

Who Has the Correct Bible: Catholics or Protestants?

By Steve Ray

Hello Baptist Friend Jerry:

It was enjoyable talking with you last night. It was a very calm discussion which was also pleasant. We spoke briefly about the canon in relationship to Dave and James' dialog. We mentioned Norman Geisler's book (see Endnote 1) especially regarding the "Apocrypha". Enclosed you will find a few items that may help you understand the Catholic position on the canon, especially the "apocrypha". As you know, Catholics do not use the term "apocrypha" to describe the books removed by the "Reformers". We refer to them as the "Deuterocanonical" books. The topic of the canon is becoming more intense because it is such a crucial issue for the Christian and it is the Achilles Heel of Protestantism, apologetically speaking. Please see my book *Crossing the Tiber* for a more detailed discussion.

Enclosed Information on the Canon (In the original letter I photocopied pages from the following books but I have not included them here though I recommend that the current reader secure the books and study the sections on the canon.) I have included a few items for you to read, if you have the time or inclination. The first two, *The Formation and History of the Canon* and *The Interpretation of Holy Scripture*, are not written with polemics in mind, nor with an apologetical agenda. They are simply a small portion of a much longer introduction to *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (ed. by Dom Bernard Orchard [New York, NY: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1953]). They seem to present a straightforward understanding of the Church's teaching for Catholics and therefore are not polemical in nature. I think they are instructive and historically accurate.

The third item I am passing along is the Second Vatican Council's document on Scripture. It is entitled *Dei Verbum* (God's Word), or, the *Dogmatic Constitution of Divine Revelation*. It gives a simple yet a profound overview of the Church's teaching on God's revelation and the Scriptures. It is a remarkable document, short, easy to read. I hope you have time to look them over.

Geisler, Currie, Keating, Ray, Simon: Agendas and Polemical Sources

Unfortunately, what most Protestants read about Catholic teaching comes from anti-Catholic sources, such as Geisler, instead of from official Catholic sources. In my company, if someone wants to know our company policy, they should ask me, or consult our company's official *Policy Manual*, not miscellaneous writings or the comments of disgruntled employees. Although I know you, Jerry, read some Catholic material (*This Rock*, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, etc.), it is certainly not the norm. Most "anti-Catholics" and run-of-the-mill Evangelicals read exclusively Protestant literature to understand Catholic teaching. How objective or informed is a person who learns everything about Israel and the Jews from exclusively Palestinian sources? Also, I have found that Protestants tend to use Protestant ideals to judge Catholic practice. What would happen, however, if Protestant practice were judged by Catholic ideals?

We briefly discussed Norm Geisler's book (Endnote 1). I mentioned that he is less "hysterical" than the other "anti-Catholic" authors in my library, but that he is still very biased and disingenuous in places. He presents incomplete or weak Catholic arguments without explaining them well or fleshing them out, and then counteracts them with the best Protestant arguments with all the flesh one could want. I have not read the whole book, but the sections I have read were very disappointing; Geisler could have done better. He is an intelligent man with a wide-ranging erudition I am disappointed. But he has an agenda, as does Keating in *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*. Most of us are propagandists at heart (whether with the unsaved or those we consider misguided), you not excluded. You are very passionate about your faith and properly attempt to share it with others.

One should not read Geisler as though he has the final word on a matter, or with the confidence that he is objective and playing with all the cards. He is actually very unfair and dishonest in places and this throws a shadow of doubt on his whole article in the section on the "Apocrypha". He injects pregnant terms, attributing them to Catholic teaching, where no such words or teachings exist in the Catholic Church. This is not honest. It is typical of anti-Catholics to build a straw man, distorting the teaching of the Church, and then bravely attack the straw man with fists flying to the cheers of the choir. But what has really been accomplished? They simply dance around destroying an illusion, they bear false witness against their Catholic brothers in Christ, they mislead their naive followers, and they exacerbate the already scandalous disunity that further erodes any possibility of Christian unity.

The world looks at the disunity and laughs, when they should be seeing visible unity and bowing the knee to the Savior, and believing in the God of the Bible (Jn 17). One should not put too much trust in this type of anti-Catholic material which is often presented as scholarly and objective. It should only be used as a stimulus to further research, honesty, and prayer. Even James White, one of the premier Evangelical debaters, admits that the Catholic position is winning some decisive victories; he is very concerned. The Reformation progeny is suffering some serious difficulties and it will only get worse as the Catholic Church again revives, as she is doing, and as she has done so often throughout the centuries. Us converts, and there are ever increasing numbers, will certainly be a strong contributing factor. Someday I hope you will join us.

