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BACKGROUND AND HISTORY TO THE APOCRYPHA

By David Phillips

The traditional story goes that in about 250BC the King of Egypt wanted to include the Hebrew Scriptures in his magnificent library in Alexandria so he commissioned seventy-two Jewish scholars to make a translation into Greek. This Greek Bible is therefore known as the Septuagint, which means “seventy” and often referred to by the Roman numerals LXX. This account of the origin of the Greek Bible is quoted by a number of early church leaders but is generally not accepted by scholars today. One problem is that in the oldest known account the seventy-two only did the Pentateuch, so someone else must have done the rest of the books. It also does not explain how two of the books translated (Esther and Daniel) have substantial passages not in the canonical Hebrew Scriptures. Nor does it explain why there are other whole books included which are not in the Hebrew canon and some of which describe history after the time the translation was said to have been made.

Alternative theories involve complex arguments about manuscripts, which are well beyond this article (and this author). What seems to be clear is that Jews in places like Alexandria (where it is estimated that 100,000 such lived) often did not know Hebrew so they used Greek. The Greek Bible, however composed, includes chapters and books which were either in the ancient Hebrew and were later removed, or were never part of the canonical Scriptures but came to be collected with them to preserve other events, sayings and history of Jewish background.

When the early Christians took the gospel message beyond Israel to the Gentiles they too were using Greek and therefore when they taught or quoted from the Old Testament they very often used the Septuagint. This can be seen in the New Testament itself where some Old Testament quotations are word for word the same as the Septuagint translation.

Before long the Church was predominantly Greek (and Latin) in its focus and few of its leaders knew Hebrew. Bibles would have been relatively scarce but what they used for the Old Testament was the Septuagint and as time went on many simply assumed that it was the authentic Old Testament. Matters are complicated further because some writers call the ‘Apocrypha’ ‘the books ecclesiastical’ and use the term ‘Apocrypha’ for what would be called ‘pseudepigrapha’ today. This is a reference to books which claim to have been written by famous figures in the OT and hidden away (hence the name) which some group or other suddenly said that they had discovered and wonderfully found that it supported their view. Some of the pseudepigraphal books are not like that, but it is the origin of the term.

Were the apocryphal books part of the Hebrew Canon? In his extensive work “The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church” Roger Beckwith concludes that there is “no significant evidence” that this was the case and considerable evidence to the contrary” p386. It is clear that many early church leaders, particularly those who knew Hebrew, were well aware that the apocryphal books were not part of the Hebrew Canon. Nevertheless some, more so in the West than the East, seem to have been unaware of this fact, whilst others who did know argued that the Jews had deliberately removed the extra books from their Bible because they supported Christian claims. Some refused point blank to accept the evidence of what the Jews had in their Scriptures, because they believed them to be blasphemers and untrustworthy, whilst others insisted that because the Church treated the apocryphal works as Scripture then they were Scripture.

The Jews of this period appear to have been well aware of the apocryphal books and it has become clear that many of the books were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic. Nevertheless the Jews argued that these books were not part of the canonical Scriptures because by the time they were written the Spirit of prophecy had left Israel so they could not be divinely inspired.

The confused attitude of Christians to the Apocrypha is well illustrated by Origen. He was a Hebrew scholar and he consulted with Jewish scholars. He accepted the view set out by many other early church writers that the canonical Hebrew Scriptures consisted of 22 books. (The number is smaller than in our Bibles today because some books were grouped together. For example the twelve minor prophets count as one book. The benefit of the number 22 is that it corresponds to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.) Nevertheless Origen quoted freely from the apocryphal books as if they were Scripture and defended some of them against others. Cyril of Jerusalem, by contrast, told people to have nothing to do with the Apocrypha because it was not Scripture, whilst he himself did read it and quote from it.

The mature view of the early church leaders is found in Jerome. He also was a Hebrew scholar, but that was a rarity in the Latin West. Article 6 actually quotes, Jerome who did not consider the Apocrypha to be Scripture nor did he include it in his Latin translation of the Old Testament. He was strongly criticised for this and eventually the Apocrypha was included in the Latin Vulgate, derived from Jerome's work, which became the standard western text for over a millennium.

What has not been mentioned so far is the evidence of the New Testament. The NT both shows us what the very earliest Christians thought but also, being the Word of God is our supreme authority on all such matters. Is Jerome's view, quoted in our Articles, consistent with the New Testament? It has already been remarked that when quoting Scripture some NT writers appear to have used the Septuagint, so they were familiar with that translation, yet there is no instance in the New Testament where any parts of the Apocrypha are quoted. However, there is at least one place (Heb 11.35) where the people whose lives are given as an example to us are found in the Apocrypha (2 Macc 6.18-7.14). In other places moral instruction is given which is remarkably similar to sayings in Wisdom or Sirach, but noticeably these are not given as straight quotation. Thus it seems that the New Testament itself models what Jerome and our Articles assert, that these books are not Scripture, but they do provide example of life and instruction in manners.

Reformation

In the immediate aftermath of the Reformation, in this as in so many other areas, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent made things much worse. The Council issued a list of Canonical Books and declared that the Latin Vulgate was the standard text. Thus some of the parts of the Apocrypha (additions to Daniel and Esther) are included with the main text and the other books are listed by name. Moreover, they declared it anathema to disagree with them. It is somewhat absurd that this gathering, given so much authority and weight in Roman-Catholicism, could in one breath canonise the Latin Vulgate which derives from the work of Jerome, and then declare Jerome's own views to be anathema. G.R.Snaith in the introduction to the Commentary on the Apocrypha writes that the decision of Trent "was ratified by 53 prelates among whom there was not one scholar distinguished by historical learning, not one who was fitted by special study for the examination of a subject in which the truth could only be determined by the voice of antiquity." (p.xxxii)

The decision of Trent is an embarrassment to some Roman-Catholic scholars who are well aware that it was wrong. Indeed the Apocrypha is often referred to as the 'Deutero-canonical' books, indicating that they were included in the canon second, rather than they have a second rate authority. Nevertheless there are still those who argue for the decision taken by Trent and in large part this is because of the support lent by the Apocrypha to some Roman dogmas such as prayers

for the dead (2 Macc 12.44). By the same token, Protestants have subsequently distrusted the Apocrypha partly because of these texts.

Our articles evidence that the first wave of protestants took the same view as the more sober and learned of the Church fathers, that the Apocrypha is not Scripture but has its place. Luther put the Apocrypha in an appendix (he was not the first to do this though) and the same was done with the Geneva Bible and Authorised King James Version of 1611. The Prayer Book lectionary provided for it to be read in Church, but only on weekdays, and one or two saint's days. Attempts were made to change both these positions during the 1600s and the Westminster Confession made it clear that the authority of the Apocrypha is no greater than any other human writing. Precisely when the Apocrypha began to drop out of English Bibles completely I am not sure but it appears to have been in the early 1800s.

The inclusion of these "other books" in the Greek Bible ensured that they were not lost, which is no bad thing, but also caused people to use them and treat them as Scripture, which they are not. Within Protestantism we have now come full-circle, the books are no longer in our Bibles but they are also now largely unknown, which is a shame, as we will see in a following article.