

The Apocrypha and the Biblical Canon—Part 5

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In previous articles we discussed: 1) the meaning of the term Apocrypha; 2) the historical value of the Apocrypha; 3) the Jewish view of the Apocrypha; 4) the Apocrypha and the Septuagint; and 5) the Apocrypha and Propheticality; and 6) Divine Providence and the Canon. Next, we see:

7) The Apocrypha and Inerrancy

As we have said, the 1546 decree of Rome was a great mistake. We must re-emphasize that the major reason for rejecting the Apocrypha is because of the presence of errors. Obviously, books with errors cannot in any manner be considered the Word of God. If the Apocrypha *is* Scripture, it then *proves* the Word of God can be errant and fallible. Thus, accepting the apocryphal books thoroughly undermines the biblical doctrine of inerrancy. This has tremendous implications, many of which we shall discuss in a separate treatment on inerrancy.

Regardless, there is no doubt whatever that the Apocrypha contains errors. Biblical scholar Dr. Rene Pache comments,

Except for certain interesting historical information (especially in 1 Maccabees) and a few beautiful moral thoughts (e.g., Wisdom of Solomon), these books contain absurd legends and platitudes, and historical, geographical and chronological errors, as well as manifestly heretical doctrines; they even recommend immoral acts (Judith 9:10, 13).¹

Old Testament scholar Merrill F. Unger writes in his *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament*, “Certainly a book that contains what is false in fact, erroneous in doctrine or unsound in morality, is unworthy of God and cannot have been inspired by Him. Tried under these criteria the Apocryphal books stand self-condemned.”²

Thus, numerous errors in the Apocrypha have been pointed out in standard works, e.g.,

Tobit... contains certain historical and geographical errors such as the assumption that Sennacherib was the son of Shalmaneser (1:15) instead of Sargon II, and that Nineveh was captured by Nebuchadnezzar and Ahasuerus (14:5) instead of by Nabopolassar and Cyaxares.... Judith.... fits readily into the time of the Maccabean uprising (2nd century B.C.), but cannot possibly be historical because of the glaring errors it contains. Thus Nebuchadnezzar was given an impossibly long reign, as was the ruler of Media, while the Assyrians and Babylonians were hopelessly confused and the armies were made to perform impossible feats of mobility.... [In 2 Maccabees] There are also numerous disarrangements and discrepancies in chronological, historical, and numerical matters in the book, reflecting ignorance or confusion on the part of the epitomist, his sources or both.³

Thus, the Apocrypha contains indisputable errors. Any Christian who needs sufficient reason for rejecting the Apocrypha as Scripture need only read the Apocrypha itself. Indeed, “More

Christians should read the Apocrypha.... To do so would settle many questions regarding canonicity.”⁴

8) The Council of Trent and the Apocrypha

How did the Council of Trent ever declare the Apocrypha was Scripture in the first place? Much in the same way Vatican I decreed papal infallibility: expediency.

Theologian Dr. Bernard Ramm observes that, “The story as to how the *Apocrypha* achieved [the] status of inspired Scripture at the Council of Trent is one of the saddest commentaries on improper scholarship in the history of Western culture.”⁵

Biblical scholar R. Laird Harris observes that for 1,500 years no Roman Catholic was called upon to believe the Apocrypha was scriptural—until the Council of Trent made its fateful decree. He agrees the Council adopted its position “for reasons of expediency rather than evidence.”⁶ Thus, the Council was “unmindful of evidence, of former popes and scholars, of the Fathers of the church and the witness of Christ and the apostles” in making its pronouncement.⁷

Dr. Rene Pache points out that a key reason for Trent’s decision was to respond to the arguments of the Protestant Reformers who were attempting to defend the principle of *sola scriptura*—that the Bible alone was the final authority for matters of faith and practice, not church tradition. Thus, Trent found in the Apocrypha a *justification* for unbiblical Catholic traditions that were rejected by the Reformers.

