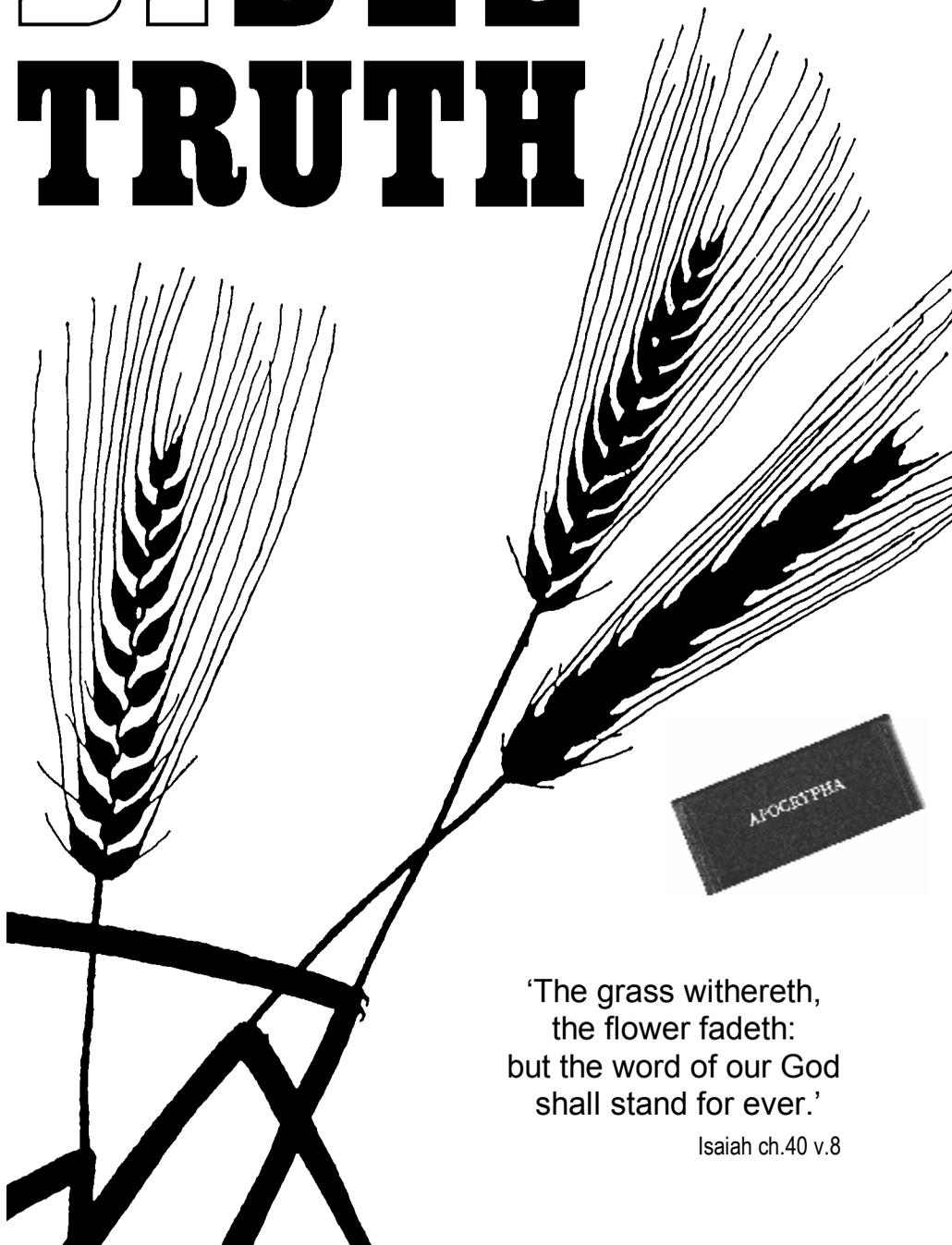


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'The grass withereth,
the flower fadeth:
but the word of our God
shall stand for ever.'

Isaiah ch.40 v.8

The Apocrypha

its background and value

by Paul Boyd-Lee



Various views are expressed by the uninformed on the importance of the Apocrypha which range between, on the one hand it having some value to the Christian reader, to being outright heretical on the other. For this reason it is worth taking a brief look at its background, and how it has been used over the years.

