

The Complete Bible: Why Catholics Have Seven More Books [Ecumenical]

ISSUE: Catholic Bibles contain seven more Old Testament (46) books than Protestant Bibles (39). Catholics refer to these seven books as the “deuterocanon”[1] (second canon), while Protestants refer to them as “apocrypha,” a term used pejoratively to describe non-canonical books. Protestants also have shorter versions of Daniel and Esther. Why are there differences?

RESPONSE: Catholic Bibles contain all the books that have been traditionally accepted by Christians since Jesus’ time. Protestant Bibles contain all those books, except those rejected by the Protestant Reformers in the 1500’s. The chief reason Protestants rejected these biblical books was because they did not support Protestant doctrines, for example, 2 Maccabees supports prayer for the dead.[2] The term “canon” means rule or guideline, and in this context means “which books belong in the Bible (and, by implication, which do not).”

The Catholic Old Testament follows the Alexandrian canon of the Septuagint,[3] the Old Testament which was translated into Greek around 250 B.C. The Protestant Reformers follows the Palestinian canon[4] of Scripture (39 books), which was not officially recognized by Jews until around 100 A.D.

DISCUSSION: Prior to Jesus’ time, the Jews did not have a sharply defined, universal canon of Scripture. Some groups of Jews used only the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch); some used only the Palestinian canon (39 books); some used the Alexandrian canon (46 books), and some, like the Dead Sea community, used all these and more. The Palestinian and Alexandrian canons were more normative than the others, having wider acceptance among orthodox Jews, but for Jews there was no universally defined canon to include or exclude the “deuterocanonical” books around 100 A.D.

The Apostles commissioned by Jesus,[5] however, used the Septuagint (the Old Testament in Greek which contained the Alexandrian canon) most of the time and must have accepted the Alexandrian canon. For example, 86 percent of Old Testament quotes in the Greek New Testament come directly from the Septuagint, not to mention numerous linguistic references. Acts 7 provides an interesting piece of evidence that justifies the Apostolic use of the Septuagint. In Acts 7:14 St. Stephen says that Jacob came to Joseph with 75 people. The Masoretic Hebrew version of Genesis 46:27 says “70,” while the Septuagint’s says “75,” the number Stephen used. Following the Apostles’ example, Stephen clearly used the Septuagint.[6] (We also know from other ancient Christian documents, like the Didache[7] and Pope St. Clement’s Letter to the

Corinthians, that the apostles' successors not only used the Septuagint, but quote from all of the books in the Alexandrian canon as the authoritative word of God.)

There is no divinely inspired "table of contents" for the Bible, therefore, Christians need an authority, like the infallible Church established by Christ, to discern which books are the divinely inspired ones. (Indeed, even if there were such a "table of contents" list, we would need an authority to tell if the list itself were inspired.) Even many Evangelical Protestant Bible scholars admit this:

While we know that at the time of Jesus there were different canons of the Old Testament because the canonical process was not yet complete, the glorious truth is that God has invited humans to be partners in the putting together of Scripture. I think the implications are that you cannot have Scripture without the community of faith [in other words, the Church]. It's not just a private revelation. God gives us Scripture, but then the [Church], by God's guidance, has to choose what's in and what's out." [8]

Why don't the Jews accept the Alexandrian canon now, though? They follow after their predecessors, who around 100 A.D. decided that the Septuagint which followed the Alexandrian canon had at least two problems: First, it was written in Greek, which after the destruction of Jerusalem by Gentiles seemed "un-Jewish" or even "anti-Jewish." [9] Second, Christians, following the lead of their apostolic leaders, widely used the Septuagint, especially in apologetics to the Jews; thus, non-Christian Jews wanted to deny the value of some of its books, such as the Book of Wisdom, which contains a profound prophecy of Christ's death.

In the words of Protestant Septuagint scholar Sir Lancelot Benton:

The veneration with which the Jews had treated this [Septuagint] (as it is shown in the case of [Jewish historians] Philo and Josephus), gave place to a very contrary feeling when they found how it could be used against them [i.e., in Christian apologetics]: hence they decried the [Septuagint] version, and sought to deprive it of any authority. [10]

What are the classic Protestant arguments against the seven deuterocanonical books? Their major objection is that the deuterocanonicals contain doctrines and practices, such as the doctrine of purgatory and praying for the dead, that are irreconcilable with authentic Scripture. This objection, of course, begs the question. If the deuterocanon is inspired Scripture, then those doctrines and practices are not opposed to Scripture but part of Scripture. Another objection is that the deuterocanonical books "contain nothing prophetic." This is clearly proved false by comparing Wisdom 1:16-2:1 and 2:12-24 to Matthew's passion account, especially Matthew 27:40-43.

