

Why We Reject The Apocrypha

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A one-volume commentary has recently been issued entitled *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture, Including the Apocrypha*. This, in effect, puts the Apocrypha on the same level with the books of the Old and New Testaments of the ordinary Protestant Bible. This tendency to level the Bible and the Apocrypha has again and again manifested itself in the history of the Christian religion. Two forces are at work which aim at so levelling them. On the one hand Sacerdotalism, finding some of its favourite doctrines supported in the Apocryphal books, has sought from time to time to raise them to the same authority as Holy Scripture, as was deliberately attempted to be done by a decree of the Council of Trent in the year 1546. On the other hand, Modernism brings down the religious records of the Old and New Testaments to the level of ordinary human writings, and so to the level of the Apocrypha. In accordance with these tendencies it is not surprising that the *New Commentary on the Bible* described as, *Including the Apocrypha*, contains both Sacerdotal and Modernist elements. However, Churches of all ages, and Protestantism in particular, have rejected the Books of the Apocrypha as not inspired, and as on a different level altogether from those of the Old and New Testaments.

The evidence for this can conveniently be grouped under two headings: (1) The history of the Books; and (2) their contents.

The term "Apocrypha" is applied to a number of books that have come down to us in close connection with the canonical books of the Bible. They are such as:

I. Historical—

1 Macc. 2 Macc. 1 Esdras.

II. Reflective—

Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus.

III. Legendary—

Tobit, Judith, Rest of Esther, Song of the Three Children, the Story of Bel and the Dragon.

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IV. The Prophetic type —

Baruch.

V. Apocalyptic Works—

2 Esdras, etc., etc.

These are books which came into existence, roughly speaking, between the time of the Prophet Malachi and the earliest Christian era.

I

The historical reasons for holding that these Apocryphal writings are not part of the inspired Scriptures, and for regarding them as merely human productions, are as follows:

The very name of the collection, viz. "Apocrypha," whether the term signifies: secret, false, doubtful, uncanonical, or deuterocanonical (a matter which has been much discussed) is the first piece of evidence; for such a name is in any case a record of the doubt originally raised, long continued, and evidently become permanent, as to their authenticity as compared with Holy Scripture. The fact is that the name ultimately attached itself to these Apocryphal books in the sense now used, because they are writings which, though they claimed, and were framed and manipulated with a view to, admission into the Hebrew Bible, were deliberately kept out of it by the Hebrew Church in Palestine. The Jews in Egypt and surrounding Greek-speaking districts, indeed, included these books in their translation of the Hebrew Bible, yet there is no conclusive evidence that they regarded the books they so included as of equal authority with the others. Incredibly long discussions have taken place on the principles that governed the Palestinian Jews in forming the Hebrew Canon, but though it is impossible to go into this matter fully here, this finally emerges: that the real sanction for the Old Testament canonical books lay on the part of the Jews then and later, as it has done in Christendom, in the witness borne to their inspiration by the experience of devout minds whose spiritual insight discerned their unique value for the nourishment of religious life and fellowship with God.

It was thus that the Canonical Books were gradually gathered and confirmed into a collection of inspired writings which justified the title of "The Oracles of God." The question whether the Apocrypha should be included in that collection became, as the centuries passed, more and more a matter of dispute. In

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Alexandria these books were indeed read in public, but even there the Jewish community, as such, did not attach to them canonical authority. As a parallel, it is instructive, that, the formation of the New Testament similarly brought into evidence an Apocrypha consisting of even a larger number of books of New Testament times, but the clearer spiritual light of those times rejected them absolutely, and though numbers of these books still exist, no attempt has ever been made to print them side by side with the New Testament.

The books of the Apocrypha of the Old Testament should have been dealt with similarly. It has often been said that from the last Book in the New Testament Canon to any other book of the same period left outside that Canon, there is a step consciously downwards. Less strongly, perhaps, this is also true of the Canon of the Old Testament to the best book in the Apocrypha. The word "Apocrypha" is found at the end of the second century applied to these books partly from the unsound character of the books, and partly from the Church's condemnation of their writers. These books seem to have gradually lost any idea of sacredness attached to them in earlier times, and to have become embodied in a collection which remained altogether outside the Hebrew Bible, though more often than not found in copies of the Septuagint and Vulgate. Small causes often produce great results, and it is possibly due to the fact that many of the readers of the Septuagint, perhaps the bulk, knowing Greek only, and being wholly unacquainted with the Hebrew Bible, came, by constant use of the Septuagint,

to take the Apocrypha as a matter of course and retained the use of those books more from custom than conviction.

In connection with the Reformation, it was Carlstadt who, in 1520, embodied the generally decided attitude of reformers against the Apocrypha as Scripture, and so emphasised and stereotyped their non-canonicity in history. It is significant that a revival or wave of spiritual life similar to that which brought about the Reformation, generally emphasised the opposition attitude. Thus in earlier times, Basil, for instance, had told his monks "to read the Canonical Books but not to meddle with the Apocrypha." The 1662 Book of Common Prayer enjoins that the Apocrypha, or rather parts of it, are to be read in public, but not as "Scripture authoritative in matters of faith," but "for example of life and instruction of manners."

