



The Books between the Testaments: What Christians Should Know about the Apocrypha

SESSION 1

Why do some Bibles contain extra books? Why are they called different things by different religious groups? How do Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox differ in their understanding of the importance of these books?

Introduction

Have you ever noticed that some Bibles have the words “with Apocrypha” written on their spines? In the Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible, these words refer to nineteen books or parts of books placed after Malachi and before the Gospel of Matthew. How did these books come to be placed in the middle of the Bible, and what value, if any, do they have? If you examine *The New American Bible* used by Roman Catholics, you will find that this Bible has no such middle section. Why? How then do these Christians regard these books, and do they read them? These are some of the questions that we will consider in the first session before turning in the second session to study Tobit, which is one of the books in the Apocrypha.

What Do We Call These Writings?

Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians call some of the books that Protestants find between the Old and New Testaments the deutero-canon, or second canon. That is, they were not part of the first canon, or the authoritative list of books that compose the Old and New Testaments. Their Bibles intersperse them throughout the Old Testament. This designation



The process of determining which books belong in the Bible has been long and faithful.

means that even though Protestants have usually called these books the Apocrypha and gather them together between the Old and New Testaments, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians regard them as Scripture but acknowledge them as Scripture that was written later than the other books. Since still other books are called the New Testament Apocrypha, the term Old Testament Apocrypha is often preferred.

The word *apocrypha*, which means “hidden,” has implied to many Christians that these writings are “secret,” even though these writings have been quite accessible, never secret. This derogatory connotation

of the word *apocrypha* leads us to look for a different term. The books then might best be called “the books in the middle of the Bible,” but not because Protestant Christians have placed them between the Old and New Testaments. These books place us in the middle of some very key issues, such as what constitutes Scriptures and which Scriptures have authority for us. Must the content of these books match church doctrine in order for them to count as Scripture? Must the books be written in Hebrew to have authority as Scripture? Does placing the books in a middle section give them less authority? Do church councils determine which Scriptures have authority, or do the people who read the Scriptures determine this?

Before we consider how these books came to be placed in the middle of some Bibles rather than remaining dispersed as in other Bibles, let us distinguish this group still further from three groups of books. As mentioned, the Old Testament Apocrypha refers to a completely different set of books than those found in the New Testament Apocrypha. The New Testament Apocrypha consists of over seventy books, only three of which were ever seriously considered part of the Christian canon (that is, the authoritative list of biblical books): the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Acts of Paul*, and the *Gospel of Hebrews*. The books in this group, which has no set number since others have been added upon discovery (for example, the *Gospel of Judas*), were written to elaborate either on Jesus’ life or on some aspect of the apostles’ lives and ministry. The Old Testament Apocrypha must also be distinguished from the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947 and therefore were never a part of the Christian canon, which has not changed for centuries. They are manuscripts written from the third century BCE to ca. 68 CE that provide us the texts used by a Jewish apocalyptic community who retreated to the Qumran desert. The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha refers to about sixty-five documents, written from ca. 300 BCE to ca. 200 CE, that include hymns, apocalypses, and legends about biblical characters such as Enoch, Moses, and Isaiah. Written about the same time as the books of the Old Testament Apocrypha, these books nonetheless were never included in official lists of Scripture.

How did the Old Testament Apocrypha come to be placed in the middle of some Bibles? We must discuss the formation of the Septuagint to find the answer.

From Hebrew to Greek and Then to Latin

In the third century BCE, the Old Testament books began to be translated from Hebrew into Greek, so this translation, called the Septuagint, became the standard biblical text that Greek-speaking Jews used and the one quoted when the New Testament was written. Interspersed among the other books of the Old Testament, the Septuagint includes books later called apocryphal or deuterocanonical: 1 Esdras; Judith; Tobit; 1, 2, 3, and 4 Maccabees; Psalm 151; Odes; Wisdom of Solomon; Sirach; Baruch; Letter of Jeremiah; Susanna; and Bel and the Dragon. When the early Christian church leaders used the Septuagint, they did not view these writings differently than the rest. In fact, the early church councils at Hippo in 393 CE and at Carthage in 397 CE and 419 CE listed the books as Scripture.

