

Overview of the Bible

The Bible could be called The Book of History. It has more translations, has sold more copies and has been read by more people than any other book. Interestingly, though it is the most recognized book in the world, it is the least understood. Though the Bible reveals the source of true life, its content and message are often debated. Some scholars put it this way – “The Bible has been used to justify wars and to found relief organizations, to support slavery and to condemn it, to fuel hatred and to promote love and understanding¹.”

Despite this, the Bible reveals the heart of a perfect and holy God conveyed through imperfect human vessels. The Bible, the written word of God, contains truth, but many readers bring to it lenses and filters that blur understanding of that truth. Many perceive the message of the Bible by how *they* want to see it or read into it what is not there. Meaning for all comes through better understanding of biblical history, context, and timing, as well as through dedicated study and illumination by the Spirit of God.

The Bible contains God’s message to the world, though it was written by many inspired human authors over a long period of time. It is a collection of 66 books by 40 authors who recorded God’s Will over a 1,500-year period on three different continents in three different languages. Those who wrote God’s message were shepherds, kings, farmers, priests, poets, scribes, prophets, fisherman and others. Their writings include history, poetry, philosophy, music, prophecy, personal correspondence, and more. Determination of which writings were deemed the authentic Word of God, a process known as *canonization*, was agreed to in the early centuries of Christianity by church leaders. In their language, the Greeks called the resulting collection of writings ‘*ta biblia*,’ ‘the books.’

Old Testament

The first 39 books of the Christian Bible are the primary sacred writings of the Hebrew people. They are known in the Christian tradition as the Old Testament. These writings were done over an approximate 1,000-year period before the birth of Christ and now appear in the Hebrew Bible in three major sections:

Law

Also called the Torah, from the Hebrew word meaning ‘instruction’ or the ‘law.’ In the Greek language these books are known as the Pentateuch meaning ‘the five scrolls.’ This section covers long spans of history – the creation of the world, the early history of humans, the birth of ancient Israel, Israel’s formation as a nation, and the laws that would govern their existence. The books in this section of the Hebrew Bible include:

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

Note: A summary description of *all* the books in the Bible can be found below. If you want to read those now, click [here](#).

Prophets

Some recorded history of Israel and, primarily, messages from God to the nation of Israel via chosen individuals to make known their disobedience to the Laws God had given them and resulting judgment that would come. The books in this section of the Hebrew Bible include:

The Former Prophets

Joshua
Judges
Samuel (1 scroll)
Kings (1 scroll)

The Latter Prophets

Major Prophets

Isaiah
Jeremiah
Ezekiel

The Twelve (1 scroll)

Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah

Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

Writings Wisdom literature, poetry, and some historical and prophetic writings. The books in this section of the Hebrew Bible include:

Psalms
Proverbs
Job
Song of Songs
Ruth
Lamentations
Ecclesiastes
Esther
Daniel
Ezra-Nehemiah (1 scroll)
Chronicles (1 scroll)

The three sections of the Hebrew Bible – Law, Prophets and Writings, have been called the Tanak, a word derived from the first letter of the three sections, Torah (Law), Nevi'im (Prophets) and Ketuvim (Writings)².

New Testament

The last 27 books of the Christian Bible are the primary sacred writings of Christianity. They are known as the New Testament. These writings were done over a much shorter period of time than the Old Testament, somewhere between 50 and 75 years after the ascension of Jesus to heaven. The New Testament is comprised of the following books:

Gospels Historical accounting of the life and ministry of Jesus from the perspective of different followers of Jesus.

Matthew

Mark
Luke
John

Early
Church
Life

Life among believers – how they were empowered, grew in number and spread the gospel message beyond Jerusalem and Palestine.

Acts of the Apostles

Letters

Paul

Romans
1 and 2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 and 2 Thessalonians
1 and 2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon

General

Hebrews
James
1 and 2 Peter
1, 2, and 3 John
Jude

Prophetic

Revelation

Christianity views all 66 books of the Old and New Testaments as one continuous story and considers the Old Testament writings to be the foundation of what is found in New Testament.

The entire narrative tells of God's relationship with humanity, specifically the Hebrew people initially chosen and favored, and expanded upon through the ministry of Jesus to include Gentiles, i.e., whoever opens their heart to the invitation of Jesus to be part of the family of God (**John 3:16**). The Old Testament is also recognized as the *Old*

Covenant because it embodies God's relationship and covenants with the initial people of faith, Hebrews. The New Testament is generally accepted and known as the *New Covenant*. As was prophesied in **Jeremiah 31:31-35**, the New Covenant declares a new and better way to relate to God through Jesus Christ, God's presence made known to the world (**see Hebrews 10:19-25, 8:13**).

Apocrypha

Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers recognize additional writings, called the Apocrypha, that are not part of Jewish or Protestant Bibles. The word apocrypha means 'hidden' in the Greek language and was likely dubbed as such because most of writings were by anonymous Jewish scribes and others after the Hebrew Bible was completed but before the New Testament came to be. Given that church leaders, much closer to the time of Jesus who arranged the books of the Bible as we know them today, chose to omit these hidden works, we believe they have secondary importance to Christ followers. We recommend focusing on the authorized books of the Christian Bible that have been read, studied, and accepted for centuries.

