

Which Books Belong in the Bible? (Part one)

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It's one issue Jesus never had to debate. Yes, he debated many questions with the Jews—the Sabbath, divorce, the resurrection of the dead, and many others. But we never read of anyone arguing with Jesus about this subject.

When the Jews disagreed with Jesus, He quoted the Scriptures. He said, “It is written,” “Search the Scriptures” and asked “Have you never read?” And yet in all the times where Jesus appealed to the Old Testament Scriptures, no one in the Bible ever said to Him, “Wait a minute! How do you know those writings are inspired of God” or “But how can we know which books belong in ‘the Scriptures’?”

They argued with Him about what the Scriptures *meant*, but they didn't question what they *were*. They never said, “Isaiah didn't write the book of Isaiah” or “The rabbis say the books of Maccabees are Scripture.” They knew which books were inspired of God and which ones were not. On that point Jesus and the Jews agreed.

But now the question of which books belong in the Bible is an issue because men have made it an issue.

We're talking about the *canon* of Scripture. That word means a rule, a standard or measurement, and in regard to the Bible it refers to how we know which books belong in the Bible and which books do not. It means the list of inspired books. In other words, of all the countless books that have ever been written, which ones were given by inspiration of God?

The subject of the canon is built upon the inspiration of the Bible. But there is a slight difference. When we study the inspiration of the Bible, we look at the *nature* of divine inspiration and the *proof* of it. When we discuss the canon, we focus on the *recognition* of these books as being inspired of God. We look at why some books were included in the Bible and others were not.

The word *Bible* is from the Greek word *biblia* which means books. It is the plural form of *biblion* which is the singular form meaning *book*. The word *Bible* means books. The Bible, we say, is a Book of books. Most Bibles say “Holy Bible” on the cover. The exact expression “Holy Bible” is not found in the Bible. Of course, the word “Bible” is not in the Bible. But we do find the words “holy Scriptures” in II Timothy 3:15 and Romans 1:2. These are the writings we call “books” of the Bible.

But what books? Which books belong in the Bible? If you look, for instance, at a KJV, NKJV and other translations, you will find 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament for a total of 66 books. On the other hand, if you read a Catholic Bible, you will see the same list of New Testament books that you find in Protestant Bibles. Each one has the same 27 books.

If you glance at the Old Testament, however, you will notice a difference. Versions like the ones we mentioned have 39 OT books. These are the books from Genesis through Malachi. But the Catholic Old Testament has 7 additional books. Non-Catholic readers see strange books like Tobit, Judith, I-II Maccabees, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus and Baruch. Why are these books in Catholic Bibles but not in Protestant Bibles?

Catholics believe that the Catholic Church decided which books belong in the Bible and which books do not. “It was by apostolic Tradition that the church discerned which writings are to be included in the list of sacred books” (*Catholic Catechism*, 120). That tradition supposedly goes back to 397 A.D. at the Council of Carthage.

Catholics say the Catholic Church alone has the authority to determine the canon of Scripture. They say, “If you don’t believe in the authority of the Catholic Church, then how can you ever know which books are inspired and belong in the Bible? After all, Bible scholars disagree on this question.” And their favorite question is: “Where in the Bible do you find an inspired list of inspired books?”

Catholic apologists inevitably make this argument against *sola scriptura*, that is, the Bible alone is our authority. If you discuss religion with Muslims, they will almost invariably bring up the Trinity as a problem for Christian belief. If you talk to Jehovah’s Witnesses, you will more than likely discuss the deity of Christ. And if you debate with Catholics, they will almost immediately bring up the subject of the canon of Scripture.

Questions on this subject do not just come from Catholics, however. The Orthodox Church has even more books in their Bible. Their Old Testament contains at least 49 books.

Also, agnostics, atheists, and gainsayers in general love to create confusion on this point. They know the power of the Bible in the life of Christians and our love for it and dependence on it, so they raise hard questions on the canon to weaken our faith. They may ask about the so-called lost books of the Bible. They may mention the Dead Sea Scrolls as if they are mystical writings that supersede the Bible. They may ask you why you do not believe in the so-called Gospel of Thomas. They usually know very little if anything about these writings and even less about the Bible itself. They only mention them to confuse.

