

Chapter 2: Interpreting the Bible as God's Word

Which Books Belong in the Bible?

As a missionary, I tried to encourage people to begin reading the Bible. Often I would take out my own Bible to show them how to look up Bible passages. Sometimes, however, I would come across Hispanics who refused to hear anything that I might read from my Bible. Their priest had told them that the non-Catholics had a “different Bible,” and they’d better be careful not to pay attention to it.

The Catholic version of the Bible has a few “extra” books in the Old Testament, compared to the Protestant Bible. Catholics also add a few extra chapters to the books of Daniel and Esther. Many Eastern Orthodox Christians add more “extra” books than even the Catholics. What’s the story? Why are these books in some Bibles and not others? And which books are really part of God’s Word?

These “extra” books and “extra” chapters were written during the time between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. As far as we can tell, they were never accepted by the Jews as part of God’s Word. The ancient rabbis called them “apocryphal” books (that is, “hidden” books). The writings that were considered to be Scriptural were open for anyone to read, but the “hidden” books were limited in circulation.

Nevertheless, centuries later, the Roman Catholic Church (around 1545) and the Eastern Orthodox Church (around 1672) formally approved adding some of these books to their Bibles. By contrast, the Lutheran Church (and virtually all of the non-Catholic, non-Orthodox churches) did **not** accept any of these books as part of the Bible, precisely because they had not been included from the beginning. How did this come about?

The short version is that Catholics and Protestants (and Lutherans) have different ideas about what God’s Word is. Protestants (and Lutherans) believe that God inspired human authors to write the books of the Bible, and this “Scripture” is the Word of God. All other books and writings are simply the words of humans. Our human traditions may be helpful; for example, the Small Catechism is a great resource! However, they can also be unhelpful; for example, the Catholic masses that include prayers to Mary and the saints. In any case, Lutherans believe that the Bible is the Word of God and everything else is of human origin. “Scriptures alone!” was one of the rallying cries of the Reformation.

By contrast, Roman Catholics believe that the Scriptures are not the only writings that God inspired. On the contrary, according to Catholics, the same Holy Spirit that inspired the books of the Bible also guides the leadership of the church throughout history. By “the church,” they mean the organization called the “Roman Catholic Church” headed by the pope. According to Catholic doctrine, the pope is the vicar (representative) of Christ and the successor to St. Peter; the Catholic church leaders are the successors to the apostles. Therefore, when the Catholic church hierarchy makes an official pronouncement, it is considered to be just as much guided by the Holy Spirit as the books of the Bible. Where the Lutheran motto is “Scripture alone,” Catholics reply “Scriptures plus tradition.”

This means that Catholics don’t have a problem with the church hierarchy deciding to officially include “extra” books in the Bible, because they consider this to be an action inspired by the Holy Spirit. Now, they didn’t just select these “extra” books on a whim. These books were very popular. And they encouraged people to have faith! The book of Sirach, in particular, was so

well-received that a few congregations even began to read portions of it in worship services. So when the Roman Catholic Council of Trent officially proclaimed that these books were part of the Bible, it did not act completely arbitrarily. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the church leaders felt that they had the authority to officially add popular religious books to the Bible in spite of the warnings of Revelation 22:18.

Please note that the Roman Catholic Church did not accept **all** of the apocryphal books as the Word of God – but it did accept the **majority** of those books found in different versions of the *Septuagint*. Catholics prefer not to use the term “apocrypha;” instead, they refer to these “extra” books as “**deuterocanonical**” books. The word “canon” refers to the Scriptures, the Bible. The “canonical” books are those which all Christians – Catholic and non-Catholic alike – accept as God’s Word. “Deuterocanonical” means “second canon.” The deuterocanonical books are those which the Catholic Church added to the Old Testament as additional Scriptures.

As a missionary, I usually did not find it helpful to get into arguments with people over these deuterocanonical books. Most of them were not reading the Bible at all! Even if their Catholic Bible had a few extra books, I wanted them to read it and put it into practice.

Furthermore, these extra books, even if they aren’t inspired, still often have some good things to say. It’s true that Catholics have used two passages in the book of 2 Maccabees to justify having masses for the dead and praying to the saints who are dead. (It’s not exactly conclusive evidence: 2 Maccabees 12:42-45 relates how a commander made animal sacrifices on behalf of his dead soldiers; 2 Maccabees 15:11-17 tells how someone had a vision of a deceased high priest.) Nevertheless, for the most part, the books are harmless – and often helpful.

I found that, as people grew in their faith and discovered the history behind these deuterocanonical books, they realized that the extra books were just human writings. They would set aside the deuterocanonical books as interesting, encouraging, but not part of the inspired Word of God.

