Did the Protestant Bible Exist Before the Reformation?

**I. The Challenge: Find an Early Church Protestant Bible.**

Finding an Early Church Father who agrees 100% with Protestantism is an unfair burden. After all, there are probably some Fathers who disagree with things now defined in Catholicism if you read their writings carefully enough. But here's a burden which *should* be considered fair: find a Protestant Bible. Find a single Early Church Father who says, "here is the canon *which we use*," and lists the precise books which Protestants have in their Bibles today. After all, for either *solo Scriptura*or *sola Scriptura*, you must first agree on *which*Bible. If no Early Church Father read the Bible used today by Protestants, none of their quotes praising the reading of Scripture are applicable to proving a "Protestant Bible only" position.  
So I decided to go to the source. Or more specifically, Archibald Alexander (1772-1851) wrote a book called *Canon of the Old and New Testaments Ascertained, or The Bible Complete without the Apocrypha and Unwritten Traditions*. Now I know what you're wondering: how could the a set of books, like the Bible, contain *unwritten*Traditions? I can only speculate. Illustrations? Maybe he was tired of seeing things like paintings of [Moses with horns](http://www.moseshand.com/studies/moses.htm). Just kidding: the whole bit about "the Apocrypha and Unwritten Traditions" is to let his audience know, "I hate everything Catholicism stands for!" And his book sure does. In it, he makes some bold statements about the Early Church Fathers and the canon. He notes that the oldest canon we have is that of Melito of Sardis, but that we only know his canon from Eusebius’ *Church History.*Regarding Melito's canon, Alexander writes, “the very same books were, in his day, received into the Canon, as are now found in our Hebrew Bibles.” So he's claiming: Melito's canon is a **100% match to the Protestant canon**. And then he writes:

Very soon after **Melito**, **Origen**furnishes us with a catalogue of the books of the Old Testament, which perfectly accords with our Canon, except that he omits the Minor Prophets; which omission must have been a mere slip of the pen, in him or his copyist, as it is certain that he received this as a book of Holy Scripture: and the number of the books of the Old Testament, given by him in this very place, cannot be completed without reckoning the twelve Minor Prophets as one.  
  
After Origen, we have catalogues in succession, not only by men of the first authority in the church, but by councils, consisting of numerous bishops, **all which are perfectly the same as our own**. It will be sufficient merely to refer to these sources of information. Catalogues of the books of the Old Testament have been given by **Athanasius**; by **Cyril**; by **Augustine**; by**Jerome**; by **Rufin**; by the **council of Laodicea, in their LX. Canon**; and by the **council of Carthage**. And when it is considered, that **all these catalogues exactly correspond with our present Canon of the. Hebrew Bible**, the evidence, I think, must appear complete to every impartial mind, that the Canon of the Old Testament is settled upon the clearest historical grounds.

Wow. Certainly, if Archibald Alexander is telling the truth, it *must* appear complete to every impartial mind, that the Canon of the Old Testament is settled upon the clearest historical grounds. So according to him, all of the canons in bold above will agree with the Protestant canon **100%**. That's the standard he sets for himself, and it's the only sensible one. After all, the difference between the Catholic and Protestant canon is only 7 books (plus longer versions of Daniel and Esther, which you can't really tell one way or another from a list of books).  
So I decided to retroactively submit Archibald's book to what might be termed the "Early Church Protestant Canon Challenge": that is, he claims 9 sources who will provide exactly what I'm looking for: A full and exact Protestant Canon. Actually, he claims just a Protestant Old Testament, but at least it's a starting place (as we'll see, he can't even deliver on this much more limited promise - sorry to spoil the surprise).

**II. What the Early Church Fathers *Actually*Believed.**

Before we begin, a lot of the lists group books together to attempt to make the canon a perfect 22 books. They do this in strange ways, like putting "the twelve minor prophets" as one book, even though it's twelve books with different authors, or grouping Judges and Ruth as one (strange) book, or putting part of Baruch with Lamentations at the end of Jeremiah, and calling it one book. Jerome explains the reasons why he thinks this is an important standard in his prologue to the Books of the Kings [here](http://www.bible-researcher.com/jerome.html). It's a pious attempt, but ultimately, it's discarded by the Church (and isn't revived by Protestants), because there are just too many books to try and find a way to reduce or group them down to 22.  
  
