

Which Books Belong in the Bible? (Part two)

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Catholic Bibles have seven books that are not in translations like the King James and the New King James Version. These books are part of a collection of Jewish writings called the Apocrypha.

But as we have shown, the Apocryphal books are not inspired. The Jews did not believe they were inspired. Jesus never quoted them. They contradict each other and they contradict the Bible. And, there is no evidence that they are inspired. There are no marks of divine inspiration in the Apocryphal books.

That is why Protestant versions do not include them. But that raises a question. Why is the Apocrypha in old translations? For instance, the original 1611 King James Version contains the Apocrypha. Does that mean the translators believed the Apocrypha was inspired and on the same level as the Old and New Testaments? Catholics and members of the Orthodox faith are quick to bring this fact to the attention of anyone who believes in a 66-book canon of the Bible.

To get to the root of this issue, we need to ask why these versions included the Apocrypha. A key explanation is found in the Geneva Bible of 1560. That was over fifty years before the KJV. That translation placed the Apocrypha between the Old Testament and the New Testament just as the KJV did. It is written in old English so here is a more readable version. This is an introductory note at the beginning of the section containing the Apocrypha:

“These books that follow in order after the Prophets unto the New Testament are called Apocrypha, that is books which were not received by a common consent to be read and expounded publicly in the Church, neither yet served to prove any point of Christian religion, save inasmuch as they had the consent of the other Scriptures called Canonical to confirm the same, or rather whereon they were grounded: but as books proceeding from godly men, were received to be read for the advancement and furtherance of the knowledge of the history, and for the instruction of godly manners: which books declare that at all times God had a special care of his church and left them not utterly destitute of teachers and means to confirm them in the hope of the promised Messiah, and also witness that those calamities that God sent to his church, were according to his providence, who had both so threatened by his providence, and so brought it to pass for the destruction of their enemies, and for the trial of his children.”

This statement is important. The translators clearly state that the Apocrypha was not in their canon. So why did they include these books in the translation? Because of the history of the Jews recorded in these books. The translators felt that this material would help to fill in the gap between the testaments.

The presence of the Apocrypha in the Geneva Bible or the original KJV in 1611 is no different from the supplementary material in many editions of the Bible today—dictionaries, histories, concordances, etc. No one thinks this material is inspired.

There is a difference between where the Apocrypha was placed in these old English translations in contrast to Catholic Bibles and Orthodox Bibles. The King James Bible and the earlier Geneva Bible put all the Apocryphal books together in one place—after Malachi and before Matthew. They placed them into one section as a historical reference and nothing more.

But Catholic Bibles mix them in with Old Testament books to give the appearance that they are just as inspired as Old Testament books. As usual in Catholic religion, the intent is to create doubt and confusion as to what the Bible is and what it means.

It is interesting that the Catholic Church did not officially declare these seven Apocryphal books as part of the canon until the year 1546 at the Council of Trent. That was in the heat of the battle of the Protestant Reformation! People were questioning and debating things they had taken for granted. There was doubt and uncertainty. And, Martin Luther had said in 1522 that the book of James was not inspired!

Catholic Bibles contained these Apocryphal books before that meeting, but the Council of Trent made their inclusion in the Old Testament an official church dogma. According to Catholic teaching, that is when the canon—both the Old and New Testament—was decided!

Think of how preposterous this claim is. The books of the Old Testament were completed by about 400 B.C. The Apocrypha was written during the interval between the testaments. The Jews in Jesus' day did not accept the Apocrypha. Jesus and the apostles did not accept these books as inspired. And yet the Catholic Church says these books were canonical, but they did not make that list official until 1500 years after the time of Christ!

I remind you that Catholics tell us the Council of Carthage decided which books belong in the Bible in 397. Which was it? The Council of Carthage in 397 or the Council of Trent in 1546? Not only do Catholics ask us to believe that their leaders had the authority to decide which books belong in the Bible in 397—almost 400 years after the time of Jesus—but they also want us to believe that this decision was not authoritative until another group of Catholic leaders made it official over 1100 years later!