A very simple definition of the word apocrypha might be that it is that body of literature which is not contained in the Bible, but nevertheless is beneficial for the instruction of the Christian. Unfortunately this explanation hardly satisfies all Christians for good doctrinal and historical reasons. The *Oxford Dictionary* in various publications describes this work as being the 'books of the Old Testament included in the Vulgate and Septuagint but not originally written in Hebrew, nor counted genuine by Jews and excluded from the Canon at the Reformation'. This reasoning gives a deeper understanding but even so omits several important aspects.

Origin of the word Apocrypha

Apocrypha is a Greek word derived from 'Apokryphos' meaning to 'hide away' and is actually used a handful of times in the New Testament in this context; for example,

'In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.'

Colossians ch.2 v.3

This particular text is rather appropriate because it describes the attitude of past people towards apocryphal books which were considered to contain wisdom, with only favoured people being permitted to have access to them. Actually the word 'crypt' is a derivation and aptly describes some people's attitude towards apocryphal writings; i.e. below the real church.

Before going further it is important to extend the reader's horizon by introducing the fact that there is an extensive collection of apocryphal books beyond that which people commonly call the Apocrypha.

Edgar Hennecke has written extensively about the New Testament Apocrypha saying that the word 'first comes before us not in connection with the history of the Canon of Scripture but in the Church's conflict with Gnosis and other heresies'. Whilst according to Clement of Alexandria, certain Gnostics appealed to these secret books which were particularly precious to them, but they were books that assuredly were not removed from the Jewish or Christian Lectionary. Later, the Ecclesiastical writers took over the use of the word but gave it a faultfinding connotation. Thus the words Apocrypha and apocryphal have come to mean spurious or untrue, though they began by being terms of dignity and respect, referring to books too sacred and secret to be in everyone's hands. So it is evident that down through the ages controversy has sometimes raged over their importance.

Apocryphal books may be viewed in three senses. First, they were considered as writings kept secret because they were vehicles of esoteric knowledge. Second they were regarded in a derogatory sense, being considered as secondary or even of a questionable nature. Lastly, and this is prevalent today especially in Protestant circles, as containing false, spurious or heretical material.

New Testament Apocrypha and other writings

As previously said, a New Testament Apocrypha exists as well as an Old. The latter might more appropriately be called the Apocrypha Proper because this is the collection of books that people are most likely to come upon; indeed it is found bound in some Bibles, particularly the older printings and current translations.

The New Testament Apocrypha which has so far come to light is even more voluminous than that of the Old. Most of it is considered to have been local in circulation, thus it is impossible to make general statements concerning its origin. Its books include titles such as *The Shepherd of Hermas* which actually also occurs in the *Codex Sinaiticus*. Then there are the *Epistles of Clement*, *The Acts of Paul*, and Gospels of *Thomas*, *Nicodemus*, and *Bartholomew*. In fact there are scores of such books, all of which may be an interesting read but have not been deemed fit to be included in the Canon of Scripture.

This is not all, for most people are oblivious to the numerous other writings related to the Christian faith that are placed in the apocryphal category.

The **pseudepigrapha** is one such and means 'books with false titles'; it refers to books similar in type to those of the Bible whose authors gave them the names of persons of a much earlier period in order to enhance their authority. *3 and 4 Esdras* as well as the *Prayer of Manasses* are among the best known and these also appear in the Common Apocrypha. The authors are in the main, notable men in Hebrew history; but the names were not sufficient of themselves to carry the books into the canonical collection of what we call the Bible. Of course these also include many works which scholars call really spurious. Further, others exist that are actually mentioned in the Canon of Scripture, the Bible, yet are not normally bound in with it. Such would include the *Book of Jasher* (see Joshua ch.10 v.13 & 2 Samuel ch.1 v.18) whereas prophesies of *Enoch* are mentioned in Jude 14-15. There is also *The Book of Jubilees* and even *The Life of Adam and Eve*. These together with a multitude of others make up two or more volumes several thousand pages long, many stories within which are in the proper sense of the word, incredible.

So in its widest sense, the word apocrypha includes a large and variable body of literature in addition to what most people view as 'The Apocrypha', i.e. the one usually associated with the Canon of Scripture. For the rest of this article the word 'Apocrypha' will refer to this latter use of the word.

Is the Apocrypha a valid part of the Bible?

