

BIB105 Biblical Hermeneutics

Unit 1 Reading 1

Stewart, “What is the History of the Old Testament
Apocrypha?”

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Don Stewart :: What Is the History of the Old Testament Apocrypha?

Are Some Books Missing from the Old Testament? – Question 3

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There were approximately four hundred and fifty years between the last Old Testament book written (Malachi) and the first New Testament book (Matthew, Galatians, James, or 1 Thessalonians). A number of significant events occurred during this period. Among them was the writing of a number of books that came to be known as the Old Testament Apocrypha.

The history of the Old Testament Apocrypha can be summarized in the following manner:

1. The Jews Were in Exile from the Promised Land

Many Jews were living outside of the Promised Land during the time between the testaments. Earlier, at the time of Jeremiah, a large contingent had sought refuge in Egypt. Then, in 586 B.C., the city of Jerusalem was destroyed along with the temple. The remaining Jews were taken into captivity. When they were allowed to return to the Promised Land a number of years later, many of them chose not to return. In fact, the number of Jews who stayed in Babylon after Ezra left to return to Jerusalem was greater than the number of Jews who had left to go back to the Promised Land.

2. There Was a New Language for the Dispersed Jews: Greek

With the conquest of the known world by Alexander the Great (330 B.C.), Greek became the international language. There were Jewish settlements in most of the Greek-speaking cities. The Jews who lived outside of Israel eventually forgot how to speak Hebrew. Consequently, they could no longer read the Scriptures in the original language. When the Scriptures were taught in the synagogue, they had to be translated from the Hebrew into Greek. This created the need for a written Greek version of the Old Testament Scripture.

3. The Old Testament Was Translated from Hebrew into Greek: the Septuagint

Thus, about 250 B.C., in Alexandria, Egypt, the most important Jewish center outside of Palestine, the Jews began to translate the Old Testament into Greek—the language they spoke and read. This translation became known as, “the Septuagint,” which means, “seventy.” According to an ancient work, seventy, or seventy-two, scholars translated the Scripture from Hebrew into Greek. These translators began with the five books of Moses and, as the years went by, they translated all the books of the Old Testament into Greek.

This Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, became popular among the Jews since Hebrew was no longer their principle language, even in Israel. Each generation would become less and less familiar with the Hebrew.

4. The Jews Lived in Turbulent Times during This Period: Their Writings Reflected Hope for Something Better

The period between the two testaments was a turbulent one for the Jews. They were under the authority of a number of different people - Egypt, then Syria, and finally Rome. Much of their literature that was written during this period reflected their struggle. With evil all around them, and many religious and political struggles, there were hopes for better days when the promised Messiah would come and bring them into a new golden age of peace.

5. The Old Testament Apocrypha Was Composed During This Difficult Period

In addition to the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, other books were also translated into Greek. This included the books of the Old Testament Apocrypha. In fact, some of the books of the Old Testament Apocrypha were originally written in Greek.

These writings reflected the hope for better days ahead. This, of course, would add to their popularity. In addition, they filled the gaps of Jewish history with stories of heroism during difficult times. Since there was not much literature produced by the Jews during this time in their history, the people cherished whatever written works they possessed. This added further value to the Old Testament Apocrypha.

One of the odd things about the Old Testament Apocrypha is that none of the books make mention of the Messiah. This is particularly strange since those books were composed when there was a great need for the Messiah to deliver Israel from its various enemies.

6. The Old Testament Apocrypha Was Not Used as Scripture in the New Testament Period

The influence of the Septuagint continued to be felt. This Greek version of the Old Testament was widely used by Greek-speaking Jews in various communities of the Roman Empire, including Judea.

As we move to the New Testament period, we find that Jesus and His disciples basically used the Septuagint as their Old Testament. This is in spite of the fact that their main spoken language was probably Aramaic, and not Greek. When they quoted the Hebrew Scriptures, it was usually from the Septuagint and not the Hebrew version. However, though they used the Septuagint extensively, they never cited the Old Testament Apocrypha as Scripture. While they directly quoted most of the books of the Old Testament, often with such introductory phrases such as, "It is written," or "God says," the books of the Apocrypha were never quoted. This is an important point.

7. The Septuagint Became the Authoritative Old Testament Text for Christians

After the New Testament period, Christians continued to quote the Greek Old Testament to prove Jesus was the Messiah. When the gospel was brought to the Greek-speaking world, the arguments for Jesus were based upon the Septuagint. Since many of these believers did not know the Hebrew language, they used the Septuagint as their Old Testament Scripture. In fact, it became their divinely inspired Old Testament.

