

# OpenTheo

## #57 The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom responds to questions on why the Roman Catholic bible includes more books than Protestant versions, what he makes of the Eastern Orthodox tradition and a listener who is thinking of 'crossing the Tiber'.

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## Transcript

[Music] The Ask NTY anything podcast.

[Music] Hello and welcome back, I'm Justin Briley, Premiost Theology and Apologetics Editor, bring you another show with the Thornton theology of Tom Wright and brought you in partnership with SBCK and NTY right online. Today taking your questions on the Catholic and Orthodox Church traditions.

Well you can find out more about the show as ever and more videos, how to ask a question yourself, more resources, all of them available at [AskNTYright.com](http://AskNTYright.com) where you can register to get our regular newsletter, you can support the show too. And again, if you're listening from the states, we'd love to do that from Premiost [insight.org](http://insight.org). Click on Ask NTY right to get involved there. Lovely to hear from John in Adelaide by the way, who

said not so much a question but a thank you.

I was listening to a podcast back in December on Broken Sign Post Tom's latest book was pleasantly surprised when a question of mine regarding limited atonement was discussed by Tom. His insights were most helpful. I very much appreciate the podcast.

It has genuinely helped me think through my faith and live it out. Thanks once again. That is very much the idea of the podcast John.

So thank you and I imagine you're listening to this and I hope you're doing well out in Adelaide. It's great to know that we've got people all over the world listening to the show. Just another shout out for our forthcoming conference on Saturday the 15th of May.

Tom is going to be one of our star speakers for Unbelievable Life. It's happening alongside a host of other great names Tom Holland, Claire Williams, Sean and Josh McDow. How to tell the greatest story ever told to a new generation is very much our theme.

Plus we'll be looking at how we do that in this sort of post-COVID time as well. If you'd like to book your place from anywhere in the world, it's all online. [Unbelievable.live](https://unbelievable.live). We're doing it at a time that will definitely suit US listeners as well.

So again, if you want to book your place, it's [unbelievable.live](https://unbelievable.live). And then find out more about the show, how to ask a question yourself and other resources at [askentiright.com](https://askentiright.com). For now, let's get into your questions. Today on the show, we're taking some of your questions on the Catholic and Orthodox traditions and denominations in general. Interesting set of questions here from Michelle, Joshua and Daniel Tom.

Let's start with Michelle in Canada who wants to know about the seven additional books that you find in Catholic Bibles. Michelle says, "As someone who grew up in a Baptist community learning from a typical NIV Bible, should I accept or reject these books as the word of God? To my unbelieving friend, this discrepancy between types of Bibles only discredits the book as a whole and it seems weird to agree to disagree with my Catholic friends on something so foundational such as the make up of the Bible." So just remind me, what these additional books that you'll find in Catholic Bibles are often referred to as, Tom? Well, they have different terms. Most in the Protestant tradition call them the apocrypha.

And many Bibles for general use as it were have a middle section. Like while I'm holding here, which is an NRSV, which has got an apocrypha. So you get from Genesis through to Malachi and then you get the books of the apocrypha, which are, but they actually include not only some specific books, the seven particular books that are in the ordinary Roman Catholic Bible, but also some additional bits like the book of Susanna, which is in

addition to the book of Daniel and things like that.

And basically, just in this goes back to the fact that in the early church, most early Christians spoke Greek and they had what we call loosely the Septuagint, which is a Greek Bible, a Greek translation of the Old Testament. But the Greek Septuagint, which was popular in the early church, had quite a few other Jewish books on top of the ones that you find in the Hebrew Bible. And so this continued in the early church.

And when the Bible was translated into Latin by Jerome, among others, the translation was made often from the Septuagint. Now Jerome knew Hebrew as well, but he reckoned that these are the books which we Christians have been reading in the Septuagint. There were other different arrangements and so on.

And it's actually a very complicated story. If somebody were to Google canon of the Bible, or if they have access to a Bible dictionary, which has an article on the canon, they'll see it is quite a complicated story. But the short version is this, that in the 16th century, with the Protestant Reformation, the Reformers said we want the true original Bible.

That means the Hebrew Old Testament, including some bits in Aramaic and the Greek New Testament. So you've got the books that are in the Hebrew Bible and the books that are in the Greek New Testament. And that means that sorry, Tobit, Judith, Baruch, First Maccabees, Second Maccabees, Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus, your Greek, not Hebrew, you don't count.