Apologetical-type discussions tend to depend on material that is polemical in nature. They are defensive or apologetic in their approach. The genre of Geisler's book and others has to be taken into account. Geisler's book is polemical and even hostile, though the hostility is better contained than in other books; Dave Currie's book (Endnote 2) is an apologetic work, also polemical, and his discussion of the "apocrypha" is in the form of a simplistic overview. The format is not wrong in either case; polemics has its place, but one should remember that it is written with a definite agenda in mind; it must be read with a discerning eye and an honest heart and not used as the *only* source of information.

Geisler's Book and the "Apocrypha in Two Parts: 1) Jamnia and the Canon, and, 2) Geisler's Either/Or Summaries

Part 1: Jamnia and the Canon

Knowing from our phone conversation and my casual contacts with your brother Tom, that there is a discussion going on regarding the “Apocrypha”, I would like to add my 2 cents and keep it short. You seem to put a lot of confidence in Geisler, so I thought I would give you some food for thought. I know you like to discuss these kind of things so I hope you don’t mind if I think out loud with you. I could have addressed any number of assertions he makes in this particular chapter on the “Apocrypha”, but I have just chosen these two as examples.

Geisler seems so confident and definite in his determination about the “Apocrypha” in general and the “Council of Jamnia” in particular. As you know, Jamnia is where the Jewish rabbis allegedly closed the canon of the Old Testament around AD 100 in Jamnia, near the Mediterranean coast in Israel. They received permission from the Romans to establish a reconstituted Sanhedrin (Endnote 3). I know Protestants depend a lot on the “Council of Jamnia” and the Hebrew Masoretic canon. It is a little disappointing in light of the facts. Geisler is better than this and I m disappointed in the way he “short-sheets” his followers in his book. I have done a little homework to help fill in a few gaps he fails to mention.

The non-Christian Jews of the first century were very anti-Christian and they considered the Church to be a radical and misinformed Jewish cult, much like we look at the Mormons or JWs as “Christian cults” today (Endnote 4). The early Christians used the Greek Septuagint as their Old Testament, following the example of Jesus and the Apostles (Endnote 5), and the Jews therefore detested it. Does it surprise anyone that they would condemn the canon and translation the Christians used, even if it was originally translated, approved of, and put into circulation by the Jews themselves three hundred and fifty years earlier (in 250 BC)? What the Church used and loved, the Jews hated. The “council” in Jamnia in AD 100 was not even an “official” council with the binding authority to *make* such a decision, if in fact such a determination *was* made. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (ed. by F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingston [New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press]),

“After the fall of Jerusalem (70 a.d.), an assembly of religious teachers was established at Jamnia; this body was regarded as to some extent replacing the Sanhedrin, *though it did not possess the same representative character or national authority*. It appears that one of the subjects discussed among the rabbis was the status of certain Biblical books (e.g. Eccles. and Song of Solomon) *whose canonicity was still open to question in the 1st century a.d.* The suggestion that a particular synod of Jamnia, held c. 100 a.d., finally settling the limits of the Old Testament canon, was made by H. E. Ryle; though it has had a wide currency, *there is no evidence to substantiate it*” (pg. 726, italics mine).

I find it extremely interesting that the Jews did not have a “closed canon” (Endnote 6) before AD 100 , and even then, the proof of a decision at Jamnia, or an actual closed canon is nonexistent. The heated discussion over the books in the canon of the Old Testament continued among the Jews long after Jamnia, which demonstrates that the

canon was not closed until well into the third century AD well beyond the apostolic period. The challenges to canonicity at Jamnia and the following centuries included *Ruth*, *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Ezekiel*, (Endnote 7) *Esther*, and *Canticles*. Even the currently accepted Hebrew canon was disputed until two hundred years *after* Christ. Geisler is overstating his case when he states or implies that the “council” finalized the canon (Endnote 8).

However, back to Jamnia: the four criteria laid down by the Jews in Jamnia, concerning which books should be removed from the collection of writings are as follows (Endnote 9). *First*, each book had to conform to the Pentateuch, *second*, it could not have been written after the time of Esdras, *third*, it had to be written in Hebrew (not Aramaic or Greek), and *fourth*, it had to have been written in Palestine.

