

The Canon of Scripture

by Sebastian R. Fama

During a discussion about Biblical interpretation, one young lady told me that she didn't need the Catholic Church to interpret Scripture for her. To which I replied: "But you needed the Catholic Church to give you the Bible in the first place." She just stared at me in silence.

Protestants spend a lot of time reading and discussing the Scriptures. However, there doesn't seem to be a lot of discussion on how we got the Bible in the first place. Understanding how we got the Bible is important. Knowing who put it together gives us insight into its proper interpretation. After all, if the Church didn't understand the meaning of Scripture she certainly had no business choosing the books that would comprise it.

One of the issues that divide Catholics and Protestants is the canon of Scripture. The canon is the list of inspired books that belong in the Bible. Catholic Bibles contain seven more books than Protestant Bibles do. The seven books, all in the Old Testament, are Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch and 1 and 2 Maccabees. Catholics call the disputed books deuterocanonical and consider them to be inspired. Protestants call them apocryphal and consider them to be spurious.

When Jesus walked the earth there were two Old Testament canons in use. There was the Palestinian canon, which is identical to the Protestant Old Testament, and there was the Alexandrian canon which is identical to the Catholic Old Testament. The Alexandrian canon was also known as the Septuagint. The Palestinian canon was shorter than the Septuagint. The reason why the Catholic Church uses the Septuagint is simple. The Apostles and the early Church used the Septuagint. Evidence can be found in the Bible itself. The New Testament quotes the Old Testament approximately 350 times. The vast majority of those quotes are from the Septuagint.

The Palestinian canon was written in Hebrew. Protestants say they use the Palestinian canon because it matches the present-day Jewish canon. They will often quote Romans 3:2, which says, "The Jews are entrusted with the oracles of God." They reason that since God entrusted the Old Testament to the Jews, they should be the ones who determine which books belong in it.

There are a couple of things wrong with this line of reasoning. First, both Old Testament canons were received from the Jews. Thus, neither one is eliminated by this verse. Secondly, the Jews didn't settle on the Palestinian canon until 90 AD at the Council of Jamnia. This was well after Jesus established His Church. At this point the Jews were no longer in charge. Ironically it was at the Council of Jamnia that the Jews also rejected the New Testament. Logically speaking, anyone who would consider Jamnia as being authoritative would also have to reject the New Testament. And I am not aware of any Protestants who have done that.

Some raise objections to what we might call, "apparent contradictions" in the seven deuterocanonical books. An apparent contradiction is something that appears to be a contradiction. However, upon closer examination we find that there is no real issue. Passages can be misunderstood for a variety of reasons. All of the books of the Bible were written centuries ago in different cultural settings and in languages that were structured differently than our own. Aside from the problems associated with translation they had many customs that were alien to our way of thinking, customs that were sometimes used in communicating with the original audience. In addition to that we need to realize that the Bible is comprised of different types of literature. We have history, poetry, apocalyptic writing, prophecy etc.... When reading any one of them we need to consider the genre in order to get an accurate understanding of what is being said. That is why we have biblical commentaries and the various books that address the various biblical difficulties.

At the birth of Christianity, the Old Testament was the sum total of Scripture. As time went on an authorized list of Christian writings was needed. Rather than take their cues from those no longer in authority, the early Christians looked to their own Church for guidance. When the Councils of Hippo (393 AD) and Carthage (397 AD) set the canon of the New Testament they also confirmed the Septuagint as the Old Testament. Both the Septuagint and

the New Testament were written in Koine Greek. Koine Greek was the language of commerce and every day communication during the time of Jesus.

Some critics attempt to dismiss the Church's role in putting together the New Testament. They would have you think that the final list was just something that everyone agreed on. The idea is that the Holy Spirit caused the books of the New Testament to fall into place without any human interaction. And of course, God could have done things in that manner. But He didn't. He chose to use the Church which He Himself had established. He knew that men could be easily misled and so He provided a way for us to know and not guess what He wanted us to know.

The fourth chapter of Ephesians is just one of many places in Scripture that illustrates the role of God's Church:

And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, **until we all attain to the unity of the faith** and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we **may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine**, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles (4:11-14).

The process wasn't as easy as some would have you believe. The book of 1 Clement was considered inspired by most in the early Church (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3:16, 325 AD). We also know that the book of Revelation was disputed by many at the time. And yet Revelation made it into the canon and 1 Clement didn't. That's because the Church set the canon of Scripture, and she did so under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Just as God worked infallibly through men in writing the Bible, He worked infallibly through men in communicating exactly which books it should contain.

And so, the canon stood unchanged for centuries. That is until Martin Luther decided that Purgatory did not exist. During a debate on the subject a Catholic Scholar quoted 2 Maccabees 12:40-45 which reads:

Then **under the tunic of every one of the dead they found sacred tokens of the idols** of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. And it became clear to all that this was why these men had fallen. So, they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous Judge, who reveals the things that are hidden; and **they turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out**. And the noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened because of the sin of those who had fallen.

He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem **to provide for a sin offering**. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish **to pray for the dead**. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought.

Therefore, he made atonement for the dead that they might be delivered from their sin.

Martin Luther had a problem. He was the man who had championed the idea of Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone). Now he was facing a verse of Scripture that refuted one of his new doctrines. His solution; throw out the book of 2 Maccabees. And as previously mentioned, he threw out six others for the same reason. He also wanted to throw out Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. He famously referred to the book of James as an "epistle of straw." Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed, and the New Testament was left untouched.

In Revelation 22:19 John proclaims, "If any one takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." It's true that this verse refers to the book of Revelation. However, common sense tells us that the same principal would apply to all of Scripture. I think it's a pretty safe bet that God would never be pleased with us throwing out any part of His word.