, and Ethel and Irvin A. Edelman Professor Emeritus of Hebrew and Judaic Studies. Schiffman is a leading scholar of ancient Judaism with special interest in the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In addition to his many publications, he is the coeditor of the Oxford Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls and editor of The Dead Sea Scrolls: Fifty Years after Their Discovery.

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Lawrence H. Schiffman

One of the most significant characteristics of Second Temple Judaism is the wide variety of texts that circulated among different groups of Jews. We are accustomed to treating these documents based more on their transmission than their literary and theological characteristics. So we speak of Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and Dead Sea Scrolls, designating in the first and last instance specific groups of texts collected in some way in antiquity. Taken together, we gain from all these texts a picture of a Jewish community, both in and outside the Land of Israel, producing all kinds of literary works and involved in vigorous debate about all kinds of religious questions. Outside the Bible presents a wide variety of these texts classified by their content and literary character, not by the ancient collections in which these writings have reached us.

For later Rabbinic Judaism, already in the Mishnah Sanhedrin, the reading of the Apocrypha and other non-biblical works was prohibited, and it was understood to lead to loss of one’s portion in the world to come. This blanket prohibition may have referred only to public reading of such non-scriptural books, since the Talmud itself quoted the apocryphal book of Ben Sira. The interpretation of this Mishnah text in the Jerusalem Talmud explicitly refers to Ben Sira, which is included in the Apocrypha—those works canonized in the Greek Bible which served as the basis for the Septuagint. Only the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible were to be considered canonical.

Because of their great significance for the history of Judaism and the background of Christianity, many of the texts of the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and Dead Sea Scrolls are included in Outside the Bible. The texts examined by our assembly of world-class scholars now provide us with an expanded notion of the nature of the literature of Second Temple Jews, most of which was already in circulation in the Hasmonean period. This literature has provided a much deeper understanding of the nature of the various approaches to Judaism in this period. Based on this wider picture, we are better able to reconstruct the influence of this literature on the later development of Judaism. Outside the Bible contributes greatly to this effort by providing readers with authoritative introductions and commentaries to these works, showing their intimate connection to the ongoing Jewish tradition.