

Get to know your bible

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Introduction

The bible is a collection of material first written down over a period of 1,000 years between 900BC and 100AD. It has two main parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament. ‘Testament’ is an old English word for ‘agreement.’ The Old Testament covers the agreement which God made with Abraham and his descendants, the Jews, to make them his chosen people; the New Testament covers the agreement which God made with everyone after the death and resurrection of Jesus that:

whoever believes in Jesus shall not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16).

The Old Testament has three parts with the following books in them in Western Protestant bibles:

1. the Torah or the first five books of the Bible,
2. the Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve minor prophets, and
3. the Writings: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra/Nehemiah and Chronicles.

In Jesus’ time there were other books which were included in the first complete editions of the bible produced around 350AD and these are still included in the bibles used by the Roman Catholic and Eastern churches. They were left out of bibles by Western Protestants on the advice of Jewish scholars who thought that

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these books were not a genuine part of the Jewish scriptures. They are known as the ‘Apocrypha.’

Scholars conventionally think of the New Testament as having five sections:

1. the gospels, or ‘good news,’
2. Acts,
3. the letters of Paul,
4. the other letters and
5. Revelation.

But this order was adopted around 200 years after the books were written. The first to be written were Paul’s letters to the Galatians, Thessalonians and Corinthians and he had probably written the last of his letters, from Rome, before Mark, who we think produced the first gospel, had completed his work. Luke probably produced his gospel next, followed by Matthew and finally by John. However, Acts, which is often treated as a quite separate book, is really the continuation of Luke’s gospel; in it Luke describes the experiences of a small number of early Christians, predominantly Paul, as they begin to spread the good news about Jesus. The one other letter which we know was written before Paul died was the letter from James who was unlawfully stoned to death in 62AD. The last book to be written was Revelation, probably around 100AD.

Until around 800BC when Hebrew got its own script, the content of all the books describing events before then was handed down by word of mouth. In some cases, there were slightly different versions of the same story. But the scribes who first wrote these word of mouth accounts down decided that it was not up to them to choose which version was ‘correct.’ So they

wrote both versions down; as a result, for example, there are two versions of the creation story, two versions of how animals were chosen to go on Noah's ark and two versions of how Joseph came to be sold into slavery in Egypt.

Until around 350AD, when Christians produced the first bibles containing all these different books, the books circulated separately on parchment scrolls and later on sheets of papyrus.

The bible becomes Greek

Apart from a few local difficulties things were reasonably stable under King David and King Solomon in the 10th century BC. But, thereafter, the Jews were subject to a series of invasions from the Egyptians in the south and the Assyrians and Babylonians to the north. The Assyrians and Babylonians took away a lot of the upper class Jews as captives and some of their descendants never returned; in 2003 the last remaining descendants of those Jews still living in Iraq were airlifted out by the Americans during the invasion of Iraq.

Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586BC but they in turn were conquered in 512BC by Cyrus the Great, one of the most enlightened rulers of the ancient world who created the Persian Empire and permitted the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple. His descendants continued to rule the empire until Alexander the Great invaded it in 334BC and over the next five years took control of the whole of the Persian Empire and Egypt where he founded Alexandria whose library was to become the most important in the world for the next 700 years.

Following Alexander's death in 323BC, his empire was divided among three of his generals but, in creating his empire, Alexander had brought Greek culture to the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean and the colloquial Greek which his soldiers

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had spoken became the most common language throughout the area. So many Jews found that they had to speak Greek in their daily lives that those who lived outside Hebrew-speaking areas gradually lost the ability to speak Hebrew. So a number of Jewish scholars living in Alexandria began to translate all the Jewish scriptures into Greek. Jesus and his disciples often quote from this version, known as the Septuagint, which differs in some places from the Hebrew version with which we are familiar.

As very few Christians knew Hebrew, when Christians decided to put together complete bibles around 350AD they used the Greek version of the Old Testament to complement the Greek of the New Testament.

