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WHO DECIDES?

Unraveling the Mystery of the Old Testament Canon

When the Church began, there were no New Testament books. Old Testament texts alone were used as Scripture. The Old Testament used in the early Church throughout the Roman world was not the Hebrew Old Testament, but a translation of the Old Testament into Greek called the Septuagint (LXX). The LXX was translated in Alexandria during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus in the middle of the third century B.C., and was the standard Old Testament in the synagogues throughout the Hellenistic world (including Palestine) at the time of Christ.

In addition to the books included in a Protestant Old Testament, the LXX contained a number of other books now commonly referred to as Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical. Some of these books are Tobit, Judith, Maccabees, and a longer version of Daniel.

The LXX is based on a very different text of the Old Testament from the Masoretic text, on which modern English translations are based. For instance, in many places the wording is quite different, and the content of the books also differs—generally the LXX text is longer, but there are also interesting additions to the Masoretic text that are not found in the LXX. The text on which the LXX is based is as ancient as the Masoretic text, as testified by the Dead Sea scrolls and many other ancient witnesses.

A Standardized Jewish Text

Judaism was quite fluid at the time of Christ. There were seven distinct sects of the Jews in the early first century, according to Eusebius. The different sects accepted the authority of different collections of books (e.g., the Sadducees and Samaritans accepted only the five books of the Prophet Moses, the Torah), and there were often significant differences in the composition of the books they accepted in common. Sometimes the same sect might even make use of multiple text bases, or as scholars call them, text traditions. For example, the Dead Sea scrolls, containing the sacred texts of the Essene sect of Judaism, show evidence of the Masoretic, Samaritan, and LXX text bases.

However, with the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, an intense standardization process began. Only the Pharisee and the Samaritan sects of Judaism survived this process. The collection of Old Testament books into what eventually became the Masoretic text was begun by the Pharisees at the Council of Jamnia, somewhere between AD 80 and 100, but was not completed until the sixth century. During this period, The Wisdom of Sirach, which was eventually excluded from the Masoretic text, was sometimes included in the Jewish canon, while Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Esther, all of which eventually found a place in that text, were sometimes excluded.

The Jews wanted a standardized Hebrew text of the Old Testament partly because of the large number of Christian Jews. The older LXX version of the Old Testament contained many messianic passages that the Christians could use to convince Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. In fact, the early Christians charged that the Pharisees had deliberately truncated the canon to avoid messianic prophecy pointing toward Jesus Christ (see Justin Martyr, *Trypho* 71–73).

For instance, Isaiah 7:14 in the LXX says, "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son"—this clearly refers to the Virgin Birth of the Messiah. On the other hand, the Pharisees' version of Isaiah found in the Masoretic text only mentions a "young woman." Moreover, many of the wisdom texts from the Deuterocanonical books, particularly Sirach, were commonly used by the Church as catechetical reading for converts. It is not surprising that the Pharisees would want to exclude these "Church texts" from their official Hebrew version of the Old Testament.

Since the Jews had never set an exact limit on the number of books in the Old Testament, it was not inconsistent with their own faith for the Pharisees to limit the books they wanted to include in their revised Hebrew canon. Like the early Church, the Jews of Christ's time were not united around a particular set of texts (beyond the Torah, that is). They were organized around a liturgical life in the temple and synagogue. For this liturgical life, they came to use texts in the services. However, the liturgical life preceded the production of the texts and formed their context. Historically, as the Jewish faith developed in the synagogues and in temple worship during the postexilic period (the four to five hundred years preceding the coming of Messiah), texts came to be used in worship (e.g., the Psalms) and teaching. As mentioned above, the exact collection of texts varied depending on the sect.

