

The Apocrypha—Part Four

By Dr. Norman Geisler

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Arguments for the Protestant Canon (con't)

Historical Arguments, Part 2

Early church council rejection. No canonic list or council of the Christian church accepted the *Apocrypha* as inspired for nearly the first four centuries. This is significant, since all of the lists available and most of the fathers of this period omit the *Apocrypha*. The first councils to accept the *Apocrypha* were only local ones without ecumenical force. The Catholic contention that the Council of Rome (382), though not an ecumenical council, had ecumenical force because Pope Damasus (304-384) ratified it is without grounds. It begs the question, assuming that Damasus was a Pope with infallible authority. Second, even Catholics acknowledge this council was not an ecumenical body. Third, not all Catholic scholars agree that such affirmations by Popes are infallible. There are no infallible lists of infallible statements by Popes. Nor are there any universally agreed upon criteria for developing such lists. At best, appealing to a Pope to make infallible a statement by a local council is a double-edged sword. Even Catholic scholars admit that some Popes taught error and were even heretical.

Early fathers' rejection. Early fathers of the Christian church spoke out against the *Apocrypha*. This included Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius, and the great Roman Catholic Bible translator, Jerome.

Rejection by Jerome. Jerome (340-420), the greatest biblical scholar of the early Medieval period and translator of the Latin Vulgate, explicitly rejected the *Apocrypha* as part of the canon. He said the church reads them “for example and instruction of manners” but does not “apply them to establish any doctrine” (“Preface” to Vulgate *Book of Solomon*, cited in Beckwith, 343). In fact, he disputed Augustine’s unjustified acceptance of these books. At first, Jerome even refused to translate the *Apocrypha* into Latin, but later made a hurried translation of a few books. After listing the exact books of the Jewish and Protestant Old Testament, Jerome concludes:

And thus altogether there come to be 22 books of the old Law [according to the letters of the Jewish alphabet], that is, five of Moses, eight of the Prophets, and nine of the Hagiographa. Although some set down... Ruth and Kinoth among the Hagiographa, and think that these books ought to be counted (separately) in their computation, and that there are thus 24 books of the old Law; which the Apocalypse of John represents as adoring the Lamb in the number of the 24 elders.... This prologue can fitly serve as a Helmet (i.e., equipped with a helmet, against assailants) introduction to all the biblical books which we have translated from Hebrew into Latin, so that we may know that *whatever is not included in these is to be placed among the apocrypha.* [ibid., emphasis added]

In his preface to Daniel, Jerome clearly rejected the apocryphal additions to Daniel (Bel

and the Dragon and Susanna) and argued only for the canonicity of those books found in the Hebrew Bible. He wrote:

The stories of Susanna and of Bel and the Dragon are not contained in the Hebrew.... For this same reason when I was translating Daniel many years ago, I noted these visions with a critical symbol, showing that they were not included in the Hebrew.... After all, both Origen, Eusebius and Appolinarius and other outstanding churchmen and teachers of Greece acknowledge that, as I have said, these visions are not found amongst the Hebrew, *and therefore they are not obliged to answer to Porphyry for these portions which exhibit no authority as Holy Scripture.* [ibid., emphasis added]

The suggestion that Jerome really favored the apocryphal books but was only arguing that the Jews rejected them is groundless. First, he said clearly in the above quotation that they “*exhibit no authority as Holy Scripture.*” Second, he never retracted his rejection of the *Apocrypha*. Third, he stated in his work *Against Rufinus*, 33 that he had “followed the judgment of the churches” on this matter. And his statement “I was not following my own personal views” appears to refer to “the remarks that they [the enemies of Christianity] are wont to make against us.” In any event, he nowhere retracted his statements against the *Apocrypha*. Finally, the fact that Jerome cited apocryphal books is no proof that he accepted them. This was a common practice by many church fathers. He had stated that the church reads them “for example and instruction of manners” but does not “apply them to establish any doctrine.”

Rejection by scholars. Even noted Roman Catholic scholars during the Reformation period rejected the *Apocrypha*, such as Cardinal Cajetan, who opposed Luther. As already noted, he wrote a *Commentary on All the Authentic Historical Books of the Old Testament* (1532) which excluded the *Apocrypha*. If he believed they were authentic, they certainly would have been included in a book on “all the authentic” books of the Old Testament.

Luther, John Calvin, and other Reformers rejected the canonicity of the *Apocrypha*. Lutherans and Anglicans have used it only for ethical/devotional matters but do not consider it authoritative in matters of Faith. Reformed churches followed *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) which states: “The Books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are not part of the canon of the Scriptures; and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than any other human writings.” In short, the Christian church (including Anglicans, Lutherans, and Protestants) has rejected the deuterocanonical books as part of the canon. They do so because they lack the primary determining factor of canonicity: The apocryphal books lack evidence that they were written by accredited prophets of God. Further evidence is found in the fact that the apocryphal books are never cited as authoritative in Scripture in the New Testament, it was never part of the Jewish canon, and the early church did not accept the *Apocrypha* as inspired.

The Mistake of Trent. The infallible pronouncement by the Council of Trent that the apocryphal books are part of the inspired Word of God reveals how fallible an allegedly infallible statement can be. This article has shown that the statement is historically unfounded. It was a polemical overreaction and an arbitrary decision involving a dogmatic exclusion.

Trent's pronouncement on the *Apocrypha* was part of a polemical action against Luther. Its sponsors deemed an inspired *Apocrypha* necessary to justify teaching Luther had attacked, particularly prayers for the dead. The text of 2 Maccabees 12:46 reads "Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from his sin. Since there was an agenda for accepting certain books, the decisions were rather arbitrary. Trent accepted 2 Maccabees, which supported prayers for the dead and rejected 2 Esdras (4 Esdras in the Catholic reckoning), which had a statement that would not support the practice (cf. 7:105).

The very history of this section of 2 (4) Esdras reveals the arbitrariness of the Trent decision. It was written in Aramaic by an unknown Jewish author (ca. A.D. 100) and circulated in Old Latin versions (ca. 200). The Latin Vulgate printed it as an appendix to the New Testament (ca. 400). It disappeared from Bibles until Protestants, beginning with Johann Haug (1726-42), began to print it in the *Apocrypha* based on Aramaic texts, since it was not in Latin manuscripts of the time. However, in 1874 a long section in Latin (seventy verses of chap. 7) was found by Robert Bently in a library in Amiens, France. Bruce Metzger noted, "It is probable that the lost section was deliberately cut out of an ancestor of most extant Latin Manuscripts, because of dogmatic reasons, for the passage contains an emphatic denial of the value of prayers for the dead."

Some Catholics argue that this exclusion is not arbitrary because this writing was not part of earlier deuterocanonical lists, it was written after the time of Christ, it was relegated to an inferior position in the Vulgate, and it was only included among the *Apocrypha* by Protestants in the eighteenth century. On the other hand, 2 [4] Esdras was part of earlier lists of books not considered fully canonical. According to the Catholic criterion, the date of writing has nothing to do with whether it should be in the Jewish *Apocrypha* but whether it was used by early Christians; it was used, alongside the other apocryphal books. It should not have been rejected because it held an inferior position in the Vulgate. Jerome relegated all these writings to an inferior position. The reason it did not reappear in Latin until the eighteenth century is apparently because some Catholic Monk cut out the section against praying for the dead.

Prayers for the dead were much on the mind of the clerics at Trent, who convened their council just twenty-nine years after Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses against the sale of indulgences. Doctrines of indulgences, purgatory, and prayers for the dead stand or fall together.