

An Introduction to the Bible

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Before the beginning of time, God existed – completely invisible and sufficient in and of Himself. Then He created, and heaven and earth came into existence. Then He spoke, and light brought visibility to God's creation. For the first time, God manifested something of Himself by physical means. It was this action which began a process of revelation which is marked by a series of climaxes. One is the calling of Abram of Ur: out of this man God formed a nation which represented Him before all other nations. To this nation, God entrusted written revelation, which we know today as the Old Testament or the Tanakh. Having spoken to this family/nation in many different ways over the period of 2,000 years, God Himself stepped into human history in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the fullest personal expression of God, for He is the God-man. After the coming of Christ, all of God's hidden secrets suddenly met their Key, giving necessity to further written revelation – what we call the New Testament. This is the record of Christ – previously anticipated by shadows and prophecies, but presently understood by explicit teaching. Hence, as of approximately A.D. 100, the written revelation of God was completed, yielding what we know today as the Bible, Scripture, or the Word of God.

Basic Facts About the Bible

The word “Bible” simply means “book.” This term became normative in ancient Christianity. By attaching the definite article “the” to the word, “the Bible” is classified in a category unique to itself. It is *the book*. The terms that the Bible gives to itself are “Word of God” and “Scripture.” When beginning a discussion on this book, it would be helpful to start with a definition. *Scripture is the written communication of God – definitively “God-breathed” in nature and in quality, produced as “men carried along by the Holy Spirit spoke from God,” so that man shall live “by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.”*

In this definition, two authorships are implied: the divine and the human. It is described this way: “Men, borne along by the Holy Spirit, spoke from God.” (2 Peter 1:21). In other words, the Bible is thoroughly and primarily from God. This is its distinctive character. Nevertheless, man was used to bring this about, so that the text genuinely reflects the mind of the human author, while it perfectly communicates the mind of God. So great is God's sovereignty that He is able to bring about His purposes, not by overriding the human will, but by using it and guiding it. Such is the case with Scripture. More will be said on this dual-authorship when the subject of inspiration is discussed.

As to the writing of Scripture's contents, at least 40 human authors were used. From the first writings to the last, a period of at least 1,500 years was covered. In total, 66 books make up its composition. These books are divided into two categories: the Old Testament, written primarily in Hebrew (containing the first 39 books) and the New Testament, written in Greek (containing the last 27 books).

The Old Testament is marked by certain sections, which are rendered differently by different groups. The Jewish division is threefold:

1. *The Law* (To Jews, the Torah)
2. *The Prophets* (To Jews, the Nevi'im)
3. *The Writings* (To Jews, the Ketuvim)

There are five modern divisions:

1. *The Pentateuch* (Genesis – Deuteronomy). This is the foundation of the nation of Israel. It contains their origin, their journey to Canaan, as well as their Law.
2. *The Historical Books* (Joshua – Esther). This records the history of the nation of Israel in their land, with the exception of Esther.
3. *Poetry/Wisdom* (Job – Song of Solomon). In general, this section presents the timeless heart-throbs of worshippers of God, whether those be made in grief, in contemplation, or in praise.
4. *Major Prophets* (Isaiah – Daniel). These are called “major” for their size; they record the messages of various prophets to Israel.
5. *Minor Prophets* (Hosea – Malachi). These are called “minor” for their size; they record the messages of various prophets to Israel.

The New Testament, on the other hand records Israel's rejection of their Deliverer and God's formation of a new entity called “the Church.” It has four main sections:

1. *History* (Matthew – Acts). The Gospels record the ministry and death of Christ, while Acts record the conception and growth of the early Christian community, based upon the preaching of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.
2. *Pauline Epistles* (Romans – Philemon). Paul, being “the apostle to the Gentiles” wrote heavily on subjects such as the Church, the local assembly, the Christian's rule of life, etc.
3. *General Epistles* (Hebrews – Jude). These are called “general,” because they were not written to one specific assembly or person. Various subjects are taken up in these letters.
4. *The Apocalypse* (Revelation). This is the prophetic section of the New Testament, and it deals with the future of Israel and the ultimate end of time according to God's purposes.