**A. Melito (d. 180 A.D.):**  
The only existent copy of Melito’s letter is from Book 4, Chapter 26 of Eusebius’ *Church History* - it's[section 14 here](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.ix.xxvi.html). In it, he **excludes Esther from the canon, and includes the Wisdom also**. The Protestant claim that Melito is repeating the same book twice by different names seems contrary to the delineation that Bishop Melito drew: specifically listing them as “Proverbs of Solomon, Wisdom also,” seems to refute any attempt to reduce this to a single book. Here's a Protestant *sola Scripturist*who [argues that Wisdom actually *was*in Meltio's canon](http://bywhoseauthority.blogspot.com/2009/03/melito-and-eastern-canon-2a.html), on the basis of the text. In either case, without Esther, this isn’t a complete Protestant Old Testament, and Bp. Melito doesn’t include a New Testament canon.  
# of Protestant Canons so far: **0**  
# of times Alexander Archibald claimed a Protestant canon existed where it didn't: **1**  
  
**B. Origen:**We also know of his canonical list through Eusebius’ *Church History*- [it's here](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.xi.xxv.html). In it, he also lists “Jeremiah, with Lamentations *and the Epistle*in one,” as canonical. The Epistle in question is the Epistle of Jeremy, now the last chapter of Baruch. At the time, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and this epistle were lumped into one by those who wanted to keep the Old Testament canon at 22 books. We’ll see this “Epistle” mentioned again in Athanasius’ and Cyril’s lists. At the very end of the list, Origen writes, “And besides these there are the Maccabees, which are entitled *Sarbeth Sabanaiel*.” It’s a cryptic sentence. He seems to think that 1st and 2nd Maccabees are canonical, but there's no way to include them in the 22-book structure he's trying to meet. So does he list them to say, "in addition to the 22, these are canonical"? Or "these are specifically outside the canonical list"? I think it's the former, but it's hard to tell. If he's *refuting* the two books of Maccabees, why include the Hebrew name (since he says he's giving the Hebrew books). And why list only those two books, instead of all of the other books thought to be canonical which he doesn't like? So I think Origen is confused by how to fit these two pieces ("Maccabees is canonical" and "there are 22 books") together. In either case, Origen’s explicit acceptance of the Deuterocanonical Baruch 6 means his canon includes part of the DC, and is *not*an exact Protestant canon. Plus, like Alexander says, he omits the minor prophets. Alexander claims it's a slip of the pen, but it's not. He says, there are 22 books, and includes 22, plus the Books of Maccabees. There's no room for the twelve minor prophets on this list without expanding it to 23 +1. So this is actually missing 12 books Protestants hold, and including part of one book which they don't hold.  
# of Protestant Canons so far: **0**  
# of times Alexander Archibald claimed a Protestant canon existed where it didn't: **2  
  
C. Athanasius:**You can find his canon [here](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.xxv.iii.iii.xxv.html), at #4-5, and 7. He counts as one canonical book “Jeremiah with Baruch, Lamentations, and the epistle.” He also omits Esther, and in fact (in #7), lists the book along with most of the DC as a *non-canonical book*used for new member of the Church. So he didn't even forget Esther. He explicitly addressed her as non-canonical.  
# of Protestant Canons so far: **0**# of times Alexander Archibald claimed a Protestant canon existed where it didn't: **3**  
  
  
**D. Cyril of Jerusalem:**  
His list is [here](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207.ii.viii.html), #34-36. In it, he says that the LXX is divinely inspired, recounting the popular Legend of the Seventy Two Translators. The LXX, you'll note, contains the **full Deuterocanon.** Then he gives his list, and like Origen, counts the book of Jeremiah as “one, including Baruch and Lamentations and the Epistle.” Plus, his New Testament list omits Revelation. To be fair, Alexander only claimed it was a perfect Old Testament canon. Of course, since it's not, he's still wrong (again).  
# of Protestant Canons so far: **0**  
# of times Alexander Archibald claimed a Protestant canon existed where it didn't: **4**  
  
  
**E. Augustine:**Augustine's list is [here](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.v.v.viii.html), #13. I knew that Archibald Alexander was wrong when I noticed Augustine on the list. He was the fervent defender of the Deuterocanon against the translators Jerome and Rufinus. Augustine presents, in the link above, the **full and exact Catholic canon**, althoug he doesn't list Lamentations or Baruch. But we already know that they were often grouped as part of the Book of Jeremiah from the authors above. And in fact, Augustine quotes from Baruch by calling it Jeremiah, which is pretty explicit evidence that he considered them all one book (see footnote 2473 [here](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf211.iv.vii.v.ix.html?highlight=baruch,augustine#highlight), which mentions that St. John Cassian did the same). His list explicitly includes Tobias (Tobit), 1st and 2nd Maccabees, Wisdom, and Ecclesiasticus (Sirach). He cites to the DC elsewhere as Scripture, for example, his use of the angel in Tobit as Scripture in [chapter 13 of City of God](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.iv.ii.xiv.html). He explicitly [says of 1st and 2nd Maccabees](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.iv.XVIII.36.html), “These are held as canonical, not by the Jews, but by the Church, on account of the extreme and wonderful sufferings of certain martyrs, who, before Christ had come in the flesh, contended for the law of God even unto death, and endured most grievous and horrible evils.” And he defends the Book of Wisdom at greater length [here](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf105.xxi.ii.xxvii.html). On the whole, I think if you're writing a book to*discredit* the Deuterocanon, our man Augustine may not be the guy to go with.  
# of Protestant Canons so far: **0**  
# of Catholic Canons so far: **1**  
# of times Alexander Archibald claimed a Protestant canon existed where it didn't: **5**  
  
