

## THE BIBLE

### ARE THE APOCRYPHAL BOOKS TO BE RECEIVED AS INSPIRED?

#### INTRODUCTION:

The canon of the Holy Scriptures is settled, but the question of the canon has been decided differently in the general parts of Christendom. Catholicism and Protestantism are united in their acceptance of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, but concerning the books of the Old Testament there is disagreement. When you look at a copy of the Catholic Bible, like the Douay translation, you will see that there are several additional books included in the Old Testament section that are not found in other translations. These extra books are generally known as the *apocrypha*. The word *apocrypha* is a Greek neuter plural from the word *apokryphon*, and it means things that ought to be kept secret and hidden away. However, for the Roman Catholic Church these books are an integral part of the Bible and are regarded as sacred and profitable.

Many who are acquainted only with modern Protestant Bibles do not realize that there is or ever has been a legitimate questions such as, “**Which books belong in the Bible?**” However, those better acquainted with the history of the Bible know that this has been a vital and hotly debated topic. A proper study of this problem really demands a careful study of each book that lays claim to being in the Bible and determines the solution on the merits of each book. But, that is beyond the possibility of this study. Therefore, this lesson will only call attention to the major points and present an overall view in dealing with the question, “**Which books belong in the Bible?**”

#### I.

#### APOCRYPHAL BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament Apocrypha include either fourteen or fifteen books, depending on the method of counting, which were written in the period of 200 B.C. to 100 A.D. Thomas Nelson and Sons have put out the most convenient and readable edition of the apocrypha in a special edition of the Revised Standard Version (1957). The titles and order of books in this edition are as follows:

1. The First Book of Esdras (also known as Third Esdras)
2. The Second Book of Esdras (also known as Fourth Esdras)
3. Tobit
4. Judith
5. The Additions to the Book of Esther
6. The Wisdom of Solomon
7. Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach
8. Baruch
9. The Letter of Jeremiah (This letter is sometimes incorporated as the last chapter of Baruch. When this is done the number of books is fourteen instead of fifteen.)
10. The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men
11. Susanna
12. Bel and the Dragon

13. The Prayer of Manasseh
14. The First Book of Maccabees
15. The Second Book of Maccabees

Three of these fifteen books (I and II Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh) are not considered canonical by the Roman Catholic Church. In Catholic Bibles the remaining twelve are interspersed among and attached to the undisputed thirty-nine books of the Old Testament: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch with the letter of Jeremiah, and I and II Maccabees which are arranged separately; the Additions to Esther are joined to Esther; and appended to the book of Daniel are the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men (added after Dan. 3:23), and Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon. (I and II Esdras of the Catholic Bible are not the same as the I and II Esdras in the above list, but are different designations for our books Ezra and Nehemiah.) Since several of the *apocryphal* writings are combined with canonical books, the Catholic Bible numbers altogether forty-six books in the Old Testament. Non-Catholic editions of the English Bible since 1535, including early editions of the familiar King James Version, separate these *apocryphal* books from the canonical Old Testament.

## II.

### THE CHARACTER OF THESE WRITINGS

1. **HISTORICAL.** I Esdras is an ill-arranged collection of much of the material found in the canonical Ezra (Esdras is a Greek form for Ezra), and includes worthless and legendary accounts that are not supported by the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and II Chronicles. It is also known as the “Greek Ezra” in contrast to the “Hebrew Ezra” (the Canonical Ezra). I Maccabees is an important source of information on Jewish history during the second century B.C. The book derives its name from Maccabeus, the surname of the Judas who led the Jews in revolt against Syrian oppression. It was written probably during the early part of the first century B.C. II Maccabees concerns the same general period, but is not as historically reliable as I Maccabees.
2. **LEGENDARY.** The Book of Tobit was written about 200 B.C. It tells the story of a religious Israelite named Tobit who was carried as a captive to Nineveh by the Assyrians. Its purpose is to encourage the keeping of the Law, yet the fictitious character of its tales detracts from its usefulness. The book of Judith is likewise to be classified as fiction. Judith is the name of a Jewish widow who successfully charms and kills the leader of an enemy army, thus delivering her city and people from impending destruction. This story of heroism was most likely composed during the time of the Maccabean revolt in order to incite courage and patriotism against the Syrian foe.

