**Does Saint Jerome Endorse the Protestant Canon?**

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In response to last week’t [two](http://shamelesspopery.com/why-not-66-answering-brian-edwards-arguments-for-the-protestant-canon-pt-i/)-[part](http://shamelesspopery.com/why-not-66-answering-brian-edwards-arguments-for-the-protestant-canon-pt-ii/) series on the canon of Scripture, my Lutheran friend Rev. Hans wrote:

I am curious about the view St. Jerome has on the Deuterocanonical books. I have read that he questioned these books and separated them from the Old Testament Canon. You brought up the Vulgate, so it might be interesting to hear from the great translator. You present great arguments, and they have been making me think quite a bit about the Protestant arguments. I am not ready to raise the white flag, but I am searching the garrison for another solid defense.

Rev. Hans is hardly the first Protestant to seek a “garrison” in St. Jerome.  He’s undoubtedly the Church Father that Protestants appeal to most often on the question of the canon of Scripture, even while his views on other subjects, like [the Marian doctrines](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3007.htm) are ignored. The reason seems obvious: Jerome looks like he’s giving Protestants exactly what they want: someone who holds to the full and exact 66-Book canon… and a brilliant Biblical scholar at that!

It’s true that Jerome generally trusted the Hebrew versions of the Scriptures over the Greek versions, and consequently spoke out against several of the Deuterocanonical Books, explicitly arguing against their canonicity at various times.  But, for a number of reasons, he’s not the garrison Protestants are hoping for.

**The first and most basic reason** is that Jerome actually argued ***for*** the Longer (Greek / Catholic) Version of Daniel over and against the Shorter (Hebrew / Protestant) version. We see this in his [reply to Rufinus](http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/fathers/view.cfm?recnum=2888). A little background: there were four Greek translations of the Book of Daniel in circulation (Aquila, Symmachus, the Septuagint, and Theodotion). All four Greek versions were of the Longer Version. For some reason, probably because it was a superior translation, the Church tended to use Theodotion’s translation, even though they used the Septuagint translation of all of the other Old Testament Books. Jerome found this fact really important, probably because it proved that the Septuagint wasn’t the divinely-inspired translation that several of his contemporaries (including Rufinus) claimed.

So Jerome translates the Book of Daniel into Latin, using the Theodotion version, and [includes a preface](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.vii.iii.xiii.html) explaining why he chose not to use the version of “the Seventy,” and noting that the Jews rejected the portions about Susanna and the Hymn of the Three Young Men. Rufinus responds, [criticizing Jerome](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf203.vi.xi.iii.xxxviii.html) for attacking the Septuagint, and for attacking the canonicity of Susanna and the Hymn of the Three Young Men. [Jerome answers](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf203.vi.xii.ii.xxvii.html) by saying that (a) yes, he *was* attacking the Septuagint translation, but has the authority of the Church on his side, and (b) no, he wasn’t attacking the canonicity of Susanna and the Hymn of the Three Young Men, but simply noting what Jewish critics argued:

We have four versions to choose from: those of Aquila, Symmachus, the Seventy, and Theodotion. **The churches choose to read Daniel in the version of Theodotion. What sin have I committed in following the judgment of the churches?** But when I repeat what the Jews say against the Story of Susanna and the Hymn of the Three Children, and the fables of Bel and the Dragon, which are not contained in the Hebrew Bible, the man who makes this a charge against me proves himself to be a fool and a slanderer; for I explained not what I thought but what they commonly say against us.

So Jerome *acknowledged* the Jewish criticisms of the Longer version of Daniel, yet still opted to translate the Greek Theodotion Longer version, rather than translating the shorter Hebrew version.  In other words, it wasn’t as if Jerome was unaware of the controversy: he intentionally opted for the Deuterocanonical version of Daniel.