You can find more details about the deuterocanonical books in the special section at the end of this chapter.

The Purpose of the Bible

Every book is written for some purpose. Mathematics textbooks are intended to teach mathematical operations. Art books have the goal of enhancing our knowledge and appreciation of art. Even novels have the purpose of entertaining us. We wouldn’t look for cooking recipes in a history text. Nor would we expect to find scientific theories in a book about football.

The Bible has the overall purpose of making us “wise for salvation” (2 Timothy 3:15, NIV). Through the Bible, God wants to lead us to trust in Christ and to grow in Christ (2 Timothy 3:16-17). John 20:31 states, “These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in his name.” (NIV)

When we interpret the Bible, we need to keep in mind this purpose. The Bible is not primarily intended to entertain us or to give us scientific information or even to satisfy our curiosity about history. There may be historical or even scientific details in portions of the Bible, but they are incidental. Every part of the Bible contributes in some way – directly or indirectly – to its central message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. When we interpret any given Bible passage, we need to constantly ask what relationship it has with the message of salvation through Christ.

This means that Jesus Christ, the Savior, is the center of the Bible. The second guideline for healthy Biblical interpretation might be called the “Christocentric” guideline:

1. Interpret each part of the Bible according to its relationship to Christ and his salvation.

Examples

How are different Bible passages related to the Bible’s central purpose? Some passages (such as John 3) directly lay out the Gospel, the message of salvation through Christ. Other passages (such as Exodus 20 or Matthew 5) present God’s Law in order to move us to repent and turn to the Savior. (We’ll look at Law and Gospel in more detail in Chapter 3.) Still other passages look at specific aspects of the Gospel. For example, Matthew 1 shows how God planned from eternity to send Christ, and how he protected and guided the family into which Christ would be born.

Rudolph Blank applies this Christocentric guideline to interpreting the Old Testament books of Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. If we read Ecclesiastes in isolation, without taking into account the Christocentric purpose of the Bible, then it could easily seem like a pessimistic philosophical treatise emphasizing the futility of everything that humans do or think. However, within the context of salvation through Christ, Ecclesiastes serves to destroy our confidence in our own wisdom and accomplishments, and to make us look for salvation outside of ourselves. 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 makes the same point more explicitly.

If we read the Song of Solomon in isolation, it might easily be seen as just an ancient love poem that somehow found its way into the Scriptures. However, in the context of Christ’s salvation, the Song of Solomon is seen as much more. It doesn’t just extoll human romantic love (although such love is a gift from God); it also points to the great love God has for his people, a love that culminates in sending Jesus as our Savior. This idea is developed further in the book of Hosea; in Isaiah 54; in John 3:29; in Matthew 22:2, 25:1-13; in 2 Corinthians 11:2; in Ephesians 5:25-33; and in Revelation 3:20, 19:7, 21:2-9, and 22:17.

Clarification

As we saw in the previous chapter, the Bible does recount historical events. Some of the historical data in the Bible has proved useful for historians and archaeologists. However, we need to remember that the primary purpose of the Bible is not to relate historical facts. The Bible doesn’t always tell us all the historical details that we would like; and it always presents historical facts as they relate to faith and salvation.

For example, the 4 gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) recount certain historical events in the life of Jesus here on earth. However, they don’t tell us all the details of Jesus’ life. Moreover, they don’t always relate the events in chronological order, that is, in the order in which the events occurred. Why not? Because their purpose is not to put the details in chronological order, but to relate certain events so that readers will be convinced that Jesus is the Savior.

In the same way, in the Bible sometimes we can find certain sociological and scientific ideas. However, it is not a sociology or science textbook. For example, the Bible sometimes speaks poetically of the sun “rising” and “setting,” and “running from one end of the heavens to the other.” This doesn’t mean that the sun is literally moving around the earth. The Bible is speaking poetically, not scientifically. We often do the same in our everyday conversations.

The Unity of the Bible

God inspired (guided) all the different human authors of the Bible. As we've seen, this means that all the different parts of the Bible share the central purpose of encouraging readers to trust in Christ and grow in Christ. It also means that the different parts of the Bible will not contradict each other. We can use what one passage of the Bible says to understand what other passages say. The third guideline for Biblical interpretation is:

2. Let the Bible interpret the Bible.

This means that when we read a particular passage of the Bible, our interpretation should be in line with what other passages say about the same topic. For example, let's say we're looking at a Bible passage that talks about the Holy Spirit. As we try to figure out what the passage means, we should take into account the other passages of the Bible that talk about the Holy Spirit. All of them should be in agreement. If our interpretation seems to contradict what other passages are saying, that should warn us that we may be going in the wrong direction.

