

*From God to Us:
How We Got Our Bible*

by
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Chapter 8

The Extent of the Old Testament Canon

The initial acceptance of the twenty-two books (same as our thirty-nine) of the Hebrew Scriptures did not settle the issue once and for all. Later scholars who were not always fully aware of the facts of the original acceptance raised questions about the canonicity of certain books. The discussion gave rise to a technical terminology. The biblical books which were accepted by all were called "homologoumena" (lit., to speak as one). Those biblical books which were on occasion questioned by some were labeled "antilegomena" (to speak against). Those nonbiblical works rejected by all were entitled "pseudepigrapha" (false writings). A fourth category, comprised of nonbiblical books which were (are) accepted by some but rejected by others, includes the disputed books of the "apocrypha" (hidden, or doubtful). Our discussion will follow this fourfold classification.

THE BOOKS ACCEPTED BY ALL--HOMOLOGOUMENA

The canonicity of some books was never seriously challenged by any of the great rabbis within the Jewish community. Once these books were accepted by God's people as being from the hand of the prophet of God, they continued to be recognized as divinely authoritative by subsequent generations. Thirty-four of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament may be classed as homologoumena. This includes every book except Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Ezekiel, and Proverbs. Since none of these books has been seriously disputed, our attention may be turned to the other books.

THE BOOKS REJECTED BY ALL--PSEUDEPIGRAPHA

A large number of spurious religious writings which circulated in the ancient Jewish community are known as the pseudepigrapha. Not everything in these pseudepigraphal writings is false. In fact, most of them arose from within the context of a religious fantasy or tradition which has its source in some truth. Frequently the origin of these writings was spiritual speculation on something not explicitly covered in canonical Scripture. The

speculative traditions about the patriarch Enoch no doubt lay at the root of the Book of Enoch. Likewise, curiosity about the death and glorification of Moses is undoubtedly behind the Assumption of Moses. Such speculation, however, does not mean that there are no truths in these books. On the contrary, the New Testament refers to truths embodied in both of these books (see Jude 14, 15), and even makes allusion to the Penitence of Jannes and Jambres (2 Ti 3:8). Nonetheless these books are not cited authoritatively as Scripture. Like the quotations of Paul from the non-Christian poets Aratus (Ac 17:28), Menander (1 Co 15:33), and Epimenides (Titus 1:12), it is only a truth contained in the book which is verified by its citation and not the authority of the book itself. Truth is truth no matter where it is found, whether it is uttered by a heathen poet, a pagan prophet (Num 24:17), a dumb animal (Num 22:28), or even a demon (Ac 16:17).

You will observe that no formula such as "it is written" or "the Scriptures say" is used in referring to these pseudepigraphal works. Perhaps the most dangerous thing about these false writings is the fact that the elements of truth are presented in words of divine authority in a context of religious fancy which usually contains some theological heresy. It is important to remember that it is only the truth quoted, and not the book as such, that is given divine authority in the New Testament.

The Nature of the Pseudepigrapha

The Old Testament pseudepigrapha contain the extremes of Jewish religious fancy expressed between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200. Some books are theologically harmless (e.g., Psalm 151), while others contain historical errors and outright heresy. The genuineness of these books is particularly challenged, since it is claimed that they were written by biblical authors. The pseudepigrapha reflect the literary style of a period long after the close of the prophetic writings, and most of the books imitate the apocalyptic format of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah--speaking of dreams, visions, and revelations. Unlike these prophets, however, the religious fancy of pseudepigrapha often becomes magical. Overall, the pseudepigrapha depicts a bright Messianic future of rewards for those who engage in lives of suffering and self-denial. Beneath the surface there is often an innocent, albeit misguided, religious motive. But the false claim to divine authority, the highly fanciful character of the events and the questionable (even heretical) teachings have led the Jewish fathers to consider them spurious. As a result they have correctly received the label "pseudepigrapha."

The Number of the Pseudepigrapha.

The standard collection of the pseudepigrapha contains seventeen books. Add to this Psalm 151 which is found in the Septuagint Version of the Old Testament, and the principal list is as follows:

*1 Baruch is listed in the Apocrypha (see p. 93).

This list is by no means complete. Other books are known, including some interesting ones brought to light with the Dead Sea Scroll discoveries. Among those are the Genesis Apocryphon and the War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness, etc. (see chap. 12).

