

# The Apocrypha

by Pastor Dan Domke

3/1/08

**What is the Apocrypha?** **Apocrypha** (à-pők'-rĭ-fă) (*hidden secret*). Fourteen books which the Jews and the early Christian fathers considered to be without divine authority. They were included in the Septuagint. All except two are in the Latin Vulgate, the Roman Catholic Bible.<sup>1</sup>

The word 'apocrypha' originally defined books deemed unsuitable for public reading because of their esoteric<sup>2</sup> content; they were regarded as containing secret instruction for the initiates in a religion. It must be pointed out that such secret things are characteristic of the mystery religions of the days before and after Jesus and St. Paul and intrinsically pagan in thought. Nowadays, 'apocrypha' means 'spurious' or even 'heretical.' The term is technically confined to books which some have claimed belong in the Old Testament canon, and most were written in the period 200 BC-AD 100.

## DOES THE APOCRYPHA BELONG IN THE BIBLE?

Now we need to deal with an issue that divides Christians. It concerns the apocrypha—the fourteen or fifteen books written between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100 (after the completion of the Old Testament canon and before the establishment of the New Testament canon) that are considered canonical by the Roman Catholic Church. When we apply the tests listed above to the apocrypha, we find that these books don't pass. I'd like to summarize the reasons Protestantism and Lutheranism has rejected the apocrypha as Scripture. Together these reasons represent a formidable case.

First, the apocrypha was never included in the Hebrew Bible, and it was not even formally included in the Catholic Bible until the Council of Trent in A.D. 1546. The Roman Catholic Church embraced the apocrypha to counter the attacks of Martin Luther and other Reformers who discovered that several aspects of Catholic theology came from the apocrypha, not from the sixty-six books of the Bible. Some of these doctrines concerned *mass for the dead*, *merits acquired through good works*, *purgatory*, *penance*, and *indulgences*. In short, the Roman Catholic Church added the apocrypha to Scripture after the fact to give divine authority to doctrines they created without scripture as a base.

Second, neither Jesus nor the New Testament writers quoted from the apocrypha as Scripture, even though they cited passages from the Old Testament nearly three hundred times. Jude quotes the noncanonical book of Enoch, but the prophecy he cites was originally uttered by the Enoch mentioned in the Bible (Gen. 5:19–24). In any event, it is fallacious to assume that just because the Bible quotes a noncanonical book that that implies it is inspired. Paul quotes pagan poets in Acts 17:28. Certainly we should not conclude from this that these poets or their writings were inspired by the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup>*Bible Study Course: Old testament.* 1994 (87). Aledo, TX: WallBuilders.

<sup>2</sup> *a* : designed for or understood by the specially [initiated](#) alone <a body of esoteric legal doctrine — B. N. Cardozo> *b* : requiring or exhibiting knowledge that is restricted to a small group <esoteric terminology>; *broadly* : difficult to understand <esoteric subjects>

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The recognized apocrypha is:<sup>3</sup>

## The Old Testament Apocrypha

Type of Book	Title	
Didactic	1. The Wisdom of Solomon (c. 30 B.C.)	Book of Wisdom
	2. Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) (132 B.C.)	Ecclesiastes
Religious	3. Tobit (c. 20 B.C.)	Tobias
Romance	4. Judith (c. 150 B.C.)	Judith
Historic	5. I Esdras (c. 150–100 B.C.)	III Esdras*
	6. I Maccabees (c. 110 B.C.)	I Maccabees
	7. II Maccabees (c. 170–110 B.C.)	II Maccabees
Prophetic	8. Baruch (c. 150–50 B.C.)	Baruch Chaps. 1–5
	9. Letter of Jeremiah (c. 300–100 B.C.)	Baruch Chap. 6
	10. II Esdras (C. A.D. 100)	IV Esdras*
Legendary	11. Additions to Esther (140–130 B.C.)	Esther 10:4–16; 24
	12. Prayer of Azariah (second or first century B.C.) (Song of Three Young Men)	Daniel 3:24–90
	13. Susanna (second or first century B.C.)	Daniel 13
	14. Bel and the Dragon (c. 100 B.C.)	Daniel 14
	15. Prayer of Manasseh (second or first century B.C.)	Prayer of Manasseh*

In Luke 11:51, Jesus accuses the scribes of slaying all the prophets God had sent to Israel from the time of Abel to the time of Zechariah. Abel died in Genesis, and Zachariah's death is recorded in 2 Chronicles 24:20–21, the last book in the Hebrew Bible (Malachi is the last book in our English Bible). In making this statement, Jesus expresses the extent of the Old Testament canon, omitting completely any of the apocryphal books.

