

Where We Got the Bible

Many types of Christian churches identify themselves as being “Bible-Believing,” “Whole Gospel,” or “Bible Based.” But you never hear of a Catholic Church identified that way. When was the last time you heard of

“St Joseph’s Bible-Believing Catholic Church,”
or “St Mary’s Whole Gospel Catholic Church?”

Many Protestants, especially those of the more fundamentalist groups, would even say that the Catholic Church is not a Bible based church! And you know what? They’re right! The Catholic Church is NOT a Bible based church!

Even more commonly, you might hear, “Catholic beliefs are not in the Bible! They are just the traditions of men that Jesus condemned. (Mark 7:8)

Many people, even many Catholics are surprised to learn that the Catholic Church places a very different emphasis on the place of the Sacred Scriptures in the life of the Church than do many other groups of Christians. Many of the evangelicals or fundamentalists don’t know or place much emphasis on the study of history. Without an appreciation for history, it is easy to have a distorted view of things without even realizing that your vision is skewed.

In order to really understand the Scriptures and their place, and relevance in the life of the Church, and in our own lives, it is absolutely necessary to know the origins and history of the development of the Bible. Many Christian groups seem to believe that the Bible, usually in the King James version, simply fell out of heaven, entire and complete. Of course, that is not realistic. The truth is, the Bible, like all things, has a history of development. Without an appreciation for this history, we cannot understand the relevance of the Bible.

The first question we have to ask is one that honestly doesn’t even occur to most people. The reason it doesn’t occur to them is because they think the answer is obvious. That question is, “What is the Bible?” Well the answer is, of course, the Bible is a large book, usually bound in black leather, that was written a long time ago and it tells us about God. Simple, right?

Well, actually, no. That image of the Bible as a single bound volume actually keeps us from realizing just what the Bible is. The Bible was never written as one big book. In fact the word “Bible” means “books.” Not one book, but many books. That’s why we say, “the book of Genesis,” or “the book of Romans.”

In ancient Egypt there grew a plant called papyrus. It’s a pithy, reed-like plant from which they made paper in the ancient world. In fact, our modern English word “paper” comes from the name of that plant. In ancient Phoenicia, a small country on the Mediterranean Sea north of Israel, (approximately where modern Lebanon is today) there was a city known by the Greek name, “Byblos”. The city was famous because it exported papyrus all over the known world. So a book made from the papyrus became known as a “biblos.” So biblo means book. The English word Bible comes from the plural of biblos, “Biblia.” So Bible means books.

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That's because there are 73 different books in the Bible, each of which actually existed as an independent book. These books were written by different authors over the course of well over a thousand years.

Most people know that the Bible is divided into two parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is composed of 46 different books. These are the Scriptures of the ancient Hebrew people. The Protestant version of the Bible only contains 39 books in the Old Testament. So some Protestants accuse Catholics of adding seven books to the Old Testament of the Bible, while some Catholics accuse Protestants of removing these seven books from the Bible. A quick look at the tables of contents reveals that the seven books in question are: Tobit, Judith, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), and Baruch; as well as some additions to Esther and Daniel. The New Testament contains the same 27 books. So what is the real story here? Where did these seven Old Testament books come from? Do they belong in the Bible? What's the real story here.

Well, there is no short, quick answer to this question. First you have to know a little Jewish history; but it's not terribly complex. At one time the nation of Israel was a very powerful nation in the Middle East of the ancient world. This was during the historical period of the United Kingdom which contains the reigns of the great King David and his son Solomon (~1050 BC to 930 BC). This period of 120 years was the Golden Age of Israel.

After the death of King Solomon the nation of Israel became politically and religiously divided. The northern portion of the country followed a new king and called their kingdom Israel. The southern portion followed King Solomon's son and called their kingdom Judah. There were originally twelve tribes that composed the nation of Israel. Ten of those tribes became the new kingdom of Israel, while two of the tribes, Judah the largest and Benjamin the smallest, became the kingdom of Judah. The two new kingdoms then bickered and warred between themselves, and, at times came to each other's assistance.

Eventually, the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrian Empire (not to be confused with the modern state of Syria). To keep conquered peoples from rebelling, the Assyrians would deport all the literate people to other parts of the empire, leaving only farmers and simple people in their homeland. They would then take other people from other parts of the empire to replace the deported people. In this way the ten northern tribes became known as "The Ten Lost Tribes of Israel" and effectively disappeared from history. In their place the mixed race of the Samaritans was born.

