

THE CANONICAL BOOKS OF SCRIPTURE

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Several times this year I have heard people ask the question: "Who is to say which Bible is the right Bible?" Usually, this question results from confusion over the difference between the Roman Catholic Bible and the Protestant Bible. Of course, these are differing translations. But for most people, the difference in translation is not the problem. What is confusing is that there are some books in the Roman Catholic Bible, that are not in the Protestant Bible. And some of the books which both Bibles have in common have extra chapters in the Roman Catholic Bible, which are not included in the Protestant versions of the same books.

To help in understanding this problem, let's first of all list the books in the Old Testaments of both Bibles (the New Testament books are the same in both). Then let's examine various testimonies to learn when and under what circumstances the books in question came into the Bible.

I. The Catholic and Protestant Old Testaments compared.

In the following lists, the titles of the Vulgate have been used for the Roman Catholic Bible, and the titles of the King James Version for the Protestant Bible. Corresponding books are on the same line. Note that sometimes two books in the Protestant Bible (Ezra and Nehemiah) are grouped as one in the Catholic Bible. This should cause no confusion. The books, or parts of books, that occur in the Catholic Bible but have no counterparts in the Protestant Bible, are marked with an asterisk (*). (There are no books in the Protestant Bible that do not also occur in the Roman Catholic Bible.)

ROMAN CATHOLIC BIBLE	PROTESTANT BIBLE
Genesis	Genesis
Exodus	Exodus
Leviticus	Leviticus
Numeri	Numbers
Deuteronomium	Deuteronomy
Iosue	Joshua
Iudicum	Judges
Ruth	Ruth

Samuhel	I Samuel, II Samuel
Malachim (Regum)	I Kings, II Kings
Verba Dierum (Paralipomenon)	I Chronicles, II Chronicles
Ezras (I Ezrae, II Ezrae)	Ezra, Nehemiah
Tobias*	
Iudith*	
Hester (includes some chapters* not found in the Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts)	Esther
Iob	Job
Psalmi (The appendix to the Vulgate lists Ps. 151*)	Psalms
Proverbia	Proverbs
Ecclesiastes	Ecclesiastes
Canticum canticorum	Song of Solomon
Sapientia (Wisdom of Solomon)*	
Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)*	
Isaias	Isaiah
Hieremias	Jeremiah
Threni (Lamentationes)	Lamentations
Baruch*	
Hiezechiel	Ezekiel
Daniel (Including The History of Susanna* The Song of the Three Holy Children* The History of the Destruction of Bel and the Dragon*, none of which, according to Jerome's prologue, are found in Hebrew)	Daniel

Osee	Hosea
Iohel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Abdias	Abdias
Ionas	Jonah
Micha	Micah
Naum	Nahum
Abacuc	Habakkuk
Sofonias	Zephaniah
Aggeus	Haggai
Zaccharias	Zechariah
Malachi	Malachi

Macchabeorum* (I,II Maccabees)*

Appendix:

Oratio Manasse* (Prayer of Manasses)*

III, IIII Ezrae* (in Protestant lists of the Apocrypha, listed as I and II, since the I and II of the Vulgate are called Ezra and Nehemiah in Prot. Bibles.)

II. Witnesses to the Authority of the Old Testament Books

A. The Jews made a distinction between the apocryphal books and portions, and the rest of the Old Testament.

First of all, the Old Testament as preserved in Hebrew, the language in which it was originally written (some parts were in a cousin language, Aramaic), contains the books of the Protestant Old Testament, but none of the disputed books or sections which are also included in the Roman Bible. Where, then, did these extra books appear?

The Old Testament of the Jews was completed by 400 BC. Between that time and the start of the first century AD, it was

translated into Greek, in a version known as the Septuagint. The questioned books make their appearance for the first time in the various copies of the Septuagint which we possess. Some of them (such as I and II Maccabees) deal with events during this period historically, and thus can be no older.

The fact that the questioned books were not part of the Hebrew Old Testament, and were not held by the Jews as being on a par with the books that were, is a testimony against their being truly a part of the Bible.

Second, the record of I Maccabees itself shows that the Jews of the period between 400 BC and Christ were conscious that God was not revealing Himself to them as He had to previous ages. I Macc. 4:46; 9:27; and 14:41 show that this period of time was one without a prophet of God.

Third, the Jewish historian Josephus in Contra Apionem I:8, writing during the first century AD, considers only the books of the Hebrew (not Greek) Old Testament to be "justly believed to be divine." He mentions other books that were written in the 400 year "silent period," but concludes that they were not "worthy of like credit with what preceded, because the exact succession of the prophets ceased."

B. For the Christian, the testimony of the Lord Jesus and the NT writers ought to carry conclusive authority. In at least two NT passages, the Lord refers to the Old Testament as a whole. In both cases, although the Greek Septuagint (which contained the apocryphal books) was widely known to his hearers, and although Greek was a more common language than Hebrew for everyday use, He referred to the Hebrew OT.

The first reference is Luke 11:50,51. Because the Jewish leaders reject Him as Messiah, the Lord says that they will be held accountable for the deaths of all the Old Testament martyrs. These He summarizes, in verse 51, by listing the first and the last, Abel and Zacharias.

It is not hard to recognize Abel, the first man in the Bible to die physically. But who is Zacharias? He is named in II Chronicles 24:20-21, and is the last martyr in that book.