Actually there is a Hebrew version of some of Ecclesiasticus, Ecclesiasticus, etc. These are complexities. Now on top of that decision, Hebrew or Greek, where the Reformers like Luther went with the Hebrew canon and the Roman Catholic Church went with the larger Greek or Latin canon.

You then get theological issues where people say, well, for instance, we Roman Catholics believe in the doctrine of purgatory. Where is that in the Bible? Well, it's in the books of the Maccabees. Actually, it isn't, but they claim it is.

That's a whole other story. So there were extra reasons why some Roman Catholics wanted that to be the case. Very interesting.

I just checked this out out of curiosity. The Council of Trent, which was the big Roman Catholic Council in the middle of the 16th century, really called to deal with the Reformation issues. They had a vote on the canon and the vote went 24 in favor, 15 against, 16 abstentions.

Can you believe it? That means that actually many Roman Catholics in the 16th century would actually have preferred to go with the Hebrew and Greek canon rather Hebrew and New Testament canon rather than what they now have. So these things were all up

in the air. The problem comes when you put other books in like the Wisdom of Solomon.

It's a wonderful book, but has all sorts of odd things about it, which don't really sit very well with what we learn in the New Testament. Then you not only add a few extra sources, you change the meaning of canon, you change the meaning of the Bible in some interesting ways. That's a whole other issue, but that's where it comes from.

The great thing to say if anyone's bothered about it is, look here. The Catholic Bible has, Matthew Mark, John, Acts, Romans, Revelation. The Catholic Bible has Genesis through to the Pentateuch, has Isaiah, it has the Psalms, etc.

So not a big deal actually. Yes, there are problems around the edge, but then this is real life. If you thought that the Bible either had to be something which dropped down from heaven in black leather bindings complete with maps or it can't be the Word of God at all, then it's time to grow up and actually think more wisely about the whole tradition.

It sometimes strikes me that we can get a bit obsessed with, you know, these are the books of the Bible and so on, the doctrine, the description of the Bible, the Bible, the Bible, the Bible, the Bible, the Bible, the Bible did not exist, it was still literally being written and yet God was able to do some pretty good stuff back then. So it's not as though, you know, people, Christians have always had to have a specific set of books. Precisely.

The rabbis debated books like Ecclesiastes, books like the Song of Songs were these part of the canon or weren't they? That's an ongoing Jewish discussion and the early Christians were debated whether books like The Shepherd of Hermas are fascinating rather to us curious book from the early second century. A lot of them in the second and third century loved The Shepherd of Hermas. It isn't in the Bible because it wasn't written by an apostle.

That raises other questions. But as you say, God was still at work in their midst. Go with the Gospels, the Epistles, Acts and Revelation, sigh of relief.

That's the core stuff. And let the ships fall outside that where they will. Before we come to someone asking about the Eastern Orthodox tradition, let's stick with the Catholic Church.

Nathaniel in Dallas, Texas says, "I'm an Anglican, but I'm considering crossing the Tiber, so to speak, and joining the Roman Catholic Church, Tom. I've been fairly unconvinced by apologists and people's arguments against the Roman Catholic Church, and this way did away from the Solar Scriptura and have started to appreciate the Church Fathers, Petri and Supremacy and Apostolic Succession more and more." So, Tom, why shouldn't I become Catholic? Why should I stay Anglican or perhaps even consider Orthodoxy? Well, great question. And I have many friends who have crossed the Tiber and actually some

who have crossed it in the other direction as well.

Roman Catholics who become Anglicans become other non-Roman Catholic things as well. And these are swirling questions at the moment, especially in America where the cultural pressures have meant that many people growing up in one church now start to look us can'tsages and say, "I don't really like what's going on here." Personally, I have quite serious problems about some of the claims that the Roman Catholic Church makes. And of course, if you join the Roman Catholic Church, you really do have to say, "I believe all these things like the perpetual virginity of Mary like..." Well, the other Mary and dogmas about Mary being bodily assumed into heaven, about Mary herself being conceived without sin, etc.