Many Protestants also argue that, because neither Jesus nor His apostles quote the deuterocanonical books, they should be left out of the Bible. This claim ignores that Jesus nor His apostles do not quote Ecclesiastes, Esther or the Song of Songs, nor even mention them in the New Testament; yet Protestants accept these books. Furthermore, the New Testament quotes and refers to many non-canonical books, like pagan poetry quoted by Paul and Jewish stories referred to by Jude, which neither Protestants nor Catholics accept as Scripture. Clearly New Testament quotation, or the lack thereof, cannot be a reliable indicator of Old Testament canonicity. (This also begs the question of which books belong in the New Testament and which do not.)

Other Protestants argue that today's Jews do not accept the deuterocanon. This objection is problematic for two reasons. The first is why the Jews reject those books (see above). These books are rejected by Jews on the basis of bias against Christianity, something to which Protestants should not want to support. The second problem is this: Why should Christians accept the authority of post-Church-establishment, non-Christians instead of the Apostles of the Church that Christ founded? Would God found a Church and then let it fall into grave error concerning the Old Testament canon? This is an untenable position for any Christian to take.

Others point to St. Jerome's "rejection" of deuterocanonical material. While Jerome was originally suspicious of the "extra" Old Testament books, which he only knew in Greek, he fully accepted the judgment of the Church on the matter, as shown in a letter written in 402 A.D.:

What sin have I committed if I follow the judgment of the churches? . . . I was not relating my own personal views [when I wrote the objections of the Jews to the longer form of Daniel in my introduction], but rather the remarks that [the Jews] are wont to make against us [Christians who accept the longer form of Daniel], (Against Rufinius, 11:33, emphasis added).[11]

Remember that Protestants reject the longer, Alexandrian version of Daniel; St. Jerome did not.

Still more Protestants claim that the Church did not authoritatively define the canon of Scripture until the Council of Trent and, since that Council was a reaction to the Reformation, the deuterocanon can be considered an "addition" to the original Christian canon. This is also incorrect. Regional councils of the early Church had enumerated the books of the Bible time and again prior to the Reformation, always upholding the current Catholic canon.[12] Examples include the Council of Rome (382), the Council of Hippo (393), and the Third and Fourth Councils of Carthage (397, 418).[13] All of these affirmed the Catholic canon as we know it today, while none affirmed the Protestant canon.

This exact canon also had the total support of important Church Fathers like St. Augustine (Christian Instruction, 397).[14] In 405, Pope St. Innocent also taught the Catholic canon in a letter to Exsuperius, Bishop of Toulouse,[15] the same year that St. Jerome completed the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible at the request of the Popes. A thousand years later, while seeking reunion with the Copts, the Church affirmed the same canon at the ecumenical[16] Council of Florence in 1442.[17] When the canon became a serious issue following the Protestant schism in the early 1500s, Trent dogmatically defined what the Church had consistently taught for more than 1,000 years.

R.C. Sproul, a prominent Protestant theologian, asserts that we must accept the Bible as a “fallible collection of infallible books,” and many Protestants find this idea appealing. There are serious problems with this position however. The chief problem is this: While it acknowledges that infallible books exist somewhere in the world, it implies that we can have no guarantee that all, or indeed any, of those infallible books are in the Bibles Christians use. If the collection is fallible, the contents are not necessarily the books which are infallible. How do we know, then, that John's Gospel, which all Christians accept, is legitimately Scripture, while the so-called “Gospel of Thomas,” which all Christians reject, is not? Sproul’s statement points to the need for an authority outside the Bible so that we can have an infallible collection of infallible books. It is ultimately contradictory to believe in the Bible’s infallibility, and the reliability of its canon, without believing in the Church’s infallibility.[18]

To answer the question, “Who decided which books are in the Bible?” we must inevitably recognize the authoritative Church that Christ founded, the Church that infallibly discerned with God's guidance which books belonged and which didn't.[19] This means recognizing that the longer Old Testament canon is the correct one.