

Bible Overview

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Structure of the Bible

1. The Bible is a book that is a collection of 66 smaller books.
2. We sometimes call the Bible by another name: the “Scriptures.” This word means “sacred writings.”
3. The Bible is divided into two parts called testaments. Think of the word testament as a synonym for the word “covenant.” A covenant is an agreement or contract between God and His people, just like you might be in a marriage covenant or have a contract with someone about some matter.
4. The Old Testament has 39 books, and the New Testament has 27 books.
5. The Old Testament is the Hebrew Bible of the Jewish people. That is their entire Bible because they do not accept the New Testament. The New Testament builds on and completes the Jewish faith.
6. We abbreviate Old Testament and New Testament as OT and NT as shorthand.
7. In the Jewish approach to the Old Testament, they see the Old Testament divided into three segments: Law, Prophets, and Writings.
 - a. Law = Torah
 - b. Prophets = Nebi'im
 - c. Writings = Kethubim
 - d. So the whole Hebrew Bible is known by the acronym TNK, TaNaK.
8. Christians typically see the sections of the Old Testament this way:
 - a. The Pentateuch – the first five books, also known as the Law.
 - b. The Historical Books – the next 12 books.
 - c. The Poetic and Wisdom books – the next five books.
 - d. The Major Prophets – the next five books.
 - e. The Minor Prophets – the last 12 books.
 - f. Detail: The Major Prophets are “major” because they wrote longer books; the Minor Prophets are “minor” because they wrote generally shorter books.

9. The New Testament has four sections:
 - a. The Gospels – the first four books.
 - b. History of the Early Church – the book called “Acts”.
 - c. The letters of the apostle Paul – the next 13 or 14 books.
 - d. The general letters, the last 8 books.
 - e. Detail: some folks will include one of Paul’s letters in the group of general letters, and some will separate the last book, Revelation, into its own category.
10. The order of the books is not chronological as we might hope. The sections are generally arranged in chronological order as to the events they describe, but the books within the sections are not. There is just too much going on throughout the events covered in the Bible to make an easier linear arrangement of the material, so there is some complexity that we have to just deal with.
11. For purposes of studying the Bible and looking things up, it is helpful to memorize the order of the books. Because there are many translations of the Bible into English, it is not really possible to say, “turn to page such and such in your Bible.”
12. Many centuries after the Bible was written, students of the Bible found it convenient to divide the books into chapters and then further into verses. The modern chapters divisions have been used since Cardinal Stephen Langton marked chapters in 1205 A.D., and verse divisions were in place since 1551 (NT) and 1571 (OT), thanks to Robert Estienne (Stephanus).
13. We identify a particular location in the Bible with its address in the form Book Chapter: verse or Book Chapter :verse1-verse2. For example, one of the most well-known verses in the Bible is at the address “John 3:16.” Another portion that tells about how one can obtain eternal life is at the address “Ephesians 2:8-9.” Some books are so short that they only have a single chapter. In that case, we can omit the chapter number and just say, for instance, Jude 17. That is equivalent to saying Jude 1:17.

Where and When the Bible was Written

1. It was written by Middle Eastern authors who wrote mostly in Israel. Later, some of the New Testament was written by Hebrew Christians as they traveled throughout the Mediterranean world. The apostle Paul who wrote half of the New Testament books was a Jew born in south central Turkey (known as the region of Cilicia at the time).
2. Many manuscripts of the Bible that give us evidence of what the original text included are of African origin. Most manuscripts are of Mediterranean origin as they came from countries that surround the Mediterranean on the north, east, and south.
3. People of many ethnicities are found in Scripture, including Egyptians, Ethiopians, Persians, and others. The Queen of Sheba is mentioned in 1 Kings 10; scholars believe she was from either Yemen or Ethiopia, and some tie her to Egypt.
4. The Bible was written over a span of about 1500 years.
5. The famous leader of Israel named Moses wrote the first five books (Pentateuch) of the Bible around 1400 B.C. as the nation of Israel moved back into Canaan from Egypt.
6. The New Testament books were written after the life and death of Jesus Christ, between 45 to about 95 A.D.
7. The apostle John wrote the book called Revelation sometime in the 90s A.D.

How the Bible was Written and by Whom

1. The Old Testament was written mostly in the Hebrew language, and a few small parts in a related language called Aramaic. Therefore, we must read it in an English translation.
2. The New Testament was written in a type of Greek called Koine Greek—the common language of the people throughout the Roman Empire.
3. The texts of the Bible were written by hand and then copied manually by scribes until the invention of the printing press around 1440 A.D. by Johannes Gutenberg.