Why, then, did Rome take so new and daring a position? Because, confronted by the Reformers, she lacked arguments to justify her unscriptural deviations. She declared that the Apocryphal books supported such doctrines as prayers for the dead (II Macc. 12:44); the expiatory sacrifice (eventually to become the Mass, II Macc. 12:39-46); alms giving with expiatory value, also leading to deliverance from death (Tobit 12:9; 4:10); invocation and intercession of the saints (II Macc. 15:14; Bar. 3:4); the worship of angels (Tobit 12:12); purgatory; and the redemption of souls after death (II Macc. 12:42, 46).⁸

Thus, a strong case can be made that the reason the Council of Trent declared the Apocrypha canonical was simply as a polemical maneuver to support Roman Catholic belief against the Protestant Reformation. To illustrate, two main doctrines in dispute during the Reformation, both supported by the Apocrypha, include salvation by faith/works (Tobit 12:9) and prayers for the dead (2 Macc. 12:45-46). Concerning these doctrines, the Catholic Church claims that they *are* scriptural because they are canonical (i.e., apocryphal). For example, concerning prayers for the dead in 2 Maccabees 12:39-36, we find the practice of postmortem intercession where the living are able to make “propitiation for the dead,”⁹ allegedly loosing them from the consequences of their sins and thus undergirding the Catholic doctrine of indulgences and prayers for the dead in purgatory:

...the troops of Judas went... to pick up the corpses of the slain... they discovered under the shirts of every one of the dead men amulets of the idols of Jamnia—a practice forbidden the Jews by law. All saw at once that this was why they had perished [by the Lord’s judgment] and... all betook themselves to supplication, beseeching that the sin committed might be wholly blotted out... [Judah] collected from them, man by man, the sum of two thousand drachmas of silver, which he forwarded to Jerusalem for a sin-offering. In this he acted quite rightly and properly.... Hence *he made propitiation for the dead that they might be released from their sin.*¹⁰

Notice however that these verses 1) do not even mention purgatory and 2) actually reject the Catholic doctrine of purgatory by teaching that deliverance of soldiers who had died in the mortal, and hence unforgivable, sin of idolatry. Regardless,

The acceptance of the Apocrypha at the Council of Trent is suspect because: ...it was used against Luther in support of the Roman Catholic position.... [Further] Not all of the Apocrypha was accepted. Only 11 of the 14 books were and one of those admitted books (2 Esdras) is *against* prayers for the dead....¹¹

We emphasize once again! Material that is either contradictory, legendary or heretical can hardly be accorded canonical status. The canonical books clearly oppose salvation by works (Galatians chs. 2 & 3) and praying for the dead (Hebrews 9:27; 2 Samuel 12:19; Luke 16:25-26). Stories such as those found in “Bel and the Dragon” are clearly legendary and therefore unauthentic as are the “Additions to Esther,” “Prayer of Azariah,” “Tobit,” “Susanna and Judith.” At other places the teaching of the Apocrypha is even immoral, e.g., where Judith was allegedly assisted by God in an immoral action (Judith 9:10-13). Both “Wisdom” and “Ecclesiasticus” teach morality based on expedience. Again, there are numerous errors in the Apocrypha. William H. Green concisely observes: “The books of ‘Tobit’ and ‘Judith’ abound in geographical, chronological, and historical mistakes, so as not only to vitiate the truth of the narratives they contain, but to make it doubtful whether they even rest upon a basis of fact.”¹² This probably explains why “Many of the great Fathers of the early church spoke out against the Apocrypha, for example, Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Athanasius.”¹³

9) The Church’s Classification of Ancient Literature and the Apocrypha

Understanding how the church catalogued Old Testament books further informs us why the Apocrypha cannot be considered Scripture. The early church used four basic classifications to gauge the great variety of literature that comprised or surrounded the Bible: the homologoumena, antilegomena, pseudepigrapha and apocrypha. The first class is called the *homologoumena*. This term refers to those biblical books that, once accepted into the canon, were never questioned or disputed. In other words, from the start, these books have maintained their canonical status to the present day. This includes approximately 87 percent of the Protestant Old Testament.

