

WINE, KINGS AND WOMEN VIE FOR STRONGEST TITLE

It's too bad some Bible readers miss some of the best stories. For there are a handful of books which are only loosely attached to the Bible but which contain some fascinating stuff.

These are the so-called "apocryphal" or "deuterocanonical" books. They are included in the Bibles used by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians.

But most Protestant Bibles leave them out, as do the official Jewish versions. That's too bad, because these largely ignored documents contain some choice tidbits.

Take the famous Tale of the Three Bodyguards, for example. You'll find it in 1 Esdras 3-4. (Just to confuse the issue a little, in some collection this book is known as 3 Esdras. Look carefully, or you'll miss it.)

Back to the Three Bodyguards. Their quaint story is set in the palaces of ancient Persia. Three of the emperor's close attendants concoct a TV-style game show.

The rules of the contest are simple. Answer this question: What is the strongest force in the world?

They will give their answers to the king; he will decide whose is best; and the winner will take home a bundle of cash, a new wardrobe, a weekend vacation, and a chance to be treated like the king's cousin.

Contestant Number One suggests that wine is strongest. Rich or poor, royalty or slaves—all are affected in the same way when they drink too much wine. They forget their troubles and fight with their friends.

In the morning they are so hung-over they can't remember a thing. Thus, suggests the first bodyguard, wine is the strongest force in the world because it befuddles all men's minds the same way.

Contestant Number Two goes one better. He insists that the king himself is the strongest force in the world.

At a whim he can send armies on the attack. He can force his subjects to cough up taxes. The abject obedience he commands proves that the king is strongest.

The third contestant trumps the other two with this answer: Women! A man will work his tail off and then give everything he has to a woman.

A petty girl can get anything she wants, even from the king. Which goes to prove that women are the strongest force around.

Contestant Number Three probably could have won with that answer. But he has a back-up plan.

On the other hand, he suggests, truth is stronger than wine, kings, or women. They come and go. But Truth—that's Truth in the abstract with a capital T—is eternal.

The upshot of it all is that the grand prize goes to the third contestant, who just happens to be a Jewish official attached to the Persian emperor's court.

According to 1 Esdras, he then used his influence with the king to enable his exiled compatriots to return to their homeland.

What can you make out of a story like that? It's not particularly original. Similar tales have been found elsewhere in the folklores of the ancient Near East.

Furthermore, the story is not told with any exceptional skill. In fact, it seems to have been forced into its context like a square peg into a round hole. The setting is contrived, and the plot is improbable.

But don't let those features spoil the fun. The Tale of the Three Bodyguards is still a charming example of oriental lore. It's got the kind of built-in interest factor which keeps you reading to the end, even though you know how it's going to turn out.

After all, the basic premise is still intriguing: Which is strongest? Wine? Rulers? Women? The truth of the matter is that such apocryphal propositions are too good to ignore.