

Books of the Old Testament

Torah (“the Law”)

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

Traditionally, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are included in the Prophets, while Daniel, Ruth and Esther are included in the Writings.

Writings

<u>History:</u>	<u>Wisdom and Poetry:</u>
Joshua	^w Esther
Judges	^w Job
^w Ruth	^p Psalms
1 & 2 Samuel	^w Proverbs
1 & 2 Kings	^w Ecclesiastes
1 & 2 Chronicles	^p Song of Songs
Ezra	
Nehemiah	^w Wisdom literature ^p Poetry

Ruth and Lamentations are shown in the order they appear in the Bible (“canonical order”).

Ruth and Esther easily cross genres between History and Wisdom

The Prophets

Isaiah
Jeremiah
^p Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel
Hosea
Joel Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

} 12
“Minor Prophets”

Books of the New Testament

<u>Gospel Accounts:</u>
Matthew
Mark
Luke
John

Acts of the Apostles

<u>Letters:</u>
Romans
1 & 2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 & 2 Thessalonians
1 & 2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon
Hebrews
James
1 & 2 Peter
1, 2 & 3 John
Jude

} Letters of Paul

Revelation

The Apocrypha (or “Deuterocanonical Books”)

Tobit	Letter of Jeremiah	<i>The Orthodox sometimes add:</i>	
Judith	Additions to Daniel:		
Additions to Esther	-Song of the Three Jews		
Wisdom	-Susanna		
Ecclesiasticus (<i>Sirach</i>)	-Bel and the Dragon		
Baruch	1 & 2 Maccabees		
			Prayer of Manasseh
			1 & 2 Esdras
		Psalm 151	
		3 Maccabees	

How Do We Use the Bible?

Perhaps that is an odd question, but it is an important place to start. Some people use the Bible as a list of rules. Others use it as a book of quaint stories, others as an archaeological artifact, and still others as a geological record. Perhaps these descriptions paint caricatures too dramatically, but with such different expectations of the Bible, readers are even more easily confused. The Bible is a complex text—a collection of numerous ancient texts, each of them complex in their own right. We read English translations from ancient and extinct languages (even modern Hebrew and Greek are new constructions of the old languages). The characters and contexts are so different from our own time. And the *kinds* of literature are varied and serve different purposes. The task of understanding the Bible is not so simple.

A Theological Text

Understanding how we *use* the Bible makes a huge difference in the task of *understanding* the Bible. **This introduction takes the approach of treating the Bible as a theological text**—a text of religious claims and accounts of experiences of God in history. This may sound like an obvious approach, but many studies of the Bible operate on far more secular assumptions. Secular study of the Bible tends to focus on reconstructing the events with secular criteria, including the assumption that God never is involved in the world—that supernatural events simply *can't* take place.

This may be a helpful assumption in the secular world that seeks an objective view outside of religious conversation. But the Bible is indeed a religious text. The Bible has been influential in the world precisely as a religious text—as the “Word of God.” Secular scholarship has yielded some important insights to the Bible, and this book will make use of those insights. But the concerns of secular introductions often miss the basic story of what the text says and what it means to Christians (and in the case of the Old Testament—to Jews as well). I hope that the reader (atheist and believer alike) will find this introduction helpful as a way of understanding how the Bible is read and understood and influential to Christians. Such an endeavor will help mutual understanding among religions more than an archeological reconstruction.

So How Do Christians Use the Bible?

- **The primary use of the Bible for Christians is to hear the voice of the living God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, revealing Jesus Christ, the true “Word of God,” who himself reveals God the Holy Trinity.**
- The Bible is the primary historical witness to Israel’s experience of God, to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and to the early church’s experience of Jesus, the Holy Spirit and God the Father.
- Since the early days of the church, the Bible is the “canon of Holy Scripture,” the authoritative body of texts for Christians, and the sacred basis for our theology and living.
- The Bible is authoritative on the character and identity of God and our relationship with God.
- The Bible is authoritative on our character and identity as people and as God’s people.
- We call the Bible “the Word of God” because its writers were uniquely inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Bible is very complex and reflects different times and contexts, but we still believe that God speaks to us today through the Bible.
- Notice that we do not, for instance, use the Bible as a geology textbook, though we recognize history where the writer has an historical purpose.

The best way to read the Bible is prayerfully, together with other Christians, listening for the voice of the living God. The Holy Spirit speaks through the church—the community of Christians around us and from Christian history too, helping us to listen and read rightly.

A 50,000 Foot Fly-by: the Basic Narrative and Structure

Literary Outlines: Old Testament and New Testament

There are two main subdivisions in the Bible: The Old Testament and the New Testament. Some have questioned these names, but the names have stuck in most conversations. The Old Testament is the collection of books sacred to Jews. The Old Testament *was* the Bible for Jesus and his disciples. The early Christian church read from it in worship and taught from it. But they also read from writings of the apostles—the leaders among Jesus’ followers. These writings became what we call the New Testament, thereby giving name to the “old” one.