I will pass on another rather lengthy few paragraphs which give more information on the rabbis in Jamnia and the issue of the canon. This is unpolemical and historical not being addressed to a polemical situation or audience:

“*Jamnia*: That the Old Testament canon was not completed until the Christian era is recognized by all critical scholars today, and many suggest that the rivalry offered by Christian books was a spur for the closing of the Jewish canon. Others prefer to find the stimulus in the disputes within Judaism, particularly between the Pharisees and some of the more apocalyptically minded Jewish sects. In particular, it is often suggested that the canon was closed at Jamnia (Jabneh or Jabneel, a town near the Mediterranean, W of Jerusalem) where Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai re-established his school at the time of the fall of Jerusalem. After a decade Gamaliel II became the head of the school, and in the period AD 80–117 he and Eleazar ben Azariah were the predominant teachers. It has been proposed that about 90–100 the council of the rabbis at Jamnia settled once and for all time the definitive list of inspired books, namely, “the Palestinian canon,” consisting of the books now called protocanonical. Recently this thesis has been subjected to much-needed criticism (J. P. Lewis, *JBR* 32 [1964] 125–32).

“Four points of caution should be noted: (1) Although Christian authors seem to think in terms of a formal church council at Jamnia, there was no “council of Jamnia.” At Jamnia there was a school for studying the Law, and the Jamnia rabbis exercised legal functions in the Jewish community. (2) There is no evidence that any list of books was drawn up at Jamnia. The rabbis, of course, recognized that certain books were uniquely sacred and “soiled the hands,” so that purification was necessary after using them (Mishnah, *Yadaim* 3:2). But this attitude may represent the popular acceptance of 22 or 24 books that we saw in Josephus and in *4 Ezra* at roughly the same period. It is no proof that a definite list had been drawn up. (3) A specific discussion of acceptance at Jamnia is attested only for Eccl and Canticles, and even in these instances arguments persisted in Judaism decades after the Jamnia period. There were also subsequent debates about Est. (4) We know of no books that were excluded at Jamnia. A book like Sir, which did not eventually become part of the standard Hebrew Bible (based on the putative Jamnia canon), was read and copied by Jews after the Jamnia period. Tosephta, *Yadaim* 2:13, records that Sir was declared as not soiling the hands, but does not say where or when this was decided.

“Perhaps the safest statement about the closing of the Jewish canon is one which recognizes that although in the 1st cent. ad there was popular acceptance of 22 or 24 books as sacred, there was no rigidly fixed Hebrew canon until the end of the 2nd cent. or the early 3rd cent. In this period various Jewish groups continued to read as sacred, books that were not included in the 22/24 count.” (Endnote 10)

I have a lot of books on the Scriptures, canon, New Testament Introductions, etc. and none of them afford the scholarly work I have found in Catholic material. Now, let’s look at this some more. Even if the Jamnian rabbis *had* closed the canon, and *did* have the authority to make such a canonical determination (to close the Old Testament canon), who says they had the authority from *God* to make such a binding determination? Why should Christians accept their determination? In AD 100 were they still God’s mouthpiece, still his prophetic people? God had already debunked the Jews as His “prophetic voice” thirty years earlier when Jerusalem was destroyed and razed by fire. God judged them and rejected their old wineskins. You, Jerry, as a Dispensationalist should relate to this. The old wine and wineskin (Judaism) was now replaced by new wine (the Gospel) and new wineskins (the Church). Why accept the defrocked, unauthoritative rabbis’ determination, instead of the Church’s?

Did you know that the rabbis of Jamnia also provided a new translation in Greek to replace their previous translation the Septuagint? Why? Because the Gentile Christians had appropriated the Septuagint as their own (along with the “apocrypha” which it contained), and were using it for apologetic and evangelistic purposes they were converting the Jews using the Septuagint. For example they were using it to prove the virginal birth of Jesus. In the Hebrew Bible, Isaiah 7:14 is rendered, “*A young woman shall conceive and bear a son*”, whereas the Greek Septuagint, quoted by Matthew (Mt 1:23), (Endnote 11) renders it, “*A virgin shall be with child and bear a son.*” That’s enough to drive the poor Jews crazy! So, the rabbis that “determined” (keep this word in mind for later in this letter) chose *your* Protestant canon, also authorized a new Greek translation to correct this “unfortunate situation”. Aquila, the Jewish translator of the new version, denied the Virgin Birth and changed the Greek word from *virgin* to *young woman*. By the way, did Geisler bring this information out in his book, to provide all the information so as to be objective and honest?

One of the key issues, if not *the* key issue regarding the canon in the first-century Jewish mind, was not necessarily inspiration, but controlling the Christian evangelization of the Jews and Gentiles. It was a Jew vs. Christian thing, and you as a Protestant with a truncated canon chosen by these Jews fall on the side of the anti-Christian, disenfranchised Jew in this matter. (Endnote 12)

We do not know much about the deliberations at Jamnia, but we do know that they mentioned the Gospels of the New Testament. They specifically mentioned them in order to specifically reject them. F. F. Bruce writes, “*Some disputants also asked whether the Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), and the gilyonim (Aramaic Gospel writings) and other books of the minim (heretics, including Jewish Christians), should be*

admitted, but here the answer was uncompromisingly negative” (The Books and the Parchments [Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1984], 88).