Meanwhile, the kingdom of Judah continued and the people eventually became known as the Jews. Several years later they were conquered by the Babylonian empire and the same scenario was repeated. The Jews were deported to Babylon where they remained for some seventy years. The Babylonians, however, were more tolerant than were the Assyrians, and the Jews were allowed to live together and keep their ethnic and religious identity intact. The Babylonians were in turn conquered by the Persians who allowed the Jews to return to Judah and rebuild their temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

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The next great event in world history occurred when Alexander the Great conquered most of the entire known world. Under the influence of Alexander and his successors, Greek language, culture and religion were spread over the entire world. Most people spoke at least two languages, their own native regional dialect and Greek. Greek became the lingua franca of the civilized world. By that time, the native language of Judah was Aramaic, the language of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. Hebrew was only a liturgical language used in religious rituals.

In Alexandria, Egypt, a great city of Hellenist (Greek) culture, there stood the greatest library in the ancient world. The library of Alexandria strove to acquire a Greek copy of every book written in the world. There was also a large Jewish population living there. The library wanted to obtain a copy of the Jewish Scriptures in Greek. They sent to Jerusalem, and over the course of many years the Jewish Scriptures were translated into Greek. This translation was known as the “Septuagint.” The Septuagint became the Scriptures read by most Jews. In the years following Jesus’ resurrection, the Apostles spread the Gospel throughout the world using the only Scriptures they had, the Greek Septuagint. The Septuagint would later become the Old Testament of the Catholic Bible.

Eventually, the Jews rebelled against their Greek masters and won their independence. This is recorded in the books of 1st and 2nd Maccabees in the Old Testament of the Catholic Bible. Jewish leaders sought to restore the place of Hebrew in their religion. They gathered together the various books of the Scriptures that had been originally written in Hebrew, but discarded those that had been originally written either in Aramaic or Greek. The result was 39 books known as the “Palestinian Canon.”

Now let’s take a look at the development of the New Testament. In the first century following Christ. The Apostles and then their disciples, the Apostolic Fathers, began to write. At first they wrote letters of encouragement and instruction to the churches they had founded. Then the Gospels were written narrating the life of Jesus. After a while much more was written. Some authors wrote using their own names (the Books of Clement, for example). Many more were written using the names of famous early Christians, or those associated with the Gospel narrative (the Gospel of Nicodemus or the Acts of Pilate, for example) in order to lend more credence to their writings. Some books written at this time were sacred, inspired books. Some contain good Christian instruction, although not on a par with inspired Scripture. Then there were some books that were terribly heretical. There were over 200 books written in all. But there are only 27 books in the New Testament! The critical questions are then, who decided which books should go into the New Testament as sacred inspired Scripture, and what did they base their decisions on?

There was only one Christian Church for the first 1500 years following the life of Christ, and that was the Catholic Church. Many Protestants want to deny that the early Church held Catholic beliefs, but reading the writings left by the disciples of the Apostles shows they were very much Catholic.

St. Ignatius of Antioch who died between 98 and 117 A.D. wrote:

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“See that you all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery (priests) as you would the apostles...wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”

St Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John and Bishop of Smyrna wrote in 155 or 156 A.D.:

“The Church of God which sojourns at Smyrna, to the Church of God sojourning in Philomelium, and to all the congregations of the Holy and Catholic Church in every place.”

The writings of the Apostolic Fathers and those of the Early Church Fathers are full of references to Catholic beliefs. The early Church identified itself as “Catholic,” a Greek word meaning universal. It called itself the Catholic Church because it was open to all people of every class, race and nation (Mark 16:15; Galatians 3:28; Revelation 5:9).

It was the Catholic Church that decided which books would go into the New Testament. This was decided at the Synod of Rome in 382 A.D. under Pope Damasus I. This was later confirmed at the Synods of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397).

The Church used as its three main criteria in deciding which books were chosen as Scripture:

1. That the books were either written by an Apostle, or one who was closely involved with an Apostle. For example, neither Mark nor Luke were Apostles, but Mark was closely connected with St Peter for many years and knew what he preached about Jesus. Similarly, Luke traveled extensively with St Paul as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles.
2. That the books were universally accepted by the Church. Certain areas accepted books that were rejected in other areas. Those that were chosen were accepted everywhere.
3. That the books had been accepted as genuine by the Early Church Fathers.

So it was the Catholic Church that took the various books, decided which ones were Sacred Scripture and which ones were not. The Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament) was then combined with the 27 books chosen to make up the New Testament, and the Bible, as one volume, was born. It must be kept in mind that none of the original books written by the original authors still exist. They were either lost or destroyed in the early centuries of Church history. The letters and gospels written by the New Testament authors were frequently read in public worship. They were also copied many times so that the various congregations could have copies. They were handled quite a bit and that alone would take its toll on the materials on which the books were written. Also, many books were burned and destroyed by the authorities during the Roman persecutions of the Church. All that we have now are copies of copies of copies. Our earliest copies are from the 5th Century. So this raises the question, “How do we know that these copies say the same things as the originals?” Answer: because the Catholic Church says so. It was the Church, after all, that made the copies, thus preserving the Scriptures.

