

# The Bible or The Church?

## Introduction

*Throughout the last several hundred years, many people have had the impression that the Bible, at some unknown point since the days of the Apostles, was somehow mysteriously written in the English of the King James Version (KJV), all ready-made and bound in a book.*

*But a truly Christian understanding of the Scriptures, however, must be founded in Truth and not in a thoughtless acceptance of the “received” notion in one’s own circle... be that circle Eastern Orthodox, Eastern Catholic, Roman Catholic, Protestant, or “nondenominational.”*

*But Truth can be a harsh master. If pursued, it can often force dramatic changes in a person’s preconceived notions, religious or otherwise, and therefore, in one’s whole life. Perhaps this is the reason why it is so seldom pursued.*

## The Bible

When we speak of “the Bible,” we speak of a collection of books. The earliest of these books of

the Bible originally existed in oral form, long before they were written down, but attained written form many centuries before the birth of Our Lord. However, the latest of the books of the Bible were written many years after His Resurrection. The very last of these were put into writing as late as the end of the first century, some 60 or more years following the Resurrection.

The earliest books, of course, comprise the Old Testament, and the later books, the New Testament. When St. Paul speaks of “scripture,” it is to the Old Testament that he refers... since few of the New Testament books had yet been written. In addition, a complete agreement in the early Church as to which books comprised the “New” Testament was yet several centuries off!

Most people do not realize that “the Church” existed for nearly 500 years before anything identical to what we now call “the Bible” could have been printed (had there even been printing presses at that time). In fact, the many individual books, of both the Old and New Testaments, existed first in papyrus scrolls, then later in hand-copied huge volumes con-

taining one or a very few books on vellum or similar material. A complete “Bible”—had it been possible to assemble one at that time—would have occupied a good-sized set of bookshelves. And surprisingly, even the contents of those shelves would have varied considerably from place to place, as we shall see.

In the West, there has always been the notion among Christians of the Protestant tradition that “Catholics” (and we will include those of Eastern Orthodox tradition) have a “different Bible” from that which they acknowledge, especially when it comes to the Old Testament. The question, that of the “different Bible,” is likely to be one of the first to arise in any initial conversation between Catholic and Orthodox Christians and Protestants. So let’s begin there ...with the Old Testament.

## The Old Testament

The books of the Old Testament are quite varied in character, and have discrete histories. Generally speaking, these books fall into four broad groups: the books of the Law (the *Pentateuch*); the history books (e.g., the books of Kings); the Prophets; and the books of Wisdom.

It is interesting to note that the first “disagreement” concerning the “table of contents” of the Old Testament long predated the Christian era: the Samaritans were distinguished from the Jews by their refusal to acknowledge as “scripture” any books other than those of Moses (the *Pentateuch*).

Most of the books of the Old Testament were written originally in Hebrew or Aramaic, or a mixture of the two. There is, however, a whole group of books that are an exception. They had been originally written (or at least only known to us) in Greek.

These books are usually called the *Apocrypha*, or “hidden books.” Unfortunately, this term is a complete misnomer, as there is nothing hidden about them. They were an integral part of the Greek text of the Old Testament (the *Septuagint*) as it was in use at the time of Our Lord.

Many quotations from the Old Testament scriptures found in the books of the New Testament are identifiably from this Greek text. A glance at any reliable reference edition of the New Testament will readily confirm this. Quotations that are clearly from the Greek text are usually identified as, e.g., “*Psalm 145:5, Septuagint*.” Nowhere, of course, do any of the New Testament books make any distinction between the various books of the Old Testament. It is of all this material that the holy Apostle Paul says when he writes, “All Scripture is given by inspiration from God” (2 *Timothy 3:16*).

It must be said that any volume that claims to be “the Bible” and yet does not contain these books is, at best, an expurgated or abbreviated Bible, and at worst, an outright misrepresentation. To determine whether a volume at hand is complete, check the table of contents for the two best-known books: *Wisdom of Solomon* and *Ecclesiasticus* (not to be confused with *Ecclesiastes*). All these “apocryphal” books formed part of the original text of the King James Version of the Bible and have simply been deleted in many modern printings.

