

Which books should be in the Bible? Why are some of the books called canonical, and others are called Apocrypha, or Deuterocanonical?

“Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms”—Luke 24:44 NIV

Jesus referred to the Hebrew scripture Bible canon, by referring to the three sections that the Jews divided it into. These sections comprise the 39 book Old Testament, from Genesis through Malachi.

As the early church developed, Gentile believers needed to be taught **“sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1)**. Although Jesus, Paul and the apostles exclusively used the Old Testament (referred to in **Luke 24:44**) as their canonical Bible, Gentiles also encountered many other Jewish religious texts among the Greek scrolls of the Scriptures. Over time some Gentile believers began to embrace these books as authoritative, and debate over their place in the churches has raged ever since.

The term “Apocrypha” (meaning “hidden away”) refers broadly to a grouping of non-canonical books. However, the collection most commonly called the Apocrypha is limited to 14 or 15 documents that were for the most part written in Greek during the last two centuries B.C.E. and the first century C.E.. These books are:

Tobit

Judith

Additions to the Book of Esther

Wisdom of Soloman

Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach

Baruch

The Letter of Jeremiah (= Baruch chapter 6)

Additions to the Book of Daniel: The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Jews; Susanna; Bel and the Dragon

1 Maccabees

2 Maccabees

The Apocrypha (the books listed above) actually represents only a small portion of the extant non-canonical Jewish literature from this period. **Second Esdras**, an Apocryphal book, which is in the Slavonic Bible and the Latin Vulgate appendix, but not in the Roman Catholic Church's apocrypha, explicitly refers to the large amount of such material known at that time. In **14:45,46**, a distinction is made between the canonical books of the Hebrew Old Testament—to be published for everyone—and 'the seventy books which were written later'—to be reserved for the so-called 'wise among the people,' by saying:

“Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first [the 39 Hebrew Old Testament books, Genesis through Malachi], and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people”—2 Esdras 14:45,46 NRSV

Some later manuscripts of the Greek Bible (the Septuagint) included the books now known as the Apocrypha, or Deuterocanonical books. During the early centuries of our Common Era (CE) Apocryphal texts were read by some Jews and Christians, and came to be regarded by some as canonical (cf. Augustine, *The City of God*, 18:36). Christian scholars, however, were aware of the discrepancies between the Greek and the Hebrew Bibles. When Jerome published his Latin translation of the Bible (the **Vulgate**), he worked directly from the

Hebrew Bible and carefully distinguished between what he considered canonical writings and the grouping of writings that he first designated as “the Apocrypha.” He placed the Apocryphal books in a second class status. Martin Luther (sixteenth century C.E.) opposed certain Apocryphal passages, such as **2 Maccabees 12:45–46**, which had been used by the Roman Catholic Church to support the doctrine of purgatory and the selling of indulgences. In his 1534 German translation, Luther printed the books of the Apocrypha together in a separate appendix, rather than interspersing them among the canonical books. The Roman Catholic Council of Trent in 1546 rejected Luther’s distinction by decreeing that the books of the Apocrypha are “Deuterocanonical” (belonging to the “second canon”). The Roman Catholic Deuterocanonical books, which remain a part of the Catholic Old Testament canon, are roughly equivalent to the Protestant Apocrypha.

Several books of the Apocrypha are pseudonymous, meaning that they purport to have been authored by a famous character of the Old Testament, such as Jeremiah, but were in fact written much later than the time of the alleged writer. Unlike the canonical books of the Bible, none of the Apocryphal books makes any claim to being inspired by God. Christians are counseled to **“not devote themselves to myths” (1 Timothy 1:4 NIV)**.

“I will bring my story to an end here too. If it is well written and to the point, that is what I wanted; if it is poorly done and mediocre, that is the best I could do” (2 Maccabees 15:38,39 NAB). This apocryphal book writer admits that he was not “inspired by God” (**2 Timothy 3:16 NAB**) to write the book.

In the New Testament, Christians are warned about accepting as truth such things as **“by a letter allegedly from us” (2 Thessalonians 2:2 NAB)**. This principle can, and should be, applied to the Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical books. Even though they are accepted by some religious authorities, Christians are counseled **“so that they will be sound in faith and will pay no attention to Jewish myths” (Titus 1:13,14 NIV)**.