OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY
Lesson 52
APOCRYPHA – Part One

I.   BACKGROUND

What does "Apocrypha" mean?

Apocrypha is from a Greek word that means "hidden away." This term has both a positive and a negative connotation. "Apocrypha" is a positive term for those who approve of the books because the books were "hidden" from common use for being too profound for ordinary people to appreciate. "Apocrypha" is a negative term for those who do not approve of the books because the books were "hidden" away because they were heretical.

When we use the term in this class, we will be referencing the books that are part of most Catholic Bibles, but not most Protestant Bibles. The term also has an extended meaning. There are a number of additional books written in the Bible age that some call "apocryphal." Some of these books were written before Christ and they carry the term "Pseudepigrapha."[1] There are a number of books written after Christ that are sometimes called the "New Testament Apocrypha." This class will not deal with either the Pseudepigrapha or the New Testament Apocrypha in any detail right now because neither were ever considered part of "scripture" by any part of orthodox Christianity or Judaism. Both the Christian community and Judaism, however accorded these books a certain measure of respect. The New Testament book of Jude, for example, references and quotes from the Pseudepigrapha.

So what exactly is the Old Testament Apocrypha?

The Old Testament Apocrypha refers to 14 or 15 books[2] that were written between 200 B.C. and 100 A.D. The titles of these books in the Revised Standard Version are:

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[1] The "Pseudepigrapha" references a group of writings that were written under pseudonyms. "Pseud" comes from the Greek word for "false" and "epigrapha" comes from the Greek for "writing."

[2] Many English versions of the Apocrypha combine "The Letter of Jeremiah" into the book "Baruch" as the last chapter of Baruch.

1. The First Book of Esdras
2. The Second Book of Esdras
3. Tobit
4. Judith
5. The Additions to the Book of Esther
6. The Wisdom of Solomon
7. Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach
8. Baruch[2]
9. The Letter of Jeremiah[2]
10. The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men
11. Susanna
12. Bel and the Dragon
13. The Prayer of Manasseh
14. The First Book of the Maccabees
15. The Second Book of the Maccabees

Why do some believe these works to be canonical (part of Holy Scripture) and others do not?

This question is not easily answered. We must remember that all of the thinking and reasons behind what is considered canon is unknown at this point in history. Still, we are not without basic knowledge that allows an intelligent decision on these matters. To address the issue of the Apocrypha intelligently, we first need to ask the question:

What process produced the Old Testament canon we have and use?

The Jews divided our Old Testament scriptures into three sections:

1. The Torah ("The Law"), also known as the Five Books of Moses;
2. The Prophets ("Former Prophets" – Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings and "Later Prophets" – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve Minor Prophets); and
3. The Writings (the remaining books in our Old Testament).

Most likely, these books were accorded status as scripture at different times. The Torah was undoubtedly recognized as scripture when the Jews returned from captivity in 538 B.C. There is also no question that the Prophets were regarded as scripture by the time of the priesthood of Simon II (219 B.C.). Most scholars believe The Writings were the last section to receive the status of scripture. A number of these books were probably recognized as scripture as early as the Prophets. Some were still in discussion by certain Jews into the later part of the first century A.D.

Around 90 A.D., a number of Jewish scholars gathered at Jamnia for a council meeting to establish the status of scripture. When the Temple was burned in 70 A.D., the manuscripts housed in the Temple were burned and destroyed.[3] It was a sensitive time for the Jews to verify the status of those books to be considered scripture. Long and approved usage of the books we consider the Old Testament served to confirm the decision of the Jewish council at Jamnia as to scripture's authenticity and authority.[4] The council's recognition of what we have as our Old Testament was not anything new. It was, rather, a confirmation of a practice that had been around some time.

There are a number of other books that are referenced in the Old Testament that were not only not considered scripture, they were also not even copied sufficiently to where we have any copies today. If we wanted to read, for example, for the Book of Jashar (referenced in Joshua 10:13 and II Samuel 1:18), we would not be successful! Similarly the book of the Wars of the Lord (see Numbers 21:14) is nowhere to be found. These and other writings of the Jews were never accorded adequate status to ensure their survival through the ages. Of scripture itself, however, we have an incredible number of transcripts, dating back to 200 B.C. (found in the caves around the Dead Sea).

