



The Apocrypha and the Old Testament

Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.
—Proverbs 30:5-6, NIV

The canon of scripture—that is, the official list of what's in the Bible—is not revealed to us by any saying of Jesus, nor does scripture itself contain any list. The canon of scripture is determined by the Church, and there are differences among the various church bodies. Because the Church grew from Greek-speaking synagogues, early Christians, who also spoke Greek, used the Septuagint, which was at that time the official Jewish translation of the Bible used by Greek-speaking Jews in the synagogue. The Septuagint became the Old Testament of the church, but its contents varied in differing regions, and it includes several books that were not recognized by Jews in Palestine. These extra books that appear in the Septuagint but not in the Hebrew canon are collectively called the *Apocrypha*.

In the eastern Church, the Apocrypha was never a matter of concern, but the western Church had many debates about it. As early as the fourth century, Jerome, who is honored as one of the 'doctors of the church' by Roman Catholics, disputed the Septuagint books that were not also present among the books recognized by Palestinian Jews. However, Jerome's opinion did not prevail, probably because of two factors:

- The Bible readings, which were always a feature of Christian worship, gradually excluded the Old Testament during the Middle Ages, so policing the canon of the Old Testament did not seem to be of much importance for several centuries. No church body issued any statement listing the official contents of the Old Testament until the time of the Protestant Reformation.
- Many hymns, anthems, and other acts of praise in Christian worship that were used from the very beginning, were taken from the Apocrypha. One good example of this is the passage in the Song of the Three Young Men, verses 29-34, which is still used in the Rite One Morning Prayer of the Episcopal Church of the U.S.A.

Martin Luther resurrected Jerome's objections to the Apocrypha. He felt, as Jerome did, that it was proper to use the Apocrypha as a liturgical resource or for moral instruction, but not as a source of doctrine. This is the way that fundamentalist churches use the writings of Bill and Gloria Gaither or C. S. Lewis, for example. To this day, Anglicans, Methodists, and Lutherans use the Apocrypha in this way. However, the Pope responded to Luther by proclaiming the Apocrypha to be scripture on a par with the rest of the Old Testament, over the protests of some Roman Catholic scholars. Today, the Roman Catholic Church considers the Apocrypha to be *deuterocanonical*, which means secondarily

canonical. This term refers to the order of acceptance and not to the degree of authority.

Orthodox Christians are probably wondering why we Western Christians are making such a fuss.

Some later Protestant groups, particularly those founded in the United States after American printings of the King James Bible omitted the Apocrypha entirely, reject the Apocrypha for any use or even consider it evil. This is an overreaction. In fact, 1 Maccabees, which appears in the Apocrypha, is a straight historical account which gives much of the background that is essential to understanding the political tensions during the ministry of Jesus. Much of the same information is available from other but less reliable historical sources, such as Josephus.

So this proverb is not involved in policing the canon, because what we consider to be the Old Testament was not finished yet, and the New Testament lay centuries in the future. In fact, there is no statement in scripture about which books are canonical and which are not; the canon is a feature of the church you belong to. What we are warned against here is a more fundamental, more serious sin: failing to distinguish between what God says and what we'd like Him to say, passing out our own opinions and traditions as if they were the very Word of God. Whether we do this by blatantly appending our own writings to the Bible and proclaiming it as God's Word or by more insidiously making our own interpretations into a new standard of orthodoxy, it is equally wrong.

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