When you press Catholics on this point, they fall back on another mythical crutch—the so called “doctrine of development.” That is just a technical way of saying that they change their story and make it up as they go.

This is a typical case of how Catholics rewrite history, especially their own history. It shows how they assign arbitrary definitions and constantly change religious requirements. The Catholic Church did not decide which books belong in the Old Testament. The evidence decided that. There was a distinct, settled body of writings that Jesus referred to as “the Scriptures,” and that collection of books is the Old Testament.

Now let's turn to the New Testament. There are 27 books in what people call Protestant versions of the New Testament. Catholic and Orthodox Bibles also have 27 books in their editions of the New Testament. We have no disagreement with them about the number.

At this stage, we need to look at the evidence for accepting the 27 books of the New Testament and no more. There is an important passage of Scripture we will use as a starting point. Peter told his readers that Paul “has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures” (II Pet. 3:15-16).

Here we see the same interconnection of inspired books that we saw in the Old Testament. These are some of the last inspired words Peter wrote before his death. He was writing to the same Christians that Paul had already written to earlier. Peter was inspired. He was an apostle. In this passage he recognizes Paul's epistles as being on the same level as “the other Scriptures” or “the rest of the Scriptures.”

Notice again that Peter mentions the Scriptures but he does not list what they are or who wrote them. He did not have to explain that to these Christians. None of them would have said, “What do you mean ‘the rest of the Scriptures?’ Which ‘Scriptures’ are you talking about?” They knew. And contrary to Catholic claims, they did not need a Magisterium of the Catholic Church to tell them that.

Peter placed Paul’s epistles in the category of Scripture. Paul wrote more books than any other New Testament writer—13 or 14 depending on who wrote the book of Hebrews. There are only 27 books in the New Testament, and since Peter wrote 2 epistles, this one passage gives us 15 or 16 in the New Testament canon!

The apostle John was in the “inner circle” of the apostles—Peter, James and John. He wrote 5 New Testament books—the book of John, Revelation, and I, II, and III John. That gives us a total of 20 or 21 of the 27.

On a word-for-word basis, Luke wrote more than any other New Testament writer. His gospel account was addressed to Theophilus (Luke 1:1-4). Acts 1:1 begins with these words, “The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach.” That matches perfectly with the book of Luke. Now we have 2 more books in the New Testament canon for a total of 22 or 23.

First Timothy 5:17-18 is another important link in this chain. “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages.’”

Paul quoted two verses of Scripture to reinforce what he said about supporting these elders. One is from the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 25:4. The other is from the New Testament in Luke 10:7. The entire New Testament was not completed when Paul wrote the book of I Timothy, but the book of Luke was already part of the canon. Notice that Paul calls both verses “Scripture”! Paul said the book of Luke is just as much a part of the canon as the book of Deuteronomy which was written by none other than Moses!

As we noticed earlier, Paul sometimes quoted pagan authors (Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12). He never referred to them as Scripture. But when he quoted these two books in I Timothy 5:18, he called them *Scripture*!

There are only a few books of the New Testament left in this close circle of writers. The book of Matthew was written by one of the apostles. It begins with the genealogy of Joseph. It connects Old Testament prophecies and types to the New Testament. Its record of the execution of Jesus by Pontius Pilate is consistent with the accounts of Josephus and Tacitus. The implication of the Muratorian Fragment is that Matthew’s account was placed first in that ancient book. And, the church historian Eusebius says Matthew the tax collector was the writer of the book that bears his name. There should be no question about the place of this book in the New Testament canon. That brings the total to 23 or 24 books.

Evidence from Papias and Irenaeus in the second century is even stronger for the book of Mark. In fact, Irenaeus, who lived from 120-202, quoted Mark 16:19. That’s in the section many question because it is missing from the later Sinaitic manuscript! The evidence leads to the inclusion of this book in the canon. That pushes the total to 24 or 25.

This brings us to the book of James. It stands to reason that the author was a notable person in the first century church. There are only two men named James that stand out: James the brother of the Lord and James the brother of John. But since Herod beheaded James the brother of John early in Acts 12, James the brother of the Lord seems to be the author. And that connects the epistle to the book of Jude. Verse 1 of that brief epistle says, “Jude, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, and *brother of James*...” That brings the number to 26 books.

