

## THE CANON OF THE BIBLE

Thoughtful Christians realize that if God has revealed Himself to man, we must be able to know *with assurance* where that revelation can be found. Since we are staking our salvation on the truth of God's word, we need to know exactly and infallibly *which books* contain divine truth. Otherwise, we might look to the words of men for the Word of God. Thus, we need an authoritative list (canon) of the inspired books of the Bible. "Canon" means a measuring standard. The canon of Scripture refers to the standard, or official list of inspired books that make up the Bible.

### The Old Testament (OT)

#### *Why do Catholic and Protestant Bibles have a different number of books in the OT?*

The Protestant OT is based on the **Hebrew canon** used by Hebrew-speaking Jews in Palestine. The Catholic OT is based on the **Greek canon** used by Greek-speaking Jews throughout the Mediterranean, including Palestine.

The city of Alexandria in Egypt possessed the greatest library in the ancient world. During the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–246 BC), a translation of the entire Hebrew Bible into Greek was begun by 70 or 72 Jewish scholars—according to tradition—six from each of the twelve tribes. From this Alexandrian translation (completed between 250–125 BC) we get the term "Septuagint," Latin for 70 (LXX), the number of translators.



This Greek translation of the OT was very popular because Greek was the common language of the entire Mediterranean world by the time of Christ. Hebrew was a dying language (Jews in Palestine usually spoke Aramaic), and so it is not surprising that *the Septuagint was the translation used by Jesus and the New Testament writers*. The great majority of the OT quotations found in the NT are from the

The Septuagint contains 46 books. The Hebrew canon contains only 39.

Why are there seven fewer books in the Hebrew canon?

Septuagint. Protestant authors Archer and Chirichigno, for example, list 340 places where the NT cites the Septuagint but only 33 places where it cites from the Hebrew canon rather than the Septuagint.<sup>11</sup> By this count, the NT writers quote from the Septuagint *over 90% of the time*. Remember also that the entire New Testament was written in **Greek**.

The Hebrew canon continued to be debated by Jewish rabbinical schools into the third century.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, however, rabbinic Judaism rejected seven books from the Hebrew canon found in the Septuagint—**Wisdom, Sirach, Judith, Baruch, Tobit, and 1 and 2 Maccabees** (as well as portions of Daniel and Esther)—chiefly on the grounds that *they could not find any Hebrew*

<sup>11</sup> Gleason Archer and G. C. Chirichigno, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament: A Complete Survey* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1983), xxv–xxxii.

<sup>12</sup> Gedaliah Alon, *The Jews in their Land in the Talmudic Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 272–276.

versions of these books which the Septuagint supposedly translated into Greek.<sup>13</sup>

Since the Christian Church had used the Septuagint from the beginning, it simply ignored the decisions of later rabbinic Judaism and continued to use the Septuagint. When the Church officially determined which books comprise the canon of the Bible (Councils of Hippo, AD 393, and Carthage, AD 397), it approved the 46 books of the Septuagint as the canon for the OT. For sixteen centuries the Christian OT was a matter of uncontested faith. Each of the seven rejected books is quoted by early Church Fathers as “Scripture” or as “inspired,” right along with the undisputed books.<sup>14</sup>

In 1529, Martin Luther proposed to adopt the 39-book canon used by rabbinic Judaism as the OT canon. Luther justified his decision to delete seven books from the OT by appealing to St. Jerome who, around AD 400, had expressed concerns that these Greek books had no Hebrew counterparts.

However, research into the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran has discovered ancient Hebrew copies of



<sup>13</sup> The rabbinic Jews used four criteria to determine their canon. They accepted only those books which were: (1) written in Hebrew; (2) in conformity with the Torah; (3) older than the time of Ezra (c. 400 BC); and (4) written in Palestine.

<sup>14</sup> Among these Fathers are Polycarp, Irenaeus, Clement, and Cyprian. For a collection of patristic quotations from each of the disputed books, see “The Fathers Know Best: Old Testament Canon” in the October 1993 issue of *This Rock* magazine (Volume 4, No. 10), 25–27.

some of the disputed books,<sup>15</sup> making their rejection unsupportable on those grounds. The principle reason Luther seems to have opposed the additional books of the Christian OT is that they taught doctrines he did not like, such as praying for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:42–45).

But here is the real question: Which OT would you rather use—the OT used by Jesus, the NT writers and the early Church, or the OT used by later Jews who had rejected Christ and persecuted Christians?

If your Bible includes the seven books, you follow Jesus and the early Church. If your Bible omits the seven books, you follow non-Christian rabbis and Martin Luther—a man who wanted to throw out even *more* books (James, Esther, Revelation), and who deliberately added the word “alone” to Sacred Scripture in his German translation of Romans 3:28.