**The second reason Jerome makes a bad Protestant garrison** is related to the first.  Jerome chose the Theodotion version of Daniel, not because he personally thought it was the best translation, but because (as he explains), he was deferring to the “judgment of the churches.” In this same letter to Rufinus, he writes, “Still, I wonder that a man should read the version of Theodotion the heretic and judaizer, and should scorn that of a Christian, simple and sinful though he may be.” In other words, *he* doesn’t even understand why the Church uses Theodotion’s translation, but he defers to Her judgment anyhow.  Given his deference to the Church on this subject, there’s no serious question where Jerome would stand today: he’d side with the Catholic Church, even if he didn’t fully understand Her reasoning.

**The third reason, related to the second,** is that Jerome translates the Vulgate. Between holding to the canon that he personally thinks should be the Christian canon, and holding to the canon that the Pope says should be the Christian canon, Jerome opts for the latter. It’s true that he had commentaries explaining his personal views on the various Books, but he translated them for use in the canon, nevertheless. Put another way: Jerome’s objections to the Deuterocanon weren’t strong enough to convince Jerome to reject the Vulgate.

**Fourth, Jerome used a strange three-tiered system** for canonicity that both Catholics and Protestants reject, with the Deuterocanonical Books occupying the middle tier. The reason that this matters is, at various places, Jerome **quotes some of the Deuterocanonical Books as Scripture**, including those he thinks aren’t (or shouldn’t be) canonical. One of the clearest examples of this is in [Letter 108](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001108.htm), in which he quotes Sirach 13:2, and expressly calls it Scripture, writing, “for does not **the scripture** say: ‘Burden not yourself above your power?’” There are several other examples of Jerome treating the Deuterocanon like Scripture, but I think you can see the problem for Protestants.

**Fifth,** Jerome’s opposition to the Greek version of the Scriptures is based on the erroneous idea that the New Testament always sides with the Hebrew version, where the Hebrew and Septuagint disagree. He said this to Rufinus:

Wherever the Seventy agree with the Hebrew, the apostles took their quotations from that translation; but, where they disagree, they set down in Greek what they had found in the Hebrew. And further, I give a challenge to my accuser. I have shown that many things are set down in the New Testament as coming from the older books, which are not to be found in the Septuagint; and I have pointed out that these exist in the Hebrew. Now let him **show that there is anything in the New Testament which comes from the Septuagint but which is not found in the Hebrew, and our controversy is at an end.**

So that’s the test: if we can show any place in the New Testament which quotes from a passage found ***only*** in the LXX, and (by Jerome’s own standard), he would have dropped his opposition.  In fact, we can show [several such places](http://shamelesspopery.com/did-jesus-use-the-greek-version-of-the-bible/).  For example, Hebrews 10:5-7 uses the LXX version of Psalm 40 as evidence of the Incarnation (while the Hebrew version lacks the critical line, “a body you prepared for me”).  This prophesy *only* works with the LXX version, not with the Hebrew version.   A second example would be Matthew 21:16, in which Jesus quotes the LXX version of Psalm 8 to explain why the children are praising Him:  the Hebrew version lacks a reference to praise, and wouldn’t work.  So by Jerome’s own testimony, we can say that he would drop his opposition had he just been exposed to these facts.

Jerome’s argument against the Deuterocanonical Books was tied, in no small way, to the fact that he was trained in Hebrew by Jewish scholars (specifically, a scholar named Barabbas, who he references in his writings), and had wrongly concluded that the Hebrew version of the Old Testament in use at his time was more reliable than it really was. Had he known what we know now, the controversy would have come to an end.

**Finally, I would suggest that the appeal to Jerome isn’t *principled*.** By that, I mean that even if Protestants were right that Jerome completely rejected the Deuterocanon (and I think the above shows that’s not the case), that’s no basis for the canon.  After all, Protestants ignore Jerome’s teachings on a wide range of issues, like Mary’s perpetual Virginity, or the authority of the Bishop of Rome, etc.  Given this, why take Jerome over and against everyone else in the early Church?  Is it because you think he’s a better Scripture scholar? In that case, why reject his translation of Genesis 3:15 as saying that “she” (Mary) will crush the head of Satan?

In other words, it’s one thing to say, “We believe this because the Church Fathers taught this.” It’s quite another to say “we believe this, now let’s try to find some Church Father to support us.” And on this question of the canon, Protestants seem to be quite egregiously engaging in the latter.