

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The Old Testament Scriptures

by Dan Trygg

“...Continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them,¹⁵ and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;¹⁷ so that the person of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” -- 2 Timothy 3:14-17

We have been talking about the reliability of the Bible as a witness about God's interaction with people in history. We discovered that the accuracy of the copying and transmission of the biblical documents is amazingly well-substantiated. **There is no other document of ancient history that has the large number of mss. that bear witness to the original writings. Furthermore, no other document in history has such early support.** The time span between the original writings, and the earliest mss. is very short. In addition, translations and references that quote the scriptures offer a way to cross check what the original writing must have been. **Finally, we saw that over and over again the findings of archaeology have proven the historical dependability of the observations and recording of the authors.** There has never been even one archaeological discovery that has ever directly contradicted a biblical statement of fact.

Some of the questions that have come up through this study have been, **“What books are supposed to be in our Bibles? Why do some church traditions include other books in their Bibles that we do not have in ours? Why are those other books excluded from ours, and what are the reasons for their exclusion? When was the “canon” of Biblical books determined? Who decided on the list of books we have in our Bibles?”**

These are very important questions. Our text says that “all Scripture (or, ‘every Scripture’) is inspired by God (literally, ‘God-breathed’), and is profitable or beneficial for teaching (doctrine), for reproof (exposure of error), for correction (‘straightening-up-again’, restoration to an upright state, making improvement), and for training (process of education, skill-building) in righteousness, in order that the person of God may be proficient (prepared, equipped, adequate-and-ready), fully-equipped-and-prepared for every good work.” This is **HUGE!! The scriptures are a powerful resource and tool that God has made available to us! The question arises, then, “What are these God-breathed scriptures?”**

There is no question regarding what the Hebrew scriptures were. The *Tanakh*, or the Hebrew Bible of the people of Israel, is clearly established and documented. **It consisted of the Law** (the *Torah*, the five books of Moses – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), **the Prophets** (*Nevi'im* – Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Zechariah, and Malachi) **and the Writings** (*Ketuvim* – Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles). Because the Minor Prophets were considered to be one book (written on one scroll), and Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah were not divided, **the total number of books in the Hebrew Bible was considered to be 24**, which was equal to the number of priestly divisions. **These books have been verified by the most ancient Hebrew mss. and confirmed by rabbinical writings. These books correspond to the 39 OT books in our Bibles.**

There were other books that had been written in ancient times that were not recognized as inspired writings, or scripture. Some are even mentioned and referred to in the scriptural writings. For example, the book of Kings refers to the “chronicles of the kings of” Israel or Judah some 36 times. There were also “chronicles of Samuel the seer, Nathan the prophet and Gad the seer” (1 Chron. 29:29). There was a “book of Jashar” referred to by Joshua and Samuel (Josh 10:12; 2 Sam. 1:18). There are other examples, as well, but none of these survived, nor were they ever treated as scripture. They are mentioned for corroboration, or as further information. **The topic for today's study has to do with some other ancient writings, written between the end of the OT, and before the time of Christ. These are referred to as Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.** They were never widely accepted by the Jews, or the early Christians, but over the centuries some of them have been included among the OT scriptures as being authoritative by some traditions within the Christian movement. Interestingly, even among those traditions, they are referred to as “deuterocanonical”, meaning that they are part of a “second canon” of writings.

The “pseudepigrapha” refer to works attributed falsely to someone who had lived centuries before. The author chose to ascribe them to some famous patriarch or prophet to give them added credibility. The name itself means “false writing.” None of these writings were accepted as scripture. **The term “apocrypha” literally means “hidden away”. It means “spurious, doubtful”.** Those parts of the church that have recognized these books prefer to refer to them as “deuterocanonical”. **What does the term “canon” mean?** The word comes from a reed or “cane” used as a measuring stick. **To say something is canonical means that it “measures up”, or “meets the standard”.**

Most of the “apocryphal” books accepted by parts of the church were first found in the codices of the Greek Septuagint translation. They are never found in Hebrew collections. There was a community of Greek-speaking Jews from Alexandria, in Egypt, who originally translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek in 250 B.C. Through most of the period of the Bible, writings were inscribed on scrolls. **The codex, or book form, was not invented until the first century.** The codex was used to combine writings together in a collection, like the chapters in a book, or as the assembly of a person’s valued library. **What is not clear is, were these writings included simply because they were “religious”, or were they thought to be inspired?** The oldest complete Greek Septuagint codices are from the 4th century AD, much later. Even though we have found apocryphal writings bound together with the translation of the Jewish canonical books, we don’t know if they were thought to be of the same nature or authority as the Jewish scriptures. **Interestingly, they are always included in separate sections, and not all of them are consistently included, nor are they in the same order.** They include additions to the book of Esther and Daniel, Baruch, Wisdom of Ben Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), 1 & 2 Esdras, Judith, 1-2 Maccabees, the Prayer of Manasseh, Susanna, Tobit, and the Wisdom of Solomon.

