

The Difference Between the Canonical and Apocryphal Books

Text: Belgic Confession 6; Luke 24:25-27, 44-48

The subject before us in this study is the Apocrypha. The word “Apocrypha” means “hidden” or “obscure,” likely due to the uncertain origins of these books, their fictitious content, or their confused application. Article 6 of the *Belgic Confession* lists thirteen apocryphal books, though some count fourteen by including IV Esdras. Rome accepts eleven of these, excluding III Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh. Eastern Orthodoxy includes even more, such as III and IV Maccabees and Psalm 151. This vagueness and inconsistency reflect theological confusion. Rome refers to its collection as “Deutero-Canonical,” a secondary canon.

The Apocrypha includes books such as II Maccabees, Bel and the Dragon, Tobit, Judith and Ecclesiasticus (also known as “The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach,” or just “Sirach”), along with additions to Daniel and Esther. In II Maccabees 15:38, the writer admits, “If I have done well... it is that which I desired: but if slenderly and meanly, it is that which I could attain unto” – a disclaimer that reflects uncertainty. This contrasts with the confident, “Thus saith the Lord” of true prophets.

Legends, Errors, and False Teaching

Bel and the Dragon introduces mythical elements: Daniel defeats idols, slays a dragon with a mixture of pitch, fat and hair and is thrown into the lions’ den again, only to be fed by Habakkuk who is miraculously transported by an angel. This version contradicts (the canonical) Daniel chapter 6, where the prophet spends only *one* night in the den and is treated with sympathy by the king. Here, Daniel appears sarcastic and theatrical, diverging from his scriptural portrayal.

Tobit presents even more troubling claims. Tobias saves a fish’s organs, which are used to exorcise demons and cure blindness (Tobit 6:7-8). The angel Raphael first claims to be “Azarias” (Tobit 5:12) and later reveals, “I am Raphael” (Tobit 12:15). This deception contradicts the holiness expected of angels. Tobit 12:9 states, “For alms doth deliver from death, and shall purge away all sin,” promoting salvation by works. II Maccabees 12:42-45 advocates prayers and

sacrifices for the dead, forming Rome's basis for purgatory. These teachings conflict with justification by faith and the finality of death.

The Apocrypha lacks prophecy. It does not foretell Christ, the church, or the last judgment. In Judith 9:2, Simeon's vengeance is celebrated, though Jacob *cursed* it in Genesis 49. The *Belgic Confession* says these books may be read "so far as they agree with the canonical books," but cannot establish doctrine. The Council of Trent (1546) canonized these books and anathematized dissenters. Jerome, translator of the Latin Vulgate, denied their inspiration, advising that while they may be read for edification, they do not belong in the canon.

Church History and the Reformation

Confusion increased during the Middle Ages. Yet the Reformers—Luther, Calvin, and the Reformed churches—rejected the Apocrypha as inspired. The Synod of Dordt (1618–19) clarified that while article 6 permits private reading of the Apocrypha, it should not be read publicly in worship. Gomarus, a leading voice at Dordt, dismissed it as superstition and fiction.

The true canon rests on three grounds: first, the internal majesty, unity and truth of Scripture; second, the inward witness of the Holy Spirit; and third, the recognition of the church. Article 5 of the *Belgic Confession* affirms, "We receive all these books [the 66] and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith."

The Apocrypha fails this test. It lacks divine authority, contradicts Scripture, and teaches error. It does not contain the voice of Christ. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice... and they follow me" (John 10:27). Romans 3:2 affirms that the oracles of God were committed to the Jews. Christ never quoted from the Apocrypha, though He frequently quoted the threefold Hebrew division: "the law of Moses, and the prophets and the psalms" (Luke 24:44).

Christ, the Apostles, and the True Canon

The apostles also never quoted from the Apocrypha. Paul, despite his many disputes with Jewish opponents, never challenged their canon. Instead, he upheld it. Jewish tradition held that prophecy ceased after Malachi, during the time of Artaxerxes. Josephus corroborates this, stating that no inspired books were written after this era.

While some Church Fathers cited or listed apocryphal books, others, including Athanasius, Jerome and Hilary, upheld the distinction. Jerome's preface marks off the Apocrypha as outside the Hebrew canon. Augustine, though more favourable, acknowledged a two-tier canon: one for doctrine, one for reading. The confusion in the early church and Middle Ages reveals a fluctuating discernment. The Reformation renewed clarity, restoring the church's submission to the 66-book canon.

This Reformation stance continues. The Trinitarian Bible Society (established in 1831) formed in part to counteract the inclusion of the Apocrypha by other Bible societies. Today, ecumenical movements such as the United Bible Societies and the World Council of Churches reintroduce the Apocrypha in the name of unity. Vatican II encourages joint translations that include it. Yet this reflects compromise, not fidelity.

Though the Apocrypha may contain historical interest, such as in I Maccabees, it is not Scripture. It is no more divinely inspired than the *Qur'an* or *Book of Mormon*. Article 6 teaches us to distinguish between true and false canons. "If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book" (Rev. 22:18). To uphold *sola scriptura* is to uphold the inspired, complete and sufficient canon: the 66 books, no more, no less.