This guideline is sometimes called the **analogy of Scripture**. The interpretation of any given passage should be "analogous" or in harmony with the rest of Scripture. However, when you read different books on interpretation, be careful when you come across this phrase "analogy of Scripture." Some books do not use it consistently or clearly.

In general, the Bible is clear. All the major Christian teachings are taken directly from multiple parts of the Bible that speak plainly about each topic. However, there are some details in the Bible that are "hard to understand" and which are distorted by "ignorant and unstable people" (2 Peter 3:16). When we come across a difficult-to-understand detail, we interpret it in the light of the clear passages.

Example: the book of Revelation

For example, the book of Revelation speaks about the future using symbol after symbol. These symbols can be interpreted in different ways; in fact, people have come up with many different contradictory interpretations. How can we be sure that our interpretation is on the right track?

It helps a lot if we turn to other parts of the Bible that speak about the future. The same God who spoke in symbols in Revelation has also spoken much more clearly in Matthew 24 and 25, in 1 Corinthians 15, in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5, and in 2 Peter 3. When we look at the clear passages first, we'll have a good understanding of what God wants to tell us about the future, and we can fit the symbolism into that framework. We interpret the symbols in the light of the passages that speak clearly and directly.

Regrettably, quite a few people neglect this guideline. For example, some "dispensationalist" theologians make Revelation (and other highly symbolic parts of the Bible) their primary source of information. They rather arbitrarily decide to take some things in Revelation literally but other things figuratively. For example, in Revelation 20, they take the "1000 years" literally but the "chaining" of the "serpent" in the "pit" to be symbolic of taking away Satan's access to the world. The interpreters also use their own criteria for deciding the meaning of each symbol. They assume that all the visions in Revelation are in a single, chronological time line. Then they claim that their particular interpretation is the only one that is faithful to the Scriptures. The clearer passages (in Matthew, 1 Corinthians, etc.) are reinterpreted so that they fit the framework taken from the symbolic passages (mainly Revelation, but also portions of Daniel and Zechariah).

Thus, most “dispensationalists” believe not only in a 1st and 2nd coming of Christ, but in 3 or even 4 comings. They believe that there will be at least 2 different final judgments, and 2 different times when the dead will be raised. None of these things can be substantiated by the clear Biblical passages about the future. They require a particular interpretation of passages rife with symbolism. Furthermore, each “dispensationalist” differs with regard to the details of the time line. That in itself ought to be a warning against extrapolating too far on the basis of symbolism alone. Let the clear passages of Scripture explain the more difficult passages.

The Authority of the Bible

In society, certain people have authority over others. In the family, for example, the parents have authority over their small children. In the army, an officer has authority over the rank and file soldiers. In the government, the president has authority over his staff. Perhaps a young child would like to eat candy, but his father doesn't let him because it's time for dinner, time to eat something healthy. Perhaps a private in the army would rather not risk his life to capture a piece of ground, but the general knows that this is the key to winning the battle. The child and the soldier both have to set aside their own preferences and adjust to what the parent (or the general) says.

God is the ultimate authority over us all. Human authorities may make mistakes. God doesn't. Our human understanding is limited. God is infinite. Our minds are clouded by sin. God is perfect. God sees things clearly, whereas we at present “see through a mirror dimly” and “know in part,” not fully (1 Corinthians 13:12, NASB) God has authority over us, not only because he created us, but also because he knows much more and plans much better.

Thus, we need to adjust our own ideas and preferences so that they are in line with what God says in his Word. The fourth guideline of Biblical interpretation is:

3. Conform your ideas to what the Bible says.

This is not an easy guideline to put into practice. Interpreters are continually tempted to go to the Bible with their own preconceived ideas and just look for verses that seem to support what they think. Verses that say something different are ignored or changed. We make the Bible conform to what we think is reasonable.

This way of doing things is sometimes called the **magisterial use of human reason**. That is, we make our human reasoning the “magister,” the authority. Reason is first, the Bible is second.

Now, let's be clear: our human reasoning ability is a good thing. It is a gift from God. But it is also fallible. All too often we make mistakes in our thinking. Also, our human understanding is limited. There are things that reason cannot grasp. For example, who can fully understand how Jesus can be both true God and true man?

We don't need to give up logic and reason, but we do need to recognize their limitations. Our reason can only take us so far. We subordinate our reason to what God says in the Bible. This is called the **ministerial use of human reason**. That is, we make our human reasoning “minister” or serve the Bible. The Bible has the ultimate authority. Reason just helps us understand what God says. The Bible is first, reason second.