THE BOOKS DISPUTED BY SOME--THE ANTILEGOMENA

The Nature of the Antilegomena

Of more interest to our study are the books which were originally and ultimately received as canonical but which were subjected to rabbinical debate in the process. The previous chapter revealed how all of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament were initially accepted by the people of God from His prophets. During the centuries which followed, a different school of thought developed within Judaism which debated, among other things, the canonicity of certain books which had previously been received into the Old Testament. Ultimately these books were retained in the canon, as their original status prevailed. Nevertheless, because these books were at one time or another spoken against by some rabbi, they are called the Antilegomena.

The Number of the Antilegomena

The canonicity of five Old Testament books was questioned at one time or another by some teacher within Judaism: Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Ezekiel, and Proverbs. Each was questioned for a different reason, but in the end the divine authority of each was vindicated.

Song of Solomon. There were some within the school of Shammai which thought this canticle to be *sensual*. In an apparent attempt to cover over the controversy and defend the canonicity of the Song, Rabbi Akiba wrote:

God forbid!--No man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs That it does not render the hands unclean [i.e., is not canonical], for all the ages are not worthy the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the

Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.¹

As others have observed, the very fact of such a statement indicates that someone had doubted the purity of the book. Whatever doubts were centered in the alleged sensual character of the Song of Solomon were misdirected. It is more likely that the purity and nobility of marriage is part of the essential purpose of the book. Whatever the questions about the various interpretations, there should be no doubt about its inspiration, once it is viewed in a proper spiritual perspective.

Ecclesiastes. The objection sometimes leveled against this book is that it seems *skeptical*. Some have even called it the "Song of Skepticism." Rabbi Akiba admitted that "if aught was in dispute the dispute was about Ecclesiastes alone [and not about the Song]."² There is little question about the occasional skeptical *sound* of the book: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity . . . there is nothing new under the sun . . . For in much wisdom is vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow" (Ec 1:1, 9, 18). What is overlooked when the charge of skepticism is made is both the context of these statements and the general conclusion of the book. A man seeking ultimate satisfaction "under the sun" will certainly feel the same frustrations that Solomon felt, for eternal happiness is not found in this temporal world. Moreover, the conclusion and general teaching of the entire book is far from skeptical. When "all has been heard," the reader is admonished, "Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man" (Ec 12:13). In Ecclesiastes, as in the Song, the basic problem is one of interpretation and not of inspiration or canonization.

Esther. Because of the conspicuous absence of the name of God in this book, some have thought it to be unspiritual. They ask, how can a book be the Word of God when it does not even bear His name? In addition, the story of the book seems to be purely secular in nature. As a result, several attempts have been made to explain the phenomenon of God's apparent absence in the book of Esther. Some have suggested that the Persian Jews, not being in the theocratic line, did not have the name of the covenant God associated with them. Others have argued that the omission of the name of God is intentional to protect the book from the possibility of a pagan plagiarism by the substitution of the name of a false god. Still others see the name of Jehovah or Yahweh (YHWH) in an acrostic at four crucial points in the story in such a way as to eliminate chance. Whatever the explanation, this much is obvious, the absence of the name of God is overshadowed by the presence of God in the preservation of His people. Esther and her companions were deeply devout: a religious fast was held, and Esther exercised great faith (Est 4:16). The fact that God granted His people deliverance in the book serves as the basis for the Jewish Feast of Purim (Est 9:26-28). This alone is sufficient indication of the authority ascribed to the book within Judaism.

Ezekiel. There were those within the rabbinical school who thought the book of Ezekiel was

1 Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah*, (Oxford: Oxford U., 1933), p. 782.

2 *Ibid.*

anti-Mosaic in its teaching. The school of Shammai, for example, felt that the book was not in harmony with the Mosaic law and that the first ten chapters exhibited a tendency toward Gnosticism. If there were actual contradictions, then the book, of course, could not be canonical. However, no specific examples of contradictions with the Torah were provided. Here again it seems to be a question of interpretation rather than inspiration.

Proverbs. The dispute over Proverbs centered about the fact that some of the teachings within the book seemed incompatible with other proverbs. Speaking of this alleged internal inconsistency, the Talmud says, "The book of Proverbs also they sought to hide, because its words contradicted one to another" (Tractate "Shabbath," 30b). One supposed contradiction is found in chapter twenty-six, where the reader is exhorted both "to answer a fool according to his folly" and not to do so (Pr 26:4-5). But, as other rabbis have observed, the meaning here is that there are occasions when a fool should be answered according to his folly and other times when he should not. Since the statements are in successive verse, a legitimate form of Hebrew poetry, the composers obviously saw no contradiction. The qualifying phrase which indicates whether one should or should not answer a fool clearly reveals that the situations calling for different answers are not the same. No contradiction exists in Proverbs 26, none has been demonstrated elsewhere in Proverbs, and hence nothing stands in the way of its canonicity.

