



Catechetical Series:

What Catholics Believe & Why

THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE:

WHO DECIDED WHICH BOOKS
BELONG IN THE BIBLE?

Behold The Truth

Discovering the What & Why of the Catholic Faith
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The Inspired Word of God

- ❖ The Holy Bible is the most widely read book in human history; and it is unlike any other book ever written.
- ❖ The Bible is the *inspired* word of God, meaning it was written by human beings under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- ❖ Many people who read the Bible today, however, take it for granted, never stopping to ask how this truly amazing and unique book came to be.

The Inspired Word of God

- ❖ The Bible did not float down to us on a cloud from heaven, leather-bound with gilded pages.
- ❖ The Bible we have today is the fruit of the work and devotion of countless individuals guided by the hand of God over several millennia.
- ❖ It is really like a small library, consisting of 73 individual books (46 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New).
- ❖ Even after these books were written they had to be collected, safeguarded, and reproduced by hand at tremendous effort and cost.





The Bible Alone?

- ❖ The Catholic Church acknowledges the Bible's authority, though she does not regard it as the *sole* authority.
- ❖ The Church recognizes Apostolic Tradition (the preaching and practice of the Apostles), as well as the Magisterium (the pope and bishops), as authorities alongside of Scripture.
- ❖ Martin Luther and the Protestant leaders in the 16th century rejected this view, insisting the Bible alone was the authority for Christians.



The Bible Alone?

- ❖ If the Bible was meant to serve as the sole authority, however, this idea would have to be taught in the Bible. But the Bible does not teach it.
- ❖ Even practically speaking, it is unreasonable to say that God meant for Scripture to be the sole authority since it remained inaccessible to large numbers of believers for the first several hundred years of the Christian era.

The Bible Alone?



- ❖ For one thing, the vast majority of people in antiquity were illiterate, and so would be unable to read Scripture for themselves.
- ❖ Also, the composition of the New Testament books was not finished till the latter decades of the first century A.D., meaning nearly two full generations of believers lived and worshiped without a completed Bible.
- ❖ Even after the books were written it was practically impossible for the average person to obtain a copy of one of them, let alone a full set prior to the invention of the printing press in the 15th century.



Apocryphal Writings

- ❖ There were also a host of other books written around the same time period called *Apocrypha*, which falsely claimed apostolic authorship.
- ❖ This led to confusion over which books legitimately belonged in the Bible and which did not.
- ❖ Some of the *Apocrypha* were written by pious believers, who sought to record oral traditions surrounding the life of Christ not included in the Gospels.
- ❖ The *Protoevangelium of James*, for example, reveals how the Virgin Mary was prepared from childhood to be the Mother of the Redeemer.



Apocryphal Writings

- ❖ Other *Apocryphal* writings promoted false ideas about Jesus.
- ❖ The *Gospel of Thomas*, which is heavily influenced by Gnostic thinking, presents a very different Jesus from the Jesus revealed in the Gospels.
- ❖ In one passage, for instance, this Jesus says: “If you fast, you will bring sin upon yourselves, and if you pray, you will be condemned, and if you give to charity, you will harm your spirits.”



The Council of Rome

- ❖ Widespread disagreement among Christians continued for many centuries on the matter of which books were authentically inspired Scripture and belonged in the Bible.
- ❖ The Bible after all did not originally come with a table of contents.
- ❖ The first definitive list of the Bible's books, or the *Canon of the Bible* (from the Greek, *kanon* or "rule"), was formulated by the Council of Rome in 382, under the authority of Pope Saint Damasus I.



The Council of Rome

- ❖ The overriding factor used by the Council of Rome to determine the canonicity of a certain book was whether or not it was universally read during the liturgy.
- ❖ This list of Old and New Testament books was corroborated by two other early councils: Hippo (393) and Carthage (397).
- ❖ Essentially, these early proclamations settled the debate over the Canon of Scripture; and the books of the Bible were not disputed again among Christians until Luther's Revolt in the 16th century.