Why accept these Jamnian Jews as “God’s mouthpiece” in determining the final Old Testament canon; and pray tell Jerry, why do you accept *their* word for anything at this late date, especially when they specifically mention the Gospels in order to reject them. They had been “de-throned” as the keepers of the oracles. In your opposition to the Catholic Church, Jerry, you accept *their* “determination” because it supports you in your anti-Catholicism. I, on the other hand, have accepted the determination and canon of the *new* covenant people of God, those who are the new priesthood (1 Pet 2:9), the new wineskin. Geisler comments that, “*The Jewish scholars at Jamnia (c. AD 90 did not accept the Apocrypha. . . . Since the New Testament explicitly states that Israel was entrusted with the oracles of God and was the recipient of the covenants and the Law, the Jews should be considered the custodians of the limits for their own canon.*” (Endnote 13)

The canon of the Jews, as the Septuagint displays, *did* contain the “apocrypha”, and only thirty years *after* God damned them to wander for another 1900 years of exile for disobeying Him and rejecting his Messiah did they come to this unconfirmed decision about their canon. Am I supposed to accept the alleged determination as authoritative and binding upon my soul, when the mantle of authority had been ignominiously stripped from their backs and gloriously passed on to the Church by an act of the Holy Spirit? Does Geisler give his readers this historical information and time-line, reminding them that God had scattered the Jews and destroyed their temple before their unauthoritative “council” rejected the Gospels and the “whole Christian canon” including the New Testament?

The Jews had no “closed canon” prior to AD 100 and they “built a wall around it” to keep the Christians out. Why collaborate with them? I accept the canon of the apostles and the early Church, which was determined by the bishops of the Church; and like them, I disregard the canon of the anti-Christian Jew and accept the canon of the Christian community (Endnote 14).

Off the subject a bit, a digression, but I found another quote recently that you may appreciate in regards to the canon. It was written by Protestant Henry Chadwick.

“In later Christian debate the history of the formation of the biblical canon has at times become a sensitive issue: were the books admitted to the church’s canon because they were self-authenticating, and a passive act of the community was to *acknowledge* their inherent authority? Or did the church actively *create* the canon in response to Marcion and other sectarian leaders whose inspired writings were either more or less than the church accepted? Both questions have to receive affirmative answers, and they are not mutually exclusive. The books were acknowledged because of their content as witnesses to the apostolic gospel; their formal acceptance as canonical scripture was a matter of discussion and decision by gradual consensus among the communities of the late second century and afterwards. But the term *canon* was being used for the standard of authentic

teaching given by the baptismal confession of faith well before it came to be used for the list of accepted books. The criterion for admission was not so much that traditions vindicated an apostolic authorship as that the content of the books was in line with the apostolic proclamation received by the second-century churches.” (Endnote 15).

Part 2: Geisler’s Either/Or Summaries

I would like to take another example from Geisler’s book to question his integrity, or at least his honesty and scholarship. It deals with the *either/or* dichotomies set up by Geisler. When I studied his book *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Endnote 16) in 1973–1974, as part of a biblical course I was taking, I realized he was very fond of acronyms and that he likes reducing everything to cute little summaries. I liked it, and still do, but it is often deceptive because it can trivialize and misrepresent important truth. He does this in his book *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals*. An example, which is actually taken from *A General Introduction to the Bible*, is on page 173, where he sets up two columns to compare two opposing positions: the supposed Roman Catholic position and his. Unfortunately, it is not as simple as he tries to make it sound. It is also not honest for he paints the Catholic Church with a broad brush and with his own colors, and does not correctly represent the teachings of the Church, using terminology to explain the “Catholic position” that Catholics do not use. Let me illustrate.

Example #1:
“Church Determines Canon” (Roman Catholic’s view),
vs.
“Church Discovers Canon” (Geisler’s view).

This is very deceptive and I ll show you why. “Determines” and “Discovers” are just two sides of the same coin and the Catholic Church understands herself to have “discovered” the canon, though in catholic theology it would probably be referred to as a development. It is not *either/or*, it is *both/and*. If an archeologist is an authoritative Egyptologist and “discovers” a total of ten Egyptian burial sites, he then, as the authority who made the discovery, “determines” that there are in fact ten sights, and that they are authentic. *Discovery* and *determination* are friends, not enemies. So why does Geisler fabricate these “conflicts” and create difficulties where none exist? This is the typical pattern of Protestant thinking that I as a Catholic just won’t take part in it always leads down dark, dead-end alleys.

