

## The Apocrypha

### I. Definition:

1. The word “Apocrypha,” as usually understood, denotes the collection of religious writings that the LXX and Vulgate (with trivial differences) contain that are not included in the Jewish and Protestant canon.<sup>1</sup>
2. When the word “apocryphal” was first used in ecclesiastical writings it bore a sense virtually identical with “esoteric,” as we shall see, so that “apocryphal writing” were such as appealed to an inner circle and could not be understood by outsiders.
3. The original meaning in classical Greek denotes strictly “hidden,” “concealed,” of a material object.
4. In this lesson apocrypha will be employed in the sense of “things hidden.”

### II. Use

1. Early Christian Usage:
  - a. The word “apocrypha” was first used technically by early Christian writers for the Jewish and Christian writings usually classed under “apocalyptic.” In this sense it takes the place of the classical Greek word, *esoterika* and bears the same general meaning, “writings intended for an inner circle and capable of being understood by no others.”
  - b. These writings give intimations regarding the future, the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God, etc., beyond, it was thought, human discovery and also beyond the intelligence of the uninitiated.
2. The Eastern Church
  - a. Christianity itself has nothing corresponding to the idea of a doctrine for the initiated or a literature for a select few.
  - b. The gospel was preached in its first days to the poor and ignorant, and the reading and studying of the Sacred Scriptures have been urged by the churches (with some exceptions) upon the public at large.

### III. “Esoteric Literature”

1. The rise of this conception in the Eastern church is easily understood. When devotees of Greek philosophy accepted the Christian faith it was natural for them to look at the new religion through the medium of the old philosophy.
2. Many of them read into the canonical writings mystic meanings, and embodied those meanings in special books, these last becoming esoteric literature in themselves; and in the case of apocalyptic writings, this esoteric literature was more revered than the Bible itself.

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<sup>1</sup> International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, pgs.161-187

**IV.** During the third century Origen, like Clement of Alexandria, was faced with the problem that no conclusively fixed boundary between the canonical and noncanonical books of the Bible had been recognized by the church.

1. He set about classifying Christian writings so that they fell into three basic groupings.
  - a. anathemata (“unobjectionable”) or homologoumena (“acknowledged”) which were in general use by the church.
  - b. amphiballomena (“included/contested”), which were contested
  - c. pseudepigrapha (“false”), which included books that were rejected as falsifications and therefore the products of heretics.
  
2. This classification was later reformulated by Eusebius of Caesarea during the fourth century.
  - a. homologoumena, (“acknowledged”)
  - b. antilegomena, (“disputed”), which were divided into two subcategories
    - *gnorima* (“acquainted with”), for those most Christians acknowledged,
    - *notha* (“illegitimate”), for those regarded as unauthentic.
  - c. apocrypha (“hidden”), which were viewed as spurious.
  
3. These arrangements of books have become settled in four categories
  - a. Homologoumena, books accepted by virtually everyone as canonical.
  - b. Antilegomena, books disputed by some.
  - c. Pseudepigrapha, books rejected by virtually everyone as unauthentic.
  - d. Apocrypha, books rejected by some as canonical or semicanonical.

#### **A. Books Accepted by All - Homologoumena**

1. The Nature of the Homologoumena:
  - a. The Homologoumena are those books that have been universally acclaimed as canonical from their beginning. They have appeared in virtually every ancient version and orthodox canonical list, as well as having been widely quoted as Scripture.
  - b. None of these books was deliberately deleted from the circulating canon in orthodox circles or brought into question by any prominent Father.
  - c. Of course, the exact number of these books will vary depending on one’s definition of “orthodox” and “prominent”; but for the most part, there is little disagreement on this point.
  
2. The Number of the Homologoumena:
  - a. Generally speaking, twenty of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament canon are considered to be undisputed.