When the text of the Septuagint read differently from the Hebrew text, the Christians usually preferred the reading of the Septuagint even though it was a translation of the Hebrew. Sadly, in many of these cases, the Christians falsely accused the Jews of corrupting the text of Scripture so that it would hide the fact that Jesus was the Messiah.

Many Christians also accepted an ancient account of the divine origin of the Septuagint. This is known as the “Letter of Aristeas.” As the story goes, the seventy, or seventy-two, translators of the Septuagint were isolated from one another. When their translations were compared, they were found to be word-for-word the same! This supposedly testified to the divine nature of this work. A number of Christians at that time accepted this explanation for the origin of the Septuagint.

While this story of the origin of the Septuagint came from Jews living before the time of Christ, it taught that it was only the Law of Moses that was miraculously translated. The Christians stretched the miracle of translation to the entire Old Testament! Therefore, certain Christians had their own divinely inspired, miraculous Scripture; the Greek Old Testament.

Flavius Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, tells us that the Septuagint originated when seventy-two men were sent from Jerusalem to Alexandria, Egypt to translate the Hebrew Law into Greek. These seventy-two elders, according to Josephus, accomplished their translation by “collaboration and comparison.” There is no idea of each of them working separately and then coming up with the same word-for-word translation. It seems the only biblical translation in which these seventy-two men did, was on the Books of Moses and not the entire Old Testament.

8. The Books of the Old Testament Apocrypha Became Identified with the Septuagint

The books of the Old Testament Apocrypha were first given canonical status by certain Greek-speaking Christians. It is possible that this came about through a mistaken belief that these writings formed part of the canon of Old Testament Scripture. It is likely that the inclusion of the apocryphal books in the Septuagint may partly be due to ancient ways in which the rolls, or scrolls, were stored.

After the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, there was no sacred building where to house the scrolls. The temple archives, which officially housed the scrolls, no longer existed. The scrolls were likely kept in some type of container. It is possible that certain non-canonical documents might have been kept in a box along with canonical documents. This would only be for the sake of storing; it would not be to give these scrolls some type of canonical status.

However, the storing together of canonical and non-canonical writings may have led some to assume that all of these writings had a divine status. This is a possible explanation as to how the canonical and non-canonical books were placed together.

It is also possible that these books were placed together because of the change from the scroll to the codex, or book form. Once the codex became popular, a number of separate writings, which previously were placed upon individual scrolls, could now be put between two covers. This is a possible explanation as to how the Old Testament Apocrypha could have been included in the same group as the Old Testament writings. It was merely for convenience sake.

Whatever the case may be, we know that eventually certain books, that were never part of the Hebrew canon, but that were identified with the Septuagint, began to be quoted as authoritative by some early Christians. For a number of inadequate reasons, these works came to be considered as part of the Septuagint; the authorized Old Testament by many believers. These non-divinely inspired writings were now linked with the divinely inspired Scripture.

9. The Jews Had an Angered Reaction to the Christians Using the Septuagint

The idea that Christians used the Septuagint as their sacred Scripture angered the Jews. The Septuagint had been translated by Jews and for Jews, but now it was being used by the Christians. Since the Septuagint became identified with the Christian Old Testament, the Jews decided to make their own translations. These included translations by Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion. Although the Septuagint was originally translated by Jews two centuries before Christ, it was rejected because of its identification with Christians. In fact, most of the manuscripts of the Septuagint that have survived to this day were copied by Christians and not by Jews.

10. The Translator Jerome Rejects the Old Testament Apocrypha as Scripture

A few hundred years after Christ, the church Father Jerome translated the entire Bible into Latin. This was the language of the common people at that time in the Western Roman Empire. His translation, the Vulgate, included the Old Testament Apocrypha, but only because the books were popular among his readers. Jerome explicitly denied that they should have the status as Scripture. Jerome said they were not books of the canon but rather books of the church. He believed they could be helpful to people, but he clearly stated his belief that they were not divinely authoritative.

His assessment of the Old Testament Apocrypha was ignored. Eventually, the Vulgate became the official Roman Catholic text on which all other translations were based. This tradition of using the Vulgate has continued until the twentieth century.

11. Augustine Accepts the Septuagint as Divine: Including the Old Testament Apocrypha

Another key figure in the history of the Old Testament Apocrypha was the church father Augustine of Hippo. His influence was enormous. He accepted the fanciful story about the divine origin of the Septuagint.