Reading the bible

Unlike most books, it is probably not a good idea to start reading the bible from the beginning. A good place to start is the gospel, or ‘good news,’ according to Luke. Luke is the only non-Jewish author in the bible and he is writing for non-Jews. Luke was an educated professional, a doctor, and he took the trouble to interview as many people as he could who had known Jesus. He includes some stories of Jesus which no-one else does, including ‘The Good Samaritan’ and ‘The Prodigal Son’ which most people have heard of even if they do not know that Jesus originally told them. He also gives voice to many of the women in Jesus’ life.

Some books of the bible are worth reading from beginning to end; with others you can gain enough from reading just sections of them. We will say when we do not think it is essential to read the whole of a book; otherwise, it is worth reading through the whole book before you move on.

You can read the bible in any translation you like as the key

messages are the same. During the twentieth century, there was a lot of interest in producing more colloquial translations because most of the Greek used in the original New Testament is colloquial and sometimes not very good Greek rather than ‘correct’ Greek but many people prefer translations using older or more ‘correct’ English rather than more colloquial English.

1 Luke

Luke met Paul, Silas and Timothy, Christian missionaries bringing the good news about Jesus to western Turkey, in Troas, a town near the Greek/Turkish border, on Paul's second missionary journey some time in the early 50s AD. He accompanied them to Philippi, a town in northern Greece, where he stayed. He joined Paul again in Philippi probably in 58 or 59 AD, as Paul was returning from his third missionary journey, and accompanied him to Jerusalem. From there Paul was taken to spend two years in prison in Caesarea before being sent to Rome, probably in the winter of 60/61 or 61/62 AD, to stand trial before the Emperor. We think that Luke spent the two years when Paul was in prison in Caesarea interviewing people who had known Jesus before accompanying Paul to Rome where he met Mark who was probably completing his gospel by this time. He may have used Mark's gospel as a framework around which to hang all that he had learned from his interviews.

After he had finished this book, he wrote a second, known as Acts, about the early history of Christianity. He presents both as letters to Theophilus. We do not know whether Theophilus was a real person or whether, because Theophilus means 'Friend of God,' this was a way of saying that he was writing to any 'Friend of God.'

Luke starts his letter to Theophilus with an account of the birth of John, who was to become known as John the Baptist, to Elisabeth, a cousin of Jesus' mother, Mary, before recounting the circumstances of Jesus' birth and early life (Lk 1–2). The poems which Mary and Zechariah say are both compilations of

words used in the Old Testament; for example, Mary draws on the poem of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, when she presents him for service in the Temple (1 Sm 2:1–10).

In reading the story of Jesus' birth, note that:

- you will find the word 'angel' everywhere in English bibles but the Greek word the original authors used simply meant 'messenger.' It had no spiritual meaning. So wherever you see 'angel' in an English bible, just think 'messenger.'
- for Christians, God appears in three different ways: as a Father, as Jesus, the son who came down to live a relatively brief human life on earth, and as the Holy Spirit (Holy Ghost in older translations) or 'Holy Breath' to translate the original Greek accurately, which, like a breath of wind, we cannot see though we can see its effects. God can interact with us in any of these three different ways though he remains one God.

As Luke contains some information which could only have come from Mary, it is possible that he met her when she was in her eighties and he was interviewing people while Paul was in prison in Caesarea; alternatively, Mary may have shared her experiences with James, who was certainly alive at the time Luke was doing his interviews, or with someone else whom Luke was able to interview.

As there is no mention of Jesus' earthly father, Joseph, after the visit to the Temple in Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve (Lk 2), we assume that he died some time later by which time Jesus was old enough to take over his earthly father's business.

Luke says that John the Baptist began his mission of calling people to be baptised as a sign of repentance in 29 AD (Lk 3). The word which John, and later Jesus, use for 'repentance' means 'a change in the way you think.' People sometimes

think that ‘repentance’ involves turning back from wrong but ‘a change in the way you think’ can also lead you forward into a new, and better, way of thinking about yourself, about God and about other people. So, whenever you see ‘repentance’ in the bible, think ‘a change in the way you think’ and how that would apply to the person or people repenting or being called to repent.

