



The Apocryphal Books

Today there is very little discussion concerning which books rightfully belong in the Bible. The canon of the Holy Scriptures is settled. But the question of the canon has been decided differently in the general parts of Christendom. Catholicism and Protestantism are united in their acceptance of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, but concerning the books of the Old Testament there is not this agreement. When one picks up a copy of a Catholic Bible he sees that there are several additional books included in its Old Testament section which are not found in Protestant Bibles. These extra books are generally known as the apocrypha.

The word apocrypha has come into the English language from the Greek and basically means hidden. It was used very early in the sense of secretive or concealed, but was also used in reference to a book whose origin was doubtful or unknown. Eventually the word took on the meaning of non-canonical, and thus for centuries the non-canonical books have been known as apocryphal books. Yet in Protestant circles "the apocrypha" is the normal designation for those extra books which are found in the Catholic Old Testament. In a stricter sense, however, these books might be better termed "the Old Testament apocrypha," since there are New Testament apocryphal writings as well.

Apocryphal Books of the Old Testament

The Old Testament Apocrypha include either fourteen or fifteen books, depending on the method of counting, which were written in the period of 200 B.C. to 100 A.D. The most convenient and readable edition of the apocryphal has been put out by Thomas Nelson and Sons in a special edition of the Revised Standard Version (1957). The titles and order of books in this edition are as follows:

1. The First Book of Esdras (also known as Third Esdras)
2. The Second Book of Esdras (also known as Fourth Esdras)
3. Tobit
4. Judith
5. The Additions to the Book of Esther
6. The Wisdom of Solomon
7. Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach
8. Baruch
9. The Letter of Jeremiah (This letter is sometimes incorporated as the last chapter of Baruch. When this is done the number of books is fourteen instead of fifteen.)
10. The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men
11. Susanna
12. Bel and the Dragon
13. The Prayer of Manasseh
14. The First Book of Maccabees
15. The Second Book of Maccabees

Three of these fifteen books (I and II Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh) are not considered canonical by the Roman Catholic Church. In Catholic Bibles the remaining twelve are interspersed among and attached to the undisputed thirty-nine books of the Old Testament: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch with the letter of Jeremiah, and I and II Maccabees which are arranged separately; the Additions to Esther are joined to Esther; and appended to the book of Daniel are the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men (added after Dan. 3:23), and Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon. (I and II Esdras of the Catholic Bible are not the same as the I and II Esdras in the above list, but are different designations for our books Ezra and Nehemiah.) Since several of the apocryphal writings are combined with canonical books, the Catholic Bible numbers altogether forty-six books in its Old Testament. Non-Catholic editions of the English Bible since 1535, including early editions of the familiar King James Version, separate these apocryphal books from the canonical Old Testament.

Contents of These Books

The Old Testament Apocrypha covers a broad range of subjects and represents different varieties of literary form. For purposes of convenience they may be classified under the following division:

1. Historical - I Esdras, I and II Maccabees.
2. Legendary - Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther, Additions to Daniel (Prayer of Azariah and Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon).
3. Prophetic - Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Prayer of Manasseh, II Esdras.
4. Ethical - Ecclesiasticus, Wisdom of Solomon.

Something of the character of these writings will now be mentioned.

1. Historical. I Esdras is an ill-arranged collection of much of the material found in the canonical Ezra (Esdras is a Greek form for Ezra), and includes also worthless and legendary accounts which are not supported by the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and II Chronicles. It is also known as the "Greek Ezra" in contrast to the "Hebrew Ezra" (the Canonical Ezra). I Maccabees is an important source of information on Jewish history during the second century B.C. The book derives its name from Maccabeus the surname of the Judas who led the Jews in revolt against Syrian oppression. It was written probably during the early part of the first century B.C. II Maccabees concerns the same general period, but is not as historically reliable as I Maccabees.

