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1-2019

Question 92 - What is the Apocrypha?

Harold Willmington

Liberty University, hwillmington@liberty.edu

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Recommended Citation

Willmington, Harold, "Question 92 - What is the Apocrypha?" (2019). *101 Most Asked Questions*. 79.
https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/questions_101/79

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101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

92. What is the Apocrypha?

After the Old Testament canon had been recognized by the Jews as being officially closed, and prior to the New Testament period, there arose a section of literature called the Apocrypha. This word literally means “that which is hidden” and consists of 14 books.

I. The Contents of the Apocrypha

- A. 1 Esdras – This book covers much of the material found in Ezra, Nehemiah, and 2 Chronicles but it also includes a fanciful story concerning three Jewish servants in Persia. They were all asked a question by King Darius concerning what the greatest thing in the world was. One said wine, another replied women, while the third claimed truth was. He won, and when offered a reward, suggested the King allow the Jews to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.
- B. 2 Esdras – This contains certain visions given to Ezra dealing with God’s government of the world and the restoration of certain lost Scriptures.
- C. Tobit – Tobit is the story of a pious Jew (Tobit) who is accidentally blinded (by sparrow dung) and is later healed by an angel named Raphael, who applies a concoction of fish heart, liver, and gall to his eye.
- D. Judith – This is the story of a beautiful and devout Jewish princess who saves Jerusalem from being destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar’s invading armies. This she does by beguiling the enemy general through her beauty, then returning to Jerusalem with his head in her handbag!
- E. The remainder of Esther – There are additional inserts to this book to show the hand of God in the narrative by putting the word *God* in the text. The word *God* does not appear in the Old Testament book of Esther.
- F. The Wisdom of Solomon – This book has been called “The Gem of the Apocrypha,” and is one of the loftier books of the Apocrypha.
- G. Ecclesiasticus – Also called “the Wisdom of Jews, the Son of Sirach,” it resembles the book of Proverbs and gives rules for personal conduct in all details of civil, religious, and domestic life.
- H. 1 Maccabees – This historical account of the Maccabean period relates events of the Jews’ heroic struggle for liberty (175-135 B.C.)
- I. 2 Maccabees – This work covers in part the same period as 1 Maccabees but is somewhat inferior content-wise.

- J. Baruch – Supposedly written by Jeremiah’s secretary, Baruch, it contains prayers and confessions of the Jews in exile, with promises of restoration.
 - K. The Song of the Three Children – Inserted in the book of Daniel, right after the fiery furnace episode (Dan. 3:23), it contains an eloquent prayer of Azariah, one of the three Hebrew men thrown in the fire.
 - L. The story of Susanna – This story relates how the godly wife of a wealthy Jew in Babylon, falsely accused of adultery, was cleared by the wisdom of Daniel.
 - M. Bel and the Dragon – This is also added to the book of Daniel. The book contains two stories:
 - 1. The first concerns how Daniel proves to the king his great god Bel is a dead idol and that the Bel priests are religious crooks.
 - 2. *Unger’s Bible Handbook* describes this event in the following words:
 The other legend concerns a dragon worshiped in Babylon. Daniel, summoned to do it homage, feeds it a mixture of pitch, hair, and fat, which causes it to explode. The enraged populace compels the King to throw Daniel in the den of lions where he is fed on the sixth day by the prophet Habakkuk, who is angelically transported to Babylon by the hair of his head while carrying food and drink to the reapers in Judea. On the seventh day the King rescues Daniel and throws his would-be destroyers to the hungry lions. (p. 459)
 - N. The Prayer of Manasseh – This is the supposed confessional prayer of wicked King Manasseh of Judah after he was carried away prisoner to Babylon by the Assyrians.
- II. Reasons for Rejecting the Apocrypha – “Why don’t you Protestants have all the books of the Bible in your King James Version?” Often Christians and Bible lovers are confronted with this question by those who have accepted the Apocrypha into their translations of the Bible. Why indeed do we *not* include these 14 books? There are many sound scriptural reasons for not doing this.
- A. The Apocrypha was never included in the Old Testament canon by such recognized authorities as the Pharisees, Ezra the prophet, etc.
 - B. It was never quoted by either Jews or any other New Testament writers.
 - C. The great Jewish historian Josephus excluded it.
 - D. The well-known Jewish philosopher Philo did not recognize it.
 - E. The early church fathers excluded it.
 - F. The Bible translator Jerome did not accept them as inspired, although he was forced by the pope to include them into the Latin Vulgate Bible.