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Endnote 17) we do not find this false dichotomy, in fact, it sees both sides of the coin. It states, “*It was by the apostolic Tradition that the Church discerned which writings are to be included in the list of the sacred books. This complete list is called the canon of Scripture. It includes 46 books for the Old Testament (45 if we count Jeremiah and Lamentations as one) and 27 for the New*” (no. 120, emphasis mine). *Discerned* is comparable to Geisler’s word “discovered” whereas *complete list* is comparable to his “determined”, since a determination has been made which books were canonical. Not as nefarious as Geisler makes it sound. In fact, Geisler rejects the canon of the Jewish Septuagint, the canon of Jesus, the Apostles, and

the early Church, and the canon of over 1.3 billion Christians today (Catholic and Orthodox). He, and you, are doing exactly what he condemns the Catholic Church of doing: *he is making a determination of the canon*, and he is very dogmatic about it. Read his book *Introduction to the Bible* and see if I am not correct. This is either hypocrisy pure and simple, or your basic ideological blindness. (I doubt you or Geisler would object to the word “determined” in speaking of the “determination” in Jamnia.)

One final note from the *Catechism*: “*As she has done for the canon of sacred Scripture and for the doctrine of the faith, the Church, by the power of the Spirit who guides her “into all truth,” has gradually recognized this treasure received from Christ and, as the faithful steward of God’s mysteries, has determined its “dispensation”*” (no. 1117a). Again, Jerry, we see *both/and*, and the logical flow from “recognize” to “determine”. It is the logical flow. For example, as mentioned in this paragraph, the bishops of the Catholic Church (Athanasius, et. al.) discovered (through study) and recognized (by careful reflection) the fullness of the doctrine of the Trinity in the Scriptures (forced upon the Church by Arian heresy). The Church proclaimed, especially at the Council of Nicaea with the resulting Creed, what the Bible stated and determined that those opposed to the recognized doctrine were outside of the Faith, like you do with Mormons and JWs today. You in a sense participate in the “regulation” or “determination” of doctrine yourself. Likewise, regarding the canon, you have not personally done the homework necessary to “discover” the canon for yourself (you follow tradition), but in your discussions you most certainly have “determined” what it is, and want to determine it for others as well.

Example #2:
“Church is Mother of Canon” (Roman Catholic’s view),
vs.
“Church is Child of Canon” (Geisler’s view).

Did the Church give birth to the canon, or did the canon give birth to the Church? Here Geisler puts an asterisk with an interesting and telling little footnote that states the opposite of his premise. It reads, “*Of course the whole canon was not completed before the New Testament church came into existence.*” What? *None* of the New Testament canon was in existence, not even one New Testament book, when the Church came into existence. The earliest writing was probably the *Epistle of James*, and by a conservative estimate it wasn’t written until about AD 44 (18). The Church was born on Pentecost (Acts 2) in about AD 30. Jerry, does Geisler’s footnote make any sense to you? The child comes from the mother, but unfortunately the mother was not yet existent! When one puts ideology before truth, this is the nonsense they are forced to accept this is the blind alley you walk in.

The Church existed *before* the canon. The New Testament writings were produced by the Church, yet the Church was subject to them. A parallel situation is the birth of Jesus, whereby the Blessed Virgin gave Him birth, yet she was subject to Him. Mary gave birth to Jesus, the Living Word, just as the Church gave birth to the written word, yet each is subject to her offspring. Remember also, if you have read any of the early writings

including Eusebius that I sent you, that the early Church wouldn't have used or been familiar with Geisler's terminology. They would have said, "*The Church is the Mother of the Canon, because the Church is the Child of the Apostolic Tradition.*" Protestants have strayed far from the early Church which they claim to love and follow.

Example #3:

"The Church Regulates the Canon" (Roman Catholic's view)

vs.

"The Church Recognizes Canon" (Geisler's view).

First, can you show me in Church teaching where the Catholic Church claims to "regulate" the canon? Does Geisler give any examples? No. Second, if it is the Church's job to "recognize" the canon we must first define the *Church*. Marcion had a reduced canon and claimed to be the true church in the second century. Is it Marcion and his group? Is it the Jews and their groups? Who or what is the Church? If we had the same situation then that we have now, there would *be* no final canon because the denominations would set up committees that would deliberate endlessly, and even if they *did* come up with a final "recommendation", that is all it would ever be because numerous denominations and individuals would disagree and establish their own canon in defiance of the committee. No authority would exist to make a final determination. We are all very fortunate that the Catholic Church was there to "recognize" the canon for us.

