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*Introducing the Bible*



1. **Derivation**

The Bible is a collection of books originating in the Middle East**,** writtenover many hundreds of years by dozens of authors. It is the sacred scripture of Christian faith. The name comes from the Greek word for a **book** (βιβλος, biblos), and reflects the belief that the Bible is “the” book.

The term “Bible”, however, may mean **different things** to different people:

**Jewish people** may refer to their Scriptures (otherwise known as the Tanakh) as “the Bible”. These form what Christians often call the Old Testament (however, it can cause offence to use the term “Old Testament” talking with your Jewish friends).

**Roman Catholic Christians** include 7 additional canonical [[1]](#footnote-1) books [[2]](#footnote-2) that date from the period between the Old and New Testaments (sometimes these are called the “apocryphal” or “deuterocanonical” books).

**Greek Orthodox Christians** include three further canonical books [[3]](#footnote-3), plus a bonus Psalm!

We’ll be thinking about the Bible in **Christian Protestant** use.

**2. Variation**

When we read a Bible today, the fact that it has been translated by one individual (or a unified committee) makes it “read” in the same way throughout. However, there is in reality a wide variety of authors, language, literary form, dates of writing, background culture and writing style:

There are probably around forty **authors** to Bible books – and possibly some others who wrote documents that provided source material, in addition to people editing material which they had inherited. Views on the exact number depend largely on different ideas of how each book came into being.

The Old Testament is written in **Hebrew** (with a smattering of Aramaic in the book of Daniel); the New Testament is written in **Greek**.

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Bible books were created to serve different purposes. Some provide **historical background** for God’s activity for His people (for example the books of Kings, or Acts). Some contain **laws** for God’s people (like Leviticus). Some record the inspired utterance of **prophets** expressing the “heart” of God (like Amos). Some are material for private or public **worship** (like Psalms). Some gather wisdom on “**how to live**” (like Proverbs). The gospels describe the **life and teaching of Jesus** (but are more than a modern “biography” – they are selective, and written to persuade). In the New Testament there are a number of **letters** written to individuals, churches, or as a circular letter to a number of churches. Several books contain glimpses of the End of All Things (Daniel, some of the teaching of Jesus, Revelation) – the technical term for this is **apocalyptic** (from a Greek word meaning “uncovering”).

The **Old Testament** books cover a historical period that starts with the beginning of the Universe; Abraham is placed in the middle Bronze Age, around 2000 BCE [[4]](#footnote-4). Traditionally, the first five books of the Bible were known as the “books of Moses”, which would place them around **1500 BCE**. However, many scholars suggest that ancient traditions were gathered, edited and blended in a centuries-long process that took until perhaps **450 BCE** for these five books to reach their current form. As a rough guide, the other books of the Old Testament were composed between the 10th and 4th centuries BCE.

The **New Testament** books are easier to date - they were all written between around **50 CE** and the end of the 1st century CE (or just after).

The books of the Bible reflect a bewildering array of **background cultures** - partly because the Bible lands are at a cross-roads for the roads of the Ancient Near East, so everyone wanted control of the area. The nation of Israel emerges after a time of dominance by **Egypt;** and for a season is a powerful international player. It then falls to **Assyrian**, then **Babylonian** and **Persian** dominance. After a short period of **Hellenistic** (Greek) rule the land is ruled (in New Testament times) by **Rome**.

When read in the original languages, the “**writing style**” of different authors is very clear. Mark reads like a tabloid, Luke like the Independent, while John combines simple vocabulary with multiple layers of meaning.

**3. Compilation**

The 39 [[5]](#footnote-5) books which make up the Old Testament were widely agreed before the time of Jesus, and were formally acknowledged within Judaism in the **4th century CE**. The final “official” listing of the 27 New Testament books comes in **397 CE**. **BUT** …

**4. Validation**

… this does not mean that the selection of books was made by Rome as "a political agenda... to solidify their own power base" [[6]](#footnote-6). The Torah (the first five books of the OT) was universally acknowledged within Judaism by the 5th century BCE, and the Prophets by the 4th. The writings of the “Church Fathers” (influential Christian writers in the first few centuries after Jesus) show an almost complete agreement on which New Testament books were authoritative by the end of the **2nd century CE**.[[7]](#footnote-7) In addition, the discovery of the “Dead Sea Scrolls” from 1946 onwards has demonstrated the extraordinary accuracy with which the scriptures were copied over centuries (these date from before the time of Jesus, and are virtually the same as ancient versions from a thousand years later).

In addition to this, we have a complete set of the four gospels dated to around **250 CE**, a set of Paul’s letters from around **200 CE**, and various fragments of the gospels dated from about **120 CE**. While there might have been editorial influences in the earliest transmission of the gospels, there is absolutely no evidence for meddling with their content since they were written down!