2. Legendary. The Book of Tobit was written about 200 B.C. It tells the story of a religious Israelite named Tobit who was carried as a captive to Nineveh by the Assyrians. Its purpose is to encourage the keeping of the Law, yet the fictitious character of its tales detracts from its usefulness. The book of Judith is likewise to be classified as fiction. Judith is the name of a Jewish widow who successfully charms and kills the leader of an enemy army, thus delivering her city and people from impending destruction. This story of heroism was most likely composed during the time of the Maccabean revolt in order to incite courage and patriotism against the Syrian foe.

The Additions to Esther are expansions of the canonical Esther which were probably handed down through the centuries by oral tradition. The Additions to Daniel contain folk-tales and legends which could not have originated much earlier than 100 B.C. and form no part of the genuine text of Daniel.

3. Prophetic. Baruch purports to come from the hand of Jeremiah's friend of that name. The contents of the book not only make this claim impossible, but help to fix the real date of composition at some point after 70 A.D. The letter of Jeremiah, which for no good reason is often appended to Baruch, is a brief notation on the vanities of idolatry. The Prayer of Manasseh, written perhaps in the second century B.C., is a prayer put in the mouth of King Manasseh after he was taken captive to Babylon. II Esdras is a collection of materials written at different times (from c. 100 B.C. to c. 200 A.D.). It is of such inferior quality that it is unquestionably non-canonical.

4. Ethical. Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, is one of the chief works of the Apocrypha. It was written by a Palestinian Jew about 200 B.C. in a style similar to the wise sayings of the Book of Proverbs. The Wisdom of Solomon is a book of ancient Jewish philosophy. It is evidently to be traced back to the city of Alexandria and to the first century A.D.

Why These Books Rejected

A brief survey of these books has indicated something of what they are like. Some of the books of the Apocrypha, such as I Maccabees and Ecclesiasticus, are truly worth while. The question, however, concerns not their usefulness but their place in relation to the authoritative Scriptures. Should they be received as "Scripture" or rejected? And if they are to be rejected, on what grounds? Are there really good reasons why they should not be accepted as divinely authoritative?

There are many valid reasons why the Apocrypha cannot bear acceptance as "Holy Scripture."

1. These books were never included in the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament. Josephus, it will be recalled, expressly limited the Hebrew canon to twenty-two books, which are the exact equivalent of the thirty-nine books of our Old Testament. Josephus knew of other Jewish writings down to his time, but he did not regard them as having equal authority with the canonical works. 1 So the Apocrypha were never received by the Jews as God-given Scripture. This takes on its full significance when it is remembered that the Old Testament is a Jewish collection of Jewish history and law - and there is no evidence that these books were ever accepted by any Jewish community, either in or outside of the land of Palestine.

2. These books, as far as the evidence goes, were never accepted as canonical by Jesus and His apostles. In the previous chapter it was learned that the Old Testament which Jesus knew is our Old Testament today. Jesus' Old Testament was the Hebrew Old Testament, and the Hebrew Old Testament has never numbered these apocryphal writings. The apostles in their preaching mention many Old Testament events, but they never refer to any incidents or characters of the Apocrypha. The New Testament writers quote from practically all of the Old Testament books, but nowhere quote from the Apocrypha as "Scripture." The canon of the Old Testament accepted by Jesus and His apostles should be sufficient for the Christian today.

3. These books were not accepted as Scripture by such Jewish writers of the first century as Philo and Josephus; the Jewish council at Jamnia (c. 90 A.D.); and by such eminent Christian writers as Origen and Jerome. About 400 A.D. the great Christian scholar Jerome, whose translation of the Latin Vulgate remains the basis of the official Roman Catholic Bible, strongly maintained that these books were "apocryphal" and were not to be included in the canon of Scripture.

4. These books do not evidence intrinsic qualities of inspiration. Great portions of these books are obviously legendary and fictitious. Often they contain historical, chronological and geographical errors. In Judith, for example, Holofernes is described as being the general of "Nebuchadnezzar who ruled over the Assyrians in the great city of Ninevah" (1:1). Actually Holofernes was a Persian general, and, of course, Nebuchadnezzar was king of the Babylonians in Babylon. Some of these books contradict themselves and contradict the canonical Scriptures. It is said in Baruch that God hears the prayers of the dead (3:4).