THE BOOKS ACCEPTED BY SOME--APOCRYPHA

The most crucial area of disagreement on the Old Testament canon among Christians is the debate over the so-called Apocrypha. In brief, these books are accepted by Roman Catholics as canonical and rejected in Protestantism and Judaism. In point of fact, the meanings of the word *apocrypha* reflect the problem manifest in the two views on its canonicity. In classical Greek, the word *apocrypha* meant "hidden" or "hard to understand." Later it took on the connotation of *esoteric*, or something understood only by the initiated and not an outsider. By the times of Irenaeus and Jerome (third and fourth centuries) the term *apocrypha* came to be applied to the noncanonical books of the Old Testament, including what was previously classified as pseudepigrapha. Since the Reformation era, the word has been used to denote the noncanonical Jewish religious literature coming from the intertestamental period. The issue before us is to determine whether the books were hidden in order to be preserved, because their message was deep and spiritual, or because they were spurious and of doubtful authenticity.

The Nature and Number of the Old Testament Apocrypha

There are fifteen books in the Apocrypha (fourteen if the Letter of Jeremiah is combined with Baruch, as it is in Roman Catholic Douay versions). With the exception of 2 Esdras, these books bridge the gap between Malachi and Matthew and specifically cover the two or

three centuries before Christ. Their dates and classification are as follows:

* Books not accepted as canonical at the Council of Trent, 1546.

† Books not listed in Douay table of contents because they are appended to other books.

The Arguments for Accepting the Old Testament Apocrypha

The Old Testament Apocrypha have received varying degrees of acceptance by Christians. Most Protestants and Jews accept them as having religious and even historical value but not canonical authority. Roman Catholics since the Council of Trent have held these books to be canonical. More recently Roman Catholics have defended a sort of deuterocanonicity, but the Apocrypha is still used to support extrabiblical doctrines and was proclaimed divinely inspired at Trent. Other groups, such as Anglicans and the various Orthodox churches, have views of varying respect for the Apocrypha. The following is a summary of the arguments generally advanced for accepting these books as having some kind of canonical status.

1. *New Testament allusions.* The New Testament reflects the thought of and records some events from the Apocrypha. Hebrews, for instance, speaks of women receiving their dead by resurrection (Heb 11:35), and makes reference to 2 Maccabees 7 and 12. The so-called wider Apocrypha or Pseudepigrapha are also cited by the New Testament (Jude 14-15; 2 Ti 3:8).
2. *New Testament usages of the Septuagint.* The Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament made at Alexandria is known as the Septuagint (LXX). It is the version most often cited by New Testament writers, for it was in many respects the Bible of the apostles and early Christians. The LXX contained the Apocrypha. The presence of these books in the LXX supports the broader Alexandrian canon of the Old Testament as opposed to the narrower Palestinian canon which omits them.
3. *The earliest complete manuscripts of the Bible.* The earliest Greek manuscripts of the Bible contain the Apocrypha interspersed among the Old Testament books. Manuscripts *Aleph*, *A*, and *B* (see chap 12) all include these books, revealing that they were part of the early Christian Bible.
4. *Early Christian art.* Some of the earliest records of Christian art reflect usage of the Apocrypha. Catacomb scenes sometimes draw on the history of the faithful recorded in the intertestamental period.

5. *The early church Fathers.* Some of the very early church Fathers, particularly in the West, accepted and used the Apocrypha in their teaching and preaching. Even in the East, however, Clement of Alexandria recognized 2 Esdras as fully canonical. Origen added Maccabees as well as the Letter of Jeremiah to his canonical list. Irenaeus quoted from the Book of Wisdom, and other Fathers cited other apocryphal books.

6. *The influence of St. Augustine.* St. Augustine (c. 354-430) brought the wider Western tradition about the Apocrypha to its culmination by giving to them canonical status. He influenced the church councils at Hippo (A.D. 393) and Carthage (A.D. 397) which listed the Apocrypha as canonical. From this time the western Church used the Apocrypha in public worship.

7. *The Council of Trent.* In 1546 the post-Reformation Roman Catholic Council of Trent proclaimed the Apocrypha as canonical, declaring,

The Synod . . . receives and venerates . . . all of the books both of the Old and of the New Testament [including Apocrypha]--seeing that one God is the Author of both . . . as having been dictated, either by Christ's own word of mouth or by the Holy Ghost . . . if anyone receives not as sacred and canonical the said books entire with all their parts, as they have been used to be read in the Catholic Church . . . let him be anathema.³

Since the Council of Trent, the books of the Apocrypha have had binding and canonical authority in the Roman Catholic Church.