The tragedy is not just that skeptics and atheists mock Christians because of this chaos and use these questions to attack Christianity. The sad part is that non-Christians who are interested in the Bible feel confused and Christians who are unable to answer these questions feel discouraged.

But there is good news. There is solid evidence to support the 66 books of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. If you are a Bible-believing person who needs assurance on this topic or a non-Christian who has been hindered by these problems, this lesson is for you.

This subject is not as complex as some make it out to be. You can understand it. You can see the evidence for yourself. The truth is that there are two lines of evidence of the books of the Bible: internal evidence, that is, evidence within the Bible itself as to what books belong in it, and external evidence, that is, historical records that reveal the early reception of the Old Testament and New Testament books. You’ll need to study to learn more about this, especially if you want to share this material with others. But this is not a subject just for “scholars.” You can use common sense with the evidence and get to the bottom of this issue.

Let’s begin with the Old Testament.

An important mark of canonicity is internal consistency. Does the book in question harmonize with other books in the Bible? This is where the Bible stands head and shoulders above all other books. There is a remarkable unity, an unparalleled harmony between the books of the Old Testament. In other words, since we are talking about the books of the Bible, let’s look at what those Bible books and the men who wrote them say about each other. Let’s see if the teaching of these books harmonizes. Let’s see what the Bible says about itself. Remember that we are focusing at this point on the canon of the Old Testament.

Numerous times the Old Testament talks about the writing, copying and preserving of these sacred writings. In Exodus 24:4 the Bible says, “And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord.” Deuteronomy 31:9 reads, “So Moses wrote this law (*torah*) and delivered it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel.”

Liberal Bible scholars over the last three hundred years have said that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament—the law or the Torah. They do not believe the Bible because the Bible says Moses wrote this law. They do not even believe Moses himself. God told Moses in Exodus 17:14, "Write this for a memorial in the book and recount it in the hearing of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." Numbers 33:2 says, "Moses wrote down the starting points of their journeys at the command of the Lord."

The New Testament clearly states that Moses wrote the law. When the Jews cited the regulation about divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1, Jesus said that Moses wrote this precept (Mark 10:4-5). When Jesus healed a leper in Luke 5, He told the man to "make an offering for your cleansing, as a testimony to them, just as Moses commanded" (v. 14). That was from Leviticus 14. He said to the unbelieving Jews, "For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?" (John 5:46-47).

After His resurrection Jesus reproved the two doubting disciples "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27). Then in Luke 24:44 He gave His full and final approval to the belief that Moses wrote the Pentateuch: "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me." Remember that verse. It is a very important statement about the Old Testament canon. We'll come back to it in a few minutes.

The Jews in Jesus' day certainly accepted the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. They were much closer to its original writing and were far more acquainted with it than liberal theologians are today. They were in a much better position to talk about who wrote it even according to the standards of antiquity so often cited by these so-called Bible experts.

Consider just a few verses. In Luke 20:28 the Sadducees told Jesus, "Teacher, Moses wrote to us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife, and he dies without children, his brother should take his wife and raise up offspring for his brother." They were referring to Deuteronomy 25:5-10, and they believed Moses wrote that passage. In the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8, the Jews told Jesus, "Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned" (v. 5). That law is found in Leviticus 20:10.

Everyday Jews believed that Moses wrote the Torah. They had never heard of the word canon, but they knew the meaning of inspiration and believed that a certain set of books and no others fit that category. "Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph'" (John 1:45).

Let's continue to notice how the dots connect. Moses, as he foretold what would happen hundreds of years later, said that the king of God's people "shall write for himself a copy of this law (*torah*) in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life" (Deut. 17:18-19). As a side note, wouldn't it be great if government officials today did this, if elected officials would read the Bible all the days of their life?