Third, if the canon is "recognized" by the Church, what is the next step? To "regulate" it, right? Regulate can be understood as the need or ability to "keep something within its proper parameters", and I don't think the Church would object to that understanding of her role. But again, "recognize" and "regulate" these are two sides of the same coin, not *either/or* but *both/and*. When a medical authority recognizes a new miracle drug, it becomes incumbent that it now be regulated, especially if it is subject to mistreatment or misapplication. Where is the conflict here? It only becomes a conflict if you ideologically deny the visible Church and opt to believe the Church is an ethereal phantom with no visible and hierarchical organs. An individual can recognize, but something larger is needed to regulate. That is the real objection Geisler has, he hates the thing that could possibly have the power to regulate, which could possibly deprive him of "his freedom" to "recognize" it his own way.

Martin Luther understood the place of the Church in establishing the canon (Endnote 19). He realized that if he could jettison the Church, or at least redefine it as "invisible" and "intangible", he was free to reevaluate and regulate the content of the canon for himself. He actually began to function as his own pope and council. If it weren't for his theologian Philip Melancthon, Protestants would no longer consider *James, Revelation, Hebrews, Jude* and a few other books as inspired Scripture. Luther placed them at the back of his German New Testament without page numbers, considering them New Testament "apocryphal" books. If Luther had his way they would *still* be ignominiously at the end of the New Testament, according to Luther's judgment that they should "no longer be included with the inspired books" (Endnote 20).

I met a wonderful and spiritual man in Egypt who loves the Lord dearly and has written commentaries on most of the New Testament books, but he denies inspiration to *Revelation of John*. He said he just ignored it because he didn't feel it belonged in the canon (he was not a Catholic). What basis other than Catholic Tradition does one have to tell him he is wrong? What criterion would you use Jerry, other than appealing to history and tradition? Even then you'd have problems because *Revelation* was challenged as canonical up until the fourth century, and then brought into question again by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century. Protestants today accept the Bible based on Tradition (or Geisler's "determination") whether they realize it or not. You will see this point in more detail as you read my friend Dave Palm's correspondence with James White, when I get copies for you.

Who Were the Canonists

One of *Mission to Catholics* tracts, entitled, *Church Fathers and Scripture*, mentions the "canonists" who supposedly determined the canon of the New Testament. The tract, written by Norm Olson and published by Bart Brewer, specifically states, "*Canonists also determined which books belonged to the Scriptures, as people were confused concerning which writings were valid and which ones were not*" (San Diego, CA: Mission to Catholics, Inc.). I wrote Mr. Olson two letters, to which I never received an answer. I asked him, "*Can you tell me who these canonists were and what Church they belonged to? Also, were they part of some organization that had the authority to make such a profound determination? Did they write down the determinations and decisions, and, if so, where would I be able to get a copy? What criteria did they use to pick the twenty-seven books, and where is their criteria written down? Why do we accept their determination as binding on us today? How do we know they were right?*" These are valid questions.

So where is the conflict? It is not *either/or*, it is *both/and*. Why do Protestants set up these false dichotomies? Did God give us a final list of what books He wants in His canon? He could have easily done so through the apostles. He could have easily done so by including the list in the *Gospel of St. John*, which was the last one written near AD 100. Why did he leave it up to the Church to "recognize" and "regulate"? Did Jesus promise to give us an authoritative Book that would be the final authority? If He did, please show me in the Scriptures where He promised it? Did He promise us an authoritative Church, and leave us men to govern it? Yes! The authoritative Church, in the first century, gave us inspired writings through her apostles and those associated with them. In subsequent centuries she recognized and discovered them, even though there is no list given in *sola Scriptura*. If all final truth is to be found in the Bible, where do we find which writings belong in the canon? If the canon is a matter of revelation binding revelation where do we find it in the Bible, since that is the only source of binding revelation a Protestant accepts?

A Few Closing Remarks

Enough of that for now. A few last words to praise mothers and home schooling. My daughter Cindy, who is now eighteen years old, is a real tribute to Christian

homeschooling and a great tribute to her mother, who took a lot of grief initially from family and friends for homeschooling back in 1981. Having been homeschooled from “day one”, Cindy has just finished her first year of college, a year early, with a 4.0 grade average, and has had an article published in a magazine. Do you receive *Hands on Apologetics*? Her article, which was originally a term paper, is the cover story entitled *Believing in God: Fable, Fiction, or Fact?* She’s a good kid and has taken to the Church like a fish to water, as has my son and younger daughters.

I had planned to keep this short (but I failed again) for I am concentrating on editing my second book for Ignatius Press. The first one should be out this summer. One last thing: an ex-Catholic Protestant (Baptist, I think) came by my office yesterday and we spent over two hours discussing “religion”. He wanted to know why I had become a Catholic. He brought up all the thread-worn objections and then started to relax and ask honest questions. He kept saying, “*This is really scary because it makes so much sense; what can I read to find out more?*” From our old Baptist church alone, nine families have converted to the Catholic Church in the last few years. I had the pleasure of sponsoring a whole family in this Easter and we already have a new family preparing for entrance next year.