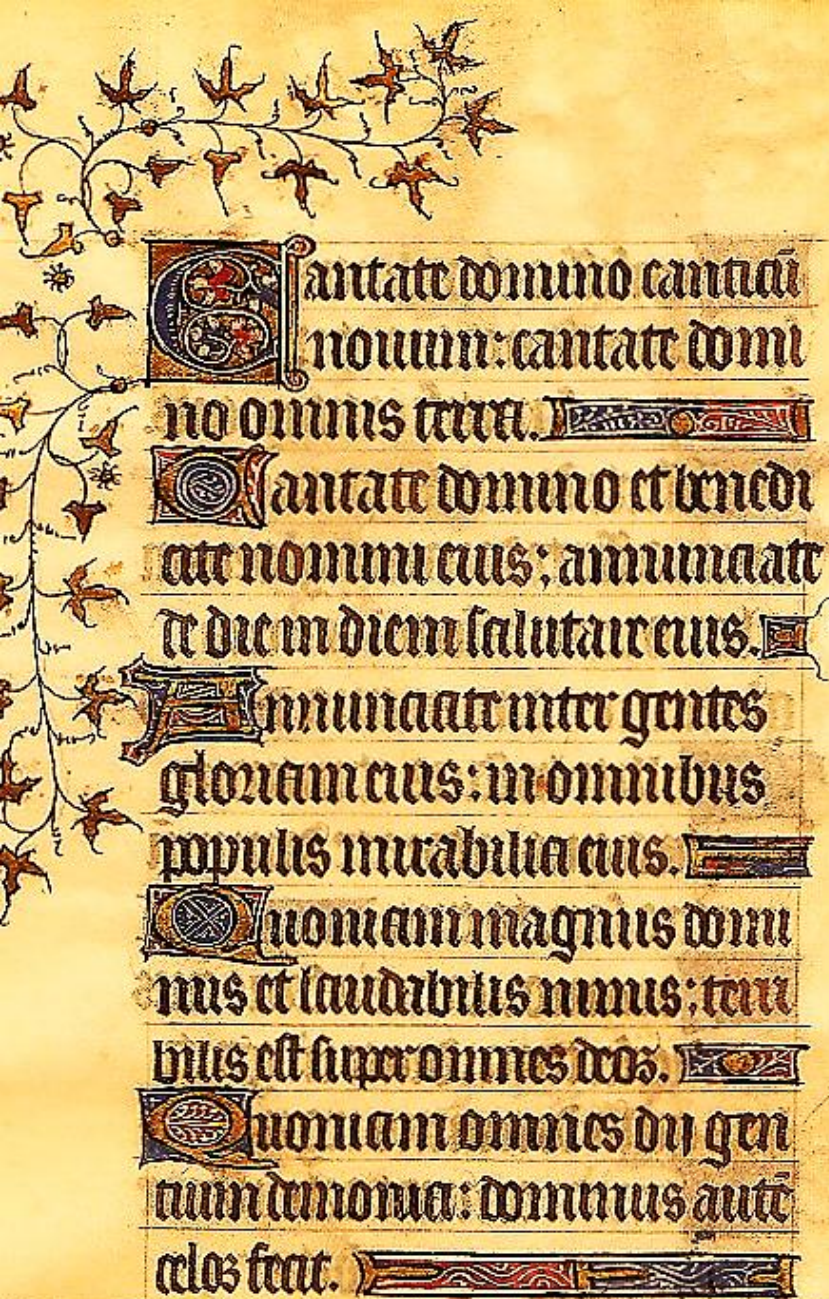


Saint Jerome

- ❖ The Catholic Church's reverence for Sacred Scripture is historically undeniable.
- ❖ Following the pronouncement of the canon, Pope Damasus commissioned Saint Jerome, the greatest biblical scholar of his day and perhaps of all time, to translate the Bible into Latin so that it could be read universally.
- ❖ Jerome's version came to be known as the *Vulgate*, after the Latin *vulgata* or the "common tongue."

Our Debt to the Monks

- ❖ From antiquity through the Middle Ages, the Bible was painstakingly reproduced by monks on parchment or vellum, a letter at a time.
- ❖ They would also often decorate the sacred page with beautiful *illuminations*.