5. These books have been shrouded with continual uncertainty. Since they were not regarded as authoritative by the Jews, they had to gain their recognition elsewhere. This recognition came from some segments of the Greek-speaking church, with the result that eventually these books became incorporated into the Greek and Latin Bibles. But there is no evidence that the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) ever had a fixed or closed canon of books. No two early Greek manuscripts agree as to which books are to be included in the Septuagint, and not all of those included in the Septuagint are accepted even by the Roman Catholic Church. The Septuagint itself is a witness against one book of the Apocrypha (II Esdras) since it is found in no manuscript of the Septuagint.

6. These books cannot be maintained on a compromise basis. The Church of England gives to the Apocrypha a semi-canonical status: they may be read in public worship "for example of life and instruction of manners" but not in order "to establish any doctrine." This position assumes that the Apocrypha at times may add to or conflict with the established teachings of the canonical Scriptures. If this is true, then the Apocrypha should not be read in public worship, for what is read regularly in public worship tends to be authoritative for the congregation. To allow the Apocrypha to be read in public worship is a strange way to show their inferior rank.

7. Objections to these books cannot be overruled by dictatorial authority. On April 8, 1546, in the Fourth Session of the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church pronounced the Old Testament Apocrypha (except I and II Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh) as authoritative and canonical Scripture. This was done even though in different periods of its own history officials of the Roman Church had been out-spoken against the Apocrypha as Scripture. But this action was not unnatural for a religious body whose whole structure is framed according to traditions and whose faith is derived equally as much from the "fathers" and "popes" as from the Scriptures. It appears that the Apocrypha would never have posed a serious problem were it not for the usurped power of Rome over Scripture. Yet Rome with all of its "infallibility" cannot make the fallible Apocrypha infallible.

The Apocryphal Books of the New

The Old Testament Apocrypha is usually thought of when one mentions the apocryphal books. Nevertheless there are other apocryphal writings, many of which are known as the New Testament Apocrypha. The New Testament Apocrypha include a variety of literary types: Gospels, Acts, Epistles and Apocalypses. These were written under assumed names of the apostles and others during the second century and later. They contain fanciful stories about Jesus and the apostles. The Apocryphal Gospels often deal with the early years of Jesus and portray him as a temperamental child, here causing the death of some of his playmates and there giving life to a dried fish. The Apocryphal Acts and others indulge in similar nonsense. The writings of the Apostolic Fathers (80-180 A.D.) are not to be classified as New Testament Apocrypha. They are simply letters of edification and encouragement written by ordinary Christians; they do not profess apostolic wisdom and authority. These writings, along with the apocryphal books, are sometimes erroneously described as "the lost books of the Bible," a sensational and misleading title because these books were never a part of the Bible.

Summary

The word apocrypha may be used with equal application to the non-canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. Generally speaking, however, it is a common designation for a special group of fourteen or fifteen books, most of which are included in the Old Testament of the Roman Catholic Bible. The Apocrypha may be divided into four groups: (1) historical, (2) legendary, (3) prophetic and (4) ethical. These books are useful but are not to be regarded as Scripture for the following reasons:

1. They were never included in the Hebrew Old Testament.
2. They were never accepted as canonical by Jesus and His Apostles.
3. They were not accepted by early Jewish and Christian writers.
4. They do not evidence intrinsic qualities of inspiration.
5. They have been shrouded with continual uncertainty.
6. They cannot be maintained on a compromise basis.
7. Objections to them cannot be overruled by dictatorial authority.

Conclusion

The apocryphal books are rightfully rejected from our Bible.

Source: How We Got The Bible, Neil R. Lightfoot (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Book House, 1970).

Footnotes:

1. Josephus, Against Apion 1. 8.

