

# DEUTEROCANONICAL BOOKS

## The “Canon” of Scripture

The Bible is a collection of books written by different human authors under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit over a period of maybe one thousand years. Together they are considered the written Word of God. Very few Christians today who study their Bible or hear it being proclaimed at church worry about the authenticity of these books as being God’s written Word. They implicitly accept the validity of their church’s estimation of them or of Christianity’s use of them from time immemorial. Yet the canon of inspired Scripture did not just instantaneously come into being. It took time and involved controversy.



When we speak today of the “canon” of Scripture we mean those collected books whose authors Christians believe were inspired by God. The term “canon” comes from the Greek word *kanon* which means a “measuring stick” or a defining rule. It was used by the early Christians to mean a “measure” or “rule” by which to establish what is normative in the Church. It could be used to refer to behaviour but by the fourth century it especially referred to the collection of books belonging to Holy Scripture. There was no Jewish concept exactly corresponding to “canon” but Jewish authorities did speak of “what is read” and “the books” of Scripture in contrast to “the external books” or “books that render the hands unclean” (Joseph Lienhard, *The Bible, the Church, and Authority*, 1995).

Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christians all esteem the Bible as the written Word of God. However, they do not all agree on which books make up the canon of Holy Scripture. There is general agreement on the 27 books of the New Testament. It is the canon of the Old Testament that is disputed. The Catholic Bible has 46 books in the Old Testament (45 if we count Jeremiah and Lamentations as one) which when added to the 27 books of the New Testament gives a canon of 73 books. The various Orthodox churches have some differences amongst themselves in their canon. They all include the books found in the Catholic Bible but can have more. The Greek Orthodox Church, for example, has an Old Testament of 49 books (48 if we count the Letter of Jeremiah as part of Baruch, as Catholics do) which when added to the New Testament gives a total of 76 books. The additional books not found in the Catholic Bible are 1 Esdras and 3 Maccabees. Additional passages incorporated into canonical books are the Prayer of Manassah and Psalm 151. However, there is a lack of clarity as to the exact status of these additional books and passages in the various Orthodox churches. Are they considered divinely inspired books or “ecclesiastical” writings? The Protestant version of the Bible has only 39 books in the Old Testament for a total of 66 books when combined with the New Testament. The parts of the Old Testament recognized by both Catholics and Orthodox

churches as Scripture but not recognized by Protestants are the books of Baruch, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), 1 and 2 Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, and the Wisdom of Solomon plus the longer versions of Esther and Daniel. How did these differences in the canon of Scriptural come about?

### **The Jewish Canon**

The process by which the books of the Bible were collected into a canon lasted for centuries. Our concern here is only with the Old Testament. According to most scholars the collection of Jewish Scriptures took place in three stages. By the second century BC the Jews divided their sacred texts in three parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the (other) Writings. Jesus Himself refers to “the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms” (Lk 24:44). The first part is the Torah, which is also called the Law or the Pentateuch. It was believed written by Moses and long accepted as supernaturally inspired and of divine authority. In fact the Sadducees of Jesus’ day accepted only these books as divinely authoritative. According to patristic scholar Joseph Lienhard “the Torah, or Pentateuch, reached its final, closed form by 400 BC, at the latest.” The second grouping, the books of the Prophets, reached its final form by 200 BC. The historical books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings are included by Jews under this category since believed either written by prophets or containing their lives. The last grouping, the Writings, was closed according to Lienhard “in the course of the second century AD.” Other scholars, like Lee MacDonald, hold that the process continued into the early third century AD and some variations in the list of Jewish sacred books existed until the fifth century. So the Torah, comprising the five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), was first to be “canonized.” The second part to be canonized was the Prophets. According to the first century Jewish historian, Josephus, pharisaic Judaism believed prophecy ceased during the time of Artaxerxes (i.e. with the prophets Ezra, Nehemiah, Malachi, Zechariah, and Haggai, around 450 BC). Jewish and later Protestant apologists tried to claim the entire canon was closed by “the Great Synagogue” in Ezra’s time but historical research has shown this to be an anachronism, not attested to earlier than about AD 200.