  
**F. Jerome**  
Jerome's the most famous. But the problem is, he never created a Protestant canon. He just doubted the authenticity of the Deuterocanon, and there's a mile of difference between those two things. What his canon would have looked like, if left to his own devices, is pretty unclear: would it have included Esther? Would it have included the LXX version of Jeremiah? Anyways, he ultimately deferred to the Church's view, even if he did complain. [Here's](http://catholicdefense.blogspot.com/2010/06/st-jerome-on-deuterocanon.html) a brief post I wrote explaining why Jerome's a bad example for Protestants, because he deferred to the authority of the Pope and Church councils over his own theological speculation. Questioning the authenticity of the Deuterocanon isn't the same as positively putting forward a dissenting canon, much less a full and exact Protestant canon. Lots of Early Church Fathers were unsure of its canonicity: that's why it's called the Deuterocanon. That doesn't mean that they used the KJV.  
  
But remember, Jerome *wasn't*left to his own devices (he was a papal secretary, after all), and he did translate and assemble a canon: The Latin Vulgate, the popular Bible used in the Catholic Church for centuries, which contained the DC (to be sure, it had Jerome's kvetching about having to translate it, and his doubts, but as I'll address below, that's pretty irrelevant if the question is "books in the canon"). Jerome could have made a "St. Jerome canon," but he didn't, because he deferred to those in authority - specifically, his boss, Pope St. Damasus, who held with the Church that the DC was canonical. Trying to use him now as an authority for the anti-Deuterocanonical position would be to do the opposite of what he'd done in life: defer to the Church. So chalk up one more Catholic canon, fully assembled.  
# of Protestant Canons so far: **0**  
# of Catholic Canons so far: **2**  
# of times Alexander Archibald claimed a Protestant canon existed where it didn't: **6**  
  
**G. Rufin (340-410):**  
His list contains "Rufin," which I assume means Rufinus of Aquileia. If so, his Old Testament canon doesn't explicitly include Lamentations. Probably, like most of the other Fathers we've considered, he uses the LXX version of Jeremiah, which contains Lamentations, the Epistle of Jeremy (Baruch 6), and in many cases, the rest of Baruch. If he meant the Hebrew version of Jeremiah, he's a book short (Lamentations) of the Protestant canon. If he meant the Greek version of Jeremiah, he's got all or part of Baruch as well. Either way, this isn't a perfect Protestant canon.  
Rufinus employed a three-tiered structure: “canonical,” “ecclesiastical,” and “apocryphal.” Canonical were those books “which the fathers have included in the canon; on which they would have us establish the declarations of our faith.” Apocrypha were “which they would not have read in the churches.” He doesn't define Ecclesiastical books. In his list of Ecclesiastical books, he doesn't include Baruch or Lamentations. So he either thought they were totally apocryphal (unlikely), or considered them canonical.  
# of Protestant Canons so far: **0**  
# of Catholic Canons so far: **2**  
# of times Alexander Archibald claimed a Protestant canon existed where it didn't: **7**  
  
**H. The Council of Laodicea, in their LX. Canon:**  
That canon is right [here](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.viii.vii.iii.lxv.html), and as you can see, it has Baruch and "the Epistle" explicitly, just like so many of the ECFs we've looked at so far. It also doesn’t have Revelation, but that's ok since it’s a regional council, and not infallible. Besides that, both the Calvinist link above, and [New Advent](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3806.htm), which is Catholic, express doubts on the authenticity of this canon, because many copies of the canons of this Council don't include it (although that may have been because the pope rejected it).  
# of Protestant Canons so far: **0**  
# of Catholic Canons so far: **2**  
# of times Alexander Archibald claimed a Protestant canon existed where it didn't: **8**  
  
