APOCRYPHA AND PSEUDEPIGRAPHA

These two terms are often found together in modern scholarly writings, although they had quite different meanings in ancient times. “Apocrypha” in its various forms refers to something hidden or concealed, usually because of its special or sacred value to the one hiding it. “Pseudepigrapha” refers to writings falsely ascribed to some important or famous figure or to writings with a false title. Such writings are not considered genuine, at least in the sense of originating with the falsely ascribed name.

During the second century A.D., some Christian authors (for example, Irenaeus and Tertullian) began to use apocryphon (singular form) to designate a forged or false writing. Both authors, and those who followed them in this practice, were trying to discredit the secret and sacred writings of their opponents, whom they considered heretics. In time, therefore, many writings once kept hidden from the general public for reasons of their sacredness and holiness were rejected and branded as unreliable or false by church fathers who disliked them.

After Jerome translated the Bible into Latin (c. A.D. 400), the books known from the Greek version of the Old Testament but not contained in the Hebrew version became known as the Apocrypha, or writings of uncertain accuracy. This collection of writings was accepted as scripture by most Christians before the Council of Nicaea, but only by some following that council. In recent centuries, Catholics have generally accepted these books with the rest of the Old Testament, and Protestants have generally denied them scriptural status. In Joseph Smith’s day, some editions of the King James Version of the Bible placed the Apocrypha between the Old and New Testaments, and some other Protestant versions included the Apocrypha either with the Old Testament or as an appendix to the Bible.

When Joseph Smith was engaged in translating the Old Testament (see Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible [JST]), he came to the Apocrypha and sought divine counsel on what to do with it. The revelation given in response to his prayer informed him that the Apocrypha contains both truth and error, but was “mostly translated correctly” (D&C 91:1). Although he was counseled not to translate the Apocrypha, the revelation states that any who read those writings with the Holy Spirit as a guide “shall obtain benefit therefrom”, without the Holy Ghost, a man “cannot be benefited” spiritually by reading the Apocrypha (D&C 91:5-6).

Since the nineteenth century, increased understanding of intertestamental Judaism and Hellenistic culture has shown the Apocrypha to be historically important and religiously valuable. These writings display a belief in resurrection, eternal life, and eschatological teachings concerning the Last Days. The fall of Adam (see Adam: Ancient Sources), sin, the Jewish Law, and the need for righteousness are topics also found in the Apocrypha.

Additionally, during the past two centuries many writings have been discovered that were purportedly written by ancient prophets or apostles, or were otherwise related to biblical texts (see Lost Scripture). Many of these writings were considered sacred to certain groups of Jews or Christians, but were rejected in the long process of biblical canonization (primarily from the second to the fifth centuries A.D.). Scholars routinely add these discoveries to the corpus of apocryphal and pseudepigraphical writings. The application of these terms in their modern sense (i.e., writings forged or falsely ascribed to an ancient religious figure) to ancient texts displays a modern bias against their spiritual or historical authenticity, but one should also note that often modern scholars do not consider most biblical books to be inspired by God or written by the authors associated with them.

One important aspect of the expanded collection of the Apocrypha has to do with the canon itself. Centuries after it was determined which books were to be included in the Bible, people began to believe and teach that the Bible was both complete (containing all that God had given through ancient prophets and apostles) and infallible (having been transmitted without any errors). Joseph Smith received correctives to both ideas, being given additional scripture originally written by ancient prophets and being inspired to make corrections in the texts of the Bible. Among the ancient writings he restored are the Book of Abraham and the writings of Moses (canonized as the Book of Moses, itself including a restoration to Moses of an older Enoch writing; see Moses 6–7); quotations from ancient biblical prophets in the Book of Mormon (such as Joseph of Egypt and four otherwise unknown writers named
ZENOS, ZENOCK, NEUM, and EZIAS); and writings from the New Testament apostle John (see D&C 7 and 93). Corrections to the biblical text include an expanded version of Matthew 24 and alternate readings in Isaiah.

Not only has modern revelation resulted in the restoration of ancient prophetic records and opened the canon in modern times, but the recovery of many ancient texts shows how open and diverse the canon was in earlier times. One ancient religious tradition, repeated in different settings and at different times, attests to two levels of sacred writings, one for public discourse and the other for more restricted use within the community of believers. One might note in this regard that a similar injunction to keep some writings within a restricted community is found in the book of Moses revealed to Joseph Smith: “Show [these words] not unto any except them that believe” (Moses 1:42; cf. 4:32). Some recently found texts bear the title “Apocryphon,” used in the ancient sense of secret or hidden writing. It was this “advanced” level of instruction that was rejected by the church fathers, and the negative meaning of “apocryphal” began to replace the positive or sacred sense. Because in ancient times many such writings were not made public by those who accepted them and because they were distorted and maligned by those who rejected them, scholars lack definitive methods by which to determine if these writings have been transmitted accurately.

In this large collection of writings, relating to both Old and New Testaments, many diverse subjects are discussed, and a few are found repeatedly. Revelation, in the form of apocalyptic texts, is perhaps the most common element: numerous apocryphal texts claim to contain the mysteries, or secrets, of heaven revealed to man. Testaments of patriarchs frequently occur in the Old Testament apocryphal writings; and instructions, eschatological warnings, ritual passages, and cosmic visions are transmitted by the resurrected Jesus to his disciples in many of the New Testament Apocrypha. The type of literature that encompasses these themes is often called Gnostic literature, and scholars generally view the gnosticism seen in apocryphal texts as a fusion of many diverse elements (Hellenism, Judaism, mystery religions, and Christianity, to name a few) into a complex and mystical religious movement. Considerable study will be necessary before all the questions relating to the origin, accuracy, meaning, and significance of apocryphal literature can be answered. Numerous versions of the fourteen books of the Old Testament Apocrypha known in Joseph Smith’s time are available, either in separate publications or in modern printings of the Bible, such as the Jerusalem Bible or the New English Bible.

Joseph Smith was well in advance of modern perceptions concerning the Apocrypha when he was given the revelation warning the Saints to seek spiritual guidance when reading such works, alerting them to truths to be obtained therein.

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C. WILFRED GRIGGS

APOSTASY

Latter-day Saints believe that apostasy occurs whenever an individual or community rejects the revelations and ordinances of God, changes the gospel of Jesus Christ, or rebels against the commandments of God, thereby losing the blessings of the Holy Ghost and of divine authority. The rise of revelatory communities, apostasies, and restorations has happened cyclically throughout the history of mankind, in a series of dispensations from the time of Adam and Enoch (Moses 7) to the present. Latter-day Saints see a historical “great apostasy” and subsequent loss of authority beginning in the New Testament era and spreading in the centuries immediately following that era. Though Latter-day Saints have not emphasized the great apostasy as much as they have the concept that the Church is a revelatory restoration, the need of a restoration implies that something important was lost after the departure of the primitive Christian church.

The English word “apostasy” derives from the Greek aposstasia or apóstasis (“defection, revolt”); used in a political sense by Herodotus and Thucyd-