

What is the Bible?

The word "Bible" is from the Latin word for "book". The Bible is a collection of books that are accepted by Christians as sacred and inspired by God, speaking truth about spiritual matters and providing guidelines for moral living. It is the work of many different human authors. The different writing skills, writing styles, personalities, world views, and cultural backgrounds of the human authors can be seen in their works. Many of the New Testament books were originally written as letters. Some Bible writings include the authors' own research and recollection of historical events.

The Old Testament

The Old Testament is the first of the two major sections of the Christian Bible. The Old Testament contains the sacred writings of the Jews. It was written over the period of roughly 1000 B.C. to 100 B.C., but it includes narration of events that occurred many centuries earlier and had been passed from generation to generation in oral form. The Old Testament was originally written in the Hebrew language with a few sections written in the Aramaic language.

Jesus Christ, the central figure of Christianity, was born a Jew and practiced Judaism all His earthly life. Christianity emerged as a separate religion after large numbers of non-Jews had become Christians. The Jewish Scripture had predicted the coming of a savior, the Messiah (meaning "anointed one" or "chosen one"), and Jesus fulfilled that role. So it is natural that Christians would keep the Jewish Scripture as part of their Bible.

The Old Testament is made of a collection of smaller books that tell us of the creation of the world and of God's greatest treasure, Man. It tells the story of God's chosen people, the Hebrews, who were later known as Israelites or Jews. Sometime around 1800 B.C., God made a covenant (or pact) with a man named Abraham to make of him a great nation. The first few of these descendants migrated to Egypt to escape a famine in their own land. After many generations they had greatly increased their numbers but had become enslaved to the Egyptians. God sent a great leader and prophet, Moses, to lead the Hebrews out of captivity and into the Promised Land of Israel. During this time God gave Moses the Ten Commandments which are still considered the basis for a moral life by both Jews and Christians. God also gave many other laws about circumcision, dietary restrictions, blood sacrifices, Sabbath observance, giving money, social welfare, crimes, social behavior, armies, qualifications of leaders, etc. These laws regulated almost every aspect of Hebrew life.

God intended for the Israelites to live according to His commandments and to show the truth of God to all the world. However, again and again, the Israelites lost sight of their mission and fell into idolatry and sin. On these occasions, God called prophets, who were men who spoke God's words, to lead them back to the right way. The Old Testament writings don't hide the fact that the Israelites and their leaders had many failings and flaws. Yet, through these flawed people, God was able to accomplish His purposes in the world.

The later Hebrew prophets foresaw the coming of a Messiah, a king who would usher in a golden era of peace and prosperity. More than any other nation, the Israelites looked to the future, to the coming of the Messiah, and to the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to make of his descendants a great nation.

The New Testament

The New Testament contains the sacred books that are unique to Christianity. All the New Testament books were written in the Greek language over the period of about 50 to 120 A.D. None of the New Testament books were originally written as part of a Christian Bible, but they were read at church services for instruction in the faith.

The New Testament tells of Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection, the growth of the early Christian Church, and predictions of the return of Jesus. It is called the New Testament because it tells us of how Jesus came to give us what the Old Testament couldn't. He came to live inside of our hearts, so that we can truly know Him and His wonderful life. He came to give us the ability to do what He tells us to do. He came to pour His love into us, so that we can love Him and others with real love.

Jesus was born sometime between 6 and 4 B.C. in the city of Bethlehem, and He was destined from birth to fulfill the role of Messiah or Christ (the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word "messiah"). He lived a quiet life for 30 years, and then He began His ministry among the Jews. He began to travel from town to town, healing the sick and preaching about the coming kingdom of God. He taught that God's kingdom is a spiritual kingdom that is to be inward, in our hearts, and not made of armies and governments and other outward things, and that it will find its fulfillment when God rules as King and defeats all evil. Jesus said He will come again someday to bring God's kingdom to fulfillment. He promised a wonderful eternal life after death for those who put their trust in Him, are washed from their sins, are filled with His new life in their hearts, and live a new life of obedience and love by the ability that He gives them.

Many religious leaders in Israel saw Jesus as a threat. They began to lose their political power because Jesus was loved by so many people who followed Him. Soon the leaders hated Jesus and decided to find a way to kill Him. They convinced the Roman government to put Jesus to death. He was executed by the painful death of crucifixion only three years after He had begun His ministry.

But three days after His death, Jesus' body was discovered missing from the tomb, and over the next 40 days many people saw Him alive again because He miraculously rose from the dead, and He talked with His disciples. At the end of 40 days, He rose up to heaven, returning to God, His Father.

Jesus' miraculous resurrection convinced many people that He truly was the Christ, and their personal savior as well. Christianity was born, and Jesus' former disciples became its leaders. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus is portrayed as the Son of God, the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah, and as the means of our personal salvation from the power of sin and death.

The first Christians suffered much persecution from the Jewish religious establishment and from the Roman Empire. But it did not stop them from living for Jesus and loving Him with all their hearts. Many people became Christians, first in Israel and then throughout Europe, Asia and the world.

Books of the Old Testament

The Old Testament contains three sections: historical books, wisdom literature, and books of prophecy. **Genesis** means "beginnings" and is the first book of the Bible. It tells of the creation of the world and of man, God's greatest treasure. **Exodus** and **Numbers** tell the story of Moses, who led the Hebrews out of captivity in Egypt around 1300 B.C. They wandered for forty years in the desert before arriving at their Promised Land. During the time in the desert, God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. **Leviticus** and **Deuteronomy** discuss the relationship between God and His chosen people, the Hebrews. They also give details of the Law that regulated almost every aspect of Hebrew life.

After conquering the land of Israel, the tribes of Israel were ruled by a series of judges for a time. Then, in the eleventh century B.C., came the monarchy with Kings Saul, David, Solomon and several other kings. Israel suffered a number of military defeats clearly because of their sins against God. Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 B.C. and many captives were taken away to Babylon. Eventually, the people were allowed to return and rebuild Jerusalem and their civilization.

Psalms is a collection of the heart-felt songs of King David. **Proverbs** contain many sayings of practical wisdom to help live a happy, successful and holy life. **Job** and **Ecclesiastes** deal with the weightier issues of the meaning of life, the existence of evil and our relationship to God. **Song of Solomon** is a love song glorifying romantic love between a man and woman, and is an allegory showing the love of Jesus for His spiritual Bride, the Church.

The prophetic books were written by prophets who were called by God to give predictions, messages and warnings to kings, other leaders and the people. Prophecy means speaking the mind of God. Some prophecies predict the future. Others are special messages of instruction or warning from God.

Books of the New Testament

The four Gospels, which means "Good News" tell of the birth, life, ministry, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. **Matthew, Mark and Luke** are very similar. The Gospel of **John** is quite different. It is much more of a spiritual work, although it also tells many of the same stories as the other three Gospels. **Acts of the Apostles** is a sequel to the Gospel of **Luke**, written by the same author. It tells the history of the first 30 years of the Christian Church.

Following the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, there is a collection of letters from the leaders who were the first followers of Jesus. All of the New Testament letters were originally written to encourage, instruct and correct the early Christians. These letters from Christian leaders were circulated among the various Christian communities and read at their meetings. Throughout the letters we see the need to put our faith and trust in Christ and to put that faith into action through Christian love (kindness and respect) for all people.

Revelation is the last book of the Bible. It is also a letter, but also tells a story through symbols, images and numbers about the end of the world. Revelation offers comfort and encouragement to Christians of all ages that God is firmly in control. When the time is right, the forces of evil that seem to dominate our world will be utterly destroyed, and God's eternal kingdom will come into its fulfillment.