

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

In the Light of Scripture

by

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CHAPTER TWO

THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

Without the interpretation of a divine infallible teaching apostolate, distinct from the Bible, we could never know with divine certainty which books constituted the inspired Scriptures, or whether the copies we possess today agree with the originals. The Question Box, page 76 (The Paulist Press, N. Y.).

NEEDLESS TO SAY, Rome claims to be “*the divine infallible teaching apostolate*,” which can teach with “*divine certainty, which books constitute the inspired Scriptures*.” She cannot be charged with excessive modesty. The question of her infallibility will be dealt with in Chapter 8. Suffice it to say here, that for reasons very inadequately set forth in that chapter Protestants cannot, in reason, accept the claim made, which is palpably false.

Her giving to church tradition equal authority with the written Word of God (Chapter 3) invalidates her claim even as a reliable teaching authority, let alone an infallible one, and her acceptance of the apocryphal books as part of the canonical Scriptures accentuates her untrustworthiness as a guide.

If we reject Rome’s authority to decide what books are canonical and what are not, to what authority can we appeal? That is a fair question, and not one which can be fully answered in a few words. But let us face it, first dealing with the Old Testament.

The books of the Old Testament from Genesis to Malachi were written over a period of roughly a thousand years. They remind us of many of our ancient cathedrals, over the course of centuries, that fill us with awe and wonder. The historian Josephus, born in A.D. 37, and Jewish tradition, as well as internal evidence, point to Ezra as the one probably responsible for gathering together the various Old Testament writings into what, in the time of our Lord and His apostles, was acknowledged as the canon of Scripture. It was to these collected writings that our Lord constantly appealed as the “**Scriptures**” calling them “**the Word of God**.” These Hebrew Scriptures, in accepted use long before our Lord was born, contained all the books found in our Protestant Old Testament, though their order was a little different.

Between 285 and 247 B.C., the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek at Alexandria for use in the Greek-speaking world, and to them were added a number of apocryphal books written after the completion of the Old Testament canon. These the Palestinian Jews refused to acknowledge as part of the Scriptures. Both the Hebrew and Septuagint Greek Scriptures were in current use during the time of our Lord and His apostles. He and His disciples in their writings quoted from the Old Testament Scriptures some 350 times. About 300 of these quotations are from the Septuagint, but there is not a single quotation taken from the apocryphal books.

That argument may be negative only, but it is too significant to be passed over, and by itself carries more weight against the divine authority of the Apocrypha than all the positive pronouncements to the contrary made by fallible popes and councils in later years, when the tide of corruption in morals and doctrine was running deep and strong.

When Jerome translated the Bible into Latin between A.D. 382 and 404, he did not translate the Apocrypha, and in common with many others of his own and later times, refused to acknowledge its canonicity. The translation of these books into Latin was the work of others, and Jerome was in no way responsible for their inclusion in the Vulgate version of the Bible. Though some references to the apocryphal writings are found in early church literature, it was not until the Councils of Laodicea and Carthage in 363 and 397 that we find them listed as an actual part of the Old Testament. But even this did not signify anything like universal acceptance, and the controversy continued.

In the sixteenth century the Reformers rejected them, and the Council of Trent, which was specially called to stop the Reformation movement, reaffirmed their canonicity. There never has been a universal acceptance of the apocryphal books, and no papal decrees can give to them an authority which intrinsically they do not possess.

The canonical books of the New Testament were all written during a period of some forty years. A few of them appeared first in Palestine, a larger number in Asia Minor, yet others in Greece, and a few in Rome. The epistles were addressed sometimes to specific existing churches, with indications that some of them at least were intended for wider circulation (see Colossians 4:16 and I Thessalonians 5:27). Others were for individuals, but the truths they enunciated were of universal application, and it does not therefore surprise us to find them in course of time widely scattered, and acknowledged as divinely inspired and authoritative. In days when communications were much more slow and difficult than they are in our time, this process was not rapid, but even before the writing of the New Testament was completed we find Paul's epistles classed with the Old Testament books as "**Scriptures**" by the Apostle Peter (II Peter 3:15, 16).

In the writings of the early church fathers we can trace the way in which they came to use in the churches, and the steady spread of their influence. To mention only a few (dates of course are all A.D.)

Clement of Rome (95) makes reference to Matthew, Luke, Romans, I and II Corinthians, Hebrews, I Timothy, and I Peter.

Polycarp (110) reproduces phrases from ten of Paul's epistles and I Peter.

Ignatius (circ. 110) quotes Matthew, I Peter, I John, and nine of Paul's epistles, and his letters bear the impress of three other Gospels.

Irenaeus (130-200) quotes most of the New Testament books which in his day had come to be known as "The Gospels and the Apostles," as the Old Testament books were known as "The Law and the Prophets."

Tertullian (160-200) of Carthage, living while the original manuscripts of the epistles were still extant, speaks of the Christian Scriptures as The New Testament.

Origen (185-254) of Alexandria, accepted the authority of the 27 books of the New Testament just as we have them now, though not sure of the authorship of Hebrews (nor are we sure of it today, though fully accepting it as divinely inspired and part of the canon) and doubtful about that of James, II Peter, and II and III John.

Eusebius (264-340) of Caesarea, who lived through the Diocletian persecution, prepared for Emperor Constantine fifty Bibles, written by careful copyists, the New Testament part of which contained all the books of our New Testament, and no others, though even then some people doubted the inspiration of James, II Peter, and II and III John.

Thus we see that even before the Councils of Laodicea and Carthage the New Testament as we have it now, with query marks against four of the smaller Epistles, was acknowledged as canonical and of divine authority.

The Council of Carthage (397) gave its formal ratification of the 27 books as we now have them, but note well that it did not make the canon, but only ratified the judgment of the churches, and accepted for itself the New Testament as the inspired Word of God.

Up to this time the papacy had not arisen, Leo I (440-461) being the first of the bishops of Rome to claim supremacy over the whole church, though many, many years were to pass before that supremacy was acknowledged, and then only in the western churches. The Church of Rome, as we know it today, was non-existent when the canonicity of the New Testament was recognized and accepted.

Thus the canon of the Old and New Testament was universally accepted by the Christian church long before the papacy came into being. The church of Christ throughout the world is not dependent upon Rome for the certainty of what books constitute the inspired Scriptures.

The Bible is self-authenticating and its authority in the church of God everywhere is inherent. It has proved its authority in the hearts of men, as Coleridge said: "It finds me." It has proved itself as it has been read and preached and expounded in the world by the spiritual miracles it has wrought.

As C. H. Spurgeon once said: "There is no need to defend the Bible. It is like a lion—let it out!"

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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