BIBLE TRANSLATIONS
AND THE
APOCRYPHA

"The books called Apocrypha, not being of Divine confirmation, are no part of the Canon of 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."

The Westminster Confession of Faith

"This Society shall circulate the HOLY SCRIPTURES, as comprised in the Canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, without note or comment, to the exclusion of the Apocrypha; the copies in the English language shall be those of the Authorised Version."

Laws and Regulations of the Trinitarian Bible Society.
BIBLE TRANSLATIONS AND THE APOCRYPHA

The inclusion of the Apocrypha in modern translations of the Bible, both in English and in many other languages, raises serious questions concerning the origin and character of this literature and its authority and place, if any, in Christian doctrine and worship.

The English Bible

The appearance of the Apocryphal books in an English Bible is by no means a new development, however unfamiliar they may be to the great majority of English readers today. Eleven Apocryphal books were bound up with Coverdale’s Bible of 1535 printed at Antwerp, and the edition of 1537 printed in England. Tyndale did not translate these books completely, but his revised edition of his New Testament included the “Epistles from the Old Testament according to the use of Salisbury”. This service book, one of the forerunners of the Book of Common Prayer, included a list of “Gospels and Epistles” to be read on certain days. Some of the “Epistles” were passages from the Apocryphal Books, and Tyndale included six of these lessons in his translation. This part of Tyndale’s work was apparently not followed by either Coverdale or Rogers, and their version of the Apocrypha is quite independent. Tyndale’s fellow-labourer John Rogers included the Apocrypha, with the addition of the Prayer of Manasses, in the edition of the work of Tyndale and Coverdale which he issued under the name of Thomas Matthew in 1537. In these editions the Apocrypha appeared separately after Malachi and was not interspersed with the Canonical Books.

The Reformers’ view

The revision known as the Great Bible, embodying much of the work of Tyndale, Rogers and Coverdale, included the books under the title “Hagiographa”. The six editions of the Great Bible published in 1540 and 1541 included a “prologue or preface” by Archbishop Cranmer, in which a distinction is drawn between the authority of these books and the rest of the Old Testament . . . “In consideration that the books before are found in the Hebrew tongue received of all men, and that the other following, which are called Hagiographa, because they were wont to be read, not openly and in common, but as it were in secret and apart, are neither found in the Hebrew nor in the Chaldee, in which tongue they have not of long been written. Wherefore, when thou wilt maintain anything for certain, rendering a reason for thy faith, take heed to proceed therein by the living and pithy Scriptures . . . “. This preface makes
it quite clear that the Reformers did not regard the Apocrypha as of equal authority with the inspired Scriptures, and it would have been more correct to use the title "Apocrypha" rather than "Hagiographa".

**English Bibles of the 16th century**

Taverner's Bible of 1539 contained "The volume of the bokes called Apocripha, conteigned in the common translacion in Latin, which are not found in the Hebrue, or in the Chaldee". One edition of the Great Bible of 1540 contained the Apocryphal books interspersed with the canonical books, but subsequent editions had these books printed separately at the end of the Old Testament. One quarto edition of the Great Bible of uncertain date, but after 1549, contains the table of Epistles and Gospels to be read according to the Prayer Book, but omits the Apocrypha. The Geneva Bible of 1559 contains the Apocrypha preceded by an article entitled "The Argument" asserting that these books were not received by a common consent to be read and expounded publicly in the church, and that they could not be used to confirm a matter of doctrine excepting in instances where they are in agreement with the canonical Scriptures. Some copies of the 1599 edition of the Geneva Bible were issued without the Apocrypha, but the gap in the page numbers shows that the type-setting included the Apocrypha and that the binder made up some copies without these books. An edition published at Amsterdam in 1640 omitted the Apocrypha and inserted a defence between the Testaments.

The Bishops' Bible of 1568 included the Apocrypha translated by Dr. Parkhurst, Bishop of Norwich. It appears at the end of the Old Testament without any preface to describe their uninspired character. A quarto edition of the Bishops' Bible dated 1575 appeared without the Apocrypha.