Augustine actually defended the Septuagint as being divinely inspired even when it contradicted the Hebrew text. For example, in the Book of Jonah, the Hebrew text said that Jonah preached the destruction of Nineveh in forty days. However, the text of the Septuagint said three days. Augustine contended that both accounts were divinely inspired. He said Jonah actually said the destruction would be in forty days, as the Hebrew text said, but the divinely inspired men that translated the Septuagint wrote three days as a testimony to the time Christ was in the grave; since Christ Himself compared His time in the grave with Jonah. Therefore, he reckoned both accounts could be true!

Augustine also believed the books of the Old Testament Apocrypha belonged with the Old Testament Scripture. It is important to note that Augustine recognized that the Old Testament Apocrypha was not

part of the sacred Scripture of the Jews and that neither Christ nor His apostles considered these writings to be divinely inspired. This was not the issue. Augustine believed the church had the right to add these books to the Old Testament canon though neither the ancient Jews nor Christ accepted their authority.

The councils of Hippo and Carthage, under the influence of Augustine, declared the books of the Old Testament Apocrypha as Scripture. A few years later, Pope Leo also stated that the Old Testament Apocrypha was indeed part of the Old Testament canon.

The matter was not really addressed for the next one thousand years. This was a time in history when people did not really make use of the Bible for themselves. They were not encouraged by the organized church to do their own private study. Therefore, the question of the extent of the canon was not really an issue.

12. The Protestant Reformers Rejected the Old Testament Apocrypha

The debate about the extent of the canon did not really come to a head until the Protestant Reformation in the 1500's. The Roman Catholic Church had been using the Latin Vulgate translation since the time of Jerome. However, Martin Luther, and the Protestant Reformers, argued that one should go back to the original sources; the Hebrew Old Testament, to establish doctrine. Therefore, they rejected the Latin Vulgate, the Greek Septuagint, and the Old Testament Apocrypha.

In his 1534 German translation, Luther placed these "outside books" at the end of his version. He declared that these books did not belong in the Old Testament canon of Scripture.

13. The Council of Trent Declared That the Old Testament Apocrypha Was Scripture

The Roman Catholic Church responded quickly to Martin Luther and the reformers. Twenty-nine years after Luther tacked his 95 thesis on the church door in Wittenberg Germany, a church council met at the city of Trent, from 1545-1563, to answer some of their charges.

As part of the Counter Reformation (called the Catholic Reformation by Roman Catholics), the Council of Trent, in its fourth session in April 1546, affirmed the Old Testament Apocrypha as Scripture. This is with the exception of three books: 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh.

This Roman Catholic Council of Trent proclaimed these Old Testament apocryphal works as divinely authoritative for all Roman Catholics. This was the first time in which a general council, as opposed to a local or provincial council, made such a decree. In the statement from Trent, there was no distinction made between the proto-canonical, or first canon books, and the deuterocanonical, or the second canon books, as Jerome had made one thousand years earlier. All of these works were authoritative for the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, anathemas were pronounced against those who dissented from their conclusions; this means those who disagreed, or taught otherwise were placed under a divine judgment!

From that day, until the present, the Roman Catholic Church has followed the decrees of Trent and included these books as part of the Old Testament. The Protestant Church continues to reject these works as Holy Scripture.

Summary – Question 3

What Is the History of the Old Testament Apocrypha?

After the Babylonian captivity, most Jews continued to live outside of the Holy land. In time, they forgot how to speak their native language, Hebrew. Greek became the international language. Consequently, the Scriptures were translated into a language they could understand; Greek. This translation is known as the Septuagint. Along with the Old Testament, there were other books that were also translated into Greek during this period between the testaments. These include the books of the Old Testament Apocrypha.

During the time of Christ, He and His disciples often used the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, when quoting Old Testament Scripture. The Septuagint then became the Scripture for the early church. As time went on, some Christians cited books from the Old Testament Apocrypha, which were translated along with the Septuagint. The Jews reacted to Christians using the Septuagint by doing new translations of the Hebrew into Greek.

Eventually, the books of the Old Testament Apocrypha were placed in Jerome's Latin translation; the Vulgate. This was over against the objection of Jerome himself. Augustine, a contemporary of Jerome, accepted the divine inspiration of the Septuagint as well as the Scriptural status of the Old Testament Apocrypha. The Roman Catholic Church followed his lead.

At the time of the Protestant reformation, Martin Luther demonstrated that the Roman Catholic Church was teaching doctrines contrary to Scripture. The Church responded by officially adding the books of the Apocrypha to the Old Testament canon. Protestant Christianity has always denied the divine authority of these books, though some Protestant groups allow the reading of these books for edification and instruction in life. The differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics with respect to the Old Testament Apocrypha remain to this day. It is not possible for both groups to be correct on this question.