

What about the Apocryphal Books?

By Martin Pickup

Many people are aware of the fact that a Catholic Bible contains some extra books that are not found in most other Bibles. The Old Testament portion of a Catholic Bible includes some additional books that are called *the Apocrypha*. Are these additional books inspired of God? Should they be granted a place in a Christian's canon?

The term *apocrypha* literally means "hidden books." Centuries ago the term was used to refer to writings deemed to be esoteric and appropriate reading only for mature believers rather than for the masses. Later, the term came to designate certain writings that some early Christians regarded as part of the Old Testament Scriptures. These works were *Tobit, The Letter of Jeremiah, Judith, 1 & 2 Esdras, Additions to Esther, Sirach, Baruch, Additions to Daniel, The Prayer of Manasseh, 1 & 2 Maccabees, and The Wisdom of Solomon*. All of these apocryphal works were composed between 200 – 30 BC, hundreds of years after the time when the 39 books of the Old Testament were completed.

Some Christians in the early centuries did believe that some of the Apocrypha were inspired. In 1546 the Roman Catholic Church officially gave to most of the Apocryphal books a *deutero-canonical* status (which effectively signified a secondary level of canonicity), and included them thereafter in all Catholic Bibles. *1 & 2 Esdras* and the *Prayer of Manasseh* were the exceptions; the Council of Trent denied these three works any degree of canonicity. Protestants have historically disavowed the inspiration and canonicity of the entire Apocrypha, though up until about 1825 Protestant Bibles still commonly included the

Apocrypha in a special section. Today, the New Revised Standard Version and some other English translations include the Apocrypha just after the 39 Old Testament books.

Are the Apocrypha Inspired?

Should the Apocryphal books be regarded as part of the Old Testament canon and therefore God's inspired word? No, because Jesus did not regard them as such. Jesus affirmed the inspiration of the Jewish Scriptures, and the Jewish canon never included the Apocrypha. The writings of Josephus and Philo, as well as the entirety of the Rabbinic Literature all indicate that the ancient Jewish canon comprised the same writings that we know today as the 39 books of the Old Testament. Even *2 Esdras* itself affirms this fact. It distinguishes the truly inspired writings of the Jewish canon from later, uninspired literature (*2 Esdras* 14:44ff).

It is true that a few of the Apocrypha are included in the earliest extant manuscripts of the Septuagint, but that fact doesn't indicate that the people producing these manuscripts necessarily thought of the Apocrypha as part of Scripture too. It only proves that they deemed them of value. Furthermore, these manuscripts come from the fourth century AD and were transmitted by Christians. That does not prove that Jews during the time of Jesus had included them in their Septuagint, much less that they regarded them as canonical.

Some people have argued, however, that the Jews of Alexandria had a larger canon than the Jews of Palestine and that the canon of Alexandria contained the Apocrypha. There is no solid evidence to back up this assertion, and a host of evidence arguing against it. No early manuscript of the Septuagint contains all of the Apocrypha; only *Tobit*, *Judith*, *Sirach*, and *The Wisdom of Solomon* are found in all of the earliest manuscripts of the Septuagint. Philo, an Alexandrian Jew himself, wrote numerous commentaries on the Jewish Scriptures throughout his life, yet he never once cited any of the Apocryphal books as Scripture. Nor is there indication in any ancient sources that a controversy existed between Alexandrian and Palestinian Jews over the content of the Jewish canon. Even if, for the sake of argument, we granted the possible existence of a broader canon in Alexandria than elsewhere, the Apocrypha were certainly not part of the Palestinian Scriptures that Jesus used and affirmed.

Yet even for the sake of argument there is no reason to grant the existence of a canon controversy among ancient Jews. The Jewish historian Josephus, about AD 90, had this to say about the makeup of the Jewish Scriptures:

Nothing can be better attested than the writings authorized among us. In fact, they could not be subject to any discord, for only that which the prophets wrote ages ago is approved among us, as they were taught by the very inspiration of God.

Josephus then speaks in detail about the documents that comprised the Jewish Scriptures, referencing all of the Old Testament books familiar to us today. He then goes on to say the following:

It is true, our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former of our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time. And how firmly we have given credit to these books of our own nation is evident

by what we do; for during so many ages as have already past, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or to make any change in them. (*Against Apion* I. 8)

It is evident from the above words that Josephus was well aware of the Apocryphal writings, but he knew that they were not part of the Jewish canon. Clearly, the Jews of Jesus' day did not include any of the Apocrypha among their inspired, holy Scriptures. It is certainly significant that while Jesus and the New Testament writers quote extensively from most of the Old Testament books, they never once quote any of the Apocryphal books.

A Proper Assessment of These Books

The Apocrypha are not without value. Some of them (most notably *1 & 2 Maccabees*) provide us with important historical information about events in the lives of Jews of the last few centuries before the time of Christ. Other books of the Apocrypha record motivational stories of Jewish faith in God (e.g., *Tobit* and *Judith*). *Sirach* and the *Wisdom of Solomon* advocate some very good practical lessons about wise daily living. When one reads the Apocrypha, it becomes quite understandable why they enjoyed a measure of popularity among Jewish and early Christian audiences.

But we must realize that the Apocrypha are human compositions and nothing more. There is no grounds for thinking that any of them were part of the Jewish Scriptures that Jesus affirmed as the inspired word of God.