

THE BIBLE: *God's Word*

II

(Catechism of the Catholic Church 120-141)

The Formation and Transmission of the Canon of Sacred Scripture

1. 33 A.D. - c. 55 A.D.

Following the death, Resurrection & Ascension of Christ, the apostles receive the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The preaching of the Word of God begins: Christ is proclaimed to the nations. Communities of believers are formed by the spoken preaching of Peter (Antioch & Rome), James (Jerusalem & surrounding area), John (Asia Minor, esp. Ephesus, Smyrna, Philadelphia etc.), Paul (Asia Minor & Greece, esp. Corinth, Athens, Thessalonika) and many others. The only written texts are the books of the Old Testament. Bearing in mind that Christianity attracted converts from a dominantly unlettered section of society (i.e., the majority!), it is no wonder that for the first generation of Christians there was in all probability no written account of the life & teaching of Christ. The Word is oral, & passed from eyewitness to disciple. The authority is that of an eyewitness: I was there.

2. c. 55 A.D. - c. 90 A.D.

Problems occur in the Christian communities. The oral teaching is forgotten, or misinterpreted. The Corinthians split into factions & turn the Mass into a group picnic where each family brings their own food (some gorge themselves, others go without), the Thessalonians forget about the Resurrection & panic about those who have died. Converts from Judaism clash with pagan converts about whether or not the dietary and purificatory rules of the Law of Moses are obligatory etc. In response, the Apostles write to their communities to correct these errors: c. 55 A.D. the first Christian text written - St. Paul's letter to the Romans. Others follow. In order to clarify the teaching of Christ for their respective communities, a number of accounts of Christ's life are written: Matthew writes for a community composed predominantly of converts from Judaism, so he shows Christ as the fulfilment of the Old Testament and the new Moses, giving the new Law. Luke writes for a community less familiar with Judaism, possibly a Greek-Christian group, so he explains the Aramaic sentences which he records Christ speaking etc. Each community has their own texts in which their apostle & founding Father calls them back to the aspects of the whole faith which they had forgotten or strayed from. These begin to be read out during assemblies of the community. Hearing that the community next door (which could be in a town 100 miles away!) have received an inspiring letter, they may ask for a copy. Texts spread - some further than others. The Word is now both oral and (occasionally) written. The authority is still that of an eyewitness: *cf. Jn 19:35 "This is the evidence*

of one who saw it - trustworthy evidence, and he knows he speaks the truth - and he gives it so that you may believe as well." In other words, what John has recorded is reliable evidence because it is an eyewitness account - therefore it can be trusted as a source book for teaching the faith that Christ entrusted to the apostles. Because it was regarded as reliable, it was accepted in the canon of scripture (those books that can *"profitably be used for teaching, for refuting error, for guiding people's lives and leading them to holiness."* (2 Tim. 3:15).) Also 1 Jn 1:1, 1 Cor 11:23.

3. c. 90 A.D. - 300 A.D.

Hundreds of different texts begin to appear: over 15 Gospels, various Acts of different Apostles, confections of the teachings of the apostles, letters of the first Christians, letters of later Christians who were widely revered for the holiness of their lives and the vigour of their teaching. Each area would collect poems and visions of their own members, especially if they were martyred, and read them during the liturgy to encourage the Churches during persecution. There is massive variety of different texts being read. Some churches rejected as heretical and contrary to the faith the same books others saw as inspired by the Holy Spirit. In addition, books which had become popular and were read in almost every church were being copied by hand: over time, serious discrepancies appeared between the copies in different churches.

Confusion was rife - what had God written and what was not to be trusted? There was overwhelming need for universal agreement on what could be trusted as a repository of divine revelation. There were three sources:

- 1) The books of the Old Testament that were written in Hebrew in Israel and accepted by Jews in and around Jerusalem (the so-called Jerusalem Canon).
- 2) The nine books written in whole or in part by Jewish communities who had returned to Egypt well after the Exodus, composed in Greek and showing the influence of Greek philosophy. These were all written before the time of Christ and were both known to and widely venerated by Jews in and around Jerusalem in Christ's lifetime. These, plus the Jerusalem canon make up the so-called Alexandrian canon. When referred to on their own, are known as the "Deutero-canonical" books - or Apocrypha. In c. 100 A.D. the Jews finally codified the texts that they would regard as inspired, settling hundreds of years of ambiguity, variety of belief and disagreement (the Samaritans, for instance, rejected every book after Deuteronomy, accepting only the five books of the Mosaic Law). The Jerusalem canon triumphed and from then on the Jews did not list the "Deutero-canonical" texts in their list of sacred books.
- 3) The books written after Christ's life, recording the events and teaching of Christ, the apostles and the earliest Christian communities.

