

## THE CANON OF THE BIBLE

If we are able to know with assurance where God's revelation to be found, we need to know exactly and infallibly which books contain divine truth. Thus we need an authoritative list of the inspired books of the Bible. "Canon" means a measuring standard. The *canon of Scripture* refers to a standard, or official list of inspired books that make up the Bible.

### THE OLD TESTAMENT (OT)

**Different Old Testaments** The Protestant OT is based on the *Palestinian* (or Hebrew) canon used by Hebrew-speaking Jews in Palestine. The Catholic OT is based on the *Alexandrian* (or Greek) canon used by the Greek-speaking Jews throughout the Mediterranean, including Palestine.

**Septuagint** 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 in Alexandria. From this Alexandrian translation (completed between 250-125 BC) we get the term *Septuagint*, Latin for 70, 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*. In fact, 300 quotations from the OT found in the New Testament are from the Septuagint.

**Seven Fewer Books?** The Septuagint contains 46 books. The Hebrew canon contains only 39. Why is that? It all started back from 100 AD in Palestine, in which the Jewish rabbis at Jamnia established the Hebrew canon, perhaps in reaction to the Christian Church, which was using the Alexandrian canon. The Jews at Jamnia rejected 7 books – Wisdom, Sirach, Judith, Baruch, Tobit, 1 and 2 Maccabees (as well as portions of Daniel and Esther) – chiefly on the grounds that *they could not find any Hebrew versions of these books* which the Septuagint supposedly translated into Greek.

**Undisputed Canon for Thirteen Centuries...** The Christian Church continued to use the Septuagint. When the Church officially decided which books comprise the canon of the Bible (Council of Hippo, 393 AD, and Carthage, 397 AD), it approved the 46 books of the Alexandrian canon as the canon of the OT. For 16 centuries the Alexandrian canon was a matter of uncontested faith. Each of the 7 rejected books is quoted by the early Church Fathers as "Scripture" or as "inspired".

**Until Martin Luther** In 1529, Martin Luther proposed the Palestinian canon of 39 books in Hebrew as the OT canon. Luther found justification for removing the 7 books from the Bible in the old concerns of St Jerome and the Council of Jamnia that the Greek books had no Hebrew counterparts.

**Who is right?** Research into the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran has discovered ancient Hebrew copies of some of the disputed books, making their rejection unsupportable. Which OT would you rather use? The OT used by Jesus, the NT writers and the early Church, or the OT used by non-Christian Jews at Jamnia and Martin Luther 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)

**Same New Testaments** All 27 books were written between 50-100 AD, and are accepted as canonical and inspired by Catholics and Protestants alike.

**What books are inspired?** The Bible didn't fall from heaven preprinted, so where did we get it? How do we know we can trust every book?

In the first 3 centuries, the canon was much debated. Some thought *Hebrews, Jude, Revelation, 2 Peter*, were not inspired, while others held that *Shepherd of Hermas, Gospels of Peter and Thomas, the letters of Barnabas and Clement*, were inspired.

### Timeline

1. Various bishops developed lists of inspired books (Mileto, 175 AD; St Irenaeus, 185AD; Eusebius, 325 AD)
2. Pope Damasus in 382 AD wrote a decree listing the present OT and NT canon of 73 books.
3. The Council of Hippo in 393 AD approved the present OT and NT canon of 73 books.
4. The Council of Carthage in 397 AD approved the same OT and NT canon. *This is the council which many Protestants and Evangelicals take as the authority for the NT canon of books.*
5. Pope St Innocent I in 405 AD approved the 73-book canon and closed the canon of the Bible.

**Who determined the NT canon?** By the help of evidence, tradition and guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church finally approved the NT canon in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Historically, the Catholic Church used her authority to determine which books belonged 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. As St. Augustine says, "I would put no faith in the Gospels unless the authority of the Catholic Church directed me to do so."

**Dilemma** Logically, 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.

## READING

In the Crosshairs of the Canon (*This Rock, November 2000*)

### *Further Research*

- The NT never quotes from the 7 rejected books. Doesn't that indicate that they were not considered to be inspired?
- The book of Judith says that Nebuchadnezzar was king of Assyrians, when he was really king of the Babylonians. If a book has errors, doesn't that indicate it can't be inspired?
- Didn't Jerome disagree about the deuterocanonical books?
- Why did the Catholic Church chain Bibles in churches?
- Why did the Catholic Church keep the Bible in Latin for so many years?
- Why did the Catholic Church burn certain Bibles?
- Why did the Catholic Church sometimes prohibit reading certain versions of the Bible?