V. Apocryphal Literature

A. Introduction
1. The word “apocrypha” means “hidden away,” and came to refer to a category of books that were separated from the canonical books.¹
2. The collection of books (and additions to existing Old Testament books) that are included among the Old Testament books by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians are known as “The Apocrypha,” or “Old Testament Apocrypha.”
3. Another term for the collection is the “deuterocanonical books;” that is, the books that are part of a “second canon.”
   a. These books are regarded as having a secondary (lesser) status with respect to canonicity and authority.
   b. They are included among the biblical documents but are acknowledged to be different and inferior to the canonical books.
4. Literature from the early Christian era that was rejected as canonical by the church is today known as New Testament Apocrypha (or apocryphal literature of the New Testament era).

B. Old Testament Apocrypha
1. The Old Testament Apocrypha are examples of a larger class of Jewish literature that arose in the period known as the Intertestamental period (ca. 350 B.C.E.-100 C.E.).
2. The specific books and additions of the Apocrypha are: 1 Esdras, 2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Baruch, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, the Letter of Jeremiah, the Prayer of Mannaseh, 1-2 Maccabees, and the additions to Daniel, Ezra, and Esther.²
3. At least some of these books were regarded by some Jewish groups as holy books, though not necessarily carrying the same level of inspiration or authority as those accorded canonical status.
   a. Note, for instance, that fragments from 1-2 Maccabees were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.
   b. Josephus also remarks about the difference in how the books of the Scripture were regarded by Jews when compared to other literature, such as 1 Maccabees, with which he is familiar.
4. The Old Testament apocrypha were known in the early church and included in at least some manuscripts of the Septuagint.
   a. The early church found some passages from the Apocrypha useful in their disputes with Jews over the identity of the Messiah and the message of the gospel. By prooftexting, they were able to argue that the Apocryphal texts prophetically predicted the sufferings of Christ.
b. The Christians’ use of the Apocrypha gave the Jews even stronger warrant to reject the Apocrypha as uninspired and therefore not a part of their canon of Scripture.

5. Although there were disputes among the Christian churches, eventually both the eastern and western branches of the early church accepted the Apocrypha within their Old Testament canon.
   a. The Eastern church, which mostly read the Bible in Greek, followed the Septuagint and included the Apocrypha as canonical. Consequently, the Eastern Orthodox churches today continue to include the Apocrypha within their Old Testament canon.
   b. The Western church, which mostly read the Bible in Latin, was initially divided.
      (1) Jerome (ca. 347-420), the biblical scholar who knew both Greek and Hebrew, and who was familiar with the Jewish canon, made a clear separation between the canonical books and the books of the Apocrypha.
         (a) The canonical books were inspired and useful for determining church doctrine.
         (b) The Apocryphal books were “ecclesiastical books,” acceptable for reading among the faithful and useful for edification and moral instruction.
      (2) Augustine (354-430), the theologian, argued that all of the Apocrypha should be regarded as canonical.
      (3) The Western church followed Augustine (despite using Jerome’s translation of the Bible in Latin!), and formally codified this practice at the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Consequently, the Roman Catholic church today continues to include the Apocrypha within the Old Testament canon.

6. The Protestant Reformers, following the example of the Jews, rejected the Apocrypha as sacred Scripture.
   a. Lutherans and Anglicans continued to allow the books of the Apocrypha to be read as useful and edifying literature, but distinguished them from the rest of the canon.
   b. Most other Protestants, following the lead of the Reformed churches, disregarded the books of the Apocrypha, placing them on the level of ordinary religious literature (i.e., perhaps worthy of reading, but lacking any authority or inspiration).

C. New Testament Apocrypha
   1. A wide variety of Christian and quasi-Christian apocryphal literature was produced from the late first century through the third century C.E.
      a. Some of this literature is still extant, though much of it exists only in fragmentary form
      b. Some is even more obscure, existing only as quotations in other works which themselves only exist in fragmentary form.
   2. Scholars categorize these works by their basic genres:
      a. Gospels: These works attempted to fill in much of the missing information about Jesus’ life that the canonical gospels omitted, such as events in his childhood.
(1) Some tried to embellish his reputation with fantastic accounts of miraculous appearances after his resurrection.

