

An Introduction to the Bible

What is the Bible?

Put simply, the Bible is God's word to mankind. It is a combination of His directions for how we should live, a history of the world, a story with a purpose and a revelation of God. The Bible is the ultimate authority on God and all matters of the Christian life and salvation.

What does 'Bible' mean?

The word *Bible* basically means "collection of books", and in its physical sense it is exactly that - the *Holy Bible* is the *collection of Holy Books* placed together to form one book.

How did we get the Bible?

Over a period of about one and a half Millenia, God inspired many different people to write down His words into 66 individual books. During the centuries following Jesus' ascension into Heaven, these were collected together to form the Bible.

The Bible since then...

Since the original texts were decided upon (a somewhat final decision being made in 397 AD), the Bible has been translated from its original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek into more languages than any other book. It is also available in English in many different translations, from the King James Version of 1611 (which is known for its archaic speech) to the modern, everyday language translations such as the New International Version and the New Revised Standard Version.

The parts of the Bible:

The Bible has many imposed divisions and subdivisions within. The most obvious being the distinction between the Old Testament (OT) books (Genesis to Malachi) and the New Testament (NT) books (Matthew to Revelation). This distinction was made simply to categorise those texts written before Christ (and therefore written when the Israelites lived under the old covenant with God) with those texts written after Christ, when all people lived under the new covenant. Here, the importance is on the word *covenant*, which is another word for *agreement*, and means the same thing as *testament*.

Within the OT there are further divisions. The first five books of the OT together form *the Law*, and the rest of the books can be divided into historical works, prophetic works or wisdom literature.

Within the NT we see that the first four books (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are each *gospels*, that is, the story of Jesus' life. There is then Acts, which stands alone as a history of the early Church. The next section of books are the epistles (which are letters), and within the epistles are subsections divided according to author. Following

these is the Revelation of John, which also stands alone as the only (mainly) prophetic text in the New Testament.

See the below table for a graphical view of the divisions of the Bible.

Genesis	OT: The Law	Isaiah	OT: The Prophets	Romans	NT: Epistles (written by Paul to specified recipients)	
Exodus		Jeremiah		1 Corinthians		
Leviticus		Lament.		2 Corinthians		
Numbers		Ezekiel		Galatians		
Deuteronomy		Daniel		Ephesians		
Joshua	OT: Books of History	Hosea		Philippians		NT: Epistles (general)
Judges		Joel		Colossians		
Ruth		Amos		1 Thess.		
1 Samuel		Obadiah		2 Thess.		
2 Samuel		Jonah		1 Timothy		
1 Kings		Micah		2 Timothy		
2 Kings		Nahum		Titus		
1 Chronicles		Habakkuk		Philemon		
2 Chronicles		Zephaniah		Hebrews	NT: Epistles (general)	
Ezra		Haggai		James		
Nehemiah		Zechariah	1 Peter			
Esther		Malachi	2 Peter			
Job		Matthew	1 John			
OT: The Wisdom Books		Mark	2 John			
		Proverbs	Luke	3 John		
	Ecclesiastes	John	Jude			
	Song of S.	Acts	Revelation			
		NT: History	NT: Apocalyptic			

The contents of the Bible:

It first must be said that the Bible as a whole is the Word of God, that is, there is no one part of the Bible which is more the word of God than other parts. Among the individual books of the Bible some are easier to read or understand, and some have more relevance to the Christian life than others, but all together form the basis for our faith.

This basically means that Christian theology (the study of what the Bible says) must take into account everything the Bible says on a particular subject in order to be a proper study of God's word.

Also, as God's word, there is nothing said in the Bible that shouldn't have been said and there is nothing missing that God wanted in there. The Bible is as God wants it. But that is not to say that there hasn't been human influence on the texts. As mentioned previously, the Bible was written over a period of approximately one and a half millenia, through many different authors, some of whom are unknown. This basically means that the Bible has two natures: it is authoritative in that it is what God wants, and it is historical in that the human influence has tied it to specific cultures and times in history.

Reading the Bible:

Because the Bible is both authoritative and historical (see above), it is important to read it as such. It is God's word that seeks application in your life, but to understand how to apply it, you must understand its original meaning, its original context.

A simple and obvious example of the need for context in any work is found in the fact that the words, "there is no God", are found 15 times throughout the Bible (NIV). It is not until you look at them in context that you realise they are all part of a sentence to the effect of "there is no God but one" (e.g., [Dt. 32:39](#)) or "the fool says in his heart: 'There is no God'" (e.g., [Ps. 14:1](#)), or similar such statements.

But the need for context extends further in the Bible to an appreciation of the culture and circumstances of the time. For example, in Exodus 21 we read that justice should be in the form of exact retribution: "take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise" ([vv.23-25](#)), while in Matthew chapter 5 we read Jesus as saying: "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well" ([vv.39-40](#)). The differences between these two apparently contradictory statements, both of which are authoritative, are reconciled through an understanding of the culture and circumstances of each statement, and the application to today's life is similarly found.

In some circumstances it may be a good idea to have a commentary handy when reading the Bible, to enable a clearer understanding of the passage you're reading. (Commentaries *comment* on the culture and circumstance, then focus on the meaning of the passages in the Bible.) But a great deal of the time application for passages can be easily found simply by thinking and praying about them. For example, in the 14th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans he instructs them to obey the authorities and the law of the land. Although we live under different authorities today, it can be clearly seen that this passage is easily applied in our lives today by obeying the government and living by the laws of the country we live in.

Sometimes understanding and applying what you read is easy, sometimes hard. The key is to read the Bible regularly, asking God to help you understand, and reading commentaries and other such works by gifted Christian scholars when the meaning and application of the text is not immediately apparent.

Finally, the Bible is God's word to us, we are supposed to live by it, and grow in godliness by obeying it. We must do all that we can to understand it and apply it as God wishes.