Some rabbis have set out various criterions they believe were used for establishing a book as scripture. Perhaps the most common criteria dealt with time of composition. The "prophetic age" was understood to have lasted from Moses until the time of Alexander the Great. Therefore, it is reasoned, any book written AFTER Alexander the Great was deemed to be, by definition, an uninspired creation of man.

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[3] This was not the first time that the Temple was destroyed with an accompanying destruction of the scripture scrolls. In 168 B.C., Antiochus Epiphanes sent an army into Jerusalem with orders to eradicate all traces of Judaism. The Temple was profaned and the scrolls and scriptures were burned.

[4] There was some debate over whether Ezekiel, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, and Esther belonged in the canon, but the general consensus was that these were scripture.

Now let's consider the question of who accords scriptural status to the Apocrypha. Let's do so by a historical overview of the books.

II.   HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

These books were written in the Hebrew or Aramaic languages. Jewish writings were being translated into Greek for use in the dispersion[3] because most of these Jews no longer had Hebrew as a primary language. The greatest core of these translations from Hebrew/Aramaic into Greek came from Alexandria, Egypt. A great number of Jews had settled there dating back even before the fall of Judah in 587 B.C. The subsequent Babylonian incursion and other international issues caused the Jewish immigration to increase.

Ptolomy II (285–246 B.C.) was a key person in this translating process. Ptolomy ruled from Egypt as one of the successors to Alexander the Great's empire. History shows us that Ptolomy took a special interest in the history and culture of the Jewish people. It was Ptolomy who summoned the seventy scholars from Jerusalem to translate the writings into Greek for what we now call the Septuagint (abbreviated with the Roman numerals for 70: LXX) which means "seventy."

The books translated into Greek included more than just the Old Testament canon. The books included also a number of other writings, notably the Apocrypha. Our Greek transcripts of the Septuagint have most of the Apocrypha included. We need to remember, however, that the inclusion DOES NOT mean that the Jews included the Apocrypha in their canon. In fact, the opposite is true.

The Jews kept all their writings on separate scrolls, questioning whether they could even combine books from the Torah section on the same scroll with books from the Prophet section. It was the Christians who put the various "books" into a single volume, called a "codex." Therefore, the presence of the Apocrypha in the Septuagint is not an indicator of the Apocrypha's authority among the Jews. Rather, the inclusion indicates that certain Christian people placed the Apocryphal books into the same textual area, if not authority, as Old Testament scriptures.

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[5] "Dispersion" references the Jews who had moved from Israel/Judah and were living in the rest of the world.

The Greek Old Testament scriptures found great usage among the Jews internationally. Something unexpected happened, however, with the advent of Christianity. The Old Testament is, of course, a key to any fair understanding of Jesus, his work, and the basis for Christianity. As the church quickly grew beyond the bounds of the Jewish people, the Gentile Christians latched on to the Septuagint as their scriptures. Indeed, the Gentiles would have been at a loss trying to read from the Hebrew texts, but the Greek texts were easily studied.

Once the Christians started using the Septuagint, the Jews started distancing themselves from the translation they had produced! The Jews viewed the Septuagint as used by the Christian cult, and the Jews returned to a principle usage of Hebrew Scriptures.

By studying the early church fathers of the 100's and 200's A.D., we find out that most used the Greek Old Testament/Septuagint. These fathers quoted the Apocrypha in the same manner that they quoted the Old Testament. Those church fathers who studied Hebrew, however, were careful to distinguish the Apocrypha from the Old Testament (Origen, Jerome, Melito of Sardis, etc.). Once we reach the 300's A.D., the Greek fathers made fewer and fewer references to the Apocrypha as scripture. Several were compiling "lists" of the appropriate books for Old Testament canon, and these books did not include the Apocrypha.

With the Latin fathers, however, the story was a bit different. Augustine, for example, quoted as readily from the Apocrypha as from the Old Testament – with equal authority between the two. Several Synodical councils also justified the use of the Apocrypha.