Third, most of the leading church fathers recognized a distinction between the canonical Hebrew Bible and the noncanonical apocryphal books, and many, such as Origen and Athanasius, spoke out against the apocrypha. Moreover, no local synod or canonical listing included the apocryphal books for almost the first four hundred years of the church's existence.

Fourth, even Jerome, who first translated the Bible from Greek into Latin (the Vulgate—which is the official translation of the Roman Catholic Church) rejected the apocrypha as part of canon.

Fifth, while the apocrypha includes some *valuable historical information*, it contains numerous nonbiblical, fanciful, and heretical doctrines. It also relates numerous historical, geographical, and chronological errors that are totally inconsistent with the inerrancy of canonical Scripture.

Sixth, the apocrypha doesn't claim to be the inspired Word of God, and it was written well past the era of the Old Testament prophets.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Mills, M. (1997, c1987). *A firm foundation for your faith: A discussion on the Bible*. Dallas: 3E Ministries.

\*Books not accepted as canonical at the Council of Trent, 1546. From Norman L. Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1983), 169.

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## Further evidence that the Apocrypha is noncanonical

**APOCRYPHA** — hidden, spurious, the name given to certain ancient books which found a place in the LXX. and Latin Vulgate versions of the Old Testament, and were appended to all the great translations made from them in the sixteenth century, but which have no claim to be regarded as in any sense parts of the inspired Word.

(1.) They are not once quoted by the New Testament writers, who frequently quote from the LXX. Our Lord and his apostles confirmed by their authority the ordinary Jewish canon, which was the same in all respects as we now have it.

(2.) These books were written not in Hebrew but in Greek, and during the “period of silence,” from the time of Malachi, after which oracles and direct revelations from God ceased till the Christian era.

(3.) The contents of the books themselves show that they were no part of Scripture. The Old Testament Apocrypha consists of fourteen books, the chief of which are the Books of the Maccabees (q.v.), the Books of Esdras, the Book of Wisdom, the Book of Baruch, the Book of Esther, Ecclesiasticus, Tobit, Judith, etc. The New Testament Apocrypha consists of a very extensive literature, which bears distinct evidences of its non-apostolic origin, and is utterly unworthy of regard.<sup>5</sup>

The study of the Scriptures has been divided into two branches—*textual*, which has to do with the text itself and its interpretation, and *literary*, which has to do with its literary characteristics and the circumstances of its origin. Under this latter the Old Testament canon was first formed, then the New Testament canon and the final rejection of the Apocrypha by the scholars of the Reformation, because it was not recognized by the most conservative Jews, who were certainly the best authorities on their own sacred writings. The greatest prudence, however, should govern every student in the study of the Scriptures, and at no time should he lose sight of the fact that the purpose of study is to know God better and incorporate His Divine principles as written in the Scriptures into his own life.<sup>6</sup>

It should perhaps be commented that when the New Testament writers talk about ‘the Scriptures’ they are referring to the Old Testament as we know it in substantially its present form. The gathering together of the books of the Old Testament and the recognition of them as Scripture was virtually complete by the first century A.D. We know that the law, the prophets and the writings existed as the three parts of the Jewish Scriptures by the second century B.C.; some doubt remained about the inclusion of one or two minor books among the ‘writings’, but in all essentials the concept that certain books were to be regarded as Scripture, and the collection of the books that make up the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament, were in existence in the first century. The books known to Protestants as the Apocrypha of the Old Testament and to Roman Catholics as the Deuterocanonical Books were not part of the Jewish Scriptures. The Jews also treasured various unwritten ‘traditions of the elders’ (Mark 7:5) as being of equal authority with the written

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<sup>4</sup>Story, D. (1997). *Defending your faith*. Originally published: Nashville: T. Nelson, c1992. (71). Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications.

<sup>5</sup>Easton, M. (1897; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996). *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Illustrations not included in electronic edition. (Electronic edition of the 3rd edition.). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

<sup>6</sup>Ainslie, P. (1908). *Among the Gospels and the Acts being notes and comments covering the life of Christ in the flesh, and the first thirty years' history of His church* (23). Baltimore: Temple Seminary Press.