### The New Testament (NT)

The first word of the NT was written about AD 50 (1 Thess), the last word between AD 90–100 (Rev), for a total of 27 books, all of which are accepted as canonical and inspired by Catholics and Protestants alike. The question is, *who determined the NT canon of inspired books?* The Bible didn’t fall from heaven pre-printed, so where did we get it? How do we know we can trust every book?

<sup>15</sup> *New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1975), 22. Dead Sea Scroll expert James C. VanderKam says Hebrew versions of Tobit, Sirach, and Psalm 151 (found only in the Septuagint) were discovered at Qumran. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 34–36.

Various bishops developed lists of inspired books:



• **Mileto**,  
Bishop of Sardis,  
around AD 175



• **St. Irenaeus**, Bishop of  
Lyons, AD 185



• **Eusebius**, Bishop of  
Caesarea, around  
AD 325



• **Pope Damasus** in  
AD 382, prompted by  
the Council of Rome,  
wrote a decree listing the  
present OT and NT  
canon of 73 books.

• The Council of Hippo (in North Africa) in AD 393, approved the present OT and NT canon of 73 books.

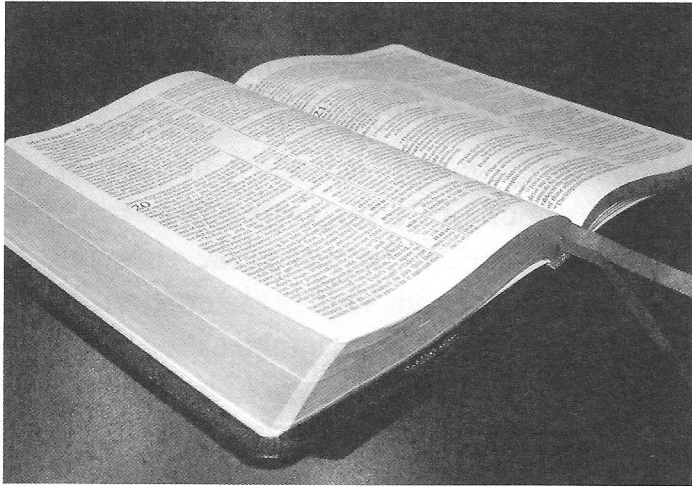
• The Council of Carthage (in North Africa) in AD 397, approved the same OT and NT canon. This is the council which many Protestants take as the authority for the NT canon of books.



• Pope St. Innocent I  
(401–417) in AD 405,  
approved the 73-book  
canon and **closed the  
canon of the Bible.**

The canon of the Bible was officially determined in the late fourth century by Catholic councils and Catholic popes. Until the canon was decided, there was much debate. Some were of the opinion that certain canonical books—Hebrews, Jude, Revelation, 2 Peter—*were not inspired*, while others held that certain noncanonical books—Shepherd of Hermas, Gospels of Peter and Thomas, the letters of Barnabas and Clement—*were inspired*. The formal Church decision settled the matter for the next 1100 years. Not until the Reformation was there any more debate about the contents of the Bible.

Historically, the Catholic Church used her authority to determine which books belong to the Bible, and to assure us that everything in the Bible is inspired. Apart from the Church, we simply have no way of knowing either truth.



Martin Luther himself admits that Christians owe their Bible to the efforts of the Catholic Church:

We are obliged to yield many things to the Papists [Catholics]—that they possess the Word of God which we received from them, otherwise we should have known nothing at all about it.<sup>16</sup>

Luther's statement supports our argument that *without the decisions of the Church, we would not know which books of the Bible are inspired.*

St. Augustine puts it bluntly:

I would put no faith in the Gospels unless the authority of the Catholic Church directed me to do so.<sup>17</sup>

St. Augustine recognizes that the only way to know for sure which books are inspired is to accept the teaching authority of the Catholic Church.

## CRUCIAL POINTS

### (1) Historically

The Bible is a Catholic book. The New Testament was written, copied, and collected by Catholic Christians. The official canon of the books of the Bible was authoritatively determined by the Catholic Church in the fourth century. Thus it is *from the Catholic Church* that the Protestants have a Bible at all.

### (2) Logically

The Church with the authority to determine the infallible Word of God, must have the infallible authority and guidance of the Holy Spirit. As we have seen, apart from the declarations of the Catholic Church, we have absolutely no guarantee that what is in the Bible is the genuine Word of God.

*To trust the Bible is to trust the authority of the Church which guarantees the Bible.* It is contradictory for Protestants to accept the Bible and yet reject the authority of the Catholic Church that gave it to them.

Logically, Protestants should not quote the Bible as authoritative, for they have no way of determining which books are inspired—unless, of course, they accept the teaching authority of the Catholic Church.

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*It is contradictory for Protestants to accept the Bible and yet reject the authority of the Catholic Church that preserved it for them.*

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<sup>16</sup> *Commentary on St. John*, ch. 16.

<sup>17</sup> *Against the Letter of Mani*, 5, 6; Jurgens, Volume 3, #1581.