

Bible overview

John Dra ne, author of many books on the Bible and contemporary spirituality, explains the background to the Bible and looks at how it has developed into its current format.

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The Bible is not just one book, but an entire library, with stories, songs, poetry, letters and history, as well as literature that might more obviously qualify as 'religious'. The Christian Bible has two main sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is the original Hebrew Bible, the sacred scriptures of the Jewish faith, written at different times between about 1200 and 165 BCE. The New Testament books were written by Christians in the first century CE.

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The Hebrew Bible has 39 books, written over a long period of time, and is the literary archive of the ancient nation of Israel. It was traditionally arranged in three sections:

The Law: the first five books, Genesis to Deuteronomy. They are not 'law' in a modern Western sense; Genesis is a book of stories, with nothing remotely like rules and regulations, and though the other four do contain community laws they also have many narratives. The Hebrew word for Law ('Torah') means 'guidance' or 'instruction', and that could include stories offering everyday examples of how people were meant to live as well as legal requirements. These books were later called the 'Pentateuch', and tradition attributed them to Moses. Some parts undoubtedly date from that period, but as things changed old laws were updated and new ones produced, and this was the work of later editors over several centuries.

The Prophets is the largest section of the Hebrew Bible, and has two parts ('former prophets' and 'latter prophets'). The books of 'latter prophets' preserve sayings and stories of religious and political activists ('prophets') who served as the spiritual conscience of the nation throughout its history, reminding people of the social values that would reflect the character of God. Some books are substantial (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), others are much shorter (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi). Sometimes, the prophets could be mime artists and dramatists, accompanying their actions by short spoken messages, often delivered in poetic form. These were the sound bites of their day, which made it easy for others to remember them and then write them down.

The 'former prophets' consist of Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings. They are history books, but what makes them also 'prophets' is that they not only record information, they interpret it, explaining its significance in relation to other events in the history of Israel, and of the wider world of their day.

The Writings include Psalms (songs, prayers and liturgies for worship), Proverbs (sayings of homespun wisdom), Job (a drama that explores the nature of suffering), plus the 'five scrolls' ('Megilloth') which were grouped together because each had associations with a particular religious festival: Ruth (the Jewish Feast of Weeks, also called Pentecost), Song of Solomon (Passover), Ecclesiastes (Tabernacles), Lamentations (Destruction of Jerusalem), and Esther (Purim). This section also includes the last books of the Hebrew Bible to be written: Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1-2 Chronicles (all history books), and Daniel (visions of a better world).

The New Testament has 27 books, written between about 50 and 100 CE, and falling naturally into two sections: the Gospels, which tell the story of Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John); and the Letters (or epistles) - written by various Christian leaders to provide guidance for the earliest church communities.

Letters were the natural way for itinerant church leaders to communicate with their converts, and the earliest ones were written before the Gospels. With some exceptions (Romans, Hebrews), they were not meant to be formal presentations of Christian belief, but offered advice to people who were working out how to express their commitment to Jesus in ways that would be relevant to the many different cultural contexts in which they found themselves throughout the Roman empire. Reading them can be like listening to one half of a conversation, as the writers give answers to questions sent to them either verbally or in writing. Paul was the most prolific writer of such letters, though he was not the only one.

The Gospels were written to present the life and teachings of Jesus in ways that would be appropriate to different readerships, and for that reason are not all the same. They were not intended to be biographies of Jesus, but selective accounts that would demonstrate his significance for different cultures. The first three are effectively different editions of the same materials, and for that reason are known as the 'synoptic gospels'. The writer of Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, which tells the story of how Christianity spread from being a small group of Jewish believers in the time of Jesus to becoming a worldwide faith in less than a generation. The New Testament concludes with the book of Revelation, which begins with a series of letters to seven churches in the area of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), but then offers a visionary presentation of the meaning of all things, from creation to the end of the world.

The sheer diversity of literature in the Bible is one of the secrets of its continuing popularity through the centuries. There is something for all moods and many different cultures. Its message is not buried in religious jargon only accessible to either believers or scholars, but reflects the issues that people struggle with in daily life. Despite their different emphases, all its authors shared the conviction that this world and its affairs are not just a haphazard sequence of random coincidences, but are the forum of God's activity - a God who (unlike the God of the philosophers) is not remote or unknowable, but a personal being who can be known by ordinary people.