- G. None of the 14 books claim divine inspirations; in fact, some actually disclaim it.
 - H. Some books contain historical and geographical errors.
 - I. Some books teach false doctrine, such as praying for the dead.
 - J. No apocryphal book can be found in any catalogue list of canonical books composed during the first four centuries A.D. In fact, it was not until 1596 at the Council of Trent that the Roman Catholic church officially recognized these books, basically in an attempt to strengthen its position, which had been grievously weakened by the great reformer Martin Luther.
- III. Additional comments on the Apocrypha Norm Geisler and William Nix offer the following summary in regards to the Apocrypha:
- A. Some of the additional books have teaching that is *unbiblical* or heretical. Two of the main doctrines in dispute during the Reformation are supported by the Apocrypha: prayers for the dead (2 Macc. 12:45-46) and salvation by works (Tobit 12:9). The canonical books of the Bible are against praying for the dead (Heb. 9:27; Lk. 16:25-26; 2 Sam. 12:19). They are also strongly against salvation by works (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:5; Gal. 3:11).
 - B. Some of the apocryphal stories are *extrabiblical* and fanciful. The story of Bel and the Dragon is a case in point. In it, the pagan priests of Bel try to deceive Daniel by using a trap door to go in and consume the food offered to Bel to prove that Bel is a “living God” who “eats and drinks every day” (v. 6). So, in order to assist the “living God,” Bel, “in the night the priests came with their wives and children, as they were accustomed to do, and ate and drank everything” (v. 15). The same unauthentic ring may be heard in the other legendary books of Additions to Esther, Prayer of Azariah, and Susanna, as well as Tobit and Judith.
 - C. Much of the teaching of the Apocrypha is *sub-biblical* and, at times, even immoral. Judith was allegedly assisted by God in a deed of falsehood (Judith 9:10, 13), and both Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom teach a morality based on expedience.

Besides this low morality, the sub-biblical nature of the Apocrypha can be seen in its historical and chronological errors. It is claimed that Tobit was alive when the Assyrians conquered Israel (722 B.C.) as well as when Jeroboam revolted against Judah (931 B.C.), yet his total life-span was only 158 years (Tobit 14:11; cf. 1:3-5). Judith speaks of Nebuchadnezzar as reigning in Nineveh instead of Babylon (Judith 1:1). William H. Green concisely summarizes the evidence: “The books of Tobit and Judith abound in geographical, chronological, and historical mistakes, so as not only to

vitate the truth of the narratives which they contain, but to make it doubtful whether they even rest upon a basis of fact.”

- D. Most of the Old Testament Apocrypha was written in Judaism’s *post-biblical* intertestamental period. Because the apocryphal books were written long after Artaxerxes’ time (Malachi’s day, 400 B.C.), namely, after about 200 B.C., then they could not be considered inspired. Not only does the Talmud testify to that end, but the canonical books of the Old Testament also imply it (see Zech. 1:5; Mal. 4:5), as do some of the statements in the apocryphal books themselves (see chap. 14). In fact, there is no claim within the Apocrypha that it is the Word of God. It is sometimes asserted that Ecclesiasticus 50:27-29 lays claim to divine inspiration, but a closer examination of the passage indicates that it is illumination not inspiration that the author claims to have.

Briefly then, with the possible exception of 2 Esdras, all of the apocryphal books are postbiblical for Judaism because they were written after the time that the prophetic spirit had departed from Israel but before the prophet cried, “Make ready the way of the Lord” (Mt. 3:3), and “the fulness of the time came” (Gal. 4:4) when God spoke through His Son.

- E. Finally, all of the books of the Apocrypha are *nonbiblical* or uncanonical because none of them was ever accepted by the people of God as the canonical books were. In order for a book to be canonical, it must satisfy the tests of canonicity:
- a. *Was it written by a “prophet” of God?* There is neither claim nor proof that they were.
 - b. *Was it confirmed by an act of God?* Because the apocryphal books were not written by prophets (see 1 Macc. 9:27), they were obviously not supernaturally accredited by God.
 - c. *Did it have the power of God?* There is nothing transforming about the apocryphal books. Their truth is not exhilarating, except as they are a repetition of canonical truth in other books.
 - d. *Did it tell the truth about God, man, etc.?* As was mentioned above, there are contradictions, errors, and even heresies in the Apocrypha. These books do not stand the test of canonical truth.
 - e. *Was it accepted by the people of God?* There was no continuous or universal acceptance of these books by the church of God.

(*A General Introduction to the Bible*. Moody Press. Chicago. 1991. pp. 270-272, 274)