The evidence is overwhelming that from the first century, both the Jerusalem Canon and the "Deutero-canonical" texts were effectively universally accepted by Christian communities as inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The far more difficult problem was with texts concerning Christ. In the East, much of the Church was trying to cope with Arianism (the heresy which denied that Christ was

truly God but accepted his humanity) - they were naturally suspicious of Gospel accounts that seemed to stress Christ's humanity without reference to being God (because this would pander to the Arian heretics). For this reason, the Gospel of St. John was particularly popular, whereas that of St. Mark was not. Mark's was written to record St. Peter's teaching - he spent his last years in Rome and it seems that one of the dominant issues he had to deal with was the true humanity of Christ. For this reason, it is thought, St. Mark's Gospel spends little time underscoring the divine claims of Christ (because these were readily accepted) while it seems to make a little more of the visibly human nature of Christ. Of course, this meant that St. Mark's Gospel was regarded as somewhat suspect by many in the East who saw the stress on his humanity as straying a little too far towards Arianism.

Nor was this the only problem. There were Christians who were so struck by the apparent difference between the God of the Old Testament (characterised by vengeance, judgement, condemnation and war) and the Christ of the New Testament (the Good Shepherd, the Son who sacrifices himself at the will of the Father so that we should not be condemned) that they decided to reject the Old Testament altogether. One figure, Marcion, condemned all text apart from a couple of St. Paul's letters and a few carefully chosen snippets of St. Luke's Gospel.

The communities were picking and choosing only those texts that supported their incomplete version of the Good News. Clarification was a desperate necessity. *WHAT COULD BE TRUSTED AS BEING THE AUTHENTIC MESSAGE OF THE APOSTLES?* Which stories were inconsistent with the Good News (like the ones recorded in the apocryphal Gospel of St. Thomas which has the Christ-child making birds out of clay and breathing them into life)? After much debate, lasting 300 years, during which time many texts fell out of use naturally or were targeted for exclusion, a general consensus was reached.

4. 393 A.D. - 1517 (the eve of the Reformation)

In 393 a council of African bishops at Hippo, & in 397 a council at Carthage, both presided over by St. Augustine, attempted to draw up a list of canonical texts. Their conclusions were sent to Pope Innocent I who, in 405 A.D., confirmed the choice. Although some still disagreed with the inclusion of the "Deutero-canonical" texts, including a few of the great Doctors of the Church (such as Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Jerome & Gregory of Nazianzen), this list became normative.

Every now and again, the question was raised about the seven Deutero-canonical books and a few argued for their dismissal from the canon of Scripture. However, for the overwhelming majority of Christians in East and West, the judgement of the 2 Councils of Carthage and its subsequent promulgation by the Pope was sufficient to settle the issue. For 1100 years there was universal consensus in the composition of the canon of Scripture.

The unresolved question concerned the text of the books. Because there was no printing, copies of the texts were hand-written. This created a terrible problem: copying texts is a laborious and painstaking ordeal - errors in transmission are almost unavoidable. By 750 A.D. the variations in the texts were so massive that different monasteries (where most of the manuscript production was done) were using texts

which were almost unique to that place: the accuracy of the texts were so corrupted by generations of copyists mistakes that versions of the same letter or Old Testament book were so divergent that they had almost become different accounts entirely. By the time of the great Frankish Emperor Charlemagne (768-812 A.D.) who ruled most of Western Europe at this time, the situation was acute. In the early 790s he ordered one of his foremost scholars, Alcuin (a native of York who now lived and worked in the Frankish court) to assemble a team of biblical scholars and produce the most accurate and original copy of all the recognised books of the Bible. Alcuin and his monks scoured the Empire for several years, visiting monasteries with renowned and reputable libraries, collecting the oldest and best preserved texts they could find, comparing different versions of the same texts so as to identify the root and original version. The fruit of their labours sits on the shelves of our homes: they produced and gave to Charlemagne in the year 800 A.D. the best and purest text of all the books of the Bible they were capable of. Charlemagne immediately sent the text to Rome for comparison with the manuscripts there and for the approval of the Pope (Leo III) and when he had received it, he ordered that it be the root copy for all texts of the Scriptures in the Empire. Since then, all Bibles have taken Alcuin's text as their primary authoritative source. We can be sure that if it was not for Charlemagne's command and the diligence of Alcuin and his monks, we would not have the universally recognised and authoritative text we have today. Interestingly, modern linguistic scholarship and the discovery of ancient fragments of Biblical texts from both East and West have, time after time, confirmed the accuracy of Alcuin's work and in only a handful of passages has it been established that the original version of the text differed in any significant way from the version which he produced.