The third group in the Jewish canon is the Writings. It is also the most diverse group of texts and the last to be fixed. It includes a hymn book in the Psalms, wisdom literature like Job and Proverbs, apocalyptic literature like the book of Daniel, and short books like Esther that were read at annual festivals. It was not closed until after the rise of Christianity and the destruction of the Second Temple, in AD 70. These events motivated rabbis to a closer consideration as to what books were recognized as divinely authoritative. This is often said to have happened at a “council” of rabbis held in Jamnia (Javneh) around AD 90 but the historical accuracy of this claim is questioned. What is known is that sometime near the beginning of the second century AD Palestinian Jews began the process of closing the third group of Scriptures, thus establishing the current Jewish canon that is recognized by Protestants as comprising the Old Testament in its entirety. The criteria used by these Palestinian Jews for determining which books were to be included or excluded from the Writings is not known. But based upon the texts that were included and excluded, scholars have speculated that to be considered authoritative

a book needed to (1) conform to the Pentateuch, and be written (2) in Hebrew (3) in Palestine, and (4) before or at the time of Ezra.

What is evident is that before Christianity began Judaism had a fixed corpus for the Law and the Prophets but not for the Writings. “Writings” were still being composed, translated and circulated. The early Church had thus inherited a still open canon from Judaism. And since the Holy Spirit had come upon the Church at Pentecost to guide it in all truth, its leaders would disregard any later decisions by the Jewish community as no longer authoritative or binding. The Church’s revealed teachings and tradition would be used to discern truth from error, inspired writings from uninspired.

### **The Septuagint**

Ever since the Babylonian Exile (6<sup>th</sup> century BC) large populations of Jews resided in regions outside the Holy Land and non-Jewish cultural influences were found within it. One effect of this was that Hebrew essentially became a dead language, confined largely to religious study and services. By Christ’s day the vernacular language of Jews in Palestine was Aramaic while Jews in other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean used “koine” (common) Greek. If Jews were going to appreciate their Scriptures some form of translation would have to be made. In Palestine *targums*, Aramaic paraphrased commentaries of sacred books, were used. Outside Palestine Diaspora Jews relied on a Greek translation of Jewish Scripture. The Greek translation was called the Septuagint (Latin for “seventy” and hence often abbreviated as LXX). It was begun in Alexandria, Egypt in the third century BC. The Septuagint was quoted by Jewish historians, poets and philosophers and also used in synagogues – that is until the end of the first century AD when many Jews ceased to use the Septuagint probably because of Christian adoption of it.

The Septuagint contained a Greek translation of the books found in the final Jewish canon but also other books. Some of these other books were originally written in Hebrew while others were composed by Jews in Greek. The Septuagint typically had a different three-part structure, arranging books by style: narrative, poetical and prophetic. Further, since most post-exilic Jews wrote in Greek or Aramaic it added historical books not found in any Hebrew versions. Because the Septuagint did not have a standard ordering or a completely standard list of books (the Jewish canon still being relatively open) the books included varied according to the collection. The books found in it at variance with the later Jewish canon (depending on the collection) are: Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch (including the Letter of Jeremiah), 1-3 Maccabees, the Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, the Book of Jubilees, 1 Esdras, additions to Esther and Daniel, and less commonly 4 Maccabees. Since none of these books contained law or prophecy they all properly belonged to the Writings. A substantial number of these books, but not all, are recognized by the Catholic Church as divinely inspired.

We know that from the beginning the Church made use of the Septuagint because it is extensively quoted from in the New Testament and in other early Christian writings. A conservative estimate puts over two-thirds of the approximately 300 Old Testament citations found in the New Testament as taken from the Septuagint. The Septuagint

influenced the New Testament profoundly. Terms used and even created in the Septuagint became part of the New Testament vocabulary. Probably the most famous and controversial reference from it is Matthew 1:23 citation of Isaiah 7:14: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive..." The Septuagint renders the passage from Isaiah exactly in this manner while the Masoretic Hebrew version appears more ambiguous.

### **Canonical Disputes in the Early Church**

The *lingua franca* of the eastern Roman Empire at the time of Christ was koine Greek. In the western part of the empire it was Latin. It was thus natural that the Church should make extensive use of the Septuagint Bible for worship, study and evangelization. It was also used to make the first translations of the Old Testament into Latin. Early Christian authors thus referred not only to the books of the Jewish canon but also to the books later rejected by the Jews. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Sixtus of Siena coined the term "protocanonical" to refer to the undisputed books of the Old Testament and "deuterocanonical" (second canon) to refer to the disputed texts. The term was not meant to suggest these books suffered from an inferior sort of inspiration but simply that controversy attended their acceptance by the Church. Protestants refer to them by the mildly pejorative term first used by St. Jerome of "apocrypha" meaning "things that are hidden."

