

A Basic Introduction to the Bible: Its Contents & How to Read It

Introduction: Although you and I come from different countries, different cultures, and different backgrounds, there is one thing we have in common: We are both from cultures whose history and values have been strongly influenced by the Bible, often in ways of which we aren't even aware.

- A. For example, you can see the crosses on top of church towers, even if you have never read the story of the crucifixion of Jesus. And there are people who try to love their neighbors as themselves, even if they are unaware that Jesus taught us to do that.
- B. I suspect that in your country, as well as in mine, there are many people who know something about the influence of the Bible, but who have never read anything in the Bible itself, and for whom the Bible remains a mysterious, unknown book.
- C. So, a good place to begin our discussion of the Bible is to ask, "What is in it? What elements make up this complex set of documents that are so ancient, and yet continue to exert a powerful influence in today's world?"

1. The word "Bible" is derived from a plural Greek term, *biblia*, which means "books."

A. This is appropriate, since the Bible is not actually a single book, but a collection of documents composed over a period of approximately 1500-1600 years (1500 B.C. to A.D. 100).

B. These documents are broadly divided into two main sections, known as the Old Testament (or, "Hebrew Bible") and the New Testament.

(1) "Testament" is a somewhat misleading translation of the Greek word *diatheke*, which means "covenant." So these two sections of the Bible are more properly called the "Old Covenant" and the "New Covenant."

(2) A "covenant" is an agreement based on promises and obligations. In the Old Testament book of Genesis, God makes a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. He promises to bless them, to make them a large nation of people, to give them a land of their own, and that through Abraham's "seed" (descendants) all nations of the earth would eventually be blessed. In return, Abraham and his descendants were to be loyal and obedient to God.

(3) So the Old Testament is a record of that covenant and how God kept his end of the bargain, and how Abraham's descendants often didn't keep theirs.

(4) The "New Covenant" (Testament) describes the "new arrangement" which is based on the coming of Jesus Christ as the sacrifice for the sins of the world.

- (5) It is important to note that the two covenants (testaments) are integrally related. The Old Testament lays the foundation for all that is found in the New Testament, and the New Testament writers quote frequently from the Old to show the continuity between what God was doing through Abraham and his descendants, and how this was fulfilled through Jesus.
- (6) So let's look at each of these "testaments" ("covenants") a bit more closely:

2. The Old Testament

- A. The Old Testament is made up of 39 books (documents). These are written almost entirely in Hebrew, although a small portion is written in Aramaic, which is a dialect of Hebrew.
- B. These documents were written over a period of more than 1000 years, from approximately 1500 B.C. to 400 B.C.
- C. The Jews divide the Old Testament into 3 main sections: "Law," "Prophets," and "Writings." But there are actually many kinds of literature found in the Old Testament: historical narratives, songs, poetry, prophetic oracles (speeches), lists of legal requirements, proverbs – to name only a few.
- D. How did these 39 documents written over so many centuries come to be combined into one book?
- (1) Exact information is lacking, but Jewish tradition says it was the work of Ezra the Scribe around 450 B.C.
 - (2) The details are not clear, but it seems that the books that make up the Hebrew Bible were agreed upon at least 100 years prior to the First Century A.D.
- E. The oldest known copies of the Old Testament are those discovered in 1947 near the shore of the Dead Sea, as part of the collection of documents known as the "Dead Sea Scrolls."
- (1) Prior to their discovery, the oldest copies of any Old Testament books dated from the Tenth Century A.D.
 - (2) The Dead Sea copies of the Old Testament books dated from the First Century A.D., so they were 1000 years older than any copies previously known.
 - (3) What is remarkable about these older copies is that they showed that very few changes had occurred in the texts over a millennium, a testimony to the accuracy with which the Hebrew scribes who copied them did their work, and the respect they had for the text.
- F. Note: I said that the Old Testament contains 39 books. This reflects the view of most non-Catholic and non-Orthodox Christians of what should and should not be included and regarded as Scripture.

- (1) In Roman Catholic Bibles, there are 54 books in the Old Testament, due to the inclusion of 15 books, usually referred to as “The Apocrypha” (from a word meaning “hidden”) or the “Deutero-Canonicals” (“Second Canon”). These additional 15 documents are regarded as Scripture, but with a kind of secondary authority.
- (2) In Orthodox Bibles, there are an additional four Deutero-Canonical books, so a total of 58 in all. They are included because of their presence in the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament made in the Third Century B.C.
- (3) All of these additional books are rejected by non-Catholic & non-Orthodox Christians because they were never received as fully authoritative among Jews or by the early church.