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Scriptures, but these were never accepted by Jesus and his followers (Mark 7:8, 13). (See further R. T. Beckwith, 'Canon of the Old Testament', in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Leicester, 1980, I, pp. 235–239.)<sup>7</sup>

*Prophetic Silence.* The writings of the Old Testament closed with the prophecy of Malachi, who was contemporary with Ezra and Nehemiah, about 432 B.C. Thus from Malachi to the beginning of the New Testament, a period of a little more than 400 years, no inspired writer appeared. This period is very appropriately called the "Period of Prophetic Silence."

For facts relating to the Jews during this time, reliance must be placed upon Greek and Latin historians, Josephus and books of the Apocrypha (books usually regarded by Protestants as uninspired).<sup>8</sup>

## The Unique View of Lutheran Theology of the Apocrypha

The viewpoint of the *Roman Catholic theologian* is that truth must be determined by both Holy Scripture and the "infallible" traditions of the Church as these are formally set forth in the papal decretals and decisions. Thus he accepts as a source and norm of faith, in addition to Holy Scripture (to which he falsely adds the Apocrypha), something that is foreign and even opposed to Holy Scripture and ascribes to it the same authority as to the Word of God. This erroneous viewpoint proves the antichristian character of papistical theology; for it, too, is in direct opposition to Holy Scripture.<sup>9</sup>

For the divine authority of the Old Testament we have the express testimony not only of the Jewish Church, but also of our omniscient Savior, who without qualification acknowledged the Bible that was in use at His time as canonical, Luke 16:29; 24:44; John 5:39; 10:35; Matt. 5:17. Had the Jewish Church erred regarding its canon, our divine Lord could not have declared it to be "the Scriptures," John 5:39. The Old Testament *Apocrypha* were received as canonical neither by the Jewish Church nor by Christ. The fact that the Roman Catholic Church nevertheless elevated them to canonical rank proves its antichristian character. For the Scriptures of the New Testament we have Christ's direct statement and promise that both His own and the apostles' Word shall be preserved and acknowledged as the infallible norm of faith to the end of time, Matt. 24:35; John 17:20; Eph. 2:20. If the divine Word is not recognized as such, the fault rests not with Scripture, but with the blindness and perverseness of those who decline to believe God's Word.<sup>10</sup>

The question as to whether also the later Christian Church has the authority to declare certain books to be canonical must be denied most emphatically. When the ancient Church differentiated between *Homologumena* (same word – agreed upon) and *Antilegomena*, (the word that was spoken against) this was a purely historical procedure, involving nothing more than the question whether certain books were written by such and such an apostle of Christ or not; but when in the sixteenth century the Council of Trent, contrary to

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<sup>7</sup>Marshall, I. H. (1982). *Biblical Inspiration* (26). Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster.

<sup>8</sup>*Bible Study Course: New testament.* 1993 (xi). Aledo, TX: WallBuilders.

<sup>9</sup>Mueller, J. T. (1999, c1934). *Christian Dogmatics* (electronic ed.) (1). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

<sup>10</sup>Mueller, J. T. (1999, c1934). *Christian Dogmatics* (electronic ed.) (130). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

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the historical judgment of the early Church, declared that also the Apocrypha should rank as canonical, it arbitrarily added to the fixed canon writings which neither Christ nor His holy apostles accepted as such. The later Christian Church cannot change or supplement the established canon, because it is not in a position to furnish the historical evidence which is required to pronounce a certain book canonical or not. The Lutheran dogmatician Chemnitz very correctly called it an antichristian undertaking to eliminate the distinction between the *Homologumena* and the *Antilegomena* which the ancient Christian Church has established.<sup>11</sup>

Christian theologians of all ages are right in saying: If the Jews had been mistaken as to their canon or had falsified it, Christ would not have so unconditionally and without limitation pointed to the Scripture in the hands of the Jews and asserted their inviolability, as He does, e.g., in the words: “They have Moses and

the Prophets; let them hear them” (Luke 16:29); “All things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses, and in the Prophets, and in the Psalms, concerning Me” (Luke 24:44); “Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and they are they which testify of Me” (John 5:39); “The Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35).—There is, however, no historical witness for the Apocrypha of the Old Testament. Neither the Jewish Church nor Christ recognized them as canonical.<sup>13312</sup>

## Non Lutheran View of the Apocrypha

Wycliffe was educated at Oxford University and was held to be an outstanding scholar. He gained a reputation as an independent thinker, renowned for his knowledge and supremacy in Scripture, and was called the ‘Gospel Doctor.’ Wycliffe showed his independence in his attitude toward Roman Catholic doctrines; he condemned the worship of images, denounced indulgences, held that Purgatory had no foundation in Scripture, held that faith in the Savior working by love was the sole condition of salvation, that we are justified by the righteousness of Christ alone, deplored the substitution of the authority of the Pope and Cardinals for the authority of Scripture, and rejected the Apocrypha from the Canon.<sup>13</sup>

