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NEW TESTAMENT APOCRYPHA

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Abstract

There was a considerable debate among the early church fathers about which books ought to be included in the New Testament Canon and which ought to be omitted. Those which were omitted from the New Testament Canon were known as Apocrypha. This paper is eclectic in nature as the researchers use both descriptive and analytical methods. The findings reveal that the reasons for their not being canonized were that they were not inspired and lacked apostolic authorship. Their writings claimed to add missing details of the canonical books, and some wrote just to satisfy curiosity. The findings also reveal the importance of providing extracanonical traditions about the life and teaching of Jesus not found in the canonized books. They provide some information about Jesus and the apostles lacking in the New Testament. They contain traditions that can be etched back to the very beginning of Christianity. They are indispensable to understanding the theological environment of the first century. The study is essential as it educates on the general understanding of which books comprise the New Testament Apocrypha and how they can help one understand some missing information about key New Testament actors not discussed in the New Testament. The researchers recommend that though these writings cannot stand on a par with the canonized books of the New Testament, they should be studied for their rich historicity. Their knowledge contributes immensely to the understanding of the New Testament.

Key Words: *New Testament, Apocrypha*

General Introduction

The development of the Apocrypha as a collection was the work of Jerome, the fourth-century Christian translator, exegete, and theologian who included them in his new Latin translation (the Vulgate).¹ Many Gospels were at the disposal of the early Christians, not just the Gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John, which the contemporary reader of the New Testament knows.² Dale C. Allison describes them as a significant, ill-defined collection of texts that mimic New Testament models.³ The Greek word *apocryphos* means

¹Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period, 450 B.C.E to 600 C. E.* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1996), 48.

²Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books that did not Make it into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8.

³Dale C. Allison Jr, "New Testament Apocrypha" in *Encyclopedia of Religion, 2nd ed.*, Lindsay Jones (Farmington: Thomas Gale, 2005), 919.

"hidden", "secret," or "concealed." They are writings that have not yet been received into the Canon but which by title equate to be at the same level with the writings of the Canon and which, according to form criticism, further developed the kinds of style created and received in the New Testament.⁴ They were not included in the Canon, although some enjoyed temporary or local canonicity.⁵ They tell the story of Jesus' birth, childhood, family, ministry, death, and resurrection. They were many, but the most commonly cited are the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, and the Gospel of the Hebrews.⁶

The Apocryphal Gospels display second-century tendencies far removed from a Palestinian tradition. They exhibit many more clearly, secondary, and tendentious (bigoted or prejudicial) features than the earlier Gospels.⁷ They were accepted mainly by Hellenistic Jews and originated in different places and with various literary forms.⁸ They are closer in the genre of novels than to biographies, and they did not draw extensively on the earlier gospels.⁹ This researcher shall discuss what the New Testament Apocrypha means, their origin, why they were not canonized, their range, motives for their writing, value, and classification with the researcher's concluding remarks.

The data in this paper was obtained from the J.C. Pool Library of the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary and internet sources. The researchers used descriptive and analytical methods in presenting the findings gotten.

New Testament Apocrypha

Initially, the term referred to esoteric writings and books that were obscure in their content. Many of them are pseudonymously attributed to New Testament individuals.¹⁰ Some of them merely speculate about Jesus in his youth and some about the apostles' fate. In which case, they were all post-apostolic writings, and thus they were never seen as scriptural nor accorded any canonical status.¹¹ Craig A. Evans notes that the title *New Testament*

⁴ Eldon Jay Epp and George W. Macrae, eds., *The New Testament and its Modern Interpreters* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989), 431.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Lee Martin McDonald, *The Story of Jesus in History and Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013), 128-133.

⁷ Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 49.

⁸ Alec Gilmore, *A Concise Dictionary of Bible Origins and Interpretation* (Maiden Lane, New York: T and T Clark, 2006), 9.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Alvin J. Schmidt, "The Apocrypha", in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization, Vol 1, A-D*, ed., George Thomas Kurian (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 77.

¹¹ Ibid.