4. It is common to hear people say that the Bible was written by man just like any other book. This is only partly true because the authorship of the Bible is actually two-fold: God worked with human authors so that they would convey in the original manuscripts precisely what He wanted them to say. Christians call this divine superintendence of the words of the Bible by the technical term inspiration.
5. Christians truly believe and teach that the words of the Bible—a good translation of the Bible—are the very words of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13). The Bible is God's words to man.
6. The Scripture has dual-authorship.

There are about 40 human authors of the Bible.

About 30 of them wrote in the Old Testament. They include:

- Moses, a Hebrew raised and educated in the palace of the Egyptian Pharaoh, turned sheep herder, and then leader of a nation of several million people.
- Other leaders of Israel such as Joshua (successor to Moses), and later kings probably had material written and archived which was later used to compose the history of Israel.
- The Hebrew King David and his son King Solomon wrote much of the books called Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes around 1000-900 B.C.
- Records of Israel's history and conquest of their homeland were kept, and compiled at times that are not exactly known to us. Much of that work was completed by the time of the priest Ezra (480-440 B.C.).
- Israel's prophets spoke many messages to the nation and her neighbors, and wrote some of those down. One of them was Isaiah. Another was Jeremiah, a priest. Then there was Ezekiel, another priest who was about 20 years younger than Jeremiah. Contemporary to Ezekiel was Daniel who wrote a short but significant book that predicts the general course of world history. These authors wrote during the period 700-500 B.C.
- Then there are the minor prophets, 12 of them: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. These books were written between the 800s B.C. and 400s B.C.

The authors also include eight men who wrote the New Testament:

- Matthew, a tax collector turned Christian minister.
- Mark, an associate of the apostle Paul, who as a young man witnessed the ministry of Jesus and particularly his betrayal, arrest, death, and resurrection.
- Luke, a physician and accomplished historian. He was a travel companion to the apostle Paul. He wrote the gospel that is named after him, and also the early history of the church called Acts.
- John, a young man who was a follower of Jesus during His time on earth, a witness of His miracles, death, and resurrection. He wrote a gospel, 3 short letters, and the last book of the Bible called Revelation.
- Paul, from the Jewish tribe of Benjamin, was before his conversion to Christianity a Pharisee. This means he belonged to a conservative politico-religious party of the Jewish people who believed in strict adherence to the Old Testament. He was very zealous, well educated, and even was a persecutor of early Christians.
- James, the oldest half-brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3) wrote a letter to Jewish Christians.
- Peter, a fisherman, wrote two letters to Christian friends which are Scripture.
- Jude, another half-brother of Jesus.
- The author of the book of Hebrews is not known.

The Big Picture of the Bible

The Bible covers the very beginning of time through eternity future. It gives God's perspective on human history: where we come from, where we are going, how to know God, get to heaven, why death occurs, and many other things. It is important to note that the Bible is a book of actual historical events and facts in addition to its teaching of spiritual matters. The spiritual and the historical are intermingled in such a way that one could not be separated from the other without destroying the whole.

The central theme of the Bible has to do with God's kingdom. Namely, God created a realm for His subjects to live in and enjoy perfect fellowship with Him, but they rebelled and then received the consequences of that rebellion.

Subsequently, God began a restoration program in which His Son Jesus Christ would redeem fallen humanity and restore humanity to a perfect relationship with Him forever.

Where Should I Start Reading the Bible?

It would be good to read the entire first book, Genesis, and then the second book, Exodus, at least through chapter 24, and then read chapter 32. This will give you a good start in understanding things from the beginning.

You can also read the Gospel of John as a good starting point into the New Testament. Actually, any of the four gospels is a great starting point.

After that, you can read through the remainder of the books. It is generally good to do so in the order they are found in the Bible. It will take a couple readings through to start to get things organized in your mind, but it will be well worth your time!

Is the Bible True?

This question is a bit controversial in our postmodern age. Can anything be "true"? Or are some things true for some people some of the time, and false for other people at the same time?

We believe there are things that are true, and things that are false, for all people, at all times, and in all places. For example:

True: Sunlight takes about 8.3 minutes to travel from the sun to the earth.

False: The moon is made of cheese.

True: $2 + 2 = 4$.

False: $2 + 2 = 5$. That answer is close, but it is still wrong.

True: God exists, God created everything, and God has revealed Himself in the Bible.

These are also all true, like any truth that we all hold to be obvious, like $2+2 = 4$.

But not everyone accepts those facts as true.

But to understand the question "Is the Bible true?" we have to understand its origin and transmission down to our day, and then consider how we ourselves can know it is true.

How Did We Get the Bible?

Revelation. This is the starting point of God's communication to man. It is a supernatural expression of God's will to mankind using a variety of means. Nature, conscience, dreams, visions, direct speech, and the Bible are among the means God has used to disclose Himself and His plan to mankind.

