

The Apocrypha and the Biblical Canon—Part 6

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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 Prophecy; and 6) Divine Providence and the Canon; 7) The Apocrypha and Inerrancy; 8) The Council of Trent and the Apocrypha; and 9) The Church's Classification of Ancient Literature and the Apocrypha. We now conclude our discussion.

10) Summary and Roman Catholic Arguments Evaluated

In *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Drs. Norman Geisler and William Nix examine the 12 reasons generally advanced by Catholicism for including the Apocrypha in the canon and show that none of them are valid. They also supply five reasons for accepting the Palestinian or Jewish canon. Below we will consider some of the reasons advanced for *accepting* the Apocrypha and why these reasons are spurious. Here we will of necessity recapitulate and summarize some earlier arguments:

1) *Possible New Testament Citations of the Apocrypha*. At best, a few New Testament *allusions* to the Apocrypha may exist, but this hardly proves the writer intended to declare such books Scripture merely because they may have been alluded to. No one, Protestant or Catholic, can deny that the New Testament never refers to any of the 14 or 15 apocryphal books as canonical or authoritative. And the fact that the New Testament authors quoted from almost all Old Testament books but no apocryphal books speaks volumes. They clearly considered Old Testament books as having divine authority by how they quoted them. If they also considered the Apocrypha as having divine authority, it is unthinkable they would not have cited them even once.

2) *The 1st Century Greek Septuagint contained the Apocrypha*. As noted, there is no proof of this. It is not certain that the Septuagint [LXX] of the 1st century contained the Apocrypha because the earliest manuscripts we have date only from the 4th century A.D. "Even if they were in the LXX of apostolic time, Jesus and the apostles implied their view of them by never once quoting them, although they are supposed to have been included in the very version of the Old Testament that they cited."¹

3) *The Church Fathers*. Citations of the Church Fathers supporting the Apocrypha as Scripture must be carefully evaluated to see exactly what a given individual believed. In many cases, what first appears to be support for the Apocrypha as canonical really isn't. Dr. Beckwith points out:

When one examines the passages in the early Fathers which are supposed to establish the canonicity of the Apocrypha, one finds that some of them are taken from the alternative Greek text of Ezra (1 Esdras) or from additions or appendices to Daniel, Jeremiah or some other canonical book which... are not really relevant; and that others of them are not

quotations from the Apocrypha at all; and that, of those which are, many do not given any indication that the book is regarded as Scripture.²

Augustine's acceptance of the Apocrypha seems to be primarily the result of his incorrect view that the Septuagint was inspired. Augustine was also somewhat inconsistent in that he rejected a book if it was not written by a prophet yet he accepted apocryphal books which do not claim to be prophetic (cf., 1 Macc. 9:27). Nevertheless, while Augustine is the single most important voice of antiquity to accept the Apocrypha, he also accorded it a status of "secondary canonicity." Further, the councils at Carthage and Hippo were small local councils dominated by Augustine "and had no qualified persons present to judge the issue of canonicity." In the end, even Augustine "later, . . . recognized that the Septuagint was not inspired, and reverted to the authority of the Hebrew scriptures."³

In spite of the fact that many church Fathers opposed the Apocrypha, Roman Catholics often reply "but they used them as if they were Scripture." Consider the comments in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*:

Thus there are a number of lists of the canonical books from the 4th century which confine themselves to the Hebrew canon and either do not mention the other writings or assign to them a lower value. . . . All these declarations, more or less unfavorable to the Apocrypha, lose much of their importance from the fact that the men who excluded the Apocrypha from the canon used them in an impartial manner as though canonical. . . . Roman theologians have rightly laid great stress upon this fact; for it proves that, notwithstanding opposite theories, ecclesiastical practice on the whole was to use the Apocrypha like the canonical writings.⁴

But this does *not* prove the early writers considered the apocryphal books Scripture. Indeed, if they spoke *against* the Apocrypha, they could hardly have considered it Scripture. Even in modern books, Christian authors will, e.g., quote Scripture and a conservative theologian along side it with equal authority, at least as far as the reader could determine. All this means is that they accept the theologian's statement because it is true, even as true as Scripture. But they would hardly accept the theologian's declaration as inspired Scripture.