Now the human links in the canonical chain bring the number of their books to all but one—the book of Hebrews.

It is true that the name of the author does not appear on the book. The question of who wrote this book has been debated for centuries. But name alone is not the only consideration of whether a book is inspired. The contents of the book are most important. In the case of the book of Hebrews, this epistle has remarkable features of a divinely inspired book. The reasoning in this book regarding Melchisedec and Christ is one of the most profound and comprehensive arguments in the New Testament regarding the position of Jesus Christ. How could a mere human invent a comparison that so thoroughly and decisively ties together (and yet contrasts) the Old Testament and the New Testament?

Melchisedec is only mentioned in three books of the Bible. There is a brief mention of him in Genesis 14. Then David mentions him about 900 years later in Psalm 110. That is a Messianic psalm. It begins with the words, “The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool” (Psa. 110:1). We know that is a prophecy of Jesus because Jesus said it was in Mark 12:36-37.

But in the same context of the prophecy in Psalm 110, we find these words, “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchisedec” (Psa. 110:6). The book of Hebrews is the only book in the Bible that tells us how that was fulfilled. It was fulfilled in Jesus. If the the book of Hebrews is not part of the Bible, then how could you ever know what it means? And if you remove this book from the canon, then you take away the fulfillment of what David wrote in Psalm 110:6.

So if anyone asks for ancient witnesses to the canonicity of the book of Hebrews, I would say he needs to consider David and Jesus. You cannot reject the book of Hebrews without denying David and Jesus. If you remove the book of Hebrews from the Bible, you loosen an inspired thread that ties the Scriptures together.

Then there are statements in Hebrews that indicate the time frame and cultural setting of the first century. It mentions “our brother Timothy” (Heb. 13:23). It mentions the service of the priests at the temple and warns about the impending destruction of the city of Jerusalem (Heb. 8:4, 13; 10:37). It beautifully connects the people and events of the Old Testament to the New (Heb. 11).

The point I am making is that there is internal consistency in these New Testament books. They agree with each other in terms of history and doctrine. In the case of many of these books, there is recognition between them or mutual confirmation of their divine origin.

The internal nature of these books was such that the original readers of the New Testament could know both that these letters were inspired and what they meant. They didn’t need some mysterious Magisterium to know that. They could know their divine origin and interpret them.

Consider the Christians in Thessalonica. The readers of the epistles Paul wrote to them could tell the difference between a genuine, inspired epistle from a fake, manmade letter pretending to be apostolic. Paul warned them “not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come” (II Thess. 2:2).

The warning was about false teachers who said that the day of Christ had already come. Paul gave three avenues these false teachers might use: “by spirit or by word or by letter.” “By spirit” means the false teachers personally. Since the spirit of man is his true essence, the Bible uses this word to refer to the person. Sometimes this word refers to a false teacher. John said, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit” in I John 4:1. He explains who this is when he says “because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” Paul tells the Christians at Thessalonica not to believe this doctrine if they hear it directly from these false prophets.

Then he says do not accept it if it comes to you “by word”—that is, indirectly by word of mouth from others.

Next, he says not to believe this teaching even if it came “by letter, as if from us,” that is, from an apostle or another inspired writer. This instruction means that these Christians could know the difference between a genuinely inspired epistle and a fake letter from a false teacher. They could know this as surely as they could know the difference between a false teacher and a true man of God.

How could they know this? Catholics say that is where the Pope and the college of bishops—the Magisterium—comes in. Catholic belief says the only way to know which books are inspired is for the Catholic Church to declare them inspired. But Paul tells *individual Christians* to discern between false teachers and true teachers and between false letters and inspired letters. These Christians could see Paul’s signature which he said was the “token in every epistle” (II Thess. 3:17). They could see the consistency between his epistles. They were very aware of the people, places and events he mentioned. And, they would have detected any kind of error had there been one.

