

How Many Books Are in the Bible?

from
*The Doctrines That Divide*¹
Erwin W. Lutzer

Even the most casual Bible student knows that there are more books in the Catholic Bible than in the one used by Protestants. Where did these differences originate? On what basis were some books selected to be in the Bible, and why were others rejected?

Upon reflection, we could expect that there would be some dispute regarding these matters. After all, the Bible did not come down from heaven bound in beautiful leather and adorned with gold gilded pages. It is a very human book that reflects the styles of the writers and the cultural setting of the times. Yet, it is also a divine book, inspired by God, and therefore free from error in the original manuscripts. Like Christ who was truly God and truly man, so the Bible has a dual authorship. Questions about which books meet this criterion are to be expected.

The word *canon* comes from the Greek word *kanon* which means a ruler or measuring rod. In a metaphorical sense, it came to refer to the standard by which various books of the Bible were judged as worthy of being called the Word of God. Within time, the word *kanon* was applied to the books themselves; Athanasius is the first one known to have used “canon” in such a context.

How the Books Were Collected

Some of the Old Testament books were immediately recognized as authoritative. Moses, after he wrote a book, put it in the Ark of the Covenant (Deut. 31:24-26). After the temple was built, the sacred writings were kept there (2 Kings 22:18). Early on, God commanded the kings to write for themselves a copy of the law. “And he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God” (Deut. 17:19). As the prophets spoke God’s word, saying, “Thus saith the Lord,” they also recognized that their message had to be recorded for future generations.

The Jews realized that special revelation ceased with the prophet Malachi (c. 400 B.C.). In the Talmud (a handbook of Jewish traditions) we read, “Up to this point [the time of Alexander the Great] the prophets prophesied through the Holy Spirit; from this time onward incline thine ear and listen to the sayings of the wise.”

But what determined whether a book was considered part of the canon? Obviously, there were other books in existence that did not merit classification with the sacred writings. Examples are “The Book of the Wars of the Lord” (Num. 21:14) and “The Book of Jashar” (Josh. 10:13).

The criterion was, first, that the book had to agree with the Torah, the first five books of Moses. But this was not the only test. Some books that agreed with the Torah were also excluded. For example, Elijah wrote a book that likely met this standard; yet it was not a part of the canon. And, of course, we must ask how the Torah itself became accepted.

Second, and most important, these books were accepted because they were believed to be inspired by God. In other words, they were selected *because they were recognized as having divine authority*. This is not to say that the Jews gave these books their authority; these books were believed to have *inherent*

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authority. If a book is inspired by God, it would have authority whether men recognized it or not. A jeweler may recognize an authentic diamond, but his recognition does not make it so.

We must guard against the notion that the church has a right to make a book canonical. But at best the nation Israel or church body can only *recognize* a book as authoritative because it is inspired of God.

The Discovery of Canonicity

But how was canonicity discovered? First, the books had the ring of self-vindicating authority. Moses claimed to be the mouthpiece of God. The Old Testament prophets repeatedly said, “And the word of the Lord came to me.” The lives of the prophets and the strong affirmation that their message came from God was accepted by the Jewish nation.

This explains why the canonicity of the Book of Esther was, for a time, in doubt. Since the name of God does not appear in the book, some thought it lacked self-vindicating authority. But closer inspection showed that the providence of God was so evident in the story that it had the authenticity that gave it acceptance.

A second test was that of authorship. It had to have been written by a man of God. Was the author, they asked, a spokesman for “redemptive revelation,” either a prophet in the Old Testament times or an apostle in the new?

For example, Paul in the New Testament argued that his message was authoritative because he was an apostle, “not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father” (Gal. 1:1). The Book of 2 Peter was disputed in the early church because some doubted that it had been written by Peter. The writing style appeared different from 1 Peter, hence the doubt. But within time the church was convinced that Peter the apostle was the author, therefore the book was accepted.

Yet in other instances the identity of the author was not always determinative. For example, the authorship of the Book of Hebrews is unknown, but the book was accepted without serious questioning because it bears the unmistakable stamp of the transforming power of God.

Of course, the book had to be consistent with previous revelation. Martin Luther thought that James taught salvation by works so he questioned its position in the canon. Later, when he revised his preface to the book, he dropped his criticism. A closer reading indicates that James does not contradict Paul’s teaching of salvation by faith. The early church was quite correct in receiving it as authoritative.

There is evidence that when an inspired book was written, it enjoyed immediate acceptance. For example, Peter accepted the epistles of Paul as being worthy of recognition as inspired Scripture (2 Pet. 3:16). Thus, the canon of the New Testament formed gradually as the books were written. Because communication was cumbersome in biblical times, it is understandable that the complete list of authoritative books was not agreed upon until a few centuries had passed. The Books of Revelation and 3 John were not immediately accepted, in part because they were unknown in some parts of the New Testament world. As their circulation grew, so did the recognition that they had the marks of divine inspiration.