However, with the loss of their center in Jerusalem and of unified temple worship (after AD 70), preserving the Jewish faith required greater standardization. The Jews could no longer afford divisions if they were to survive as a people. Thus, they needed a collection of unproblematic texts to use in their now dispersed population and synagogue-only worship. They needed to eliminate the use within their communities of texts useful to those whom they considered heretics (e.g., Christians, Gnostics, and Hellenizers). Particularly, they did not want to use in their services texts that the Christians could use to demonstrate that Jesus Christ is the Messiah promised by the Prophets of the Old Testament. The canon, or list of accepted texts, that the Jews produced as their standard is significantly shorter than the LXX and came to be known as the Masoretic text.

What Is the Christian Old Testament?

This distinction between the Jewish version of the Old Testament (Hebrew Masoretic text) and the Christian version of the Old Testament (Greek LXX) would not have been a serious concern for the Church if it hadn't been for the growing separation of the Latin-speaking Church in the Western Roman Empire from the

By Daniel Lieuwen

Greek-speaking Church in the East. In the fifth century, St. Jerome produced what became the standard Latin version of the Old Testament. However, instead of basing his translation on the LXX, St. Jerome moved to Jerusalem, lived with a Jewish family to learn Hebrew, and translated the Old Testament based on an early version of the Masoretic text.

Jerome's translation, together with a translation of the New Testament into Latin, came to be called the Vulgate and included most of the Deuterocanonical, or Apocryphal, books of the Old Testament, but separated them from the rest. It also preserved many of the Christological prophecies which later versions of the Masoretic text omit. But because it was based on a text tradition different from that of the LXX, significant differences between the Vulgate Old Testament and the LXX are evident.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Latin Vulgate was the standard translation of the Old Testament used in the West, while the LXX remained the standard in the East. While the New Testament of the earliest versions of the Vulgate is very similar to the Greek New Testament used by the Eastern Churches, the Old Testaments differed somewhat. But this did not present a significant problem for the Church at that time.

The Western Council of Hippo (393) was probably the first council to specify the limits of the New Testament canon, and it accepted the twenty-seven–book canon that we have today, allowing only these books to be read in church under the name of "canonical writings." The discussion of the limits of the New Testament canon continued for centuries, but by the early sixth century, nearly all Christians recognized only the twenty-seven books in our current New Testament as canonical. (To this day, the Nestorians recognize a twenty-two–book subset and the Ethiopians a superset of the New Testament.)

The canon of the Old Testament books, on the other hand, has never been clearly decided or closed by the Church. It is clear from the quotations from the Old Testament by the New Testament writers and other very early Christian witnesses that the preferred and almost exclusive version of the Old Testament for the earliest Christians was the LXX. However, the books cited as Scripture vary widely even among the New Testament writers. For example, St. Jude, the stepbrother of the Lord, in his canonical New Testament letter cites the apocryphal Book of Enoch.

