The Canon of Scripture

by Sebastian R. Fama

During a discussion about Biblical interpretation, one young lady told me that she did not 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 does not 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 did not 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. Most 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 did not settle on the Palestinian canon until 90 A.D. 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 point to the "apparent contradictions" in the disputed books as evidence against them. An apparent contradiction is something that appears to be a contradiction. However, upon close examination we find there is no real contradiction. Apparent contradictions can also be found in the universally accepted books of the Bible. For example; the apostle Paul’s conversion story appears twice in the book of Acts. While on the road to Damascus Paul sees a bright light and falls to the ground. Then Jesus speaks to him. Regarding his travelling companions the first account says: “The men who were travelling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one” (Acts 9:7). The second account says: “Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me” (Acts 22:9). How could both verses be true? You can hear a voice but not understand it much like people talking down the end of a hall. In this case you could honestly say you heard (noise). You could also say you did not hear (comprehend). And of course, both statements would be true. Use of the word “hear” is not always strictly literal.

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 A.D.) and Carthage (397 A.D.) 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 believe that the final list was just something that most of the churches 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 then he enabled believers to recognize His work. Divisions in the Church throughout the ages pretty much disproves that. It is true that God could have done things in that manner. But He did not. He chose to use the Church which He Himself had established. He knew that even the best of men could be misled. And so, He provided a way for us to know and not guess what He requires of us.

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 was not as easy as some may think. The book of 1 Clement was considered inspired by most in the early Church (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3:16, 325 A.D.). 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 did not. That is 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 the Protestant Reformation. Whenever the Bible contradicted some new doctrine created by the reformers, books were either downplayed or eliminated. When debating Martin Luther on the Church's view of Purgatory, Johann Eck Quoted 2 Maccabees 12:40-45 which clearly supports the Catholic doctrine. Luther replied that the passage had no binding authority since the book was outside the canon.

Martin Luther once famously referred to the book of James as "an epistle of straw." He sought to have it removed from the Bible. He claimed that he valued the book highly but that he did not think it was of apostolic authorship. When we dig a little deeper, we find that the book of James contradicts one of the Reformations foundational doctrines. Martin Luther taught all one had to do to be saved was to trust in God's perfect love. But James writes: "man is justified by works and not by faith alone… For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:24-26). Such a refutation of his new doctrine must have been perplexing.

No matter how you interpret Scripture there is one thing that logically everyone should agree on. And that of course is that no man has a right to remove books from the Bible no matter what the reason. For if some books can be removed why can't we just throw the whole thing out? Are we really to believe that it took God 1500 years to get the Bible right?

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. Whenever we find ourselves at odds with Scripture it is a safe bet that the problem lies with us. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). And so is His word.

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