

Sacrament of the Word

September 6, 2015 | Patrick Preheim, Marg Buckner, & Alison Jantz

My first serious Bible was a leather bound Oxford Annotated Revised Standard Version given by my parents one Christmas back in the 1980s. It lists translational variants and textual uncertainties as well as links to other parts of the bible based on language. This was good stuff for someone just getting curious about the Bible. To top it off there were an additional 330 pages near the back of my RSV grouped under the title "Apocrypha". Apocrypha was a seriously big word for me requiring dictionary assistance. "Of dubious origin", a basic definition offered. And yet here they were in my bible, books which some deemed suspect and others deemed sacred. In vain I have waited decades for a sermon in which someone helps me through this conundrum and the potential impact it might have on my faith. I guess the moral of the story is that if you are waiting to hear a particular sermon on a particular topic you may need to be the one to preach it, so be careful what you wish for on a Sunday morning! In all seriousness, though, no journey through the Protestant Bible would be complete without at least a mention of the Apocrypha. Today is our nod to those many books which Martin Luther understood as "useful and good to read" but "not equal to sacred scripture" (Quoted in The New Oxford Annotated Revised Standard Version, edited by Bruce Metzger (preface to the Apocrypha, x)).

"Who gets to label something as sacred?", is my question. I know there is criteria scholars use in making these assessments, but I don't think it should be that complicated. Does the text in question produce a sense of wonder? Does it foster compassionate living? Does it promote love of God and neighbour? Politics and theological bias have limited my exposure to books Christian siblings name as sacred, and this doesn't sit well with me. In fact, I think it does a serious disservice to the Jesus of our gospels. Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh John's gospel tells us (1.14), and no particular words or number of words adequately represent this Word. He is the Word who was present at creation and in whom all things are held together (Col 1.15-20). This Word goes way beyond any text. God loves us. God desires a connection with us. God speaks to us: in writings, in music, in creation, in scientific study, etc.,... "Words" from God, and the Word (Jesus Christ), come at us in myriad ways. Surely the Biblical text is one of those. But what about those "words" which go beyond the Protestant bible? The Apocrypha allows us space to consider the Sacrament of the Biblical word and the sacramentality of various words.

Apocrypha fact: Both the Old and New Testaments have groups of supplementary books labeled apocryphal (for example see The Apocryphal New Testament (translated by Montague James) and The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament (edited by R.H. Charles) both of which sit on my shelf). Martin Luther, in addition to eliminating the Old Testament Apocrypha from his translation of the Bible, also wanted to excise Hebrews, James, Jude, and the Revelation of John. How different our bibles would look had he gotten his way. Many would argue his choices were as much about [theological perspective as the disputed books apostolic connection](#).

A part of this sermon time necessarily includes a brief history of the books we call Apocrypha because our understanding of the history informs our attitude toward non-biblical resources. In both the Old Testament and New Testament times people of faith had been listening to the voice of God, and sometimes these persons or their followers got around to writing things down. A particular letter might appeal to a particular community because it spoke to their needs, but it might seem a real dud when shared in a different town. One church might accept the Letter of Barnabas to be scripture while another community didn't (Metzger in the RSV study bible, 1170). These differences led to differing collections of treasured books. Among Jews who read their scripture in Greek, for example, books like today's text from Ecclesiasticus were understood as sacred (see articles on the Septuagint). Among Syrian Christians through the 5th century it was common to read from a gospel compilation called the Diatessaron. Among Orthodox Christians there is a 151st Psalm. Through the course of Judeo-Christian history there have been various unique sources that have made or not made the cut. It must be stated, though, that a large core was the same. In the end it was those letters that proved most useful to faith and life that made the formal category called canon. These books, in particular, were seen to mediate more clearly something about God or God's people. For much of our spiritual history this special classification was not meant to discount other sources.

Perhaps some have heard of the Gospel of Thomas and what distress it has caused more than a few church goers. Well, one of my Seminary professors suggested that in those early centuries many people of faith treated the Gospel of Thomas as a type of bed time reading. Whole communities of people utilized it as a spiritual resource even if it wasn't Sunday morning worship material (Peter Erb in History of Christian Spirituality). I have a beloved college classmate, in fact, who relies on the Sermon on the Mount and the Gospel of Thomas for spiritual nourishment. Why? Because, he says, they are ethical in nature and he struggles with statements of belief in a God that transcends anything we can say about God. And I am grateful a canon within a canon and the Gospel of Thomas keep avenues of contact open between him and the Great Spirit.

