

# Counting the Canon

Steve Kellmeyer

[This Rock](#), September 1998

How many books are there in the Bible? Roman Catholics answer the question differently than Christians whose roots lie in the Protestant Reformation. The history behind this simple question is surprisingly complex, revolving around the inclusion of seven books, Tobit, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and parts of Esther and Daniel in the canon of Scripture. The beginnings of the story can be traced back to the pre-Christian era, to the nature of ancient Jewish worship and the alterations forced upon it by the Babylonian exile, as God prepared for that perfect moment which He chose to enter into history through the Incarnation and establish His living Body, the Church. It is a history which Martin Luther and his successors never really understood, but which is pivotal to understanding exactly why the question still separates Christians.

While the Ark of the Covenant resided in the Temple, Judaic worship centered around two things: ritual Temple sacrifice and the Torah, interpreted by the priests and applied to daily life. However, the rise of the Persian Empire and its official language, Aramaic, along with the Babylonian Exile and the resulting Diaspora, changed things. The Exile took the Jews away from the Temple, temporarily halting ritual sacrifice, while Persian Aramaic supplanted Hebrew. The synagogue system of studying Torah developed during the Exile, as the teachers of Israel struggled to preserve the nation's divine heritage. However, by 530 B.C., when a remnant of the now Aramaic-speaking Jews returned from exile, Hebrew was largely understood only by the rabbis, not the Jewish people - Ezra needed translators by his side as he read the Hebrew Scripture aloud to them (cf. Neh 8:2-8, 13:24). As Hebrew fell out of use, Palestinian Jews developed Aramaic targums,

translation-commentaries of sacred Hebrew books. Alexander the Great's conquest of the entire Near East about 334 B.C. added a third language, soon to be used universally in trade, to the mix: "koine" Greek. Jews in synagogues throughout the Near East began using koine Greek translations of Hebrew Scripture, a set of translations commonly called the "Septuagint," which means "the 70," named for the 70 legendary scholars who supposedly translated the sacred Hebrew books into Greek in Alexandria.

This set the stage for difficulty. Apart from Torah, the first five books of the Bible, the teachers of Israel had never made crystal-clear distinctions about which books were or were not considered holy. By 130 B.C., Sirach attests to a tri-partite structure in Hebrew Scripture - Law, Prophets, and "other books" - but only the Law and Prophets had a definitely fixed and ordered list of books; the content of the Writings was uncertain. The Septuagint, on the other hand, arranged books not by content but by style; narrative, poetical, and prophetic. While Moses and the prophets wrote in Hebrew, post-Exilic Jews preferred to write in Greek, thus Greek collections soon had books which the Hebrew lists never saw. Because the Septuagint didn't have a completely standard list or ordering of books, the included books varied according to collection, with no clear distinction made between earlier and later works. By the Incarnation, synagogues throughout the Near East used versions of the Septuagint which included Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch (including the Letter of Jeremiah), 1-3 Maccabees, the Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, the Book of Jubilees, 1 Esdras, and additions to Esther and Daniel.

This situation was not considered a serious problem, however, since Jewish religious instruction relied heavily on oral tradition. Even Torah was read according to oral tradition. Torah was written as one long word without spaces, punctuation, or vowels - it was literally

the word of God. Rabbinical students learned how to read the text by listening to their elders read it over and over again. Rabbis disliked targums because they encouraged private interpretation of Scripture and undermined Divinely authorized oral teaching authority (cf. Mt 23:2-3: Christ commands the people to respect their teaching authority, but not their lived example). Oral interpretive tradition was the rule of faith for the Jews.

Jesus fully accepted this arrangement. He spoke Aramaic. He wrote nothing, nor did He authorize His disciples to write. He commanded them only to preach orally, in the ancient Judaic teaching tradition. He used the Greek Septuagint to teach. Of approximately 350 references made to Old Testament Scripture by the inspired New Testament writers, over 300 (85%) refer to the Septuagint. For example, Jesus, when discussing "human traditions" (Mark 7:6-8), quotes a version of Isaiah 29:13 found only in the Septuagint. While God wrote the Old Testament in the Hebrew used by Moses and the prophets, He apparently found the Greek translation used by His Chosen People an excellent instrument for divine revelation, perhaps utilizing the fact that Hebrew "does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language" (prologue to the Book of Sirach).

By 70 A.D. Jerusalem and the Temple were razed by the Romans, the Levitical priesthood was destroyed and the Jewish faith was hemorrhaging followers to the rapidly spreading belief that Jewish prophecy had been fulfilled in Jesus. Because this belief spread most rapidly among the Jews of the Diaspora and the Gentiles of the eastern Mediterranean, the language of trade, koine Greek, and the Greek Septuagint was the common denominator between all the communities.