John’s preaching was so strident that people began to wonder whether he was the Messiah — the ‘anointed one’ or ‘Christ’ in Greek — who had been promised to the Jewish people by the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel in the 7th and 6th centuries BC. According to the Jewish tradition, the Messiah would be descended from King David, restore the Jewish kingdom and usher in an age of justice and peace. In fact, several Jews had proclaimed themselves as the Messiah in the recent past but none had come to anything; so it was not as strange a question to ask John as you might think.

When Jesus asked for baptism from John, a dove symbolising the Holy Spirit flew down on to him (Lk 3).

After the baptism Jesus was tempted in three different ways before returning to Galilee (Lk 4).

At the time the country was divided into three parts: Galilee to the north, along with some territory on the east side of the river Jordan, was ruled by Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, the rest of the land to the north and east of the river Jordan was ruled by Herod Philip, another son of Herod the Great, and Samaria, south of Galilee and to the west of the river Jordan, along with Judaea in the south was the Roman province of Judaea which had a Roman governor (Figure 1.1). Note that Lake Galilee is sometimes called Lake Gennesaret.

John the Baptist baptised people in the river Jordan but, after his baptism, Jesus went back to Galilee, where he had been brought up in the town of Nazareth, and did most of his

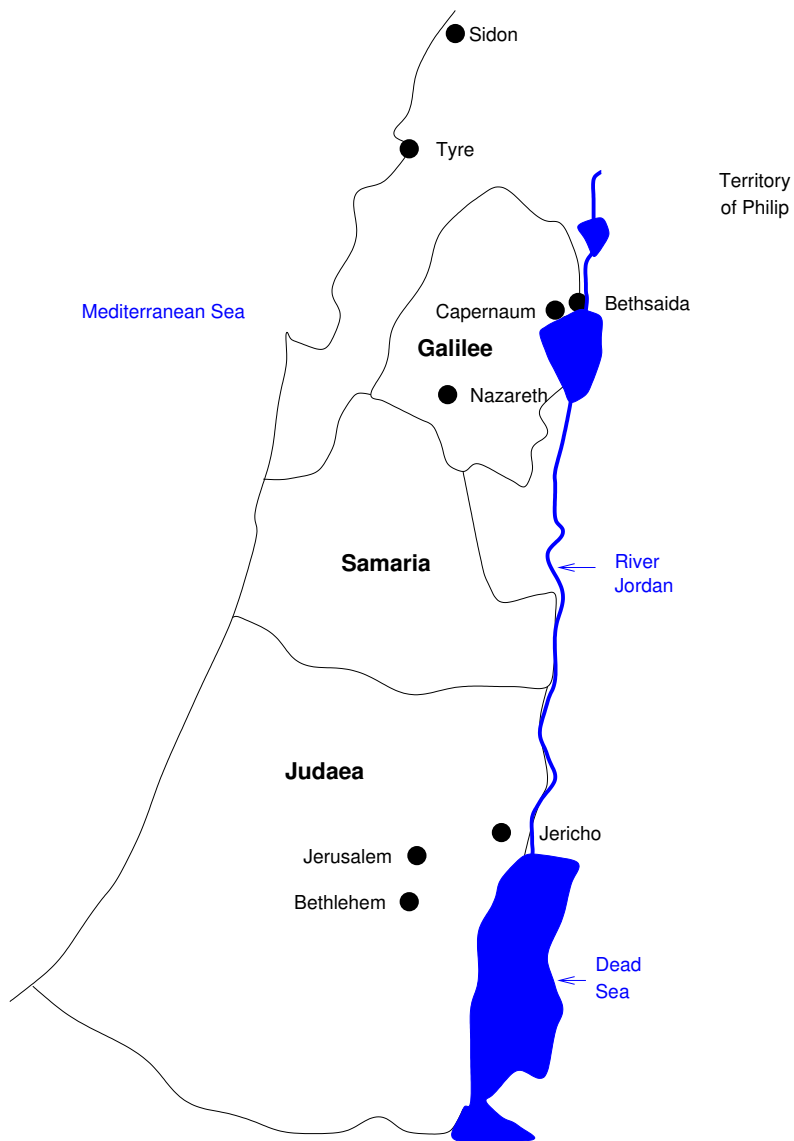


Figure 1.1: Division of the country

preaching, teaching and healing there, only occasionally returning to Judaea in the south usually to visit Jerusalem, which was in Judaea, for particular Jewish festivals.

On his return to Galilee, Jesus visits Nazareth where he is invited to do the reading in the synagogue; the scroll he is given contains chapter 61 of the book of Isaiah, a part thought to have been written in the 5th century BC. Luke gives the text of the reading from the Greek translation of Isaiah which is slightly different from the version of Isaiah which you will find in your bible. We do not know whether Jesus read from the Greek translation or Luke used the Greek translation because that is the one with which his readers would be familiar. The important point to note is that Jesus stops reading at ‘the year of the Lord’s favour’ and says that this prophecy is being fulfilled as they listen to him; he does not go on to the next verse about God’s vengeance (Lk 4).

In and among Luke’s accounts of Jesus’ work of healing and teaching are accounts of his calling and choosing the twelve men who would become known as the twelve disciples (for example, in Lk 5 and 6). The Greek word translated in the bible as ‘disciple’ is ‘student;’ so, whenever you come across the word ‘disciple’ in the bible, think ‘student.’

