

Why Do Catholic Bibles Have More Books?

The Deuterocanon, the Councils, and the Question of Who Decides

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I. Two Bibles on One Table

Open a Catholic Bible and a Protestant Bible side by side and count the books of the Old Testament. The Catholic Bible has forty-six; the Protestant has thirty-nine. Both communions confess that Scripture is the inspired word of God, and they cannot agree on what Scripture is. That is not a small disagreement to have survived five centuries of debate between people who all claim to submit to the Bible, because it means the debate has never actually been conducted over a common text.

The disagreement admits of no soft resolution. Either the Catholic Church added seven books to the word of God, or the Reformation removed seven books from it. If the first, the Church stands convicted of tampering with Scripture to serve her doctrines, and every Protestant suspicion of Rome finds its footing. If the second, then the principle of Scripture alone was founded in the very act of altering the Scriptures—and the list that defines the Protestant Bible is itself a tradition of men. One side or the other changed the Bible, and the dates say which. This essay is about those dates, and about the deeper question underneath them: who has the authority to say what the Bible is?

II. The Books in Question

The books at issue are seven: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, and the first and second books of Maccabees, together with the longer Greek forms of Esther and Daniel. Catholics call them the *deuterocanon*, the “second canon”—not second in authority, but second in the sense that their place was disputed before it was settled. Protestants call the same books the *Apocrypha*. The two names carry the whole argument between them: one says these books belong to the canon whose status took longer to recognize; the other says they never belonged at all.¹

The terminology itself is late. The distinction between “protocanonical” books, accepted by all from the beginning, and “deuterocanonical” books, doubted by some before being received, was coined by Sixtus of Siena in the sixteenth century to describe a state of affairs a thousand years older. The early Church had her agreed books and her discussed books—in the Old Testament and in the New alike, for Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation were all doubted somewhere before they were received everywhere. Dispute followed by settlement is not the mark of a book that does not belong to the canon. It is how nearly a third of the canon arrived.²

III. The Bible of the Apostles

Start where the apostles started. The Old Testament of the early Church was the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Scriptures made for the Jewish diaspora in the centuries before Christ—and when the New Testament writers quote Scripture, they overwhelmingly quote it in the Septuagint’s wording, including in places where the Greek differs from the Hebrew text.³ The Septuagint was the Bible of the synagogues in which Paul preached, the Bible of the Gentile churches to which the epistles were written, and the Bible in which those churches read Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, and the books of Maccabees. The apostles, who warned their converts about so many dangers, never once warned them away from those books.

And the New Testament breathes their air. The book of Wisdom describes a righteous man who calls himself God's son and is condemned to a shameful death by mockers who taunt him: "Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; for if the righteous man is God's son, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries" (Wis. 2:17–18). At the Cross, the mockers say: "He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him; for he said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Matt. 27:43). The evangelist is showing his readers a scene they had already read.⁴

The Letter to the Hebrews, cataloguing the heroes of faith, praises those who "were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life" (Heb. 11:35). No account in the Hebrew canon answers to that description. The mother and her seven sons in 2 Maccabees 7 answer to it exactly: tortured one by one, each offered release for compliance, each refusing in the explicit hope of resurrection—"the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws" (2 Macc. 7:9).⁵

It is true that the New Testament never introduces a deuterocanonical passage with "it is written." But that test proves more than its users want. The New Testament never formally quotes Esther, Ecclesiastes, or the Song of Solomon either, and no Protestant removes them; while Jude quotes a prophecy of Enoch found in a book that no one adds.⁶ Formal citation was never the Church's criterion of canonicity, and it cannot be made one now without redrawing both Testaments.

IV. What the First Christians Read

Leave the New Testament and the trail continues without a break. Clement of Rome, writing to Corinth at the end of the first century, retells the deliverance wrought through "the blessed Judith" alongside Esther, and echoes the language of Wisdom. Polycarp, the disciple of the apostle John, writes to the Philippians that "almsgiving delivers from death"—the counsel of Tobit. The Didache echoes Sirach's teaching on giving. These are the earliest Christian documents outside the New Testament, and they treat the disputed books as the furniture of the Christian mind.⁷

The pattern holds through the centuries that follow: the books are read in the liturgy, cited in catechesis, and painted in the catacombs, where Tobit and the mother of the Maccabees kept company with Daniel and Jonah on the walls under which Christians buried their dead. Individual Fathers had individual doubts—Melito, Origen, Athanasius, and Jerome drew their lists differently, as Fathers also did for the New Testament—but the worshipping Church read the larger canon, East and West, for as long as there had been a Church.