**5. Communication**

The story in brief: [[8]](#footnote-8)

Creation (and the human predicament)

The Call of a People

 The Gift of a Land

The Growth of a Nation

Failure and Decline with the loss of the land

 Collapse and Re-Building land regained, but not sovereignty

The Coming of Jesus the answer to the human predicament

 The Emergence of the Church

**6. Inspiration**

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” 2 Timothy 3 16

The word “God-breathed” is accurately translated as “in-spired”; but Christians understand the way in which this has functioned in different ways, which in turn affects the way in which they understand how Scripture carries God’s authority:

**Dictation theory** suggests that every word (in its original language, and as originally given) was dictated by God. Because of this, every word is accurate and authoritative; the only area for debate would be how to put the commands or concepts into practice. This view (similar to how Muslims view the Qu’ran) is not held by many Christians in the UK.

The **verbal plenary inspiration theory** [[9]](#footnote-9) recognises the diversity of literary style and language in Bible books, reflecting the different individual authors; but maintains that the reliability and integrity of the books has been supernaturally protected by God as the books have been communicated and passed down to us. You might think of this as divine transmissions received with consent and expressed individualistically. This is broadly the “conservative” view.

**Dynamic inspiration** acknowledges God as the conceptual source of the writings, but places this alongside a recognition that the authors also had considerable freedom to compose and express this in their own way. For some, the expression of the authors’ style includes their uncritical adoption of the world-view of their age – which may no longer be applicable to us. This is the more radical (some would say “liberal”) view. While it has common-sense value, it is also an approach that appears dangerous to some - once you start to accept “human” dimensions to what is contained in Scripture, where will you end up?

**7. Interpretation**

All Christians approach Scripture with some sort of interpretative principle (if your instinct is to question this: has your right hand ever done wrong? – and is it still attached?! (see Matthew 5 30). The technical term for interpreting Scripture is **hermeneutics**.

Your **culture** and **pre-suppositions** will affect interpretation. Five hundred years ago, you would have assumed the earth was flat and at the centre of the universe. Today, a convinced atheist might read scripture with a high level of scepticism, a “seeker” with cautious anticipation, a Christian with an existing “package” of beliefs about how scripture “ticks”.

Your **purpose in reading** may also affect your interpretation. You may be seeking to comprehend what a story meant to those who first heard it; or to apply its meaning to your own situation. You might read for “study” purposes, or “soak” in a passage for spiritual shaping. You might approach scripture intellectually, or asking the Holy Spirit’s illumination.

The **context** of a passage is significant - verses taken “out of context” may not mean what was originally intended. For example, some of Paul’s letters respond to specific pastoral questions raised in specific churches.

The **form of writing** is relevant: for example, was Genesis intended as a scientific or historic document - or as a poetic affirmation of God’s sovereign creation?

Understanding the **intentions** (and **culture**) of the original writer may be needed for clear understanding today: for example, Jesus talking about cutting off a hand may be seen as “Semitic hyperbole”, emphasising the *importance* of our choice of actions rather than a literal command.

Some guiding principles:

* if you don’t know much about a particular Bible book, read the **introduction** to it first in (for example) the Message, the NIV Study Bible, or (for more detail) a Bible Handbook.
* ask for the **Holy Spirit**’s help – He was involved in the writing!
* think about the **impact** of the event or story on those who were there; on those who recorded it; and then its relevance for today.
* what is the “**plain meaning**” of the passage or verse? Does this ring true to the Bible as a whole?
* when you’re thinking about “**doctrines**”, seek to get the Big Picture in the Bible – don’t build a doctrine from a single verse or a biased selection. A concordance can be helpful for this.
* don’t be afraid to ask **difficult questions** – especially if something doesn’t seem right to you. Remember - Jesus *is* the Truth (John 14 6). Talk with friends, pastor, or small group leaders.



**Some helpful resources:** (with best new Amazon price)

**The New Lion Handbook to the Bible**: Alexander, Pat & David (Eds): Lion 2009: £13.60. Lots of pictures!

**An Idiot’s Guide to the Bible**: Williams, Derek: Paternoster, 2002: £4.99. An easy way in!

**Biblical Interpretation 101**: Morphew, Derek: Vineyard, 2012: £8.74. Quite detailed, but easy to read.

**Understanding Scripture**: Grudem, Wayne; Collins, C.; Screidner, T.: IVP, 2012: £8.38. A clear conservative view.

**What the Bible Really Teaches:** Ward, Keith: SPCK, 2004. £9.99. Radical, but Biblically rooted, look at the tricky bits.

1. “Canonical” means formally agreed and accepted by church structures [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees. There is also some additional text to some of the books in a “Protestant” Bible [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 1 Esdra, 3 and 4 Maccabees, and (not surprisingly!) Psalm 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. BCE stands for Before the Common Era, and CE for Common Era. This dating is used by those within Religious Studies to avoid the “confessional” implications of BC (= Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini, the “year of the Lord”) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. for our Jewish friends, 24 books – the same books, but some collating, for example 1 & 2 Kings together, the “minor prophets” as one book. Sometimes - for example, in the Psalms - the verse numbers are slightly different. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brown, Dan: **The Da Vinci Code**: Anchor Books 2003: p234 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. see the excellent refutation of Dan Brown’s ideas in Green, Michael: **The Books the Church Suppressed**: Monarch 2005 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. for a comparatively painless introduction to the story, see Fuller, Mike: **The Entire Story of the Bible in 50 Minutes**: Trinity Publishing 2008 (DVD). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. see Warfield, Benjamin Breckinridge: **Inspiration and Authority of the Bible:** Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)