At certain times in history definitions and opinions are important. To say that the Apocrypha was never in the Canon of Scripture would be untrue. It needs to be realised that it was not until the 6th c AD that the Bible started to make its appearance in its various forms that we find today, and later still before it took the name 'Bible'. By this time much of the allocation of sacred writings had been made to the Canon of scripture. So does the Apocrypha form part of Holy Writ? The word Bible means 'the books' and in a general sense, the Apocrypha is of course part of that great collection of books or fragments that make up the life of the Hebrew and later Christian peoples. However, there is more to it than this and besides, the word Bible is intended to mean the 'authoritative' collection of books, thus one arrives at, how does one decide what is authoritative?

The sort of criteria used to judge which ancient writings should be included are their language, inspiration, and how they have been used and quoted by Divines in the past as well as whether acceptable holy men of the past included them in their collections. It is evident that sometimes personal preference or the leanings of a community has had influence on what was selected.

All this being the case, it is worth applying some of the material to hand. First, most of the Apocrypha in its original form is found in Greek rather than Hebrew and so Jewish religious leaders disregarded it as inspired. Indeed some apocryphal writers disclaimed inspiration with certain passages indicating this such as,

'All these things, I say, being declared by Jason of Cyrene in five books ...'

2 Maccabees ch.2 v.23

Early critics like Origen and Clement referred to those apocryphal sections in the Septuagint as 'scripture, Divine scripture' and 'inspired'. More importantly though, the New Testament writers do not quote these books, nor do they definitely refer to them. Further, their existence in the Greek Bible of Christ's time does not seem to have given them any prestige for the Jewish authorities of His day. Later still, the Church Fathers made some use of them by quotation and allusion but were not so emphatic in their favour as to secure their incorporation in the regular canonical books of the Bible.

Though earlier editions of the Authorised Version of the Bible included the Apocrypha, it has been omitted from printings in the last century or so. Nevertheless, it is often found within *The Jerusalem Bible* – that used by Roman Catholics – and thus not unsurprisingly *The Vulgate*. Perhaps worryingly an increasing number of editors of modern translations such as the *New Revised Standard Version* have thought fit to find space for it. This translation is particularly popular amongst theologians and theological colleges at present. I said worryingly because there seems to be an increasing trend to read the Apocrypha during Church services in preference to the Canon of Scripture – The Holy Bible, as we know it. This was not the intention of Christian believers in time past who saw the Apocrypha merely as a supplement to the core books of Holy Writ.

New Testament Apocryphal writings

These have not been received into any generally accepted Canon of Scripture yet their titles and other statements lay claim to be in the

same class of writings. Also from the Form Criticism point of view, elements foreign to acceptable biblical doctrine intrude. It is worth noting that some New Testament apocryphal scripts appear more frequently than others in some well known scriptural collections. For instance, *The Codex Sinaiticus* contains the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, whilst the *Epistle of Clement* is found added to 'Corinthians' in *The Codex Alexandrinus*. *The Codex Claromontanus* not only includes all these but also the '*Revelation of Peter* and *Acts of Paul*'. These really are the only apocryphal books that had any chance of being included in the Bible today.

The final stage of the Palestinian Jewish Canon

This was completed in AD 90 at the Council of Jamnia where all the Apocryphal books as the Established Church defines them, were excluded. Meanwhile, Hellenistic Jews included the Apocrypha in their Canon. Consequently the Christian Church found itself with a dilemma as to whether to use the larger or smaller Canon and the question as to whether the Apocrypha is put in the Bible or not is still unresolved by scholarship alone.

The Apocrypha and denominations

In recent centuries it has largely become a matter of denomination as to whether the Apocrypha be embodied in the Bible or not.

Up to the time of the Reformation the Bible in common use was Jerome's Vulgate and this version being translated from the Septuagint (the Greek-Hellenistic) naturally included the Old Testament Apocrypha. Before the Council of Trent the Roman Catholic Church kept an open mind on the subject and their Canon remained open. At that council though, in 1546, it pronounced the enlarged Canon and included the Apocryphal books as to be deserving in all parts of 'equal veneration'. Within the next century the Reformed churches unanimously agreed in keeping the Canon of Jerome but refused to allow any dogmatic authority of the Books of the Apocrypha. Thus they retained what is known as the Hebrew Canon, i.e. those books which the Jews of Palestine agreed to be authoritative. So by the 17th century the Christians were divided over the Apocrypha's authority. Was it to be the Church of Rome's declaring it to be fully canonical, or the Protestant churches holding that only the Hebrew collection was so? Of the Reformed churches, some held a severe view whilst others held a milder one on the matter.