Throughout Scripture, though it is a singular work by the hand of God, there are various literary types used. A major portion of it is *narrative*, which is used to portray events as they happened; narrative sections record God's practical dealings with His people. Often they provide lessons for Christian living or illustrations of teaching in another part of Scripture. Another major style is *poetry*; primarily in Job through Song of Solomon, this style brings out the deep feelings of the heart, whether in grief to call out to God, in praise to marvel at His works, or in teaching to convey a lesson. As well, there are sections devoted to plain teaching and direct communication of truth: these are called *didactic* sections. Finally, there are *prophetic* sections in Scripture, which speak events which were future at the time of writing. Some prophecies have been fulfilled, while some remain our expectation. Some prophecies are explicit statements that cannot be mistaken. Some prophecies are highly symbolic in language. Prophetic passages of Scripture serve to establish the promises of God as reliable, and enliven

our hope in the glorious future which God has prepared.

The Claims of the Bible

If Scripture is to be understood correctly, one must understand the purpose for which God gave it. If it will be appreciated, it must be viewed as unique. Thus the question arises: *what makes Scripture what it is?*

A Book of Exclusive Revelation. This is at the very heart of the Bible: Scripture manifests God by His very own words. It is a book about God, written by God. From the beginning, God has used words to unveil Himself and communicate His nature: "...the LORD revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the LORD." (1 Samuel 3:21). Similarly, when Moses asked to see God's glory, the Lord descended in visible glory *and* made a proclamation of His nature (Exodus 34). So then, as God speaks in the Bible with words, He is unveiling Himself. This is exclusive to the Bible.

A Book of Singular Doctrine. Scripture not only manifests a God to be known, but it embodies a faith to be believed. In Jude 3, this "faith" is described as "once for all time delivered unto the saints." It is a single entity, established in time, never to be modified.

A Book of Authoritative Instruction. Since the Bible is God's Word and the embodiment of Christian belief, it follows that this book holds full authority in the life of the Christian. Not only that, but it empowers a life to be lived. It reveals to us the character of God; thus we are called to be like Him. It reveals to us the commands of God; thus we are called to obey. It reveals to us the calling of believers; thus we are called to be consistent with who we were made to be. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." This book is life to the Christian. "Therefore, you shall observe to do as the LORD your God has commanded you: you shall not turn aside to the right or to the left." (Deuteronomy 5:32)

Thus, as a whole, Scripture manifests God's Being, truth, and will. Without these things, we would not know Who to worship, what to believe, or how to behave. Scripture is truly the Christian's greatest possession.

The Contents of the Bible

The Central Message of Scripture. The Bible, though it is a unique document, is not only a unique document. It has a message to convey. It has a purpose to fulfill. From beginning to end, the God of Creation is seen as progressively manifesting His intrinsically holy Being, especially emphasizing His greatness, His glory, and His grace. Through the initial fall of man and the succeeding ages of failure in which man exposes his complete depravity, God manifests His judgment upon sin and yet His faithful compassion in spite of it. Such reached its climax when God manifested His Person in His Son and his character of both extreme justice and extreme grace in the cross of Christ. Subsequent to this work, God has exalted His Son so that all will ultimately recognize Him as Messiah to the Jews, Saviour and Master of Gentiles, and Bridegroom of the Church. Christ is the center of Scripture. He is its message; He is its purpose.

But to appreciate this purpose, the Bible student must understand the various means by which God portrays this purpose. In other words, we must understand how the Bible divides itself on a broad scale. This can be done by noticing the three people groups dealt with in Scripture, the main themes which are developed, the various epochs of time emphasized, and

the different covenants made. These will give a comprehensive summary of the Bible's contents.