When we read the Bible, God will often challenge us to change our ideas and our perspectives. Change is not easy. In the first place, humans just don't like change in general. Secondly, even though we are Christians, we still have the old, sinful nature hanging around, and it resists anything to do with God. However, good interpretation lets God have the final word.

Example: the Trinity

This guideline can be applied to passages that speak about the Trinity (that is, that show that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but still just one God). There are many Bible passages that clearly state that the Father is God (for example, 1 Peter 1:3, 1 Corinthians 8:6), that the Son is God (for example, 1 John 5:20, Romans 9:5, John 5:23), that the Holy Spirit is God (for example, Acts 5:2-3, 2 Corinthians 3:17), that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Matthew 3:16-17) but that he is just one God (Mark 12:29, Deuteronomy 4:35). Even the Old Testament uses a plural form for the word “God” and speaks of the Spirit and of the Word as well as the Father.

However, the idea of the Trinity doesn’t make sense to human reason. Among others, the Jehovah’s Witnesses reject this idea. Once when I was speaking with a member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, I read some of the Bible passages that talk about the Trinity. I asked him, “Don’t you think these passages clearly state that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?” He replied, “Oh, but they can’t mean that!” I asked, “Why not?” He said, “Because that doesn’t make sense! God has to make sense!”

Why should we think that God always has to make sense to us? Does a baby always understand what his parents are doing? On the contrary, instead of complaining about the times when we don’t understand God, we should give thanks for all the times when God has explained things on our level. And we should adjust our ideas to the Bible, not the reverse.

Example: Matthew 5:38-48

Let’s look at an example that is a bit more specific. In Matthew 5:38-48, Jesus commands us (his disciples) to love our enemies and do good to them rather than seek vengeance. A Lutheran woman – a charter member of a congregation in Caracas – once said to me that it is not necessary for us to obey the commands of Christ in this passage. According to her, Jesus himself could keep these commands because he is God, but they are impossible for any purely human being. She felt that these words were for Jesus, not her.

On reading this passage, it is clear that Jesus is not talking to himself. On the contrary, he is talking to us, his disciples, and he is commanding us to obey these words. It’s true that it is very difficult for us to forgive rather than seek revenge. However, Jesus is calling us to do precisely that. If we fail to keep these commands, we need to ask God for forgiveness, not try to justify ourselves by sidestepping his clear words.

As you can see, even though this lady was a committed Christian, she fell into the temptation of changing the Bible to fit her own comfort zone. Many other people have done the same thing. Today, some Bible scholars claim that it is false to say that the Bible “is” the Word of God; rather, we should say that the Bible “contains” the Word of God. That is, they believe that some parts of the Bible are God’s Word and other parts are not. Furthermore, they feel that they are capable of distinguishing which parts come from God and which don’t. In other words, if the Bible says something that doesn’t agree with their ideas, they can just say that it isn’t really part of God’s Word.

Other scholars claim that the Bible “gives testimony” to the way that some people have perceived God. That is, they believe that the Bible gives one side of things, but other perspectives are also valid. In this way, they don’t have to pay attention to anything the Bible says that conflicts with their own ideas.

Interpreters have used many different tricks to sidestep or to change what the Bible says. However, if we truly want to hear what God is saying, we need to let the Bible change our thoughts and actions instead of imposing our ideas on the Bible.

The Transforming Power of the Bible

Through the Bible, God not only wants to change our ideas and thoughts; he also wants to transform our hearts and our lives. Some interpreters of the Bible limit themselves to extracting the teachings or doctrines that the text presents. It is true, of course, that the Bible teaches us many truths. However, it does more than that. Hebrews 4:12 states: *For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (NIV)*

In recent years, different philosophers have come to realize that words have more power than they previously thought. For example, suppose we are at the dinner table, and someone says the simple words “Is there any salt?” On the surface, this is a simple question asking whether there is salt in the house. Philosophers call this a locution, an utterance, something said. However, below the surface, the person is probably really requesting that someone actually pass them some salt. Philosophers call this an illocution, what the speaker really intended to communicate behind the surface words. Finally, these simple words may result in someone going and getting the salt. Philosophers call this a perlocution, an action that is caused by the words spoken. So the purpose of the words was not just information, but action. And speaking the words caused an action to occur.

You don’t have to be a philosopher to know that God’s Word is powerful. When God says something, it becomes reality. For example, Genesis 1:3 tells us that God created the heavens and the earth by his Word. Thus, when God condemns our sin in the Bible (for example, in Matthew 5:22), we are truly in trouble. However, when God forgives us for Jesus’ sake (for example, in 1 John 1:8-9) we are really forgiven.