Jewish Christian oral teaching competed successfully against traditional Jewish oral teaching, and it used Jewish Scripture to do it. This sparked two movements within

non-Christian Judaism. First, Jewish scholars began debating whether or not the Christians' "Greek Scripture" was really Scripture. Second, around the year 200 A.D., the rabbis began writing down Jewish religious and civil law and their commentaries on it, creating what would become the Talmud six centuries later. These Jews ultimately refused the deuterocanonical Old Testament books, probably because of theology (e.g., 1 and 2 Maccabees teaches resurrection of the dead, while Wisdom chapters 1-5 contains an unsettlingly prophetic description of Christ's Passion and Death) and because they were written in Greek, not Hebrew.

Meanwhile, Christians had their own problems. While Jewish brethren argued only Hebrew writings were truly inspired, Gentile and Jewish Christians, following the tradition of Sirach and the Maccabean authors, were writing numerous Aramaic and Greek works about God's last and greatest intervention in the life of Israel. Lives of Christ and manuals of Christian practice/belief proliferated. Unfortunately, no one was certain which of those writings should be considered sacred either. Christians simply couldn't be sure of the sacredness of any of the books in the Jewish tradition after Malachi - even the Song of Songs was initially contested by some traditional rabbinical authorities, while Jude 9 alludes to the Assumption of Moses, a book which was not in the Hebrew canon or the Septuagint and is not now considered part of Sacred Scripture. The arguments led early Christians to distinguish between the *homologoumenoi* (the "accepted" books) and the *antilegomenoi* (the "contested" books), sometimes also called the *amphiballomenoi* (the "contradicted" books).

While Old Testament arguments revolved around traditional Jewish acceptance of the books as sacred, New Testament difficulties related mostly to authorship. If the book was not clearly apostolic in origin, the Church tended to dispute or reject it. For instance, the

western Church was not convinced Hebrews was written by the apostle Paul, while the eastern church was. Meanwhile, the eastern Church doubted the Apostle John wrote the Apocalypse, while the western Church knew he had. Some New Testament works deemed apocryphal were and are recognized as essentially good to excellent theological works, e.g., the Didache, the Shepherd of Hermas, but uncertain authorship prevented their acceptance as inspired. Other apocryphal books were not only of uncertain or flagrantly false authorship, but also had serious error mixed in with otherwise acceptable theology, e.g., the Gospel of Thomas, and the Acts of Pontius Pilate. Many orthodox Christians fought to include theologically sound works like the Didache in the canon of the New Testament, arguing for their apostolic origin. However, the typical early Christian was illiterate. He could make no judgements himself about matters of canonicity, inspiration, or the fine points of theology in a written work. Even the literate Christians faced raging disputes. No one could tell the canonical books without a scorecard and nobody had one.

About 140 A.D., a man named Marcion exploited this problem to his own benefit. He rejected all Scripture, Old and New Testament, except for portions of the Gospel of Luke and ten Pauline epistles. He asserted that the God of the Old Testament was *not* the God of the New, that Christianity did not fulfill Judaism but replaced it, and that all creation was evil. Consequently, Jesus Christ, being God, could not really be a man. Denying some portion of accepted canonical Scripture soon became a common facet of heresy. This heresy forced the Church to accelerate its work in identifying Scripture.

### **The Scorecard:**

#### **Councils and papal decrees which defined or re-iterated the list of Sacred books**

- 382 - Pope Damasus convoked a synod which produced the Roman Code. The Roman Code identified a list of holy Scripture identical to the Council of Trent's formally defined canon.
- 393 - Council of Hippo

- 397 - First Council of Carthage
- 405 - Innocent I wrote a letter to the Gallican bishop Exsuperius of Toulouse listing the books of Scripture.
- 419 - Second Council of Carthage

After roughly three centuries of prayer and discussion, the Church essentially solved the problem during a forty-year burst of activity. In the Old Testament, Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, parts of Esther (chapters 11-16, or A-F), and parts of Daniel (3:24-90 and 13, 14) were recognized as inspired. In the New Testament, the Church accepted Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation. Each of the decrees and councils above provided the same list of Scripture. No council or papal decree gave a different list. While Athanasius and Jerome had some sympathy towards the Jewish unwillingness to accept the Old Testament books, both bowed to the authority of the Church, accepting her definitions of Scripture. By 450 A.D., today's list of inspired books was almost universally accepted in the western Church. Mark 16:9-20, Luke 22:43-44 and John 5:4, 8:1-11, while not in the earliest manuscripts, would also eventually be accepted. 500 years later, Jewish scholars completed codification of their sacred writings with the production of the "Masoretic" text of Scripture. Between 800 and 925 A.D., the Jewish family Masorete added punctuation, vowels, and spacing to the Hebrew Scripture. The Masoretic version functionally replaced the original Hebrew text.