In the early Church, there was little discussion concerning the “table of contents” of the Old Testament. The Apostles and the Church Fathers alike consistently used the text of the Septuagint (Greek) Old Testament. They frequently cited in their writings passages that exist only in the Greek edition, or



in which there is a significant difference in sense between the Greek and Hebrew texts. (This is evident in *Psalms* and even more so in the *Book of Jeremiah*). This use of the Greek edition was also true of the “other Jews” of the time of Our Lord.

Interestingly, the books of the *Apocrypha* came to be an issue, not for the early Christians, but for the post-Resurrection Jews. These books, in many cases, clearly prophesied concerning Our Lord, and so were an embarrassment to those who refused to accept His divinity. Consequently, these books were officially barred from the Jewish canon (the official “table of contents”) of the Scriptures during the Jewish Council of Jamnia at the end of the first century A.D., 60 or so years after the Resurrection. Although the Church held firmly to the Greek text, 15 centuries later, Christian reformers chose to accept the authority of the Jewish Council of Jamnia in preference to that of the Apostles and the Church Fathers.

At first it seems to make no sense that the reformers should object to these books for the same reasons as those held by the rabbis of Jamnia. But the answer is simple: in addition to prophesying about Jesus Christ, some of the books make quite evident, prophetically, the special role of Mary the Theotokos (Mother of God) in God’s plan of salvation. Numerous passages from these books are cited very effectively by the Fathers in discussing the Church’s understanding of the role of the Mary as Theotokos. Many reformers simply opted to get rid of the books they disliked, using the pretext provided by the rabbis that the books did not exist in the Hebrew text.

Revisionism even found its way into the New Testament. Although Martin Luther did not entirely

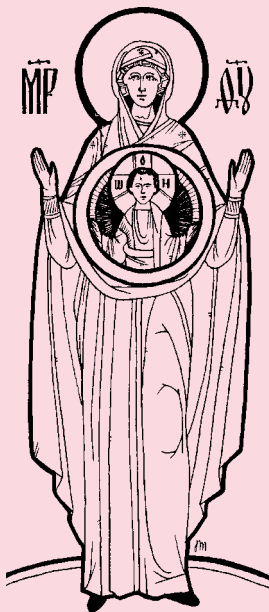
delete the Epistle of James, which flatly contradicts his teaching that salvation is “by grace alone” from the Scriptures, he did attempt to rearrange the order of the books of the New Testament, placing this epistle at the very end and calling it an “epistle of straw.”

Unfortunately, the revisionism of these early reformers fostered a “pick and choose” approach to the Scriptures that has proven to be the normal method of interpretation of the Bible by many Western Christians. Today, we see the logical consequence of this thinking: more than 25,000 denominations, “nondenominations,” and sects in America alone most of which proclaim to be “based on the Bible and the Bible alone” (*sola scriptura*). Each claims to accept the Bible as the inspired word of God, yet each quarrels with the other as to what the Bible says and means. Why?

Quite simply, because they use an approach to the Scriptures called the “proof text” method. Those portions of Scripture that happen not to support (or even flatly contradict) an already established belief are either explained away or ignored, just as some of the reformers simply threw away a whole collection of books of the Old Testament that they found troublesome.

## The New Testament

To dwell at too great a length on the matter of the Apocryphal books of the Old Testament, however, could be very misleading. For in some significant respects, it is entirely beside the point. There are more critical issues at stake. But in order for these issues to be meaningfully or intelligently addressed, it is first necessary to understand and ac-



cept that the Church and the Holy Scriptures have a history... that is, that certain things happened, in a certain order, at certain times.

We must admit that the Church existed on the Monday after Pentecost. Yet, on that day none of the books of the New Testament existed! Most of the New Testament books would not be written for another 20 or more years, and a few not until nearly the end of that century. If we (or those with whom we discuss the Faith) deny the existence of this history, refuse to admit facts as part of divine Truth, then we really have nothing to discuss at all.