Whenever we read the Bible, the Holy Spirit is working on our hearts to convince us and change us. To this end, sometimes the symbols, parables and Bible stories have more impact on our hearts than doctrine and logic. When I was younger, I was a real “Enlightenment” guy, that is, I practically worshipped reason and logic. Sometimes it bugged me that the Bible spent so much space on poetry and flowery language and stories. I felt that it was a pain to extract the important stuff – the doctrines – from that kind of literature. Why did God bother?

I have since come to understand that God is interested in the heart as well as the mind. When we read the Bible, we don’t just extract sound teaching; we also get to know God himself and his love. God speaks to us and works changes in us. Thus, the fifth guideline for interpreting the Bible is:

4. Note how God touches hearts through each Bible passage.

When you interpret a Bible passage, don’t just find the abstract truths, but also note how the passage leads people to know God and his love, and his power to transform lives. Consider how each part of the Bible – history, teaching, symbol, poetry – impacts the heart.

Example: Psalm 23

Psalm 23 (“The Lord is my Shepherd”) is probably the most famous of all the Psalms. When I call on people in the hospital, they almost invariably want to hear me read Psalm 23. It is a

standard part of almost every funeral service. Even people who have not darkened a church door in years love to hear that Psalm.

Why is it so popular? It's only a few lines long. We could condense its message into just a few words, for example: "God will take care of me." File that under the doctrinal category of "God's Grace" and we're done, right?

Well, no, we're not done. God is doing more than that with the Psalm 23. Somehow, the Holy Spirit is using imagery and poetry to move people, even some who may want nothing to do with the church or its doctrine. Through these words, God is communicating something very personal: "I'm here with you, no matter what." Even though the name "Jesus" is not explicitly mentioned, we all know that he is in fact the "good shepherd" (John 10). So the Holy Spirit works through the Psalm towards a response of faith in Christ, even for people who are on their sickbed or who are grieving.

So if you are writing an interpretation of Psalm 23, you'll need to do more than just list the teachings it contains. You should note the poetry, the images, the personal language. And if you preach on this text, you should consider including stories or poems that bring home God's love in a personal way. How does God touch our hearts through this text?

We'll study more about God's transforming power in the chapter on Law and Gospel and the chapter on Reader Response.

Summary

So far, we have just been exploring some interpretive guidelines based on the fact that the Bible is the Word of God:

1. Pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance.
2. Interpret each part of the Bible in accordance with its relationship to Christ and his salvation (the Christocentric guideline).
3. Let the Bible interpret the Bible (the analogy of Scripture).
4. Conform your ideas to what the Bible says (the ministerial use of Scripture).
5. Note how God touches hearts through each Bible passage (the transforming power of Scripture).

In the next chapter, we'll look at a very important Lutheran contribution to Biblical interpretation: the distinction of Law and Gospel.

Special Reading: the Deuterocanonical Books

This is an optional reading for those who want a few more details about the “extra” books added by the Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox to the Old Testament.

Introduction

The Catholic version of the Bible has a few “extra” books in the Old Testament, compared to the Protestant Bible. Catholics also add a few extra chapters to the books of Daniel and Esther. Many Eastern Orthodox Christians add more “extra” books than even the Catholics. What’s going on? Why are these books in some Bibles and not others? Which books are really part of God’s Word?

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Nevertheless, centuries later, the Roman Catholic Church (around 1545) and the Eastern Orthodox Church (around 1672) formally approved adding some of these books to their Bibles. By contrast, the Lutheran Church (and virtually all of the non-Catholic, non-Orthodox churches) did **not** accept any of these books as part of the Bible, precisely because they had not been included from the beginning. How did this come about?

Background: A Shift in Language

In order to understand what happened, we need a little background. First of all, between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament, the Hebrew language was in decline. At one point in history, Hebrew (and its “sister language” Aramaic) were the “international languages” spoken throughout Palestine and a good portion of the Middle East. However, as time passed, fewer and fewer people spoke Hebrew. Greek emerged as the new international language.

As more and more Jews began to speak Greek, different scholars began to translate the Old Testament books from Hebrew into Greek. We know of several different ancient Greek translations. (For example, Origen published 4 different Greek translations side by side in the “Hexapla.”) However, as time passed, the most popular translation became the *Septuagint*.