In Jesus’ day, there were three main ‘denominations’ among the Jews: the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes. The Essenes, who lived a monastic way of life, are not mentioned in the bible; the Pharisees were the ‘religious police’ who believed that only strict obedience to the laws of Moses would save the Jewish people — though, as Jesus pointed out, they often lacked humanity in the ways in which they tried to implement these laws; the Sadducees were more pragmatic and what might today be called ‘rational,’ supporting general adherence to the laws of Moses but not accepting ideas like resurrection from the dead.

In order to collect taxes, the Romans used a franchise sys-

tem similar to the one that used to be used for the railways in Britain; people bid for the franchise in their area and then collected enough tax to pay the Romans and to give themselves a decent, though often excessive, income. Inevitably, people like Levi, and Zacchaeus whom we meet much later, who held one of these franchises were disliked by most people (Lk 5 and 19).

On the east side of Lake Galilee there were ten ‘Greek’ cities, that is, cities where people did not follow Jewish practices such as not rearing pigs or eating pork; on one trip across Lake Galilee Jesus encounters someone with mental health problems who has ended up living in the local cemetery. Mental health problems were considered to be caused by demons and, when Jesus drives the demons out of the man, he lets them go into the local people’s pigs who go mad and rush over a cliff (Lk 8). (Don’t try to find an explanation for Jesus’ behaviour in this case — ask someone or wait until you are doing a bible study on this passage.)

After the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus asks the disciples who people think he is and they say John the Baptist whom Herod had recently executed or Elijah, the prophet who had lived around 800 years earlier and fought against the growth of paganism among the Jews. Peter says that he is the Messiah (‘Christ’ in Greek) and a little after that most translations say that Jesus says that anyone who wants to follow him must take up his cross each day. The word which is translated ‘cross’ refers to the stake which each Roman soldier carried when they were on the move and which were used to build the palisade around their camp at night. Though Jesus has just mentioned that he will be put to death, he does not say how and it seems highly unlikely that the disciples would have taken this as a reference to a crucifixion. But the disciples would have seen Roman soldiers marching, each carrying a stake on their backs, something the soldiers had to do each day when they moved

camp. It seems more likely that Jesus was pointing out that following him carried daily obligations (Lk 9).