**The Authorised Version, Revised Version and Revised Standard Version**

When the time arrived for work to commence on the revision which was to become so widely known as the Authorised Version or King James Version, the Apocrypha had an established, if unwarranted, place in the printed English Bible, and a committee of six scholars, among them Samuel Ward, Downes and Boys, laboured at Cambridge on this part of the undertaking. Scrivener was not greatly impressed by this part of their work. He wrote in the "Homiletic Quarterly" for October 1881, "It is well known to Biblical scholars that the Apocrypha received very inadequate attention from the revisers of 1611 and their predecessors, so that whole passages remain unaltered from the racy, spirited, rhythmical, but hasty, loose and most inaccurate version (being the
first published in England) made by Coverdale for the Bible of 1536”. According to Rivington’s “Records of the Stationers Co.” quoted by Scrivener in “The Authorised Edition of the English Bible of 1611”, Archbishop Abbot in 1615 forbade anyone to issue a Bible without the Apocrypha on pain of one year’s imprisonment. Nevertheless Norton and Bill, “Printers to the King’s most excellent Majesty” published in 1629 a small quarto edition without the Apocrypha, but this had “APO” after the tailpiece at the end of Malachi – indicating that the inclusion of the books was intended. The following year Robert Barker issued a reprint of this Bible with the Apocrypha between the Testaments.

John Canne, a leader of the English “Brownists”, fled to Amsterdam after the Restoration of Charles II and issued there in 1664 an octavo edition of the Authorised Version without the Apocrypha. This edition contains a “Preface to the Reader” by Canne and his marginal notes showing that the Bible is its own interpreter. In 1653, while he was in England during the Protectorate, Canne had been granted an exclusive licence to print this Bible for seven years.

Among the ancient volumes in the Trinitarian Bible Society library are the following:— A.V. Printed by John Field – Cambridge University Press 1662 without Apocrypha; A.V. with John Canne’s Preface and Marginal notes 1682 without Apocrypha; Geneva Bible with Apocrypha – printed in London 1578; A.V. with Apocrypha 1613, and many others.

More than two hundred and fifty years later the English Revised Version of 1885 was in course of preparation, and although the Apocrypha had not formed part of the original scheme, the University Presses entrusted its revision to a special company composed of members of the committees engaged upon the work, and published it in 1894. The American Revised Standard Version also embraced the Apocrypha, although this was not included in the first editions, but was published several years later in 1957. Dean Weigle was chairman, and Bruce Metzger of Princeton Theological Seminary was secretary of the committee of ten scholars who worked on the R.S.V. Apocrypha. One of the most popular editions containing these books is the Oxford Annotated Bible (R.S.V.) with the Apocrypha, published by Oxford University Press in 1966. The Apocrypha continued to be included in many editions of the King James Version until the controversy arose in the 1820’s over the inclusion of these books in some of the foreign versions published by the British and Foreign Bible Society. After that time it became much more common for the Authorised Version to appear without the Apocryphal books, but the University Presses and Her Majesty’s Printers have continued to issue some editions containing them up to the present time.
Wyclif and Luther

Notwithstanding this long record of the inclusion of the Apocrypha in the English Bible, the Evangelical and reformed churches confidently reject these books and assert that they have no right to be regarded as part of the Divine revelation. The same view was held in the 14th century by John Wyclif, the “Morning Star” of the Reformation. In the Wyclif Bible, which was the first translation of the Bible into English, the prologue listed the books of the Hebrew Canon and added, “Whatever book is in the Old Testament besides these . . . shall be set among the Apocrypha, that is, without authority of belief”. The Wyclif Bible contained the Apocryphal books because they were in the Latin Vulgate, on which this English version was based.

The complete edition of Martin Luther’s Bible appeared in 1534 with the Apocrypha separated from the rest of the Old Testament and placed between the Old and New Testaments under the title, “Apocrypha; that is, Books which are not to be considered as equal to Holy Scripture, and yet are useful and good to read.” Luther’s work was issued in parts, beginning with the New Testament in 1522, followed by the Pentateuch in 1523, the Historical books and “Hagiographa” in 1524, Jonah in 1526, the rest of the Prophets at intervals, and then the whole Bible in 1534 and a revised edition in 1541.

During this period Zwingli, Pellican, Leo Juda and other scholars at Zurich used Luther’s work up to the end of the “Hagiographa” as the basis of a new translation, and added their original translation of the Prophets and Apocrypha. This Zurich Bible was issued in parts between 1524 and 1529 and in one volume in 1529 and 1530. The 1531 edition contained a new translation of the “Hagiographa”.