The question for us to consider is “Do these pre-Christian apocryphal books ‘measure up’?” Do they meet the same canonical standards as we find in the inspired scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?

(1.) Manuscript evidence is not there. Apocrypha (A.) are not found in any Hebrew mss. of the scriptures. The Greek codices we have are much later, but even they do not agree as to what A. were included, nor in any order.

(2.) Not universally, or even widely, accepted. Not accepted at all by Jews, *ever*. Not acknowledged by Jesus or the apostles. Not in the earliest lists of scriptures. Melito, bishop of Sardis (170 AD) lists all our OT books, except Esther. None of the A. books were even mentioned. Even the Jewish historian, Josephus (37-100), acknowledged only the books in our OT. Most church leaders rejected them. Those who did cite them also referred to other non-canonical books, and there is no consistency in their references to justify special status.

(3.) Church councils that recognized them were only local, not universal. The council of Hippo (393), and of Carthage (397) were called and influenced by one man, Augustine, the bishop of Hippo. Later in life, however, he appears to have changed his mind (*City of God* 18:36). It was not until the Council of Trent (1545-1563), in reaction to the Protestant Reformation, that the Roman Catholic church recognized the A. as scripture, i.e., deuterocanonical.

(4.) These books were rejected by the greatest scholar of that time, Jerome. He translated the Hebrew OT and Greek NT scriptures into Latin to become the Latin Vulgate. Initially, he refused to translate the A. or to include them in his translation. After his death (420 AD), however, they were included in the Vulgate, against his wishes.

(5.) There are doctrinal errors taught in the A. writings. (a.) **salvation by works**, especially almsgiving, was said to purge away sin and ward off death (Tobit 4:11; 12:9; 14:11); (b.) **the doctrine of purgatory** is taught, along with the belief that the living should pray for the dead, so that they would be loosed from their sins, and that they can even make atonement for them through paying money for religious services (2 Maccabees 12:41-46); (c.) **God hears the prayers of the dead** (Baruch 3:4); (d.) **the pre-existence of human souls** (Wisdom 8:19,20); (e.) **God made the world out of pre-existing matter** (Wisdom 11:17); and (f.) **it says that “the body weighs down the soul”** (Wisdom 9:15). This agrees with Greek philosophy, not the Bible. (g.) **Tobit was instructed to use the smoke of a fish’s heart and entrails to drive away demons** (Tobit 6:5-7). This sounds more like superstition and the attempted use of magic, than relying on God.

(6.) There are historical errors in the apocrypha. (a.) **The age of Tobit** when he died does not “add up”. Tobit 1:3-5 says that he was “still a young man” when his tribe deserted from the house of David to join Jeroboam’s rebellion, and offer sacrifice to the calf at Dan. This would have been 931 B.C. But the text also says that he and his people were taken into exile to Nineveh by the Assyrians. This did not happen until 721 B.C. Tobit would have had to be 210 years old, ...yet, Tobit 14:1,2 says that “Tobit died in peace when he was 112 years old”. Contradiction! (b.) **Historical errors in the book of Judith 1:1.** The text says, “It was the 12th year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, who ruled over the Assyrians in the great city of Nineveh...” Two errors, here. Nebuchadnezzar ruled over the Babylonians, not the Assyrians, and He ruled at Babylon, not Nineveh. (c.) **Baruch 6:2 states that the Jews would serve in Babylon for seven generations.** By contrast, Jeremiah 25:11 stated that they would serve the king of Babylon for 70 years. History proved Jeremiah right, not Baruch. (d.) **The A. books describe three different accounts of Antiochus IV Epiphanes death** – repentant in his bed (1 Macc. 6:16), stoned and dismembered in the Temple (2 Macc. 1:16), and struck down suddenly by God Himself (2 Macc. 9:5).

It is clear, when we compare the sketchy, spurious and erroneous nature and contents of these books alongside the extensive and early manuscript evidence of the Bible, and the near universal agreement of the Jews and all branches of the Christian church regarding the canon of the Hebrew scriptures, **the apocryphal books simply do not measure up.** They may be valuable to read, in order to gain some insight into the culture and some historical background of the Bible, but **they are in no way the inspired words of God.** They should *not* be utilized to make or support theology or doctrine. **The scriptures we have in our Bibles are “God-breathed”.** These writings do *not* share that distinction. Therefore, ***we should focus our attention on what we know is true, dependable, and beneficial.***