

Which Bible?

The bible tells **one story** – The story of **Salvation History** – This story finds its fulfillment in **Christ**. There are many translations. Three of note are:

- The New American Bible
- The Revised Standard Version
- The English Standard Version.

What does it mean to say that the bible is “inspired”? There are so many translations of the original texts. Some of them vary quite a bit. What then specifically is inspired? What’s inspired is what the sacred author *intended* to say. For this, the study of *all aspects* of Scripture is essential. What was important during the time period that the sacred writer was composing his text? (Think of 9/11.) Muslims believe that the Koran was literally dictated, word-for-word, to Mohammed by Allah in Arabic. Catholics hold no such view about the bible.

The **Protestant Reformation**, which started in Germany, (famous for the doctrine of Sola Scriptura) gave rise to an explosion in the scholarly study of Sacred Scripture. To this day, the Germans hold the lead in the study of Scripture, though Catholic scholarship is quickly catching up. To this day, much of the jargon used by Scripture scholars, Catholic and Protestant alike, is German in origin. Initial Catholic reluctance of the scholarly study of Scripture was largely in opposition to the Protestant Reformation. Sacred Scripture was not to be questioned or tampered with, which of course in one sense is true.

Until around the 19th century, the **Vulgate** of St. Jerome, who translated the bible from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek into Latin in A.D. 382 was the official Catholic text of the Bible. To this day, the Vulgate remains the definitive text of the Bible when establishing Catholic Doctrine, but there are (much!) better translations for the study of Scripture.

The breakthrough in Catholic Scripture scholarship came when Pope Pius XII published his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Inspired by the Spirit) in 1943. This opened the door for Catholic scholars to freely pursue the academic study of Sacred Scripture. Until then, the critical study of Scripture was largely frowned upon.

It is important to remember that the Church, exercising its magisterial teaching office, is still the only authoritative interpreter of Scripture. This does not mean that every word in Scripture has an authoritative interpretation by the Church, in fact the majority does not. While all of Scripture is inspired, not every line of Scripture is of equal weight.

Why are there two different Old Testaments?

The Protestant Old Testament contains 39 books, while the Catholic version has 46. In almost all Christian traditions today, the New Testament consists of the same 27 books. The Catholic Old Testament contains an additional seven books that the Protestant Old Testament does not: Tobit, Judith, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, Wisdom (of Solomon), Sirach, and Baruch and parts of the Books of Esther, Susanna, and Daniel chapters 13 & 14. Why is this? There are two important “canons.” A *canon* simply means a *rule* or the official listing of books. These two canons are the **Alexandrian Canon** and the **Palestinian Canon**.

The Palestinian Canon: This canon, the one currently accepted by the Jews, from antiquity had certain rules on what books of the Bible could be considered legitimate. For example, they had to be written in Hebrew. They had to be composed within the confines of the Holy Land (the Southern Kingdom of Judah with the capital city of Jerusalem). The Northern Kingdom of Israel (capital city Samaria) had apostatized after it was conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C. and its inhabitants were not considered as true Jews by the Jews of the Southern Kingdom.

Further, books to be included in the canon of Scripture had to be written before the time of the Temple reforms that took place upon the return from the Babylonian exile under King Hezekiah. This obviously excluded certain books that were written in Greek or written by Jews in Persia during the exile. While books such as Maccabees were not included, these books were widely read by Jews for inspirational purposes. This canon eventually became today's Protestant Bible.

The Alexandrian Canon: Around 200 B.C., Alexander the Great conquered much of the known world. It was at this time that Greek became the lingua franca. By this time there were many devout Jews living in places like Alexandria and Rome who no longer spoke Hebrew, so a translation was needed.

Alexander the Great was killed in battle (at age 33), and Ptolemy II commissioned the translation of the Torah into Greek, famously known as the **Septuagint** (Greek for 70). As legend has it, Ptolemy II was building the great and famous library of Alexandria (hence the name Alexandrian Canon) where he wanted to have all of the books in the world. But of course, they all had to be in written Greek because clearly intelligent, civilized people only spoke and read Greek 😊. Ptolemy wanted a copy of the Jew's holy book, the Torah, so he hired 70 Jewish rabbis (72 in actuality, six from each tribe), and sent them into 70 different rooms to translate the Torah. When finished they compared translations, and they supposedly (miraculously) matched word for word. So from its beginning, the Septuagint had the status of not just a translation, but a holy translation, an inspired translation that has divine authority. This took place around 200 BC or a bit earlier. Over time, the other books of the Old Testament were translated into Greek. By the time of the New Testament, there was essentially a complete Old Testament in Greek, what we call the Septuagint or LXX (Roman numeral 70), for the 70 translators that went into those 70 rooms to translate the Torah.

By the time of Jesus, probably most of the Jews in the Greco-Roman world did not know Hebrew, but they did speak Greek. Oftentimes in the synagogue, the Scriptures were read aloud in Greek, not Hebrew. Even in the Holy Land Jews spoke Aramaic, not Hebrew (they're cousin languages). There's a very strong tradition of Greek-speaking Judaism by the time Jesus is born. It is likely that Jesus was fluent in both Aramaic and Greek. St. Jerome needed to learn Hebrew and Greek to produce his Latin Vulgate.

The Protestant canon matches the Jewish canon of the Old Testament. Hence they do have a precedent for what they adopted, but until then Christian canon always followed the Septuagint. The Septuagint actually has other books in it in addition to the Deuterocanon, like Psalm 151. It has the Odes of Solomon has a handful of other Greek texts that are not in our Catholic canon today. Some of these **Deuterocanonical** books were only preserved in Greek, not in Hebrew, and so the Protestants just threw out the Deuterocanon and adopted the Jewish canon instead.

What's interesting is that the earliest complete copy of the Hebrew Bible is from about 980, almost a thousand years after Jesus. The earliest complete copy of the Septuagint is from around 380. Hence the Septuagint represents an authentic and more ancient tradition than does the Hebrew.

Of course, we know that most of the Old Testament books were originally written in Hebrew, but those original scrolls were lost in antiquity long ago. So where did the Hebrew Bible that Jews use today come from? A group of Jews known as the Masoretes between the 7th and 10th centuries A.D. copied and edited the authoritative Hebrew and Aramaic text of the 24 books (not 39) of the Tanakh – Tanakh is what Jews call the Bible, and it is an acronym – Torah ('Instruction' or 'Law'), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings), sometimes simply written TNK. It defines the Jewish canon with its vocalization and accentuation and is known as the Masoretic Text. Until the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in 1947, the oldest Hebrew text of the Old Testament dates back only 1000 years.