Actually, it is a bit misleading to speak of the *Septuagint* as a single translation. “Septuagint” means “70.” According to a legend, 70 Jewish scribes traveled to Egypt and then translated the whole Old Testament in 70 days. Sometimes the *Septuagint* is abbreviated “LXX” (which is the number 70 in roman numerals).

Regrettably, in this case the legend is not correct. In reality, each book of the Old Testament was translated by different people at different times, and probably in different places. It was only later that these separate translations of different books were brought together as a whole. Some books in the *Septuagint* are translated very carefully, almost word for word in their accuracy. Other books are paraphrased, translated freely (almost carelessly).

At the same time that the *Septuagint* was being put together, the “apocryphal” books were being written. Most if not all of these books were written in Greek, probably in Egypt. If any of them

was not originally written in Greek, it was soon translated. The books in general promote faith in the one true God, and they became very popular. They were “best sellers” of their day.

Thus, Greek translations of the books of the Old Testament were circulating at the same time as other popular religious books in Greek. This leads us to the second important shift which took place.

Background: A Shift in Book Binding

For years and years, books were written on scrolls. Scrolls are bulky; you can't fit all that much writing on a single scroll. For that reason, each Old Testament book (and each apocryphal book) circulated as a separate scroll. There were some exceptions; for example, the writings of the twelve “minor prophets” of the Old Testament were so short, they were often lumped together on one scroll. However, for the most part, each book had its own scroll.

Thus, individual books were circulating separately. In the synagogues and at the Temple in Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders took care to distinguish between the Biblical scrolls and the other scrolls in their collections. Individual people who were wealthy enough to own scrolls, were not necessarily so discriminating.

When Jesus came, virtually all of the first Christians were Jewish. Many of them were familiar with the apocryphal books as well as the Old Testament books. As tensions grew between Christian Jews and non-Christian Jews, the Christians were increasingly isolated from the synagogues. At the same time, more and more non-Jews became Christians. Most if not all the New Testament books were written in Greek. If any book was not originally written in Greek (possibly the book of Matthew), it was quickly translated.

Shortly after the writing of the New Testament (towards the end of the 1st Century after Christ), the **codex** became popular. A *codex* is a bound book, that is, a stack of sheets of paper (or parchment or papyrus or something similar) with one edge “bound” or stuck together. A *codex* has many advantages over a scroll. It is more compact, so more writing can be stored in a much smaller area. Most scrolls are written only on one side; the codex can have writing on both sides of a page. A codex generally lasts longer than a scroll, and different passages can be accessed easily by just turning to the page rather than running through the scroll bit by bit.

With the *codex*, for the first time all the books of the Old Testament could be gathered in one document. In fact, non-biblical books could also fit in the same *codex*. On my own bookshelves today, I have a Bible that also contains Luther's Small Catechism. The Catechism is not part of the Scriptures themselves, but the publishing house believes that the Catechism is of great value and that it is worthwhile to publish both the Bible and the Catechism together in one binding. Perhaps you have something similar, a study Bible or a devotional Bible that contains not only the Biblical text but also a concordance, maps, devotions, or other documents in the same binding. In the same way, when the *codex* first became popular, some people bound together not only the Biblical books, but also other, apocryphal books that they liked.

Although the *codices* last longer than scrolls, they eventually wear out. Today, we have in our hands only four copies of the *Septuagint* in the form of a *codex*. They date from the 4th and 5th Centuries after Christ. This means that each of these copies was written at least 200 years after the codex first became popular. Each of these copies contains some apocryphal books; however, there is a bit of variation with regard to which books are included. Here is a list of the apocryphal books that have been included with different codices of the *Septuagint*:

Extrabiblical Books in Different Codices of the <i>Septuagint</i>			
Codex Vaticanus (4th Century AD)	Codex Sinaïticus (4th Century AD)	Codex Alexandrinus (5th Century AD)	Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (5th Century AD)
Tobit Judith Wisdom Sirach Baruch Epistle of Jeremiah Prayer of Manasses Psalms of Solomon	Tobit Judith Wisdom Sirach 1 Maccabees 4 Maccabees	Tobit Judith Wisdom Sirach Baruch Epistle of Jeremiah 1 y 2 Maccabees 3 y 4 Maccabees Prayer of Manasses Psalms of Solomon	Wisdom Sirach <i>Most of the Old Testament is missing from this manuscript</i>

In addition to these “extra” books, the first three versions of the *Septuagint* generally add some chapters to the books of Esther and Daniel.

Codex Alexandrinus also adds Psalm 151 to the book of Psalms.