The bottom line, of course, is that the books of the Bible were recognized as authoritative by the people of God. There is little doubt that we must exercise faith that God superintended his Word so that only inspired books were chosen to be in the canon. Equally important is the fact that the final list of books was not chosen by a synod or council of the church. These met to ratify the books that the people of God had already chosen.

The Apocrypha

Both the Roman Catholic and Protestant Bibles have thirty-nine books in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New. The difference is that a Roman Catholic Bible has an additional eleven books inserted between the Testaments. Where did these books come from?

To begin, we must realize that both branches of Christendom acknowledge the existence of books that are false writings that have never laid serious claim to canonicity. The Book of Enoch and The Assumption

of Moses are known to have existed, but all agree that they lack the stamp of inspiration. In the New Testament the Shepherd of Hermas was thought by some to be authoritative, so it hovered around the canon for sometime before it was dismissed as a forgery

But there was another group of books that are accepted by the Roman Catholic church but rejected by Protestants. These books originated in a canon in Alexandria in Egypt. It was in this city in 250 B.C. that the Old Testament was translated into Greek and called the Septuagint, meaning “seventy.” (Allegedly the translation was made in seventy days utilizing seventy scholars.) This explains why some of the earliest manuscripts of the Septuagint that exist today (dating back to the fourth century) contain these additional books.

These books, commonly called the Apocrypha (the word means “hidden”), are interwoven among the books of the Old Testament. In all, there are fifteen books, eleven of which are accepted as canonical by the Roman Catholic church. But because four of the eleven are combined with Old Testament books, the Douay Version contains only seven additional books in its table of contents.

There are several reasons why the Roman Catholic church considers the wider Alexandrian list of books to be canonical. Briefly, they are (1) the New Testament quotes mostly from the Septuagint, which contained the Apocrypha. Then, (2) some of the early church fathers accepted the Apocrypha as canonical—Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria for example. Also, (3) Augustine and the great councils of Hippo and Carthage, which he led, are said to have accepted them. Finally, (4) the Council of Trent called to respond to the inroads of the Reformation pronounced them canonical in A.D. 1546. The council said that if anyone does not receive these books in all of their parts, “let him be anathema.”

Reasons to Reject the Apocrypha

Protestants give numerous reasons for rejecting these additional books:²

1. Though there are some allusions to the apocryphal books by New Testament writers (Hebrews 11:35 compares with 2 Maccabees 7, 12) there is no direct quote from them. Also, no New Testament writer ever refers to any of these fourteen or fifteen books as authoritative. Quotes from the accepted books are usually introduced by the phrase, “It is written,” or the passage is quoted to prove a point. But never do the New Testament writers quote the Apocrypha in this way.

2. There is no evidence that the books were in the Septuagint as early as the time of Christ. Remember, the earliest manuscripts that have them date back to the fourth century A.D. Even if they were in the Septuagint at this early date, it is noteworthy that neither Christ nor the apostles ever quoted from them.

3. Though some of the early leaders of the church accepted them, many did not—Athanasius, Origen, and Jerome, to name a few.

4. The evidence that Augustine accepted the Apocrypha is at best ambiguous. For one thing, he omits Baruch and includes 1 Esdras, thus accepting one and rejecting another in contrast to the Council of Trent. For another, he seemed to change his mind later about the validity of the Apocrypha.

Jerome, while making a Latin translation of the Bible, disputed with Augustine about the value of these additional books. Though Jerome did not want to translate them, he eventually made a hurried translation of them but kept them separate from his translation of the Bible. However, after his death, these books were brought into his Latin translation.

Augustine, as mentioned, argued in favor of the Apocrypha, though he later seemed to give them a kind of secondary canonicity. His testimony, though important, is not entirely clear.

5. Even the Roman Catholic church made a distinction between the Apocrypha and the other books of the Bible prior to the Reformation. For example, Cardinal Cajetan, who opposed Luther at Augsburg, in

² Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986). 170-177.

1518 published *A Commentary on all the Authentic Historical Books of the Old Testament*. His commentary, however, did not include the Apocrypha.

6. The first official council of the Roman Catholic church to ratify these books was at the Council of Trent in 1546, only twenty-nine years after Luther posted his ninety-five theses on the door of the church at Wittenberg. The acceptance of these books at this time was convenient since the books were being quoted against Luther. For example, 2 Maccabees speaks of prayers for the dead (2 Macc. 12:45-46) and another book teaches salvation by works (Tob. 12:19).

Even so, the Roman church accepted only eleven of the fifteen books; we naturally would expect that these books, since they were together for so many centuries, would be either accepted or rejected together.

7. The content of the Apocrypha is sub-biblical. Some of the stories are clearly fanciful. Bel and the Dragon, Tobit, and Judith have the earmarks of legend; the authors of these books even give hints along the way that the stories are not to be taken seriously.