Our Debt to the Monks

- ❖ With the fall of the Roman Empire, the monks became the guardians of the books of Western Civilization, and the monasteries became centers of learning, the start of the university system.
- ❖ The monks defended the Bible and other books from destruction at the hands of barbarian hordes, often at the cost of their lives.
- ❖ In 806, Norseman invaders murdered 68 monks in the sack of the monastery on Iona.



Saint Bede the Venerable

- ❖ Sections of the Bible were first translated into English by Saint Bede the Venerable, a Catholic priest, in the 8th century.
- ❖ It is sometimes claimed that Luther was the first to translate the Bible into German, but in reality the Bible had been translated by the Catholic Church into German and many other languages well before Luther's time.
- ❖ In fact, nearly two dozen printed German editions of the Bible existed prior to Luther's version.



The Gutenberg Press

- ❖ The first printed Bible was produced around 1455 by Johann Gutenberg, a Catholic layman and the inventor of movable type.
- ❖ Gutenberg's Bible contained the seven *deuterocanonical* (or “second canon”) books of the Old Testament, so called because their status had been contested for a time by some Jewish scholars.
- ❖ The Catholic Church has always recognized the canonicity of these books, which include *Tobit*, *Judith*, *Wisdom*, *Sirach* (or *Ecclesiasticus*), *Baruch*, and *First and Second Maccabees*, as well as some sections of *Daniel* and *Esther*.



Disputes Over the Canon

- ❖ The founders of Protestantism rejected the *deuterocanonical* books.
- ❖ Luther also disputed the canonicity of certain New Testament books that undermined his teachings.
- ❖ He condemned the *Letter of James*, for example, which he called “an epistle of straw,” because it says “a man is justified by works and not by faith alone” (2:24), which contradicted his belief we are justified by faith alone.



Disputes Over the Canon

- ❖ Fortunately, Luther's opinion on the New Testament books was the minority opinion and Protestantism accepted all 27 books.
- ❖ The denial of the *deuterocanonical books* persisted, however, and these were removed from the Protestant Old Testament.

The Septuagint



- ❖ The *deuterocanonical* books are included in the famous Alexandrian Canon, a Greek version of the Old Testament produced between 250 and 100 B.C.
- ❖ This canon was formed by 70 Jewish scribes at the request of the Egyptian Pharaoh Ptolemy II Philadelphus, who wanted to have a standardized collection of Judaism's Sacred Books translated into Greek for inclusion in the Library of Alexandria.
- ❖ The canon produced by these 70 scribes has come to be known as the Septuagint after *septuagintus*, the Latin word for “seventy.”

The Septuagint

- ❖ The Septuagint was used in ancient Palestine and was even preferred by Jesus and His followers.
- ❖ We know this because the great majority of Old-Testament quotations that appear in the New Testament come from the Greek Septuagint.





The Jamnian Canon

- ❖ The Septuagint would be adopted by the early Christians as their official Old Testament.
- ❖ The Protestants, though, rejected the Septuagint in favor of a Hebrew canon produced by a group of rabbis in the village of Jamnia around 90 A.D., two to three centuries later than the Septuagint.



The Jamnian Canon

- ❖ The rabbis at Jamnia rejected the *deuterocanonical* books largely because they were Sadducees who denied the resurrection of the dead and these books spoke of the resurrection.
- ❖ The founders of Protestantism found it advantageous to also reject the Septuagint in favor of the Jamnian Canon because of passages in the *deuterocanonicals* that support Catholic doctrine.
- ❖ *Second Maccabees*, for instance, proves the ancient Jews prayed for the dead, a practice which the Protestants denounced.



The Council of Trent

- ❖ In 1546, in reaction to Protestantism's denunciation of the Septuagint, the Council of Trent raised the Catholic Canon of Scripture to the level of a *dogma*, the highest form of doctrine.
- ❖ The canon which the Council of Trent confirmed as the official list of the Bible's books was the same list declared by earlier councils, and is the same Bible we celebrate in the Church today.



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