This is very significant. If Christians in the first century could know the books that were from God and the books that were not, then we can do the same today. If they could know which books were canonical, then so can we—without a bishop or a priest.

But consider another parallel. There were false apostles in the New Testament (II Cor. 11:13). Jesus said to the church at Ephesus, “You have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars” (Rev. 2:2). The brethren at the church, not a Magisterium, made this determination.

But how? How could people in the first century know that some men were true apostles of Christ and others were false apostles?

Was it because they *said* they were apostles? No. The false apostles at Ephesus claimed to be apostles but they lied. Both real apostles and false apostles *said* they were apostles. There had to be some other way of verifying genuine apostles, some outside means to distinguish the true apostles from the false ones. That source was the miracles the true apostles of Christ did. Paul called them “signs of an apostle” (II Cor. 12:12).

The Catholic Magisterium has no such verification by miracles, and for that reason alone it should be rejected. In other words, the whole issue with the Catholic Church is that they *say* they are guided by the Holy Spirit in what they teach but they cannot give proof for that claim!

If Christians in the church at Ephesus could tell the difference between a true apostle and a false apostle, and if the saints at Thessalonica could distinguish a genuine epistle from a false one, then we can know which books belong in the Bible and which ones do not today without the so-called authority of the Catholic Magisterium.

How could people in the New Testament distinguish between books that were inspired and writings that were not? That is really no different from asking how those same people could know which sermons were inspired and which ones were not. One was written and the other was spoken but the question is basically the same. They could tell the difference between a true prophet of God and a false prophet. In the same way, they could know when a book was inspired and when a book was not.

The same question could be raised about the number of the apostles. Catholics ask us where the Bible gives a list of inspired books. We could ask: Where does the Bible give a list of all the true apostles of Jesus? Yes, there is a list of the twelve in Matthew 10, Mark 3, and Luke 6. Then it gives a list of the eleven in Acts 1. Matthias was added to the number in Acts 1. Paul was also later added as an apostle.

But how do we know there were not others? After all, if we wanted to muddy the waters like Catholics do about the canon, we could say that Paul and Barnabas were both apostles according to Acts 14:14. We could say that James the brother of Jesus was an apostle since the Bible refers to him as an apostle in Galatians 1:19. We could say there were other apostles besides the twelve because Titus and others are called apostles in II Corinthians 8:23. You won't see that word in many translations of II Corinthians 8:23 because they give the word "messengers." But the word in Greek is *apostoloi* which is the word for apostles.

Of course, the word apostle is used in a general and a specific sense. It means one who is sent. In a general sense Barnabas and James and Titus were apostles in the sense that they were sent. But the men we call "the apostles"—Peter, James, John, and the others amounting to fourteen—were apostles in the specific sense.

My point is that the early Christians had a "canon" if you will of apostles in the specific sense, but they didn't have that list in one passage. And, they could tell the difference between true apostles and false apostles.

So, if men could determine that there were fourteen and only fourteen apostles of Christ, then men (without a Magisterium) can know that twenty-seven and only twenty-seven books comprise the New Testament. Christians in the first century knew what "the Scriptures" were just as they knew who "the apostles" were.

Now let's look briefly at ancient records. This testimony is old but it is secondary. We will look first at what has been labeled "Marcion's Canon." Marcion was one of the first higher critics of the Bible. As we are about to see, his was not a canon in the ordinary sense of the word.

Marcion was a bishop in Rome around 140 A.D. He argued that the God of the Hebrews in Old Testament is not the true God. He was not an idolater. What he objected to was the wrath of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. He did not believe a loving God could strike people dead and

wipe out cities like Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone or destroy the earth with a flood.

As a result, Marcion did not believe in some books of the New Testament because they portrayed the same kind of God. He thus rejected all of the Old Testament and accepted only the book of Luke and ten of Paul's epistles: Galatians, I Corinthians, II Corinthians, Romans, I Thessalonians, II Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon and Philippians.

Tertullian, who lived from 145-220, wrote that Marcion made "an excision of the Scriptures as suited his own subject matter" (Tertullian, *On Prescription Against Heretics*, chapter 38).