  
**I. The Third Council of Carthage:**  
[It's here.](http://www.bible-researcher.com/carthage.html#note4) And of course, it contains the full and exact Catholic canon. This was the regional council whose views caught on throughout the entire West, and put to rest most of the concerns about the Deuterocanon. It's believed that it was reaffirming an earlier Synod, the Synod of Hippo, so this is arguably two (regional) Church Councils for the Catholic canon. But we'll just count it as one.  
Final score:  
# of Protestant Canons listed: **0**  
# of Catholic Canons listed: **3**  
# of times Alexander Archibald claimed a Protestant canon existed where it didn't: **9**  
  
  
So of the 9 sources which Alexander Archibald pointed to as having "catalogues" which "exactly correspond with our present Canon of the Hebrew Bible," not a one did. And three of them explicitly affirmed the Catholic canon. And remember, this is just 3 of the examples held up to *disprove* the Catholic canon, which is a very different thing than saying that Catholics can only find 3 supporters. Every one of his sources affirmed at least part of the Deuterocanon. This raises some questions, like where does the Protestant authority for their Bible come from? And why is Archibald Alexander's book considered part of Calvin College's Christian Classics Ethereal Library? It's a smear on the Catholic Church which even a few hours of research will easily disprove.  
  
So Archibald lost the Early Church Protestant Canon Challenge, and badly. It turns out that his book was just meant to drum up support for his pet position, without actually being based in facts. Which leaves us with the original question: did any early Christian, when saying, "these are the books which our church uses" or *even* the lesser claim of "these are the books which I personally wish our church would use" mention the precise canon used by Protestants today? I can't prove a universal negative - that is, that there was no Christian over all those centuries - but every avenue I've looked down has come up a dead end, or (worse, for the Protestant position), the exact opposite of what is meant to be proven: early Church Fathers hammering home the authenticity of the Catholic canon.

**III. Nota Bene: Where Jerome and Rufinus went Wrong.**

Two Early Church Fathers, Jerome and Rufinus, were particularly skeptical on the authenticity of the Deuterocanonical Books, and wanted them considered as "Ecclessastical" books - edifying, but not the source of doctrine. Here are some reasons for where and why I think they went wrong:  
(1) There's a reason Archibald Alexander appeals to "men of the first authority in the church, but by councils, consisting of numerous bishops." Bishops are leaders of their diocese, and if a bishop says "this is a canon," that's pretty good evidence that everyone in his diocese is using that canon. In contrast, if it's a Bible scholar or theologian, it may just be a case where academia rots good men's brains. Jerome and Rufinus, who have canons *nearest* that of modern Protestants, were the ones who were deviating. They weren't bishops, like most of the others on this list. They were scholars: both of them were translators, which isn't insignificant. As translators, they discovered that there weren't Hebrew manuscripts of the Deuterocanon [which the earlier Church Fathers already knew], and decided that the Jews must not have ever considered the Deuterocanon as Scripture [a conclusion most scholars would now disagree with, I believe]. On the basis of this evidence, they doubted the authenticity of the DC. But they're the innovators, the ones who don't represent the orthodox view. Both of them imagine that the Hebrew-speaking Fathers would have held canons without the DC in it, but there's no evidence of this. In fact, all the canons before theirs, as we've seen, held the DC in whole or in part. Alexander is right to value early bishops over early scholars to gauge the ***historical belief*** of the early Church. He's just wrong about what those early bishops believed.  
(2) Jerome and Rufinus' canons were *hypothetical*canons. They weren't listing the books which Catholics (anywhere) used, but the books which they thought that they *should* use (and in Jerome's case, not even listing, at all). There are fewer copies of a Rufinus Bible (0) then a Jefferson Bible (1). In neither case, do we assume that these quirky canons represented anything more than the editor's quirkiness. And while there are a *lot*of Jerome Bibles, they contain the DC. It's much easier to convince *yourself*of a change in the Church than to convince the Church (or actually accomplish that change). The bishops' canons were the in-practice, tried, tested, and true canons.  
(3) The Vulgate compromise - this isn't so much where things went wrong, as how they were righted. Jerome translated the Deuterocanonical books, but noted his concern about their authenticity. That's fine. The New American Bible was translated in part by people who are apparently heathens. Note[footnote 16 on Matthew 16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/matthew/matthew16.htm). It denies the authenticity of Jesus' prophesies, suggests He doesn't know about the Passion, and comes pretty close to denying that He's God. [Jimmy Akin takes it to task here](http://www.jimmyakin.org/2005/01/the_new_america.html). The books of the Bible are protected by the Holy Spirit. The footnotes and introductions are not. So Jerome's books were divinely protected, but his introductions were not.