ORTHODOX OLD TESTAMENT	ROMAN CATHOLIC OLD TESTAMENT	PROTESTANT OLD TESTAMENT
Genesis	Genesis	Genesis
Exodus	Exodus	Exodus
Leviticus	Leviticus	Leviticus
Numbers	Numbers	Numbers
Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy
Joshua	Joshua	Joshua
Judges	Judges	Judges
Ruth	Ruth	Ruth
1 Kingdoms (= 1 Samuel)	1 Kings	1 Samuel
2 Kingdoms (= 2 Samuel)	2 Kings	2 Samuel
3 Kingdoms (= 1 Kings)	3 Kings	1 Kings
4 Kingdoms (= 2 Kings)	4 Kings	2 Kings
I Paralipomenon (= 1 Chronicles)	1 Paralipomenon (or Chronicles)	1 Chronicles
2 Paralipomenon (= 2 Chronicles) [1]	2 Paralipomenon (or Chronicles)	2 Chronicles
1 Esdras		
2 Esdras [2]	1 Esdras	Ezra
Nehemiah	2 Esdras	Nehemiah
Tobit	Tobit	
Judith	Judith	
Esther	Esther	Esther [3]
1 Maccabees	1 Maccabees	
2 Maccabees	2 Maccabees	
3 Maccabees		
Psalms [4]	Psalms	Psalms
Job	Job	Job
Proverbs of Solomon	Proverbs of Solomon	Proverbs of Solomon
Ecclesiastes	Ecclesiastes	Ecclesiastes
Asma (Canticle of Canticles)	Canticle of Canticles	Song of Solomon
Wisdom of Solomon	Wisdom of Solomon	
Wisdom of Sirach	Ecclesiasticus (Sirach)	
Hosea	Hosea	Hosea
Amos	Amos	Amos
Micah	Micah	Micah
Joel	Joel	Joel
Obadiah	Obadiah	Obadiah
Jonah	Jonah	Jonah
Nahum	Nahum	Nahum
Habakkuk	Habakkuk	Habakkuk
Zephaniah	Zephaniah	Zephaniah
Haggai	Haggai	Haggai
Zechariah	Zechariah	Zechariah
Malachi	Malachi	Malachi
Isaiah	Isaiah	Isaiah
Jeremiah	Jeremiah	Jeremiah
Baruch	Baruch (incl. Epistle of Jeremiah)	
Epistle of Jeremiah		
Lamentations	Lamentations	Lamentations
Ezekiel	Ezekiel	Ezekiel
Daniel	Daniel	Daniel [5]
4 Maccabees [6]		

[1] Including the Prayer of Manasseh.
[2] Sometimes 2 Esdras and Nehemiah are combined into one book as 2 Esdras.
[3] Esther here does not include those sections called "Additions to Esther."
[4] The numbering of the Psalms diverges after Psalm 8. The Septuagint also includes one additional Psalm.
[5] Daniel here does not include those sections separately labelled as "The Song of the Three Children," "Daniel and Susannah," or "Daniel, Bel and the Snake (Dragon)."
[6] 4 Maccabees is always in an appendix.

Most of the Deuterocanonical books are quoted or alluded to as Scripture by the Apostles, the Church Fathers, and even Jesus Christ Himself.

Today, the only Christian group to include Enoch in the canon of the Old Testament is the Ethiopian Coptics.

In fact, differences in Old Testament canons exist among most major Christian groups in spite of a common New Testament canon. Most Protestants reject the Deuterocanonical books completely. The Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox lists of accepted Deuterocanonical books differ (the Greek list is longer). There are even slight differences between the Russian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox versions of the Old Testament. However, these distinctions are irrelevant to most English-speaking Christians, because most Bibles published in English omit the Deuterocanonical books completely.

The Protestant Canon

Most Bibles that are available in North America today are published by Protestants; consequently, the Old Testaments in these Bibles are translations based on the Jewish Masoretic text and omit the Deuterocanonical books. The historical reasons for this appear almost accidental, and most English-speaking Christians are unaware of them.

The Protestant Reformers' emphasis on original languages (coming out of their Renaissance heritage) led most of the Reformers to insist on using the Old Testament canon available to them in Hebrew, which had become standard among the Jews (the Masoretic text). During the late Middle Ages, the Germans and Englishmen who began to translate the Bible into "the language of the people" were ignorant of the importance of the LXX (or in some cases even completely ignorant of its existence). They assumed that the Hebrew Masoretic text used by the European Jews of their day was more authentic than the Latin Vulgate, which in their mind was tainted by its association with the Latin Church based in Rome.

Although modern English translations of the Old Testament take into consideration the LXX and other text traditions, they have continued to rely principally on the Masoretic tradition. This has led to the sometimes embarrassing situation of an English Bible in which the New Testament quotations of the Old Testament are very different from the supposed "original" found in the Old Testament translation included in the same Bible.

For example, the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible has Paul quoting Isaiah as saying, "He who believes in him [Messiah] will not be put to shame" (Romans 9:33). The footnote in the New Oxford Annotated edition of the NRSV refers the reader to Isaiah 28:16, which reads only, "One who trusts will not panic."

