

Article reprinted from *CrossWay* Issue Autumn 2006 No. 102

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APOCRYPHA – ITS USE

By David Phillips

Does the Apocrypha have any value for today? If so, what is that value? Our Thirty-Nine Articles cite the observation of Jerome that “other books the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners”. This could be taken simply as an observation of prevailing practice and since it is largely untrue today within the protestant Churches then perhaps the time has come to admit that the Apocrypha has no such value. Nevertheless, Article 6 is not simply describing existing practice, as an Article of Religion it is really commending this for continuing practice. But before we consider this more fully it is worth noting the value of the Apocrypha not mentioned by the Article.

Common value

Some books of the Apocrypha have a general worth as historical record. First Maccabees is highly regarded in this respect, it provides quite a detailed account of a brief period of Israel’s history. Even some of the non-history books have value both in terms of ancient literature and because they do shed some light on historical matters. Together they fill in some of the gaps between the events described in the Old and New Testaments. These things could be said of other ancient books and there are more modern and readable histories. Nevertheless they have a valuable as history not least because they do not fear to see God’s hand in events.

Particular value

Of more particular value is the fact that the Apocrypha does help us to understand some of the things we find in the New Testament. An example often quoted is the evolution of the idea of eternal life. The idea of such an evolution is clearly erroneous since we have the authority of the Lord Jesus that eternal life is clearly taught in the Old Testament Scriptures (Mtt 22.29ff). Nevertheless it does appear that the appreciation of this truth grew over time in the Israelites and by the time of the Apocrypha it is more obviously articulated than in the Old Testament. This should not be overplayed though, because the Sadducees still managed to get it wrong.

We can also see particular value in these books precisely because they have been so widely used by the Christian Church. Anyone wishing to read the writings of the early church will sooner or later find references to the Apocrypha, and plenty of them. The same can be said of medieval and early protestant theologians. Thus the Apocrypha is part of our Christian heritage, and understanding what it says gives us a greater appreciation of that heritage and of some of the divisions and controversies that have arisen. It also helps to appreciate the significance of the Benedicite (Song of the Three) in Christian worship.

On the basis of the above there are good grounds for saying that Christians, especially those who teach, should be familiar with the Apocrypha. However, Jerome and Article 6 commend the Apocrypha for other reasons.

Doctrinal value

The Article and Jerome state explicitly that the Church “doth not apply them to establish any doctrine”. It could be argued that they have some value where they illustrate or support doctrine clearly taught elsewhere but as the Articles indicate they should not be used to establish doctrine

and in general this means that if the Apocryphal books have to be appealed for primary references then there is something wrong with the doctrine in question.

Morals and Manners

What then of the assertion in the Articles about example of life and instruction in morals? We can see this in part in Hebrews 11, the heroes of the faith. They are all commended for their faith, but some are not to be found in the Old Testament. In fact in 11.35 reference is made to people who are not in Scripture but who are mentioned in the Apocrypha and in particular in 2 Macc 6.18-7.14. This does not mean that the author is referencing 2 Maccabees, merely that he was aware of the events that are also recorded there. Here we have an example, though admittedly only one, where Jerome's principle can be seen at work in the New Testament itself. If we wish to learn more of these heroes of the faith, then our easiest source is 2 Maccabees, so it does provide us with example of life.

Our problem arises when we find things in the Apocrypha which are unhelpful, or just plain wrong. The classic example of this is also in 2 Maccabees, this time chapter 12. Judas Maccabeus led the Jews in battle against the Idumeans. After the fight (and the Sabbath) the bodies of the dead Jews were collected for burial. But each of those who died were found to be wearing idolatrous tokens. The people were scandalised but recognised the judgement of God. Judas took a collection and prayed and 'made an atonement for the dead so that they might be delivered from their sin.' This text has been used to support intercession and the saying of masses and is in no small part responsible for protestant mistrust of the Apocrypha. If this is historically accurate then we have to conclude that Judas was wrong in what he did and his example of life is not one we should follow. We come to this conviction because there is nothing in Scripture to support what he did and much to indicate that it was wrong.

Therefore, we can see that there are clear limits to the use of the Apocrypha. Where we find practices which are not in accord with the rest of Scripture we should not follow this example. This immediately means that the Apocrypha is not something we should commend to young Christians, since they may find it difficult to discern the helpful from the unhelpful.

It might also be reasonably asked, if we have to be on our guard with the Apocrypha in this way wouldn't it be better to stick simply to Scripture. The answer to this is in two parts. First, Christians have never taken this view in general terms. I doubt that I am alone in having commended in preaching and teaching the lives of those who have gone before. If we are able to commend the example of Athanasius or Luther, Thomas Cranmer or Hudson-Taylor, what is wrong in commending the example of Tobit or Susanna? Not everything our heroes did was right, indeed sometimes it is their failures that are instructive. Secondly, we have the same dilemma in Scripture, which is full of people who are fallen and fallible like us. When we read of Samson marrying a prostitute or David committing adultery we know that their actions are not examples for us to follow. Thus even within the canon of Scripture we have to show care in the lessons we draw.

Therefore, despite some of the unpalatable parts, I can see no reason for dissenting from the view of Jerome and our Articles that there is merit in reading the Apocrypha for example of life and instruction of manners, so long as we remember that it is not Scripture and that it must be submitted to Scripture.

What should we do with the Apocrypha?

Should we read it in our Churches?

There is more encouragement to do this today than at any time since the Reformation because Common Worship lectionary, based as it is on ecumenical practice, includes many occasions when the Apocrypha can optionally be read in Sunday worship. This is in spite of the fact that until the 20th Century changes to the Lectionary had reduced the reading of the Apocrypha considerably. Despite the modern provision I cannot see that we should read the Apocrypha in our Churches except by way of background or illustration to a sermon, or in the such instances as the *Benedicite*. It is far more profitable to make sure that Scripture is read instead because that is the Word of God. Moreover there is a danger, when there is so little Biblical literacy, that people will gain the wrong impression of the Apocrypha.

Should we read it in private?

As indicated above I believe that there are good reasons why we should read it in private. It will help in understanding Scripture and some of the courageous examples are a great inspiration. It may be that there are other works which can perform similar functions but the Apocrypha has a particular call on our attention because of its use by Christians through the ages.

Should we include it in our Bibles?

No, I do not think this wise. On the one hand I suspect that if these books had not been included in Bibles then some of them would have been lost like many other ancient works. Nevertheless our survey of the history of the Apocrypha showed that its inclusion in the Bible caused people over time to view it as Scripture. The decision not to include these books in protestant Bibles has ensured that they have not been misused or abused within protestant Churches.

If they are to be read in private but not included in our Bibles then the obvious solution is that they should be printed in a separate book. It seems to me that there would be value in doing this and in giving a bit of historical background together with a brief introduction and a few helpful notes for each book. To the best of my knowledge no such book exists but it would ensure that a valuable asset is not lost whilst also ensuring that it is not treated in a way that cannot be justified.