I have sent copies of these articles along to Tom, since we have discussed these issues in times past and I assume you two are discussing them in detail now, in fact, you told me you were when we spoke on the phone. I am contacting my friend Dave for the complete correspondence between him and James. I will forward them to you as soon as I receive them. Keep in touch.

In the Blood of the Lamb and in His Church,

Steve Ray

See also **The Old Testament of the New Testament Church** at http://department.monm.edu/classics/Speel_Festschrift/sundbergJr.htm

Further notes: “The completion and fixation of this canon is often ascribed to the “Synod of Jamnia,” a series of rabbinic discussions held late in the first century a.d., in which it was sometimes discussed whether certain books like Ecclesiastes had full scriptural status. It is now considered doubtful whether these discussions dealt with the fixing of a canon at all, and some think that the canon now standard was achieved back in Maccabean times (second or first century b.c.). But even if the standard canon existed as a list, that does not mean that everyone knew of it or took it as binding.” (Harper Bible Commentary, *Palestinian Canon Groupings*.)

The Hebrew Canon: Among Jews, the oldest canon appears to have been the one defining the Torah (the first five books of modern Bibles), which was not only the central document of Jewish faith but also the fundamental law of the Jewish nation. These five books reached final form and were set apart not earlier than the mid-sixth and not later than the fourth century b.c. It is the one canon upon which all Jewish groups, and also

Samaritans and Christians, have usually agreed.

Alongside the Torah, most Jews of the first century a.d. appear also to have accepted a second canon of somewhat less authority, called the Prophets. This included historical books (Joshua through 2 Kings, but not Ruth), as well as the more strictly prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Prophets (Hosea through Malachi in the Protestant order). The remaining titles of the Hebrew Bible the total list corresponding to the canon of the Protestant ot are known as the Writings (Ruth, Esther through Song of Solomon). The canon of Prophets may be almost as old as that of Torah, but neither it nor the Writings was accepted by Samaritans or, perhaps, by Sadducees. The canon of Writings probably reached final form only after the first Jewish war against Rome (a.d. 66–70), under the leadership of the rabbinic courts at Jabneh (Jamnia). In the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were hidden away during that war, a wide variety of writings are found, with no obvious canonical distinctions among them.

The Hebrew canon was developed among Jews who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic. Many Jews of late antiquity, however, spoke only Greek. As early as the third century b.c., Greek versions of the Hebrew books were being made for their use. Some of these Greek books have rather different forms from those they took in the Hebrew canon (e.g., Jeremiah and Daniel); others were ultimately excluded from the Hebrew canon (e.g., Ecclesiasticus). There were also original works written in Greek, such as the Wisdom of Solomon, which came to be canonical only in the Greek language realm. The result was a larger, but somewhat ill-defined, canon of writings revered among Greek-speaking Jews.

The early Christian church achieved its greatest successes in the Greek-speaking world and inherited these Greek-language scriptures (often called, collectively, the Septuagint). Christians never fully agreed, however, on the exact boundaries of the canon. Eastern and Western churches used somewhat different lists. St. Jerome (d. a.d. 420) attempted to introduce the Hebrew canon into the West through his Latin translation, the Vulgate, but failed to win assent. The Ethiopian Church continued to revere books such as *1 Enoch* that disappeared elsewhere. During the Reformation, Protestants on the European continent used the Hebrew canon to define their ot, while Anglicans granted a deuterocanonical or secondary canonical status to books not found in the Hebrew canon but long accepted among Western Christians (the so-called ot Apocrypha). (Harper's Bible Dictionary, *Canon*)

Development of the Biblical Canons: The development of the various biblical canons was a long and complex process. Prior to the fall of Jerusalem in a.d. 70, the working canon of Jewish scriptures in Palestine seems to have been rather open-ended and inclusive. After 70, however, there was a narrowing tendency, so that by about the time of the Council of Jamnia (ca. a.d. 90) the rabbis had rejected the larger canon that continued in the lxx in favor of the twenty-four-book collection we have labeled the Hebrew Bible. Ultimately this Jamnian canon became the canon for Judaism as a whole.

