

Learning about the Apocrypha

Something "Worth Reading"

Have you ever read a book that was helpful to you, or pointed you to Jesus, even though it wasn't Holy Scripture? Or ever hear a pastor use non-scriptural materials, like a poem, in a sermon to illustrate a biblical point?

Contemporary Christians find meaningful books "worth reading" all the time. From devotionals or history, to theology and even fiction, believers supplement their Bible reading with a wide range of materials. Did you know that this been so since the very early Church?

During the time that both the Hebrew Bible (the [Tanakh](#)) and, much later, the Christian Bible were coming together in the recognizable forms that we know them today, there were many debates about which materials would be included. For the [Jewish canon](#), this process was finished by about 200 BC, and for the [Christian canon](#), it was nailed down by about 400 AD. In the end, when all the dust settled, there were writings that were left out, not included in the official list.

Meanwhile, for Jews, and also for Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant believers, there remain inspiring writings that though they are not judged to be on the same level, or order, as Holy Scripture, they are what the Orthodox church calls "readable" or "worth reading".

Some of these writings are referred to as "[Deuterocanonical](#)", or "second canon" (Jewish writings not in the Hebrew canon but considered canonical by Catholic and Orthodox believers).

So, for the early church Fathers, to whom we owe a great debt, the debate went something like this: "There are writings that we believe are Holy and inspired and should be included with the Hebrew Scriptures to form the official Bible. On the other hand, there are also some inspiring writings that are really worth reading and should be commended to believers. They don't rise to the level of Holy Scripture, but they're important and worthy." The [Book of Sirach](#), often read in the early church and also called "Ecclesiasticus" is one of those writings. Sirach has appeared lately in some of the lectionary listings for Sunday readings.

You might also have heard of the term "Apocrypha" or "apocryphal". The books we're talking about are often collected together in what's sometimes called the [Apocrypha](#), an extra, separate collection of writings that are sometimes published together with the Scriptures, but, again, are not considered to be Holy Scripture. (A more contemporary example of this might be a popular author's devotional material published and bound together with Scripture).

By the way, you might like to know that the debate in the early church about which books should be included in the Bible was a pretty intense one, with various groups (even to this day) disagreeing about what the list ought to be. After the big split between the Eastern and Western Church in 1054, separate traditions arose about what books should be considered canonical. And, as you might suspect, when the Reformation began in 1517, there was further debate amongst Protestants about this issue.

So, where does this leave us, Epiclerosis, when presented with non-canonical but inspiring writing?



Perhaps the ancient, balanced view is best: We will, as always, *carefully* compare all that we read with Holy Scripture and say this about these extra-biblical books: "While this material is not Holy Scripture, it is 'worth reading'. Lord show me how, through the Holy Spirit, You can use it for my good and the Kingdom's benefit."

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