After Moses died, his servant Joshua became leader of the Israelite people. The record in the book named after him clearly shows that the Jews accepted the law written by Moses as inspired of God. Joshua understood that it was to be preserved in form and perpetuated by teaching. God told Joshua to "observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant

commanded” (Josh. 1:7). The Lord then added, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it” (Josh. 1:8).

Later in Joshua 8 after the battle with Ai the Bible says, “Now Joshua built an altar to the Lord God of Israel in Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses: ‘an altar of whole stones over which no man has wielded an iron tool.’ (that refers to what Moses wrote in Exodus 20:25) And they offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord, and sacrificed peace offerings. And there, in the presence of the children of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written” (Josh. 8:31-32).

Here we see a verse that not only concerns the *canon* of the Old Testament Scriptures but also shows the *transmission* of the text from one generation to the next. Joshua and the Israelites definitely accepted Moses’ writings as inspired and made sure they were copied faithfully for succeeding generations.

From this point throughout the Old Testament there is continuity and consistency in the books it contains. The writers sometimes mention one another. They teach the same doctrine. There are no doctrinal contradictions as some have suggested. This harmony between Old Testament writers is significant. And here is where the connection to Moses comes in: these later writers from Joshua through Malachi honor, cite, and apply the law of Moses consistently.

Consider the records in First and Second Kings. In I Kings 2:3, David told his son Solomon to keep the commandments of God “as it is written in the law of Moses.” Later in II Kings 14:6, the inspired writer appealed to the law found in Deuteronomy 24:16 and said this was “written in the Book of the Law of Moses.” Even later during the Babylonian captivity Daniel referenced “the curse and the oath written in the Law of Moses.” He was talking about the promise and the warning in Deuteronomy 28.

After the return from captivity, the prophets appealed to the authority of the written law Moses gave. In Ezra 3:2 the men of Israel built an altar to offer burnt offerings to God “as it is written in the Law of Moses.” Nehemiah cited Moses in chapter 1 and in chapter 8 the Bible says “they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded Israel” (v. 1). Among the last words in our English version of the Old Testament we find these words: “Remember the Law of Moses, My servant” (Mal. 4:4).

The Torah of Moses, then, was not just the doctrinal foundation for the later Scriptures of the Old Testament. It was also the unifying thread that tied those books together into a single canon of Scripture.

This unity is an important aspect of the inspiration and canonicity of the Old Testament. The writers mention one another and verify their authority from God. That is what we mean when we say that there is mutual confirmation or verification between these books. We have already seen that later authors connect their Scriptures to the Scriptures Moses wrote. But we also see this connection between other prophets and the events they recorded.

For instance, the book of Amos begins by saying that he spoke these words “two years before the earthquake” (Amos 1:1). Zechariah wrote about this earthquake after it happened in Zechariah 14:5. Both prophets say it occurred during the reign of Uzziah king of Judah.

God sent Jonah the son of Amittai to preach to the people of Nineveh in the book that bears his name. The record in II Kings coincides with the account in the book of Jonah. It mentions “the word of the Lord God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai” (II Kings 14:25).

In Daniel 9:2, Daniel referred to what the prophet Jeremiah said about the seventy years of captivity (Jer. 25). Jeremiah quoted Micah 3:12 and said “Micah of Moresheth” said these words. That is how Micah identifies himself in the opening verse of the book of Micah. Haggai and Zechariah were contemporary prophets. Ezekiel praised Daniel for his character (Ezek. 14). Elijah passed the mantle of prophetic activity to Elisha in II Kings 2. There was a succession of prophets, a chain of prophets and the Scriptures they wrote.

The books of the Old Testament were mostly written between 1500 to 400 B.C. One exception may be the book of Job. The Old Testament is not a loose collection of old but unrelated writings. It is a remarkably interconnected body of historical writings that are united by a single aim: to bring the Messiah into the world.

This is a basic overview of the nature of the Old Testament books. Now let’s look outside the Old Testament at the external evidence.

The Jewish historian Josephus lived from 37-100 A.D. He wrote, “For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another, as the Greeks have, but only 22 books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death. This interval of time was little short of 3000 years; but as to the time from the death of Moses, till the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in 13 books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life” (*Against Apion*, 1.8).