And at this point it would be good to hear from our people on this question of the impact non-canonical and yet important literature upon their lives.

Marg: My Personal Canon within a Canon (with Apocrypha)

Last Sunday morning when asked if I would be willing to give a 5 minute presentation on this topic I was stunned, to say the least, so I asked for time to think about it. "Email me tomorrow" said Geraldine.

The afternoon was spent mulling over this intriguing subject to which I had never given any serious thought and doing some preliminary research. On Monday I emailed Gerry to tell her "yes".

Tuesday the research continued: definition of canon, how the canon was established, various councils that worked on the canon, what criteria was used to decide inclusion or

exclusion of the Christian writings that were already being used by the churches of the day, etc. etc.

On Wednesday I called Patrick to see what the sermon topic would be. He emailed me what he had then called to discuss it. We were totally on the same track: most of my research was in his and that blew my entire introduction, which on reflection, was a good thing. What Patrick wanted from me was my personal canon and how it enriches my life of discipleship. Now that was very tricky because if I even had a canon it would be so eclectic and fluid; it would depend on my mood, state of mind, how well I slept or did not sleep and even on the weather!

So here goes—my personal canon within a canon with apocrypha.

The councils that worked to establish the N.T canon had four criteria that had to be met to see whether or not a writing would be accepted into the canon so I should have some criteria. I came up with six. 1. Does the writing inspire me to act or think differently than I do now. 2. Does it comfort me or help me. 3. Does it give me hope and reassurance. 4. Is the writing relevant for me in my time and place. 5. Does it stir me, grab me or even disturb me in some way. 6. Does it necessarily have to be in the Bible.

As eclectic and fluid as my canon is, my primary source is the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. I go to it for inspiration, comfort, wisdom and help. That having been said I find that not ALL of the Bible is especially inspiring and so I tend to skip over some of it.

In the Pentateuch, the first 5 books of the O.T. there are just too many odd laws, detailed descriptions of many offerings, too many who begat whom, and too much repetition for me to find inspiring.

Same thing for the historical books, Joshua to Esther. Some interesting and inspiring stuff here but on the whole I cannot truly say they enrich my life but I would definitely put parts of each of them in my apocrypha.

I linger in the poetical and wisdom books, from Job to Song of Solomon. We have recently finished studying the Book of Job in our womens Bible study and a number of years ago Prof. Waldemar Janzen led a very interesting study of Job so this Job who refused to curse God even in his darkest hours has become somewhat of a friend. Even so this is not a “go to” book in my canon. I find myself going to the Psalms again and again for comfort, inspiration, wisdom and help. but here again not all of them are in my canon.

Next we meet the Prophets from Isaiah to Malachi. Each of them has something to say (some more than others) and here again I prefer some more than others. The entire Book of Amos is in my canon. This cowherd who came thundering from Tekoa cried “let justice flow like a river and righteousness like an ever flowing stream”. Parts of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea and bits of Ezekiel make the cut but the others I omit.

I agree with Martin Luther when he says that the Apocryphal or Deuterocanonical Books are “useful and good for reading” but they are not in my canon.

Now we come to the N.T. where I spend most of my time is spent but not all the writings are in my canon.

From Matthew, the first of the gospels, the part which is in my canon is the Sermon on the Mount.

The entire Gospel of Mark makes the cut not because it is the shortest but because it is so fast moving. One almost gets tired when reading it because so much happens so fast. From Jesus baptism to his ascension there seems to be an urgency in the message.

From Luke’s gospel the Magnificat, Mary’s song of praise, the story of the birth of John the Baptist and the Walk to Emmaus are in my canon.

From John’s gospel the discussion between Nicodemus and Jesus in chapter 3, Jesus encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well and Jesus washing the disciples feet are in my canon.

Acts, which is the second volume of Luke’s gospel tells the story of the beginning of the church. Parts of Acts in my canon include the story of Stephen, the conversion of Saul, the story of Peter and Cornelius and the conversion of Lydia.