In the Dark and Middle Ages, copies of the sacred texts were the most precious objects the Church possessed. The Bible contained the Word of Life - together with the registers of Baptism, the Bible was identified with the Book of Life, which is read about in the book of Revelation, containing the names of those who are chosen for eternal life. More than any other text, the Bible was copied and studied. Thousands of commentaries on the books of Old and New Testament were written, setting down the Interpretation of the passages for the enlightenment of future generations. The first universities established in the eleventh century and following, were originally centres of learning for clerics to study the meaning of the Scriptures once they had mastered the necessary tools to interpret them. Copies of the Bible, or of the four Gospels were lavishly decorated with illuminations, elaborate and intricate decorative borders, gold-leafed initial letters. Rare and expensive stones were ground down to make beautifully coloured inks for the illustrations. Gold and precious stones (rubies, emeralds, amethysts etc.) were arranged to make suitably valuable covers that displayed for all to see the paramount importance of the texts they contained. Today, we might balk at the expense of the lavish and wealthy decoration given to copies of the Bible (after all, Christ had few good things to say for money), but we should not be too judgemental - if anything deserves to be highly prized and to be adorned with the most valuable items we possess it should surely be the books and vessels we use in the worship of God.

It should also be noted that even without the gold and precious decoration, the books themselves were of enormous value. Since there was no paper, all books were made with vellum (the pre-prepared hides of animals, usually sheep). This was vastly expensive - one single copy of the Bible was prepared, illuminated and decorated as a

gift for the Pope by the monks of Wearmouth in the time of St. Bede (c. 700 A.D.). The Codex Ammiatinus can be seen today in the Vatican Museum: it is estimated that it took almost 2000 sheep to provide sufficient vellum to make the book. In other words, Bibles were valuable not only because they contained the inspired Word of God but also because they cost a fortune to produce. It is no wonder that monastic libraries used to chain their copies of the Scriptures to the desks: all books were chained to desks because it made them a little harder to steal - and because it meant they were therefore available to whoever wished to read them.

Printing: with the advent of the new technology of printing, the Church was quick to take advantage of the possibility of bringing the Scriptures into people's homes. William Caxton, who brought the first printing press to England, published his first printed book in the 1430's - it was a copy of St. Mark's Gospel, paid for and commissioned by the Bishop of London over 100 years before the Reformation in this country. By 1480 (three years before Luther was born and almost 40 years before the start of the Reformation in Europe), there were copies of the Scriptures in whole or in part throughout Europe: there were translations of the Latin texts of the Bible in three different printed editions in French, four in German, at least eight in Italian, three in English, one in Flemish and two in Spanish (and these are just the ones we know of - there may be many others which have not come to light yet). Far from preventing the translation of the Bible into the various popular languages, it was without exception at the specific request of Bishops that these translations were made and all of them with the highest ecclesiastical approval. Many translations were forbidden - not because the Church was opposed to giving the Scriptures to the people but because the translations were very inaccurate. But then, all denominations, protestant as well as Catholic, suppressed wrongful translations of the Bible because of the danger of spreading false teaching as though it were the teaching of Christ - King Charles I of England almost ordered the execution of the printer of the infamous "Adulterous" Bible (a misprint of the Ten Commandments had the Lord order Moses "Thou shalt commit adultery"!)

When the mistake was noticed, all copies had to be withdrawn and destroyed for fear of the effect the teaching might have on the people: the printer in question was fined over £1000! Despite the protestant accusation (which persists to this day in many quarters), the Catholic Church was the first to use the printing press to bring the Scriptures into the public arena, and was very keen to translate them into the vernacular. There is nothing sinister about suppressing translations because they are manifestly inaccurate.