V. The Councils and Their Lists

When the Church finally listed her books, she listed these. The Council of Hippo in 393 set out the canon of Scripture—forty-six books of the Old Testament, deuterocanon included, and twenty-seven of the New. The Third Council of Carthage confirmed the same list in 397, in the generation and the province of Augustine. In 405, Pope Innocent I sent the same list to Exsuperius, bishop of Toulouse, who had asked which books were to be received.⁸ These are the very councils and the very decades to which Protestants point for the settling of the New Testament canon. The list that gives every Christian his twenty-seven New Testament books is the list that gives the Catholic his forty-six.

Nor did the matter rest on the fourth century alone. In 1442—a lifetime before Luther posted his theses—the Council of Florence, in its decree of union *Cantate Domino*, professed that one and the same God is the author of the Old and the New Testament and set out the books by name: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, and the two books of Maccabees among them.⁹ When Trent, in April of 1546, solemnly defined the canon against the Reformers' challenge, it did not construct a Bible to win a controversy. It defined, under attack, the same list the Church had been reading at her lecterns for eleven hundred years. The late date belongs to the challenge, not to the canon.¹⁰

VI. Jerome, the Honest Difficulty

The strongest Protestant witness is Jerome, and he deserves to be treated with the honesty his scholarship demands. Translating the Old Testament afresh from the Hebrew, Jerome came to prize what he called the "Hebrew truth," and in his prefaces he distinguished the books found in the Hebrew Bible from those current in Greek, assigning the latter to be read for the edification of the people rather than for the establishing of doctrine. That is a real doubt from a real authority, and the Catholic case does not need to explain it away.¹¹

But Jerome must be read to the end of his story. He translated Tobit and Judith anyway, at the request of the bishops he served. He cited the disputed books in his own later writings. And when his omission of the Greek portions of Daniel was thrown at him as an error, he protested that he had been reporting what the Jews say about those passages, "not giving my own personal views"—for, he wrote, the churches read them.¹² Jerome the scholar had his preference; Jerome the churchman deferred to the judgment of the Church. The Reformation took his preference and discarded his deference, which is precisely the inversion this essay is about. Even Cardinal Cajetan, Luther's opponent at Augsburg, still followed Jerome's division on the eve of the Reformation—proof enough that the question remained discussable inside the Church until the moment it became a weapon outside her.¹³

VII. Whose Jewish Canon?

Paul writes that the Jews were “entrusted with the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2), and the Protestant argument leans its full weight on that verse: the custodians of the Old Testament did not receive these books, so the Church may not. But the argument assumes there was one settled Jewish canon in the first century for the Church to inherit, and there was not. The Sadducees held to the books of Moses. The Pharisees read a larger collection. The Greek-speaking synagogues of the diaspora—the mission field of the apostles—read the larger collection still, and the community at Qumran copied books from every part of it.

The tidy version of the story says a rabbinic council at Jamnia closed the Jewish canon around A.D. 90. There was no such council. The scholar who examined the Jamnia hypothesis most closely concluded that the gathering was an academy, not a council; that it issued no binding list; and that discussion of particular books continued among the rabbis for generations afterward. His study has been the consensus ever since, and the “Council of Jamnia” survives only in polemics.¹⁴ Nor were the disputed books Greek compositions foreign to the Holy Land: the Dead Sea Scrolls yielded Tobit in both Aramaic and Hebrew—five manuscripts, attesting all fourteen chapters—and Sirach in Hebrew, at Qumran and again at Masada.¹⁵

The Jewish canon that eventually excluded the deuterocanon was closed in the generations after the Temple fell—closed by a community that had also weighed the Gospels and rejected them. A Christian who takes that canon as decisive has accepted the judgment of the synagogue on one shelf of books and overruled it on the other. Being “entrusted with the oracles of God” made Israel the custodian of revelation; it did not make the synagogue of the second century the arbiter of the Church’s Bible. The steward does not outrank the heir.

