

Deuterocanonical Books of the Old Testament

*Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel:
Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you. ~ Jeremiah 30:2*

 ONE OF THE MOST frequently asked questions about the Bible by Christians who are not Catholic is why there are seven more books in a Catholic Bible than a Protestant one. The answer to this question involves a little research into Church history as well as into Judaism in the centuries just before and after Christ.

The deuterocanonical (a word meaning “second canon” or second list) books of the Old Testament are those not usually found in a Hebrew or Protestant Bible. They are: Judith, Tobit, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, and Baruch, plus parts of Daniel and Esther. By about 100 BC, a Greek translation of the entire Old Testament, including a number of books existing only in Greek, was made for the use of Jews who lived outside Palestine and who had difficulty reading Hebrew. The seven books listed above are those originally written in Greek. However, the Jews in Palestine eventually rejected this translation, and late in 100 AD began to draw up their own list of Old Testament books, and excluded them.

This controversy between Greek- and Hebrew-speaking Jews did not seem to affect the Church. In fact, when the New Testament books were being written, the Greek and not the Hebrew text was almost exclusively used when an Old Testament reference was quoted. It is true that no references from the deuterocanonical books appear in the New Testament, but if that alone were the sole criterion for determining their value, then we would also have to exclude other Old Testament books which are also not cited, notably Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs.

It is clear that, during the first few centuries of the Church’s history, the deuterocanonical books were not thought to be inspired Scripture by everyone, but by the end of the 4th century these books were universally accepted by the Church in the canon (that is, in the official list of books recognized as inspired by the Holy Spirit).

Even St. Jerome, the great biblical scholar

who at first disputed these books, later included them in the official Latin Bible translation called the Vulgate. This Latin Bible was used for nearly a thousand years throughout the Christian world before the invention of the printing press around 1450, when Bibles began to be printed in other languages.

The printing press made the Bible more accessible to people, but also brought many problems. The work of translation is very tedious and requires great skill and knowledge. Many of the translations were poorly done and full of discrepancies. Even the King James Version, which was and still is one of the better translations, had over 30,000 errors in it. Amidst this printing frenzy came Martin Luther.

When Martin Luther broke from the Church, he rejected the deuterocanonical books, not out of any concern for whether they had been written in Greek or Hebrew, but for doctrinal reasons. For example, in 2 Maccabees 15:12-16, a story is told of a vision in which the dead are praying and interceding for the People of Israel. Luther rejected the doctrine that the dead could intercede for the living and so excluded 2 Maccabees and all the other deuterocanonical books in his translation of the Bible. Even books in the New Testament, such as the Letter of James and the Letter to the Hebrews, were initially rejected by Luther because they did not fit his theological views on faith and salvation.

Today, because of the work of joint scholarship among Protestants and Catholics, many Protestant groups accept the value of these books. Anglicans and Episcopalians now use them in their prayer and liturgy. And even many non-Catholic Bibles include them between their covers, usually listed separately at the end in a section called “apocryphal writings” — that is, additional writings not considered to be God’s inspired word — or simply the Apocrypha. Sometimes this section also includes books not recognized

as canonical by the Catholic Church.

(CCC 120)

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