8. *Non-Catholic usage.* Protestant Bibles even since the Reformation have often contained the Apocrypha. Indeed, in Anglican churches the Apocrypha is read regularly along with the other books of the Old and New Testaments in public worship. The Apocrypha is also used by churches in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

9. *The Dead Sea community.* Books of the Apocrypha were found among the scrolls of the Dead Sea community at Qumran. Some of these books were written in Hebrew, indicating their use among Palestinian Jews even before the time of Christ.

In summary argument, this position argues that the widespread employment of the Apocrypha by Christians from the earliest centuries is evidence of its acceptance by the people of God. This long tradition was culminated by an official recognition of these books as inspired and canonical by the Council of Trent (1546). Even non-Catholics to date give something of a quasicanonical status to the Apocrypha, as indicated by the place they give them in their Bibles and in the churches.

3 Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed. rev. (New York: Harper, 1919), 2:81.

Reasons for Rejecting the Canonicity of the Apocrypha

The opponents of the Apocrypha have offered many reasons for excluding it from the canon. These arguments will be reviewed in the same order as those presented by the advocates of the larger canon.

1. *New Testament authority.* The New Testament never cites an apocryphal book as inspired. Allusions to these books lend no more authority to them than do the New Testament references to the pagan poets. Further, since the New Testament quotes from virtually every canonical book of the Old Testament and verifies the contents and limits of the Old Testament (omitting the Apocrypha--see chap. 7), it seems clear that the New Testament definitely excludes the Apocrypha from the Hebrew canon. Josephus, the Jewish historian, expressly rejects the Apocrypha by listing only twenty-two canonical books.

2. *The Septuagint translation.* Palestine was the home of the Jewish canon, not Alexandria, Egypt. The great Greek learning center in Egypt was no authority in determining which books belonged in the Jewish Old Testament. Alexandria was the place of translation, not of canonization. The fact that the Septuagint contains the Apocrypha only proves that the Alexandrian Jews translated the other Jewish religious literature from the intertestamental period along with the canonical books. Philo, the Alexandrian Jew, clearly rejected the canonicity of the Apocrypha at the time of Christ as does official Judaism at other places and times. In fact, the extant copies of the LXX date from the fourth century A.D. and do not prove what books were in LXX of earlier times.

3. *The early Christian Bible.* The early Greek manuscripts of the Bible date from the fourth century. They follow the LXX tradition which contains the Apocrypha. As was noted above, this is a *Greek translation*, not a *Hebrew canon*. Jesus and the New Testament writers quoted most often from the LXX but never once from any book of the Apocrypha. At best, the presence of the Apocrypha in Christian Bibles of the fourth century shows only that these books were accepted to some degree by Christians at that time. It does not indicate that either the Jews or earlier Christians accepted these books as canonical, to say nothing of the universal church, which has not held them to be canonical.

4. *Early Christian art.* Artistic representations are not grounds for determining the canonicity of the Apocrypha. Catacomb scenes from the Apocrypha indicate only that believers of that period were aware of the events of the intertestamental period and considered them part of their religious heritage. Early Christian art does nothing to settle the question of the canonicity of the Apocrypha.

5. *Early church Fathers.* Many of the great early church Fathers, including Melito, Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Athanasius, spoke against the Apocrypha. No important Father before Augustine accepted all the apocryphal books canonized by Trent.

6. *The canon of St. Augustine.* The testimony of Augustine is neither definitive nor unequivocal. First, Augustine at times implies that the Apocrypha had only a deuterocanonicity (*City of God* 18. 36) instead of a primary canonicity. Further, the Councils of Hippo and Carthage were small local councils influenced by Augustine and the tradition of the Greek Septuagint translation. No qualified Hebrew scholars were present at either of these councils. The most qualified Hebrew scholar of the time, St. Jerome, argued strongly against Augustine in his rejecting the canonicity of the Apocrypha. Jerome refused even to translate the Apocrypha into Latin or to include it in his Latin Vulgate versions. It was not until after Jerome's day and literally over his dead body, that the Apocrypha was brought into the Latin Vulgate (see chap. 18).

