

Catholic vs. Protestant Bibles

By Greg Witherow

Catholic Bibles contain Old Testament books not found in Protestant Bibles and as such Catholics are sometimes asked to explain this discrepancy. In this short essay we will briefly cover the differences between the Catholic and Protestant Bibles and the reasons behind those differences.

The Books In Question

The Catholic Bible has seven books and parts of two others in the Old Testament that are not found in Protestant Bibles¹. Catholics refer to these books as the Deuterocanonical² books while Protestants refer to them as apocryphal³ books. The books in question are the following:

Tobit
Judith
The Book of Wisdom
Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus)
Baruch
1 Maccabees
2 Maccabees
Seven chapters in the book of Esther⁴
Two chapters and a prayer in the book of Daniel⁵

But how did these books find their way into the Catholic Bible and why do Protestants dispute them? To answer these questions we will look at the Bible from the time of Christ through the period of the Reformation.

¹ The Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches all recognize the same 27 books that make up the New Testament. Note that the KJV Bible had the apocryphal books in the back of the Old Testament until the early 19th century. They have since been omitted, but KJV Bibles with the apocryphal (deuterocanonical) books can still be purchased – although they are hard to find.

² Deuterocanonical means second canon; deuter meaning second. For example the book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Bible and found in the Old Testament, means second Law. It was the second time Moses had given the Israelites the Law of God; the first time was before the 40 years of wandering in the desert and the second time was after the 40 years of wandering in the desert. They then entered the Promised Land.

³ Apocryphal books are those that are looked to as worthy of historical information but not inspired and therefore not of canonical character.

⁴ By omitting the chapters found in the Catholic Bible, the Protestant book of Esther has the distinction of being the only book of the Bible that does not reference God **even once**. The additional chapters found in the Catholic version contain all the prayers made by Esther and her appeals to God's intervention (chapters 10-16).

⁵ The two additional Catholic chapters of the book of Daniel are Susanna (chapter 13) and Bel and the Dragon (chapter 14) and the prayers of the three children (chapter 3, verses 23 and 24).

The Old Testament at the Time of Christ

At the time of Christ there was no consensus on a canon of scripture. Instead there were competing Jewish communities with different lists of books they regarded as inspired. No Jewish council had defined a canon of books. The Pharisees revered 39 books, the same 39 found in Protestant Bibles today. Two other groups, the Sadducees⁶ and the Samaritans recognized only the first 5 books of Moses known as the Pentateuch (Genesis - Deuteronomy). The Essenes were a Jewish sect that held to a third list. The complete list of their revered books is not known; we only know that the list was different⁷. It should be noted that the groups mentioned here, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Samaritans and the Essenes were geographically centered in Palestine. This is in stark contrast to our last Jewish group that was not only located in Palestine, but also dispersed throughout the known world. They therefore had a more far-reaching influence in their practices. This group was known as the Hellenists, the Greek speaking Jews dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. The Scriptures revered by this group were in the books contained in the Greek Septuagint.

The Septuagint was the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. It was transcribed by 72 translators in Alexandria, Egypt and completed about 150 B.C. This Greek translation of the scriptures was needed, as over the centuries the Hebrew language had become a dead language. And as such the Jews of the dispersion needed the scriptures in their vernacular language, namely Greek. The result was a new translation of the Bible known as the Septuagint. This Greek Bible contains all of the books found in the Catholic Old Testament with some additional books⁸.

Christ, the Apostles and the early Christians used the Septuagint as their primary Old Testament Bible. Of the approximately 300 Old Testament quotes in the New Testament, two-thirds of them are quotes from the Septuagint as opposed to the Hebrew Scriptures⁹. How do we know? Because the wording of the Septuagint is sometimes different from that of the Hebrew Bible. A classic example of this is Isaiah 7:14. In the original Hebrew it states that a young woman (Hebrew: *almah*)¹⁰ will bear a child and he shall be called Emmanuel. In the Greek Septuagint it states that a virgin (Greek: *parthenos*) will bear a child and he shall be called Emmanuel¹¹. Matthew the Apostle, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, chooses the Greek Septuagint version of this verse to quote

⁶ Josephus *Antiquities* 18.16.

