



St. George's Fall Theological Forum

The Canon of Scripture: How did the Bible become the Bible?

Part 3 – The Old Testament and the Apocrypha

What is the Apocrypha?

- From the Greek *αποκρυφον*; *apocryphon* (singular) or *apocrypha* (plural), and means 'something that is hidden'.
- The Apocrypha, as we use it today, refers to the body of literature written during the Intertestamental period (500 BC to 100 AD). The writings shed light on the state of Judaism following the Exile and up to and including the time of Christ.
- The term 'apocrypha' first used in our sense by Jerome in the late fourth century when he was addressing the 'problem' of the additional books found in the LXX which are not found in the Hebrew canon
 - In *Prologus galeatus*, he confirms the validity of the 24 authorized books of the HS but regards the additional books, Wisdom, Sirach, Judith, and Tobit, 'among the Apocrypha' and 'not in the canon'.
 - In another prologue to his translation of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs he states, "the church indeed reads Judith, Tobit, and the books of Maccabees, but it does not receive them among the canonical books, so let it also read these two volumes for the edification of the people but not for establishing of doctrine.
 - Our own Episcopal Article VI is almost a direct quote from this work, and even states so: "...as Hierome saith..." (BCP p. 868).
- Other Episcopal use: readings from Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus are included in the lectionary, and the Prayer of Manasseh is one of the Canticles (#14) in the Morning Prayer 2 liturgy (BCP p.90; however, this is the first prayer book to include it).

List of Books

- The list of what we call the Apocrypha consists of fifteen¹ books as follows:
1 Esdras, 2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, The Additions to the Book of Esther, The Wisdom of Solomon (or Wisdom), Ecclesiasticus (or the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach), Baruch, The Letter of Jeremiah, the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, The Prayer of Manasseh, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees
- The Apocrypha is slightly smaller than the NT in size. For comparison: OT has 592,439 words (929 chapters), the NT has 181,253 words (260 chapters), and the Apocrypha has 152,185 words (183 chapters).²
- Other texts, such as 3 and 4th Maccabees, 1 Enoch, and Psalm 151 are found in some LXX manuscripts and sometimes included in this list, but most modern Apocrypha do not.
- We must note that during the period from about 300 BC to 100 AD there were a voluminous number of other writings around, most of which are not extant, such as the *Apocalypse of Zechariah*, the *Assumption of Moses*, and *The Apocalypse of Elijah*.

Dating and Significance

Authorship & Dating

- Authorship: most of the Apocrypha are anonymous or pseudepigraphic. The primary exception to this is Ecclesiasticus, which is clearly credited to Jesus ben Sirach. The additions to Esther are

¹ The total is sometimes reported as 14, in these cases the Letter of Jeremiah has been included with Baruch

² Metzger, Bruce. *An Introduction to the Apocrypha*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, page 3.

attributed to a Lysimachus, a Palestinian Jew who made the additions sometime after 200 BC. The Letter of Jeremiah claims to be written just after the Exile, but is anonymous.

- Dating: Dating many of the Apocrypha is difficult. 1 & 2 Maccabees obviously couldn't have been written before the Maccabean revolt (c. 167-160 BC). Most of the books were written in the second or first century BC, some clearly intending to be works of sacred fiction, like Tobit, others intended to 'fill in the gaps' of canonical books like Daniel and Esther, the former coming to its final (canonical) form during this same period.

Intertestamental period – Apocrypha fills the gap from the closing of the OT chronology to NT times

- Almost 400 years transpires between the chronological closing of the HS and the dawn of the NT age. The Apocrypha gives us valuable insight into what those intervening years looked like and the conditions for the time of Christ.
- Israel changed hands a number of times under various empires, and even achieved a brief period of independence under that Hasmonean dynasty (Maccabean), until succumbing to Roman forces which played a huge role in Israel's simmering and explosive nationalism at the time of Christ.
- A stronger role and emphasis on angels in the Apocrypha. Angels obviously feature in the HS/OT, but many are named in the Apocrypha (e.g. Azarias, in Tobit), and this may explain why a number of NT passages speak against the worship of angels as a specific characteristic of Judaism (see Heb.1:4-9).
- Also during this period the HS were translated into Greek, a work that is called the Septuagint (LXX). This event is significant in that 1) the LXX scrolls and codices include many (but not all and usually differing) Apocryphal books, and 2) because of the heavily Greek speaking character of the Early Church the LXX, and with it the Apocrypha, became the normative and even authoritative version of the Scriptures (OT) used in many churches of the Early Church.

Septuagint-plus works

- The additional, that is non-canonical, books we call the Apocrypha included in the LXX were often referred to as the "Septuagint-plus" works.
- These books were widely dispersed, read, and used by Jews during the first and second centuries. Thus many concluded (including many Church Fathers) that their inclusion in the LXX indicated their canonicity, or at least the Jews in Alexandria who were responsible for translating the LXX considered them canonical.
- Three reasons why it is likely that the Jews who used the LXX did not consider the Apocryphal books as canonical:
 1. The number and content of the books is inconsistent across manuscript copies
 2. Philo of Alexandria, the leading Jewish scholar of the first century in Alexandria, does not once quote from them
 3. The manuscripts we have of the LXX were copied by Christians, not Jews.
- However, it is worthy of note that these books were considered important enough to copy and preserve, and even translate into other languages, even if they have not canonical status.