In the first weeks, months, years of her existence, the Church had no written documents whatever, except the books of the Old Testament as indicated earlier. The events of the Gospel were related from one believer to another by word of mouth. Those who came to accept the Faith heard them from the believers. This was entirely in keeping with the culture in which the Church lived, which was above all else an oral culture. Relatively few people were able to read, let alone write, so they heard the word of God and kept it (cf. *Luke 8:21; 11:28*). The holy Apostle Paul insists upon the matter: “Therefore brethren, stand fast and hold to the traditions which you have been taught, whether by word or our letter” (*2 Thessalonians 2:15*).

**Letters and Epistles:** As the Church began to spread beyond her place of origin in Jerusalem and Galilee, communications between local churches became necessary... so “letters” were written. Some of these were of such great importance to understand-

ing the Faith that they began to be read in church services, along with the Scriptures (Old Testament). But initially copies of these letters existed only in the local churches to which they had been addressed, although in time in many other churches as well.

As travelers moved from one place to another they carried hand-written copies of the letters for the edification of other believers. Some of these letters were written by the Apostles, but there were letters written by other believers as well. Eventually, some of the letters came to have the character of what we now call “open letters,” addressed to the Church as a whole rather than to any particular congregation. These are now termed “universal” or “catholic” or “general” epistles.



**The Four Gospels:** As the Church spread it also became necessary to commit the central core of the events of Our Lord’s life and His teaching to writing—to provide a written Gospel for those who came to the Faith far from the little out-of-the-way province of the Roman Empire in which the Lord had lived and died. So it was that the four written Gospels came into being.

But this came to pass only after the Gospel had been proclaimed and passed from one believer to another by word of mouth, by tradition (“handing-on”) for many years.

It is readily apparent upon comparison that not one of the written Gospels exactly matches the others nor contains the entire story. Just as apparent, perhaps more so, all four Gospels taken together are less than the totality of the Tradition of which they are a part. As the Gospel of St. John concludes:

“And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written” (*John. 21:25*).

Neither any one nor all four of the Gospels together were written to be absolutely exhaustive and final. Were that the case, of course, we would have no need of the rest of the New Testament, nor the Old Testament.

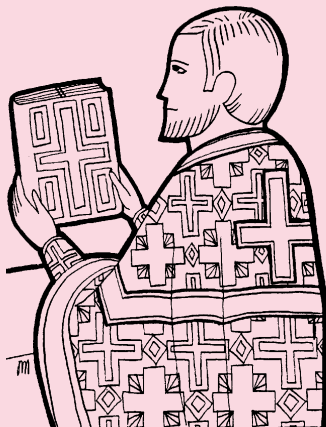
***Revelation and Acts:*** In the New Testament, the books *The Revelation of St. John the Theologian* (the *Apocalypse*) and the *Acts of the Apostles* are “special cases.” The former, almost certainly the last book of the New Testament to be written, is agreed by most scholars to have been written by St. John near the end of his life, during the reign of Domitian, probably about A.D. 95 (although parts of it may perhaps have been written at an earlier date). It is the only book of the New Testament concerning which there was significant disagreement in the Church. In fact, there were parts of the Christian community that for several centuries did not accept it as part of the Scriptures. The *Acts of the Apostles*, written by the Evangelist Luke, of course, could not have been completed any earlier than A.D. 63, as it refers to St. Paul’s imprisonment at Rome, which continued into that year.

## Other Books?

The picture we have, then, is that of a growing body of Church literature throughout the first 70 years of the Church’s life. Some of the books were originally known in only one or a few local churches; others more rapidly gained a widespread audience. What was considered “scripture” in a particular local

church was that which was read at the Church services, along with the books of the law and the prophets, and the *Psalms* from the Old Testament.

But we have not yet touched upon the fact that in this rich climate oral Tradition and the new books that spoke of salvation, there were also “other books”... quite a number of them, in fact. Some of these books were written even during the time in which the books of the New Testament came to be; others were written shortly later.