One significant divergence from the Latin acceptance of the Apocrypha came from Jerome. Jerome was the preeminent scholar who was charged with translating the scriptures into Latin for a universal text for the church. Jerome was a phenomenal student of Greek, but also a good Hebrew scholar (though he came to his Hebrew knowledge much later in life that his Greek). For the Old Testament, Jerome actually went back to the Hebrew Scriptures to translate into Latin rather than use the Septuagint. Jerome spoke out loudly that the scriptures should not include the Apocryphal works. In spite of his ready defense, two bishops heavily leaned on Jerome to make some inclusions of certain Apocryphal works. Jerome did so (with two books), but only after noting in the translation that the works were not on par with scripture.

As the Middle Ages unfolded, several scholars would add more translations of the Apocrypha into Latin for inclusion in later copyings of Jerome's Latin text (called the "Vulgate"). From the Middle Ages up to the Reformation, one can list a number of Church theologians who accepted the Apocrypha and a number of church theologians who asserted that the Hebrew canon was proper for church usage.

The reformation marked a schism between Luther and the Reformers and the Catholic Church on a great many issues, including the canon. Luther's purpose behind his rebellion against the church stemmed from a desire to examine and correct any corrupt church practices or doctrines using scripture as the measuring authority. Some of Luther's debates found his opponents using the Apocrypha to prove the doctrines of purgatory and the usage of prayers and Mass for the dead (II Macc. 12:43-45). Interestingly, however, one part of the Apocrypha expressly refutes the doctrine of purgatory (Book of Wisdom 3:1*ff*).

Luther challenged the arguments by challenging the authority of the apocryphal references, distinguishing the Apocrypha from scripture. Luther found the distinction of the Apocrypha from scripture also helpful on another issue. Luther felt that certain apocryphal passages seem to indicate acquired merit through good works, a concept that flew against the core of Luther's understanding of justification by faith. (*See* Tobit 12:9; Ecclus. 3:30; II Esdras 8:33; 13:46, etc.) Of course, in fairness, we should note that Luther felt the New Testament Epistle of James was also infringing on the doctrine of justification by faith. While Luther did not excise James from the canon, Luther did call James "an Epistle of Straw."

Luther's translation of the Bible into German contained most all of the Apocrypha, but he deliberately set it in a section apart from the rest of scripture. The only part of the Apocrypha Luther did not put into his translation was I and II Esdras. In his own words, Luther omitted those because "they contain absolutely nothing which one could not much more easily find in Aesop or in even more trivial books" (*See*, Preface to Book of Baruch).

The reformers continued to produce scripture without the Apocrypha or with the Apocrypha and an accompanying note that they were not included as scripture but for their usefulness in devotional life. Rather than examine all translations, let us focus on the prominent ones in English.

The first English translation of scripture was by Miles Coverdale (1535). Coverdale placed the Apocrypha apart from other scripture because, in his words in dated English, they are "not judged amonge the doctours to be of like reputacion with the other scripture." Coverdale did include the Apocryphal Prayer of Manasseh, and he also placed the Apocryphal Baruch at the end of the Book of Jeremiah.

Two years after the Coverdale Bible, the English translation called the Thomas Matthew Bible came out. This was the first Bible that gathered the entire Apocrypha into one section.

The Geneva Bible, one of the most important English translations ever, came out in 1560. Actually, many editions of the Geneva Bible were printed between 1560 and 1630. This Bible is significant as the first English Bible to divide the text into verses. It also was the first to use italicized letters for words which the translators were adding to make the text sensible in idiomatic English. This was the Bible used by Shakespeare, Bunyan, the Pilgrims and many others. The introduction to the Apocrypha section is noteworthy enough to modernize the old spelling and reproduce it here in its fullness:

> These books that follow in order after the Prophets unto the New Testament, are called Apocrypha; that is books, which were not received by a common consent to be read and expounded publicly in the Church, neither yet served to prove any point of Christian religion, save inasmuch as they had the consent of the other Scriptures called canonical to confirm the same, or rather whereon they were grounded: but as books proceeding from godly men, were received to be read for the advancement and furtherance of the knowledge of history, and for the instruction of godly manners: which books declare that at all times God had an especial care of his Church and left them not utterly destitute of teachers and means to confirm them in the hope of the promised Messiah, and also witness that those calamities that God sent to his Church, were according to his providence, who had both so threatened by his Prophets, and so brought it to pass for the destruction of their enemies, and for the trial of his children.