The Old Testament

The Old Testament constitutes roughly 75% of the volume of the Bible. It contains a variety of kinds of literature—from story and poetry to law and history. Its basic frame is the history of God’s relationship with his people Israel. There is poetry and wisdom literature, and books from the prophets, proclaiming God’s word to the people. And there are laws of their covenant relationship with God.

The basic story starts (in Genesis, the first book) with God creating the world and relating to it and to humanity, caring for people and dealing with their sin. Then we read stories of the ancestors of the Jews: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (the “patriarchs”) and their families. God chooses them for a unique relationship with him. In the book Exodus, the story continues with God using Moses to deliver them from slavery in Egypt. God makes a covenant (like a contract or promise) with them that is described in the Ten Commandments and several books that expand these laws. This is why the first five books are often called the Law (the **Torah**).

The history of Israel continues with the establishment of Israel as a nation, the first kings (including King David and King Solomon), then the division of Israel into two kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The prophets write in challenge to the evils of the kings and peoples of this several hundred years period. The kingdoms are destroyed by larger empires, Assyria and Babylon. This destruction and the exile to Babylon is presented as part of God’s judgment and renewal of the people. The people later return to the land once more.

The literary structure and diversity of the Old Testament

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew (with a little Aramaic) over numerous centuries. The Old Testament contains three kinds of texts: the **Torah**, the **Prophets**, and the **Writings**. The Torah is the central core of texts sacred to Jews, though they also use the Prophets and the Writings. These last two categories are less defined terms. Traditional groupings of Prophets and Writings don’t necessarily match genres as expected. Writings include **History**, **Poetry** and **Wisdom** literature. Ruth and Esther could fall into either categories of history or wisdom.

Old Testament:

- Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy (the first five books)
- Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and the twelve “Minor Prophets”
- Writings:
 - History: Joshua, Judges, (Ruth), Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, (Esther)
 - Poetry: Psalms, Lamentations, Song of Songs
 - Wisdom: Ruth, Esther, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes

Traditionally, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are included in the Prophets, while Daniel, Ruth and Esther are included in the Writings.

The New Testament Story and Literary Structure:

The New Testament contains scriptures revered by Christians, written in Greek by the early followers of Jesus. They tell the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (through four writers or traditions in the “**Gospel**” accounts), the story of the early church, and records of letters and teachings for the church in the first century AD. The New Testament books can be grouped as **Gospels** and **Letters** (also called “Epistles”), with the Acts of the Apostles as a sequel to the Gospel according to Luke, and with Revelation as an apocalyptic text (visionary prophecy). The book Hebrews is also more of a sermon than a letter, but it is traditionally grouped with the Letters.

New Testament:

- **Gospels:** “according to...” Matthew, Mark, Luke and John: Jesus’ life, ministry and the cross
- **Acts of the Apostles:** account of the Apostles, stressing the Holy Spirit (“part II” of Luke)
- **Letters:** letters by Paul to various churches; Hebrews (a sermon), and other letters
- **Revelation:** apocalyptic literature: prophecy in vivid visionary form about God’s victory

The Apocrypha or Deutero-canonical books

Note: the Apocrypha is a selection of Jewish literature that is not held as authoritative scripture by Protestant Christians (nor included in Hebrew scriptures by Jews). For this reason, these books are sometimes omitted from editions of the Bible, and sometimes included in a separate section to distinguish them. Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians *do* include the Apocryphal books (sometimes called the “Deutero-canonical” books) in their Bibles. Some Bible editions therefore integrate these books into the Old Testament, and others maintain them in a separate section.

See the next page for historical outlines of the Bible and key historical dates.

Historical outlines:

Here, in a few words, are the basic historical frameworks for the Old and New Testaments:

The Old Testament:

Creation and patriarchs, EXODUS → Judges, Kings (Israel and Judah) → EXILE, return.

The timeframe of the Old Testament story spans over 1000 years from the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) to the return from exile. **The Exodus** (where God delivered the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and brought them to the Promised Land) **and the Exile** (where Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and its holy temple, and carried plunder and people into exile) are the two monolithic events in the Old Testament. Added to the destruction of the rebuilt Jerusalem temple by Rome in AD 70, and the Nazi Holocaust, these are the big events in Jewish history.

After the exodus, the tribes lived loosely in the land, and leadership was provided by “judges” as needed. The tribes were united into one kingdom under King Saul (then David and Solomon). Under Solomon’s son, the kingdom split into two kingdoms: Israel and Judah (north and south). Israel was destroyed by Assyria, and Judah was destroyed and exiled by Babylon, the people later returning and rebuilding the temple under the rule of the Persian Empire. The Prophets spoke against the evils of the kings and people especially during the time of the kings.

The New Testament:

Jesus and the early church that followed.

The timeframe of the New Testament, by contrast, spans only decades. The New Testament describes the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus and the early decades of the church that followed. These books were written between ~AD 40 (early letters) to ~AD 100 (Gospel according to John and Revelation). The Gospel accounts most certainly had oral origins and their final forms probably derived from combinations of earlier writings in some cases.