The Additions to Esther are expansions of the canonical Esther, which were probably handed down through the centuries by oral traditions. The Additions to Daniel contain folk-tales and legends that could not have originated much earlier than 100 B.C. and form no part of the genuine text of Daniel.

3. **PROPHETIC.** Baruch purports to come from the hand of Jeremiah’s friend of that name. The contents of the book not only make this claim impossible, but also help to fix the real date of composition at some point after 70 A.D. The letter of Jeremiah, which for no good reason is often appended to Baruch, is a brief notation on the

vanities of idolatry. The Prayer of Manasseh, written perhaps in the second century B.C., is a prayer put in the mouth of King Manasseh after he was taken captive to Babylon. II Esdras is a collection of materials written at different times (from c. 100 B.C. to c. 200 A.D.). It is of such inferior quality that it is unquestionably non-canonical.

4. **ETHICAL.** Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, is one of the chief works of the Apocrypha. A Palestinian Jew wrote it about 200 B.C. in a style similar to the wise sayings of the Book of Proverbs. The Wisdom of Solomon is a book of ancient Jewish philosophy. It is evidently to be traced back to the city of Alexandria and to the first century A.D.

### III. WHY THESE BOOKS HAVE BEEN REJECTED

A brief survey of these books has indicated something of what they are like. Some of the books of the Apocrypha, such as I Maccabees and Ecclesiasticus, are worthwhile. The question, however, concerns not their usefulness but their place in relation to the authoritative Scriptures. Should they be received as “Scripture” or rejected? And if they are to be rejected, on what grounds? Are there really good reasons why they should not be accepted as divinely authoritative?

There are many valid reasons why the *Apocrypha* cannot bear acceptance as “Holy Scripture.”

1. These books were never included in the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament. Josephus expressly limited the Hebrew canon to twenty-two books, which are the exact equivalent of the thirty-nine books of our Old Testament. Josephus knew of other Jewish writings down to his time, but he did not regard them as having equal authority with the canonical works. (*Josephus, Against Apion I. 8.*) So the *Apocrypha* were never received by the Jews as God-given Scripture. This takes on its full significance when it is remembered that the Old Testament is a Jewish collection of Jewish history and law – and there is no evidence that these books were ever accepted by any Jewish community, either in or outside of the land of Palestine.
2. Jesus and His apostles, as far as the evidence goes, never accepted these books, as canonical. We have already learned that the Old Testament that Jesus knew is our Old Testament today. Jesus’ Old Testament was the Hebrew Old Testament, and the Hebrew Old Testament has never included these *apocryphal* writings. The apostles in their preaching mention many Old Testament events, but they never refer to any incidents or characters of the *Apocrypha*. The New Testament writers quote from practically all of the Old Testament books, but nowhere quote from the Apocrypha as “Scripture.” The canon of the Old Testament accepted by Jesus and His apostles should be sufficient for the Christian today.
3. These books were not accepted as Scripture by such Jewish writers of the first century as Philo and Josephus; the Jewish council at Jamnia (ca. 90 A.D.); and by such eminent Christian writers as Origen and Jerome. About 400 A.D. the great Christian scholar Jerome, whose translation of the Latin Vulgate remains the basis of the

Roman Catholic Bible, strongly maintained that these books were “*apocryphal*” and were not to be included in the canon of Scripture.