Apocrypha is a misnomer since it implies that these are writings of the New Testament itself. He further states that, in reality, these are post-Christian Apocrypha.¹² M. R. James concurs that the epithet Apocrypha does not of itself imply inaccuracy, unauthenticity, or unorthodoxy.

The title probably developed on the Old Testament Apocrypha analogy, a more specific collection of books.¹³ However, the researcher maintains the use of the *New Testament Apocrypha* because the terminology does not affect the meaning of the writings per se. The title may be unsatisfactory, but it is convenient.¹⁴ The *New Testament Apocrypha* is mainly a collection of writings, most of which are about or pseudonymously attributed to New Testament figures. However, the limits are not known with regards to the pseudepigrapha.¹⁵ These writings were greatly influenced by the philosophies of religions of the cities or nations from which they came. Some of them were written to replace the Gospels of the New Testament but were declared false by the early church officials.¹⁶ Most often, apocryphal books from the church's early history present stories of legends meant to fill in the information about the apostles and Jesus lacking in the New Testament.¹⁷ Although the New Testament does not quote them directly, their influence permeates the New Testament.¹⁸ One of the most apparent features of the Apocrypha is that they attempt to parallel New Testament books. It is, therefore, possible to group them under Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses, plus a small group of miscellaneous works.¹⁹ As histories or historical novels, they help understand and appreciate the genres of the New Testament

¹² Craig A. Evans, *Noncanonical Writings and New Testament Interpretation* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 150.

¹³ Donald Guthrie, "Apocryphal New Testament", in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, eds., Gra J. D. Douglas, Earle E. Cairns and James E. Ruark (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Regency Reference Library, 1978), 54.

¹⁴ Robert A. Kraft and George W. E. Nickelsburg, eds., *Early Judaism and its Modern Interpreters* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1986), 162.

¹⁵ Watson E. Mills, Roger A. Bullard, Walter Harrelson et al, *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1991), 44.

¹⁶ Herbert Lockyer, F.F. Bruce, R.K. Harrison, *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary: An Authoritative One-Volume Reference Work on the Bible, With Full-Color Illustrations* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986), 76.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ R. J. Bauckham and S.E. Porter, "Apocryphal Acts and Epistles" in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, eds., Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 69.

¹⁹Guthrie, 54.

books, the most important being the ones that take the narrative form.²⁰ They may not be used for public lection but could be used personally.²¹

Their Origin

The question of how the Literature came about cannot be answered in a single sentence. There were different motives operative that emerged at other times and led to the production of the Literature.²² The Apocrypha originated as developments of forms and types present in the New Testament.²³ They appear to be almost contemporary with the canonical writings and have been written based on the same traditions and accordingly valued in particular districts precisely as the canonical Gospels were in other churches.²⁴

David A. deSilva opines that the Apocrypha represents a fine collection of Jewish Literature and contributes to the period's historiography providing essential information about a formative period for Judaism within which the church grew.²⁵ Some scholars considered them as secret books hidden from the general reading public.²⁶ The researcher disagrees with this assertion because these books were never regarded as secret or hidden; people like Jerome, who first compiled them in their collection of Bible books, could never have had access to them. Historical facts present the apocryphal books as uninspired books and not mystical books.

Why they were not Canonized

Roman Catholics and Protestants disagree regarding the exact number of books in the Scriptures. Myrin J. Houghton of Faith Baptist Theological Seminary Akeny opines that there are good reasons for rejecting the Apocrypha as part of the Holy Scripture. They are

²⁰ Daniel J. Harrington, "The Old Testament Apocrypha in the Early Church and Today," in *The Canon Debate*, eds., Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, Massachusetts: Peabody Publishers, 2012), 206.

²¹ J. D. Douglas, J.I. Packer, A.R. Milliard et al, eds., *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary Part 1: Aron-Golan* (De Montford, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1962), 75.

²² Wilhelm Scheemelcher, ed, *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans., R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), 64.

²³ Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha, Vol 1, ed.*, Wilhelm Scheemelcher (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), 62.

²⁴Hennecke, 61.

