

The Apocrypha and the King James Bible

By Bryan C. Ross

Why did the King James Translators include the Apocrypha in the 1611 edition? This question is often raised to cause doubt regarding the belief that the King James Bible is “without error.” Many reason as follows: if the KJB’s translators were inspired and they included the Apocrypha in the 1611 edition but it was removed before the standardization of the text in 1769 edition, then which edition is without error? This argument is often coupled with the notion that advocates for the inerrancy of the KJB believe its translators were “inspired” by God when making their translation. While many have made this unfortunate claim there is no reason why anyone should think that the King James translators viewed the Apocrypha as inspired Scripture.

The purpose of this short essay is to set the record straight regarding the attitude of King James as well as the translators of the Bible that bears his name toward the Apocrypha. In order to prove that the King James translators did not believe the Apocryphal books to be inspired Scripture, we will consider four general lines of argumentation: 1) historical precedent for how the Apocrypha was handled in English Bibles before 1611, 2) the views of King James I as well as the translators as to the spurious nature of these books, 3) internal formatting and textual evidence within the 1611 edition, and 4) the omission of the Apocrypha overtime.

Historical Precedent Before 1611

In 1535, Miles Coverdale published a complete English Bible. Coverdale’s Bible set a precedent in one history-making matter related to the relationship between formatting and doctrine. In versions predating Coverdale’s, the apocryphal books were scattered throughout the Bible and included within the text of the Old Testament. The Coverdale Bible was the first to locate the Apocrypha between the Old and New Testaments. In doing so, Coverdale emphasized their secondary importance when he wrote, “The books and treatise, which among the father’s of old are not reckoned to be of like authority with the other books of the Bible, neither are they found in the Canon of the Hebrews ([Coverdale Bible](#), page 375).” Coverdale, was the first translator to set apart the apocryphal books as having a distinct place and a lesser value than the canonical books. His precedent established the standard format for Protestant English Bibles. (Brake, 55-56)

F.F. Bruce concurs with Donald Brake regarding when the apocryphal books were first placed between the Testaments. Bruce writes,

Coverdale’s Bible of 1535, following a Zurich Bible of 1524-1529, first separated the apocryphal books from the canonical books of the Old Testament and placed them after Malachi, with special introduction of their less authoritative character. There was one exception: Baruch was still placed after Jeremiah. But in a 1537 edition of Coverdale, Baruch was removed from there and placed after Tobit. (Bruce, 163)

The Matthews Bible of 1537, which added the Prayer of Manasseh as well as the Great Bible of 1539 followed Coverdale’s lead in placing the Apocryphal books between the Testaments. The Geneva Bible

of 1560 prefaced the Apocryphal section (between the Testaments) with the strongest statement to date against the canonicity of the Apocryphal books (*Geneva Bible*, 775). Moreover, the Geneva translators printed the Prayer of Manasseh as an appendix to 2 Chronicles, adding a notation as to its apocryphal character. The Bishops Bible of 1568 also separated these books from the rest of the Old Testament and included a separate title-page; however, they included no apologetic reason for doing so. This omission angered the Puritan party within the Church of England, which agreed with the Genevan tradition and was against the canonicity of the Apocrypha. The first English Bibles to omit the Apocrypha were some copies of the Geneva version published at Geneva in 1599. There is a gap in the page-numbering between the Testaments, indicating that the decision to omit the Apocrypha was made after the pages were printed and prior to binding. (Bruce, 163-164)

Views of King James and the Translators

By the early 17th Century when the translation work on the Authorized Version began, there was already historical precedent for including the Apocrypha in a separate section between the Testaments. Furthermore, Protestants had been using this device to put forth their belief that the Apocryphal books were not inspired Scripture since the Coverdale Bible of 1535. Consequently, the King James translators were merely following the standard Protestant practice of the day as to how to handle the Apocrypha in the English Bible. These realities reflect the religious tension still present in the early 17th Century; the Church of England retained the custom of reading from the Apocrypha in public worship services during certain seasons of the year (Hills, 98). In fact, King James himself did not view the Apocryphal books as Scripture, as *The Political Works of James I* makes clear.