(See MacDonald p. 442, Steinmann p. 171, Kaiser p. 1)

Increasing Popularity of Some of the “Extra Books”

Because some of the apocryphal books were so popular and because they appeared in some copies of the *Septuagint*, as time passed some Christian congregations began reading certain portions in their churches. By the time of the 4th Century AD, Christian theologians were arguing over these books. For example, Jerome (347-420 AD) did not believe that these books belonged in the Bible, because they did not form part of the Hebrew Old Testament. On the other hand, Augustine (354-430 AD) argued that the Christian church, guided by God, should determine which books belonged in the Bible. Augustine also may have been influenced by the legend of the *Septuagint* translation. Many theologians of that time felt that the *Septuagint* translations were just as inspired as the Hebrew original. And since some copies of the *Septuagint* included some apocryphal books, why not include them in the Bible?

Jerome translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Latin. At the same time, Jerome also translated some of the apocryphal books that appeared in the copies of the *Septuagint* – although it is clear from his writings that he did not consider them to be Scripture. Jerome’s Latin translation (the *Vulgate*) in time became the *de facto* Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. Not all of the apocryphal books made it into the *Vulgate*. Jerome translated Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, the Epistle of Jeremiah, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. Later versions of the *Vulgate* sometimes include other apocryphal books, like the Prayer of Manasses and 4 Maccabees. Some later versions of the *Vulgate* also include books that are not found in the *Septuagint*, such as 3 and 4 Esdras.

Scriptures Alone

Centuries later, Roman Catholic theologians began to use portions of the book of 2 Maccabees to justify the practices of praying to the saints and paying for the sins of the dead (to get them out of purgatory). 2 Maccabees 15:11-17 speaks about a deceased high priest who appeared in a vision. This is not exactly an exhortation to pray to the saints, but Catholic theologians took it to mean

that deceased holy people could act on behalf of the living. 2 Maccabees 12:42-45 relates the story of how a commander ordered sacrifices to be made at the Temple to pay for his fallen soldiers' sins. 2 Maccabees says that this story is included in order to show the commander's faith in the resurrection. Catholic theologians took it to mean that they could help deceased people leave purgatory sooner by having masses for the dead, buying indulgences, or doing other things to pay for their sins.

At the time of the Reformation, Luther and the other Reformers objected to these practices. They also insisted that the apocryphal books should not be considered part of the Bible. According to the Reformers, the Old Testament should only include those books which were accepted as the Word of God at the time of Jesus. These "extra" books were not part of the original Old Testament; on the contrary, they were human writings that were later accepted because of human traditions. One of the mottos of the Reformation was: "*Sola Scriptura*," that is, "Scriptures alone." It's not that the Reformers hated tradition. Tradition can be helpful! However, the Reformers insisted that human traditions could not be on a par with the inspired Word of God.

By contrast, Roman Catholics believe that the same Holy Spirit who inspired the books of the Bible is still inspiring their church and its traditions. Thus, for Catholics, certain traditions are not purely human, but guided by God. Who decides which books are included in the Bible? According to Catholics, the church hierarchy decides, guided by the Holy Spirit and by tradition. For them, the Reformers were attacking God's church by challenging this holy tradition.

Extra Books Made Official

During the Council of Trent (around 1545), the Roman Catholic Church officially accepted certain apocryphal books as part of the Bible. Note that the Catholics did not accept **all** of the books that appear in the different codices of the *Septuagint*. However, they did accept the **majority**.

Roman Catholics do not like to use the term "apocryphal" to describe these "extra" books that they have accepted. Instead, they use the term "deuterocanonical." The word "canon" refers to the Bible, the Holy Scriptures. The "canonical" books are those original books of the Old Testament which all believers accept as God's Word (Catholic and non-Catholic, throughout the ages). The word "deuterocanonical" means "second canon." The "deuterocanonical" books are those "extra" books which the Roman Catholic Church has added later to the Old Testament.

The Roman Catholics are not the only ones to include some of these "extra" books in the Bible. In 1672, the Eastern Orthodox Church also formally recognized some of these books as God's Word. In fact, the Orthodox Church accepts several more books than the Catholics. On the following page is a list of the "deuterocanonical" books accepted by different churches.

Deuterocanonical Books Accepted as God's Word by Different Churches		
Protestant Church	Roman Catholic Church	Eastern Orthodox Church
Does not accept any book that does not appear in the Hebrew Old Testament.	Tobit Judith Some chapters added to the book of Esther 1 y 2 Maccabees Wisdom Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) Baruch Epistle of Jeremiah Some chapters added to the book of Daniel	Tobit Judith Some chapters added to the book of Esther 1 y 2 Maccabees 3 Maccabees Psalm 151 Wisdom Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) Baruch Epistle of Jeremiah Some chapters added to the book of Daniel 1 Esdras (also called 3 Esdras)

(See MacDonald p. 443-444)

You will note that the extra books recognized by each church do not correspond exactly with the books found in different codices of the *Septuagint*. For example, no church accepts 4 Maccabees or the Psalms of Solomon, although these books appear in some of the copies of the *Septuagint*. On the other hand, the Orthodox Church accepts 1 Esdras (also called 3 Esdras), which doesn't appear in any of the extant copies of the *Septuagint*.