Meaning of “Hagiographa”

The word “Hagiographa” (Holy Writings) has been used in three different senses and it is important to ascertain the precise meaning of the writer when quoting from various works. The word is used in relation to the canonical Books constituting the third division of the Hebrew Scriptures, which were entitled – the Law, the Prophets and the Writings.

In one place Jerome uses “Hagiographa” of an Apocryphal Book, when he states that Tobit was cut off by the Jews from the Divine Scriptures and placed among the Hagiographa. He makes a similar reference to Judith, but some manuscript copies of his writings have “Apocrypha” in this place. In the middle ages “Hagiographa” and “Apocrypha” were often used indiscriminately when referring to the Apocrypha. Some writers have used the word Hagiographa in its literal sense when referring to the whole of the Scriptures as the Holy Writings.
The Church of England

The Articles of the Church of England when first issued in 1552 contained no list of the Books of the Bible, but the 6th Article of the revised Articles of 1562 gives a list of the Canonical Books accompanied by the declaration that, “the other books (as Jerome saith) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners, but yet it doth not apply them to establish any doctrine”. The Article then enumerates 1 and 2 Esdras (that is 3 and 4 Esdras, the former being known in our Bible as Ezra and Nehemiah), Tobit, Judith, the rest of the Book of Esther, Wisdom, Jesus the Son of Sirach, Baruch the Prophet, the Song of the Three Children, the Story of Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, the Prayer of Manasses, and 1 and 2 Maccabees.

The Reformed Confessions of Faith

The Gallican Confession of 1561 and the Belgic Confession of the same year regarded the Apocrypha in the same way as the Helvetic Confession of 1566 which stated, “We do not deny that certain Books of the O.T. were named by the ancients apocryphal, by others ecclesiastical, as being read in the churches, but not adduced for authority in matters of belief: as Augustine, in the 18th Book of the City of God, ch. 38 relates . . .” In the same year the Confession of the Dutch Churches rejected the authority of these books – “We make a distinction between those (the canonical books) and such as are called Apocryphal, which may indeed be read in the Church, and proofs adduced from them, so far as they agree with the canonical books, but their authority and force are by no means such that any article of faith may be certainly declared from their testimony alone, still less can they impugn or detract from the authority of the others”.

The Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 was even more explicit – “The books called Apocrypha, not being of Divine confirmation, are no part of the Canon of 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”. Three years before this the Long Parliament ordered that only the Canonical Books were to be read in church, but this order was rescinded after the Restoration.

Why included in the English Bible

The inclusion of the Apocrypha in the English Bible is easily accounted for. These books seem to have been compiled during the period B.C. 250 – B.C. 100 and were appended to the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament which came to be known as the Septuagint or LXX. Greek writers early in the Christian era,
having little or no familiarity with the Hebrew, made frequent use of
the LXX and quoted also from the Apocryphal books which it
contained. Although the Greek Church from the time of the
Council of Laodicea in A.D. 363 gave these books a lower rank than
those received as “canonical”, and although in the Western Church
the opinion of Jerome was widely held, that the Hebrew canon was
the ultimate text, the books continued to be copied and quoted by
many Christian writers. The Old Latin versions made from the LXX
included them and Jerome himself translated them and sent them
forth with his Latin Vulgate.

Influence of the Latin Vulgate

During a period of many centuries the Latin Vulgate was the
Bible of Western Christendom. In the 14th century, the Wycliff
Bible followed the Vulgate in reproducing the Apocryphal books
but included a careful explanation that these were not to be
regarded as of equal authority with the other books. The translators
of the 16th century were also influenced in their judgment by the
fact that the Latin Vulgate had joined the Canonical and
Apocryphal books together for upwards of twelve hundred years.
Another consideration ensured the inclusion of these books long
after the era of the Reformation. The Church of England Book of
Common Prayer prescribed certain “lessons” to be read during the
various services and the lectionary included certain readings from
the Apocrypha. As the Prayer Book was often bound in the same
volumes with the Bible, and the 6th of the 39 Articles sanctions their
use, although of inferior authority to the Canonical Books, it is not
surprising that the Apocrypha held its place in these composite
volumes.

The Council of Trent and the R.C. Versions

At the Roman Catholic Council of Trent the place of the
Apocrypha was discussed in the light of the utter rejection of the
authority of these books by many of the Protestants, and the
Council duly pronounced an anathema upon all who did not accept
the Apocrypha as contained in the Latin Vulgate, except 1 and 2 (3
and 4) Esdras and the Prayer of Manasses, as “sacred and
canonical”. The books are of course to be found in the Douay
Version, the Jerusalem Bible, and other Roman Catholic Versions.