So does it really matter whether or not some of the Fathers quoted the Apocrypha as they quoted Scripture? No. Again, if they were critical of these books or doubtful of their scriptural status, how can we possibly conclude they intended them to be seen as Scripture, or their citing of them as having scriptural authority? The Apocrypha, e.g., could have been quoted to simply make a point because what was said at that point was true. Regardless, what difference does it make how some of the Church Fathers quoted the Apocrypha if the content of the Apocrypha *proves* it is not Scripture?

4) *Inclusion with the Manuscripts.* We have seen why this occurred. The fact that the Apocrypha was part of Greek manuscripts of the 4th century hardly proves they were part of the 1st century canon. However, "None of the great Greek manuscripts. . . contain all of the Apocryphal books. In fact, only four (Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, and Ecclesiasticus) are found in all of them. . . [further] no Greek manuscript has the exact list of Apocryphal books accepted by the Council of Trent. . . ."⁵ The Syrian Bible or the Peshitta of the 2nd century did *not* contain the Apocrypha.

5) *Acceptance by Church Councils.* Geisler and MacKenzie point out, "No canonical list or general council accepted the Apocrypha as inspired for nearly the first four centuries of the Christian church. This is especially significant since all the lists available and most of the Fathers from this period rejected the Apocrypha. The first councils to accept the Apocrypha were only local ones

without ecumenical force.”⁶ Thus, no apocryphal book can be found in the listing of recognized canonical books for at least 300 years.⁷ As Dr. Harris remarks, “We have here summed up all the important witnesses in the Early Church to about 400 A.D. With one voice they insist that the strict Jewish canon is the only one to be received with full credence.”⁸

6) *Acceptance by the Greek Church.* But even the Greek Church has not *always* accepted the Apocrypha.

7) *Its Appearance in Protestant Bibles.* The fact that the Apocrypha appeared in Protestant Bibles is irrelevant because they “were generally placed in a separate section because they were not considered to be of equal authority. Even Roman Catholic scholars through the Reformation period made the distinction between the Apocrypha and the Canon.”⁹ Again, F. F. Bruce has supplied several examples of the inclusion of the Apocrypha in different Bibles, but these Bibles imply or observe the Apocrypha is not to be considered Scripture.

A final argument for inclusion concerns the authority of Rome. For Rome, as far as interpreting Scripture is concerned, the issue is not what the text of Scripture itself declares but what the Catholic Church, claiming divine guidance, *claims* it declares. This is also the thrust of the Roman Catholic apologetic for the Apocrypha. The Catholic canon of the Old Testament is correct because the Catholic Church, claiming divine guidance, declares it to be correct. This ends all discussion.

The Catholic Church is forced to argue in such a manner because it has no biblical or other evidence in support of its view of the divine authority of the Apocrypha. In the end, evidence is irrelevant because, in the final analysis, it does not really matter. Since Rome is the final interpreter of everything, she must be the final interpreter of evidence as well. And for those who aren’t convinced by this line of reasoning, it is their problem, not that of the Catholic Church. It is the spiritual problem of the critic, who refuses to submit to the authority of “Christ’s church.”

Not unexpectedly, Rome teaches that the church has priority *over* the Scripture. As the argument goes, the Church came first and *then* the Scripture came from the Church, therefore, the Church is above the Scripture. This is the exact opposite of the position of Protestantism and explains why we can find even Catholic apologists logically admitting things like, “the Catholic Church technically is not a Bible-based church.”¹⁰ This, regrettably, is true; it is a church based on the teachings of Roman Catholic tradition. This is exactly the problem; the ecclesiology of Rome irreparably damages its bibliology both in hermeneutics and in canon.

Clearly, there was never a time when the church was without Scripture. Because the Old Testament was the Bible of the New Testament church, the Scriptures *pre-existed* the church and the argument of Rome is false. Further, even for the New Testament, the church was founded *during the time* when New Testament revelation was being received. So it cannot be logically argued that the Church preceded the Scripture and therefore has authority over the Scripture.

Geisler and Nix conclude by noting that “all of the arguments used in favor of the canonicity of the apocryphal books merely prove that these books have been given varied degrees of esteem and recognition, usually falling short of full canonicity,” until the Council of Trent.¹¹

The fact that these books were *entirely* rejected by the Jews and at best had only limited acceptance by the Christians—and that there was no official decree of canonicity until the Council of Trent, some 1600–1800 years after they were first written, argues quite forcefully *against* their status as Scripture.