Pope Damascus commissioned Jerome to translate the Old Testament into Latin in 382 CE. First using the Septuagint and then using manuscripts written in Hebrew, Jerome was occupied with this translation project, known as the Vulgate or the Latin Vulgate, for twenty years; even so, he did not complete a translation of the New Testament (so it was finished by others). Unlike most, he wanted to omit the apocryphal books because there were no Hebrew versions, and their contents, while providing models of faith, contributed nothing to doctrine. Pope Damascus and Augustine persuaded Jerome to translate them anyway. Because many Vulgate manuscripts included his preface and notes that make distinctions between canonical and edifying books, these apocryphal books continued to have an uncertain status.

The Reformers

When the printing press was invented, the first book published by the Gutenberg Press was the Latin Vulgate (ca. 1456). This Bible is the one that many Christian churches were using, including Martin Luther’s. Luther did not value the apocryphal books much because they were not originally written in Hebrew and were not useful for doctrine, especially since certain passages, in his estimation, supported praying for the dead, salvation by good works, and purgatory. He placed them at the end of his German translation (1545). Because of the antagonism between the Catholic Church and the Reformed movement, the Catholics reacted to Luther’s assessment at the Council of Trent (1545–63) and affirmed these

books as canonical: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, 1–2 Maccabees, and additions to Esther and Daniel. The books 1–2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh in the Vulgate were rejected, but they were placed at the end of the Old Testament, affirming the middle of the Bible as the place where apocryphal books should usually be placed, if included at all.

The Swiss reformer and theologian John Calvin did not value these books at all: “Of their admitting all the books promiscuously into the Canon, I say nothing more than it is done against the consent of the primitive Church”¹ (“On the Fourth Session” in *Antidote to the Council of Trent*, 1547). That the King James Version (1611) included them in a separate section in the middle, as had the Thomas Matthew Bible (1537) and the 1599 edition of the Geneva Bible, indicates that the debate continued. In 1615, George Abbot, the archbishop of Canterbury and one of the translators of the King James Version, penalized the publishing of the Bible without the Apocrypha. Still, not all agreed. The 1646 Westminster Confession of Faith (1.3) affirmed John Calvin’s assessment that these books be denied as part of the canon.

Nevertheless, in the early nineteenth century, partly because the Edinburgh Bible Society deemed them as unworthy of attention, other Bible societies also decided not to endorse their publication. Up until World War II, the Lutheran areas of Germany included the books in their Bibles. After World War II (1939–45), the American Bible Society provided funding only if the apocryphal books were excluded. This lack of easy availability meant that many Protestant Christians for a considerable number of years had little knowledge of their contents. More recently, these books have been included in Protestant Bibles, some of which the American Bible Society offers on its Web site for purchase.

Having summarized the historical formation of this group of writings, let us now consider what books three groups of Christians include and then their contents in general.

Variations in the Old Testament Apocrypha/Deuterocanon

A comparison of the Septuagint and Catholic and Protestant Bibles with the Old Testament Apocrypha and Eastern Orthodox Bibles shows us that the number and the order of the biblical books differ in each. Protestant Bibles that include the Apocrypha contain all the books

found in the Septuagint except Odes but also include the Prayer of Manasseh and 2 Esdras. Roman Catholic Bibles omit 1 Esdras, 3–4 Maccabees, Odes, and Psalm 151. Eastern Orthodox Bibles include all the books in the Septuagint but also include the Prayer of Manasseh.