G. Even though the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament is the body of Scripture for ancient Judaism, it is likewise valued by Christians as Scripture because it is a source of ancient history, spiritual insight, and inspiration.

3. The New Testament

- A. The New Testament is composed of 27 books (documents), all of which were originally written in Greek. Not the “Classical” Greek of ancient literature, but “Koine” (common) Greek, the everyday spoken language of the First-Century Mediterranean world.
- B. The New Testament was written in Greek rather than in Latin (the official language of the Roman Empire) due to the influence of Alexander the Great, who 400 years before the time of Christ had sought not only to conquer the world, but to “Hellenize” it (bring it under Greek influence) through the imposition of Greek forms of education, philosophy, religion, and the Greek language. Four hundred years later, Greek was still the common language spoken around the Mediterranean and read by those who could read any language.
- C. The authors of the New Testament include some of Jesus’ original followers (such as Matthew, Peter, and John), as well as later followers (such as Paul, Mark, and Luke).
- D. Some of these documents are anonymous, although it is clear the early Christians knew who the writers were.
- E. As in the case of the Old Testament, the New Testament contains several forms of literature, such as the four “Gospels” (which tell the story of Jesus), the book of Acts (which records the first 30 years of the history of the early church), 17 letters (which explain to Christians how to live as followers of Jesus), and the book

of Revelation (an apocalyptic work which offers encouragement to believers facing persecution).

- F. The dates of these documents range from the late 40s A.D. to approximately A.D. 95-100.
- G. Between their completion by the end of the First Century A.D. and their final acceptance as a collection of authoritative Scripture in the Fourth Century A.D., they were widely copied and circulated among Christians in various parts of the Roman Empire.
- H. Today, there are more than 5000 copies of these documents (or portions of them) in the Greek language still in existence. Also, there are numerous manuscripts in other languages (such as Coptic, Old Latin, Armenian, and Syriac). The existence of so many copies allows scholars to compare readings in the different manuscripts, and even after 2000 years, to determine with a high degree of accuracy what the originals most likely said.
- I. The New Testament documents are by far the best-supported documents from the ancient world. For example,
 - (1) Livy's *Roman History* exists in only 20 manuscripts, none older than the Fourth Century A.D.
 - (2) The *Annals* of the Roman historian Tacitus survive only in parts, and in only two manuscripts, one from the Ninth Century and one from the Eleventh.
 - (3) Caesar's *Gallic Wars* survive in only 9 or 10 good manuscripts, the oldest of which was made 900 years after Caesar's time.
- J. Most of the New Testament documents (for example, the 13 letters of Paul and the four Gospels) were accepted as authoritative as soon as they were written due to the authors' status as first-hand witnesses of Jesus. By the early Fourth Century A.D., the other 10 documents had likewise been judged to be authoritative and worthy to be called "Scripture" for the Christian faith.
- K. The New Testament completes the story of God's willingness to save humanity from its sins by looking into the future, when Jesus will return and eternity begins.

Suggestions for Beginning to Read the Bible:

1. *Don't* try to read it from beginning to end! Rather, begin with the parts that will give you the major themes and story-line of the Bible. Advance to others later.
2. Begin with Genesis and Exodus. These will give you the story of Creation, the entry of sin into the world, God's covenant with Abraham, the beginning of the Israelite nation, and

their captivity in Egypt, followed by the Exodus from that slavery.

3. After reading Genesis and Exodus, move to the New Testament and read any one of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John). This will give you the story of Jesus as the fulfillment of all that God had promised in the Old Testament, as well as his life and teachings, and the account of his death and resurrection.
4. Then read the book of Acts, which tells the beginning of the early church and its spread from Jerusalem to the wider Gentile world.
5. After Acts, read Paul's letter to the Romans to learn how and why the blood of Christ is able to cleanse us of our sins, even though we in no way deserve it.
6. The important thing is not simply to read *about* the Bible, but to read the Bible itself and see first-hand the power and beauty of its message.
7. This theme of the Bible's importance will be the subject of tomorrow's lecture.

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