

# The Apocrypha—Part Five

By Dr. Norman Geisler

(from *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Book House, 1999)

**Doctrinal Arguments. Canonicity.** The true and false views of what determines canonicity can be contrasted as follows (see Geisler, *General Introduction*, 221).

<b>Incorrect View of Canon</b>	<b>Correct View of Canon</b>
Church Determines Canon.	Church Discovers Canon.
Church Is Mother of Canon.	Church Is Child of Canon.
Church Is Magistrate of Canon.	Church Is Minister of Canon.
Church Regulates Canon.	Church Recognizes Canon.
Church Is Judge of Canon.	Church Is Witness of Canon.
Church Is Master of Canon.	Church Is Servant of Canon.

Catholic sources can be cited to support a doctrine of canonicity that looks very much like the “correct view.” The problem is that Catholic apologists often equivocate on this issue. Peter Kreeft, for example, argued that the church must be infallible if the Bible is, since the effect cannot be greater than the cause and the church caused the canon. But if the church is regulated by the canon, not ruler over it, then the church is not the cause of the canon. Other defenders of Catholicism make the same mistake, giving lip-service on the one hand to the fact that the church only discovers the canon, yet on the other hand constructing an argument that makes the church the determiner of the canon. They neglect the fact that it is God who caused (by inspiration) the canonical Scriptures, not the church.

This misunderstanding is sometimes evident in the equivocal use of the word *witness*. When we speak of the church as being a “witness” to the canon after the time it was written we do not mean in the sense of being an eyewitness (i.e., relating first-hand evidence). The proper role of the Christian church in discovering which books belong in the canon can be reduced to several precepts.

- *Only the people of God contemporary to the writing of the biblical books were actual eyewitnesses to the evidence.* They alone were witnesses to the canon as it was developing. Only they can testify to the evidence of the propheticity of the biblical books, which is the determinative factor of canonicity.

- *The later church is not an evidential witness for the canon.* It does not create or constitute evidence for the canon. It is only a discoverer and observer of the evidence that remains for the original confirmation of the propheticity of the canonical books. Assuming that it is evidence in and of itself is the mistake behind the Roman Catholic view.

- *Neither the earlier nor later church is the judge of the canon.* The church is not the final arbiter for the criteria of what will be admitted as evidence. Only God can determine the criteria for our discovery of what is his Word. What is of God will have his “fingerprints” on it, and only God is the determiner of what his “fingerprints” are like.

- *Both the early and later church is more like a jury than a judge.* The jury listens to

the evidence, weighs the evidence, and renders a verdict in accord with the evidence. The contemporary (First-Century) church looked at the first-hand evidence for *propheticity* (such as miracles), and the historic church has reviewed the evidence for the *authenticity* of these prophetic books which were directly confirmed by God when they were written.

In a certain sense, the church does “judge” the canon. It is called upon, as all juries are, to engage in an active sifting and weighing of the evidence as it renders a verdict. But this is not what the Roman Church practiced in its magisterial role in determining the canon. After all, this is what is meant by the “teaching magisterium” of the church. The Roman Catholic hierarchy is not merely ministerial; it is magisterial. It has a judicial role, not just an administrative one. It is not just a jury looking at evidence; it is a judge determining what counts as evidence.

Therein lies the problem. In exercising its magisterial role, the Roman Catholic church chose the wrong course in rendering its decision about the *Apocrypha*. First, it chose to follow the wrong criterion, *Christian usage* rather than *propheticity*. Second, it used *second-hand evidence* of later writers rather than the only *first-hand evidence* for canonicity (divine confirmation of the author’s propheticity). Third, it did not use *immediate confirmation* by contemporaries but the *later statements* of people separated from the events by centuries. All of these mistakes arose out of a misconception of the very role of the church as judge rather than jury as magistrate rather than minister, a sovereign over rather than servant of the canon. By contrast, the Protestant rejection of the *Apocrypha* was based on an understanding of the role of the first witnesses to propheticity and the church as custodian of that evidence for authenticity.

***New Testament Apocrypha.*** The New Testament *Apocrypha* are disputed books that have been accepted by some into the canon of Scripture. Unlike the *Apocrypha* of the Old Testament, the New Testament *Apocrypha* has not caused a permanent or serious controversy, since the church universal agrees that only the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are inspired. Books of the *Apocrypha* have been enjoyed for their devotional value, unlike the more spurious (and usually heretical) books of the New Testament pseudepigrapha. Pseudepigraphal writings are sometimes called “*Apocrypha*,” but they have been universally rejected by all traditions of the church.

The New Testament *Apocrypha* includes *The Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas* (ca. A.D. 70-79), *The Epistle to the Corinthians* (ca. 96), *The Gospel According to the Hebrews* (ca. 65-100), *The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians* (ca. 108), *Didache* or *The Teaching of the Twelve* (ca. 100-20), *The Seven Epistles of Ignatius* (ca. 110), *Ancient Homily* or *The Second Epistle of Clement* (ca. 120-140), *The Shepherd of Hermas* (ca. 115-40), *The Apocalypse of Peter* (ca. 150), and *The Epistle to the Laodiceans* (fourth century [?]).

***Reasons for Rejecting.*** None of the New Testament *Apocrypha* have experienced more than a local or temporary acceptance. Most have enjoyed at best a quasi-canonical status, merely appended to various manuscripts or listed in tables of contents. No major canon or church council accepted them as part of the inspired Word of God. Where they were accepted into the canon by groups of Christians it was because they were believed wrongly to have been written by an apostle or referred to by an inspired book (for example, Col. 4:16). Once this was known to be false they were rejected as canonical.

**Conclusion.** Differences over the Old Testament *Apocrypha* play a crucial role in Roman Catholic and Protestant differences over such teachings as purgatory and prayers for the dead. There is no evidence that the *Apocryphal* books are inspired and, therefore, should be part of the canon of inspired Scripture. They do not claim to be inspired, nor is inspiration credited to them by the Jewish community that produced them. They are never quoted as Scripture in the New Testament. Many early fathers, including Jerome, categorically rejected them. Adding them to the Bible with an infallible decree at the Council of Trent shows evidence of being a dogmatic and polemical pronouncement calculated to bolster support for doctrines that do not find clear support in any of the canonical books.

In view of the strong evidence against the *Apocrypha*, the decision by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches to pronounce them canonical is both unfounded and rejected by Protestants. It is a serious error to admit nonrevelational material to corrupt the written revelation of God and undermine the divine authority of Scripture (Ramm, 65).

### Sources

H. Andrews, *An Introduction to the Apocryphal Books of the Old and New Testaments*

Augustine, *The City of God*.

R. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism*

M. Burroughs, *More Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls*

H. Denzinger, *Documents of Vatican II*, chapter 3

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*

N. L. Geisler, "The Extent of The Old Testament canon," in G. F. Hawthorne, ed., *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*

\_\_\_\_\_ and W. E. Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. ed.

Josephus, *Antiquities*. 1.8

B. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha*

B. Ramm, *The Pattern of Religious Authority*

P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*

A. Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament*

B. Westcott, *A General Survey of the Canon of the New Testament*