Then Jesus takes three of the disciples up a hill where his appearance is transformed and he is seen talking with Moses, the person revered by Jews as the person who had inaugurated their religious practices around 1,500 years earlier, and Elijah (Lk 9).

Luke then inserts two stories, The Good Samaritan and Martha and Mary, which do not appear in any other account of Jesus' life (Lk 10), before describing how Jesus introduced what we now know as the Lord's Prayer to his disciples (Lk 11), and then resumes the story. It seems that this 'interlude' in the story may have been deliberate because Luke successively tells parables about a man showing love, a woman showing love in a quite different way and God showing love, thereby demonstrating that Jesus understood the different ways in which people might express love.

Much of what Luke recounts is included in other accounts of Jesus' life but among the other stories which only appear in Luke's account are The Prodigal Son (Lk 15) and the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16; sometimes known as 'Dives and Lazarus').

The Rich Man and Lazarus is not in fact an original story of Jesus but based on an earlier Jewish fable; what people would have been looking out for was how the storyteller finished the story. The ending which Jesus gives, 'They will not be convinced even if someone were to rise from the dead,' turns out to be prophetic about responses to his own resurrection later on.

Probably three years after he had started his preaching, teaching and healing, Jesus decided to enter Jerusalem in the symbolic way prophesied for the Messiah. When he went into the Temple he drove out the traders (Lk 19). Jewish law prohibited 'graven images' such as the heads of rulers on coins; so visitors to the Temple who wished to buy something to sacrifice —

as Jesus' parents had done when Jesus was an infant — had to change their Roman coinage, complete with the Emperor's head, into Jewish coinage and then use that to buy animals for sacrifice.

Jesus spent the next few days teaching in Jerusalem while one of his disciples, Judas, offered to hand him over to the Jewish authorities. Knowing this Jesus shared a passover meal with his disciples on the Thursday evening in the course of which he instituted what we now know as the Lord's Supper (Lk 22). 'Passover' refers to the story of the angel of death 'passing over' the Jews who had been enslaved in Egypt 1,500 years earlier and only killing Egyptian children — an event which resulted in the Jews being allowed to leave Egypt and return to Palestine.

Jesus then went to a garden well-known to his disciples where he was arrested, taken before the chief priests and then the Roman governor and ordered to be crucified alongside two others who had already been condemned to death (Lk 23).

While he was being crucified, Luke says, one of the criminals asked Jesus to remember him to which Jesus said that he would be with him in paradise. This is normally translated as 'paradise' but Luke's readers would have known that this is the name of the Garden of Eden in the Greek Old Testament. So a better translation would be, 'Today, you will be with me in the Garden of Eden' (Lk 23).

Jesus was crucified on a Friday and the Jewish Sabbath starts at dusk on Friday; so he was buried very quickly to avoid breaking Sabbath laws and only on Sunday morning, after the end of the Sabbath, did people return to visit the tomb. Luke ends his account of Jesus' life with accounts of various appearances to people after his resurrection and concludes with an account of his ascension, or return to heaven, which Luke says took place not far from Jerusalem (Lk 24).

2 James

James was an earthly brother of Jesus; he does not appear to have been a follower of Jesus during Jesus' earthly life but Jesus appeared to him after his resurrection and within a few years he becomes a co-leader with Peter of the Christians in Jerusalem and an authority to whom people appealed in matters of dispute.

He was unlawfully stoned to death in 62 AD by the Jews between the death of the Roman Governor Festus, who had sent Paul to stand trial before the Emperor, and the arrival of his successor Albinus when there was no governor present in the Roman province of Judaea.

James addresses his letter to Christians all over the world; by this time there were Christian communities in South India, North Africa, the Middle East and Europe as far west as Italy. It is essentially practical advice on how to live a good Christian life.