Main Themes Developed. Though Scripture has many sub-narratives and addresses many topics, it has a handful of identifiable overarching themes. Three are obvious from the outset of Genesis. In chapter 1, God's power through Creation was displayed. In chapter 2, the necessity of relationships was established. In chapter 3, God's remedy for and judgment of sin were predicted. Such themes recur constantly throughout the text of Scripture. Of course, there are other themes to be noticed, which will be touched on briefly.

First, one can notice the glory and revelation of God in His Creation. What would be the purpose in designing creatures of cognition were it not for His own fame and glory? God Himself is the ultimate purpose of all things, "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory forever." (Romans 11:36). He promises, "I will not give my glory unto another." (Isaiah 48:11).

Secondly, there is the obvious emphasis of God's justice in light of man's depravity and wickedness. From the beginning, man fell into sin and thus ruined his standing before God. Romans 1-3 prove the depth of his wickedness on every hand. The day will come when God will finally judge sinners and their sins at the Great White Throne (Revelation 20:11-15).

Third, we find the incarnation and exaltation of God's Son as the constant anticipation. In Genesis 3:15, He is called the "seed of the woman," which cannot but emphasize His humanity. In Deuteronomy 18, God speaks of a Prophet, Who would both be like the people and rule over them. In Isaiah 52, He is predicted to be "Exalted, extolled, and very high." Such is the anticipation of the entire Old Testament. And the New Testament only enlarges on this, as Hebrews 1 shows.

In line with this, there is the theme of redemption through Christ's ultimate sacrifice on the cross. Animal sacrifice has been from the beginning (Genesis 3:21); it was emphasized further in Israel's Law (Leviticus 1-7). These sacrifices never truly satisfied God (Micah 6:6-8), but they only pointed to and illustrated the ultimate offering, which Christ made (Isaiah 53 / Hebrew 9:14). He is the only Mediator between God and man; He is the only true Ransom price which could save man (1 Timothy 2:1-6).

This sacrifice is what brings us into a relationship with God – the ability to enjoy and please Him. Psalm 63 illustrates the fact that man's ultimate occupation is satisfaction in God. "For Christ also has suffered for sins once for all, the righteous One for the unrighteous ones, that he might bring us to God." (1 Peter 3:18). Ephesians 2:1-10 is a perfect overview of our transition from being unable to serve God to actively bringing Him pleasure. Service to God and satisfaction in Him an obvious theme throughout Scripture.

Finally, the ultimate direction of time is much taken up in the Bible. In fact, it is popularly estimated that one-third of Scripture is prophetic in nature. In Isaiah 46 God says, "I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure." In the beginning, God created; in the end, God's creative acts are perfected and consummated (Revelation 21-22). In the beginning, God set up man as head; in the end, Christ is Head over all things, given unto His Bride (Ephesians 1). As well, there is coming an ultimate day when God "will have put down all rule and authority and power." (1 Corinthians 15:24). In this day, He will be fully recognized and submitted to by all.

People Groups of the Bible. The narrative of Scripture can also be neatly divided into three main people groups: Gentiles, Jews, and the Church of God (1 Corinthians 10:32). Each people group has a distinct place in God's purposes, but each has in common the recognition of Christ as Lord and Saviour. God dealt mainly with Gentiles in the first 2,000 years of human history, the Jews for the next 2,000, and the Church for the next 2,000.

God primarily dealt with Gentiles in Genesis 1-11, and from Creation this people group proved that man only grows more wicked as he multiplies further. In Genesis 6:5, we find this as we read, "And Yahweh saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Thus God destroyed mankind by a worldwide flood, saving only 8 people (Noah and his family). But even with the progeny of this godly family, only a few generations were needed for man to form a pagan religion (Genesis 11). Thus, God scattered the Gentiles into the whole earth so they could not congregate and infinitely multiply their wickedness. Nevertheless, in spite of general wickedness, God preserved a godly line from Adam's third son, Seth. In the future, God promises that the Gentiles will recognize Him and come into a state of blessing (Isaiah 2:2-4).