5. The Reformation

In the sixteenth century the reforming churches made their own changes to the canon of Scripture. The seven "Deutero-canonical" books of the Old Testament were excluded from the canon on the mistaken assumption that they were rejected in the early years of the Church (and, it was supposed, only adopted when the Church had become corrupt). In addition, there was a move to edit the New Testament to remove passages that offended against protestant theology. The Letter of St. James was especially targeted because of its explicit rejection of the doctrine that salvation is given to us by faith alone and without the need for good works: this belief was one of the central pillars of protestant theology but totally incompatible with St. James's Letter (for this reason, Martin Luther referred to it as the "letter of straw"). In the end it was decided not to drop the Letter because it was composed by an apostle so could

not just be discarded - the solution adopted in the end was to remove it from its normal place within the New Testament and put in an appendix at the back (in the hope that it would never be read, or if it was read, that it be understood as supplementary to the New testament and not a part of it).

At the Council of Trent, the issue of exactly which books were Scriptural was raised again: not because the Church was in any doubt but so that the Bishops in Council with the Pope could proclaim with the highest authority the exact composition of the Bible and confirm the Church's constant and unchanged teaching since 405 A.D. On April 8th 1546, the Fathers of the Council solemnly and infallibly declared that the whole of the Alexandrian canon, including the whole of each of the "Deutero-canonical" texts, was rightfully regarded as inspired by the Holy Spirit and that together they make up the Canon of Sacred Scripture. For Catholics, any lingering doubt, which had survived the fifth century concerning the authenticity of the "Deutero-canonical" texts, was unequivocally put to rest. The Word of God, speaking through the assembled teachers of the Church, (the bishops in communion with the Pope), had defined authoritatively that these texts were indeed the written Word of God.

A Conclusion

We need to remember that the canon of Sacred Scripture was established by the authority of the Catholic Church - God guided the bishops at the various Councils to accept these books in their entirety and to reject others. Christ did not tell the apostles which books were authentic, nor did a list of inspired books descend from heaven after the Ascension of Christ. The books are not Scripture simply because I agree with them, or I feel, on mature reflection that they match up to what I understand God to be about. The list we have today is the list given to us by the Church and supported solely by the weight of the Church's constant witness. If you believe the Church could teach error, then you will have to accept that the list could be wrong. Accepting the authority of Scripture presupposes you accept the authority of the Church, that you understand and accept that Christ is the voice behind the Church's teaching, and it is his infallibility that guarantees the truth of the Church's formal teachings. If you deny that Christ speaks infallibly through the instrument of the solemn teaching of the Church, then you will have to acknowledge the possibility that the Church has solemnly taught error - in which case, nothing she has ever taught is certain of being true (even down to the divinity of Christ himself) – but that in the instance of Sacred Scripture, we may all have to acknowledge that some or even all of them are not scriptural at all and full of errors or heresies about God.

It turns out that Sacred Scripture and the authority of the Church are mutually complimentary and essential to each other. There is no opposition between them, and the reliability of the teaching of each is necessary for the other - Scripture roots Church teaching in the very words of God, while the solemn and certain teaching of the Church (i.e., of Christ speaking through the Church) guarantees that Scripture is what it says it is and claims to be "*God's word and not some human thinking*" (*1 Thess. 1:13*). If you pit the authority of Scripture against the authority of the Church by making out that they are in opposition to each other (as was said at the Reformation) then you have to choose between them - either Scripture is your teacher or the Church is your teacher. What you end up with is neither: without the Scriptures,

the Church has no justification for its existence - but without the Church, there is no reason to accept these books as inspired by God (or to reject any others). If you are prepared to say that these books were certainly inspired by God and can truly be used to teach and refute error (*2 Tim. 3:16*), then you will have to acknowledge that you can only say this because the Church assures you it is true. That means you have accepted that the Church teaches infallibly and is the principal guardian of the Truth (*1 Tim. 3:15*). The Scriptures need the Church just as the Church needs the Scriptures: according to Scripture it is *the Church* which is the "*pillar and bulwark of the Truth*" (*2 Tim 3:16*) but she relies on the Scriptures to present that truth to the world.