It is interesting to see how the Jerusalem Bible and New Jerusalem
Bible follow the objectionable practice of interspersing the
Apocryphal books with the canonical ones. Tobit, Judith, Esther,
and I and II Maccabees follow Nehemiah, while Wisdom and
Ecclesiasticus follow the “Song of Songs”; Baruch follows
Lamentations, the “Song of Azariah” or “Song of the Children” is
added to Daniel 3 after verse 23, extending the chapter to 100
verses, “Susanna and the Judgement of Daniel” appears as chapter 13 of Daniel, and “Bel and the Dragon” as chapter 14.

The introduction to Tobit, Judith and Esther in the New Jerusalem Bible describes the first two as “deutero-canonical” – that is to say, only recognised by the Church after a certain hesitancy in the patristic period. But they have been read and quoted from early days and appear in the official canonical lists in the West from the time of the Roman Synod of A.D. 382, and in the East from A.D. 692, the “in Trullo” Council of Constantinople”. The anathema of the Council of Trent did not hinder the writer of this introduction from expressing the opinion that “the Book of Judith in particular shows a bland indifference to history and geography”.

The surest guide

It must be remembered that these disputed books were never received into the Hebrew Canon and that the scrupulous care exercised by the guardians of the sacred text did not allow these writings to be placed upon the same level as the Hebrew Scriptures given by inspiration of God. Josephus, a contemporary of the Apostles, gives the list of Books recognised by the Jews, and then adds, “From the reign of Artaxerxes to within our memory there have been several things committed to writing, which however have not acquired the same degree of credit and authority as the former Books, inasmuch as the tradition and succession of the prophets were less certain”. It is also of great importance to note that neither our Lord nor the New Testament writers quote from these books, while their quotations from the canonical books amount to many hundreds. These considerations are of infinitely greater weight than the opinions of Greek “Fathers” and the decrees of successive councils of the “Church”.

The Bible Societies

It has already been mentioned that the Apocrypha was included in many editions of the Authorised Version issued by the University Presses in the 1820’s when the British and Foreign Bible Society decided to exclude it from their foreign versions. The Society did not circulate the Authorised Version with the Apocrypha, but for several years the Society had sanctioned the inclusion of the Apocrypha in a number of foreign versions. The exclusion of the Apocrypha was an important change in the policy of the Committee brought about by the insistence of the Edinburgh Bible Society that the Apocrypha should not be regarded as part of the Holy Scriptures given by Divine inspiration, and that its production and circulation should constitute no part of the work of a Bible Society pledged to the distribution of God’s Word alone. The case was ably stated by Robert Haldane, and his articles and correspondence on the subject were given wide publicity. Attention was drawn to the
fact that in several European languages Roman Catholic versions were circulated by the Society including the books of the Apocrypha interspersed with the Canonical Books. When the controversy was at its height a number of prominent ministers published a statement approving the policy of the British and Foreign Bible Society. The list of signatories included such distinguished evangelicals as Charles Simeon, Henry Venn, and Leigh Richmond. Haldane was convinced that these men were mistaken on an important matter of principle. The Edinburgh Bible Society withdrew its support and separated from the British and Foreign Bible Society on this issue. In later years the Edinburgh Bible Society joined with the Edinburgh and Glasgow Auxiliaries of the B.F.B.S. and others who held the same views to form the National Bible Society of Scotland.

The amended rules of the British and Foreign Bible Society

The whole issue came to a head in 1826 and 1827 and the B.F.B.S. was constrained to amend its rules by the addition of the following:

I. That the fundamental law of the Society, which limits its operations to the circulation of the Holy Scriptures, be fully and distinctly recognised as excluding the circulation of the Apocrypha.

II. That in conformity with the preceding resolution, no pecuniary aid can be granted to any Society circulating the Apocrypha; nor, except for the purpose of being applied in conformity with the said resolution, to any individual whatever.

III. That in all cases in which grants, whether gratuitous or otherwise, of the Holy Scriptures, either in whole or in part, shall be made to any Society, the books be issued bound, and on the express condition that they shall be distributed without alteration or addition.