Just as the Protestant acceptance of the Masoretic text of the Old Testament had little to do with theology, the Protestant omission of the Deuterocanonical books from the Old Testament has very little to do with theology, although in the past hundred years or so it has taken on theological significance among many Protestant groups.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, most Protestants accepted the Deuterocanonical books as inspired in at least some limited sense. For example, the original version of the King James Bible, the most popular version of the Bible in English, included most of the Deuterocanonical books. And for many years in England, it was even illegal to publish a Bible without these books.

They continued to be included in almost all Protestant versions of the Bible until the missionary movement of the first part of the nineteenth century. In order to save on shipping costs, missionary Bible societies began publishing partial Bibles (New Testaments, Gospels, etc.). Converts and religious movements that were born out of this missionary movement came to believe that the thirty-nine books in the truncated, missionary-society–produced Old Testaments were the only "true" books of the Old Testament.

Most evangelical Protestants in America are heirs of this missionary movement. Consequently, many Americans who take the Bible seriously hold a grave misunderstanding about the Old Testament. They sincerely but mistakenly believe that the Deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament are not a part of the Christian Bible. They are ignorant of the fact that most of the Deuterocanonical books are quoted or alluded to as Scripture by the Apostles, the Church Fathers, and even Jesus Christ Himself.

A Septuagint Revival

Currently there is no translation of the LXX into modern English. Thank God that the St. Athanasius Academy has undertaken the Old Testament Orthodox Study Bible project in order to provide a good translation of the LXX into contemporary English. However, this project will not be completed for a few more years. In the meantime, an excellent translation of many of the Deuterocanonical books is available in most editions of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. However, for the thirty-nine books of the Protestant Old Testament, it is based primarily on the Masoretic text. Sir Lancelot Brendon's *The Septuagint with Apocrypha* can be used to supplement the NRSV, although its language is somewhat archaic. Holy Transfiguration Monastery's translation of the LXX Psalter (and Biblical Canticles) is also available and highly recommended.

Many prayers in the Church are based on prayers found in the Deuterocanonical books. The stories (or full stories) of many saints and angels celebrated in the liturgical calendar of the Orthodox Church are found in these books. The Wisdom of Solomon and the Book of Sirach, listed among the Deuterocanonical books, are storehouses of wisdom on a par with Proverbs. Edification and inspiration await those who take the time prayerfully to read these important books of the Church. ❖

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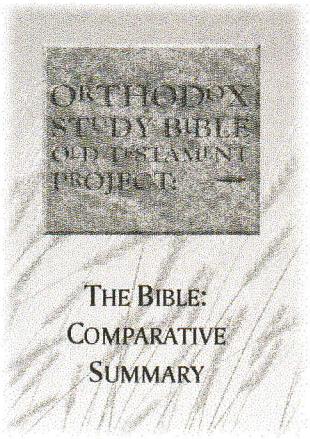

Question?

What are the differences between the Old Testaments of the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Protestant Churches?

Answer:

THERE ARE SEVERAL SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES:

1) Books within the Bible, 2) Source and content of the books themselves, 3) Titles of books, and 4) Order in which books are placed.

The Orthodox Church has always used the Septuagint (LXX) as its Old Testament. The name *Septuagint* was given to honor the seventy (or seventy-two) Jewish elders who began the translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek. The Septuagint was used by Christ and His disciples. Most of the New Testament quotations of the Old Testament are from the Septuagint which remained the Old Testament of the Church everywhere until the time of Jerome (d. 420).

After that, the Catholic Church, and those churches under its authority, began to accept Jerome's Latin translation of a more recent Hebrew Old Testament and use his edition for their Old Testament. The Catholic Church labeled some books as "deuterocanonical," to distinguish them from those books they considered canonical. Later, the Protestant reformers of the 16th century, and their heirs, separated these books from the rest of the Old Testament, calling them *The Apocrypha.* Many Protestant leaders consider the Apocrypha books unworthy of being bound with the Bible and by the early 19th century, Protestant Bibles were being published without the Apocrypha. Today, many Protestants have never even heard of these books and those who have, consider them untrustworthy and likely heretical.