VIII. The Reformation’s Revision

What the sixteenth century changed was not Rome’s canon but the challengers’. Luther’s German Bible of 1534 gathered the disputed books out of their places and set them between the testaments under a new heading: “Apocrypha: these books are not held equal to the Scriptures, but are useful and good to read.” The judgment was his own, and it did not stop at the Old Testament. In his 1522 New Testament, Luther wrote that the Epistle of James was “really an epistle of straw” compared with the books that preach Christ, and he grouped James, Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation at the back of the volume, unnumbered in his table of books. Honesty requires the footnote: the “epistle of straw” remark was dropped from editions after 1537. But the principle that produced it—one

man's judgment of which books preach Christ, deciding which books are Scripture—remained, and it is the principle on which the shorter Old Testament stands.¹⁶

The confessions then fixed the revision in law. The Westminster Confession of Faith: “The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of Scripture; and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.” The Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles kept a gentler tone—the Church “doth read” these books “for example of life and instruction of manners,” but does not “apply them to establish any doctrine”—and kept the books themselves in the lectionary and the printed Bible.¹⁷ For centuries, in fact, Protestant Bibles still carried the Apocrypha as an appendix; the familiar sixty-six-book Bible with no trace of them is largely the work of the Bible societies, which ceased printing the appendix in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ The deuteroconon did not enter the Bible late; it left some Bibles late.

IX. A Bible Cannot List Its Own Books

Beneath the historical question sits a logical one, and it is the one that should give a thoughtful Protestant the longest pause. Scripture nowhere lists the books of Scripture. The table of contents at the front of every Bible is not an inspired text; it is a judgment about inspired texts, and someone must have had the authority to make it. The question “which books belong in the Bible?” cannot be answered by the Bible, any more than a letter can certify its own signature.

Reformed theology, to its credit, states the resulting position candidly. The canon of Scripture, R. C. Sproul writes, is on the historic Protestant view “a fallible collection of infallible books.”¹⁹ The phrase is offered as a resolution, but read it slowly: it concedes that the one thing standing between the believer and the wrong Bible is a human judgment that may be mistaken. A certainty about every word of Scripture that rests on an admittedly fallible list is borrowed certainty—borrowed, in fact, from the Catholic councils that drew the list up, since no Protestant body has ever produced an independent one. Augustine stated the alternative sixteen centuries ago: “I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the Catholic Church.”²⁰ The canon is a gift that comes with a giver. Receive the list, and you have already trusted the Church that drew it up.

X. The Standing Objections, Answered

“Judith gets its history wrong.” Judith opens with Nebuchadnezzar reigning over the Assyrians in Nineveh—a combination no ancient reader with a synagogue education could have missed, since Nebuchadnezzar was the famous king of Babylon and Nineveh's fall

was the subject of an entire prophetic book. The signal is the point: the book announces itself as something other than a chronicle, the way a parable does. Inspiration guarantees the truth a book intends to teach in the form it intends to teach it; it does not convert every genre into court records. The same charge, pressed consistently, would indict the parables of Jesus for naming no verifiable Samaritan.²¹

“Tobit and Maccabees teach false doctrine.” Tobit says that “almsgiving delivers from death” and purges away sin; the objection is that this contradicts salvation by grace. But the New Testament speaks the same idiom: “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8); “give for alms those things which are within; and behold, everything is clean for you” (Luke 11:41). And 2 Maccabees commends sacrifice for the dead “that they might be delivered from their sin” (2 Macc. 12:45)—which is a problem for the doctrine of the Reformers, not for the doctrine of the Church. A book cannot be expelled from the canon for disagreeing with a theology invented to be measured by the canon; that is the circle closing on itself.²²

“The author of 2 Maccabees apologizes for his work.” He does: “if it is poorly done and mediocre, that was the best I could do” (2 Macc. 15:38). The humility of the penman disproves inspiration no more than Paul’s “I write this, not as a command” (1 Cor. 7:6) disproves his, or than Luke’s account of his own methodical research (Luke 1:3) disproves his. Inspiration is not dictation; God’s authorship works through the human author’s mind, style, and self-estimate. If a book must be dropped whenever its humanity shows, the canon will not stop shrinking at sixty-six.²³

XI. What Hangs on Seven Books

It may seem, at the end, a quarrel for specialists—seven books, an appendix, a heading in an old German Bible. It is not. The scene this essay began near is a mother watching her seven sons die in a single day rather than break the law of God, telling the last and youngest that the Maker who formed him in her womb will give him back his life. The Letter to the Hebrews holds that family up among the heroes of faith. For eleven centuries every Christian who opened a Bible found them inside it.