By the 16th century, the Latin words "protocanonical" (meaning "first canon") and "deuterocanonical" (meaning "second canon") replaced the Greek terms for "accepted" and "contested," while the Greek term "apocrypha" was kept to describe the Septuagint books rejected by the Church and all other non-Septuagint ancient texts. "Apocrypha" means "hidden," shorthand for "these books are to be hidden from all but the wise," since the books

have historically tended to be misunderstood by those not well-formed in the mysteries of faith. Around this time, the canonical status of the Christian Old Testament was again called into question, this time by Elias Levita, a Jewish contemporary of Luther. He theorized that Ezra presided over "the men of the Great Synagogue" and closed the canon in the 5th century B.C. His "proof" was Nehemiah 8 and 9, the great assembly of the people to whom Ezra publicly read the Law after the return from Exile. Though no historical evidence of a "Great Synagogue" exists, Luther popularized Levita's idea since it supported his bid to discard the Old Testament deuterocanonical books and thereby strengthened his dubious theology. Shortly after the Reformation began, Protestants began jeering the deuterocanonical books as "apocrypha" in order to disparage the inspired quality of that part of Scripture. The Rationalists of the 17th and 18th centuries followed suit, since it undermined the authority of the Church.

Today, opponents present two classes of arguments against the books. These center around both the content of the books in their relationship to the rest of Scripture and the determination of who has proper authority to recognize or reject books as inspired.

Five arguments are directed against the contents of the books themselves: (1) God forbids sorcery, yet Tobit uses sympathetic magic to drive away a demon and heal blindness, (2) Scripture is inerrant, yet Judith and Tobit both have erroneous geography and history, (3) similarly, Sirach and 2 Maccabees both implicitly deny they are inspired Scripture, since both contain prefaces in which the authors apologize for any possible errors, (4) God forbids lying, yet Judith and the angel Raphael provide sinful examples by giving false information (Tobit 5:5, 5:13, Judith 9:10, 13), and (5) none of the books are quoted in the New Testament.

Far from presenting an exercise in magic, Tobit presents the ancient Christological symbol of the fish (who is, in Tob 6:3, literally a catcher of men) salted and roasted on coals (as Christ was scourged and roasted in the sun on the Cross) in order to permanently destroy the power of a murderous demon and drive him away from a virginal bride. The fish is also used to heal a blind man (cf. John 9) by making things like scales fall from his eyes (cf. Acts 10:18).

Apparent errors are not restricted to Tobit and Judith. The book of Daniel says the Medes were a world power in the era between the neo-Babylonians and the Persians (cf. Dn 2:31-45, 7:1-7), but no historical evidence confirms it. Belshazzar was never titled a king, despite Daniel's assertions otherwise, and he was the son of Nabonidus (556-539 B.C), not of Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 B.C.) (cf 5:1-30, 7:1-7, 17, 8:1-27). Only Daniel records a Darius the Mede. Darius I was really king of Persia (522-486 B.C).

Similarly, other books show dubious statements by the inspired authors. 1 Cor 1:15, for example, shows Paul forgetting whom he baptized, while 1 Cor 7:12 and 1 Cor 7:40 both are explicitly asserted to be Paul's personal opinion, not God's word. Is this letter, these passages, or these books therefore also to be denied canonical status?

Likewise, many books of Scripture highlight morally dubious acts. The Hebrew midwives lie to Pharaoh (Ex 1:19), while Judges, in addition to presenting a situation similar to Judith (Jdg 4:17-22), also shows a man who offers his own daughter as a holocaust (Jdg 11:29-40), and another who gives his wife to a crowd to be raped to death in place of himself (Jdg 19:22-30), while Genesis shows Jacob being rewarded for stealing Esau's birthright (Gen 25 and 27).

Finally, the lack of quotes applies equally well to Esther, Nehemiah, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Ruth, while Enoch and the Assumption of Moses *are* referred to in the epistle of Jude. If New Testament quotes demonstrate Old Testament canonicity, consistency demands that opponents discard the former books while adding the latter two to the canon of the Old Testament. The earliest Christians would probably have been amazed at this judgement: while the catacombs have frescoes depicting scenes from the deuterocanonical books, such as Judith holding the head of Holofernes, Tobias and Raphael, Judas Maccabeus, the mother of Maccabees with her seven martyred sons, Daniel in the lion's den, and the three boys in the fiery furnace, there are no such frescoes from any apocryphal books. Besides, the New Testament *does* allude to the books: Mt 22:25-26 echoes Tob 7:11, 1 Pet 1:6-7 is reminiscent of Wis 3:5-6, while Heb 1:3 recalls Wis 7:26-27. The same lessons are taught in 1 Cor 10:9-10 and Judith 8:24-25, and similarly valorous martyrs are provided in both Heb 11 and 2 Mac 6 and 7.