When we consider the books that Marcion left out of his "canon" and which ones he included, we get an early picture of what Christians in the second century believed about this subject. After all, he was considered a heretic because of his beliefs. But why did early Christians denounce what he said about these Bible books unless they were commonly accepted among Christians of the time?

The unintentional testimony of Marcion is significant in two ways: first, because it is early and second, because he is a *hostile* witness as to which books were accepted as inspired by these early Christians. He certainly had no idea that his tirade against the books of the Bible would some day be used to affirm the canon of Scripture.

The Muratorian Fragment is part of a manuscript that dates back to about 170 A.D. That date is given because it mentions Pius I serving in the church at Rome. Pius died in 157 A. D.

This ancient source gives a partial list and a brief description of New Testament books. The first pages were damaged and lost, so it begins with these words: "...at which nevertheless he was present, and so placed them in his narrative." This refers to the book of Mark because the next words are "The third book of the Gospel is that according to Luke." Though the section before this is missing, the fact that he says Luke is the third record of Jesus' life means that Matthew wrote the first one. He then says, "The fourth of the gospels is that of John, one of the disciples."

Next the manuscript talks about the epistles of John and quotes from I John 1:1. Then he says, "The acts of all the apostles were written in one book. For 'most excellent Theophilus' Luke compiled the individual events that took place in his presence."

After this it reads, "As for the epistles of Paul, they themselves make clear to those desiring to understand which ones they are, from what place, or for what reason they were sent." The writer then lists the Corinthian letters, Galatians, Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, the Thessalonian epistles, the "two" epistles to Timothy, one to Titus and the letter to Philemon. The Apocalypse or Revelation, he says, was written by John.

He mentioned the epistle of Jude and said it was accepted at the time. He did not mention the book of Hebrews, the epistles of Peter and the book of James for some reason, or at least in this manuscript fragment they are not mentioned.

However, he said that "an epistle to the Laodiceans and another to the Alexandrians" had both been "forged in Paul's name to further the heresy of Marcion." It also says the book the Shepherd of Hermas "cannot be read publicly to the people in church either among the Prophets, whose number is complete, or among the Apostles, for it is after their time." He also listed *The*

Apocalypse of Peter but added that “some of us are not willing that the latter be read in church.” His list also includes the *Wisdom of Solomon* which is a book of the Apocrypha.

The Muratorian Fragment is not perfect. We would not agree with everything it says. But neither would the Catholic Church. But in spite of its weaknesses, this ancient document is one early witness to the books of the New Testament.

These two ancient sources—Marcion’s canon, and the Muratorian Fragment—are not complete lists of books in the New Testament, but they do show the antiquity of the New Testament books and give considerable historical evidence of the early canon of the New Testament.

After all, if someone today only has a Catholic Bible, he will see books that are not inspired just like people in the second century saw mistakes in the Muratorian manuscript. But thank God Catholic Bibles are not the only ones available. A person can find out the truth on this subject today just as people in the days of the Muratorian Fragment could. There were many other manuscripts of the New Testament books that were in existence. There will always be some debate about the canon. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be having this discussion.

Let’s go next to the Reformation leader Martin Luther. It is well-known that Luther rejected the book of James from his canon in his Preface to the Book of James. He said that James “flatly contradicts” Paul on the subject of faith and works and called this book a “right strawy epistle.” But I am not defending Luther. He was wrong.

There is a bit of irony in the whole controversy about the canon, especially if a person looks at the issue from outside the realm of Christianity. Catholics and Protestants for the most part agree that there are 27 books in the New Testament. There is no controversy about that. The disagreement is about how that number is determined and who decided it.

Catholics say the Magisterium of the Catholic Church alone decided the canon of Scripture. Protestants, especially Calvinists, believe that the Holy Spirit verifies the canon by His internal witness. And yet students from both groups analyze the basic evidence we have discussed in this lesson and use logical reasoning to draw their conclusions.