## Luther said in the Preface to the Book of Judith 1534<sup>2</sup>

If one could prove from established and reliable histories that the events in Judith really happened, it would be a noble and fine book, and should properly be in the Bible. Yet it hardly squares with the historical accounts of the Holy Scriptures, especially Jeremiah and Ezra. For these show how Jerusalem and the whole country were destroyed, and were thereafter laboriously rebuilt during the time of the monarchy of the

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<sup>11</sup>Mueller, J. T. (1999, c1934). *Christian Dogmatics* (electronic ed.) (130). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

<sup>133</sup>Baier-Walther, I, 149. Gerhard, *Loci (locus “De Scriptura Sacra,”* § 75 sqq.), furnishes much material on the refusal of the early Christian Church to receive the Apocrypha into the canon. Cf. Keil, *Einleitung*, § 216; H. L. Strack, R. E., 2d ed., VII, 442 ff.

<sup>12</sup>Pieper, F. (1999, c1950, c1951, c1953). *Christian Dogmatics* (electronic ed.) (0). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

<sup>13</sup>Mills, M. (1997, c1987). *A firm foundation for your faith : A discussion on the Bible*. Dallas: 3E Ministries.

<sup>2</sup>On the date, cf. WA, DB 2, 547 and Reu, *Luther’s German Bible*, p. 211, over against EA 63, 91.

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Persians who occupied the land.<sup>14</sup> So he concludes as most others the Book of Judith does not belong in the Bible.<sup>15</sup> Luther goes on commenting on several other books from the apocrypha and notes he calls them ‘fiction’.

He says, “but the texts of Susanna, and of Bel, Habakkuk,<sup>68</sup> and the Dragon, seem like beautiful religious fictions, such as Judith and Tobit,<sup>69</sup> for their names indicate as much. For example, Susanna means a rose,<sup>70</sup> that is, a nice pious land and folk, or a group of poor people among the thorns; Daniel means a judge,<sup>71</sup> and so on. Be the story as it may, it can all be easily interpreted in terms of the state, the home, or the devout company of the faithful.<sup>16</sup>”

## “Preface to the First Book of Maccabees 1533”<sup>58</sup>

This is another book not to be found in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>59</sup> Yet its words and speech adhere to the same style as the other books of sacred Scripture. This book would not have been unworthy of a place among them, because it is very necessary and helpful for an understanding of chapter 11 of the prophet Daniel.<sup>60</sup> For the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy in that chapter, about the abomination and misfortune which was going to befall the people of Israel, is here described—namely, Antiochus Epiphanes—and in much the same way that Daniel [11:29–35] speaks of it: a little help and great persecution by the Gentiles and by false Jews, which is what took place at the time of the Maccabees. This is why the book is good for us Christians to read and to know. [Vol. 35, Page 351]<sup>17</sup>

Luther makes additional positive comments in regard our historical understanding of the times the Prophet Daniel and King Antiochus Epiphanes. He says Maccabees is history and helpful, but once again he refuses to call it either inspired or scripture, just a secular account of history which is always a good thing to know.

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<sup>14</sup>Luther, M. (1999, c1960). *Vol. 35: Luther's works, vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (35:337). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

<sup>15</sup>Luther, M. (1999, c1960). *Vol. 35: Luther's works, vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (35:354). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

<sup>68</sup>The subordinate role of the prophet Habakkuk in Bel and the Dragon (verses 33–39), as well as the reference to him in the opening verse of the Septuagint text (Oesterley, *An Introduction to the Books of the Apocrypha*, p. 290) may have led to Luther’s inclusion of the name in the title.

<sup>69</sup>Cf. pp. 337–339, 345.

<sup>70</sup>Susanna is a Greek adaptation of the Hebrew *shoshannah*, a lily or lily-like flower.

<sup>71</sup>Daniel is traditionally derived from the Hebrew word *din* meaning to judge, and so means “God is my judge.”

<sup>16</sup>Luther, M. (1999, c1960). *Vol. 35: Luther's works, vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (35:354). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

<sup>58</sup>On the date cf. WA, DB 2, 531, and Reu, *Luther’s German Bible*, p. 211, over against EA 63, 104.