IV. That all grants of the Scriptures to Societies which circulate the Apocrypha, be made under the express condition that they be sold or distributed without alteration or addition; and that the proceeds of such sales of any of such copies of the Scriptures be held at the disposal of the British and Foreign Bible Society.

Complete reversal of policy in 1967

This clear exclusion of the Apocrypha held its place in the rules of the B.F.B.S. for 140 years until in 1967 a change in the Society’s constitution made it possible for the Apocrypha to be included at the discretion of the Committee in any version circulated by the Society. During that long period more Bibles were circulated than in the first eighteen centuries of the Christian era – and they all went forth without the Apocrypha. Now that “interconfessional
co-operation” on Bible translation has been introduced, the national Bible Societies invite Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox scholars to join hands with liberal and evangelical “Protestant” scholars, with the object of producing Bibles which Protestants and Roman Catholics will use without distinction. Such a plan makes the inclusion of the Apocrypha, at least in some editions, quite inevitable. Hence the recent change in the rules.

The National Bible Society of Scotland

The Articles of Constitution of the National Bible Society of Scotland state that “The Holy Scriptures shall be circulated without the accompaniment of the books commonly called the ‘Apocrypha’ and without note or comment; but in exceptional circumstances the Directors may approve of the addition of notes of an explanatory character.”

Notwithstanding this emphatic exclusion of the Apocrypha, the name of the National Bible Society of Scotland is to be found upon one of the title pages of the “New English Bible with the Apocrypha” published in March 1970. The list of those who planned and directed the translation includes the British and Foreign Bible Society and the National Bible Society of Scotland. A footnote states that the publication of the Apocrypha does not imply that the bodies represented on the Joint Committee hold a common opinion upon the canonical status of these books.

The American Bible Society

The American Bible Society’s policy with regard to the Apocrypha was explained in an article entitled “Evangelicals and the Bible Society” in the summer 1970 issue of the Evangelical Missions Quarterly published at Wheaton, Illinois, U.S.A. To the question, “Will the American Bible Society publish the Apocrypha?” the official answer given was as follows: “The American Bible Society has published the Apocrypha for many years . . . The first American Bible Society publication of the Apocrypha in Spanish was produced for the American Bible Society in 1824 at the request of evangelicals in Latin America because they were the only Bibles they could get the Roman Catholics to read. For much of this century American Bible Society English catalogues have listed a Bible with the Apocrypha at the request of leaders of the Episcopal Church.

“The continuing policy of the Bible Societies is to include the Apocrypha only upon the specific request of a denomination or other Christian missionary body and only on two conditions: (a) that the books of the Apocrypha are gathered between the O.T. and N.T. as distinctly separate and (b) that the full additional cost of
providing the Apocrypha is carried out by the requesting group. This is exactly the same policy the American Bible Society has followed since its founding. It should be noticed that this means that only a few editions will contain the Apocrypha”.

In recent years, many Bible Societies have welcomed Roman Catholics on to their main committees, so that there is no clear testimony to the uninspired character of the Apocryphal books. A rapidly increasing number of new foreign-language translations contain the Apocrypha, in spite of the earlier promise that such editions would be few.

Those who wish to obtain the Apocrypha for purposes of research and study have no need to turn to one of the Bible Societies, for the University Presses and Her Majesty’s Printers between them show in their catalogues numerous editions containing these books, both in the Authorised Version and in several modern versions. The Bible Societies would do well to regard this field of study as already more than adequately provided for, and concentrate their efforts on circulating the inspired Word of God.

The Trinitarian Bible Society

The Laws and Regulations of the Trinitarian Bible Society explicitly reject the Apocrypha in Law III which begins, “This Society shall circulate the Holy Scriptures, as comprised in the Canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, without note or comment, to the exclusion of the Apocrypha; the copies in the English language shall be those of the Authorised Version”. The Society has not circulated a single copy of the Bible containing the Apocrypha, and has no intention of doing so. The object of the Society is “to promote the glory of God, and the salvation of men, by circulating at home and abroad, in dependence upon the Divine blessing, the HOLY SCRIPTURES, which are given by inspiration of God, and are able to make men wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” The Apocryphal books are not “Holy Scriptures given by inspiration of God”, and it is no part of the work of a Protestant Bible Society to promote their publication and circulation. God has promised to bless and prosper His own Word, not the uninspired writings of men –

“So shall My Word be that goeth forth out of My mouth; it shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it”. 

Isaiah 55.11.

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