He starts by stressing the importance of faith and wisdom, the problems of wealth and temptation and the need not just to receive the Christian message but to put it into practice (Js 1). He warns against prejudice and stresses the need to 'love your neighbour as yourself' and the importance of demonstrating your faith in action (Js 2). Some Christians have questioned this passage because other writers stress the importance of faith in being a Christian rather than action. However, psychological research has shown that people only really believe something once they begin to act on it; James makes his argument in a slightly different way but he also reflects what Jesus had said about only knowing what people are like as a result of their

2 *James*

fruit, or how they behave.

James warns people not to let their tongues loose because of the damage that can cause and not to be motivated by selfish emotions (Js 3). He warns people against the temptations of this world, against judging people and against boasting (Js 4).

He warns the wealthy not to take advantage of others and urges patience and integrity, stressing too the importance of looking after others, in particular those who may have wandered away from the faith (Js 5).

Perhaps more than any other book in the bible, this gives the best snapshot of the issues a first century Christian leader had to deal with in the everyday lives of Christians.

3 Psalms

The book of Psalms is a collection of poems, some of which are clearly intended to be sung while others are more meditative. We know what instruments were available to the Jews because they are listed in Psalm 150:

Praise him with the sound of the trumpet,
praise him with the harp and lyre,
praise him with with the drum and choir,
praise him with strings and pipe,
praise him with tuned cymbals,
praise him with the loud cymbals.

but we have no idea what their music might have sounded like.

About half the psalms are attributed to King David who was a talented musician who, in his youth, was summoned to the court of King Saul to play his lyre to soothe the King when he was in one of his moods. However, not all the attributions, notably the one for psalm 37, may be correct.

Many of them were composed before there was a Hebrew script, that is, before 900BC, and are therefore oral poetry, handed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next. These share a characteristic of other oral poetry in having lines paired so that the second line says the same thing as the first line but slightly differently. This helps people to remember the poems better.

The psalms which were almost certainly written after Hebrew got a script are psalms 37, 111, 112, 119 and 145 because each section or line starts with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in the

3 *Psalms*

same order as in the alphabet. Without the alphabet being in existence, it would not have been possible to write psalms 37, 111, 112, 119 or 145.

Psalms 137 was definitely written much later because it refers to the time when the Jews had been taken into exile in Babylon.

It is probably not a good idea to read all the psalms in one go but to return to them from time to time. However, some are worth picking out for a first time reader:

- Psalm 1 on following God;
- Psalm 8 on creation;
- Psalm 15 on behaviour which will be rewarded;
- Psalm 22 a remarkable prophecy of aspects of the crucifixion of Jesus and of its consequences for future generations;
- Psalm 23 probably the best known and best loved of the all the psalms because it presents such a positive picture of what it means to have a relationship with God;
- Psalm 51, probably written by David after he had seduced Bathsheba and sent her husband, Uriah, to his death in an assault on a city, is remarkable in describing the key phases through which someone who has committed a serious offence passes before reaching true repentance (Table 3.1);
- Psalm 91 on God's support when going through difficult situations — it also contains the lines which were used in one of Jesus' temptations:

They will support you in their hands
In case you hurt your foot against a stone.

Table 3.1: Phases in Psalm 51

Verses	Phase
1–2	Denial of responsibility
3–6	Realisation; coming to terms with the enormity of what he has done
7–11	Asking someone else to sort the problem out
12–15	Bargaining
16–17	Acceptance of responsibility

- Psalm 100 on thanksgiving;
- Psalm 103 on the nature of God;
- Psalm 121 on God’s protection;
- Psalm 127 contains the motto in Halifax’s crest;
- Psalm 130 a prayer for help;
- Psalm 136 a hymn of praise to God for his love;
- Psalm 137 a much later psalm written after the Jews were taken into exile in Babylon; it features prominently in William Walton’s oratorio *Belshazzar’s Feast*;
- Psalm 139 on the difficulty of escaping God’s scrutiny;
- Psalm 150 a hymn of praise.

There is probably a psalm to address almost any situation in which you find yourself and you may recognise some other psalms because their first lines are familiar, perhaps from the words of a hymn or song written by the theologian and hymn writer Isaac Watts (1674–1748) or a later hymn writer.