In fact both parties did not take the whole Apocrypha as a block decision but some portions were considered authoritative whilst others were thought to be spurious. Strictly speaking the Roman Church only set its seal of authority on eleven out of the fourteen books with the *Prayer of Manasses* and *1st & 2nd Esdras* being omitted.

Translators like William Tyndale, Miles Coverdale, and Martin Luther all played their part in establishing modern thinking and assumptions as to whether the Apocrypha is Holy Writ or not. Tyndale translated direct from the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts not including the Apocrypha; Coverdale introduced the Apocrypha into English by editing it himself and although it was published in the first edition of the Authorised Version in 1611, by 1629 it was being left out. It is interesting that Luther placed these books apart under the title 'Apocrypha' but also segregated 'Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation' at the end of the New Testament as 'books of lesser value'. In 1826 as a result of the controversy, the then British and Foreign Bible Society excluded it from all their Bibles.

By this time the abundance of apocryphal literature of all sorts had been excluded from ecclesiastical use which set the term 'apocryphal' free for the writings which were not entirely withdrawn and were included only in the Septuagint.

Importance of the Apocrypha

It would be quite wrong to assume that Romanists value the Apocrypha whilst Protestants can find no use for it. The Old Testament Apocrypha is widely recognised for its historical importance, these 'outside' books light up a crucial period of Jewish and early Christian history - c. 200 BC - AD 100. There is also another reason which has existed from the earliest times. Origen speaks of apocryphal books which were those Jewish books which the synagogue had rejected but which enjoyed extensive popularity. The same could be said for certain portions which are increasingly being found in church lectionaries in this our generation.

The nature of the Old Testament Apocrypha subjects are these.

Historical - 1 & 2 Esdras, 1 Maccabees

Legendary - 1 Baruch, Judith

Apocalyptic - Sirach, Tobit, Prayer of Manasses, Epistle of Jeremy

Historical & Legendary - Additions to Daniel & Esther, 2 Maccabees

This Work also shows us the authority of other scriptural documents as well as testifying to its own contents. Though Protestant churches may not include the Apocrypha in their Bibles today, nevertheless they make use of the contents and advocate reading of them. For example, *Sirach*, otherwise known as *Ecclesiasticus* has been used in the Church since the third century because of its practical use as a Church Lectionary (reading book).

Indeed, the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England and ascribed to by other churches around the world, rule that,

'And the other Books (as Hierome saith) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine; such are these following;'

Then follows a list of the books commonly found in the Apocrypha as set out under the heading 'Some important gleanings...' below.

References from the Apocryphal books are also included in the Table of Lessons found in the Book of Common Prayer. Further, the Apocrypha appears within the *Kings Bible* on which the Coronation Oath is taken. Dr J. Paterson Smyth tells an interesting story about the coronation of King Edward in which the Bible Society sent a magnificently bound Bible as a coronation gift, only it had to be returned as it was without an Apocrypha. This highlights the importance that the Apocrypha has played in the life of England's national Church.

Not only does the Old Testament Apocrypha have its values connected with the Hebrew Canon but also this literature of inter-testamental Judaism is an element of the New Testament background. Likewise, the New Testament Apocrypha resembles the Old by supplementing scanty historical data. These New Testament apocryphal books perhaps do not contain true religion or true history but they were very likely written to reinforce the existing stock of Christian beliefs. This could have been by revealing new doctrines, usually differing from those which held the field. Also, they interpreted old doctrines, again usually in a fresh sense by extolling some special virtue like the Virgin Birth or the Second Coming.

Some important gleanings from the fourteen Books of the Apocrypha are very briefly summarised as follows.

I & II Esdras

This opens with King Josias of Judah and later tells of his wounding at Megiddo. It goes on to describe the destruction of the Temple and later overlaps parts of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The Second Book repeats much of the Patriarch's history and continues into the captivities of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. It contains a valuable reference to the 10 tribes in captivity.

'Those are the ten tribes, which were carried away prisoners out of their own land in the time of Osea [Hosea] ... For through that country there was a great way to go, namely, of a year and a half: and the same region is called Arsereth.'

II Esdras ch.13 vv 40 & 45

Tobit

Tobit the son of Tobiel was married to Anna and he was of the tribe of Naphtali. He confirms the murder of King Sennacherib of Assyria and gives an insight into life among the ten tribes in captivity.

Judith

Judith is described as a remarkably pious woman of Israel.

'But she increased more and more in honour, and waxed old in her husband's house, being an hundred and five years old ... And the house of Israel lamented her seven days ...'