It needs to be realized that disputes in the Church over which books were inspired and thus canonical were not restricted to the Old Testament. Prior to the Church councils of the late 300s, there was a wide range of disagreement over some of the books of the New Testament. Certain books, such as the four Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, and most of the epistles of Saint Paul, had long been agreed upon. However a number of the books – most notably Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, and Revelation – remained disputed until the canon was authoritatively settled. These are in effect New Testament "deuterocanonical" books. Other books often cited by early Christian writers and sometimes thought inspired included the Didache, 1 Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Letter to Barnabas. Their non-canonical status was eventually established by the Church while still being recognized as edifying to read. Thus they are more properly classified as early "ecclesiastical writings."

Not only was the status of entire books of the New Testament once contested, so were certain passages in the accepted books. For example, in the Gospels Mark 16:9-20; Luke 22:43-44; John 5:4 and John 8:1-11 are not found in every ancient manuscript. Yet how many Christians today worry about the inspiration of these verses which tell us about the woman caught in adultery, of Jesus' sweat being like blood during the Agony in the Garden, of an angel that stirred the pool of Siloam, and Christ's appearance to Mary Magdalene?

If one accepts the deuterocanonical New Testament books and passages as inspired why reject the deuterocanonical Old Testament books and passages? Both were established as canonical by the authority of the same Church. If the Popes and the Church councils can be wrong on the Old Testament, logic dictates they can be wrong on the New Testament too. If the Church is not infallible in its universal decisions on matters of faith, which includes its decisions about the canon of Scripture, then how can anyone be certain that they are not reading uninspired books in their Bible?

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the scholar, Johann Salomo Semler, tried to explain why a large part of the Christian world used a longer canon than the Jews or the Protestants. He postulated that at the time of Jesus the Jews actually had two closed canons of Scripture: the shorter Palestinian canon and the longer Alexandrian canon. He conjectured that Gentile Christians, who predominated, took over the longer canon of the Hellenistic Jews. This “double closed canon” theory became popular later among Protestant apologists when the claims made for the Great Synagogue of the fifth century BC fell apart. It made the Palestinian canon sound more authentic and superior. The problem with the theory of a closed Alexandrian canon in Judaism, as American scholar Albert Sundberg demonstrated (*The Old Testament of the Early Church*, 1964), is that there is no evidence for it. It is a magnificent theory constructed without anyone noticing that it lacked historical foundations.

### **Deuterocanonical Books and the New Testament**

There is no doubt that the New Testament authors used the Septuagint but did they make reference to its deuterocanonical books? Protestant apologists have suggested that the New Testament – the heart of the Bible to the Christian faith and on whose canon all Christian sects agree – may be seen to implicitly define the Old Testament canon by the books it quotes. And by this criteria the deuterocanonical books fair badly as no explicit quotes from them can be found in the New Testament.

While it is true there are no explicit quotes from the deuterocanonical books in the New Testament, yet there are a number of probable allusions. The German, E. R. Stier, in 1828 published a collection of 102 New Testament passages that he believed resembled the Apocrypha. A more conservative estimate would put the number at over two dozen (David Currie, *Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic*, 1996). A few examples will suffice. The Gospel writers tell of an episode where the Sadducees put a question to Jesus about a widow who had been married to seven brothers (Matt. 22:25; Mark 12:20; Luke 20:29). This may be an allusion to the book of Tobit (3:8 and 7:11). Jesus’ description of hell where “the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48) is an image used in the book of Judith (16:17). In 1 Cor. 10:1 Paul’s statement of “our fathers being under the cloud passing through the sea” is described in the Book of Wisdom (19:7). Some of the parallels are much clearer in Greek than in English, but even in English James 1:19, “Be quick to listen, slow to speak,” is very similar to Sirach 5:11, “Be swift in listening, but slow in answering.”

While allusions to or quotes from a text made by New Testament authors obviously carries some weight, it does not in and of itself prove a book inspired. For example, the New Testament never quotes from the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Obadiah, Zephaniah, Judges, 1 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Lamentations or Nahum which are nonetheless accepted as Scripture by Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox alike. And the New Testament does contain an allusion to the Assumption of Moses (Jude 9), quotes the Book of Enoch (Jude 14), and refers to the writings of pagan poets like Aratus (Acts 17:28), Epimenides (Titus 1:12-13), Menander (1 Cor 15:33), and Euripides (Acts 26:14), none of which are accepted as Scripture.