Josephus said we (the Jews) have only 22 sacred books. These are the same 39 books we see in the King James or New King James Old Testament. The order of the books is different (in the Hebrew Bible the first book is Genesis and the last book is II Chronicles). But the content of the books is the same as we find in the KJV and other Bibles.

The reason Josephus said the Hebrew Old Testament had 22 books is that the Jews combined some of the books. For instance, First and Second Samuel were one book as were First and Second Kings. The Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters, and the Jews organized these books to correspond to their alphabet.

You’ll notice that Josephus said there were three sections of the Hebrew Scriptures: five books of law written by Moses, thirteen books of the prophets, and four other poetic and practical books. It is uncertain as to exactly which books the Jews combined, but the Hebrew Bible to this day is divided into three sections: the law or *Torah*, the Prophets or the *Neva'im*, and the Writings or the *Ketuvim*.

Do you remember what we read from Jesus in Luke 24:44? He talked about the prophecies of Him that were “written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms.” Those are the same three divisions. The third division was called the Psalms although it included other books because that section began with the book of Psalms.

To the Jews in Jesus’ time and for Jesus and the apostles, those were the inspired books. That was the Old Testament canon.

There is no record of a Jewish council that met to decide which books belonged in the Old Testament. The Jews accepted these inspired books because they were written by men they knew were prophets of God. That inclusion of books took place over the course many centuries, not in a few days at some ecumenical council.

Some suggest that the Old Testament canon was determined at the Council of Jamnia around 90 A.D. That is not only untrue; it is ridiculous. That would mean that the question of the

Old Testament canon was undecided when Jesus quoted from it! And, we've already shown that the Jews had already recognized the books that were canonical before Jesus came.

This brings us to the question of the Apocrypha, a group of Jewish writings made between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Seven of these fourteen books are included in Catholic Bibles. Why do Catholic Bibles have these books but Protestant Bibles and Hebrew Bibles do not?

It is true that some ancient manuscripts of the Septuagint contain some books of the Apocrypha. For instance, the Sinaiticus manuscript dates back to the fourth century A.D. It contains some of the Books of the Apocrypha. But the Sinaiticus also contains the Epistle of Barnabas and The Shepherd of Hermas. Those are books in what is often called the pseudepigrapha. Yet not even the Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church accepts these books as part of the canon!

There are many reasons why the books called the Apocrypha are not a part of the canon. One is that there is no evidence that they should be in the Bible. When we look at these other books in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, for instance, the book of Judith or Tobit, we need to ask, "Do these books have marks of divine inspiration? Do other inspired books confirm their inspiration?"

So let's think for a moment about marks of inspiration. The most important of these is prophecy. There are many prophecies of Jesus in the Old Testament, but there are also many prophecies of individuals and nations. We have discussed Old Testament prophecy in other lessons, so I won't repeat that material here. But I will ask this: Does the book of Judith or Tobit or I Maccabees contain prophecies? The answer is no.

Another evidence is scientific foreknowledge. For instance, how could Job have known about the great springs on the bottom of the deep ocean floor in Job 38:16 unless he was inspired of God? Do any of the books of the Apocrypha show knowledge of geography, medicine, or biology that was so advanced that it must have come from God? Again the answer is no.

Archaeology gives us many examples of the historical reliability of the Old Testament. The Moabite Stone records the conflict between Mesha the king of Moab and the son of Omri king of Israel. That was Ahab. That is what we read in II Kings 3. The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III King of Assyria mentions Jehu king of Israel—the same Jehu we read about in II Kings 9 and 10. Sennacherib's Prism records how Sennacherib the king of Assyria bragged about invading Judah during the reign of Hezekiah. That story is recorded in II Kings 18 and 19.

The Bible has these and many other marks of divine inspiration. The Apocrypha has none. If the books of the Apocrypha are inspired of God, is it not reasonable to expect to see indications of inspiration in at least some of these books? But there is no such indication in any of them.