⁷ The Book of Enoch (quoted by Jude in the New Testament) and the Book of Jubilees are believed to have been included in the canon of the Essenes. You can go to <http://www.answers.com/topic/dead-sea-scrolls> for more information.

⁸ In addition to the Deuterocanonical books found in the Catholic Bible, the books of 1 Esdras, 2 Esdras, 3 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, the Prayer of Manasseh and Psalm 151 are found in the Septuagint. It should be noted that no new doctrines are introduced in any of these books. Orthodox churches hold that these books (minus 4 Maccabees & Psalm 151) are scripture as most Orthodox regard the Septuagint as inspired.

⁹ While I've seen different numbers touted, the point is the vast majority of quotes come from the Septuagint. See the web site <http://www.scripturecatholic.com/septuagint.html> as one source.

¹⁰ The Hebrew word for virgin is *bethoolaw*.

¹¹ So which translation is right? The answer is both of them. Mary was both a young woman and a virgin. The theological understanding of the passage that the Greek translators embraced was embraced by the divinely inspired Matthew in writing his New Testament book.

in Matthew 1:23 where he declares, “a virgin shall be with Child” in the Christmas story. This is just one of many examples of how it can be determined which Old Testament version is being used by the New Testament writers.

The Pharisees Call A Council

When the Roman legions burned the Temple during the Jewish Wars in 70 A.D. much of the Jewish way of life lay in embers. Gone was the central unifying symbol of Judaism. Furthermore, the Christian faith was threatening Judaism as it was proclaiming that Jesus of Nazareth was the Jewish Messiah. The Old Testament Bible of the Christians was the Septuagint and as such, the Jews grew increasingly disenchanted with it¹². With the twin threats of the Roman Legions and the Christian faith looming, the Pharisees convened the council of Jamnia towards the end of the 1st century A.D to reaffirm the truths of Judaism. At the council the Pharisees rejected the Septuagint (a Greek language document and increasingly associated by many as a Christian book) and declared that only the Hebrew language books traditionally embraced by the Pharisees would be regarded as divinely inspired¹³. The resulting Jewish canon contains the list of books Protestants regard as canonical today.

The Church Calls A Council

In the early centuries there were festering controversies in the Church over what the New Testament canon should be. The Church finally settled the matter in 3 local (as opposed to an ecumenical) councils. They were the council of Rome (382 A.D.), the council of Hippo (393 A.D.), and the council of Carthage (397 A.D.). In these councils the Catholic Church authoritatively and infallibly declared what books are to be considered divinely inspired and authoritative. The 27 books that make up our New Testament were declared canonical in these councils¹⁴. And as such the matter was considered closed. But the Church didn't just list the New Testament books; she also listed the Old Testament books. And that list contained the Deuterocanonical books found in Catholic Bibles today. **It is ironic that the same councils Protestants point to as authoritative in settling the New Testament canon were also used by the Church to authoritatively settle the Old Testament canon.**

The Reformation

For the following centuries Christendom made no distinction between the Deuterocanonical books¹⁵ and the rest of the Bible as handed down in the Latin Vulgate.

¹² “The time came when one rabbi compared the ‘accursed day on which the seventy elders wrote the Law in Greek for the king’ to the day on which Israel made the golden calf”. So quotes the Protestant scholar F.F. Bruce from his book *The Canon of Scripture*, p.50.

¹³ The Pharisees only had Greek versions of the Deuterocanonicals available in their day. As they would only regard a book as inspired if it was written in the Hebrew dialect, these books were rejected. But with the discovery of the dead sea scrolls in the 1940's there were Hebrew fragments of the Deuterocanonicals found that make up the Septuagint books they rejected.

¹⁴ The canon was reaffirmed at Carthage (419), II Nicea (787), Florence (1442) and Trent (1546).

¹⁵ In other words, they were viewed as inspired scripture as the rest of the Old and New Testament was.