Why does our Lord cite him as the last of the OT martyrs? In the Greek Bible, II Chronicles comes where it does in our English Bibles, near the middle. In particular, it comes before the books of Maccabees, which are full of outstanding martyrs. Consider Judas Maccabeus in I Macc. 9, and his brother Jonathan in I Macc. 12. These men's deaths were also later in time than Zacharias. If Our Lord is referring to the Greek Old Testament, with the Apocrypha, it is hard to see the point of His statement.

But His point is very well made if He is referring to the Hebrew Old Testament. For there II Chronicles is the very last book in the Bible!

The second reference is Lk. 24:44. There, what He had called in Lk. 24:27 "all the scriptures," He calls "the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms."

The way the Jews arranged their Hebrew Bible, this was a way of referring to the entire collection. (Compare the similar outline, "law, prophets, and other books," in the Prologue to Sirach.) The "law" was the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. The "prophets" included all the historical books except Chronicles (these historical books were called the "former prophets"),

and all of what we would call "prophets," such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Minor Prophets (Daniel was not included in this section) (these were called the "latter prophets."). The "Psalms" referred to the third section, mostly poetic, which contained Psalms (the entire section was named for its first member), Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and I, II Chronicles.

But the arrangement of books in the Greek Old Testament was significantly different. These three titles could not be used to describe it. In fact, it was usually divided into five parts!

Thus, Our Lord here shows that He considers the authoritative prophecies concerning Himself to be recorded in the Hebrew, rather than the Greek, Old Testament. Thus the books of the Apocrypha had no place in what He termed, "all scripture."

C. A further testimony should be noted from our Lord and the NT writers at large. They quote from every book of the Hebrew Old Testament except Esther and the Song of Solomon. But not once do they quote from the books of the Apocrypha. This is remarkable, particularly since they do sometimes quote from books which are not Scripture (Cf. Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12; Jude 14). Yet they seem to have studiously avoided citing those works which would later be so confusing.

D. Since the Roman Catholics are the ones who are most interested in supporting the authority of the Apocrypha as Scripture, it may be interesting to ask some of the church fathers what they thought about the books. Augustine (of Hippo) and Jerome both lived from about 350-425.

Augustine held that some (but not all) of the Apocryphal books were of equal authority with Scripture. Speaking of Maccabees and some undefined "other" books, he writes, "These are held as canonical, not by the Jews, but by the Church, on account of the extreme and wonderful sufferings of certain martyrs, who, before Christ had come in the flesh, contended for the law of God even unto death and endured most grievous and horrible evils" (City of God, xviii, 36). But he did not hold all of the Apocrypha to be authoritative. In Christian Doctrine, II, 8, par. 13, he enumerates the Old Testament books which he believes to be authoritative. The only apocryphal books which he clearly includes are Tobit, Judith, and Maccabees I and II. He omits at least I, II Esdras. And in City of God, XV, 23, he speaks out very plainly against those books which "have been set apart from canonical authority under the title of apocrypha."

Thus Augustine, while endorsing some of the Apocrypha, would reject others.

E. Jerome, whose work in translating the Bible from Hebrew into Latin laid the foundation for the Vulgate, was far more harsh with the Apocrypha. In his Preface to the Books of Solomon, he speaks of Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon thus: "And so, just as the church reads Judith and Tobias and Maccabees (in public worship) but does not receive them into the canonical Scriptures, so let it read these two books also for the edification of the people, not for the establishing of the authority of the doctrines of the church." Not only does he explicitly reject these five books (six, if Macc. is counted as two) of the apocrypha, but elsewhere (in the Prologus Galeatus) counts everything which is not in the Hebrew Old Testament (that is, the entire Apocrypha as we now know it) as secondary, and not on a plane with inspired Scripture.

F. If the greatest of the Roman Catholic fathers were thus divided on the authority of the Apocrypha, how did they come to be recognized as Scripture by the church, officially? The Reformation rang with the rallying cry of the Protestants, "Scripture Alone!", and immediately people began to ask, "What Scripture?" It was by a decree of the Council of Trent (AD 1546) that all the books of the Vulgate were declared to be canonical, without distinction. While the Catholics were thus embracing the Apocrypha completely, the Protestants reacted in the other direction, and though the Westminster Confession of Faith puts them on an equal plane with other human writings, many conservative Protestants abhor them as vehemently as the Catholics embrace them! (Cf. F.F. Bruce, Tradition Old and New. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970, pp. 135f.)

III. Conclusions.

A. The distinction between the Catholic and Protestant Bibles is a real one. It was recognized as early as 200 BC, in the difference between the Hebrew and Greek Old Testaments.

B. The usage of the New Testament writers, and of our Lord in particular, never endorses the Apocrypha as inspired Scripture. Two statements of our Lord show that when He thought of the Old Testament revelation of God, He thought of the Hebrew, and definitely not the Greek, version.

C. Even among early Catholic church fathers, there was not clear acceptance of the Apocrypha. Jerome, the father of the Vulgate, insists that the Apocrypha may not be used as a basis for doctrine, as may the Hebrew Old Testament books.

D. The official adoption of the Apocrypha by the Roman Catholic Church seems to be more a polemic move to establish a well-defined position from which to fight the Reformation, than a uniform persuasion that these books really were inspired.

E. We conclude that the Apocrypha are simply non-inspired books of purely human authorship. They do not bear the authority of Scripture. They may be useful in studying the history and thought of the period between 400 BC and the birth of Christ, but are in no sense infallible, as are the books of the Hebrew Old Testament and the New Testament.