- b. This includes all of the books from Matthew through Philemon, plus 1Peter and 1John. It is true that some also included the latter three books (Philemon, 1Peter, 1John) among disputed books; however, it is probably better to refer to those as omitted rather than disputed books.
- c. A disputed book is characterized as one that is retained and yet questioned, not merely one that is not quoted nor included in a given list.
- d. Unless there is clear evidence that a book was absent from a canonical list or from a Father's quotation (or enumeration) because it was considered of doubtful authenticity or authority, it would be better not to classify it as Antilegomena.
- e. In either event, if the seven disputed books were extended to ten, they, interestingly enough, would still be among the last books in the order of the New Testament canon.

## **B. The Disputed Books - Antilegomena**

1. The Nature of the Antilegomena:
  - a. It has already been implied that the reason for certain books having been classed as Antilegomena consists in the fact that these books possessed neither uniform nor universal recognition in the early church.
  - b. They were books that became the subject of canonical controversy and had, as it were, their canonical "ups" and "downs."
  - c. It should be said, however, that these books were seldom considered anticanonical, or even uncanonical. Instead, they were given a sort of semicanonical status, as has been accorded to the Old Testament Apocrypha.
2. The number of the Antilegomena:
  - a. There are seven books in the Antilegomena, that is, seven books that may be properly called, "disputed books."
  - b. Concerning the possibility of including three more books in this list, it should be noted that there is good early evidence for the canonicity of 1Peter, 1John, and even the brief epistle to Philemon.
  - c. Certainly there is almost no evidence that those who possessed the three books did not consider them authentic and apostolic.
  - d. The seven books that came into question for various reasons are, Hebrews, James, 2Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation.
3. In order to understand the issue at stake, the books "spoken against" (Antilegomena) must be considered.
  - a. *Hebrews*. This book was questioned because of its anonymity. In the East, where it is considered Pauline, it was readily received. The West was slower, however, because of uncertainty as to its apostolic authorship, and possibly because individuals in the heretical Montanist sect appealed to Hebrews for one of their erroneous Doctrines.

- 1) One other reason that the West was slow in its deliberation was its stress upon apostolic authorship rather than apostolic authority as the correct test of canonicity.
  - 2) In the fourth century, through the influence of Jerome and Augustine, the West finally recognized the epistle as canonical.
- b. *James*. James was questioned as to its veracity, although some questioned its authorship as well.
- 1) The supposed conflict with Paul on justification by faith held back full acceptance as late as the time of Eusebius.
  - 2) Even during the Reformation period, Luther had doubts about James, calling it, “flatly in contradiction to St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture.”
  - 3) Luther placed it at the end of his New Testament, along with Hebrews, Jude and Revelation, in a lesser position. As a result of the work of Origen, Eusebius (who personally favored James), Jerome, and Augustine, the West finally recognized its complementary nature to Paul’s epistles and hence, its canonicity.
- c. *2 Peter*. The genuineness of 2 Peter was questioned. In fact no other book in the New Testament has been questioned as persistently. (cf. Handout #3)
- 1) Even Calvin seemed to be unsure of it. Jerome stated that the hesitancy to accept 2 Peter was due to dissimilarity of style with 1 Peter.
  - 2) Whether, as Jerome thought, this characteristic is due to different amanuensis may never be fully settled.
  - 3) It is clear, however, that ample evidence is now available to attest that this epistle is rightly attributed to the apostle Peter.
    - a) Another reason for rejecting 2 Peter has been the claim that it is a second century work. However, W.F. Albright has pointed out the reminiscences of Qumran literature in 2 Peter and dates it before A.D. 80.
    - b) The discovery of the Bodmer manuscript (P72), which contains the earliest known copy of 2Peter (late third century), reveals that it was in use and highly respected by Coptic Christians in Egypt during the third century.
    - c) Besides the possible allusions to 2Peter in Pseudo-Barnabas 15:4 (cf. 2Peter 3:8), there is the testimony of Origen, Eusebius, Jerome, and Augustine, which finally triumphed. Benjamin B Warfield perceptively observes that there is more evidence for 2 Peter than there is for Herodotus and Thucydides.
    - d) Furthermore, there is positive internal evidence for the authenticity of 2 Peter. For although there are some marked differences, there are some close similarities to 1 Peter both linguistically and doctrinally.