The Contents

When we turn to read the contents of these books, we need to ask what has been considered objectionable about them. Were they simply rejected because they had been written in Greek and not Hebrew? In some cases, it appears that this is the main reason. Or did their contents have objectionable theological themes? Verses such as 2 Maccabees 12:39–45, which refers to praying for the souls of the dead, and 2 Maccabees 15:12–16, which refers to the priest Onias and the prophet Jeremiah—both dead—as interceding to God on behalf of humans, would be examples that the Reformation leaders noted as supporting doctrines that they rejected: prayers of the living on behalf of the dead for their salvation and the intercession of dead saints on behalf of the living. The reformers objected to these practices because they believed that the fate of those who have died is decided by God and is beyond our abilities to influence and that God can be approached for our intercession directly. But are the practices mentioned in 2 Maccabees in the second century BCE as well as in the rest of these books really the same as those the Reformers were criticizing in their day? In addition, let us consider this question: Must Scriptures be discarded because certain rituals are no longer practiced or considered necessary by some people?

The nineteen deuterocanonical or apocryphal writings found among Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox Bibles consist of tales, Wisdom literature, historical narratives, an apocalypse, a letter, and poems; they were written from ca. 200 BCE to 100 CE and provide us insight into the history and culture of the Jewish people. If it were not for these writings, we would know less about this period of history and the extent of the struggles of the Jewish people and their persecution. For example, 1 Maccabees tells us about the Maccabean Revolt and the Jews’ reclaiming the power to govern themselves. Second Maccabees provides a theological interpretation that explains that God was disciplining the Jews through Antiochus IV’s persecution of them. Third Maccabees deals with the Egyptian Jews’ struggles and persecution under Ptolemy IV Philopater. Fourth Maccabees tells about the martyrdom of Eleazar, the seven brothers, and their mother

SEPTUAGINT (Books are interspersed)	ROMAN CATHOLIC BIBLES (Books are interspersed)	PROTESTANT BIBLES (Separate section)	EASTERN ORTHODOX BIBLES (Books are interspersed)
1 Esdras, after 1 and 2 Chronicles Esther includes Additions to Esther Judith, after Esther Tobit, after Judith 1, 2, 3, and 4 Maccabees, after Tobit Odes with Prayer of Manasseh, after Psalms, which ends with Psalm 151 Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach/ Ecclesiasticus, after Job Baruch, after Jeremiah Letter of Jeremiah, after Lamentations Susanna, before Daniel Prayer of Azariah and Song of the Three Jews is in Daniel Bel and the Dragon, after Daniel	Tobit, after Nehemiah Judith, after Tobit Esther includes Additions to Esther 1 and 2 Maccabees, after Esther Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach/Ecclesiasticus, after Song of Solomon Baruch and Letter of Jeremiah, after Lamentations Daniel includes Prayer of Azariah and Song of the Three Jews, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon	Tobit Judith Additions to Esther Wisdom of Solomon Sirach/Ecclesiasticus Baruch Letter of Jeremiah Prayer of Azariah and Song of the Three Jews Susanna Bel and the Dragon 1 and 2 Maccabees 1 Esdras Prayer of Manasseh Psalm 151 3 Maccabees 2 Esdras 4 Maccabees	1 Esdras, after 1, 2 Chronicles Esther includes Additions to Esther Judith, after Esther Tobit, after Judith 1, 2, 3, and 4 Maccabees, after Tobit Odes with Prayer of Manasseh, after Psalms, which ends with Psalm 151 Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach/Ecclesiasticus, after Job Baruch, after Jeremiah Letter of Jeremiah, after Lamentations Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, after Daniel

because they refused to eat defiling foods. In addition, 1 Esdras, with a parallel account of portions of 2 Chronicles and Nehemiah, tells about an earlier period of Jewish history: the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple and the resettlement of the Jews who returned there after the exile had ended. Second Esdras, in contrast, is an apocalypse that presents the author's struggles to affirm God's goodness and power in light of all the difficulties facing the people. Two books provide us additional collections of Wisdom literature, namely, the Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach. Five of these writings can be classified as tales, which have historical settings but aim to convey some teachings about living piously and courageously: Tobit,

Judith, Additions to the book of Esther, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon. In the next session, we will take a closer look at the book of Tobit.

About the Writer

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Endnote

1. John Dillenberger, ed., *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 146–47.