THERE ARE FOUR CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE SEPTUAGINT AND THE OSB-OT-STUDY BIBLE:

FIRST: The Septuagint is the Old Testament used in the historic Church.

SECOND: The Church used the Septuagint from the beginning.

THIRD: The Old Testament of the Catholics and Protestants represent changes based upon false and inaccurate assumptions about the "true Bible".

FOURTH: Those desiring the right Bible, need the Septuagint in readable English.

LASTLY: Our focus is the Trinity; the Incarnation; and the One Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church

THE OTHER SIDE COMPARES THE LXX TO THE CATHOLIC & PROTESTANT BIBLES

The Bible: A Comparative Summary

ORTHODOX OLD TESTAMENT	ROMAN CATHOLIC OLD TESTAMENT	PROTESTANT OLD TESTAMENT
Genesis	Genesis	Genesis
Exodus	Exodus	Exodus
Leviticus	Leviticus	Leviticus
Numbers	Numbers	Numbers
Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy
Joshua	Joshua	Joshua
Judges	Judges	Judges
Ruth	Ruth	Ruth
1 Kingdoms (= 1 Samuel)	1 Kings	I Samuel
2 Kingdoms (= 2 Samuel)	2 Kings	2 Samuel
3 Kingdoms (= 1 Kings)	3 Kings	I Kings
4 Kingdoms (= 2 Kings)	4 Kings	2 Kings
1 Paralipomenon(=1 Chronicles)	1Paralipomenon (or Chronicles)	I Chronicles
2 Paralipomenon(=2Chronicles)*	2 Paralipomenon (or Chronicles)	2 Chronicles
1 Esdras		
2 Esdras**	I Esdras	Ezra
Nehemiah	2 Esdras	Nehemiah
Tobit	Tobit	
Judith	Judith	
Esther	Esther	Esther****
I Maccabees	I Maccabees	
2 Maccabees	2 Maccabees	
3 Maccabees		
Psalms (151 in number)	Psalms (150 in number)	Psalms (150 in number)
Job	Job	Job
Proverbs of Solomon	Proverbs of Solomon	Proverbs of Solomon
Ecclesiastes	Ecclesiastes	Ecclesiastes
Asma (Canticle of Canticles)	Canticle of Canticles	Song of Solomon
Wisdom of Solomon	Wisdom of Solomon	
Wisdom of Sirach	Ecclesiasticus (Sirach)	
Hosea	Hosea	Hosea
Amos	Amos	Amos
Micah	Micah	Micah
Joel	Joel	Joel
Obadiah	Obadiah	Obadiah
Jonah	Jonah	Jonah
Nahum	Nahum	Nahum
Habakkuk	Habakkuk	Habakkuk
Zephaniah	Zephaniah	Zephaniah
Haggai	Haggai	Haggai
Zechariah	Zechariah	Zechariah
Malachi	Malachi	Malachi
Isaiah	Isaiah	Isaiah
Jeremiah	Jeremiah	Jeremiah
Baruch	Baruch (Incl. Ep. Of Jeremiah)	
Epistle of Jeremiah		
Lamentations	Lamentations	Lamentations
Ezekiel	Ezekiel	Ezekiel
Daniel	Daniel	Daniel*****
4 Maccabees***		

* including the Prayer of Manasseh.

** Sometimes 2-Esdras and Nehemiah are combined into one book as 2 Esdras.

*** 4 Maccabees is always in an appendix

**** Esther here does not include those sections called "Additions to Esther."

***** Daniel here does not include those sections separately labeled as "The Song of the Three Children"; Daniel and Susanna"; "Daniel, Bel and the Snake (Dragon)."