

The Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: An Evangelical View

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Evangelicalism is on many points so diverse a movement that it would be presumptuous to speak of the evangelical view of the Apocrypha. Two axes of evangelical diversity are particularly important for the subject at hand. First, while many evangelicals belong to independent and/or congregational churches, many others belong to movements within national or mainline churches. (If we include charismatics among evangelicals—an alignment with which most charismatics would concur—then in the worldwide movement independent or congregational evangelicals make up the overwhelming majority of evangelicals.) These independent evangelical groups often reflect, as we shall see, rather different perspectives on the Apocrypha from those of evangelicals in mainline or national churches. Second, more than many religious movements, evangelicalism embraces an extraordinary range of intellectual training and awareness. Thus not a few evangelical leaders at the lower end of the educational spectrum will scarcely have heard of the Apocrypha, much less read it; if they have heard of it, it will only be as something bad connected somehow with Catholics and their view of revelation and tradition. But at the upper end of the educational spectrum, though the Apocrypha will not be accepted as Scripture, it is known, sometimes studied, and universally recognized to form part of the matrix of the world in which the New Testament came to birth.

Evangelicals of all stripes adopt the classic Protestant view that the Apocrypha should not be considered part of the canon of Scripture. What Mallau says of Baptists could be said of all evangelicals: they “took over the essential theological decisions of the Reformation . . . [and] said no more than other Protestants about deuterocanonical writings.”¹ This means, of course, that they think of these books as “apocryphal” and not as “deuterocanonical.” The latter term was coined by Sixtus of Sienna in 1566 to distinguish two groups of books. On this view, the “protocanonical” books are the books of Scripture received as inspired by the entire Church from the beginning, while “deuterocanonical” refers to those books and parts of books whose authority and inspiration came to be recognized a little later, after the matter had been debated by certain Fathers. Thus for Roman Catholics, “deuterocanonical” does not carry overtones of “less than canonical” or “second tier of canonicity,” still less “apocryphal”; for Protestants, “Apocrypha” seems still to be the best designation. The list of canonical Old Testament books accepted by the Council of Trent in 1546 includes all those fourteen or fifteen books normally referred to collectively as the Apocrypha, minus the Prayer of Manasseh and 1 and 2 Esdras. Traditionally, Protestants have restricted themselves, so far as the Old Testament is concerned, to the books of the Hebrew canon. (The nomenclature is problematic, because some of the Apocrypha almost certainly sprang from Semitic originals. But it is clear enough what is meant.)

Objections to Canonicity

Because most of the fifteen books of the Apocrypha are found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint (LXX), and it was the Greek form of the Old Testament that circu-

1. Hans-Harold Mallau, “The Attitude of the Baptists to the Deuterocanonical Writings,” *The Apocrypha in Ecumenical Perspective*, UBS Monograph Series 6, ed. Siegfried Meurer, tr. Paul Ellingworth (Reading: UBS, 1992) 129.

lated widely in the Hellenistic church, many have argued that (a) the Septuagint represents an Alexandrian (as opposed to a Palestinian) canon, and that (b) the early church, using a Greek Bible, therefore clearly bought into this alternative canon. In any case, (c) the Hebrew canon was not “closed” until Jamnia (around 85 C.E.), so the earliest Christians could not have thought in terms of a closed Hebrew canon. “It seems therefore that the Protestant position must be judged a failure on historical grounds.”²

But serious objections are raised by traditional Protestants, including evangelicals, against these points. (a) Although the LXX translations were undertaken before Christ, the LXX evidence that has come down to us is both late and mixed. An important early manuscript like Codex Vaticanus (4th cent.) includes all the Apocrypha except 1 and 2 Maccabees; Codex Sinaiticus (4th cent.) has Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, and Ecclesiasticus; another, Codex Alexandrinus (5th cent.) boasts all the apocryphal books plus 3 and 4 Maccabees and the Psalms of Solomon. In other words, there is no evidence here for a well-delineated set of additional canonical books. (b) More importantly, as the LXX has come down to us, it is a Christian collection that has undergone the move from scrolls to codices (i.e. books bound like ours, with many “books” within the one volume). This meant that for the first time things were being bound together that had never been bound together before. As Metzger puts it:

Books which heretofore had never been regarded by the Jews as having any more than a certain edifying significance were now placed by Christian scribes in one codex side by side with the acknowledged books of the Hebrew canon. Thus it would happen that what was first a matter of convenience in making such books of secondary status available among Christians became a factor in giving the impression that all of the books within such a codex were to be regarded as authoritative.³

(c) Ancient sources yield very little evidence supporting the view that Alexandria produced its own canon, and the notion that diaspora Judaism went its own way in this respect faces some extraordinarily difficult historical criticism.⁴ (d) Two Alexandrian church Fathers, Origen and Athanasius, give lists of Old Testament books that differ but little from the traditional Jewish reckoning.⁵ (e) The Council of Jamnia may have discussed the status of one or two books (as Luther did a millennium and a half later); there is no convincing evidence that Jamnia actually “closed” the Hebrew canon.⁶ (f) Despite arguments to the contrary,⁷ the New Testament writers rarely allude to books of the Apocrypha, and do not cite them as Scripture, the way they do with Old Testament books.