The King James Version of 1611 set apart the Apocrypha with a title: "Apocrypha" but without any note or preface.

Meanwhile, in the Roman Catholic world, the reformation actions on the Apocrypha prompted church reaction. In 1546, the Council at Trent issued the first Catholic decision on the issue of the canon's limits. The council ruled that the Apocrypha (save the Prayer of Manasseh and I and II Esdras) were sacred and canonical. An anathema was announced upon all who would not receive the whole Latin Vulgate as sacred and canonical.

A number of Catholic scholars over the century (just as a number of Catholic scholars BEFORE the council) have since disagreed with the canonicity of the Apocryphal books announced at Trent. The official position of the Church, however, has not changed.

Lying somewhere between the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches is the Church of England. The position of that church on the Apocrypha is worth noting. While not commending the books for their teaching on doctrine, the Church of England vouched for the books as profitable for moral instruction. England as a country was for many years the major publishing house for English translations of the Bible. By the 1800's, the inclusion of the Apocrypha in the British Bible Society's publishings provoked huge debate for over a decade, with the eventual result being the course and practice of not including the Apocrypha in most English translations. The Edinburgh Bible Society issued its statement denouncing the Apocrypha as "replete with instances of vanity, flattery, idle curiosity, affectation of learning and other blemishes; with frivolous, absurd, false, superstitious and contradictory statements" (1825).

A historical note of trivia – The Bible Society supplied the coronation Bible for King Edward VII in 1901. The Bible did NOT have the Apocrypha, as it had been excluded since 1827 in Bible Society editions. Prior to signing the coronation oath, the Monarch is to kiss the coronation Bible. Under British tradition, that Bible should contain the Apocrypha. Because the Apocrypha was missing from the official coronation Bible, at the last minute, a substitute Bible had to be found for the coronation.

As noted earlier, most of the Early Greek Fathers did not subscribe to the Apocrypha as canonical. Interestingly enough, as history has unfolded, the Greek Church has accepted the Apocrypha as scripture.

III. USES OF THE APOCRYPHA

Although the Apocrypha is not regarded as inerrant scripture in this class, this view does not mean it is without merit or use. There are multiple ways the Apocrypha are useful to us today. First, the Apocrypha contains useful historical information about the time period between the Old and the New Testaments. A number of the books are historical in nature and set forward important data to help us understand a good bit we read about in the New Testament. For example, we better understand the origins of the Pharisees and the Sadducees from reading the Apocrypha. Similarly, we better understand the political interplay of the Jews with the Roman government. The issue of whether it is scriptural to pay taxes to a Pagan Roman Emperor is an issue on which the Apocrypha gives us historical background data to help frame the 1st century debate.

The Apocrypha in an even more specific way helps us understand certain parts of the New Testament. It is clear reading the Apocrypha side by side with the New Testament that Paul was familiar with a good bit of the Apocrypha. Romans echoes a fair amount of thought and language found in the Wisdom of Solomon (more on this next week!). A number of Paul's other writings probably show a similar relationship. Likewise, the book of Hebrews and the Epistle of James have passages that seem to indicate some reflections that grew out of Apocryphal books. Study of the Apocrypha can help folks further understand certain scriptures by seeing a possible relationship to other works.

The Apocrypha helps us see the advent of "letters" as a basis for communicating God's message. The Old Testament books are not letters themselves, and only rarely do they contain a letter. Yet, the New Testament scriptures are heavily weighted with letters and epistles. We see in the Apocrypha this transition of transmitting information about God and his interaction with his people.

Another area where the Apocrypha helps us put the New Testament into focus and historical perspective lies in the doctrinal areas of personal immortality, activity of angels and demons, expectations of a Messianic king, etc. Again, these areas will be dealt with next week as we look into the books of the Apocrypha in a little more depth.

IV.   POINTS FOR HOME

1. There is more to the Apocrypha than meets the eye.
2. Scripture is not an afterthought. It comes from intense historical study, prayer and debate.
3. There is profit in studying and being prepared to defend your beliefs.
4. Ours tools for greater Bible understanding are far and wide.