

What is the Bible?

The Bible is a collection of books, some short, some long, written over a period of almost a thousand years in several different countries and in at least two languages. (The word “Bible” simply means “books”; “Scriptures” means “writings.”) Christians believe that this book, or this collection of books, contains in a special way the message, the Word that God has revealed to human beings. The Bible tells those who read it with faith the truths that they need to know about who God is, who we are, what God’s promises are, and how God wants us to live. It has been translated into hundreds of languages. Many stories from the Bible, like the Good Samaritan, have become part of our literature, even among people who have no idea of Christianity.

The whole Bible tells one great Story, although the story is told in many different ways. In a nutshell, this Story tells us about the one God, who is wise, good, and powerful. He made everything there is and specifically made us human beings to be like him and to know him and love him as he also loves us. The first people, and all the rest of us after them, rebelled against God. By sending Jesus, God has restored and forgiven us, like naughty children. In the end he will restore his whole creation to the beauty, love, and goodness he had originally planned for it to have. Everything in the Bible fits into this Story in some way. The

most important person in the Bible is Jesus, God’s own Son who came into the world to restore it: the Old Testament promises that he will come, and the New Testament tells about him.

Christians believe that the Bible is “inspired” and is, or contains, the “Word of God” in a special way. This means that the whole Bible, when we read it *as a whole*, lets us meet the Word, who is a Person, God himself, in a very real way. But this Word is always spoken to us through human words, through historical events, and through human writers and languages. The Holy Spirit inspired these writers to write the Truth about God. We always have to try to hear the one Word that is expressed in all these human ways. So we cannot take little pieces of the Bible out of context and attach them to questions they were never intended to answer. We also cannot say that the Bible is “true” and everything else in the world is “false.” Other writers, including scientists, may be in some way “inspired” by the Holy Spirit too, for God is the source of *all* truth and goodness and beauty. Nevertheless, the Bible is special in a way no other writing is, and all sound Christian teaching is and always must be based on the teaching contained in the Bible.

What is in the Bible?

The Christian Bible is divided into two parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament. The **Old Testament** was and still is the Bible of the Jews; Moslems

respect it too. Jesus and the first Christians were Jews, and they continued to find the Word of God in the Scriptures they knew; Jesus often quotes from the Old Testament. These books were originally written in Hebrew. They include several different kinds of writing - history, instructions for living, stories, prayers, poetry.

The first five books are what the Jews call the Torah, the most basic law or teaching which God has given. **Genesis** begins with a poetic account of how God made the world (this includes the stories of Adam and Eve and of Noah and the ark) and later called one group of people into a covenant relationship with himself. The rest of the Old Testament works out this relationship and prophesies that God will send a Savior to restore the world. The **Psalms** are the prayers and hymns of the Old Testament. Some editions of the Bible also contain the “Apocrypha,” sometimes called the deuterocanonical books, as part of the Old Testament. These are other writing of Old Testament times, which we know today only in their Greek form because the Hebrew has been lost, and which are considered “inspired” in a slightly lesser way than the so-called “canonical” books.

The **New Testament** contains the most important of the books and letters the early Christians wrote to record the teaching they received from Jesus. Sometime in the second century the Church decided that these particular books

were the best and most complete way to express the Christian faith, and made them the New Testament “canon,” or approved list. These were written in Greek, many of them by people whose first language was not Greek but Aramaic. The four **Gospels** (**Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John**) tell the story, the “Good News,” about Jesus, and show how he is the Savior, the Messiah, promised in the Old Testament. The Book of Acts continues the Gospel story by telling about the early Church.

Most of the remaining books are letters from a Christian teacher to local churches or individuals, teaching about Christian faith and life. The last book of the Bible, the Book of **Revelation**, tells about God’s final victory at the end of time, using some rather difficult symbols and images. There are some New Testament “apocryphal books” too, other early Christian writings which were not included in the canon because the Church thought they were less reliable.

The books of the Bible were written about two thousand years ago (some more, some a little less), in the languages which were in use then. Most of us have to read them in translation, and also have to try to understand the very different culture of those times. English, Arabic, and our other common languages did not even exist then. Translating a text from one language to another *always* changes the meaning at least a little. But, since God can guide translators too, and since no one set of words can tell the

whole truth of God, having several versions can help us to understand the message even better. Also, different translations are made for different purposes. Some try to be very accurate and to give the original meaning as closely as they can. The King James Version (also called the Authorized Version) is accurate, but old and therefore difficult for today's readers. The Revised Standard Version (not the New RSV), the Jerusalem Bible, and the New English Bible are accurate translations. Others are more interested in being easy to read, like the Good News Bible. The Episcopal Prayer Book has its own translation of the Psalms. Sometimes a translator paraphrases the text to express a meaning he wants to emphasize, as, for example, saying "sisters and brothers" when the text says "brothers." It is a good idea to be familiar with more than one translation and to compare them. It can also be interesting to compare the English with some other language you know, perhaps Spanish or Latin. People who want to study the New Testament in depth often learn at least a little of the original Greek in order to understand the vocabulary that is used.

How do I read the Bible?

The Bible can be read in many ways. It can be read and studied like any other book, as literature or history or both. A school or college course in the Bible often does this. But, if as Christians we believe that the Bible speaks God's word to us, we need to read it with that in mind,

and pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we try to learn what God is telling us. The Bible can and does speak to each of us directly in our own lives.

The Bible is the book of the Christian community, of the Church, and is meant to be read and heard by the whole community in worship. In the Episcopal Church, as in many others, certain Bible readings are assigned for each Sunday, from both the Old and the New Testaments. These are often chosen to go together and to help us understand the whole Biblical story, and are also usually the topic for the sermon. Therefore, a good introduction to the Bible is to listen to these readings in church and to try to understand them.

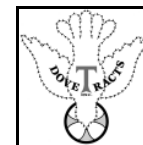
A Christian will also read the Bible on his or her own and pray about what it says. But a person who isn't warned will probably pick up the Bible like any other book and begin at page one. This is probably *not* a good idea for a first reading, because some of the hardest parts are at the beginning.

One good place to begin is with one of the Gospels, preferably Mark or Luke, to see just who Jesus is and what the "Good News" is about him. Most people will probably want to begin with one of the easy modern translations, like "Good News" or the one by J. B. Phillips. (If you read something you don't understand, keep going, and come back to the hard bit later.) Following Luke with Acts

continues the story into the lives of the first Christians. The letters of St. Paul contain some wonderful and beautiful teaching. These parts of the New Testament will lead you to others, and back to the Old Testament. Then it may be time to try Genesis and Isaiah. Eventually you probably *will* want to read from the beginning to the end. A study Bible will often have notes that will help you with difficult places and refer you to related passages.

Once you have some idea of what is in the Bible, you can also use the Bible as part of your prayer. Now you will read a passage, not like a homework assignment or to learn the facts, but slowly and in a very personal way. First ask God to guide you. What does this say to me? Is Jesus talking to me here? Is God asking me to do something in my life? Of course not all parts of the Bible will be equally easy to use in this way. But once you form the habit of reading the Bible regularly (ideally every day), and of reading through whole books a little bit at a time, you will hear God speak more and more often. Then you too will begin to understand why the Bible is God's word to all people, at all times, and you will meet the living God in its pages.

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