2. Marvin E. Tate, “Old Testament Apocalyptic and the Old Testament Canon,” *Review and Expositor* 65 (1968) 353. Cf. also A. C. Sundberg, Jr., “The Protestant Old Testament Canon: Should It Be Re-Examined?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 28 (1966) 199.

3. Bruce M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957) 178.

4. Albert C. Sundberg, Jr., *The Old Testament of the Early Church* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964) 52, passim.

5. For Origen, see Euseb. H.E. 4.26; Athanasius, Ep. List. 39.

6. See, for example, Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Hamden: Archon, 1976) 121-124; Jack P. Lewis, “What Do We Mean by Jabneh?” *Journal of Bible and Religion* 32 (1964) 132; Robert C. Newman, “The Council of Jamnia and the Old Testament Canon,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1976) 319-349; Gyunter Stemberger, “Die sogenannte ‘Synode von Jabne’ und das fröhe Christentum,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 29 (1977) 14-21; D. E. Aune, “On the Origins of the ‘Council of Javneh’ Myth,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991) 491-493; Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon and the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 275; cf. David Kraemer, “The Formation of Rabbinic Canon: Authority and Boundaries,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991) 613-630.

7. A not uncommon example is found in Peter Stuhlmacher, “The Significance of the Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha for the Understanding of Jesus and Christology,” in *The Apocrypha in Ecumenical Perspective*, op. cit. 2. He says that the “most important evidence” that the NT cites the Apocrypha as Scripture is: Mk. 10.19, quoting Ex. 20.12-16 and Deut. 5.16-20, and then Sir. 4.1; 2 Tim. 2.19, quoting Num. 16.5, but also Sir. 17.26 (Stuhlmacher offers two more cases of “quoting” pseudepigraphical sources, which need not concern us here). These two instances, the “most important evidence,” are not convincing. Even if the words “do not defraud” (Mk. 10.19) are drawn from Sir. 4.1 (and I am uncertain that this is the case, for certainly the entire phrase in Sirach is not cited), the primary reference to the decalogue (Ex. 20 and Deut. 5) is unambiguous; the additional words may be part of common halakic expansion. The second quotation in 2 Tim. 2.19 is not at all close to Sir. 17.26. Many commentators think it is a generalized summary of the exhortation in Num. 16.26, using language found elsewhere in the OT; the first part of it is reminiscent of the LXX of Joel 3.5.

During the first two centuries or so, most Greek and Latin church fathers, including Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Cyprian (none of whom knew Hebrew) quote passages from the Apocrypha as “Scripture”: undoubtedly these books were circulating, and in some cases were revered. Only a few fathers at this stage were interested in the limits of the Palestinian Jewish canon (e.g. Melito of Sardis) or the differences between, say, the Hebrew text of Daniel and the additional story of Susanna in the Greek version (e.g. Africanus). The turning point came with Jerome, who in his Latin translation followed the order of the Hebrew canon and by means of prefaces drew attention to the separate category of the apocryphal books. Later copyists of the Latin Vulgate did not always preserve these prefaces, with the result that during the medieval period the Western church customarily regarded these additional books as part of Scripture.

For evangelicals, these disputes cannot be dismissed as arcane bits of obscure history. Because of their high view as to the nature of Scripture, the delineation of the boundaries of Scripture is of fundamental importance. It is not simply that the prophetic “Thus says the LORD,” ubiquitous in many strands of the Old Testament, is conspicuous by its absence from the Apocrypha; it is something more. Since evangelicals strongly insist that their beliefs and doctrine be grounded in Scripture, to exclude the Apocrypha is to unseat, say, the doctrine of purgatory, which finds precious little support outside the Apocrypha.

The Value of the Apocrypha

Yet despite these negative judgments about the Apocrypha, informed evangelicals have important reasons for knowing these books well. These may be grouped into three categories, though the latter two overlap.