From Romans I have selected Chapter 12: The new life in Christ. “I appeal to you therefore brothers and sisters to present your bodies as a living sacrifice...

My canon selections from 1st Corinthians are Chapter 10:23-31: Do all to the Glory of God...all things are lawful but not all things are beneficial. And Chapter 13: the gift of love, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels...

In 2nd Corinthians Paul is genuinely concerned for the church but I do not like the boastful way he talks about himself so although there is some good stuff there, the letter is not in my canon.

Galatians is written in hot indignation reflecting Paul’s vigorous response and defense in answer to a particular devastating attack upon the legitimacy of his work. Nevertheless, Chapter 5:22-26, The fruit of the Spirit, is in my canon.

- From Ephesians the whole armor of God, Chapter 6:10-18 is in my canon.
- Imitating Christ’s humility, Philippians 2:3-11 is on my canon list.
- From Colossians I have chosen Chapter 3:1-17, A New Life In Christ to be part of my canon.
- The remaining letters of Paul from 1st Thessalonians to Philemon are in my apocrypha.

- Hebrews 11:1-12-12, the meaning of faith (according to the writer) is in my canon.
- The well known section of James, “Faith without works is dead” Chapter 2:14-26 is included in my canon.
- From 1st Peter “ Living stones Chapter 2:1-5 and Chapter 5:6-11 are in my canon.
- Second Peter is in my apocrypha.
- “God is Love” from 1st John Chapter 4:7-21 is in my canon.
- 2nd and 3rd John Jude and Revelation did not make the cut.

My apocrypha includes all the parts of the Bible which did not make it into my canon as well as writings ranging from the **Tao te Ching** written by the ancient eastern philosopher Lao Tsu to **Pooh's Little Instruction Book** inspired by A. A. Milne. **Deep River** by Howard Thurman was particularly helpful when I was in V.S in the south side of Chicago. **Mister Jones Meet the Master**, Sermons and Prayers of Peter Marshall is one of my mainstays. **The Life of Christ in Poetry** has been a staple for me for many years as has a little booklet entitled **My heart-Christ's Home**. The latest book in my apocrypha is called **Baseball as a Road to God** by John Sexton. But my canon is not yet closed!

This has been a most interesting, difficult and, yes, inspiring assignment. I encourage all of you to try it.

Alison:

I grew up surrounded by books. I admit that I was not overly interested in the Bible in my earliest years, but in just about anything else! In our living room, our television sat in the middle of a bookshelf with my mom's books above, below, and beside the television. Whenever I would watch tv, I would look at the books on the shelf and it became a point of familiarity and a certainty of home. I couldn't wait to read those books – to be able to unravel the code of what all of those letters said and meant.

As soon as I was able to read, I read...with great gusto. As a kid, if I confessed to feeling bored, I would often end up with a new book to read. This situation created the opportunity to be introduced to Madeleine L'Engle's "A Wrinkle in Time," and C.S. Lewis' Narnia books. These books have stayed with me since.

Speaking of C.S. Lewis, I recently re-watched "Shadowlands." A movie from the 1990's taking the viewer through the later life of C.S. Lewis. The movie, which was first a play, written by William Nicholson, has the character of C.S. Lewis say, following the death of his wife, "We read to know we are not alone."

Books create presence and an opportunity for intellectual relationship. Reading is an interactive, lively, immersive experience that has the ability to sweep the reader into another world, a new way of thinking, a new way of experiencing the world. This is my experience of reading and is therefore, forms the basis of how I approach thinking and being in the world.

When I am reading a captivating novel or an environmental concern book informing me of the dire situation of our world in the midst of global warming and destruction, I come away from many of those books feeling as though I had been in intense conversation. If nothing else, reading often creates a need to go have a conversation

Frederick Douglass, an African American social reformer and abolitionist of the early 19th century stated, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free." Regardless of what life throws at you or what you are in the middle of managing, books are always there and their narratives bring comfort, familiarity and endless opportunity for growth and maturation.

So what exactly is my non-biblical/non-canonical canon of literature? Anything that stirs mind and soul, and beckons me to imagine new things and see a concept, situation or event in a new way. The most intriguing, challenging, enriching and insightful literature leaves one always a little bit uncomfortable.