The second category is called the *antilegomena*. It refers to books that *were* first accepted but *later* disputed by some. This includes 13 percent of the Old Testament books. We see that some rejected “The Song of Solomon” because it was allegedly too sensual; “Ecclesiastes,” because it was allegedly too skeptical; “Esther,” because it did not mention the name God; “Ezekiel” because it was mistakenly thought to be anti-Moses, or even Gnostic, and “Proverbs” because a few of the proverbs seemed to contradict one another. Note that the homologoumena and antilegomena comprise 100 percent of the Protestant Old Testament.

The fact of the antilegomena proves two things: 1) that almost 90 percent of the Protestant Old Testament canon was *never* disputed once accepted and 2) the few books that were first accepted but later disputed withstood the test of time, confirming the credibility of the original selection process and determination.

Thus, the antilegomena was originally *accepted* into the canon; it was only *subsequently* disputed by some rabbis. So the real issue for the antilegomena is whether or not the later arguments for exclusion had any validity. They did not. Thus, “The Song of Solomon” is not really sensual; in those few places it is explicit, it merely describes the physical joys of married life. “Ecclesiastes” may have seemed skeptical but look at its final conclusion in chapter 12. The whole point of the book is to show that apart from trust in God, life is indeed futile. To argue that “Esther” is “unspiritual” simply because it does not mention the name of God is a *non sequitur*. In fact, the omission of God’s name may have been intentional “to protect it from pagan plagiarization and the substitution for it of the name of a heathen god” since the Jews were

living in Persian exile among the pagans.¹⁴ Regardless, there *is* an acrostic of the name Jehovah four times in the book in such a manner that a chance origin is ruled out. And even though the direct name of God is absent, His grace and power, seen in the deliverance of His people, is certainly present quite powerfully.¹⁵ Concerning “Ezekiel,” there are no contradictions with Moses, because none have ever been shown. Any genuine errors or contradictions between “Ezekiel” and the Pentateuch, or the presence of genuine Gnostic teachings, would have excluded the book from consideration as Scripture and/or it would never have been placed in the canon to begin with. Finally, the few alleged contradictions in “Proverbs” are only apparent. For example, consider Proverbs 26:4-5: “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.” Obviously, the exhortation to “answer a fool according to his folly” and to *not* do this is dependent upon circumstances, as the context indicates.

The third category is the *pseudepigrapha*. These are the books that were rejected by all. This includes a large number of false or spurious writings including “The Books of Adam and Eve;” “The Books of Enoch;” “The Books of Sibylline Oracles;” “The Assumption of Moses;” “Psalms of Solomon;” “The Books of Baruch;” “The Story of Ahikar,” etc. Although these books claim to have been written by biblical authors “they actually express religious fancy and magic from the period between about 200 B.C. and A.D. 200.... Most of these books are comprised of dreams, visions and revelations in the apocalyptic style of Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah.”¹⁶

The fourth category takes us to the subject under discussion, the *Apocrypha*, which involved the books rejected by most but accepted by some. We have now seen why these books have been rejected by most.

(to be continued)

Notes:

- ¹ Rene Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* (trans. Helen I. Needham) (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), p. 172.
- ² G. Douglas Young, “The Apocrypha,” in Carl Henry, *Revelation and the Bible* (Baker), p. 172, citing p. 109 of *Introductory Guide*.
- ³ *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 1, pp. 207-210, cf., *Encyclopedia Britannica Macropaedia*, Vol. II, p. 932ff.
- ⁴ R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), p. 194.
- ⁵ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), p. 20; in his article, “The Apocrypha,” (*Kings Business*, Vol. 38, pp. 15-17, July 1947) he also discusses the reasons why it is impossible to accept the Apocrypha as Scripture.
- ⁶ Harris, p. 193.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- ⁸ Pache, p. 173.
- ⁹ Robert C. Broderick (ed.), *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, rev. & updated (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987), p. 502.
- ¹⁰ R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, Vol. 1, The Apocrypha (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) pp. 149-50, emphasis added.
- ¹¹ Norman L. Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971, Rev., 1986), p. 273, emphasis added.
- ¹² In *ibid.*, p. 271.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 272.
- ¹⁴ Geisler & Nix, 1st ed., p. 164.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.