When Catholics say that these seven books of the Apocrypha are inspired, we need to ask: Where is the proof that they are inspired? What is the positive evidence that they *are* inspired? The burden of proof is on their shoulders. It is not our job to prove that the Apocrypha is *not* inspired. It is their duty to prove that it *is*. Anybody can hand us a book and claim it is inspired, and if we had to read or listen to every one of these so-called revelations to settle the question of the canon, we would never have much time to look at the Bible.

There is no reason, no positive proof that these books should be in the canon.

But on the negative side, the book of I Maccabees in the Apocrypha admits that whoever wrote it was *not inspired!* I Maccabees 9:27 says, "So there was a great affliction in Israel, the like whereof was not since the time that a prophet was not seen among them." This passage

recognizes a point in time when prophets ceased to appear in Israel. There were no prophets. This means there were no prophecies either in spoken form or in written form as Scripture.

I Maccabees 4:46 says the people “laid up the stones in the mountain of the temple in a convenient place, until there should come a prophet to shew what should be done with them.” I Maccabees 14:41 says, “Also that the Jews and priests were well pleased that Simon should be their governor and high priest for ever, until there should arise a faithful prophet.”

These verses in the Apocrypha say prophets did not write it. Compare those words to what Jesus said in Matthew 26:56. There He called the Old Testament “the Scriptures of the prophets”! The Apocrypha was not written by prophets. The Old Testament was. Therefore, the Apocrypha is not part of the Old Testament!

The apocryphal books were written between the Old Testament and the New Testament. That was a period of about 400 years. The Jews wrote books during this period but even they knew those books were not inspired. They did not accept the Apocrypha into the canon and to this day the Hebrew Bible does not contain these books.

This is significant in light of Catholic claims about the antiquity of their religion. For instance, Catholics say that early church fathers were in a better position to tell us what the apostles taught than anyone today. After all, they either had some contact with an apostle or they knew someone who did. Surely they understood what the apostles said about their own writings better than later interpreters.

But if this is true, then what about the Jews and their own Scriptures—the Old Testament? Would they not have been in a better position to say which books comprised the Hebrew Scriptures than Catholics who came along much later?

Let’s look further at what Josephus said. He wrote, “It is true, our history has been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there has not been an exact succession of prophets since that time; and how firmly we have given credit to these books of our own nation is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or to make any change in them; but it is become natural to all Jews immediately, and from their very birth, to esteem these books to contain divine doctrines...” (*Against Apion*, 1.8).

Next, consider the fact that Jesus never quoted these books. He sure did not quote them as inspired Scripture. He quoted Isaiah, David and Moses by name but never the Apocryphal books. New Testament writers use the expressions “It is written” and other phrases when they quote an Old Testament book. There are hundreds of quotations of the Old Testament in the New. There are even some quotations of pagan authors in the New Testament; Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12 are clear examples. But there are no examples of New Testament writers quoting Apocryphal books as inspired and authoritative Scripture.

And, while most Old Testament books are cited in the New, a few are not. For instance, the book of Esther is one example. So being quoted in the New Testament as Scripture is not the only mark or test of canonicity. But the absence of any citation of the Apocrypha in the New Testament is just another indication that there is no positive evidence *for* including these books in the Old Testament canon.

An even more telling fact is that the Apocryphal writers contradict one another. For instance, we have already seen that I Maccabees 9:27 and other passages in that book indicate that there were no prophets and thus no inspired writers in the intertestamental period. But in the

book of II Esdras 1:4 the writer says, “And the word of the Lord came unto me saying...” That is a claim to divine revelation which had ceased.

But there is something worse about the Apocrypha. It contradicts the Bible. One example is found in Bel and the Dragon, a fictitious book that supposedly adds to the story of Daniel in the Bible. Bel and the Dragon 1:31 says that Daniel was in the lion’s den for six days. But the Bible says he was only in the lion’s den overnight (Dan. 6:14-19).

And if you ever read the Apocrypha you will notice right away that these writings are nowhere near the level of the Old Testament in terms of depth and insight.

But if the Apocrypha is not inspired, then why are they in older translations like the KJV and the Geneva Bible? We’ll look at that and other questions in the next video.