Patrick:

Apocrypha fact: Did we know how influential the Old Testament Apocrypha has been in the arts? "[I]t is a fact that... [Shakespeare]'s daughters bore the names of two of the chief heroines of the Apocrypha—Susanna and Judith." Furthermore, "allusions to about eighty passages from eleven books of the Apocrypha have been identified in his plays". Did we know that the text outstanding musical compositions like "Now Thank We All Our God" (HWB #86) and Handel's oratorio "Judas Maccabaeus" were based on upon the Apocrypha (Metzger in the RSV study bible introduction to the Apocrypha, xviii-xix)? If you turn to HWB #269 "Thine is the Glory" you will see the tune name JUDAS MACCABAEUS; this is one of the tunes from the oratorio. Good gravy, what would Luther say!

Marg and Alison's reflection on canon make me consider the approach of Jesus to canon. Jesus had the entirety of our Old Testament, and he drew selectively from it. Few passages in our Gospels reflect that truth more clearly than Jesus' first sermon. He sauntered into the synagogue, opened the scroll to Isaiah and read "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4.16ff). And then he stops. He refused to finish that particular verse from Isaiah 61:2 which he was quoting, the part of the verse speaking of God's vengeance. It is almost as if he supplemented Isaiah 61 with the Ecclesiasticus 28: "The vengeful will face the Lord's vengeance, for he keeps a strict account of their sins. Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. Does anyone harbour anger against another, and expect healing from the Lord? If someone has no mercy towards another like himself, can he then seek pardon for his own sins?" (vv. 1-4)

In fact, I wonder if Jesus didn't have access to copies of Ecclesiasticus; Ecclesiasticus would not have been scripture for the Palestinian Jewish community (Metzger in the RSV study bible preface to Apocrypha, ix), but maybe it was part of his personal canon.

Maybe it was bed time reading in the home of Mary and Joseph. The parallels between Jesus son of Joseph and Jesus son of Sirach are actually quite striking.

Right off the mark we have the similarity of names. Ecclesiasticus is the only book in the Apocrypha for which we know the name of the author (50.27). Oh sure the name Jesus (Joshua in Hebrew) would have been fairly common. Is it possible, though, that the angelically directed name of Jesus points to the Wisdom of Sirach as well as to the Joshua of Jericho fame? Perhaps, the angel was suggesting, wise living will be one way Jesus son of Joseph will bring salvation to his people.

This possibility holds some water when we consider the parallels between the teachings found in Ben Sirach with the teachings of Jesus found in the Gospels. The section out of chapter 28 read earlier fits easily with material in the Sermon on the Mount. Chapter 29 addresses lending to neighbours in similar ways to Luke 6 (6.34). Chapter 31 gives advice how the rich can allow their wealth to be a blessing not a burden, and this is not so far off from a number of Gospel stories where the wealthy find salvation (Luke 8.3, Luke 19.1-27, John 12.1-8, etc.,.). Chapter 32 addresses banquet protocol akin to banquet parables in the Gospels (Luke 14.7-23 for example). And there are other thematic similarities.

To this point my considerations of Christ and his canon have remained in his Jewish tradition. A few writers, Thich Nat Han for example, have looked at the ways in which Jesus had familiarity and appreciation for aspects of Buddhism (Living Buddha Living Christ). While that would be an intriguing topic to explore, it is one for another day.

In conclusion, a sacrament is something which is particularly effective in mediating the goodness and grace of God (See Sandra Schneider's *The Revelatory Text*, p. 40ff), so...

- Words are sacramental when they draw us towards that Great Spirit we call God (Matt 22.37).
- Words are sacramental when the effect good fruit in our lives (Gal 5.19-26; Matt 7:15-20). A tree will be known by its fruits. Love, joy and peace are a far cry from conceit, envy, and strife.
- Words are sacramental when they serve to build up the community, not tear it down.

The good news is that God loves us and is still speaking divine Words to us. God will speak through the sacred texts of our Protestant tradition, the sacred texts of our broader Christian communion, and the Sacramental Words which are found beyond our Christian tradition. May we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and Spirits to discern. Amen.