

WHAT ABOUT THE APOCRYPHA?

If you grew up in the Roman Catholic Church, you may have heard references to Tobit, or Judith, or 2 Maccabees. Along with other works, they form a collection of books known as the Apocrypha. Included between the Old and New Testaments in Catholic Bibles, the Apocrypha contains wisdom literature, historical stories from Old Testament times, prophecy, and narratives that recount the history of the Jewish people in the intertestamental period (from the fourth century B.C. to the time of Christ). Catholics consider these books biblical. Protestants do not; in fact, their Bibles do not even contain these books.

Why do Protestant Christians consider these books non-biblical?

There are several reasons. First, these apocryphal writings were primarily produced in the intertestamental period, but Jews in Jesus' day never considered them biblical. There was general consensus that the writings were beneficial for historical purposes, but not authoritative in the same sense as the Old Testament.

One Jewish historian of that time said this, from Artaxerxes [a Persian king who ruled about the time that Old Testament history ends] to our own times a complete history has been written, but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records, because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets. (*Josephus, Against Apion 1.41*)

First, archaeologists have only found ancient copies of these apocryphal writings in Greek, which indicates they were never circulated as part of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament).

Second, neither Jesus nor the New Testament writers ever considered these books biblical. Almost every book of the Old Testament is quoted in the New Testament, yet not once is a passage from an apocryphal book quoted as authoritative teaching from God. In fact, no book of the Apocrypha is even mentioned in the New Testament.

Third, while on the whole these books are edifying, they do contain some historical errors and theological elements that are inconsistent with the rest of the Bible. A common example is 2 Maccabees 12:42-45, which teaches that prayers and atonement can be offered for the dead to be forgiven of their sin. This is in direct contradiction with much of the Bible that teaches that each person is accountable for his or her own sin and that only Jesus can make atonement for us.

Fourth, most early Christians did not consider these books to be biblical. When final decisions were being made about which books to include in the New Testament, apocryphal books were typically rejected. In A.D. 367, church leader Athanasius published a universal list of the biblical books. Referring to the Apocrypha, he wrote that they were "not indeed included in the Canon, but appointed by the Fathers to be read by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness." (*Paschal Letter 39*) In other words, these books can be beneficial to your faith, but they are not biblical.

How did the Roman Catholic Church come to regard these books as canonical (part of the Bible)?

Around this same time, Jerome, one of the early church fathers, translated the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts of the Bible into Latin. He also translated the apocryphal books and circulated them with the Bible, even though he made the distinction between “books of the canon” and “books of the church” (*canon* means those books recognized as biblical.) Eventually, this Latin version became the dominant text of the Bible and the Apocrypha gained equal status. Even some Catholic Church doctrines (such as Purgatory) depended heavily on passages in apocryphal books. In the sixteenth century, the reformers quickly recognized that these books were not God’s inspired Word and rejected them. In a backlash against the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church declared the Apocrypha as officially part of the canon for the first time, though they still use the label *deuterocanonical* meaning, “later or second added to the canon.”

Fundamental differences

This allows us to conclude with a fundamental difference between Catholics and Protestants and their understanding of the church, authority, and the Bible. Catholics believe that God has vested the church (as represented by papal leadership) with the ability to confer authority on literary works, establishing them as official teaching or Scripture. Thus they would say that the Bible gains its authority ultimately from God, but through and under the authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

On the other hand, Protestants believe that the church cannot confer authoritative status on anything. Rather the church, represented by all Christians, merely recognizes the works that God has already imbued with authority.

What can be learned?

First, there are very good reasons to reject the Apocrypha as part of the canon of Scripture.

Second, there are some theological problems with the Apocrypha, but on the whole, these books can be helpful for understanding the Jewish people of the intertestamental period.

Third, this discussion really strikes at the issue of authority. Roman Catholics and Protestants openly disagree about the nature of authority in general and the role of the Apocrypha specifically. Yet, they can find common ground on the biblical books they do agree on – the Old and New Testaments – and God’s grand story of creation and redemption found within.