²⁵ David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha: message, Context and Significance, 2nd ed.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002), 4.

²⁶Siegfried H. Horn ed., *Seventh Adventist Bible Dictionary* (Washington D.C: Review and Herald, 1960), 50.

historical, not necessarily doctrinal.²⁷ Matt Slick notes that many church fathers rejected the Apocrypha as Scripture. Many just used them for holy purposes because they rightfully have some devotional purposes but are not inspired.²⁸ The researcher finds this self-contradictory because it does not make much sense to designate a book as not being inspired and claim they were used for holy and devotional purposes. Therefore, the question is, which holy and devotional purposes could an uninspired book pose? Donald Guthrie avows that this Literature was simply the result of the desire to satisfy the imagination. Some were written just for the pleasure of the reading and entertainment of the readers.²⁹ Many of the narrative forms in Apocrypha are therefore fanciful and fictional.³⁰ In a mainly uncritical age, precisely members of the general public, there was always a ready market for romances that concerned the earliest Christian leaders.³¹ Donald Guthrie asserts that they did not teach Christ as others did.³²

Milliard J. Erickson avers that the church rejected these books because they were dated from the second century but considered them spurious (fake).³³ That is to say, the early church judged the books as false and not what they appeared to be. The three general criteria that the Fathers have applied were; origin in the apostolic circle,³⁴ continuous use, and orthodoxy.³⁵ Whether a book should be regarded as Scripture and placed within a canon seems to have been determined ultimately by early church use.³⁶ They have never maintained a position of authority among Christians. None of them have equally justly claimed apostolic authorship or apostolic authority, which was one of the tests of canonicity used by the early church. Their literary and spiritual quality marks them on a

²⁷ <https://www.faith.edu> Accessed 21st September 2021.

²⁸ <https://www.carm.org> Accessed September 21, 2021.

²⁹ Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament 100-300 CE: A Reader in Early Christianity*, 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 268.

³⁰ Guthrie, 54.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Donald Guthrie, "The Development of the Canonical Pseudepigrapha in New Testament Criticism," in *The Authorship and the Integrity of the New Testament* (Marylebone Road, London: SPCK, 1965), 14.

³³ Milliard J. Erickson, *A Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994), 13.

³⁴ Robert Gundry, *New Testament Survey*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003), 146.

³⁵ R.T. Beckwith, "The Canon of Scripture", in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds., T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner and D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity, 2000), 30.

³⁶ Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon: Revised and Expanded Edition*, foreword by Helmut Koester (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 246.

secondary level compared to the canonized books.³⁷ DeSilva adds that the apocryphal books were rejected as part of the Canon because there was no significant consensus in the early church about their canonicity. He adds that the most serious of the concerns was that how specific passages were used to establish doctrines was especially objectionable to Protestant Reformers.³⁸

These books were primarily written not long from the last one hundred years and claimed to add to the inspiration of the Bible. They claim to be based upon authentic sources of Christian antiquity, but every one of them has been proven by scholars not to be that important and genuine.³⁹ Margaret Baxter notes that one of the qualifications of a book to be canonized was that the book had to be ancient.⁴⁰ They were not canonized because the supposed old documents they claim to have their sources from have never been found. S. Barabas calls them derogatorily fraudulent works.⁴¹ Craig A. Evans concurs that most of these documents are pretty late and secondary and therefore do not assist New Testament Interpretation.⁴²

The New Testament Apocrypha contains writings similar to New Testament books but were not included in the New Testament Canon. These writings were significantly shaped by the knowledge and religions of the cities or nations they came out of. Yet, some of them were written to replace the gospels of the New Testament but then were pronounced heretical writings by leaders of the early church.⁴³

The Range of New Testament Apocrypha

Most recent collections have chosen to organize and present the New Testament apocryphal Literature corpus in terms of the four genres represented in the New Testament itself; Gospels, Acts, Letters, and Apocalypse.⁴⁴ They Include; The Gospel of the Ebionites, the Gospel of the Hebrews, Gospel of the Nazareans, Gospel of Nicodemus (The Acts of

³⁷ Horn, 55.

