

**BIB 501E INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL STUDIES**  
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**Notes on the canonicity of the Books of the Maccabees**

On this subject, see *NJBC* 26:3 (p. 422), and F.-M. Abel, *Les livres des Maccabées* (Paris: Gabalda, 1949), vii-xi. Origen (third century) considered 1-2 Macc as belonging to the Sacred Scriptures. For Jerome (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries), on the other hand, what was not in the Hebrew canon was “apocryphal.” Regarding 1-2 Macc, he says only that 1 Macc was written in Hebrew, whereas 2 Macc was written in Greek. 1 Macc is included in the mutilated (incomplete) Codex Sinaiticus (4<sup>th</sup> century); Codex Alexandrinus (5<sup>th</sup> century) contains all four books of the Maccabees.

The council of Hippo in 393 (EB 16)<sup>1</sup> declared “the two books of the Maccabees” to be “canonical Scriptures.” The same canon listed by this council is also listed by the (“third”) council of Carthage, 397, and, with a difference that does not affect the Books of the Maccabees, by the council of Carthage of 419, (EB 19). “The two books of the Maccabees are mentioned in the decree of Gelasius I (494), in the canon of the church of Africa, and in the Apostolic Canons.”<sup>2</sup> The councils of Florence (1441/2, EB 47), Trent (1546, EB 58) and Vatican I (1870, EB 79, reaffirming Trent) declare them to be inspired by God. There is no reason given for this in these texts. According to the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, vol. 9 pt. 2 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1927), col. 1493, the patristic and ecclesiastical tradition has used 2 Macc 15:12-16 but little, and then to affirm the doctrine of the communion of saints (Origen); Aquinas cites it in the *Summa theologiae* III<sup>ae</sup> pt. suppl., q. 72, a. 3, in discussing whether the prayers of the saints for us are always heard by God.

There was a counter-current to the discredit to which the Septuagint was subjected in early Christian times, and the inclusion of the books of the Maccabees were an important part of this counter-tendency; according to Père Abel, this may be one of the reasons for their inclusion in the canon. In the ecclesiastical writers of the second through fifth centuries, the books of the Maccabees are cited, but not in regards to 2 Macc 12:38-

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<sup>1</sup> “EB” stands for *Enchiridion Biblicum* (Documents of the Church on Sacred Scripture).

<sup>2</sup> Abel, *Les livres des Maccabées*, viii.

46 (prayer for the dead who died in sin) or to 15:12-16 (intercession by the righteous who are dead); this latter passage is or to purgatory. Origen does cite this latter passage in his book “On Prayer” (235). See Abel, *Les livres des Maccabées*, ix-xi. This Dominican author (from the École Biblique) lists as reasons why these books did not disappear the esteem they enjoyed in Christian circles, the edifying and sacred value that the Fathers attributed to them, and their canonization, but does not mention the doctrine of purgatory, *ibid.*, xi.

“Purgatory” is a term that became widely used in the Middle Ages. See *Diccionario teológico* (K. Rahner – H. Vorgimlér, eds.; trad. española de R. Areitio; Barcelona: herder, 1966), col. 602. It is defined as a dogma of faith for the first time in the councils of I Lyon (1245), Dz 456; II Lyon (1274), Dz 464; Florence (1438-1445), Dz 693; Trent (1547 and 1563 sessions), Dz 840, 983; Tridentine Profession of Faith (Pius IV bull, 1564), Dz 998. See also Dz 530 (Benedict XII, 1336). “Dz” stands for *Denzinger: Enchiridion Symbolorum* (numbers may need to be converted).

The origins of the belief, “in, germ,” can be traced to Origen in the third century, but “until the 4<sup>th</sup> century the idea of direct combination of purgatory and [final] judgment prevailed without exception.” *Encyclopedia of Theology. The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (K. Rahner, ed.; ET New York: Seabury Press, 1975, 1319. It is with Augustine that “the doctrine of purgatory is detached from that of the universal eschaton.” The Scriptural basis here is to 1 Cor 3:12-15 regarding purification by fire. As to the usefulness of prayers for the dead, this is mentioned in Trent (see above).