In Genesis 12, God called a Gentile named Abram out of paganism. Out of this man's family, God formed the nation of Israel. The progress of Israel's history takes up the entire Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. Initially, the nation was formed out of three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. After Jacob moved to Egypt with his family of 70+, Israel grew dramatically – into the population of millions in only a few generations. Seeing this as a threat, Pharaoh enslaved the nation. God brought the people of Israel out of this bondage that they could function as a true nation in their promised land. Israel's time in the land exposed man's general wickedness yet again, as they sunk into darkness, division, and idolatry. As judgment upon them, God brought the nation into captivity in Babylon, after which the nation would never be the same. Following the ministry of the last prophet (Malachi), there were 400 years of silence, in which God gave no new revelation or message. The silence was broken by the coming of Israel's Messiah, Jesus Christ. But they in their darkness rejected Him and plunged themselves into collective blindness that has not been lifted to this day. God will in a coming day restore Israel to a position of blessing and leadership among the nations (Romans 11 and Zechariah 11-14). God's promises to Israel as His chosen nation will never be forfeited.

After the rejection of Christ, God formed an entirely new people, called the Church of God, made up of both Jew and Gentile people (Ephesians 1-3). This is a body which finds its identity and destiny in Heaven, as opposed to Israel which found those things on earth. Though there will be false confessors amongst the Church, those who make up the true Church will never collectively reject God. Rather the Lord promises to gather this people unto himself (1 Thessalonians 4-5) without any sort of separation from its link with Him in any way. Ephesians and Colossians are vital in understanding the nature of this body, which Christ has made His Bride.

Key Events. While the Bible is full of narratives, all of which play a significant role in its purpose, there are a few key events which are spoken of more or are more impactful than other events.

1. Creation. The first words of Scripture are these: "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth." Creation is the setting of all God's dealings with His

creatures. By His own right as Creator, God holds all authority over the creation; this will be recognized fully when time is consummated.

2. The Fall. When God created Adam, this man was sinless and innocent. Yet in Genesis 3, Adam, on the behalf of all his progeny, rebelled against God and plunged the human race into sin and death. This is called “the Fall,” and it explains the state of the world and the depravity of all mankind.
3. The Flood. After the days of Adam, man multiplied on the earth exponentially. Sadly, where there is growth in population, there is usually growth in wickedness. Hence, Genesis 6 records, “When men began to multiply upon the earth... the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and... every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” As mentioned earlier, God brought judgment upon the whole world by means of a flood, only saving 8 people. The flood forever changed the physical earth and continually served as an example of God's righteousness in His judgments.
4. The Tower of Babel. When the population grew after the Flood, mankind again took up a course against God and built a religious center that contradicted God's desire for them. They desired to congregate in Babel, rather than spread across the world as God commanded. Thus, God confounded the languages of the population so it could no longer work in unity. Hence, the different language groups spread across the globe, which explains the existence of different languages, cultures, people groups, and religions.
5. The Call of Abraham. A number of years after Babel, God called a man named Abram (later changed to Abraham) to be the father of a new nation, Israel. God promised to Abram that he would be the source of blessing for many nations, ultimately through the Messiah.
6. Exodus and Giving of Law. When Abraham's descendants grew in number, they moved to Egypt because of the worldwide famine that occurred. As those descendants grew further, they were forced into slavery, bringing need for deliverance. God delivered them, gave them a written law code, and brought them into their land. This event explains the solidification and foundation of the nation of Israel.
7. Babylonian Captivity. While in their land, the people of Israel constantly rebelled against God, leading to a nation-wide split between the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. Because of the nation's repeated idolatry at this time, God sent a successful Babylonian invasion, which brought the whole nation under captivity. The nation never fully recovered from that.
8. First Coming of Christ. This is the center of all Scripture: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” God was manifested in the flesh, for Christ is the Son of God. In His life on earth, He fulfilled the standards of perfect humanity. In His death, He satisfied God's wrath and made way for the forgiveness of sins. After death, He resurrected, forever defeating death and guaranteeing the efficacy of His work. Then He ascended as the God-man into heaven to be glorified and exalted as Great High Priest for His people and as King waiting till His enemies are “put under His feet.”