³⁸ DeSilva, 56.

³⁹ Merrill C. Tenney and Steven Barabas, eds., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible in Five Volumes: Volume One-A-C* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1975), 213.

⁴⁰ Margaret Baxter, *New Testament Introduction to the Formation of the Christian Scriptures* (Causton Street, London: SPCK, 1988), 97.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Craig A. Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005), 257.

⁴³ Ronald F. Youngblood, ed., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Nelson, 1989), 89.

⁴⁴ David Noel Freedman, Gary A. Herion, David F. Graf et al, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol. 1* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 295.

Pilate), Gospel of Peter, Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the Protoevangelium of James, The First Apocalypse of James, Second Apocalypse of James, Apocryphon of James, Apocryphon of John, Book of Thomas the Contender, the Dialogue of the Savior, Epistula Apostolorum, Gospel of the Egyptians, Gospel of Mary, Gospel of Philip, Letter of Peter to Philip, Pistis Sophia, Questions of Mary, Questions of Bartholomew, Second Treatise of the Great Seth, Sophia of Jesus Christ, Two Books of Jeu, Gospel of Thomas, Synoptic Sayings Source, Teachings of Silvanus, On the Origin of the World, Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians, Gospel of Truth, Hypostasis of the Archons, Treatise on Resurrection, Tripartite Tractate, Coptic Apocalypse of Elijah, Arabic Apocalypse of Peter, Coptic Apocalypse of Peter, Greek/Ethiopic Apocalypse of Paul, Latin Apocalypse of Paul, Apocalypse of Sophonias, Apocalypse of Thomas, Ascension of Isaiah, Christian Sibyllines, Concept of our Great Power, Book of Elchasai, V and VI Ezra, Melchizedek, Mysteries of St John the Apostle and the Holy Virgin, Acts of Andrew and Mathias, Acts of John, Acts of Paul(and Thelca), Coptic Act of Peter, Greek Acts of Peter, Acts of Peter and the 12, Acts of Philip, Acts of Thomas, The Kerygma Petrou, Abgar Legend, Correspondence between Paul and Seneca, Epistle of Pseudo-Paul's Letter to the Laodiceans, Interpretation of Knowledge, Kerygma of Peter, Testimony of Truth, Valentinian Exposition, Odes of Solomon, On the Anointing, on Baptism A, On Baptism B, On the Eucharist A, On the Eucharist B and A Prayer of Paul.⁴⁵

Motives for Writing

The New Testament Apocrypha were written to add missing details from the canonical books. The most prevalent source for such a motive was Gnosticism; Guthrie argues that a book like the Gospel of Thomas has a composition of sayings, some closely running alongside the Synoptic Gospels and some framed in the language of Gnosticism.⁴⁶ He further notes that the Gospel of Peter, which is the main orthodox but has docetic implications in its account of the crucifixion, is less pronouncedly gnostic. In many cases, the introduction of skeptical doctrine is indirectly done.⁴⁷

According to Guthrie, another motive for its writing ⁴⁸ was that there was no reasonable alternative when fictional works were published a considerable time after the putative (accepted) author died. More so, a suitable device was for them to concentrate on the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, which offered most opportunities for creating

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

speeches containing deviating doctrine.⁴⁹ Since Gnostics usually show little interest in the humanity of Jesus, and thus the resurrection experiences came into greater prominence.⁵⁰

H. F. Vos adds that though, for the most part, the apocryphal writings were deliberate fabrications and never had any severe claims to canonicity, some satisfying the curiosity engendered by the failure of the canonical gospels to Christ's early life or numerous aspects of his personage.⁵¹ Another motive for writing the apocryphal Literature is that they tried to supply details concerning the apostles omitted from the acts. Those with unorthodox tendencies made an effort to accept their views by embedding them in works attributed to Christ and the apostles.⁵² They managed to gain some popularity, proven by the number of these works in actuality in whole or in part and the significant allocation of their use. In ignorant communities, they were sometimes used without suspicion in church services, and their contents continued to make a widespread impact on popular piety.⁵³