Key Biblical Dates:

- ~1400-1300 BC: Exodus from Egypt.
- ~1000 BC: Kings: Saul, David, and Solomon.
- 922 BC: The Kingdom divides into Israel (north) and Judah (south).
- 721 BC: Assyria destroys Israel and scatters the people.
- 586 BC: Babylon destroys Jerusalem and the Temple, and takes people into exile.
- 538 BC: First return of Jews from exile (under the Persians).
- ~450 BC: Temple rebuilt under Ezra; Walls of Jerusalem rebuilt under Nehemiah.
- 167 BC: Maccabean revolt and Jewish independence (Rome later gains control).
- ~30 AD: Ministry, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus.
- 70 AD: Rome destroys the Temple and scatters the Jewish people (the “Diaspora”).

How Did the Bible Become the Bible?

The Development of the “Canon of scripture”

How and when were these ancient writings recognized with the authority of the “Word of God?”

The Old Testament:

Jews had chosen the scriptures holy to them before the time of Christ. These are the Old Testament scriptures, written from oral histories, original writings and chronicles, and compilations by the Jewish communities that preserved them.

The Old Testament is an anthology of writings from over many centuries, many relying on older oral and written tradition. There is evidence in the Biblical text that, in some cases, two or more accounts of the same event are included in the narrative, indicating that multiple traditions were both carefully preserved and brought together. One theory suggests two or perhaps four sources for the Torah (the first five books). These strains of tradition are usually titled by the letters J, E, D, and P. One notices J writings by the references to God as “Yahweh” or “The LORD” in most translations (all capital letters). E, on the other hand, refers to God as “God.”

Though many texts have early origins, modern scholars focus on the time around the exile as a time when many earlier texts were compiled together (roughly 600 BC). Other prophetic writings followed. Dating *the writing* of these ancient texts is *very* difficult, so take specific claims (even “scholarly” claims) with great caution.

The people of Israel (especially the Jewish people returned after the exile) used all of these texts together as authoritative. By the time of Jesus, the most common “Bible” for Jews was a Jewish translation into Greek called “**The Septuagint**” (completed ~130 BC). Hebrew was no longer a commonly spoken language for Jews (Aramaic was more common in Judea), and the language most common to Mediterranean culture was Greek. The Septuagint contained the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings (and the Apocryphal/Deutero-canonical books). The Septuagint was widely quoted by New Testament authors and the early church.

The New Testament:

The earliest texts of the New Testament are Paul’s letters (as early as 51 AD). Though they naturally relied on oral tradition and earlier written works, the final form of the Gospel accounts appeared later (with the Gospel according to John as the latest to settle into its final form). All of the New Testament writings date to before 100AD (Revelation being perhaps the latest).

The New Testament Gospel accounts and letters were considered authoritative in the church and circulated all over the Roman Empire. We see some teachers as early as 90 AD quoting these writings as authoritative support for their teaching. By 100 AD prominent teachers provided lists of which books were authoritative. These are the same books that form the bulk of the New Testament.

Some of these texts, especially the Gospel accounts, show some editing and cross-influence (Matthew and Luke seem to rely on Mark quite a bit), and each text reflects the context of particular communities facing particular issues. But these books were widely used and authoritative throughout the church early on. The question of “official” designation of the New Testament books arose later in order to clarify some theological confusion.

Setting the standard by using the older books

~150 AD, some teachers began to teach theology quite different from traditional Christian theology, for instance speaking *against* the whole Old Testament, saying that the God of the Old Testament was a separate god from the God of the New Testament, and denying that Jesus was human at all, but only a spirit (physical = bad, spirit = good). This line of thought known as “Gnosticism” was very different from the Christian witness and needed a clear response from the rest of the church. A significant part of the response was to determine what had always been openly taught and believed and used by the church everywhere (what was “catholic”), what had apostolic authority, and what had been important for the church’s teaching to preserve in historic centers of the church. This effort brought clarity to which writings met these criteria all over the church (and included the Old Testament).

Much of the existing New Testament was used widely as a complete collection fairly early on—perhaps ~AD 130 or earlier, by evidence from other writings. In the many decades that followed, the finer points of what was considered authoritative (there were some questions on a couple of the letters in some quarters) were refined between centers of the church in the east and west of the Roman Empire. A Council of bishops in the late 300s AD affirmed the authority of the current New Testament collection, but the decision was based on substantial precedent. Broad recognition of this collection was uniform by 400 AD. We call this official list the “canon of scripture.”

The Apocrypha or Deutero-canonical books:

In some Bible translations, there is a section in between the Old Testament and the New Testament commonly called the Apocrypha. Most Protestants do not recognize the Apocrypha as part of the Bible, while Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox do, integrating these books into the Old Testament in their Bibles (and sometimes calling them “Deutero-canonical” books, meaning “second canon” books). Some protestants (Anglicans, for instance) regard the Apocrypha as useful for teaching and read from it in the church, despite its secondary status. These writings were part of earlier translations (~130 BC) of the Old Testament, but they were not accepted by later Jews (as early as 100). Protestant views on these texts arose, in part, because of this wrinkle in universal acceptance.