Inspiration. Inspiration is a miracle by which God through the Holy Spirit superintended the action of the human authors of the Bible so that in their writing of His revelation, they did not err, omit, or add anything to the words God wanted recorded in the original manuscripts of Scripture. Inspiration applies to the process of writing or "reducing God's word to paper" and to the result of that writing. Inspiration applies to the very words of the Bible, and to every word of the Bible.

Preservation and Transmission. The Bible was copied by hand in the early years—in fact, for the first 2800 years of its existence. We have thousands of manuscripts of the Bible or portions thereof, which outnumber the manuscripts of any other ancient literature by orders of magnitude. Only since the printing press in 1440 A.D. have we had printed manuscripts that can be duplicated in large numbers with little, if any, variation between them. God promised to preserve his Word, not miraculously, but providentially. This does not mean that all of its books are available at all times to all people, but it does mean that the Bible is generally available to humanity. There are no lost books.

Canonicity. It took some time for the church as a whole to recognize all the books that belong in the Bible. The process by which this recognition became formalized is called canonicity. The list of books so recognized is called the canon. The Biblical books were "canonical" from the moment they were written, but the process of recognition and acceptance took a bit longer. People did not just uncritically accept any book that came along purporting to be Biblical. They had to be authored by a recognized apostle, or one of the close associates of the apostles.

For a NT book, the book had to be universally applicable to the church, even if it was a letter written for a specific occasion. It had to teach correct doctrine, and agree with all the other books. Finally, the book had to be in regular use by the churches. With these qualifications, you soon come to a closed set of books.

For an OT book, it had to be authored by Moses or an accepted prophet, agree with the contents of the Torah, and had to be important for the nation of Israel.

Textual criticism. Because the text of the bible had to be hand copied, there were inevitably errors that arose in the copying process. As a result, if you look at 100 representative manuscripts of the same passage, you will undoubtedly find differences between them. Then the question is, "what was the original text?" This is the question that the science of textual criticism answers. "Criticism" is not meant to be negative. It is meant to indicate that discerning judgment has to be made if there are differences in order to ascertain which variations represent the original text. For instance, if only 1 of the 100 manuscripts disagrees with the other 99, then it is most certainly the case that the 99 have it correct.

Translation. All of the above just brings us a Bible in Greek (NT) or Hebrew (OT). Then we need someone skilled in those languages who is able to translate the text into our mother tongue. In our case, we have a wealth of translations available. In many language groups (more than 1500), there are no portions of the Bible translated into that language. 1.5 billion people in the world are in this boat.

Reading. Now that you have a Bible in your own language, you have to actually pick it up off the shelf and open it, and then read it. It does no good if it sits there unused!

Interpretation. Finally, when you read the Bible you have to interpret it to extract the meaning of it. There are principles by which this is done to ensure that the God-intended meaning is understood.

How Do I Know it is True?

The emphasis here is how to I personally know the Bible to be true?

1. The main way I know it is true is that God conveys to me, as a believer, certainty and acceptance of its truth. I know that it is the Word of God, and not the word of men (1 Thessalonians 2:13).
2. Fulfilled prophecy. Detailed events were predicted in advance, and later these events in fact happened just as they were predicted. For example, Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1 name a Persian King—Cyrus—years before he ever came on the scene. Isaiah 53 expresses details about the Jewish Messiah that were fulfilled 700 years later. Daniel predicted the rise of Gentile kingdoms after Nebuchadnezzar, including Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome, long before those events occurred.
3. Consistency of its contents despite being written over hundreds of years by about 40 authors.
4. Corroboration of eyewitnesses. One example is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Probably thousands saw him die on a cross outside of Jerusalem, and we have a record of over 500 people seeing Him after he was raised. Another example is the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. The entire nation of Israel at the time saw remarkable events on the mountain in which God spoke to Moses the fledgling nation's new "constitution."
5. The tremendous effect that the Bible, Judaism, and Christianity on the world. While not a bulletproof argument, this is evidence for the truth of Scripture. It has "civilized" the society; it has touched music and art, technology and education, it has raised the place of women where it has been practiced, and has emphasized helping the poor. In 2009, Alvin J. Schmidt wrote an entire book on this subject entitled *How Christianity Changed the World*. The Bible is the best-selling book of all time, with copies numbering into the billions.
6. The fact that the Bible depicts man as a sinner is another evidence that the Bible is not a work of fiction. It paints an un-retouched picture of the evil of mankind. It is not a glowing recommendation for the goodness of man, and it doesn't hide anything embarrassing about humanity.
7. That it has been corroborated by archaeological and scientific discoveries throughout the recent centuries.