But this changed at the Reformation when Luther rejected the canonicity of the Deuterocanonical books. Luther used three arguments for his decision. First of all the Deuterocanonicals gave strong Biblical support for purgatory¹⁶. This was proof to Luther that the books were in error, as Luther had no room for purgatory in his theology. As God's Word cannot contain error and these books obviously had such an error (according to Luther), the Deuterocanonical books had to go¹⁷. Luther also appealed to the fact that the Jews had rejected the Septuagint (with its Deuterocanonical books) at the council of Jamnia. Finally, Luther pointed out that some of the Church Fathers doubted the inspiration of the Deuterocanonicals¹⁸. In time the rest of the Protestant Reformers fell in line. The result is that today the Protestant Bible has 66 books while the Catholic Bible steadfastly maintains the 73 books she has had for 2,000 years.

It would serve us well to briefly examine Luther's objections as well as other objections touted by Protestant apologists to the Deuterocanonical books.

Arguments Against the Deuterocanonicals Examined

1. Some Church Fathers questioned the Deuterocanonicals

Saint Jerome and a handful of other Church Fathers did indeed question the inspiration of the Deuterocanonicals. But they were in a minority and eventually the reasoning of Saint Augustine and the majority of the Church Fathers prevailed. Luther embraced this minority position, one that had been over ruled by the Church. But if Christians were to cast out all the books that have been questioned at one time or another (this was Luther's reasoning) then the books of Revelation, James, Jude, Hebrews and 2 Peter would need to be omitted from the New Testament as they were amongst the disputed New Testament

¹⁶ 2 Maccabees 12:42-45 contains a story where there are prayers made for the dead. There is no need to pray for those in Hell, as they will not be released. There is no need to pray for those in Heaven, as they cannot do any better. The implication is that there is a third possibility (purgatory) where the dead can be released from the suffering and enter eternal bliss. While the New Testament is not devoid of passages referring to purgatory, this is one of the strongest found in the Bible.

¹⁷ It wasn't just the Deuterocanonicals that bothered Luther. He was initially persuaded (by his own reasoning) that the New Testament books of Jude, James and Revelation had to go as he viewed them as problematic with his new theology of salvation by faith alone. Cooler heads prevailed and Luther eventually included these New Testament books in his German Bible.

¹⁸ Jerome is most frequently cited as one who held these books in question. But he was in the minority as Augustine and most of the other Fathers looked on these books as scripture. Even Jerome relented once Mother Church made her decision. Jerome was persuaded, against his original inclination, to include the Deuterocanonicals in the Vulgate edition of the Bible—testimony to the fact that the books were commonly accepted and were expected to be included in any edition of the Scriptures. And it can be documented that in his later years Jerome did accept the deuterocanonical parts of the Bible. In his reply to Rufinus, he stoutly defended the deuterocanonical portions of Daniel even though the Jews of his day did not. Jerome wrote, "What sin have I committed if I followed the judgment of the churches? But he who brings charges against me for relating the objections that the Hebrews are wont to raise against the story of Susanna, the Son of the Three Children, and the story of Bel and the Dragon, which are not found in the Hebrew volume, proves that he is just a foolish sycophant. For I was not relating my own personal views, but rather the remarks that they [the Jews] are wont to make against us" (Against Rufinus 11:33 [A.D. 402]). Thus Jerome acknowledged the principle the canon of the Bible was a judgment of the Church, not of later Jews.

books. But individual Christians do not need to fret over this matter because Mother Church has ruled on it with her binding authority given to her by Christ¹⁹.

2. The Council of Jamnia rejected the Deuterocanonicals

Councils of non-Christian religions do not have the authority to define the Christian faith. Can we all agree on this? In the 4th century, three Church councils (Rome, Hippo and Carthage) ruled on the matter. In opposition, one Jewish council ruled on the matter. A Jewish council convened after the establishment of the Church²⁰ has no doctrinal authority to define Church teaching. How can this even be disputed?

3. The Deuterocanonicals contain teachings inconsistent with the Christian faith

Luther was appealing to scripture alone (sola scriptura) in formulating his new creeds. Given these parameters, the Catholic apologist Eck confronted Luther with scriptural passages to support purgatory. When Luther was called on to abide by his principle of 'scripture alone' and to concede the scriptural authority for praying for the dead (as found in 2 Maccabees 12:45f), Luther instead rejected what all of Christendom had accepted as scripture for 1,500 years. But the question must be asked, where did Luther get such authority to delete these books? His answer was that he had such authority based on the right of private judgment as led by the Holy Spirit.