4. These books do not give evidence of intrinsic qualities of inspiration. Great portions of these books are obviously legendary and fictitious. Often they contain historical, chronological and geographical errors. In Judith, for example, Holofernes is described as being the general of “Nebuchadnezzar who ruled over the Assyrians in the great city of Nineveh” (1:1). Actually Holofernes was a Persian general, and, of course, Nebuchadnezzar was king of the Babylonians in Babylon. Some of these books contradict themselves and contradict the canonical Scriptures. It is said in Baruch that God hears the prayers of the dead (3:4).
5. These books have been shrouded with continual uncertainty. Since they were not regarded as authoritative by the Jews, they had to gain their recognition elsewhere. This recognition came from some segments of the Greek-speaking church, with the result that eventually these books became incorporated into the Greek and Latin Bibles. But there is no evidence that the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) ever had a fixed or closed canon of books. No two early Greek manuscripts agree as to which books are to be included in the Septuagint, and not all of those included in the Septuagint are accepted even by the Roman Catholic Church. The Septuagint itself is a witness against one book of the *Apocrypha* (II Esdras) since it is found in no manuscript of the Septuagint.
6. These books cannot be maintained on a compromise basis. The Church of England gives to the *Apocrypha* a semi-canonical status: they may be read in public worship “*for example of life and instruction of manners*” but not in order “*to establish any doctrine.*” This position assumes that the *Apocrypha* at times may add to or conflict with the established teachings of the canonical Scriptures. If this is true, then the *Apocrypha* should not be read in public worship, for what is read regularly in public worship tends to be authoritative for the congregation. To allow the *Apocrypha* to be read in public worship is a strange way to show their inferior rank.
7. Objections to these books cannot be overturned by dictatorial authority. On April 8, 1546, in the Fourth Session of the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church pronounced the Old Testament *Apocrypha* (except I and II Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh) as authoritative and canonical Scripture. This was done even though in different periods of its own history officials of the Roman Church had been outspoken against the ***Apocrypha as Scripture***. But this action was not unnatural for a religious body whose whole structure is framed according to traditions and whose faith is derived equally as much from the “fathers” and “popes” as from Scriptures. It appears that the *Apocrypha* would never have posed a serious problem were it not for the usurped power of Rome over Scripture. Yet Rome with all of its “infallibility” cannot make the **fallible *Apocrypha* infallible**.

#### IV. CRITERIA FOR DETERMINING WHICH BOOKS BELONG IN THE BIBLE

Recognizing that there is a problem and a legitimate question as to which books belong in the Bible, what criteria are to be used to test the various books that are under consideration? The

ultimate test or question is, “**Is the book inspired by God?**” This automatically raises the question, “**What is meant by inspiration?**” While there are various definitions of inspiration, depending on the degree of authority one recognizes in the Bible, yet to Christians who hold that the Bible is the sole, absolute authority for the Christian’s life and conduct, the proper definition of inspiration must include the following:

1. Since God is perfect and infallible, an inspired book is absolutely infallible and errorless in its facts and doctrines in the original manuscript.
2. Since God is holy and pure, an inspired book must present only holy and pure doctrines.
3. Since God is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent, then an inspired book should reflect these characteristics in such ways as prophecy which is fulfilled, accurate statements with regard to geography, astronomy, science, math, psychology and all areas of knowledge to the extent that it makes reference to these. If God is the creator of the world and man, he could not make an inaccurate statement about them. A book that does is not inspired.
4. Since God is absolute truth, one inspired book cannot contradict another.
5. Since God is just and fair, an inspired book must be impartial, without prejudice toward anyone.

These are the minimum criteria for an inspired book. Someone may argue, “you define inspiration by defining God, but you cannot know God’s characteristics apart from revelation.” While this may in part be true, if God is not at least all the above things, it would be impossible to serve Him. If God were unholy, impure, unfair and a liar, we certainly could not trust Him even if we obeyed Him.

Another important criteria for determining which books belong in the Bible is the will to believe. Jesus said in John 17:17, “***If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from myself.***” Thus, faith and unbelief are largely a matter of attitude. In a discussion of this point it is necessary to answer a frequent question, “*Why did God allow such an important question regarding which books belong in the Bible to be a matter of debate?*”

The answer, I believe, lies in the biblical doctrine of the free moral agency of man. Since Adam and Eve, man has had the freedom to accept or reject God’s word. Moses was God’s appointed leader, and was inspired by God to speak for Him. Yet, Korah, Dathan, Abiram (Numbers 16) and, at times, all the children of Israel challenged the canonicity of the word which he spoke and the laws which he gave. In the days of Ahab, Micaiah (2 Kings 22) spoke the words of the Lord. What he spoke was truth inspired by God and thus canonical. But Ahab and 400 prophets rejected its authority. Jeremiah spoke the words of the Lord and even wrote them in a book but the princes of Judah rejected their canonicity and even King Jehoiakim took Jeremiah’s canonical book inspired of God, cut it up and threw it into the fire with contempt (Jeremiah 36). Finally, the apostle Paul spoke the inspired words of God and yet his words were rejected and his authority was questioned and controverted by some at Corinth, Galatia, and other places (2 Corinthians 10-12).