Method of Transcription

For thousands of years, God has been speaking to those who would *listen*. Some listened; others did not. When God visited the earth in the person of Jesus, he said, "He who has ears, let him hear" (**Matthew 13:9**). So that humanity would have no excuse for not hearing God's message, Jesus came into the world (often called the Living Word) and proclaimed the good tidings of that message. In addition, a written version of the message would come to the world through a long series of events, involving many, in the form of the Bible. Here's a quick overview of how the Bible came to be:

Initially, everything God spoke to humans was shared orally.

At some point individuals, often called scribes, started writing on papyrus scrolls what was originally shared orally. The most famous of these scrolls are the Dead Sea scrolls, discovered in the Qumran area of Israel in 1947³, containing writings dating back over 1,000 years. They had been hidden in caves, like many of the original sacred writings, to protect them from those who sought to destroy matters of faith. The Dead Sea scrolls are generally thought to have been written by Essenes, Jewish separatists in the Qumran area near the Dead Sea.

Scrolls with sacred writings were copied and recopied by hand for centuries. There were no Staples Copy Centers or the Internet in those days.

Before printing presses came to be, the scriptures were translated to numerous languages for broader knowledge and understanding. Greek was one of those languages. The translation is known as the Septuagint and was available around 100 BC. A Latin version of the Psalms and the Gospels was transcribed by 1350 AD.

John Wycliffe and others first translated scriptural texts to English from 1380-1397.

The invention of the printing press dramatically accelerated the availability of the Bible. Though other cultures had worked on typesetting and elementary printing capabilities, Johannes Guttenberg is recognized as the inventor of the modern-day printing press, sometime between 1440 and 1450⁴.

William Tyndale and others created the first New Testament version from the original Greek in 1525. The first copies reached England in 1526.

The King James Version of the Bible (KJV) was authorized by King James I and written by 54 scholars from the Hebrew and Greek in 1611. The KJV is known for its accuracy and literary appeal.

The first English Bible with numbered verses became available in 1560, with copies coming to America with the Pilgrims in 1620.

Since then, many translations of the Bible were printed in many languages so anyone could read and hear its message. The Bible is now available in print and online across the globe in almost every language.

Due to its ancient history and the cultures through which it has passed, the Bible is known and recognized in many ways – scripture, biblical narrative, Good News, Gospel, sacred writ or writings, text, testament, guidebook, creed, doctrine, and others. The Bible has influence not only in Judaism and Christianity, but also in Islam.

Primary Message of the Bible

You are loved by the God of the universe who created all life, including you. God has reached out to the world throughout history with an invitation to embrace Him. Today, that invitation comes through Jesus, God's Son, who asks you to confess your sins, to accept Him as the Savior of the world, to believe that He died on a cross, was buried and rose from the dead, and to confess Jesus as Lord of your life.

Closing Thoughts

If you have not made Jesus your Savior and Lord and want to know more about how to do that, please go to http://www.sourceoftruelife.com/Getting_Started. If you have received Jesus as your Savior, please embrace the Bible as one of the key resources in your spiritual journey. Read it, study it, devour it, value it, learn from it, apply it to your life. To find the right Bible for you, consider these points:

Bibles exist in many translations. For study purposes and reading, a *literal* translation, faithful to the original language in which it was written, is recommended. Consider:

King James Version (KJV)
New King James Version (NKJV)
Revised Standard Version (RSV)
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)
New American Bible (NAB)
New American Standard Bible (NASB)
New Jerusalem Bible (NJB)
New English Bible (NEB)
New International Version (NIV)

Shop for one. Read passages from the Old and New Testaments in each and settle on one that you can understand. Among these, some are **red-letter** editions⁵, with words that Jesus spoke written in **red**.

If you struggle to read and understand a literal translation of the Bible, consider a *contemporary* or *paraphrase* version:

Contemporary – written in modern language, like the *Good News Bible* or

The Message. Others exist but, be aware that, some dilute and compromise the message of the original language.

Paraphrase – easiest-of-all to read and well-suited for young and first-time readers. One of the most popular is *The Living Bible*. Others exists, but we would not recommend using a paraphrase as a study Bible.

A word about *commentaries* on the Bible, books that attempt to explain what scripture means. Commentaries can be helpful but should always be understood as the author's interpretation and opinion about what the scripture says. Given differences of interpretation, reading commentaries may confuse you even more. If you go to them, read several versions for balance and weigh everything you read against the scripture itself.

Once you have the right Bible for you, do not let it sit on a bookshelf collecting dust. Underline what strikes you as important, highlight words and passages, mark it up, make notes in the columns. These practices are good for recall, future study, and reference.

Find a reading plan for your study of the Bible. Many exist and will guide you through the Bible in a year or several years.

If you have already read through the Bible, consider doing more in-depth study of individual books in the Bible or study topics like prophecy, wisdom literature, or others.

Footnotes

¹ Geoghegan, J. and Homan, M., *The Bible for Dummies*, p. 1

² Geoghegan, J. and Homan, M., *The Bible for Dummies*, p. 12

³ Levy, L., The Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library, [The Dead Sea Scrolls](#)

⁴ Liulevicius, V., The Great Courses Daily, [The Story of Johann Gutenberg and His Printing Press](#) ([thegreatcoursesdaily.com](#))

⁵ Got Questions, [What is a red letter Bible? | GotQuestions.org](#)