These are things which grew up particularly in the Middle Ages and which were finally codified and made mandatory, only very much in the modern period, in the 20th century. And it seems to me that's a shame that puts a barrier between the Roman Catholic Church and those of us who think, "Well, if that really wasn't taught in Scripture at all, and it does seem to me to undermine some things which are taught in Scripture." Paul says that Jesus is the only one to have received His resurrection body so far and that the rest of us will receive it when Jesus comes again. So the idea that Mary somehow has it ahead of time, I think Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 would shake his head and sorry, that's just not going to fit.

So there's all sorts of things like that. These are details. And in many discussions, and I've done a lot of dialogue with Roman Catholics both formally and informally, and Maggie and I've spent time in Rome getting to know Catholic counterparts and so on, had a wonderful time.

And certainly sharing in fellowship and being able to pray together, yes. But then there comes a certain point where the Roman Catholic traditionally argues from what the Pope said last week back to the decisions of various councils, back to the Middle Ages, back to the fathers. And finally, there may be a bit of Bible back there somewhere.

We Anglicans characteristically do it exactly the other way around. We say Jesus is the center of our authority. We find out about Jesus through Scripture.

Now let's work forwards from there and bring on board. Yes, the church fathers. Why not? The idea of Petrine supremacy though, interestingly, that was only really thought through in the 16th century again in response to Luther and co because that wasn't how the medieval period read the key text.

Just for those who might not know exactly what's meant by that phrase. What does Pet try and see? The idea of Petrine is to do with Peter with Jesus commissioning Peter to be the great central leader of the church. And that goes back to the passage in Matthew 16 where Jesus says, "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church." Now

interestingly, if you look at the modern commentaries on Matthew, they will tell you that that was only interpreted in terms of therefore the Roman Catholic Church which Peter founded is the true church.

It was only interpreted like that in the 16th century. And of course it's always been disputed by the Greek Orthodox who split off, well they would say that was the Roman Catholics who split off a thousand years ago. So there are huge controversies there and I would look very carefully before you jump into a system which looks magnificent and well-structured and so on and doesn't have all the oddities that particularly the American Episcopal or Anglican Church has at the moment alas, as indeed we do in England in other ways.

But actually people inside it and on the edge of it will say it's not really quite like that inside. It looks solid and massive from the outside but once you get inside there are just as many questions and puzzles and problems as any other church has. So I would say think twice, if you do it, God bless you, God be with you.

I have a lot of good friends in that tradition. It wouldn't be where I myself would want to go. Finally Joshua in Illinois.

Being from America, the western/Latin church is all I know but I'm intrigued by the Eastern Orthodox Church. So Tom what are some of the strengths and weaknesses of our Eastern Orthodox Church? I am not an expert on Eastern Orthodox and I wish I knew more about it. There's actually a lot of Orthodox teaching here in Oxford and when I was teaching here before I did know Bishop Callistos Ware quite well who's a great Patristic scholar and a great contemporary Orthodox figure.

I think the strengths that I do see are particularly a holistic view of creation and new creation. The Greek Orthodox really have believed all along that God is renewing creation not abandoning it and they see the western tradition really from August in onwards as going in a dangerously dualistic direction. The Orthodox too have borrowed from their own Greek philosophers like Plato and so on but they see that the western tradition has become almost dualistic in the sense of this world doesn't matter.

We are going to a spiritual place and so that's all that matters and then particularly the western development of the great heaven and hell scheme of the western middle ages as you see it in Dante's poetry or as you see it in the great painting in the Sistine Chapel. I was once in fact I think it's the last time I was in the Sistine Chapel. I was at a service, an ecumenical service and a Greek Orthodox Archimandrite was sitting beside me and he looked at that painting in the Sistine Chapel and said we Orthodox don't do it like that.

That's not how we do eschatology and sadly the service then begun. I never got the chance to say tell me more about how you do eschatology but I think the answer would

be we believe in God renewing the heavens and the earth as a whole not this horrible separation and I'd love to explore that more. I think therefore the eastern Orthodox have this great sense of the goodness of creation and the fact that creation itself is they would use the word almost sacramental.

That is to say that God allows us to glimpse through creation who he really is which is why icons mean what they mean. You don't worship the icon. The icon helps you to look through the creation not least the beauty of creation or the beauty of procreation as in something that a human being has painted or written as they say and then discern God, heaven, the lives of the saints, etc.