What is more, these books have historical errors. It is claimed that Tobit was alive when the Assyrians conquered Israel in 722 B.C. and also when Jeroboam revolted against Judah in 931 B.C., which would make him at least 209 years old; yet according to the account, he died when he was only 158 years. The Book of Judith speaks of Nebuchadnezzar reigning in Nineveh instead of Babylon.

These inaccuracies are inconsistent with the doctrine of inspiration which teaches that when God inspires a book it is free from all errors.

8. Finally, and most important, we must remember that the Apocrypha was never part of the Old Testament Hebrew canon. When Christ was on earth, he frequently quoted from the Old Testament but never from the Apocryphal books because they were never a part of the Hebrew canon.

In Christ's time, there were twenty-two books in the Old Testament, but the content was identical to the thirty-nine books in our present Old Testament (several of the books in the Hebrew Bible were combined, which accounts for the different figure). Genesis was the first book in the Hebrew canon and 2 Chronicles was the last. On at least one occasion, Christ referred specifically to the content of the Hebrew canon when he said:

Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar (Matt. 23:34-35)

In the Hebrew canon, the first book of the Bible was Genesis, where the death of Abel is recorded, and the last book was 2 Chronicles where near the end of the book the murder of Zechariah is described (24:21). In between these two events lay the entire content of the Old Testament. He assumed it ended with the Hebrew Scriptures and not the Apocrypha.

The Apocryphal books were written in Greek after the close of the Old Testament canon. Jewish scholars agree that chronologically Malachi was the last book of the Old Testament canon. The books of the Apocrypha were evidently written about 200 B.C. and occur only in Greek manuscripts of the Old Testament. Since Christ accepted only the books we have in our Old Testament today, we have no reason to add to their number.

The Lost Books

Occasionally we hear references to the so-called lost books of the Bible, books that some people think have been hidden from the general populace. In 1979, Bell Publishing Company of New York came out with a book entitled *The Lost Books of the Bible*. On the flyleaf it says that these books were not among

those chosen to comprise the Bible, and “They were suppressed by the church, and for over fifteen hundred years were shrouded in secrecy.”³

These books are not really as secret as the authors imply. New Testament scholars have been well aware of their existence throughout the centuries, though perhaps these books were not accessible to the common man. Their credibility is rejected by both Catholics and Protestants.

These books include stories about the birth of Mary and of Christ. Also there are a dozen or more stories that took place during Christ’s lifetime. Three or four purport to relate to events in the Old Testament.

These books never even vied for a place in the canon. Unlike some other books that were actually disputed (the Shepherd of Hermas, for example), these books were recognized as legends from the beginning. These “forgotten books” are so obviously inferior to those in our Bible that they cannot be taken seriously.

Indeed, in the preface, Dr. Frank Crane admitted the point by saying that legends and apocryphal stories surround all great men such as Napoleon, Charlemagne, and Julius Caesar, so we can also expect that tales would grow up around Christ. He went on to say that Christ appealed to the “fictional minds” of his day. These writers, Crane admitted, do not pretend to write down what is strictly true, but tinge all events with their imagination.

Finally, Crane said the common man can now make his own decision as to whether the early church did right in rejecting these books. He did not hesitate to say that common sense itself will show the superiority of the accepted canonical books.

I agree. Should there be any doubt about the accepted books, the best solution would be to read these so-called lost books. And for that matter, one should also read those books that laid more serious claim to canonicity. They also are so inferior to the books of the New Testament that we become convinced that the early church did not err.

In the upper room, Christ promised that the Holy Spirit would help them recall his teachings. “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He Will bear witness of Me” (John 15:26). That was a tacit confirmation of the New Testament that still needed to be written. The early believers recognized those writings that were either written by an apostle or by someone personally acquainted with one. After the apostolic period, no more books could claim the stamp of divine authority.

The Book of Revelation ends with a warning:

I testify to everyone who bears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to then; God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book (Rev. 22.18-19)

Although these words refer specifically to the Book of Revelation and not to the New Testament as a whole (there were still questions as to which books were properly in the New Testament when Revelation was penned), yet they are a warning to the many false cults who have claimed to add to God’s Word.

In our present New Testament we have the final word from God until our Lord returns and the Bible as we know it will no longer be necessary.

Biblical Studies Foundation has received so many questions concerning the number of books in the Bible that we are delighted to have been given permission to use chapter 8 in Erwin Lutzer’s book, *The Doctrines That Divide: A Fresh Look at the Historic Doctrines That Separate Christians* (Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, 1998).

Other chapters in this excellent book cover questions such as:

³ *The Lost Books of the Bible* (New York: Bell Publishing Co., 1979).

Is Christ Truly God?
Is Christ Truly Man?
Was Mary the Mother of God?
Was Peter the First Pope?
Justification: By Faith, Sacraments, or Both?
Why Can't We Agree about the Lord's Supper?
Why Can't We Agree about Baptism?
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