“As for the Scriptures; no man doubteth I will beleue them; But euenfor the *Apocrypha*; I hold them in the same accompt that the Ancient did: They are still printed and bound with our Bibles, and publikely read in our Churches: I reuerence them as the writings of holy and good men: but since they are not found in the *Canon*, wee accompt them to bee *secunde lectionis*, or *ordinis* and therefore not sufficient whereupon alone to ground any article of Faith, expect it be confirmed by some other place of Canonickall Scriptuere;” (123)

“And it is a small corrupting of Scriptures to make all, or the most part of the Apocrypha of equall faith with the *Canonickall* Scriptures, contrary to the Fathers opinions and Decrees of ancient Councils?” (137)

Despite the fact that most of the translators agreed with King James with respect to the Apocrypha, it was included in the translation because of the influence of Archbishop Bancroft. Being an Anglican, Bancroft made the decision to include the Apocrypha in the 1611 despite staunch Puritan opposition. (Brake, 147)

According to Adam Nicolson, author of *God’s Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible*, the Apocrypha is generally acknowledged to be the least satisfactory in terms of translation when compared with the rest of the King James Bible. (Nicolson, 199) “Because they were not considered inspired by God, the translation in these books is much freer than the

translation of the canonical books. In fact, the translation principle that each original word must have a direct English equivalent was abandoned on occasion.” (Brake, 147) The Second Cambridge Company assigned with the task of translating the Apocrypha under the leadership of John Duport, gave the following reasons for not admitting the apocryphal books into the canon, or list of inspired Scriptures.

1. “Not one of them is in the Hebrew language, which was alone used by the inspired historians and poets of the Old Testament.
2. Not one of the writers lays any claim to inspiration.
3. These books were never acknowledged as sacred Scriptures by the Jewish Church, and therefore were never sanctioned by our Lord.
4. They were not allowed a place among the sacred books, during the first four centuries of the Christian Church.
5. They contain fabulous statements, and statements which contradict not only the canonical Scriptures but themselves; as when in the two Book of Maccabees, Antiochus Epiphanies is made to die three different deaths in as many different places.
6. It inculcates doctrines at variance with the bible, such as prayers for the dead, and sinless perfection.
7. It teaches immoral practices, such as lying, suicide, assassination and magical incantation. For these and other reasons, the Apocryphal books, which are all in Greek, except one which is extant only in Latin, are valuable as ancient documents, illustrative of manners, language, opinions and history of the East.” (McClure, 185-186)

If the translators felt so strongly against the Scriptural nature of the Apocryphal books, why did they include them between the Testaments? The answer is that they were simply following instructions. Prior to the beginning the translation process Bishop Bancroft issued a list of fifteen rules that the various companies of translators were expected to follow when doing their work. The first rule states, “The ordinary Bible read in the Church, commonly called the Bishop’s Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the Truth of the original will permit.” (Teems, 260) The Bishop’s Bible was to serve as the base text or starting point for the translation process. As noted above, the Bishop’s Bible followed Coverdale’s precedent in offsetting the Apocryphal books from the rest of the Old Testament by separating those books into their own section between the Testaments.

Internal Evidence

Lastly, an examination of a 1611 edition of the Authorized Version bears witness to a interesting phenomenon that signifies the attitude of the translators toward the Apocryphal books. Every page of the Old and New Testament contains a brief summary in the top margin as to what the reader will find on each page. For example, in the top margin for I Chronicles 15 one reads, “The bringing of the Arke.” In contrast, when one considers the Apocryphal section of the 1611, beginning with I Esdras and ending with II Maccabees every page has Apocrypha written twice in the top margin. This practice is akin to stamping spurious or false on the top of every page. Moreover, at the end of Malachi the reader will observe the following statement, “The end of the

Prophets.” Likewise, the end of II Maccabees contains the following quotation along the bottom margin, “The end of the Apocrypha.” Immediately adjacent the reader will observe an ornate title page indicating the beginning of the New Testament. In short, the translators made every literary and visual effort to make it clear to their readership that they did not view the Apocryphal books as inspired Scripture.

Conclusion: The Omission of the Apocrypha Over Time

In 1615, Archbishop Abbot, Brancroft’s successor forbade any printer from issuing a Bible without the Apocrypha, on pain of one year’s imprisonment. (Bruce, 164) An edition of the Geneva Bible published at Amstermade in 1640 omitted the Apocrypha deliberately: it was not simply the binder’s doing this time. A defense of the omission was inserted between the Testaments. “This omission was in line with the prevailing tendency in England at this time, where, in 1644, Parliament ordered that the canonical books only should be publically read in Church. This tendency was reversed after the Restoration, but the exclusion of the Apocrypha became increasingly popular among the Nonconformists. It is noteworthy that the first English Bible printed in America (1782-3) lacked the Apocrypha.” (Bruce, 164)

The argument that the King James Version translators must have considered the Apocrypha to be inspired since they included it in the 1611 edition is wrong. The Apocrypha was included based upon the historical practice up to that time to include it. However, it is clear that neither King James nor the translators considered the Apocrypha to be inspired, and in fact, the very layout and design of the 1611 edition testifies to the face that the Apocrypha was not considered canonical. Subsequent to 1611, as the religious and political situation in England changed so did the handling of the Apocrypha in the English Bible. By the time the text of the King James Bible was standardized in 1769, it had long been resolved that the Apocrypha would not be included in Protestant editions of the Bible, and thus, the Apocrypha went from being included in a manner that testified to its lack of canonicity to being omitted in its entirety.

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Bible Links

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