It is not only that you can have both the Sacred Scriptures and the Church, both of which speak infallibly and in harmony: it is quite clear that you must have both, for when you take one of them away, the other is irreparably damaged. It is noticeable that the communities that preserved the doctrine of the authoritative teaching of the Church are the same communities that have upheld the divine origin of the Scriptures and their authority. However, those communities who rejected the teaching authority of the Church in the hope that this would preserve the authority of the Scriptures intact have found, in the course of history that without the authority of the Church to defend Scripture, even the Scriptures themselves are taken to pieces and bit by bit are overturned, reversed or reinterpreted so as to mean nothing (for instance, scriptural teaching on divorce, homosexuality, chastity, fornication, observance of the Christian Sabbath, contraception, abortion, sacramental confession, original sin, bodily resurrection, the full humanity and divinity of Christ, the existence of angels, heaven and hell, the reality of human free will, the existence of objective moral good and evil, the inerrancy of the scriptures themselves, the unbroken succession of bishops from the time of the election of Matthias in Acts 1, the sacramentality of marriage, the teaching authority of the Church, the virgin birth of Christ and the perpetual virginity of Mary, the existence of purgatory, the permanent institution by Christ of primacy in the Church through St. Peter and his successors, the doctrine of justification by faith and good works, efficacious prayer for the dead, and the teaching on the effective communion of saints have only been defended from Scripture by those communities who preserved the ancient Christian doctrine in the authority of the Church to speak with certainty by the power of Christ himself – those communities who denied this authority in the Church and saw infallible teaching only in the Scriptures have progressively questioned and then rejected all these Scriptural teachings, as well as others which I haven't mentioned). Without the authority of the Church, even the Scriptures are drained of their power and are slowly put to one side: discount the Church's authority and you will be unable to avoid eventually denying the authority of Scripture. Defend and proclaim the Church's authority to speak infallibly, and you will find that you have reinforced and strengthened your faith in the reliable witness of Sacred Scripture.

Christ intended his Church to be endowed with both: they both flow from him and draw their authority from him. He it is who speaks in both and guarantees the truth of what they proclaim. It is no wonder that experience has shown us that they stand or fall together.

- In order to trust Sacred Scripture we have to be able to trust the teaching of the Church. If we don't trust the Church, we can't even be certain that these books were truly authored by God.

- We must accept the teaching of the Scriptures, whole and entire, because to ignore it is to ignore Christ himself - this is the teaching of the Church.

The Canon of Sacred Scripture in the Catholic Church

1) *The Old Testament*

- 46 Books in all. Books in bold type indicate “Deutero-canonical” texts in whole or in part. These books would not be found in the texts of Scripture in Reformed churches such as the Anglican, Methodist etc.
- These 46 are traditionally divided into 4 groups:

The Five Books of The Law of Moses (The Torah)	The Historical Books	The Wisdom Books	The Prophets
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Joshua Judges Ruth 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Tobit Judith Esther 1 Maccabees 2 Maccabees	Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes The Song of Songs Wisdom Ecclesiasticus	Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Baruch Ezekiel Daniel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi
5 Books	16 Books	7 Books	18 Books

2) The New Testament

- 27 Books in all. There is no difference in content between the New Testament of the Catholic Church and that of any other mainline Christian denomination.
- They are by custom divided into 4 categories.

The Historical Books	The Letters of St. Paul	The Catholic Epistles	Prophetic Book
The Gospel of St. Matthew	Romans	James	The Apocalypse of St. John
The Gospel of St. Mark	1 Corinthians	1 Peter	
The Gospel of St. Luke	2 Corinthians	2. Peter	
The Gospel of St. John	Galatians	1 John	
The Acts of the Apostles	Ephesians	2 John	
	Philippians	3 John	
	Colossians	Jude	
	1 Thessalonians		
	2 Thessalonians		
	1 Timothy		
	2 Timothy		
	Titus		
	Philemon		
	Hebrews		
5 Books	14 Books	7 Books	1 Book

NOTE:

1. The Letter to the Hebrews is placed among the Letters of St. Paul. This accords with the oldest tradition of the Church. All the ancient Fathers of the Early Church record that St. Paul was the accepted author of Hebrews. However, in recent years, this has been questioned and now opinion has swung almost without exception the other way: either way, the Letter is included in the section of St. Paul's letters as it has been since this division began to become popular.
2. The Catholic Epistles: this does not mean that these were written to Catholic communities whereas the others were written to the other denominations! Don't forget that when the Scriptures were written and preserved, there were no other denominations, only the Catholic Church. This group is called 'Catholic' because this means 'universal'. These are the letters written not to a specific community (like Romans or Ephesians) but to the entire Christian family, throughout the whole world – hence the title 'Catholic' – universal.