<sup>59</sup>Except for some parts of I Esdras, none of the Apocrypha mentioned by Luther is found in the Hebrew Bible. Except for II Esdras all of them are found, however, in the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Oesterley, *An Introduction to the Books of the Apocrypha*, p. 6.

<sup>60</sup>See Luther’s interpretation of Daniel 11 in his Preface to Daniel in this volume, pp. 306–313.

<sup>17</sup>Luther, M. (1999, c1960). *Vol. 35: Luther's works, vol. 35 : Word and Sacrament I* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (35:350). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

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In keeping with early Christian tradition, Luther also excluded the Apocrypha of the Old Testament. Sorting them out of the canonical books, he appended them at the end of the Old Testament with the caption, “These books are not held equal to the Scriptures, but are useful and good to read.”<sup>26</sup> Because they were not in the Septuagint, Luther omitted III and IV Maccabees as well as III and IV Esdras. But he also cut out I and II Esdras because “they contain nothing that one could not find better in Aesop or in still slighter works.”<sup>2718</sup>

## Preface to the Book of Baruch 1534<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, the book’s chronology does not agree with the [accepted] histories.<sup>52</sup> Thus I very nearly let it go with the third and fourth books of Esdras,<sup>53</sup> [Vol. 35, Page 350] books which we did not wish to translate into German because they contain nothing that one could not find better in Aesop<sup>54</sup> or in still slighter works. As to the Fourth Book of Esdras, St. Jerome says it contains vain fancies,<sup>55</sup> nor did Lyra<sup>56</sup> want to comment on it. Besides, it does not exist in Greek.<sup>57</sup>

Whoever is so inclined may and should translate them; only let him not include them among these [recognized] books. Baruch, however, we shall let run with the pack because he writes so vigorously against idolatry and sets forth the Law of Moses.<sup>19</sup>

In regard to Baruch, note what Luther says of this book. Baruch is little better than Aesop suggesting that Baruch is nothing but a fable. The evidence is mounting toward concluding these maybe nice, sometimes helpful books to read like any other literature and history, but does not measure up to that of inspired, revealed, infallible and inerrant Holy Scripture.

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<sup>26</sup> See p. 337, n. 1.

<sup>27</sup> See pp. 349–350.

<sup>18</sup> Luther, M. (1999, c1960). *Vol. 35: Luther's works, vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (35:232). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

<sup>50</sup> On the date cf. WA, DB 2, 547 and Reu, *Luther's German Bible*, p. 211, over against EA 63, 103.

<sup>52</sup> The historical discrepancies between Baruch and the canonical books, which point to a date of composition sometime after A.D. 70, are listed in Oesterley, *An Introduction to the Books of the Apocrypha*, pp. 258–260.

<sup>53</sup> According to the terminology of the Vulgate, which Luther is here using, I and II Esdras are called III and IV Esdras, while the canonical Ezra and Nehemiah are called I and II Esdras (Esdras being the Latin name for Ezra). Even the Council of Trent on April 8, 1546, excluded III and IV Esdras from the list of apocryphal books which it officially declared to be “sacred and canonical” Scripture for the Roman Catholic Church; it did not exclude Baruch. Cf. Luther’s negative estimate of IV Esdras in his 1522 Preface to Revelation, p. 398.

<sup>54</sup> Luther’s high regard for Aesop’s *Fables* led to his translating fourteen of them, also in the year 1530. Berger, *op. cit.*, III, 99–114. WA 50 (432), 440–460.

<sup>55</sup> See Jerome’s preface to Ezra. Migne 28, 1403.

<sup>56</sup> In his monumental *Postillae perpetuae*, Nicholas of Lira significantly avoided IV Esdras. Cf. p. 290, n. 128.

<sup>57</sup> Apart from some reminiscences and three direct quotations in early church writings, no traces of the Greek version of IV Esdras have been preserved. Oesterley, *An Introduction to the Books of the Apocrypha*, p. 159.

<sup>19</sup> Luther, M. (1999, c1960). *Vol. 35: Luther's works, vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (35:349). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

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## **Final Conclusions**

The Apocrypha is interesting reading and should not be kept from pious believing Christians. Second, it must be remembered that some of the histories are more trustworthy than others. Third, it is neither inspired nor sacred scripture. They are not revealed, inerrant, nor infallible. Therefore in preaching, the Bible must be the basis for preaching law and gospel, but illustrations and some points of history can be quoted from the Apocrypha to illustrate a biblical point this to also include other non-canonical books.

Well, that is my two cents for the day on this subject. Pastor Domke