7. *The Council of Trent.* The action of the Council of Trent was both polemical and prejudicial. In debates with Luther, the Roman Catholics had quoted the Maccabees in support of prayer for the dead (see 2 Mac 12:45-46). Luther and Protestants following him challenged the canonicity of that book, citing the New Testament, the early church Fathers, and Jewish teachers for support. The Council of Trent responded to Luther by canonizing the Apocrypha. Not only is the action of Trent obviously polemical, but it was also prejudicial, since not all of the fourteen (fifteen) books of the Apocrypha were accepted by Trent. One and 2 Esdras (Roman Catholic, 3 and 4 Esdras; the Douay version names the canonical books of Ezra and Nehemiah as 1 and 2 Esdras respectively) and the Prayer of Manasseh were rejected. The rejection of 2 Esdras is particularly suspect, for it contains a strong verse against praying for the dead (2 Esdras 7:105). In fact, some medieval scribe had cut this section out of the Latin manuscripts of 2 Esdras, and it was known by Arabic manuscripts until found again in Latin by Robert L. Bently in 1874 at a library in Amiens, France.

The decision at Trent did not reflect either a universal or indisputable consent with the Catholic church of the Reformation. During that very time Cardinal Cajetan, who opposed Luther at Augsburg in 1518, published a *Commentary on All the Authentic Historical Books of the Old Testament* (1532) which omitted the Apocrypha. Even before this, Cardinal Ximenes distinguished between the Apocrypha and the Old Testament canon in his *Coplutensian Polyglot* (1514-1517). With this data in view, Protestants generally reject the decision of Trent as unfounded.

8. *Non-Catholic usage.* The use of the Apocrypha among Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant churches has been uneven. Some have used it in public worship. Many Bibles contain translations of the Apocrypha, although it is placed in a separate section, usually between the Old and New Testaments. However non-Catholics have employed the Apocrypha, they have never given to it the same canonical authority of the rest of the Bible. Instead, its use has been more devotional than canonical among non-Catholics.

9. *The Dead Sea Scrolls.* Many noncanonical books were discovered at Qumran, including

commentaries and manuals. It was a library and as such it contained numerous books not believed by the community to be inspired. Since no commentaries on or authoritative quotes from the Apocrypha have been discovered at Qumran, there is no evidence to demonstrate that they held the Apocrypha to be inspired. We may assume that they did not regard the Apocrypha as canonical. Even if evidence to the contrary is found, the fact that the group was a sect which had broken off from official Judaism would mean that it was not expected to be orthodox in all its beliefs. As far as we can tell, however, they were orthodox in their view of the canonicity of the Old Testament; that is, they did not accept the canonicity of the Apocrypha.

Summary and Conclusion

The extent of the Old Testament canon up to the time of Nehemiah comprised twenty-two (or twenty-four) books in Hebrew and relisted as thirty-nine in Christian Bibles, and was determined by the fourth century B.C. The minor disputes since that time have not changed the contents of the canon. It was the books written after this time, known as the Apocrypha, which because of the influence of the Greek translation at Alexandria, gained a wide circulation among Christians. Since some of the early Fathers, particularly in the West, made use of these books in their writings, the church (largely under the influence of Augustine) gave them a broader and ecclesiastical use. Until the time of the Reformation, however, these books were not considered canonical. Their canonization by the Council of Trent stands unsupported by history. Even that verdict was polemical and prejudiced, as shown earlier.

That these books, whatever devotional or ecclesiastical value they may possess, are not canonical is substantiated by the following facts:

1. The Jewish community has never accepted them as canonical.
2. They were not accepted by Jesus nor the New Testament writers.
3. Most great Fathers of the early church rejected their canonicity.
4. No church council held them to be canonical until the late fourth century.
5. Jerome, the great biblical scholar and translator of the Vulgate, strongly rejected the Apocrypha.
6. Many Roman Catholic scholars, even through the Reformation Period, rejected the canonicity of the Apocrypha.
7. Neither Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, nor Protestant churches to this date have recognized the Apocrypha as inspired and canonical in the full sense of the word. In view of this date it behooves Christians today not to use the Apocrypha as the Word of God, nor use it as an authoritative support for any point of doctrine.

Indeed, when examined by the criteria for canonicity set forth in chapter 6, the Apocrypha is found wanting:

1. The Apocrypha does not claim to be prophetic.
2. It does not come with the authority of God.
3. The Apocrypha contains historical errors (see Tobit 1:3-5 and 14:11) and such theological heresies as praying for the dead (2 Mac 12:45 [46]; 4).
4. The value of its contents for edification is mostly repetitious of the material already found in the canonical books.
5. There is a conspicuous absence of prophecy such as is found in the canonical books.
6. Nothing is added to our knowledge of Messianic truth by the Apocrypha.
7. The reception by the people of God to whom they were originally presented was negative. The Jewish community has never changed this stand. Some Christians have been less definitive, but whatever value is placed upon them, it is evident that the church as a whole has never accepted the Apocrypha as canonical Scripture.

Geisler, Normal L., Nix, William E. *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974.
Note: No change of any kind has been made to the text.