## Evidence of Early Church Acceptance

The early acceptance by Christians of the deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament as Scripture is demonstrated by history. For example, on the walls of the catacombs one can find scenes depicting the three young men in the fiery furnace, Daniel in the lion's den, Tobit, Raphael and the fish, Judith with the head of Holofernes, Judas Maccabees, and the martyred mother and seven sons. All these images are based on persons or events recorded in the deuterocanonical books. On the walls also are depicted persons and events from the Old Testament. But no scene solely found in a book considered apocryphal by the Catholic Church is depicted in the catacombs.

The Protestant patristic scholar J. N. D. Kelly concedes: "It should be observed that the Old Testament thus admitted as authoritative in the Church was somewhat bulkier and more comprehensive [than the Protestant Bible]...It always included, though with varying degrees of recognition, the so-called apocrypha or deuterocanonical books....In the first two centuries...the Church seems to have accepted all, or most of, these additional books as inspired and to have treated them without question as Scripture. Quotations from Wisdom, for example, occur in I Clement and Barnabas...Polycarp cites Tobit, and the Didache [cites] Ecclesiasticus. Irenaeus refers to Wisdom, the History of Susannah, Bel and the Dragon [i.e., the deuterocanonical portions of Daniel], and Baruch. The use made of the Apocrypha by Tertullian, Hippolytus, Cyprian and Clement of Alexandria is too frequent for detailed references to be necessary" (*Early Christian Doctrines*, 1960, 53-54). Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Origen, and others at times explicitly refer to certain deuterocanonical books as "Scripture."

With the exception of Melito of Sardis (AD 160), and to a lesser extent Origen, Christian writers of the first three centuries treated the deuterocanonical books as they did the protocanonical ones. (Origen accepted Esther and probably Baruch as Scripture but not the books of Maccabees.) It was not until the 4<sup>th</sup> century that some of the Fathers, most notably the great biblical scholar Jerome, began to have reservations concerning them. Jerome counseled that the deuterocanonical books not available in Hebrew and not considered canonical by the Jews could be permitted as models of faith and conduct but should not be used to establish doctrine. In other words he was recommending they be treated like other books found in some editions of the Septuagint that are not considered inspired but are treated as "ecclesiastical" books (e.g. 3 Maccabees and the Book of Jubilees). Such a change of view is difficult to explain. In the case of Jerome it may be that he was influenced by the Jewish teachers who instructed him in Hebrew. In a reply to Rufinus, however, Jerome did defend the deuterocanonical portions of Daniel as Scripture even though the Jews of his day did not accept them as such. A near contemporary of Jerome, Athanasius, also disputed the inspiration of the deuterocanonicals except the "epistle of Baruch" which he included as part of the Old Testament (*Festal Letter 39*). Cyril of Alexandria included Baruch and Esther but excluded the rest from his listing of Scripture (he also excluded from his New Testament listing Hebrews and Revelation). The patriarch of Constantinople, Gregory of Nazianzus, fails to mention any of the deuterocanonical books – as well as the New Testament books Hebrews and Revelation – in his listing of Scripture.

## **Controversy in the Fourth Century**

So, while most of the earliest Christian writers appear to have treated the Old Testament deuterocanonical books as inspired, by the 4<sup>th</sup> century other important Christian writers began to question the status of these books. With such controversy and confusion arising it is not surprising that at this time we find local Church synods and councils making the first formal and authoritative statements about the extent of the biblical canon. The results of such deliberations are especially useful because they do not represent the views of only one person but of what was accepted by Church leaders of whole regions. The canon of both the Old and New Testament was given at the Synod of Rome in 382, under the authority of Pope Damasus I. It was reaffirmed at the Council of Hippo in 393 and at the First Council of Carthage in 397. In 405 Pope Innocent I reaffirmed the canon in a letter dispatched to Exuperius, bishop of Toulouse. Another council at Carthage in 419 reaffirmed the canon of its predecessors and asked Pope Boniface to “confirm this canon, for these are the things which we have received from our fathers to be read in church.” The canon affirmed by all these regional councils and synods is identical with that of the modern Catholic Bible, including the deuterocanonical books.

