

Understanding Apocrypha, Part 2

[Note: The Hebrew Scriptures at the time of Christ were combined and arranged differently than our Old Testament today. Two common arrangements had either 22 or 24 books. The consensus among scholars is that the 22 or 24 were identical to the 39 in the Protestant Old Testament today.]

Common Proposals:

- 1. The Old Testament canon must not have been clear because Jewish rabbis argued about which books should be included.**

“The actual discussions of the contents of Scripture in ancient Judaism show no trace of an expanded canon that included the Apocrypha.” (Blomberg, 49)

“The only debates reflected among the rabbis in early post-Christian centuries were whether a few of the twenty-two or twenty-four books ... merited inclusion, not whether any others deserved to join them.” (Blomberg, 52)

- 2. Since the library at Qumran (the cave settlement where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, which was inhabited during the centuries before Christ) contained more than just biblical books, Judaism must have accepted other books.**

We know little about this unusual Jewish sect that was hiding away at Qumran. If you came to my library in my office you would find many books besides the Bible, but that would not imply anything about my view of the canon. We do know that the residents at Qumran produced commentaries on thirteen biblical books but not on any apocryphal books, and that only three of the books in the Roman Catholic apocrypha were found there.

- 3. Since the early Greek translations of the Old Testament include some apocryphal books, and since Jesus and the apostles quoted from those Greek translations extensively, they must have approved of those apocryphal books.**

The Septuagint was first translated in the 200s B.C. But since our earliest manuscripts come from the A.D. 300s and 400s, we don't really know what apocryphal books the original Septuagint contained. We only know that it was published with the Apocrypha 300 or 400 years after Christ. We also know that no two early Septuagint manuscripts agree on which apocryphal books should be included.

More importantly, Jesus and the apostles never cited the Apocrypha as scripture, and it's quite possible that they never cited the Apocrypha at all. Therefore, it requires a huge logical leap to say that Jesus and the apostles approved of the Apocrypha because they quoted from the Hebrew scriptures in the Septuagint.

- 4. Since the first full Bibles from the Christian period include some apocryphal books, they must have been accepted as canonical.**

The Bibles referred to here are the manuscripts known as Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, and Sinaiticus that we spoke about recently. These are the earliest Bibles to contain both the Old and New Testaments. It's important to note that it's not "The Apocrypha" that was included in these Bibles, but three different assortments of apocryphal books. Only four apocryphal books are found in all three of the early Bibles. Three of those four are listed as noncanonical in Athanasius's *39th Festal Letter* (that we talked about in our NT discussion) which comes from the same time period as these Bibles. So while there is considerable scholarly discussion about why early Christian Bibles included apocryphal books, the evidence hardly supports the Apocrypha as we know it.

5. Since some regional synods approved of apocryphal books, they must have been canonical.

There were regional councils that included some apocryphal books in their canonical lists, though the historical evidence is sometimes uncertain. For example, the Council of Laodicea (A.D. 363) may have included two, the third Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) may have included six. There seems to be very little evidence to support the oft-cited "Council of Rome" that supposedly affirmed the Apocrypha in the late 300s. No church-wide council approved the Apocrypha until the 1500s.

In regard to both #s 4 and 5 above, it is important to note that several early Jewish and Christian lists from the 200s to early 400s list only the 22-book or 24-book Hebrew canon without any apocryphal books.

6. Since the Reformers didn't like the theology in the Apocrypha, they tried to remove those books from the Bible. (Or, "Martin Luther removed the Apocrypha because it taught purgatory." Or, more simply, "Protestants took the Apocrypha out of the Bible.")

The Reformers did push back against the Apocrypha because of the 1,000-year official dominance in the Roman Catholic Church of one translation, the Latin Vulgate, which had included an assortment of apocryphal books. The Reformers did question the Vulgate tradition that these apocryphal books should be in the Bible. But long before the Reformation and long before anyone was teaching about purgatory, much less arguing about it, many people (including Jerome) were questioning the Apocrypha. The Reformers didn't "remove" the Apocrypha from the Bible any more than the lists from the A.D. 200s-400s referred to above "removed" the Apocrypha.

Just as importantly, as we saw last week, it is only slightly true that the Apocrypha clearly taught doctrines that were contrary to the Reformation. As a matter of fact, Luther actually taught that the apocryphal books were "useful and good to read, but not equal to the Holy Scriptures."

7. Since the New Testament alludes to apocryphal books, they must have scriptural authority.

The Old Testament refers to many outside works – especially historical records – that are not Scripture, and the New Testament writers cite a handful of poets and writers of their day. This does not mean that these works are inspired by God.

There may be genuine allusions to the apocryphal books in the New Testament, since some of these works were popular in the first century. But many of these proposals are very speculative, and they are clearly not in the same category as “The Scriptures say” type of quotations in the New Testament. Here are examples of the ways the New Testament supposedly uses the Apocrypha:

In Wisdom 2 the wicked refer to a righteous man who “reproaches us for sins against the law,” and so they say: “let us condemn him to a shameful death.” They also say “if the righteous man is God’s son, he will help him.” Jesus frequently reproached the Pharisees for not keeping the law, and was condemned to a shameful death. They taunted him that He should have been able to save himself if He was God’s chosen one.

Hebrews 11:35 refers to “others [who] were tortured, not accepting release....” There is no direct Old Testament parallel for this, but 2 Maccabees 7 tells a story about a mother whose seven sons chose to be martyred rather than eat pork.

Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 27:6 says “The fruit of a tree shows the care it has had; so speech discloses the bent of a person’s heart.” Jesus taught that you could recognize false prophets “by their fruits,” and that “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”

Wisdom 11:6-7 says “Instead of a river’s perennial source, troubled with impure blood as a rebuke to the decree for the slaying of infants, you gave them abundant water beyond their hope.” Matthew 2:16 records how Herod slayed the infants in Bethlehem.