Judith ch.16 vv 23-24

Her book largely describes the expansion of the Assyrian Empire and is famous for the sparing of Israel from Holofernes (Nebuchadnezzar's army captain).

Esther

This work is titled *The rest of the Chapters of the Book of Esther which are found neither in the Hebrew, nor in the Chaldee*. Fittingly it contains a preface to and conclusion of the canonical book of the same name, thus it is about Judah in Babylon. It opens with Mardocheous (Mordecai) having a symbolic dream and then gives more detail of the story of Aman (Haman) trying to destroy the Jews.

The Wisdom of Solomon

This book as might be expected runs parallel to the canonical Book named *Proverbs*.

Ecclesiasticus

This also is similar to *Proverbs* but rather than Solomon's wisdom, it contains that of 'Jesus the Son of Sirach'. For people that find healing does not come by other means, he has this to say.

'Honour a physician with the honour due unto him for the uses which ye may have of him: for the Lord hath created him.

For of the most High cometh healing, and he shall receive honour of the king.

The skill of the physician shall lift up his head: and in the sight of great men he shall be in admiration.

The Lord hath created medicines out of the earth; and he that is wise will not abhor them. ...

And he hath given men skill, that he might be honoured in his marvellous works.'

Ecclesiasticus ch.38 vv 1-4 & 6

Interestingly the famous musical piece 'Let us now praise famous men' comes from the opening verses of the 44th chapter.

Baruch

Herein Baruch the son of Neriah, scribe to Jeremiah gives more warnings to Judah in Babylon.

Song of The Three Holy Children

This is said to follow the third chapter of Daniel and writes about Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (whom Nebuchadnezzar's Prince of the Eunuchs renamed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego). The book gives greater detail about the fiery furnace they endured and after their deliverance contains their wonderful song of praise commonly known in Anglican parlance as 'The Benedicite, Omnia Opera'. In the Book of Common Prayer this canticle is set out in full and is sung between the reading of the Old and New Testament Lessons, usually after Easter.

The History of Susanna

Written by the wife of Joacim, she was,

'... one that feared the Lord. Her parents also were righteous, and taught their daughter according to the law of Moses.

Now Joacim was a great rich man, and had a fair garden joining unto his house: and to him resorted the Jews; because he was more honourable than all others'.

Susanna vv 2-4

Then follows a remarkable story of how she was wrongly accused and the reader is introduced to Daniel the Prophet whose wisdom saved her.

'From that day forth was Daniel had in great reputation in the sight of the people.'

Susanna v.64

The History of the Destruction of Bel and the Dragon

This is said to have been cut off from the end of Daniel. It tells of Daniel in old age exposing the frauds of the priest of Bel by strewing ashes on the floor, to show up footprints.

The Prayer of Manasses

This Manasses is otherwise known as King Manasseh of Judah.

'Wherefore the LORD brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon.

And when he was in affliction, he besought the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers,

And prayed unto him: and he was entreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD he was God.'

2 Chronicles ch.33 vv 11-13

This short book then, of only one chapter, contains the prayer that King Manasseh is said to have uttered and how it was answered.

I & II Maccabees

This writing concerns the people of Judah, Benjamin & Levi during the prophetic 70-week period. Amongst many other snippets of information the first book tells of the formation of the Greek and Roman Empires; the setting up of the Abomination of Desolation (ch.1 v.54); a treaty with Rome (ch.8 vv 19-20); and even permission granted to the Jews to coin money (ch.15 v.6).

In the 2nd Book mention is made of the Scythians (ch.4 v.47); martyrdom is preferred to eating swine's flesh (ch.7 vv 1-2); finally in ch.7 v.23 and ch.12 vv 43-45 the Gospel of the Resurrection of Believers is preached.

Conclusion

The Apocrypha then, has much to offer the reader as background material to the Canon of Scripture that these days is commonly called *The Bible*. In fact it was commonly bound in with some earlier editions of the Authorised Version.

In the past none of the usually available concordances, Crudens, Youngs, or Strongs, contained references for the Apocrypha. However, in 1643 Samuel Newman used the collected works of Clement Cotton to produce, *A Large & Complete Concordance to the Bible in English* which does include it. Nowadays the Internet comes to the rescue with several sites, including Amazon, that offer Apocrypha concordances for sale. www.webchapel-x.com/wcconc though, is most helpful in providing a website where words can be looked up for free.

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