There are mysteries there which I feel are very attractive and I know that many today want to go that route. The thing that I am anxious about in Orthodox theology is that because of what the Western tradition has done with the theology of the cross really ever ever since Anselm again thousand years or so go. The eastern Orthodox have tended to say well you Westerners have these funny theories about the ransom or Jesus dying in our place or whatever.

We don't go for all of that. As far as we're concerned the cross is simply the necessary prelude to the resurrection and the resurrection is the renewal of all things, etc. I would want to say to my Orthodox friends actually there is more to the cross than meets the eye and please can we explore it together.

I'm sure many Orthodox theologians do. It's just it's not my field. I haven't read enough really to know there.

Well thank you very much Tom so much more that could be said but in the time we've got that that's a great start I imagine for Joshua in Illinois and Nathaniel in Dallas. I don't know if there's a similar term to crossing the Tiber to going to the eastern Orthodox tradition. Is there a river you cross to become eastern Orthodox? There's a river you cross.

Yes. I'm not sure what you would say that I remember going to one very very senior Anglican prelate some years ago who faced with the crisis in Anglicanism said well I'm not moving either east or west. I'm standing here.

So there is a sort of sense of well there are those two options but they are significant disadvantages in both. Yes. Anyway thank you very much again Tom and we look forward to more questions same time next week.

Thanks for listening today. Next time we'll be looking at your questions on Genesis and creation. Just a quick reminder that our show partner NT Right Online are offering a free ebook from Tom on the book of Acts to podcast listeners you can find links with the show notes.

You can also find out more there about the show at askNT Right.com and do head over to unbelievable.live if you'd like to register for our upcoming conference with Tom right. You can attend live wherever you are in the world and be part of a live edition of this very show. It's all happening on Saturday the 15th of May at the unbelievable conference.

That's unbelievable.live. Now just before you go Tom and I often mention CS Lewis in passing during our conversations he's been a significant influence on both of us. Now if you enjoy this podcast I've got a feeling you'll also love a podcast that we're launching very soon called the CS Lewis podcast with Alistair McGrath. It'll be hosted by my colleague Ruth Jackson and will involve her sitting down regularly with Alistair rather like I do with Tom to talk all things CS Lewis.

Alistair McGrath is professor of science and religion at the University of Oxford and a world-renowned authority on CS Lewis his life the world he lived in his Christian faith. It'll be launching soon on Monday the 29th of March so look out for it on podcasts then and make sure to subscribe. For now I'm going to leave you with just a little taster of what you can expect.

The CS Lewis podcast with Alistair McGrath Do you think CS Lewis would have an Instagram profile? His friends might set one up but I'm not sure Lewis himself would. I think that Lewis is always receding into the background. Lewis is very very clear about what does a good author do he said back in the 1920s says a good author does not say look at me he says look at what I've seen.

And for Tolkien we are almost designed by God to tell stories. And Tolkien began to help Lewis see that really Christianity told a story the story of God the story of Christ our story and Lewis suddenly began to realize how everything hung together her everything made sense and that if he thought Christianity as a story a true myth which makes sense of every other story we tell then that makes perfect sense. He writes to Arthur Greaves an enormous excitement this is it I've discovered it.

It's right it's exciting and that's a very important point and maybe Lewis might have got there in his own but actually Tolkien was the catalyst. I first read the Conchler's Na'an Yohanaz about 22. I have said I actually rather enjoyed them and maybe because I'm very childish about theirs.

I think for Lewis though there were a number of objections one was that he felt that science had eliminated the conceptual space once occupied by God. Another was he thought there was a sort of similarity of form between Christianity and pagan myths which meant they were all inventions and then thirdly there was this anxiety about suffering in the world. So those were three major concerns for him but as his story of faith shows he was able to overcome all of those.



If someone is thinking how do I begin to defend the Christian faith have you got any advice that you would give? I would begin by saying let me tell you why I find Christianity so compelling and exciting and then I would tell them. And everyone that's into this podcast will be able to do exactly the same thing. And in doing that you're telling your own story and your audience will be interested.

They may want to raise objections but they're going to hear you first. They want to hear the positive. They're not raised questions.

The problem is otherwise you just raise questions and people don't know why those questions are significant. You need to explain why this matters, why it's so exciting and then deal with the questions. The C.S. Lewis podcast with Alistair McGrath.

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