[Note: These additional books, however, should not be confused with the wholly inauthentic books written later, in the second and third centuries, by various heretics, who attributed their “forgeries” to the Apostles in an attempt to authenticate their teachings, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Essene Gospel of Peace*.]

Some of the authentic early “other books” may indeed have been written by the Apostles themselves (e.g., the *Epistle of Barnabas*; the *Apostolic Constitutions*). Others were written by other members of the early Christian Church or by the immediate successors of the Apostles in the governance of the Church (e.g., the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Epistles of St. Clement, of St. Ignatius, of St. Polycarp*). Some of these books were used in various parts of the Church and some of them quite widely regarded as “scripture,” exactly on a par with the Gospels and the other books of the New Testament as we now know it.

The earliest indication that any of these books (both those we now regard as the “New Testament” and the other books) were regarded as “scripture” is evidenced by their use in the worship of the Church and of their citation in the writings of the Church Fathers. However, the early decades of the Church’s

life were preoccupied with missionary activity and persecution. If it occurred to anyone to make a written “table of contents” of the new scriptural books during this period, we have no indication of it.

## The Canon of the New Testament The Table of Contents

The earliest known list of books that apparently were regarded as “scripture” in the Church’s history comes from about A.D. 130 is known as the *Muratorian Canon*.

Portions of the work have been lost, but it did include the four Gospels and most of the epistles of St. Paul, as well as various other books. But doubts existed in various parts of the Christian community concerning the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, the *Epistle of Jude*, the *Second Epistle of Peter*, the *Second* and *Third Epistles of John*, and the *Apocalypse*. As noted earlier, there were portions of the Church in which books other than those we now recognize as part of the New Testament were accepted as such.

It is not until A.D. 369, with St. Athanasius’ *Festal Epistle* for that year, that we find a “table of contents” for the New Testament that corresponds exactly to that which we now accept. For 336 years the Church had been living, growing, developing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit... and only at that time would it have been possible (though not yet with universal acceptance) to print “the Holy Bible” as we now know and accept it!

This date is already four decades after the Council of Nicea, after the Creed had been written, after the Church (as many would have it) had been finally and ultimately corrupted by St. Constantine.

What can one make of this? We shall have to come back to this momentarily... but first let us conclude the history of the “table of contents.”

Only five years earlier than St. Athanasius’ *Festal Epistle*, the Council of Laodicea promulgated a list of the books (the canons of which were confirmed by the Sixth Ecumenical Council) of the New Testament that was identical, except that it did not include the *Apocalypse (Revelation)* among “all the books that are to be read” (Canon 60). However, it would not be for quite some time that there was truly universal agreement as to the books of the New Testament. And it would be yet another thousand years before there would be a single book identical in contents to what we now call the Bible. So, to what conclusion does

THREE HIERARCHS



this drive us?

## The Bible and The Church

Obviously, the Bible came into existence and came to be what it is only in the context of the living, dynamic Church of Jesus Christ, which had its origin at Pentecost (although its antetype is to be found in the Chosen People, whose history led to the incarnation of the Son of God).

It was the life of the Church throughout the first 70 or so years of her existence that, guided by the Holy Spirit, gave rise to the written texts that in due course were to comprise the New Testament. And for more than another 300 years, it was the continuing life of the Church that was required to refine and define the exact contents of the Scriptures.

Thus, it can be pointless and misleading, and even dangerous, to discuss the Scriptures apart from

the life of the Church. If the Scriptures as we know them could only come into existence through the action of the Holy Spirit upon and in the Church over a period hundreds of years, then obviously the rest of the experience of the Church during those same centuries (and subsequent ones as well) is of vital importance to their understanding.

### Which Came First?

The classic riddle, “which came first: the chicken or the egg?” is very much to the point here. It should be apparent that the Church long precedes the Bible as a single collection of books and considerably precedes even the individual books of the New Testament. Thus, it is quite certain that the Church founded by Our Lord was not “based solely on the Bible.”

The Church was created by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. At that time, the Church had no Bible as we know it... and didn't have to in order to be truly the Church of the New Testament. It can be said with some justification that if every single copy of the Bible in existence were destroyed, the effect upon the Church would be minimal ...although certainly the context in which such an event could occur would not be!