Sirach 29:11-12 says “Dispose of your treasure according to the commandments of the Most High, and that will profit you more than the gold. Store up almsgiving in your treasury, and it will save you from every evil.” Jesus taught to “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.”

Jesus and his apostles were at the temple during Hannukah (John 10:22-36), therefore they accepted 1 and 2 Maccabees (which are the historical documents that explain Hannukah) as Scripture.

8. Jude quoted the Apocrypha with scriptural authority.

Jude 9 *But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you."*

Verse 9 probably alludes to the pseudepigraphal *Assumption of Moses*.

Jude 14-15 *It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, "Behold, the Lord came with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him."*

Verses 14-15 quite clearly quote from a pseudepigraphal work called *1 Enoch*.

These are challenging verses, because they seem to indicate that these portions of these two pseudepigraphal works contain truth. The especially challenging one here is the quote from *1 Enoch*, because this is a book that historians date to the centuries around the time of Christ. Yet Jude seems to be saying that *1 Enoch* accurately cited a prophecy from the ancient character Enoch

who lived thousands of years before (Genesis 4-5). This is surprising, though not entirely unprecedented (Paul also referred to a Greek poet as a “prophet” in Titus 1:12).

There are several suggestions about how to interpret these things, and you can consult any conservative commentary to read about the options. But for our purposes in this study, the most important fact is that *Assumption of Moses* and *1 Enoch* were not books that were ever seriously considered to be scripture. They are *not* part of the Apocrypha. These books are not in the Catholic canon, and Catholics don’t have any easier time explaining this Enoch quote than we do.

Other things to know:

- There are significant historical inaccuracies in the apocryphal books (Wegner 125, for a chart of examples).
- The apocryphal books authoritatively cite the Hebrew Scriptures 19 times (by the count of Dempster, 347) but never authoritatively cite each other.
- The Roman Catholic Church – including popes – didn’t always agree on the Apocrypha. (White, 114-115)

Josephus and the Hebrew Scriptures

One of the most historically credible statements about the Old Testament canon was made by Josephus in the A.D. 90s:

“Among us there are not thousands of books in disagreement and conflict with each other, but only twenty-two books, containing the record of all time, which are rightly trusted. Five of these are the books of Moses the prophets ... in thirteen books ... the remaining four books contain hymns to God and instruction for people on life. Although such a long time has now passed, no-one has dared to add, to take away, or to alter anything; and it is innate in every Judean right from birth, to regard them as decrees of God, to remain faithful to them and, if necessary, to die on their behalf.” (quoted in Dempster, 330)

As noted earlier, the historical evidence strongly indicates that the twenty-two book Hebrew canon was identical to our thirty-nine book canon today. Note that by the time of Josephus in the A.D. 90s, “a long time [had] now passed” since the last Hebrew Scriptures, and “no-one [had] dared to add” to them.

Was Josephus unaware that there had been many other important Jewish writings in more recent times? Certainly not, for in the same context he wrote:

“From Artaxerxes [400s B.C.] up to our own time every event has been recorded, but this is not judged worthy of the same trust, since the exact line of succession of the prophets did not continue.” (quoted in Dempster, 330)

Though Josephus knew of important recent Jewish writings, he knew that the Jewish people did not consider these to have the same scriptural authority as those written during the “succession of the prophets.” When the “succession of the prophets” ended, Josephus (and his fellow Jews) believed that the trustworthy Scriptures also ended. While it might sound unusual to refer to a “line of succession of the prophets,” there is actually significant Old Testament support for this idea (1 Chronicles 29:29, 2 Chron. 9:29, 12:15, 13:22, 20:34, 32:32, 33:18-19, Jeremiah 25:11-12 with Daniel 9:2, Jeremiah 26:18, etc.).

It is important to note that Josephus was not a lone voice giving his opinion, but was writing this very publicly on behalf of his own Jewish people. It is very unlikely that he was so publicly misrepresenting their view of their own Scriptures, and scholars continue to confirm the historical credibility of his statements (for example, “The Old Testament Canon, Josephus, and Cognitive Environment” by Stephen G. Dempster, in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, D.A. Carson, editor, 321-361).

Kaiser adds an important additional point:

“What makes this testimony from Josephus even more credible is the fact that Josephus noted in his autobiography that when the Roman General Titus conquered Jerusalem in A.D. 70 ... he gave the sacred scrolls of the temple to Josephus. Therefore, Josephus was in an excellent position to know just what books were part of that collection.” (Kaiser, 36)

Again, it may sound unusual to us to refer to a collection of canonical books in the temple, but there is actual some Old Testament evidence to support this idea of an official temple collection of the Hebrew Scriptures (Ex. 25:16, Deut. 10:2, Deut. 13:26, Josh. 24:26, Deut. 17:18, 2 Kings 22:8). It is also fascinating that 2 Maccabees records that Judas Maccabeus gathered the sacred writings at the newly-cleansed temple, and that he did this “in like manner” to what Nehemiah had done centuries earlier (2 Maccabees 2:13-14). So it is quite possible that the Hebrew Scriptures were completed when Nehemiah gathered them together into the newly rebuilt temple of his day, which was also the time when the “succession of prophets” came to an end. This temple (the one built during the time of Nehemiah and cleansed during the time of Judas Maccabeus) was the *same temple* that was destroyed by Titus in A.D. 70 when Josephus was given the “sacred scrolls of the temple.” So it is possible that Josephus was accurately describing the Hebrew canon that had existed all the way back to the time of Nehemiah (which is also the time when Chronicles, which seems to summarize the entire Hebrew canon, concludes).