Certainly, if men could so reject the direct words of God and treat shamefully the inspired persons speaking for God, then people of a later generation indeed may be expected to reject the words of God in written form and treat shamefully the books of his spokesmen. If people in ancient times could reject in person the true spokesmen of God such as Jeremiah and Paul and could substitute in their place false prophets and false teachers, then certainly men today will reject the true books of God and accept false books as authoritative.

God's word self-authenticates itself as is indicated in Deuteronomy 13:1-18; 18:9-22; Jeremiah 28:9, 17. In the same way that God's people of old could distinguish between sorcerers, false prophets and God's true prophets, we can distinguish between inspired books and books of men. However, we must want with all our heart to do God's will.

Apparently this is what Acts means in 13:46-52 and 16:14. The Jews at Antioch of Pisidia thrust God's word from them while the Gentiles had a will to believe. Lydia wanted to do God's word and thus her attitude of heart caused God's word to self-authenticate itself to her. It is senseless to have the will of skepticism. Only the will to believe has hope.

Of course, God has not left us without objective evidence. He just has not made this objective evidence so overwhelming that a rebel against God or a false teacher cannot possibly find support to justify his own delusions.

## V.

### EVIDENCE FOR THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

As in the case of the Old Testament, the canonicity of a New Testament book is not determined by the acceptance or rejection of that book by men. Its canonicity is determined by its inspiration of God and God's overruling providence to authenticate it to those who will to do His will. Marcion rejected all the books except Luke and ten of Paul's epistles. This, however, did not nullify the inspiration of the others because in his self-delusion he refused to accept God's word.

A few others rejected or questioned the recognition of some books like James, Jude, First and Second Peter, etc. On the other hand, a few contended that I Clement, Barnabas, and Shepherd of Hermas, should be accepted. However, the vast majority of sincere Christians were led to accept as the word of God the present twenty-seven books of the New Testament.

The earliest Christians had no need to list the inspired books. They knew them because they knew the writers. However, gradually sects began to develop in the church and heretics began to lead astray the elect. Luke may have written his gospel due to the circulation of heretical versions (Luke 1:1-4). At any rate, after the work of Marcion and other heretics, some Christian leaders felt it necessary to discuss the question of which books were authoritative and some gave forth lists. However, none of these could be considered binding. The lists only served as recommendations. Furthermore, neither was the authority of a New Testament book settled by a church council.

H. C. Thiessen has made a careful study of these early discussions and lists and has written an excellent summary of them in his *Introduction to the New Testament*. His conclusion is most interesting:

“It is a remarkable fact that no early church council selected the books that should constitute the New Testament Canon. The books that we now have crushed out all rivals, not by any adventitious authority, but by their own weight and worth. This is in itself a strong proof of the genuineness and authenticity of the books that have survived.”

After making a study of the Apocryphal New Testament books Metzger concludes by quoting M. R. James:

“The most cogent proof that these books are intrinsically on a different plane from the books of the New Testament is afforded merely by reading them side by side with the books of the New Testament and allowing each to make its own impression. Then, in the words of M. R. James, ‘it will very quickly be seen that there is no question of anyone’s having excluded them from the New Testament: they have done that for themselves.’” (Bruce M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha*, pp. 262, 263).

We believe that God’s divine providence has provided ample internal and external evidences to prove that the sixty-six books of our Bible are inspired by Him. If we will do His will, He will help us to know His teaching.

### Questions

**1. What is the basic meaning of the word apocryphal? How is it generally used?**

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**2. How many Apocryphal books are there?**

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**3. How does the Douay translation differ from the translations recognized by the Protestant world?**

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**4. Which books are not considered canonical by the Roman Catholic Church?**

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**5. Since some of the apocryphal books are combined with those canonical, how many books are there in the Catholic Bible?**

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**6. Why have these books been rejected?**

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**7. What are the criteria for determining which books belong in the Bible?**

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**8. Why should we not be surprised at people rejecting the written word?**

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