First, those who belong to Protestant national or mainline traditions are aware that within their traditions the books of the Apocrypha are designated with some such encomium as “useful to be read in the churches” or the like. The Anglican Book of Common Prayer, for example, from 1549 onwards, included prescribed lessons from the Apocrypha. Those who wished to forbid the practice, on the grounds that the sufficiency of Scripture might be jeopardized, were told by the Bishops of the Savoy Conference (1661) that the same objection could be raised against sermons. The comment was both astute and disingenuous: astute, because the sufficiency of Scripture was never designed to shut down the reading of all other material, and disingenuous, because the real issue was not the mere reading of other material, but the reading of it in a context in which confusion between canonical and extra-canonical authority might prevail. In any case, these branches of Evangelicalism have certain historical and denominational reasons for knowing the Apocrypha, indeed for knowing it well enough to distinguish it from Scripture. All of this must be contrasted with Trent, which pronounced its anathema on anyone who “does not accept as sacred and canonical the aforesaid books in their entirety and with all their parts, as they have been accustomed to be read in the Catholic Church and as they are contained in the old Latin Vulgate Edition.” For accuracy’s sake, one should note that “the aforesaid books” excluded 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh even though they had been included in some manuscripts of the Vulgate. In the official Vulgate edition of 1592, these are printed as an appendix after the New Testament, “lest they should perish altogether.” The phrase “in their entirety and with all their parts” refers to the Letter of Jeremiah, read as ch. 6 of Baruch, the Additions of Esther with Esther, and the various additions to Daniel—Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon—with Daniel.

Second, precisely because of their high view of Scripture, evangelicals are perennially interested in the dimensions of texts that purport to provide historical information and perspectives relating to the times and places embraced by Scripture. Although, like all good readers, evangelicals are interested in different literary genres, not for them an approach to, say, narrative, that treats a purportedly historical

narrative text as if it can be properly interpreted by studying only its narrative properties while ignoring its extra-textual referents. While acknowledging the cultural “locatedness” of any interpreter, not for them the unqualified open-endedness of some postmodern readers. This means that sources, not least the Apocrypha, that help fill in the large holes in our knowledge of Second Temple Judaism—the history, culture, social structures, and beliefs of what used to be more commonly called the intertestamental period—will be treasured.

The issue is not simply the sequence of events that bring us from the Persian period to first-century Palestine under the Roman superpower, but how outlooks, values, and structures of thought and of society changed. Thus devotional literature like the Prayer of Manasseh is as important as historical literature like 1 Maccabees and 1 Esdras; the liturgical cast of the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men is of as great interest as the legendary material in Bel and the Dragon; the view of women in Judith and Susanna is as compelling as the fiery rhetoric and exaggerated numbers in 2 Maccabees; a didactic narrative like Tobit, with its indebtedness not only to the Old Testament but to sources like the Story of Ahikar, the fable of the Grateful Dead and a tractate of the god Khons, is as informative as the quite different didactic books of wisdom literature, Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon. It has even been suggested that the Letter of Jeremiah provided later writers with a model of how letters—that most common form of communication in the ancient world—might be used for religious purposes, a point of no small interest to readers of the letters of the New Testament.

Third, allied with the interest of evangelicals in the historical dimensions of the biblical texts (and therefore of extrabiblical texts that clarify that dimension) is their interest in the theological dimension. Evangelicals are invariably interested in how things hold together, not merely in atomistic exegesis. Moreover, they hold to the notion that revelation is normally mediated through the language and experience of particular people in particular times and places. That means that if from the perspective of canonical authority they exclude the Apocrypha, from the perspective of understanding the language and categories of the New Testament writers they cannot afford to do so. The Apocrypha constitutes an important part of the historical and theological matrix in which the New Testament came to birth, along with, of course, material such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo and Josephus, the pseudepigrapha, the earlier strands of the rabbinic corpus, the vast Graeco-Roman corpus, and more.

This reality prompts many important questions that have a critical bearing on biblical interpretation, and thus on theological structures. To what extent do the accounts of the Maccabean martyrs provide a model for vicarious suffering? How do linguistic usage and common beliefs help shape Christological titles in the New Testament? To what extent does the propensity of this literature (not least the Apocrypha) to elevate God and emphasize his transcendence, sometimes at the expense of his personal engagement, open up more space for angels and other mediators? To what extent do the three so-called traditional acts of piety—almsgiving, fasting, and prayer—come to fruition in this literature, and what is their relation to, say, the Sermon on the Mount?

However strongly evangelicals, as part of the larger Protestant tradition, reject the Apocrypha as Scripture, they can no more dismiss this corpus from all consideration than they can write off the world and culture into which the Christ was born, and in which the New Testament was written.