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Our Lord and His Apostles quoted literally from the Old Testament as canonical Scripture, but only reminiscences or parallels from the Apocrypha are found in any part of the New Testament. Apostolic Fathers made use of passages from the Apocrypha, but though they make use of them, do not quote them as Scripture. Galeatus, having enumerated the canonical books, says: "Whatever is beside these is to be placed in the Apocrypha and is to be read only for edification, not to establish the authority of ecclesiastical doctrines." Josephus rejects the Apocrypha; Philo never refers to it.

II

Then there is next the internal evidence for the rejection of the Apocrypha. It is especially at the present day that the Apocrypha is judged not so much by an appeal to authority as by the general character of the writings themselves. This is, as we have seen, practically the same course that was taken by the Jews of old. For instance, the Jewish legend that the tongue of prophecy was silent after the days of Malachi, and that thenceforth revelation was no longer vouchsafed to the people of Israel, practically represents the results of comparison between the Books of the Hebrew Canon and the Books of the Apocrypha. Nor could stronger confirmation be required for their rejection from the Hebrew Canon, for the views of Jerome in the Western Church, for the Athanasian view in the Eastern Church, and later for the unanimous decision (with minor differences) of the Reformed Churches, than is afforded by the investigation of the books themselves, their character and style, and their place in the literature of the Jewish nation! They prove, by contrast, that the books of the Hebrew Canon as a whole are generically distinct from the ordinary religious literature of the Jews, while it is evident that the books of the Apocrypha form an essential part of that literature. As a German critic puts it, the Books of the Apocrypha are mostly mere controversial writings, in a twofold direction. They advocate the interests of Judaism rather than those of true religion, being concerned with a difference with Heathendom outside, and with factions inside, Judaism. The difference of their contents from that of the revelation of true religion as contrasted with Judaism, contained in the New Testament, is noteworthy.

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A further survey of the Books of the Apocrypha makes evident the fact that they are really supplementary in character to the Books of the Old Testament. They bear names of authorship by notable men in Hebrew history, which are manifestly not matters of fact, and these names

are apparently, it might almost be said self-evidently, attached with a view to gaining for the books entry into the Canon. It is all the more significant that they did not gain such entry. They were rejected instead by the Palestinian Jews and by the larger proportion of the early Christian Church. The style of these books is for the most part very artificial; the inferiority of the imaginative writings also impresses itself. As compared with the canonical Scriptures there is a lack of inherent religious power. They do not make any such claims as are made by the canonical books. The son of Sirach (Prologue, ch. xxxix, 32), one of the best of these books, claims no higher pretension than that of wisdom and learning. Compare 1 Maccabees for their own confession of inferiority in prophetic gifts of the age after, as contrasted with the age before the Canon was closed. Not one of the writers claims the coming to him of the "Word of Jehovah." Moreover, in the Apocrypha there occur unscriptural fables, fictions and doctrinal errors. Compare Tobit vi. 1-8; Judith ix. 10; 2 Macc. ii; Bel and Dragon, etc. Alms are represented as having power to earn merit. Compare prayers for the dead in 2 Macc. xii. There is no sort of progressive plan or mutual interconnection between these books as there is between the Old and New Testament Books. Historical errors, inaccuracies, and evidently fictitious stories and speeches also occur. According to the Book of Wisdom man enters upon life free of any disposition to sin, that is, with his moral nature "tabula rasa." The judgment to be passed upon men is a judgment according to works pure and simple. These writings, in fact, reflect the age in which legalism had invaded every aspect of Jewish life. Exaggerated views of the position of the Jews are taken. At the same time it should be noted that the standard of morals of the books is not so high as that of the Old Testament. They are really books illustrating the condition of the Jewish people, their habits of thought, their literary taste and skill, their mental training, their historical judgment during the time of and approaching that of the Christian era. Herein consists the real value of the Apocrypha, but that value goes no further. The intrinsic merits of the books themselves bear no

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proportion to their value as literary productions of their time. It is a special sign of decay in honesty and discernment in writing, when, as is done in these books, writings are passed off and accepted as belonging to actual history which evidently do not. Errors and anachronisms can be traced. They really belong to a class of Jewish literature called the Haggada, in which historical, biblical, and allegorical types were employed to illustrate the text of the Canonical Scriptures. There is a want of creative power.

It has been said that though the fashion had been for a long period to ignore the Apocryphal books, yet in modern times they have been more studied as documents of great value "illustrating one very important stage in the religious history of the world." A German critic contends that they prove that Judaism was a great deal more receptive than was formerly assumed, but this is subject to the very great problem presented by the numerous phrases and passages and even longer insertions which appear to have been made after the composition of the books with a view to correction and conforming them to higher conceptions. It remains, of course, true that from the point of view stated, there is a value in these books. The Book of Wisdom rises to a strain among the loftiest of human productions and comes very near to aspects of truth which are paralleled in the New Testament (if critical words and passages are part of the original text); but though the branches, leaves, and blossoms are an important part of the development of fruit, yet they are essentially different from the fruit itself. No vendor would offer them for the same purpose as the fruit. Though the literature produced by the intervening period may form part of the development of religious truth, yet it remains as

essentially different from New Testament religious truth as the branches, leaves and blossoms of a fruit tree differ from the fruit. Any vendor exposing for sale the former with the latter as food would create great surprise. So a treatise entitled: "The value of fruit as food, including the branches, leaves and blossoms," would startle intelligence and experience. Likewise, the title: *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture, Including the Apocrypha*, affronts spiritual experience and insight.

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