

# Guide to the Bible

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*"The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written."*

- Confession of 1967 of the Presbyterian Church (USA)

## What is the Bible?

- The Bible is not one book. It's sixty-six different works of literature, written in many different genres, written by dozens of authors over the course of centuries. But for Christians, together the Bible is meant to tell a story: the story of the good news of Jesus Christ.

- Christianity is not based on the Bible. Christianity is based on good news of Jesus Christ, and the Bible is a *canon*— a *measuring stick*— the way we, as the church, measure our faithfulness to the good news of Jesus Christ.

- Both the Old Testament and the New Testament give witness to the good news of Jesus Christ: the New Testament is the written testimony of Christ's earliest followers. Christ identified himself as the continuation of the Old Testament's story and the fulfillment of Old Testament promises.

- The doctrine of Biblical Inspiration say the Bible is inspired by God, meaning that through the Spirit of God at work through the authors and the church, the Bible is a trustworthy witness to good news of Jesus Christ.

- The doctrine of Sola Scriptura says that because the Bible is inspired by God, Bible alone includes everything we need to know about the good news of Jesus Christ.

## Five Basic Rules for Interpreting the Bible

I. Always Interpret the Bible in Community. Everyone has the ability to interpret the Bible, but God gives us one another so that we might challenge each other, support each other, and grow together

in our faith. Therefore, decisions about what the Bible means should always be made in community with other Christians.

2. Always Interpret the Bible with the good news of Jesus Christ in mind. For Christians the Bible is meant to tell a specific story, the story of Jesus Christ, through whom God and humankind are reconciled. We should remember and consider this greater story when interpreting the Bible.

3. Always consider the literary context of the Bible passage: When interpreting the Bible we should always ask: who wrote the passage? Why did they write it? What genre did they write it in? Who did they write it too? Did they borrow from any other Bible passage?

4. Always consider the historical context of the Bible passage: The Bible was written thousands of years ago in places thousands of miles away. So when interpreting the Bible, we should always ask: when was the passage written? What was the world like when it was written? How is the world different today, and how might that change our understanding of what the passage has to say? What might we be missing in the passage?

5. Don't be afraid to struggle with the Bible. The Bible includes some very difficult stories and teachings, and we shouldn't be afraid to struggle with these parts of the Bible. If we never question our faith, then it never becomes our own faith. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions of the Bible. But also don't feel like struggling with something the Bible says means you have to give it all up.

## Different Bible Translations

The Bible was originally written in Hebrew and Greek, which means any Bible we use in English is a translation. Translating a text is hard work, and often, different translators come to different conclusions about how passages should be translated. There are a variety of Bible translations out there, and some are better than others.

For easy reading and understanding, we recommend the **Common English Bible (CEB)**, translated in 2011. This is a translation that is good for reading in worship. The **New International Version (NIV)**, translated in 1978 is another, a less direct and easy-to-read translation like the CEB, but does not use gender-inclusive language.

For more in-depth Bible Study, we recommend more direct translation, like the **New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)** from 1989, or the **Jewish Publication Society (JPS)** translation of the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew term for the Old Testament. These are the translations that are most often

used in academic settings. The **English Standard Version (ESV)** from 2001 is also a good direct translation, but unlike the NRSV, it does not use gender-inclusive language.

The **Message** is a creative paraphrasing of the Bible completed by pastor Eugene Peterson in 2002. It uses fresh, poetic and modern language, but is best used in comparison to a direct translation. While the **King James Version (KJV)** from 1611 is a historically significant translation, it can be difficult to understand and we have much more accurate translations available today.

## The Old Testament

The Old Testament is made up of 39 different books, originally written in Hebrew between around 900 BCE and 300 BCE. These books were written by the ancient Israelites, and include folk stories, history, ancient laws, social commentary, words of wisdom, words of prophesy, prayers and songs. Together, these books document the story of the Israelites, who believed they were God's chosen people, and seek to answer the question, "What does it mean to be the People of God?"

The first eleven books of the Old Testament form one long story about the people of Israel, sometimes called the *Great History*. The first five books of the Bible are called the *Torah* or the *Pentateuch*. Together they tell the story of how the people of Israel came to be and how they came to be God's chosen people. **Genesis** tells a story about how the world and humankind came to be, and tell the story of Israel's forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. **Exodus** tells the story of how the Moses people of Israel came to escape slavery in Egypt. **Leviticus, Numbers** and **Deuteronomy** all continue the story of Moses and the Israelites explain the law— handed down to Moses by God.

The story of Israel continues with the book of **Joshua**, which tells how the Israelites came to conquer the holy land God had promised to them, and with **Judges**, that tells about the period after the conquest, when the people of Israel were ruled by a system of judges. **I & II Samuel** and **I & II Kings** chronicle the history of Israel's kings, including Saul, David and Solomon and their descendants. They also chronicle the history of some of Israel's great prophets, including Samuel and Elijah. These books tell about the rise of Israelites' first kings, about the building of God's temple, about how the Israelites came to split into two kingdoms—Israel in the north and Judah in the south— about how the Kingdom of Israel fell, and finally about how the Kingdom of Judah came to be conquered and exiled from the promised land by the Babylonian Empire. Together these eleven books make up the *Great History*.

The books of **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** continue this story of the *Great History*, giving the history of the Jews return to the promise land after the Babylonian exile and the rebuilding of the temple. **I & II Chronicles** retell the same long story as the *Great History*, only from a different perspective. The book of **Ruth** tells a side story to the *Great History* that takes place during the period of the Judges, and the book of **Ester** tells a side story to the *Great History* that takes place after the Babylonian Exile.