NT & the Apocrypha

- LXX was widely used in Jesus' day, and most if not all the writers of the NT were familiar with it; however, none indicate the specific limits of the LXX canon.
- The NT makes some use of and reference to apocryphal writings, e.g. in Hebrews and Jude. The epistle of Jude quotes 1 Enoch 1:9 in verse 14 (although 1 Enoch is not included in most modern Apocrypha) and earlier makes reference to the archangel Michael who contends and disputes with the devil over the body of Moses (Jude 9), which is taken from a book called *The Assumption of Moses* (which is not extant).
- However, usage, reference, and even quotation of the Apocrypha in the NT does not confer canonicity. Paul, debating in the Areopagus in Athens quotes the Greek poet Epimenides of Crete (Acts 17:29), "In him we live and move and have our being", which

is actually a very well known and popular verse today. Does this mean we should consider Epimenides' writings as a whole as canonical? No, it simply shows the versatility of Paul in applying the truth of the Gospel to various cultural contexts. Nonetheless, we should note that the small part of the Truth that Epimenides touches on, has found a place within the canon, not on its own merits, but because it was appropriated by the Apostle, through the Holy Spirit.

Apocrypha and the Church Fathers

- Because of the widespread use of the LXX, and either because of or even contributing to the legends regarding its 'miraculous' translation, the Apocrypha was readily received by many Church Fathers and quoted frequently.
- Some like Origen, considered it 'canonical', mainly for reasons of personal preference (he lived and worked in Alexandria, after all!), and because there was a widespread usage in the Church. However, he had to recognize that many of the books therein were not written in Hebrew but in Greek, and thus could not be part of the Hebrew Canon. Origen apparently wanted to eat his cake and have it, too.
- Church Fathers who wrote and spoke in Greek or Latin tended to accept the Apocryphal works (as Septuagint-plus), although no unanimity regarding a complete list that we know of was ever established. Fathers who knew Hebrew and had contact with Jews or Jewish Christians, like Jerome, were able to argue against the Apocrypha's inclusion in the Christian canon because they were not considered canonical in the HS.
- Note on Athanasius. Establishes three categories: 1) canonical (inspired); 2) edifying but not inspired (ecclesiastical); and 3) apocryphal (scurrilous). Athanasius uses 'apocryphal' to define books to be rejected and avoided in the Church. But this is not how Jerome uses the term, which would be category #2 in Athanasius's model. Thus a discrepancy of usage of the same term among the father's of which we must be aware. Athanasius' three fold division was used for a long time in the Latin west, however, it is Jerome's usage which has prevailed to the present.

The Current state

Protestant (Anglican) Position

- Jerome's Latin Bible, the Vulgate, slowly became the standard text in the West. Although Jerome rejected the Apocryphal books as canonical, there was much opposition to him.
- However, over time it became customary to add to copies of the Vulgate a number of books which Jerome didn't even consider Apocryphal, such as 3 and 4 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh, and consequently most users of the Bible didn't make a distinction between canonical and apocryphal books.
- In the Middle Ages Hugh of St. Victor in Paris went against tradition and re-asserted Jerome's position regarding the Apocryphal Books.
- By the time of the pre-Reformation many early English translations did include the Apocrypha, but this was more a matter of form, since they were in the Vulgate.
- But with Luther and the Reformation, the key doctrine of *sola scriptura*, greatly brought the question to the forefront, and Luther, who rejected the Roman Catholic practices of indulgences and prayers for the dead (which find their warrant in 2 Mac. 12:45f) also re-asserted Jerome's distinctions. Thus from an early stage the Apocryphal books were separated in the Reformation from the canonical books of the OT
- Subsequent English and other translations of Protestant Bibles sometimes included the Apocrypha as a separate section, with a preface explaining their non-canonical status, such as the Coverdale Bible of 1535.

- In the English Church, Article VI asserts the Lutheran/Reformed (i.e. Jerome's) position, although we note that some of the later Homilies refer to apocryphal books as scripture.
- As time moved on, most Protestant Churches and later Bible Societies believed it was confusing to most Christians to include the Apocrypha in the biblical volume, and preferred to publish them separately. This is the current state within Protestant publications of the Bible and the Apocrypha.

Roman Catholic & Orthodox position

- The Council of Trent (1545-1563), convened to address the Reformation and settle questions of doctrine and tradition that had been raised, also tackled the matter of canon.
- The fourth session (1546) ruled that among the various texts of the Bible available, it was the "ancient and vulgate edition", that is Jerome's Latin Vulgate, that is authoritative, and that this edition comprised what are called protocanonical and deuterocanonical books without distinction. Thus the question of the differing status of these two sets of books within the canon was not addressed, and Jerome's own distinctions set aside.
- The rulings of Trent were ratified at the First Vatican Council (1869-70), and there seems to be general consent among Catholic scholars today to refer to the Apocrypha as 'deuterocanonical', thus maintaining Jerome's distinctions in practice but without conciliar support³
- The Orthodox Church: In 1642 and 1672 at the Synods of Jassy and Jerusalem, respectively, confirmed as "genuine parts of Scripture" the contents of the "Septuagint-plus", namely: 1 Esdras (3 Esdras in the Vulgate), Tobit, Judith, 1,2&3 Maccabees, Wisdom, Ben Sira, Baruch, and the Letter of Jeremiah.
- The LXX remains the authorized OT for most of the Greek Orthodox Church, and its deviations from the Hebrew canon attributed to divine agency and inspiration. However, for the most part Orthodox scholars follow the categories of Athanasius and confer a lower level of authority to the Apocrypha than the protocanonical writings.

³ Bruce, F.F. *The Canon of Scripture*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1988; p 105.