Until the 1500's this was the one and only Christian Bible. It was translated into Latin in the 4th Century by the great biblical scholar, St Jerome. Latin was the language of the Roman Empire

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that had long since conquered the known world. All educated people spoke and read Latin. St Jerome's translation became known as the Latin Vulgate. That became the official version of the Holy Bible for the only Church that existed, and made the Scriptures accessible to more people than ever before. So the Catholic Church is not Bible based. The Bible is Church based. That is, the Catholic Church was not founded upon the authority of the Bible. Instead, the Bible is based upon the authority that Christ gave His Church. Any Christian who accepts the New Testament is accepting the authority and tradition of the Catholic Church!

When Martin Luther led his rebellion against the Catholic Church in the 1500s, he made some changes that would forever affect the history of the Bible. He decided that his new church needed a new Bible. Instead of using the Old Testament from the Christian Bible, he used the Jewish version from the "Palestinian Canon." That is how the Protestant Bible lost the seven missing books. Luther also wanted to drop several books from the New Testament, but his followers would not agree. They said the people would never accept it. So he did not drop any New Testament books although he never accepted the books of James, which he called "an epistle of straw" nor Revelation, of which he said, "a revelation should be revealing." However, he did add to the Protestant New Testament. Where St Paul says, "For we account a man to be justified by faith, without the works of the law." (Romans 3:28), Martin Luther added the word "alone," causing the text to read, "For we account a man to be justified by faith alone, without the works of the law." There is nothing in the Greek to support this.

Why did Martin Luther do this? It was because Martin Luther did not seek to "re-form" Christianity. Instead he created a whole new church, in fact a whole new religion. He founded this new religion upon two doctrines that had never been a part of the Christian faith. These two doctrines are called:

1. **sola fides** (faith alone) – The belief that we are saved by faith alone without any consideration of our actions. No wonder he didn't like the book of James that says, "Faith without works is dead." (James 2:17)
2. **sola scriptura** (Scripture alone) – The belief that all Christian truth is contained in the Bible, therefore, there is no need for Christian tradition nor for the teaching authority of the Church.

All Protestant denominations are founded upon these two principles, neither of which is supported by Scripture. Since I am discussing the Scriptures here, I will confine myself to a brief comment on sola scriptura. It seems amazing to me that the Bible would contain all truth even though the Bible never once makes that claim. If the Bible was intended to contain all Christian truth, wouldn't it contain that truth? What the Bible does say is that there were things Jesus said and did that were not written down (John 21:25). It also says that the early Church taught things that were spread by word of mouth, but not written down and it calls these things traditions (2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6). Since the 4th Century there has been a Catholic Bible and since the 16th Century there has been a Protestant Bible with seven less books in the Old Testament. Both Bibles, in many different versions have been translated into just about every language in the world. I am often asked which version or translation is best. The stock answer to that question is, "The best Bible is the one you'll read!" After all, it doesn't make much difference which Bible you have if you don't actually read it. However, people's tastes are different. There seem to be three main criteria that determine if the Bible you own is one that you will actually read. Keep in

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mind there is no perfect Bible. Each version has its own strengths and weaknesses. These criteria are as follows:

1. Readability
2. Accuracy of translation
3. Beauty of expression

Readability – Certain versions of the Bible are much more readable than are others. For many readers, especially new readers, this is a very important consideration. In my opinion, the most readable version is the New American Bible, which is also the version approved by the U.S. Bishops. It is, however, not the most accurate version. Another Bible that is pretty readable is the Jerusalem Bible.

Accuracy – Some versions are generally more accurate translations than are others. This becomes an important consideration for university students or those engaged in serious biblical studies. For accuracy, I like the Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition. It is highly accurate, and while not as readable as the New American Bible, it's not bad. I don't find the beauty of expression to be very impressive, however.

Beauty of Expression – Some versions of the Scriptures are worded so beautifully they are truly works of art. For beauty of expression I prefer the older, more traditional Catholic versions like the Douay-Rheims. Its weak point is its readability, but the wording is truly beautiful. This is because, unlike the two previously mentioned versions, it is translated from the Latin Vulgate, rather than from the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts.

Which one do I like best overall? It's the one you like best, the one that you will read and use. Many people like to have two: one for its readability for just reading. The New American Bible is a good choice for this. And a second Bible that may not be as easy to read, but which is more accurate for study. For this I would recommend the New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition.