

Why We Reject the Apocrypha



January 2, 2007

Faith Pulpit

Faith Baptist Theological Seminary

Ankeny, Iowa

January—February 2007

Why We Reject the Apocrypha

Myron J. Houghton, Ph.D., Th.D.

The subject of the Apocrypha can be difficult and detailed, but this article should simplify matters. If you want to explore this subject in greater detail, you should read a chapter entitled, “The Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha” in the book *A General Introduction to the Bible* by Norman Geisler and William Nix, published by Moody Press. Unless otherwise noted, the facts and arguments used in this article are taken from this source.

What Books Belong in the Old Testament?

The word canon means “ruler” or “standard” by which something is judged. In this context it refers to the books that belong in the Bible. Notice that Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant versions of the Bible have the exact same books in the New Testament. There is complete agreement on this. The disagreement comes over how many books there are in the Old Testament. Protestant versions of the Bible contain 39 Old Testament books, while Roman Catholic versions contain 7 more books plus some additions to the books of Daniel and Esther. Eastern Orthodoxy accepts all of these plus 3 extra books! If you want to look at these books, find a copy of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible that contains the Apocrypha, and the table of contents will separate the books according to those that are accepted by the Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox religions. The word apocrypha means “hidden.” Sometimes these books are called “deuterocanonical,” which means “belonging to a second canon.”

How Did the Apocryphal Books Become Part of Some Bibles?

Actually no one knows for sure how the apocryphal books came to be part of some copies of the Old Testament. Many, however, think that the extra books were added when the Old Testament (originally written in Hebrew) was translated into Greek. This Greek translation of the Old Testament is called the Septuagint and was produced by Jewish scholars in Alexandria, Egypt about 250 B.C. This theory is based on the fact that the earliest copy of the Septuagint available today contains these extra books, while none of the Hebrew Scriptures contain them. These books, along with the rest of the Bible, were translated by Jerome into Latin around A.D. 400, but Jerome himself did not think they belonged in the Old Testament.

Why Don't We Accept the Apocryphal Books?

(1) Even though the Septuagint existed in New Testament times and was available to the New Testament writers (the Book of Hebrews quotes from the Septuagint), there are no direct quotations from the Apocrypha in the New Testament nor does the New Testament refer to any apocryphal books as part of Scripture. (2) No general church council in the first four centuries of Christian history endorsed apocryphal books. While some early Christians thought highly of these books, others, such as Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Origen and Jerome opposed them. (3) While Augustine accepted the Apocrypha, his list is not exactly the same as that found in Catholic Bibles [for example, he omitted Baruch, which is in the Catholic Bible, and he included 1 Esdras, which is not in the Catholic Bible]. Furthermore, Augustine seems to have changed his mind from accepting the Septuagint as authoritative to later recognizing that only the Hebrew Scriptures were inspired. (4) Even the Roman Catholic Church did not officially recognize the Apocrypha as belonging in the Bible until the Council of Trent in A.D. 1546—Catholicism's response to the Reformation. (5) The Apocrypha appeared in Protestant Bibles even before the Council of Trent and on into the nineteenth century but were placed in a section separate from the Old and New Testaments. (6) Some teachings found in the Apocrypha appear to be unbiblical and even heretical, such as praying for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:45–46) and salvation by works (Tobit 12:9). The New Testament teaches that after death comes the judgment (Hebrews 9:27) and that salvation is by grace and not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9); (7) Some stories in the Apocrypha seem fanciful or even unethical (for example, Judith asks God to help her in a falsehood, Judith 9:10-13).

What Difference Does It Make?

I do not accept the Apocrypha as part of the inspired Word of God. The first five reasons given in the previous paragraph provide good historical reasons for rejecting the Apocrypha as part of Holy Scripture: these books were not quoted directly by New Testament writers, and no general church council endorsed them until A.D. 1546. Nevertheless, I do not think one is required to see false doctrine in these books. It is really a matter of how one interprets these passages. For example, does 2 Maccabees 12:45–46 teach prayer for the dead? Certainly not as a regular habit. Judas Maccabeus and his Jewish soldiers discovered that some of their comrades had died in battle because they had taken from their slain enemies what was forbidden to them. They had an animal sacrifice offered on behalf of their dead fellow-soldiers and prayed that God would not hold this sin against them. They did this because of their belief in a future resurrection. It is their belief in the resurrection that is commended in this passage. It is possible to interpret this passage in a manner similar to the way we interpret Job 19:25, where Job looks forward to a future vindication in the resurrection.

Does Tobit 12:9 Teach Salvation by Works?

It says, "For almsgiving saves one from death and expiates [removes] every sin." Before we make a final decision on this passage in Tobit, we should look at similar words and ask if they teach that salvation is by good works: "The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation." These are the

words of the Lord Jesus, found in John 5:28-29! I do not believe that they teach that salvation comes by works, but I can understand why someone might think so. In light of verse 24 (“He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life”), I interpret these words of Jesus to mean that good works demonstrate whether or not a person really is trusting in God the Father and Jesus Christ for salvation. Could not the words in Tobit be understood similarly?

Finally, that Judith asks God to help her in a falsehood (Judith 9:10–13) is supposed to prove that the teaching of this book is unethical. But are there not stories in Bible books that seem to promote the same thing? Rahab the harlot lied in order to protect the Jewish spies (Joshua 2:3–7). She was commended not for lying but for her faith (Hebrews 11:31). By the same token, neither is Judith commended for her falsehood.

Conclusion

Don't allow someone to whom you are witnessing to make the Apocrypha a reason for not accepting the gospel from your Bible. If you are using the New Testament, you have the exact same books found in every Bible version, whether Protestant, Orthodox or Catholic. The Apocrypha does not teach that we can pray people out of purgatory, nor does it have to be interpreted to teach salvation by works or to promote lying. There are good reasons for rejecting the Apocrypha as part of Holy Scripture, but those reasons are historical and not doctrinal.