- d. *2 and 3 John*. These books were also questioned as to their genuineness.
- 1) Because of their private nature and limited circulation, they did not enjoy a widespread acceptance.
  - 2) The author identifies himself not as an apostle but as an “elder,” another factor that hindered its acceptance.
  - 3) But the similarity of style and thought to 1John, and the use of “elder” by apostles on other occasions (1Peter 5:1), argues strongly for the Johannine authorship.
- e. *Jude*. This was disputed on the question of authenticity.
- 1) The majority of those who questioned Jude did so on the basis of its alleged references to the Pseudepigraphical *Book of Enoch*, (vv.14-15; cf. Enoch 1:9).
  - 2) Jerome specifically says this is the reason it was challenged.
  - 3) However the explanation which most commended it is that Jude’s citation of Enoch does not demand approval of the work as a whole, but extends only to those portions that he utilizes for his purpose. This situation is not materially different from Paul’s references to pagan poets (Acts 17:28; 1Cor. 15:33 (Menander, *Thais*); Titus 1:12).
  - 4) Like 2 Peter the Bodmer papyrus manuscript P72 from Egypt confirms the use of Jude during the third century.
- f. *Revelation*. The Apocalypse (Revelation) was included in the Antilegomena because its authenticity was challenged.
- 1) The doctrine of *chiliasm* (millennialism) was the focal point of the controversy, which lasted longer than that over any New Testament book.
  - 2) It is a curious thing that Revelation was one of the first books to be recognized in existing writings of the apostolic Fathers, and one of the last to be questioned.
  - 3) There is external evidence for its recognition from the time of the Shepherd of Hermes (115-140 a.d.), continuing into the Second century until the Montanists began to attach their unique form of millennialism to it.
  - 4) It seems clear that the question was not one of inspiration, but interpretation and association with particular doctrinal emphases that occasioned the dispute.
  - 5) Once this was understood, the authentic apostolic authority of Revelation was vindicated.

4. As with Revelation, so with all of the disputed books: once the question of authenticity or genuineness was settled, there was no problem about their canonicity.

5. It was clear that a book was written by a prophet of God, and it told the truth about God, man, and so on, then it was recognized to be the Word of God.

### C. The Books rejected by All - Pseudepigrapha

#### 1. The Nature of the Pseudepigrapha:

- a. During the first few centuries, numerous books of a fanciful and heretical nature arose that are neither genuine nor valuable as a whole.
- b. Eusebius of Caesarea called these “totally absurd and impious.”
- c. Virtually no orthodox father, canon, or council considered these books to be canonical and, so far as the church is concerned, they are primarily of historical value.
- d. These books indicate heretical teaching of gnostic, docetic, and ascetic groups, as well as the exaggerated fancy of religious lore in the early church.
- e. At best, these books were revered by some of the cults and referred to by some of the orthodox Fathers, but they were never considered canonical by the mainstream of Christianity.

#### 2. The number of the Pseudepigrapha:

- a. There was apparently a large number of non-canonical books even in the first century (2 Thess. 2:2,15; 3:17)
- b. By the ninth century Photius listed some 280 of them, and more have subsequently been discovered.

#### 3. The following list includes some of the more important Pseudepigraphal books of the New Testament.

- a. Gospels: There are more than fifty Pseudepigraphal gospels. However, many are known only by name and others by a few scattered citations in the church Fathers.

##### 1) *The Gospel of Thomas*- Early second century.

- a) The Gospel of Thomas was known to Hippolytus, Origen and Irenaeus.
- b) Like other accounts of the infancy of Christ, the Gospel of Thomas contains fanciful stories of alleged childhood miracles of Jesus.
- c) One story tells of when a “child ran and dashed against his shoulder, Jesus is said to have been provoked and said unto him: “Thou shalt not finish thy course (lit., go all thy way). And immediately he fell down and died.
- d) It appears to have a gnostic influence and reflect a dimension of personality in Jesus that is utterly at variance with that as set forth in the NT gospel accounts, **GIB pg. 302.**

2) *The Gospel of the Ebionites* - Second Century

- a) The Ebionites were a Jewish sect of Christians who stressed the Law of Moses.
- b) They denied the deity of Christ, and are said to have accepted only one gospel.
- c) They believed Jesus was a mere man who God adopted at the time of His baptism, **GIB pg. 303**.

3). *The Gospel of Peter*- Second Century

- a) Eusebius identified it as docetic, which means it denied the true humanity of Christ.
- b) The Gospel of Peter teaches several things that fail to concur with the NT
  - 1) Pilate was guilty for the death of Jesus and only the Jews were answerable for it.
  - 2) Jesus felt no pain when crucified.
  - 3) That Jesus' "brother and sisters" were from a first marriage of Joseph
  - 4) It also contains an embellished account of the resurrection of Jesus, **GIB pg. 303**.

4) *Protevangelium of James* - Late Second Century

- a) It is mentioned by early church Fathers.
- b) Only one manuscript copy is preserved.
- c) It is characterized by a particular devotion to Mary.
  - 1) Speaks of her miraculous birth and her perpetual virginity
  - 2) Mary was born after only six months in the womb and walked seven steps only six months after her birth.
  - 3) Mary was only sixteen when all these mysterious things happened.
  - 4) The text contains one of the most outlandish miracle stories of Jesus birth, **GIB pg. 304**.

5) *The Gospel of the Hebrews* - Second Century

- a) A false gnostic gospel that was known to Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome.
- b) It was mistakenly believed by some that this was the original Hebrew version of the gospel of Matthew, which many believe to have been written prior to the Greek version.
- c) According to Irenaeus, it was used by the Ebionites to exalt the Old Testament law and to repudiate the apostle Paul.

d) Some of the features of the Gospel of the Hebrews include the following:

- 1) A special appearance of Christ to James, who, contrary to the canonical gospels, is said to have been at the last supper.
- 2) Reference to the Holy Spirit as our “mother.” Jesus said, “Even now did my mother the Holy Spirit take me by one of mine hairs, and carried me away unto the great mountain Thabor”

6) *The Gospel of the Egyptians* - Second Century

- a) This spurious gospel is mentioned by Clement of Alexandria and Origen.
- b) It purports that Jesus, “showed his disciples that the same person was Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” There seems to be an early ascetic tendency in the cult that produced the work.
- c) This gospel has a gnostic disdain for Jesus’ body . For example it states, “When Salome inquired when the things concerning which she asked should be known, the Lord said: When ye have trampled on the garment of shame, and when two become one and the male with the female is neither male nor female.”
- d) In another instance it asserts, “The Lord said to Salome when she inquired: How long shall death prevail? ‘As long as ye women bear children’, not because life is an ill, and the creation evil: but as showing the sequence of nature: for in all cases birth is followed by decay.”

7) *The Gospel of the Nazaraens* - Early Second Century

- a) This book is closely related in content and compass to the synoptic gospels.
- b) It was referred to by Jerome as “the Gospel which the Nazarenes use.”
- c) Some of the features include:
  - 1) That the man with a withered hand was a mason who said, “I was a mason and earned [my] livelihood with [my] hands; I beseech thee, Jesus, to restore to me my health that I may not with ignominy have to beg for my bread.”
  - 2) It says (contrary to Matthew 12:40) that Jesus did not spend “three days and three nights” in the grave.



3) It declares, as Jerome notes, that “in the Gospel which is written in Hebrew characters we read not that the veil of the temple was rent, but that the lintel of the temple of wondrous size collapsed.”

4) It claims that thousands were converted at the cross when Jesus said, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34): “At this word of the Lord many thousands of the Jews who were standing round the cross became believers.”

8) *The Gospel of Philip* - Second Century

a) This is a gnostic gospel known only by one citation until a fourth-or fifth-century manuscript was found in the Gnostic Library at Nag Hammadi, Egypt (1945)

b) It narrates the manner of the ascent of a soul through seven successive spheres of hostile “powers” (planetary archons).

c) It contains some noncanonical sayings of Christ, such as, “A disciple one day asked the Lord about something worldly. he replied: Ask thy mother, and she will give thee strange things.”

9) *The Book of Thomas the Athlete*

a) A gnostic-like gospel containing an alleged dialogue of Jesus and Thomas that occurred between the resurrection and ascension.

b) This book contains condemnations of the flesh, womanhood, sexuality, and promises of a future rest in the kingdom of heaven.

c) It begins, “The secret words spoken by the Saviour to Judas Thomas, and which I have written down, I, Matthew, who heard them while they spoke together.”

10) *The Gospel according to Mathias: Traditions of Mathias.*

a) Known by Origen, Eusebius, Ambrose, and Jerome.

b) Quotations from it are preserved by Clement of Alexandria

c) There is a Gnostic influence manifest.

11) *The Gospel of Judas* - Late Second Century.

a) This gospel was known to Irenaeus and Epiphanius (c. 315-403), bishop of Salamia.

b) The product of an antinomian Gnostic sect, it may have contained “a Passion story setting forth the ‘mystery of the betrayal’ and explaining how Judas by his treachery made possible the salvation of all mankind.

12) *Epistle of an Apostle* - Second Century

- a) Unknown before a Coptic text was found in Cairo in 1895.
- b) This presents a dialogue between Christ and the eleven disciples after the resurrection.
  - 1) “He entered into the womb of Mary in the disguise of the angel Gabriel.”
  - 2) “At that time I appeared in the form of the archangel Gabriel to (the virgin) Mary and spoke with her, and her heart received (me); she believed and laughed; and I the Word, went into her and became flesh; and I myself was servant for myself, and in the form of the image of an angel; so I will do after I have gone to my Father.”

13) *The Apocryphon of John* - Second Century

- a) This is a Pseudepigraphal post-resurrection dialogue between a disciple and the Revealer.
- b) It says, “I am [the Father]; I am the Mother, I [am the Son].”

**D. Books Accepted by Some - Apocrypha**

1. The nature of the Apocrypha:
  - a. For the most part, these books were not received as canonical and, like the Pseudepigrapha, they were used heretically by the sects and were even quoted by some orthodox writers.
  - b. Nonetheless, on the whole they have one further characteristic, namely, they were not only part of the religious literature quoted by the fathers, but sometimes appeared in local ecclesiastical canons and Bible Translations.
  - c. Some of the Fathers and churches considered several of these books to be canonical.
  - d. Nevertheless the testimony of the church in general, as well as the final canonical decisions, reveals that partial and local judgment was faulty.
  - e. Still, local acceptance and wide circulation of some of the books manifest their value as well as their esteem.
2. The number of the Apocrypha
  - a. Here again, the number is somewhat arbitrary, because it is based on two distinctions that are difficult to determine precisely, that is, the difference between the “orthodox” and “heretical” fathers.
  - b. In a general way, the latter may be determined by the canons and creeds of the church councils of the first five centuries, while the former by whether or not the book was used only homiletically, or theologically and authoritatively.

3. The following list fits into the category of books used at least ecclesiastically, and possible canonically.

a. *Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas* (c. A.D. 70-79)

- 1) This is widely circulated epistle is found in the Codex Siniaticus (c. 340), and mentioned in the table of contents of Codex Bezae
- 2) It was quoted as Scripture by Clement of Alexandria.
- 3) It parallels the canonical epistle to the Hebrews in style although it is more allegorical and mystical than the Hebrews.
- 4) There is some debate as to whether it is a first or second century document.
- 5) Nonetheless, it may be concluded with Brooke Foss Westcott that “while the antiquity of the Epistle is firmly established, its Apostolicity is more than questionable.”

b. *Epistle to the Corinthians* (c. A.D. 96).

- 1) Dionysius of Corinth (160-80) says that this epistle 1 Corinthians by Clement of Rome, was read publicly at Corinth and elsewhere, and it is found in Codex Alexandrinus.
- 2) Herbert T. Andrews sums up the situation on this epistle, saying, “Today no one would put in a plea for its recognition as Scripture, yet from a historical point of view the epistle has no little interest for us...It gives us a very good conception of the Christian belief at the time...It contains explicit references to Paul’s first Epistle to the Corinthians, and gives several quotations from the Epistle to the Hebrews, and so proves that these books were widely circulated and recognized before the close of the first century.”

c. *Ancient Homily, or the so-called Second Epistle of Clement* (c. A.D. 120-40)

- 1) This was known and used in the second century and is also called 2 Corinthians of Clement of Rome.
- 2) There is no clear evidence that it was considered fully canonical, at least on any broad scale.

d. *Shepherd*, of Hermas (c. A.D, 115-40)

- 1) This is the most popular of all the noncanonical books of the New Testament.
- 2) It is found in the Sinaiticus, in the table of contents of Bezae, in some Latin Bibles, quoted as inspired by Scripture by Irenaeus and Origen.
- 3) It is a dramatization of spiritual truths and as such is like Ecclesiasticus of the Old Testament Apocrypha - ethical and devotional, but not canonical.

e. *Apocalypse of Peter* (c. 150)

- 1) This is perhaps the oldest of the noncanonical New Testament apocalypses, and it enjoyed great popularity in the early church.
- 2) It is mentioned in the Muratorian Fragment.
- 3) Its description of heaven is picturesque, and its picture of hell are grotesque, depicting it as a lake of “flaming mire” or a “lake of pitch and blood and boiling mire.”
- 4) As to its authenticity, even the Muratorian Fragment raised questions, saying some would not permit it to be read in their churches. The church in general agreed with that conclusion.

## E. Evaluation of the New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

### 1. The value of the New Testament Pseudepigrapha

- a. In general, these books have no positive theological value, and almost no historical value, except as they reflect the religious consciousness of the church during the early centuries.
- b. Their value may be summarized as follows:
  - 1) They contain, no doubt, the kernel of some correct traditions.
  - 2) They reflect the ascetic, docetic, and gnostic tendencies, and heresies of early Christianity.
  - 3) They show a popular desire for information not given in the canonical gospels, such as the childhood of Jesus, and the lives of the apostles.
  - 4) They manifest an illegitimate tendency to glorify Christianity by means of pious frauds.
  - 5) They display an unhealthy desire to find support for doctrinal interests and heretical teachings under the guise of apostolic authority.
  - 6) They reveal an unwholesome attempt to fill up supposed lacks in the canonical writings.

### 2. The value of the New Testament Apocrypha

- a. There is no doubt that the theological and historical value of most of these books is much higher than that of the Pseudepigrapha.
- b. In brief, they are valuable, but not canonical.
  - 1) They provide the earliest documentation of some of the canonical books of the New Testament.
  - 2) They reveal beliefs within the subapostolic church.
  - 3) They form a bridge between the apostolic writings of the New Testament and the patristic literature of the third and fourth centuries, thus providing some clues to that transition.
  - 4) They possess hints as to the rise of later unorthodox teachings (e.g., allegorical interpretation in Pseudo-Barnabas)
  - 5) They contain much historical value about practices of the early church.

c. With the above values in mind, it should be emphasized that none of these books is to be considered canonical or inspired. Several reasons may be proffered in support of that contention.

- 1) None of them enjoyed any more than a temporary or local recognition.
- 2) Most of them never did have anything more than a semicanonical status, being appended to various manuscripts or mentioned in tables of content.
- 3) No major canon or church council included them as inspired books of the New Testament.
- 4) The limited acceptance enjoyed by most of these books is attributed to the fact that they attached themselves to references in canonical books, because of their alleged apostolic authorship,. Once these issues were clarified, there remained little doubt that these books were not canonical.

#### **F. Conclusion:**

1. On the question of New Testament canonicity, twenty of the twenty-seven books were never seriously questioned in orthodox circles, namely the Homologoumena.
2. The other seven books, called Antilegomena, were questioned by some of the fathers for a time, but were finally and fully recognized by the church generally.
3. There are numerous books that were never accepted by anyone as authentic or canonical, which are called Pseudepigrapha.
4. The final class of books called Apocrypha, were of good quality and integrity that had a local and temporary acceptance, although they were never widely nor finally considered to be canonical.