It must be noted, however, that these early regional councils and the papal letter are not considered by many scholars as intending to be definitive pronouncements on the full extent of the canonical Scriptures. This may explain why Eastern Orthodox churches, while accepting as inspired all the books recognized by the Catholic Church, often have some extra books in their Scriptures. At the Synod of Jerusalem in 1672 the Orthodox churches’ expressed their reaction to the Protestant canon by affirming Tobit, Judith, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Wisdom, the additions to Daniel, and 1 and 2 Maccabees as canonical. But with no definitive listing of the Old Testament canon made before the Eastern Schism of 1054, Orthodox churches probably feel free to include other books and texts found in various collections of the Septuagint. Another explanation may come from the Orthodox churches’ tendency to react negatively to dogmatic pronouncements made by Rome after the Schism. Thus the status of books previously treated as ecclesiastical writings may be receiving undo emphasis in reaction to the Council of Trent’s authoritative pronouncement on the canon of the Old Testament. After all, the eastern Council of Trullo (A.D. 692), considered by Orthodox churches as an ecumenical extension of the Third Council of Constantinople, adopted the Catholic canon of Carthage (A.D. 419).

## **Protestant Rejection**

In 1441 the Council of Florence promulgated the Catholic canon for the “Jacobites” (i.e. Syrian Monophysites) as found in the fourth and fifth century councils. But it was only at the Council of Trent, in 1546, that a universally binding and definitive listing of the canon of Scripture was given. This was long after the Eastern schism and in response to the Protestant rejection of the deuterocanonical books. In doing this, the Council did not add the deuterocanonicals to Scripture but simply reaffirmed what had been believed since the early Church and her councils.

What led to the Protestant rejection of books held universally by Christians, East and West, as inspired for 1500 years? Interest in the Hebrew language and in things Jewish (like the Kabbalah) had been growing among Christians in Europe for more than two centuries before the Reformation. The Christian Humanists became interested in the Hebrew language, and those who learned it naturally favoured the Hebrew books. Early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Dominican Johannes Reuchlin had published a Hebrew grammar in Latin and became the first modern Christian to translate part of the Bible directly from Hebrew. All this attention on the Hebrew Scriptures with its shorter canon tended to raise questions about the accuracy and value of the Latin Vulgate with its longer canon.

Then in June and July of 1519 Martin Luther engaged in a historic debate with Johannes Eck at Leipzig, Germany. The topic of the debate was Purgatory. Luther appealed to the Bible as the final authority. Eck quoted 2 Maccabees 12:45: "It is a holy and salutary thought [to pray for the dead]. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin." Luther admitted the accuracy of Eck's quotation but challenged the place of Maccabees in the canon. Eck conceded that Maccabees was not in the Hebrew canon but appealed to the Church's canon and to Augustine. Luther appealed to Jerome and the "Hebrew verity." Luther thus denied the right of the Church to decide in matters of canonicity. Instead it was to be determined by the internal worth of the book (Sundberg, *The Old Testament of the Early Church*). Luther made the canon an acute issue for the Church\*. Eventually all the Reformers insisted on the shorter Hebrew canon. For three centuries, however, Protestants still continued to print the deuterocanonical books in their Bibles (such as the *King James Version*) but in an appendix as "Apocrypha." The deuterocanonicals were treated as worth reading for moral instruction but not as sources of Christian doctrine (i.e. they were treated as "ecclesiastical" writings). Today some English Protestant Bibles still contain them as an appendix, but not most. In 1827 the British and Foreign Bible Society was the first to drop them completely from its published editions. Thus we have the situation as it stands today.

\* Martin Luther also proposed removing Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation from the New Testament canon. While this suggestion was rejected by Protestant denominations, some Lutheran editions of the Bible relegated them to a special appendix at the back of the New Testament.

For more information read the article on the canon of Scripture found at <http://www.bridegroompress.com/sc/canon.htm#ot2nd>

Read Mark Shea, "5 Myths about 7 Books," at <http://www.holyspiritinteractive.net/columns/markshea/sheavings/5myths.asp>

See also the table listing the Old Testament books recognized as canonical by the various Christian Churches found at <http://my.execpc.com/~gto/Apocrypha/Summaries/table.html>

Finally James Akin, "Deuterocanonical References in the New Testament" at <http://www.cin.org/users/james/files/deutero3.htm#james>