(2) Others, especially those written by Gnostics, claimed to have secret teachings that were not given to the Twelve, but which were passed on through a line of other specially chosen disciples.

b. Acts: Following the pattern of the canonical Acts, these works purported to tell the stories of the ministries of the other apostles.

(1) Largely fictitious, though perhaps containing some authentic traditions, these works may be the sources of some of the earliest traditions about the lives of the apostles that are still extant.

(2) For instance, *The Acts of Paul*, written in the late second century by a presbyter from the province of Asia contains a description of the Apostle Paul that may hearken back to an eyewitness of Paul’s ministry: “a man, small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness; for now he appeared like a man, and now he had the face of an angel.”

c. Epistles: These include earlier Jewish works (such as the Letter of Jeremiah) as well as pseudonymous letters that seek to borrow apostolic authority for the author’s ideas.

d. Apocalypses: Christian writers often used the genre of apocalyptic, already widely used among the Jews and familiar to Christians from the book of Revelation, to produce works claiming to give prophetic insight concerning the future.

3. When compared with the canonical New Testament books, these apocryphal books are decidedly inferior.

a. They tend toward exaggeration and speculation, especially of the miraculous or bizarre.

b. Many borrow language from the canonical books, often in support of what are otherwise questionable or heretical ideas.

c. Harrison’s conclusion is instructive: “the New Testament apocryphal writings preserve at best a series of debased traditions about the Founder and teachings of early Christianity. At worst, the narratives are entirely devoid of historical value and in some respects are alien to New Testament spirituality. Even where they seem to support a tradition current in some part of the church, the evidence they present is inferior to what can often be had from other sources.”

4. Certain religious writings by Christians were widely read and highly regarded. Three in particular were considered for a time by some parts of the church to be canonical: *The Didache* (also known as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*), *The Epistle of Barnabas*, and *The Shepherd of Hermas*.

a. Each of these books was eventually denied entrance into the canon, primarily on two counts:

   (1) They were regarded as having been written too recently; i.e., after the apostolic period, and therefore could not claim apostolic authority.
(2) They could not be clearly linked with an apostolic figure as the source of the writing.

b. Note, for instance, the following comment from the author of the Muratorian Canon (ca. 180 C.E.) concerning *The Shepherd of Hermas*: “The Shepherd was written very recently, in our own times in the city of Rome, when bishop Pius his brother was occupying the chair of the city of Rome; and therefore, while it is proper for it to be read, it cannot be publicly read in church to the people, to the end of time, either among the prophets [i.e., as belonging to the Old Testament], whose number is complete, or among the apostles [i.e., as belonging with the New Testament].”

c. Church leaders continued to commend these books—the author of the Muratorian Canon, which listed the authoritative books of the New Testament, regarded *Hermas* as a genuine prophecy—but nevertheless concluded that they could not be accorded the same status as those books which came from the apostles.
Endnotes

1. Among some groups, certain books were regarded as containing esoteric teaching that was reserved for the spiritually elite, and therefore was “hidden” from the common people. More often, however, religious authorities viewed the contents of certain books as offensive or dangerous, and therefore worthy of being kept from public view, so as not to corrupt the faith by introducing heterodox ideas or undermining the authority of the inspired Scriptures. Consequently, these other books were labeled as apocryphal in order to categorize them as non-inspired. See further, R. K. Harrison, “Old Testament and New Testament Apocrypha,” in *The Origin of the Bible*, updated ed., Philip Comfort, ed. (Carol Stream, Ill.: 2012), 79-94, 82-84.


6. Both *The Didache* and *The Shepherd of Hermas* included a section known as “The Two Ways.” This section may have been derived from an earlier Jewish writing, and probably circulated independently, or in a different form, prior to its incorporation into the two books.


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