We are unable to reconstruct with confidence precisely which lists of books were considered authoritative by Jesus and his earliest followers. By the second century, it was

not uncommon to find church fathers using books found in the lxx but not in the Jamnian canon. Yet a few writers (e.g., Origen, Jerome) distinguished between the books of the Hebrew Bible and the remainder in the lxx tradition; indeed, the latter group they labeled Apocrypha (hidden or outside books), a group they considered edifying but not authoritative. On the whole, however, Eastern and Roman Catholic tradition generally considered the ot apocryphal books to be canonical. It was not until the Protestant Reformation that these books were clearly denied canonical status (in Protestant circles). The Roman church, however, continues to affirm their place in the canon of Scripture. (Achte-meier, Paul J. Harper's Bible dictionary / general editor, Paul J. Achte-meier; associate editors, Roger S. Boraas ... et al. with the Society of Biblical Literature. 1st ed. San Francisco : Harper & Row, c1985.)

Endnotes:

1. Norman Geisler and Ralph MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995).
2. Dave Currie, *Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1996).
3. "The chief reason for asking if the Writings section [of the Old Testament] was complete in our Lord's time is that we have records of discussions that went on among the rabbis after the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. . . . When the destruction of the city and temple was imminent, a great rabbi belonging to the school of Hillel in the Pharisaic party yochanan ben Zakkai, by name obtained permission from the Romans to reconstitute the Sanhedrin on a purely spiritual basis at Jabneh or Jamnia, between Joppa and Azotus (Ashdod). Some of the discussions which went on at Jamnia were handed down by oral transmission and ultimately recorded in the rabbinical writings" (F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* [Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1950, 1984], 88). Realize here, that if we base our confidence in the discussions in Jamnia we are ultimately placing our trust in oral tradition passed down and later put in written form.
4. I use the term "Christian cults" because they broke off from the general Christian teaching, claim to be Christian, mimic our terms, and use the same Bible (though poorly translated; e.g. Jn 1:1 for JWs in their *New World Translation*).
5. This is not contested and will be discussed more as we go along. But, I will add this documentation here. "The Septuagint was the standard Old Testament text used by the early Christian church. The expanding Gentile church needed a translation in the common language of the time Greek. By the time of Christ, even among the Jews, a majority of the people spoke Aramaic and Greek, not Hebrew. The New Testament writers evidence their inclination to the Septuagint by using it when quoting the Old Testament" (Mark R. Norton, editor of the Bible Department at William Tyndale Publishers, *The Origin of the Bible*, ed. by Philip W. Comfort [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publ., 1992], 165).

6. The way they described it is to “*make a fence around it*”.
7. See F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell H. Fleming, 1984), 89.
8. “*At this council vigorous debates took place on the question of the canonicity of certain books. It would be overstating the case if we said that this council fixed the limits of the Hebrew canon*” (David Ewert, *From Ancient Tablets to Modern Translations* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983], 71).
9. This is interesting, because they were not deciding which books to *include* in the canon, but which books to *remove* from it.
10. Brown, Raymond Edward, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy [Englewood Cliffs, NJ : Prentice Hall, 1968], 521–522).
11. Isn't it interesting that Matthew, a Jew, who's intended audience was the Jewish people, did not defend the doctrine of Christ's virgin birth from the Hebrew Bible, but instead quoted from the Greek Septuagint? This was the text used by the early Church.
12. F. F. Bruce writes, “ *Greek Judaism , it has been said, with the Septuagint had ploughed the furrows for the gospel seed in the Western world; but it was the Christian preachers who sowed the seed. So thoroughly, indeed, did Christians appropriate the Septuagint as their version of the scriptures that the Jews became increasingly disenchanted with it. The time came when one rabbi compared the accursed day on which the seventy elders wrote the Law in Greek for the king to the day on which Israel made the golden calf. New Greek versions of the Old Testament were produced for Jewish use*” (F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988], 50.
13. Geisler, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals*, 169.
14. Yes, several Fathers accepted the Jewish Masoretic canon (e.g. Jerome) and if you will read the enclosures I have sent, you will get a full historical perspective on that matter. It was never an individual Father that made binding decisions for the Church, it was only the councils that could do so.
15. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, ed. by John McManners (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 29. It is a very beautifully illustrated book with very thoughtful sections. Chadwick is also the author of the very well-received book *The Early Church*.
16. Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1968).

17. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984).

18. “While one may not be able to prove conclusively that the book of James was written as early as 45 to 50 AD, its content fits that era fairly well” (Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Introduction* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961], 262).

19. Martin Luther writes, “We concede as we must that so much of what they [the Catholic Church] say is true: that the papacy has God’s word and the office of the apostles, and that we have received Holy Scriptures, Baptism, the Sacrament, and the pulpit from them. What would we know of these if it were not for them?” (*Sermons on the Gospel of John, Chap. 14–16* (1537), in vol. 24 of *Luther’s Works* [St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publ. House, 1961], 304).

20. Patrick O Hare, *The Facts About Luther* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, rev. ed., 1987, orig. Cincinnati, 1916), 202–203.