And the question of the seven books is finally the question of this whole section of the site. If the canon of Scripture reaches the believer through the discernment of the Catholic Church—her liturgy, her councils, her popes confirming her councils—then Scripture alone was never alone, and the Church that handed over the book has some claim to be heard about its meaning. If instead each believer, or each tradition, may revise the list, then the Bible itself becomes an artifact of private judgment, and no one can say where the revising ends. The Catholic answer is the mother’s answer: the God who gives the law gives the book, and He gives both through a people He has authorized to carry them.

Count the books; check the dates; and then ask not only *what* the Bible is, but *whom* you trusted to tell you.

Endnotes

1. The deuterocanonical books and passages: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Baruch (with the Letter of Jeremiah), 1 and 2 Maccabees; the Greek additions to Esther; and in Daniel, the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon.
2. On the terminology of Sixtus of Siena and the parallel history of the disputed New Testament books (the *antilegomena*), see “Bible, III (Canon),” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*.
3. See the tabulations in G. L. Archer and G. Chirichigno, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament* (Moody, 1983): the large majority of New Testament citations agree with the Septuagint, including where it differs from the Masoretic Hebrew.
4. Wisdom 2:12–20; Matthew 27:39–43. Scripture quotations in this essay are from the Revised Standard Version.
5. Hebrews 11:35; 2 Maccabees 7, esp. verses 9, 11, 14, 23, and 29.
6. Jude 14–15, quoting 1 Enoch 1:9. Esther, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon are nowhere formally cited in the New Testament.
7. 1 Clement 55 (Judith, with Esther); 1 Clement 27 echoing Wisdom 12:12; Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 10, with Tobit 4:10 and 12:9; Didache 4:5 with Sirach 4:31.
8. Council of Hippo (393); Third Council of Carthage (397); Innocent I, letter to Exsuperius of Toulouse (405). All three lists contain the deuterocanonical books without distinction, and are identical with the catalogue of Trent.
9. Council of Florence, Bull *Cantate Domino* (4 February 1442).
10. Council of Trent, Session IV (8 April 1546), Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures.
11. Jerome, Preface to the Books of Samuel and Kings (the *Prologus Galeatus*); Preface to the Books of Solomon.
12. Jerome, *Apology Against Rufinus* 2.33, on the additions to Daniel: he reports the objections of the Jews, “not giving my own personal views.” His translations of Tobit and Judith were made at the request of bishops, as his prefaces to those books record.

13. Cajetan, *Commentary on All the Authentic Historical Books of the Old Testament* (1532), at the end of Esther.
14. Jack P. Lewis, “What Do We Mean by Jabneh?” *Journal of Bible and Religion* 32 (1964), pp. 125–132.
15. Tobit: 4Q196–200 (four Aramaic manuscripts and one Hebrew). Sirach: Hebrew fragments at Qumran (2Q18; Sirach 51 in the Psalms scroll 11QPsa) and the Hebrew Ben Sira scroll found at Masada.
16. Luther, Preface to the New Testament (1522); the remark was dropped from editions after 1537. On the 1534 Apocrypha heading, see any facsimile of the Luther Bible; the four relegated New Testament books stand unnumbered at the end of his table.
17. Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), I.3; Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1571), Article VI.
18. The British and Foreign Bible Society resolved in 1827 to cease funding the printing of the Apocrypha; American societies followed, and the sixty-six-book printing became standard.
19. R. C. Sproul, “The Establishment of Scripture,” in *Sola Scriptura! The Protestant Position on the Bible*, ed. Don Kistler (Soli Deo Gloria, 1995).
20. Augustine, *Against the Letter of Mani Called Fundamental*, 5.
21. Judith 1:1; cf. the fall of Nineveh in the book of Nahum and 2 Kings, and Nebuchadnezzar as king of Babylon throughout 2 Kings, Jeremiah, and Daniel.
22. Tobit 12:9; 1 Peter 4:8; Luke 11:41; 2 Maccabees 12:43–45.
23. 2 Maccabees 15:38; 1 Corinthians 7:6; Luke 1:1–4.

For Further Reading

Why Catholic Bibles Are Bigger, by Gary Michuta—the canon controversy traced from pre-Christian times through the Reformation, source by source.

Canon of the Old Testament, Catholic Encyclopedia—the documentary history of the canon. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03267a.htm>.

Bible, III (Canon), by Fr. William G. Most—canonicity, inspiration, and the criteria question. Free online at <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/most/>.

Council of Trent, Session IV—the Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures itself. Free online at <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/fourth-session.htm>.

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“You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws.” — 2 Maccabees 7:9

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of *the Catholic canon of Scripture and the place of the deuterocanonical books*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church’s teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author’s alone.