9. The Coming of the Holy Spirit and Formation of the Church. After Christ ascended, He sent the Holy Spirit, which initiated an entity called the Church, which is Christ's Body. This happened on Pentecost in Acts 2. There will be a day when this entity will have reached completion, and Christ will join His Bride (the Church) unto Himself, in which day it will share with His glory.
10. The Tribulation. Following God's dealings with the Church, God will again take up dealings with Israel and the Gentiles in judgment, ultimately culminating in the restoration of Israel as God's chosen nation.
11. The Second Coming of Christ and Events Surrounding It. After God judges the earth, Christ will visibly return to deliver the nation of Israel from any persecution it received from the nations and cleanse Israel in an ultimate Day of Atonement. When Christ returns, He will establish his promised earthly Kingdom, in which He will rule with a rod of iron for 1,000 years. In this time, there will be perfect peace and perfect justice administered.
12. Final Judgment. Following 1,000 of Christ's reign on earth, God will sum up time by initiating the final judgment at the Great White Throne, after one last attempt of rebellion by the Devil. From this point, all who were enemies of God will be enemies of God eternally, and all who were made servants of God will eternally serve Him. Then God will create a New Heaven and New Earth, a creation in which all will be perfect eternally. This will be the eternal state of the believer, while the Lake of Fire will be the eternal dwelling of the sinner.

Time-Periods Emphasized. Scripture is also neatly understood when its different time-periods are outlined. Whereas Scripture can be understood by highlighted events, there are also distinct ages which are marked by a specific mode of divine administration. These are called dispensations. For instance, God dealt with man according to man's innocence in the Garden of Eden. After the fall, God dealt with man according to his conscience, after the Flood according to human government. When God called Abraham, God interacted with man based on divine promises which had to be received by faith. After the nation of Israel was delivered from Egypt, God brought them under the time period marked by the Law, but only until Christ. When Christ came, a time period was initiated marked by grace administered through the gospel proclamation of the Church. After God's purposes for the church are complete, He will initiate the earthly Kingdom of Christ, which will be 1,000 years of perfect rule, as mentioned already. Each of these time periods are marked by increased revelation of God's nature and of man's intrinsic wickedness.

Covenants Made. In Scripture, there are 5 covenants recorded, all of which have special significance to the overall message of Scripture, particularly when it comes to the Jews. Just for the sake of brevity, they will be listed as such:

1. Covenant with Noah – God promises never again to destroy the earth by water.
2. Covenant with Abraham – God promises to preserve the progeny and property of Abraham.
3. Covenant with Moses – God prescribes the practices of Israel until Christ would come.
4. Covenant with David – God promises the throne to David and his Son (Christ).

5. The New Covenant – God gives, not a law for man to keep, but a completely new heart with which to obey. This covenant was ratified by the blood of Christ.

Subjects Surrounding the Topic of Scripture

While the contents of the Bible are the most important to understand, for an introduction to be complete, one should also know what issues and questions arise when discussing the topic of Scripture. These will be given in point form, for the sake of conciseness.

Questions Regarding the Nature of Scripture. (1) Revelation: How has God disclosed Himself in Scripture? (2) Inspiration: Is this book God-Breathed? (3) Sufficiency: Does this really contain the whole counsel of God for us today? (4) Infallibility: How reliable is it? (5) Authority: What authority does it hold over my life?

Questions Regarding the Origin of Scripture. (1) The Canon of Scripture: What books belong in the Bible? (2) The Language of Scripture: How do we translate and study the original languages? (3) The Transmission of Scripture: How did we get the Bible?

Questions Regarding the Interpretation and Application of Scripture. (1) Hermeneutics: How do we interpret a Bible passage? (2) Exegesis: What are we meant to get out of a passage? (3) Illumination: How does God enlighten my mind to Scripture? (4) Application: How does this affect my life today?