But what of the second objection? Who has proper authority to recognize the books of Scripture, each individual Christian or ecumenical councils headed by the Pope? Opponents assert that it cannot be the latter, since Trent was the first ecumenical council to formally use the word "canon" in its definition of inspired books. Such a late definition means Christians were left without a clearly-defined word of God for well over a millenium - a preposterous idea. Obviously, Trent arbitrarily added the Old Testament deuterocanonical books to Scripture to protect flawed Roman Catholic theology. Sadly, this argument ignores history. As has been seen, the canon was ratified in the late 4th and early 5th centuries. The Second Council of Niceae (787 AD) formally ratified the African Code, which contained what Trent would name "canonical," while the Council of Florence (1441 AD) defined a list of

inspired books identical to both. Although only Trent used the words "canon" and "canonical," its list was identical with every list the Church had provided since the late 300's. The Council of Trent's Sacrosancta decree (April 8, 1546 A.D.), the first formal canonical definition of Old and New Testament Scripture to the Church Universal, was the third formal affirmation of their inspiration in ecumenical council, and at least the eighth affirmation overall.

In fact, since 382 A.D. only one council or pope has even appeared to deny the canonicity of an Old Testament deuterocanonical book. Pope St. Gregory the Great, writing in his *Morals on the Book of Job* around the year 600 A.D., said of 1 Maccabees "...we are not acting irregularly, if from the books, though not canonical, yet brought out for the edification of the Church, we bring forward testimony. Thus, Eleazar, in the battle smote and brought down the elephant, but fell under the very beast that he killed (1 Macc 6:46)." However, this was not a formal universal teaching to the faithful, rather, it was private theological commentary on the book of Job. Such a teaching is not a statement invoking papal authority, nor is it subject to or preserved by the charism of papal infallibility.

Further, consider the ramifications if the authority of the Body of Christ since 382 A.D. is wrong. If Trent's Sacrosancta decree incorrectly added Old Testament deuterocanonical books, how do we know it correctly defined the New Testament canon? After all, the arguments against the New Testament deuterocanonical books and passages are identical to those against the Old, i.e., Jewish scholars rejected New Testament writings, Trent added them to Scripture to support flawed theology. Luther made an argument rather similar to this when he attacked the Apocolypse, Hebrews, Jude, 2 Peter, and seriously considered "throwing Jimmy [the epistle of James] into the fire" because it

contradicted his faith-alone theology. Standing in judgement of Scripture, Luther called James "an epistle full of straw," while regarding all five books as quasi-canonical. Interestingly, Luther did not completely discard the deuterocanonical Old Testament books he attacked, he merely relegated them to an appendix between the Old and New Testaments. For 300 years, many Protestant translations retained this appendix because the books were recognized as useful for moral instruction. Indeed, the Protestant kings of England imposed the death penalty on anyone who omitted the deuterocanonical appendix. The books were only completely discarded in 1827 by the British and Foreign Bible Society.

Supposedly, Jewish authority is accepted for Old Testament definition but rejected for New because Jewish scholars who rejected Christ could know nothing about the New Testament, while they knew the Old Testament because they lived it. However, this falsely separates the two Testaments of Scripture. Since the New Testament lies hidden in the Old, while the Old is fulfilled in the New, the Old Testament is just as permeated with Christ as the New. Simply put, Jewish scholars who rejected Christ rejected the guidance of the Holy Spirit and thus could not properly recognize either Old or New Testament Scripture.

Luther claimed to accept the Hebrew canon only because the Jews knew what books constituted the Old Testament better than anyone. Yet Luther's sermons showed little respect for Jewish theological opinion in other areas or for Jews in general. He ignored Old Testament Midrash commentaries or targums. Though the Jews have long prayed Q'addish, an eleven-month prayer of purification for the recently deceased, he rejected Purgatory, claiming his newly-defined canon had no prayers for the dead. He ignored the fact that all early first-century Jews accepted the Septuagint. He ignored the fact that the non-Christian Jews upon whose opinion he relied for Old Testament canonicity rejected the entire New

Testament. In short, Martin Luther pretended to rely on the authority of Jewish Scripture scholars, the same Jews upon whom he poured verbal vitriol from the pulpit, in order to subvert the authority of the Body of Christ. If the ability or authority to determine the canon of Scripture rests in the individual Christian, upon what grounds could Marcion - who claimed to be led by God in using a severely mangled canon in order to deny Christ's humanity - be fought? According to Mt 18:17, the Church has final authority to settle disputes between Christians. Certainly the decision concerning what is truly God's word is within her authority.