The Value of the Noncanonical or Apocryphal Gospels

It is customary to speak of the New Testament Apocrypha in terms of their value in bearing witness to the history of early Christianity only as it developed in the second and the third centuries.⁵⁴ Scholars disagree considerably on the importance of these sources as some even prefer the portrait of Jesus in a few of them instead of the canonical sources.⁵⁵ However, below are some values of the Literature;

Richard Bauckham opines that many of these extracanonical books provide many extracanonical traditions about the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Some of the great importance for the study of the canonical Gospels are not found in the Gospels as such but in other early Christian Literature.⁵⁶ That is to say that some apocryphal books help in understanding canonical books.

The New Testament Apocryphal books were written to fill in information about the apostles and Jesus lacking in the New Testament. For instance, some New Testament writings claim to give details on the childhood of Jesus (the Protoevangelium of James and

⁴⁹ Guthrie, 55.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ H. F. Vos, "New Testament Apocrypha", in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed., Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1984), 65.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ McDonald, 129.

⁵⁶ Richard Bauckham, *The Christian World Around the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002), 509.

the Gospel of Thomas).⁵⁷ They also claim to provide information on how Jesus was raised from the dead. Thus, they are essential because they expand the accounts found in the New Testament.⁵⁸

Helmet Koester concurs with their importance and notes that they contain many traditions that can be etched back to the very beginning of Christianity. He adds that these books provide a much more colorful spectrum than canonical writings and permit insights into the manifold diversity of early Christian piety and theology.⁵⁹

David A. deSilva notes that the apocryphal books are essential for both Jews and Christians of all denominations as texts that are themselves rich with the theological interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures, shaping, preserving, and extending theology.⁶⁰ This, according to him, is bolstered by the fact that the leading voices of the early church recognized the contribution these texts made to the formation of Christian theology.⁶¹

Another point he gives on the importance of Apocryphal Literature is that they contribute significantly to the growth of angelology and demonology.⁶² According to DeSilva, Demons are the source of affliction for individuals, but there is a relief with binding and exorcism of demons provided in these books. Regarding angels, he notes that they act on behalf of people and are expected to intervene in the lives of individuals, whether in taking human prayers before God as messengers or bringing assistance or revelations from God to human beings.⁶³ This means apocryphal writings add meaning to the understanding of the ministry of angels and the mission of demons, thereby providing a way to deal with those demons.

New Testament Apocrypha are essential because they are indispensable to understanding the theological environment of the first century. This to deSilva is because they witnessed how theological traditions were selected, weighed, modified, or extended in the past centuries.⁶⁴ In concurrence, Graig Lanier opines that the church can read them

⁵⁷ Youngblood, 89.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament: History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 13.

⁶⁰ David A. deSilva, "Mystery Religions" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible in five Volumes: Volume Four. M-P, eds.*, Merrill C. Tenney and Steven Barabas (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 54.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

only because they do not contradict the Canonized books.⁶⁵ He further posits that through the attention given to these texts, we arrive at a much better-informed understanding of what was at stake theologically in the confession of Jesus as Messiah and the questions addressed to early Christians.⁶⁶ In this regard, David Brakke affirms that they provide information about Jesus and the apostles that the first two to five centuries had about Jesus.⁶⁷

Brakke also notes that these texts are resourceful in that they made significant contributions to early Christian theology, especially in Christology, personal eschatology, anthropology, and martyrology. He posits that all Christians would profit from engaging the apocryphal books as worthy conversation partners if not as canonical authorities.⁶⁸

David Briones affirms that they provide us with rich historical information that illuminates our understanding of the New Testament. He adds that the golden nuggets of proper Apocrypha broadly reflect popular forms of Christianity and are valuable sources for early church students.⁶⁹ H. S. Vos corroborates that one will gain essential insights into the nature of Christianity during the post-apostolic period through Apocryphal books.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Vos notes that because many heretical beliefs and superstitions are mainly written in these works, one can understand the slippage of the teachings of grace and the matching rise of legalism, a growing honoring of Mary, and an increase of supernaturalism by studying them.⁷¹