But does this mean that each individual Christian has the right to reject books or sections of scripture based on their understanding of the Christian faith? Or did only Luther have this authority on a one time basis? Or does a modern day Luther have a similar authority and is the canon of the Bible therefore still in play?

4. Christ and the Apostles never quoted from the Deuterocanonicals

Luther did not make this appeal but often contemporary Protestants do. But where in the Bible does it say that Christ or the Apostles have to quote from a book of the Old Testament in order to mark the book as inspired scripture? If this is the measure of canonicity then many of the books of the Old Testament would need to be discarded (Christ and the New Testament writers didn't quote all of the Old Testament books that even the Protestants regard as canonical). Additionally, using such reasoning we would need to add the books of Enoch and the Assumption of Moses (they are quoted in Jude) to the Old Testament canon. But such reasoning is unbiblical and unfounded.

5. None of the books of the Deuterocanonicals claim to be scripture

A few brief comments can be made on this claim. First of all, just because a book claims to be scripture, does not mean it is scripture. Second of all, most books of the Bible do not have a claim within them stating they are scripture. Thirdly, where in the Bible does it say that a book needs to claim it is scripture? This argument is a nonstarter.

¹⁹ See Matthew 16:17-19 and Matthew 18:18.

²⁰ The Church formally came into being at Pentecost in 33 A.D. (approximately).

Summary

There is only one way we know whether a book is divinely inspired. And it is not because a book claims to be inspired. It is not because Christ or the Apostles quotes from it²¹. It is not because we think we know who the author is²². It is not because the Holy Spirit has guided history to ensure a consensus amongst Christians²³. Rather, it is because the Church is the only entity with the authority to define what the received books are. Christ did not hand us a New Testament when he ascended to heaven. But he did leave us a Church with a Magisterium to make decisions that are **binding on earth** and also **binding in heaven**. It is the Church that is the pillar and foundation of truth²⁴.

The Catholic Church has consistently declared the Deuterocanonicals to be divinely inspired from her earliest councils. And as such these books have been part of the Bible for 2,000 years. At the time of the Reformation the Protestant sects rejected these portions of scripture that for 1,500 years had been part of the Christian Bible. And as such they claimed to have the authority to do so based on the right of private judgment (**and a fallible judgment, as they concede**²⁵).

R.C. Sproul is a highly regarded contemporary Reformed theologian. He summarizes the Catholic vs. Protestant debate on the canon of scripture in the following manner:

“The Catholic Church believes in an **infallible list of infallible books** while the Protestant churches believe in a **fallible list of infallible books**²⁶”.

Plainly said.

²¹ For example, the Books of Enoch and the Assumption of Moses are not scripture even though Jude quotes them.

²² Someone might be tempted to say we know a book is scripture because an Apostle penned it. There are problems with reasoning. Many of the books the Apostles wrote are not signed by them. For example, it is only by Sacred Tradition that we know that Matthew wrote the book of Matthew. And even if a book claims to be written by an Apostle, how do we know whether or not the claim is true? There are non-Biblical books that make such a claim but in fact are not. And does the author really matter? To this day we do not know for sure who wrote the book of Hebrews, but the Church has declared it to be scripture. But to the Catholic, the claimed authorship of a book is not the only key to its canonicity. It is the ruling of the Church that is the key to a book's canonicity.

²³ The whole point of this debate is that there is no historical consensus amongst Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox on what the Old Testament canon is. While this essay has focused on the Protestant-Catholic debate, some Orthodox churches have additional books, beyond the Deuterocanonicals, that they regard as scripture. But all Orthodox churches regard the Deuterocanonicals as scripture.

²⁴ 1 Timothy 3:15.

²⁵ The Westminster Standards (originally composed in 1646), a Calvinist and Presbyterian creed concludes its declarations in Chapter 31, section 4, “All synods or councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err, **and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice**, but to be used as an help in both”. Amongst other things declared in the Westminster Standards is the list of Protestant canonical books in Chapter 1. But we see in Chapter 31 that this list cannot be regarded as a “rule of faith” but only “used as an help”. We thus are left with each individual’s private judgment, as he or she feels led by the Holy Spirit.

²⁶ See R.C. Sproul’s book, Essential Truths of the Christian Faith, page 22.