Summary of the Content of the Deuterocanonical Books

"Historical" Books

1 and 2 Maccabees: Relate the story of the Jewish war for independence from Syrian oppressors, led by Judas Maccabee and his brothers. ("Maccabee" means "hammer.") 1 Maccabees relates more of the historical facts, and 2 Maccabees is more inspirational.

3 Maccabees: A legend about the persecution of the Jews in Egypt after the victory of the Maccabees. Many scholars do not consider the details of this book to be historical.

1 Esdras (also called 3 Esdras): Different traditions assign different numbers to this book. It briefly relates the events from the time of the good King Josiah until the reading of the Law by Ezra.

Fictional Stories with a Moral

Tobit: This is a fictional story which teaches that angels guide those who pray and do good. In the story, Tobit goes on a long journey and with the help of an angel, comes back with wealth, with medicine for his ailing father, and with a wife.

Judith: This fictional story teaches that God is the true sovereign of the world. Judith, trusting in God, deceives and kills the general of an enemy army that is threatening her city.

Prophetical Books

Baruch: Baruch was the prophet Jeremiah's secretary. This book of prophecies was supposedly written by Baruch during the Babylonian exile. It calls the people to repentance and promises salvation to those who repent.

Epistle of Jeremiah: This book supposedly is a letter which the prophet Jeremiah sent to the Israelites who were taken into exile. The letter emphasizes that idols have no power.

Wisdom Books

Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus): This is a book of wisdom literature which affirms the value of Jewish tradition in the midst of clashes with Greek culture (*Hellenism*). Sirach affirms that all the wisdom in the world comes from God, and can be attained by keeping God's commandments.

Wisdom: This book goes farther than Sirach in affirming the value of the Jewish religion in an environment where Greek culture predominates. Supposedly Solomon wrote this book to warn kings and leaders to love justice and seek God wholeheartedly.

Extra Chapters Added to Biblical Books

Chapters added to the Book of Esther: The Biblical book of Esther never directly mentions the name of God. These added chapters emphasize clearly that God himself acted through Esther to save the Jews.

Chapters added to the Book of Daniel: Several passages are added: a prayer, a song, and two stories. The prayer and the song show the faith of Daniel's friends (the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Children). The story of Susannah emphasizes the wisdom and justice of Daniel. The story of Bel and the Dragon underlines the zeal of Daniel for the true God, opposing any form of idolatry.

Psalms 151: This is a dramatic poem attributed to David. It speaks of his life as a shepherd and musician, and celebrates his anointing by God and his victory over Goliath.

Conclusion

So what can we do about this situation? Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit guided their church's hierarchy to accept the deuterocanonical books as inspired. Protestants (and Lutherans) believe that human traditions – no matter how well-intentioned – should not be allowed to add to the original Scriptures.

Some Protestant Christians disparage the deuterocanonical books and feel that they need to make it a priority to confront Catholics with their error. Personally, I don't think that attitude is very helpful. For one thing, the deuterocanonical books do contain some good encouragement for believers. Yes, it's true that the Roman Catholic Church has used a few lines out of these books to support some doctrinal errors. However, that does not mean that the books themselves are

irredeemably evil. They just aren't on a par with the Scriptures. Luther felt that it reading these books is worthwhile; they were even printed in a separate section in Luther's Bible.

Secondly, unless we're having a theological discussion about this particular point, it's usually not worthwhile to spend a lot of time fighting about it. Most people are not reading any Bible at all (whether Catholic or non-Catholic). With them, our time would be better spent sharing Christ's salvation. Later, as people grow in their faith and discover the history behind these deuterocanonical books, they often realize that these extra books are just human writings.

Thus, if someone insists on the Catholic Bible (with its deuterocanonical books), I prefer to encourage him or her to actually read it rather than fight about who is right. We might say, for example, "It's true that Catholics have several extra books in their Bibles. They added these books formally around 1545, following a long tradition. We Lutherans, on the other hand, only accept the original books of the Bible. However, I'm not interested in fighting over who is right. If you prefer the Catholic Bible, then read it and put it into practice!"