However, Merrill C. Tenney gainsays and posits that much of their content is worthless, except in illustrating the mental outlook of their written period. Occasionally, however, a fragment of historical verity may be embedded in a mass of superstitious fiction.⁷²

Classification of Apocryphal Literature

⁶⁵ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/can-protestants-edified-apocrypha/> Accessed November, 2021.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ <https://www.thegreatcoursesdaily.com/christian-apocrypha-teach-us-about-jesus/> Accessed November, 2021.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 57.

⁶⁹ R. J. Bauckham and S.E. Porter, "Apocryphal Acts and Epistles" in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, eds., Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 66.

⁷⁰ Vos, 65.

⁷¹ Ibid, 65.

⁷² Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Times* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 23.

It is possible to categorize them under Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses, plus a small group of diversified works. Of these literary forms, the most proliferate was the acts, and the least productive was the epistolary form.⁷³ However, the Literature offered a suitable medium for those who wished to claim a secret source for their doctrines, as many literature authors did.⁷⁴ In this paper, it will be possible only to mention the significant examples of the Literature.

The Gospels

There are three main types among the Gospels, and the first shows some influence from the Synoptic in its literary form.⁷⁵ There is also a tiny fragment known as papyrus Oxyrhynchus, which comprises only a few verses but is part of the early second century. The second Gospel is essentially Gnostic imparting gnostic doctrines in teachings attributed to the holy Lord. Their beliefs clashed most times with the church beliefs and brought untold schism in the early church.⁷⁶ Examples of this include the Apocryphon of John, the Gospel of Thomas, and the *Sophia Jesu Christi*.⁷⁷

The Apocryphal Acts

The New Testament says little in detail about the lives, achievements, and deaths of even the best known of the apostles.⁷⁸ Apart from Judas Iscariot, only the end of one apostle is recorded in the New Testament by Herod in Acts 12:2.⁷⁹ To satisfy the natural curiosity of the faithful and to provide some spur of courageous piety, the early church composed numerous fanciful accounts of acts of various apostles.⁸⁰ Of these compositions, some with definite heretical bias were written by sectarians to promote their sects.⁸¹ A few of them are in circulation, and of these, few are even nearly complete. In form and content, apocryphal acts resemble Hellenistic romance (A quasi-setting where a heroine lover was

⁷³ Guthrie, 54.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ <https://www.learnreligions.com/what-is-gnosticism-700683> Accessed November, 2021.

⁷⁷ Guthrie.

⁷⁸ Jerald C. Brauer, ed., *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, MCMLXXI), 46.

⁷⁹ <https://www.compellingtruth.org/apostles-die.html> Accessed November, 2021.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid

separated from her lover by a series of misadventures)⁸², a popular form of secular literature in the early centuries of our era.⁸³ The Apocryphal Acts offers Literature, emphasizes polemics, and sometimes apologetics.⁸⁴ They deal with the journeys of the eleven surviving apostles.⁸⁵ Some of the Apocryphal Acts made attempts to edify; some only entertain. There is no way to classify these works because all of them are attributed to the apostles. These extant books are circulated under Peter, John, Paul, Andrew, and Thomas.⁸⁶ There are many proofs to show the high regard in which apostolic words were held in the early church. It is essential that although these books mean to have the same form as recognized acts, the attribution to individual apostles at once sets them apart.⁸⁷ Moreover, the frequency with which heterodox doctrine occurs further reveals the gulf between the canonical and apocryphal books.