All this is proof of the error made at the Council of Trent. In this regard, it is important to note that even some Catholic scholars of the Reformation period agreed with Protestants on this issue: “Even noted Roman Catholic scholars during the Reformation period rejected the Apocrypha, such

as Cardinal Cajetan, who opposed Martin Luther.”¹²

Geisler and MacKenzie also point out that even the *New American Bible*, the current Roman Catholic Bible, has notes in it which make the “revealing admission that the apocryphal books are ‘religious books used by both Jews and Christians which were *not included* in the collection of inspired writings.’”¹³

In light of the above, standard Catholic theological and historical arguments for inclusion of the Apocrypha into the canon are simply not credible. The NIV discussion of the Apocrypha in the section, “The Time Between the Testaments,” aptly concludes our article:

Their recognition as authoritative in Roman and Eastern Christianity is a result of a complex historical process.... The Apocryphal books have retained their place primarily through the weight of ecclesiastical authority without which they would not commend themselves as canonical literature.... The Jewish community that produced them repudiated them, and the historical surveys and the apostolic sermons recorded in Acts completely ignore the period they cover. Even the sober, historical account of 1 Maccabees is tarnished by numerous errors and anachronisms. There is nothing of theological value in the Apocryphal books that cannot be duplicated in canonical Scripture, and they contain much that runs counter to its teachings.¹⁴

Thus, we can only agree with Old Testament authority G. Douglas Young, author of *A Grammar of the Hebrew Language*, and *Ugaritic Concordance* who concludes, “...the historical evidence is unambiguous; the conclusion from history is that the Apocrypha do not merit a place in the Scripture....”¹⁵

Notes:

¹ Norman L. Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971, rev. 1986), pp. 267-268.

² In *ibid.*, p. 268.

³ Geisler, Nix, 1st ed., p. 173.

⁴ *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. 1, pp. 214-15.

⁵ Geisler, Nix, 1st ed., p. 173 or rev., ed., p. 286.

⁶ Norman L. Geisler, Ralph MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), p. 169.

⁷ R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), pp. 188-191.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁹ Geisler and Nix, rev. ed., p. 269.

¹⁰ James R. White, *The Roman Catholic Controversy* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1996), p. 242.

¹¹ Geisler and Nix, rev. ed., p. 270.

¹² Geisler and MacKenzie, p. 171.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹⁴ NIV text notes, p. 1432.

¹⁵ G. Douglas Young, “The Apocrypha,” in Carl Henry, *Revelation and the Bible* (Baker), pp. 184-185.

NOTE: “Despite some claims to the contrary (in particular those relating to the Council of Jamnia, ca. 90), the Hebrew canon had been settled once and for all by the time of Christ” (D. G. Dunbar in Carson, *Hermeneutics*, pp. 309-310). *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* also observes, “None of these books was accepted into the Hebrew canon by the Jewish Synod of Jamnia, which met at a time (c. A.D. 100) when the authentic Jewish heritage was thought to be in danger of erosion from the syncretistic tendencies of apocalyptic writing and from the increasing influence of Christianity” (p. 53). Dunbar points out that

Several criticisms may be offered to the theory of an undefined pre-Jamnian canon. (1) [A.C.] Sunberg [in *The Old Testament of the Early Church*, 1964] relies heavily on the thesis that the delimitation of the hagiographa is the product of the Jamnia Council. However, the constitute nature of these rabbinic discussions for the closure of the canon has been too severely undermined to bear the weight of Sunberg’s hypothesis. (2) The appeal to the variation of the earliest (4th and 5th C.) Septuagint manuscripts from one another and from the order and numbering of the

rabbinic sources is not decisive. These LXX codices are Christian productions and questionable sources from which to derive the shape of the Hebrew canon in New Testament times. If, as previously noted, this criticism is valid for the "Alexandrian hypothesis," it must also tell against Sunberg's reconstruction. (3) Reference to the Church Fathers for support of an undefined canon of the first century is open to precisely the same objection as the appeal to the LXX. Nor does Sunberg give sufficient attention to assessing the relative value of the Patristic sources. (4) Even if it is the case that the Qumran sect recognized as Scripture a broader range of materials than did later Judaism... the views of this group cannot without explicit evidence be extrapolated to all of Judaism outside Qumran. There is then no compelling reason to revise the historic Protestant evaluation of the Apocrypha. The New Testament writers did not acknowledge these books as Scripture, nor did a significant number of the patristic writers whose witness to the Hebrew tradition of twenty-two biblical books [in the Hebrew canon]. (pp. 309-10)