Catholics say “There is no inspired list of New Testament books in the New Testament, so if you believe in *sola scriptura* you can never know the canon.” Robert Haldane in his book *The Evidence and Authority of Divine Revelation* said even if we could point to such a list, they would not accept it. He was probably right. They would find some way to reinterpret and twist what it said. And they will always play the Magisterial trump card.

One thing is obvious if you have dealt with Catholics on this point. They always bring up the canon, but after a while you realize that the issue is not the canon. Here is why.

Why do Catholics include the seven books of the Apocrypha? Do they gain anything doctrinally? They may find support for purgatory in II Maccabees. But they could still affirm that doctrine without the Apocrypha. If they do not need these seven books, why was it so important for them to include them?

As far as the New Testament is concerned, Catholics agree with us about what those books are. They agree that there are 27 books, no more and no less.

So if the seven Apocryphal books are not vital to Catholic belief, and if there is no disagreement about the New Testament books, then why do Catholics make such an issue about the canon?

It is because the question of the canon is a trap, a back door if you will, to get you to bow the knee to Rome. Catholics pound you with hard questions about the canon to, as the Reformers used to say, “drive you to Rome.”

Their method of evangelism is to destroy your confidence in the Bible—what it means and how these books were collected and declared to be Scripture. They want you to feel like you are drowning in the deep waters of unfamiliar church history so that you will beg them to pull you into the “Mother Church” and save you from this sea of confusion.

Their argument, reduced to its bare bones, is this: “You cannot find a list of inspired books in the New Testament. You do not know why some books were included and others were rejected. Therefore, you must turn to the oldest authorities on this subject for the answer: The Roman Catholic Church!”

The Catholic argument about the canon is an argument by default. It is a false dichotomy. Catholics say you must either rely on your judgment to decide which books belong in the Bible, in which case you can never know, or you must rely on the Magisterium. But the one question that they refuse to face is why should we trust the Magisterium? Where is the proof that God speaks through them any more than He spoke to Joseph Smith?

Catholics teach that there is no hope outside of the Catholic Church for understanding this issue. And if the Catholic Church alone has the truth about the canon of Scripture, if the Magisterium has authority from God to declare what Scripture is and what it means, then there is no end to the control they have over people who submit.

Catholics use the issue of the canon as a smokescreen. The real issue is not the canon. It is control. It is power.

A Catholic ploy is to keep you on the defensive while they avoid defending their outrageous claims. Only the Magisterium, they tell us, has the authority to declare what the Scriptures are and what they mean. But that is a mere assertion they make over and over without answering a simple question: where is the *proof* that the Holy Spirit guides the Magisterium? Catholics want to keep you distracted so you won't press that question, but that is exactly what you should do!

Thank God we do not have to be at the mercies of a religion like this. Thousands in Europe who rejected its empty claims paid with their own lives to keep from bowing the knee to Rome. If you are in this religion, you are being treated like citizens of a dictatorial nation. You have been made to feel that you are totally dependent on the Catholic Church for spiritual life just as people under an oppressive government are completely dependent on the state. Catholicism is a big government religion that passes out spiritual food to its citizens, and it keeps them coming back by telling them that they cannot feed themselves spiritually. The Catholic Church beats down its members and destroys their ability to think for themselves and use the mind God gave them. “No” say Catholic leaders. “We must do that for you.”

That is what the issue of the canon is really about in Catholicism.

Thank God we do not have to live in this spiritual bondage. Christ gives us liberty that makes us free (Gal. 5:1).

Read your Bible. Do not let anyone intimidate you into thinking that you are unable to interpret the Bible on your own. If you are a Catholic, you have heard a lot about Peter. Listen to the final words of Peter himself in the book of II Peter. In chapter one he said the Scriptures are

from God, not from men. In chapter two he warned about false teachers who lead people astray. In chapter three he urged us to heed Paul's epistles and "the rest of the Scriptures." Read them for yourself. Do what they say—nothing more and nothing less. In this last epistle he said that God had given "all things that pertain to life and godliness." Look in the Bible for that wisdom and direction, not in a council of men.

Reading on the canon of Scripture:

F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*

R. Laird Harris, *The Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*

Bruce Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha*