Commentary On WCF 1.2-3 – What is the canonical status of the Apocrypha?

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WCF 1.3

The Books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the scripture; and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.

- Luke 24:27, 44, *And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself…And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses, and in the Prophets, and in the Psalms, concerning me.*
- Rom. 3:2, *Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.*
- 2 Pet. 1:21, *For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.*

What are the books commonly called Apocrypha?

The word *Apocrypha* means *hidden*. There are many so-called apocryphal works that are known today (OT Apocrypha, and NT Apocrypha), but in the context of the Westminster Assembly (1646), and the debates of the 16th and 17th century between Protestants and Roman Catholics, the "Books commonly called Apocrypha" refers to:

1. Tobit
2. Judith
3. 1-2 Maccabees
4. Wisdom (of Solomon)
5. Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)
6. Baruch
7. Greek Additions to Esther
8. Greek Additions to Daniel (Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon).

Note: 1-2 Esdras (also called 3-4 Esdras), 3-4 Maccabees, and the Prayer of Manasses, were regarded as non-canonical by both Protestants and Roman Catholics. The Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches include as canonical: The Prayer of Manasses, 1-2 Esdras, 3-4 Maccabees, and Psalm 151.

Why do Protestants regard these books as non-canonical?

1. Because according to Romans 3:2, the oracles of God were committed to the Jews, and the Jewish Church never considered them to be canonical.
    a. The Jewish historian Josephus (38-100 AD) acknowledges this in *Against Apion.*
2. Because they are never quoted or referenced as Scripture by Christ or the Apostles in the New Testament.
3. Because they are not included under the categories that Jesus describes as authoritative (the law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms).

4. Because they were not written in Hebrew, which was the original language of Scripture for the Jewish people prior to the New Testament.
5. Because they were not authored by the prophets (Hebrews 1:1), and one of the apocryphal books explicitly confesses this (see Prologue to Sirach).
6. Because they contain various fables, impious doctrines, and false histories.
    a. A sample of these can be found in Francis Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (1696 AD), Vol. 1, Page 104-105:

    IV. The style and matter of the books proclaim them to be human, not divine. It requires little acuteness to discover that they are the product of human labor, although some are more excellent than others. For besides the fact that the style does not savor of the majesty and simplicity of the divine style and is redolent with the faults and weaknesses of human genius (in the vanity, flattery, curiosity, mistaken zeal and ill-timed affectation of learning and eloquence, which are often met with), there are so many things in them not only foolish and absurd, but even false, superstitious and contradictory, as to show clearly that they are not divine but human writings. We will give a few specimens of the many errors. Tobias makes the angel tell a falsehood. He says that he is Azariah, the son of Ananias (Tob. 5:12*) and that he is Raphael, the angel of the Lord (12:15). The angel gives a magical direction for driving away the devil by the smoke of a fish's liver (Tob. 6:6), against that of Christ (Mt. 17:21). He arrogates to himself the oblation of prayers (Tob. 12:12), which belongs to the work of Christ alone. The book of Judith celebrates the deed of Simeon (Jud. 9:2), which Jacob cursed (Gen. 49:5-7); praises the deceits and lies of Judith (Jud. 11), which are not very consistent with piety. Worse still, she even seeks the blessing of God upon them (Jud. 9:13). No mention is made of the city Bethulia in the Scriptures; nor does any trace of the deliverance mentioned there occur in Josephus or Philo, who wrote on Jewish subjects. The author of Wisdom falsely asserts that he was king in Israel (Wis. Sol. 9:7, 8) that he might be taken for Solomon. Yet he alludes to the athletic contests which in the time of Solomon had not been established among the Greeks (Wis. Sol. 4:2). Further, he introduces the Pythagorean metempsychosis (metempsychösin, Wis. Sol. 8:19, 20) and gives a false account of the origin of idolatry (14:15,16). The Son of Sirach (Sir. 46:20) attributes to Samuel what was done by the evil spirit raised by wicked devices (1S. 28:11), falsely speaks of Elijah's bodily return (Sir. 48:10), and excuses his oversights in the prologue.

    V. There are so many contradictions and absurdities in the additions to Esther and Daniel that Sixtus Senensis unhesitatingly rejects them. Baruch says that in the fifth year after the destruction of Jerusalem, he read his book to Jeconiah and to all the people of Babylon; but Jeconiah was in prison and Baruch had been taken away to Egypt after the death of Gedaliah (Jer. 43:7*). He mentions an altar of the Lord (Bar. 1:10) when there was none, the temple being destroyed. The books of the Maccabees often contradict each other (compare 1 Mac. 1:16 with 9:5, 28 and chapter 10). The suicide (autocheiria) of Razis is praised (2 Mac. 14:42). Will-worship (ethelothrêskeia) is commended (2 Mac. 12:42) in Judas's offering a sacrifice for the dead contrary to the law. The author apologizes for his

> youth and infirmity and complains of the painful labor of abridging the five books of Jason, the Cyrenian (2 Mac. 2:23*, 24; 15:39).

What does it mean for something to be *canonical*?
The following excerpt is from *The Biblical Canon Lists From Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* by Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade (2017):

> The use of the term 'canon' (κανών) in reference to a collection of sacred Scripture dates to the fourth century. The term had been used in a variety of ways in early Christianity, as in earlier Hellenistic Greek, generally indicating a 'standard' or a 'rule'. The apostle Paul used the word a few times in this way (2 Cor. 10:13–16; Gal. 6:16), and Irenaeus wrote about the 'canon' of faith (Haer. 3.2.2). In the fourth century, Eusebius devised canon tables to aid comparison of parallel passages in the Gospels, and the decrees of ecclesiastical councils also received the label 'canons'. At nearly the same time, Athanasius described the Shepherd of Hermas as outside the canon (Decrees of the Synod of Nicaea 18), using here the word 'canon' for the first time (in our extant sources) in the sense of the canon of sacred Scripture. In his canon list (included in this volume), Athanasius labelled the authoritative books 'canonized' (Ep. fest. 39.16, 20, 21). The Synod of Laodicea likewise spoke of the canonical books (τὰ κανονικά) and the non-canonical books (τὰ ἀκανόνιστα). Latin adopted the Greek word, as did other languages, including English. A canon list, then, should be a list of the books that an author or council considers to constitute the biblical canon.[1]

In the Westminster Confession of Faith, the canon of the Scripture refers to all those books, "which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life" (WCF 1.2). The Reformed sometimes distinguish between a *canon of faith* (which is Holy Scripture), and a *canon of ecclesiastical reading*. This latter sense of the canon would allow for the Apocryphal books to be read for edification, or even liturgically in some traditions, but not for the establishment of doctrine.

History Notes

- St. Jerome (died 420 AD) and St. Augustine (died 430 AD) debated the superiority of the Hebrew Old Testament (Masoretic Text, MT) compared with the Greek (Septuagint, LXX) and Latin versions. This was a question open to debate in the 5th century.
- It was not until the Council of Trent in 1546 (4th Session), that the Church of Rome decreed the canonical status of the apocrypha: "If anyone does not accept as sacred and canonical the aforesaid books in their entirety with all their parts, as they have accustomed to be read in the Catholic Church and as they are contained in the old Latin Vulgate Edition, and knowingly and deliberately rejects the aforesaid traditions, let him be anathema."
- In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), the apocrypha are enumerated among the Old Testament.

[1] Gallagher, Edmon L.; Meade, John D.. The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis (pp. xii-xiii). (Function). Kindle Edition.