The Epistles

Bartman D. Ehrman notes that there are more epistles in the New Testament than any genre, and it is ironic that relatively few apocryphal epistles exist.⁸⁸ There are some, and these still make for fascinating reading. They include a set of correspondences allegedly between the apostle Paul and the greatest philosopher of his day Seneca.⁸⁹ Of the noncanonical epistles, the best known are those of Clement and Barnabas though these hardly come under the title as ordinarily used.⁹⁰ Among others are the spurious Saint Paul to the Corinthians and the Laodiceans.⁹¹ Other letters that were not faked in the name of a herald are included in this collection because they were revered by one group as bearing sacred authority.⁹² This is true of productions such as the Epistle of Barnabas, an anonymous piece later attributed to Paul's traveling friend Barnabas, and the Letter of 1

⁸² <https://www.britannica.com/art/Hellenistic-romance#:~:text=Hellenistic%20romance%2C%20also%20called%20Greek,reunited%20and%20live%20happily%20together>. Accessed November, 2021.

⁸³ Guthrie.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/> Accessed November, 2021.

⁸⁶ Guthrie.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ehrman, 156.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ M. R. James, "Epistles and Other Writings," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, eds., F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 72.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ehrman, 156.

Clement, later attributed to someone believed to be a bishop of Rome.⁹³ Both Barnabas and Clement were considered by some traditional Christians of later times to be accepted authorities and so were included in some documents of the New Testament.⁹⁴ Other noncanonical letters, including several gnostic creations – which try to convince proto-orthodox readers of agnostic points of view are Ptolemy's Letter to Flora and the Letter of Rheginus.⁹⁵

Non- Canonical Apocalypses and Revelatory Treatises.

P. Vielhauer notes that Christianity started as an eschatological and enthusiastic movement and expressed its faith primarily in Apocalyptic and prophecy language.⁹⁶ As a result, from the beginning, of the Middle Ages, it produced extensive apocalyptic Literature to which the Sibyllines (prophetic and mysterious materials) also belong.⁹⁷ One of the apocalypses widely considered canonical by orthodox Christians is the Apocalypse of Peter. Others are included as a testament in one of our oldest documents of the New Testament (the Shepherd of Hermas).⁹⁸ It was written by Hermas, the brother to the bishop of Rome.⁹⁹ Various early Christian groups read and revered other visionary texts, including Jewish-Christians, Montanists, and Gnostics.¹⁰⁰ Their teachings were subversive to the New Testament revelation and were excommunicated from the church.¹⁰¹ While some of these books discuss the tail end of the world as we know it, others narrate prophetic visions of the fate of individual souls rewarded with eternal bliss in heaven or damned to never-ending torments in hell (the Apocalypse of Peter).¹⁰² Others provide general warnings of future catastrophes on earth from which believers needed to prepare themselves (the Shepherd of Hermas). Others show how this world came into being in the first place, along with the supernatural realm and the human race (the Secret Book of John).¹⁰³

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ P. Vielhauer, "Apocalypse and Related Subjects," in *New Testament Apocrypha: Writings Relating to the Apostles. Apocalypses and Related Subjects*, ed., Wilhelm Scheemelcher, trans., R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), 581.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ <https://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/lbob/lbob26.htm> Accessed November, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Vielhauer.

¹⁰¹ https://biblehub.com/library/killen/the_ancient_church/chapter_iv_the_gnostics_the.htm Accessed November, 2021.

¹⁰² Vielhauer.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the New Testament Apocrypha, their origin, why they were not canonized, their range, motives for writing, value, and classification. The researcher does not subscribe to Apocryphal Literature as Scripture because they failed the canonical indices set by the early church fathers. One of the criteria of the Canon which was very important—in fact, crucial—was the criterion of apostolicity, which means authorship by an apostle or by an apostolic Associate and thus also a date of writing within the apostolic period. The researcher concurs to the school of thought that, while the Apocrypha are not approved for public lection, they are nevertheless valued for private study and improvement. Many of these works appear to be told simply for the pleasure of the reading, essentially as entertainment for their hearers. There is a wide gap between the canonical books and their spurious imitations. Despite their use of apostolic names, they lack the apostolic content entirely and are nonetheless a witness to the extravagant character of much that passed for attractive Christianity. The study of these kinds of literature will demonstrate the superiority of the New Testament books in both meaning and form. It will amplify respect for criterion and the validity of the canonical process. Thus, the assertion that apocryphal books were on the same level as canonical ones is a farce.

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