The books of **Jeremiah, Isaiah, Daniel** and **Ezekiel** are often called the *Major Prophets*, and are all writings by and stories about great prophets of Israel. A prophet is someone who is called to speak words of warning and hope on God's behalf, often about specific situations. The books of **Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah** and **Malachi** are also writings by and stories about prophets. These twelve books are much shorter, and are often called the *Minor Prophets*.

The book of **Psalms** is a collection of ancient poetry and songs of the people of Israel. **Lamentations** is an ancient work of poetry regarding anger and sadness surrounding the Babylonian Exile. **Song of Songs** is an ancient work of poetry about romantic love. The Book of **Job** is an ancient hebrew folk story about what suffering happens to good people, and **Ecclesiastes** is an ancient hebrew sermon that reflects on life's meaning and purpose.

## Some Major Old Testament Figures

**Adam & Eve** are the first two human beings. They disobey God and eat of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. **Cain & Abel** are the children of Adam & Eve. Cain murders his brother Abel in jealousy. **Noah** builds a great boat at God's command to harbor all the animals of the world during a God-sent worldwide flood.

God makes a covenant with **Abraham** and promises to make in the father of a great nation who will be God's chosen people. **Isaac** is Abraham's son, born to Abraham and his wife **Sarah** in old age. **Jacob & Esau** are Isaac's sons, who feud with one another over who get's Isaac's inheritance. Jacob eventually changes his name to Israel, and has twelve sons, each of whom become the patriarch of one of the twelve tribes of Israel, including his youngest son **Joseph**.

Starting in Exodus, **Moses** becomes the leader of the Israelites. He leads them out of slavery in Egypt and is given God's law as the Israelites wander through the desert for forty years. **Joshua**, in the book named after him, leads the Israelites to conquer the promised land.

**Samuel** is a prophet of God who is tasked with finding and anointing Israel's first king, **Saul**, and later anoints Israel's second and greatest king, **David**, who founds the city of Jerusalem, and whose descendants would rule as King for centuries to come. David's son **Solomon** builds a temple to God in Jerusalem. After the Kingdom of Israel splits into two— Israel and Judah— **Elijah** becomes an important prophet, speaking out against idolators.

## The New Testament

The New Testament is made up of 27 books that were originally written in Greek from between around 50 CE and 100 CE. Within these books are early christian histories, letters written to different churches and church leaders, and early christian sermons. The New Testament presents itself as a continuation of the Old Testament's story. Together, these books continue to ask the same question as the Old Testament— "What does it mean to be the people of God?"— by also asking "Who is Jesus Christ and what does he mean for the world?"

The first four books of the New Testament are *Gospels*, books that tell about the life, teachings, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The first three gospels are often called *Synoptic Gospels*, because they are very similar. The Gospel of **Matthew** includes Jesus' famous "sermon on the mount." The Gospel of **Mark** contains fewer of Jesus' teachings and more stories about Jesus' healings and miracles. The Gospel of **Luke** includes more stories about Jesus interacting with women, the poor and the oppressed. The fourth gospel— Gospel of **John**— shares a number of stories about Jesus' life and teachings, some of which are not found in the other three gospels, and puts a greater emphasis on Jesus' divinity.

The **Acts of the Apostles** was written as a sequel to the Gospel of Luke by the same author. It gives the history of the early Christian church after Jesus' death and resurrection. It focuses on early leaders of the church, including Jesus' disciple Peter, Jesus' brother James, and the apostle Paul.

**Romans, I & II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians,** and **I & II Thessalonians** are all letters written by the apostle Paul to various early Christian churches throughout the ancient world. The letters of Paul are the oldest Christian writings we have. **Philemon, I & II Timothy** and **Titus** are all letters written either by Paul or on Paul's behalf to other early Christian leaders.

**Hebrews** and **James** are two ancient Christian sermons. **I & II Peter** were letters written on the apostle Peter's behalf. **I, II & III John** are all letters written by the same author of the Gospel of John. Finally, **Revelation** is the last book of the Bible, and recalls a highly symbolic vision of an early Christian prophet named John the elder.

## Major New Testament Figures

**Jesus** was a Jewish carpentry worker turned leader of an underground religious movement from Galilee, just to the north of Judah. He lived as a servant to others and taught the world about the coming of the Kingdom of God. The New Testament teaches that he was God in the flesh, fully human and fully divine; and that he was crucified by the authorities and was resurrected from the dead three days later. For Christians, Jesus is the central figure of both the New Testament and the entire Bible, and the very basis of the Christian faith.

Jesus was born to a virgin named **Mary**. He was baptized by a Jewish prophet named **John the Baptist**. He gathered a following of disciples, many of whom were fishermen, like **Simon Peter**, and the brothers **James & John**. Jesus' followers also included women, like **Mary Magdalene**, who was the first person to discover and witness Jesus risen from the dead. Jesus was crucified under **Pontius Pilate**, a Roman governor of Judea. Along with Peter and John, **James the Just** was a brother of Jesus' who would become an important leader in the early church. **Paul**, who was converted in a vision of Jesus, was another important leader in the early church, who would write letters to Gentile Churches across the ancient world. Finally **John the Elder** was an early Christian prophet who wrote about his visions in the book of Revelation.

## Three Tips for Reading Through the Bible

1. It's best to start first with the New Testament, and then read the Old Testament, and then read the New Testament again. The Old Testament is much longer than the New Testament, you don't start with the New Testament, it's almost like reading a book where the main character (Jesus) doesn't show up until three-fourths of the way through!

2. Don't get bogged down. In lots of places, the Bible has long lists of genealogies and ancient legal codes. It can get easy to get lost in these long passages. If it's your first time reading through, don't be afraid to skip ahead!

3. We recommend starting with the Gospel of John, followed by the Gospel of Luke, followed by the Acts of the Apostles, followed by Paul's letter to the Romans.