But the converse is not true. If there were no Church [but we are assured this will never come to pass as “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (*Matthew 16:18*)], the Bible would not be sufficient to provide what is needed for our salvation. If we doubt the truth of this, we need only cast our glance over the spectacle of what happens when people attempt to create their own “churches” based upon their own, private interpretations of the Holy Scriptures.



### How Can We Understand the Bible?

We must, then, look to the Church if we are to have any correct understanding of Scripture. St. Peter insists: “No prophesy of the Scripture is of private interpretation” (*2 Peter 1:29*). But we must not expect to find this understanding by acquiring some compendium of the “true meaning” of the Bible. It is of wisdom—divine wisdom—that we speak... and divine wisdom cannot be reduced to a series of sentences or paragraphs or books of merely human writing, inspired or otherwise. No, it is to the life of the Church that we must turn if we are to understand the Bible.

This life cannot be ours except by participation. We must be saturated in it through the prayers of the

Church, through reading in the wisdom of the nearly 2,000 years of writings of the Fathers and Mothers of the Church, and through the daily life of the Christian community. Apart from this life in the Church there can be no real understanding, only misunderstanding. The annals of the Church's history are filled with such... as are the shelves of any large library. Wherever man tries to rely upon his own "reason," rather than upon God's Wisdom as imparted in the holy Church, separation from the Truth is a certain outcome.

## And Where Is This Church?

But where, an honest inquirer can legitimately ask, are we to find "the Church"?

This question could have been easily answered in the first few years of the Church's life. But it wasn't long before there were those who wished to substitute their own misunderstandings for divine understanding... even in the epistles of the holy Apostle Paul we can read of such.

Long before the canon of Holy Scripture was firm, it was necessary for the Church to reject the false teachings of the Gnostics, who taught that salvation was to be attained by knowledge; of Arius, who refused to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God; and of many others. Even today we have millions and millions of Christians claiming to be either a part of the Church or claiming to be the only true Church.

Nevertheless, there truly is and never has been but one Church. That Church has always been at one with the teachings of the holy Apostles, and always in genuine historical and spiritual continuity with them.

That Church first had to define itself as "catholic" or universal, in distinction from the "particular" or partial understandings of some of the early heretics.

Later, it had to define itself as "orthodox," as of the same Faith as the Apostles and the Church throughout the ages... in distinction from those who were "heterodox," accepting "another faith."

From the very beginning, there has been much tolerance for sinners (even though not for their sins), but none for false teachings, for heresy: "If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (*Galatians 1:8*).

And what is this "Church"? It is the same Church that was founded by our Lord, governed by the Apostles in the earliest decades, later guided and shepherded by their successors, the bishops.

It is the same Church that suffered intermittent persecution for three hundred years and that finally attained freedom under the reign of St. Constantine, which by the guidance of the Holy Spirit defined the meaning of the Scriptures as it confronted the perpetrators of the various heresies.

It is the same Church that in the holy Councils wrote the Nicene Creed, summarizing the very essence of the Faith and the Scriptures and in these same Councils wrote the Canons that are the guidelines even to this day for its life.

It is the same Church that teaches us to venerate the holy images (icons) of our Lord, His mother, and all the saints.

And, inspired by the Holy Spirit, it is the same Church that learned how to celebrate the holy Lit-



urgy, the Lord's Supper, with dignity and splendor long before that time at which we can identify a final agreement concerning the contents of the Bible.

And so we are forced, if we confront the facts with honesty and integrity, to one inescapable conclusion: it is only through the Church that we have access to the Bible at all. And it is likewise to the Church that we must turn for its understanding.

***Only in the life of the Church is it possible for the Bible to be for us the living, life-giving Word of God. Only in the Church can we become one with our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ... He in us, and we in Him, that we all may be One in Him (cf. John. 17:22-23).***



**Glory to Jesus Christ!  
Glory Forever!**

*Text excerpted and adapted from various Eastern Catholic and Orthodox Christian sources.*



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