

Most Christians can trace their spiritual growth back to the time they began to read their Bible. To many, the Bible can be kind of intimidating. Understanding how the Bible is organized and why it was written will help increase our desire to get to know God through His written word to us.

Structure

The Bible divides into two basic sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament. Testament is another word for covenant or promise. Thus, the Bible is a book about God's promises to us. The bulk of the Old Testament primarily covers a period of time from about 2500 BC to 400 BC. It specifically focuses on God's interactions with the Hebrew people. There are 39 books, or sections written by a number of different authors. The New Testament has 27 books, which were all written between about AD 40 and AD 90. They focus on the life, ministry, and ultimate effect of Jesus Christ.

Let's first look at the Old Testament.

- Divides into 3 sections: law, poetry, prophets
- History (Genesis to Esther): contains a history of the Hebrew (Jewish) people and it is for the most part chronological
- Poetry (Job to Song of Solomon): contains poetic prose teaching, sometimes composed in the form of a song as in the book of Psalms, sometimes in statements of wisdom as in the book of Proverbs, most of this section was written during King David and Solomon's lifetime approximately 1000 BC.
- Prophets (Isaiah to Malachi): contains writings of the prophets. They wrote much, including teachings on righteousness and calling for repentance. Their message primarily targeted two major catastrophes in Israel's history. In 722 BC, Israel's Northern Kingdom was destroyed by Assyria, and then in 586 BC, Babylon attacked and captured the Southern Kingdom (Judah or Jerusalem). These events were incredibly significant in the lives of God's people. By and large the prophets wrote to warn of or explain these events. Some even predicted the end of these historical events and the return of the Jewish people to Israel. Some also predicted the coming of the Messiah (Jesus). The final prophet, Malachi, wrote about 400 BC and then there was silence until Jesus' arrival.

Let's now look at the New Testament.

- Also divides into 3 major sections: history, epistles/letters, prophesy
- History: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John (known as the Gospels), and the book of Acts. These all record the life and teachings of Jesus as well as the history of the early church led by the apostles after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.
- Epistles/letters (Romans to Jude): letters written by early church leaders to various congregations or individuals. These contain teaching, encouragement, and historical insight into some of the problems encountered in the early church that are all still very relevant today.

- Prophecy (Revelation): The book of Revelation is primarily about Jesus' second coming when He will gather His followers, whether living or previously deceased.

Here's a short quiz about the previous section:

What does the word testament mean? _____

During what time frame does the Old Testament take place? _____

How many books are in the Old Testament? _____

During what time frame does the New Testament take place? _____

How many books are found in the New Testament? _____

Unique in Character

There has never been a book in history written like the Bible. Here are a few examples that make it so unique compared to other written works in history.

- Time span: the Bible was composed over approximately 1,300-1,500 years (roughly 1400 BC to 1st century AD)
- Geographical production: the books didn't arise from a single region in the ancient world, rather it was written by peoples from regions as diverse as Rome in the West, Egypt in the South, and Mesopotamia in the East
- Authorship: approximately 40 different authors ranging in background from kings (David, Solomon), fishermen (Peter, John), military leaders (Joshua), tax collector (Matthew), physician (Luke), and a zealous religious leader (Paul).
- Languages: originally written in 3 different languages Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek
- Circulation and Translation: as of 2014, the Bible or portions of it has been translated into 2,883 languages
- Survival and Resiliency: in history, both ancient and modern there have been attempts to completely eradicate the Bible but to no avail

How We Got the Bible

This is a very brief description of a robust topic of how certain writings were chosen to be included in the Bible we now possess today.

- The term canon is derived from Greek, and it means "measuring rod," "standard," or "norm." Canon is used to describe the authoritative list of books that the church acknowledged as sacred Scripture.
- The marks of canonicity included:
 - *Apostolic authorship or approval* – an example of apostolic authorship would be the Gospel of Matthew which was written by the apostle Matthew. An example of apostolic approval would be the Book of Acts, written by Luke, who was not one

of the apostles, but worked closely with the apostle Paul as well as the other apostles in writing both books.

- *Recognized as authoritative within the early church* – The writings of the early church fathers (disciples of the apostles) have been studied to see which books or letters were referenced in their writings, indicating what was being taught to early Christians. A few of these early church fathers would be Polycarp (AD115), Clement of Alexandria (AD 200), Justin Martyr (AD 100-165), and Irenaeus (AD 180).
 - AD 180 - Irenaeus's writings attest to 20 books of the current NT canon
 - AD 249 - Origen in his writings includes almost all 27 books.
 - AD 367 - Athanasius of Alexandria included a list of NT books identical to our current canon in a letter to the churches at the time.
 - AD 393 - a church council, the Synod of Hippo, reaffirmed all 27 books again without change. There has been no serious questioning of the 27 since that time.
- *Harmony with the books that were undoubtedly part of the Canon (OT and the NT Gospels would be examples)* – God cannot contradict Himself (2 Cor. 1:17,18) or lie (Heb. 6:18). Knowing this the church fathers establishing the canon used this principle in deciding what include or not include.

Is the Bible We Have Accurate With the Original Writings and History

This is again a very brief description of a robust topic. We will only touch on the New Testament.

- Number of Ancient manuscripts: There have been approximately 15,000-20,000 texts of the ancient versions of the New Testament catalogued. The number of surviving ancient manuscripts for Plato is only around 200! If placed in a stack this would be almost 1 mile high just for the New Testament. The average from a writer from the same time period is about 4 feet high.
- The earliest dating for some of the Greek manuscripts is dated as early as AD 130. This is less than 100 years after the apostles were alive!
- Non-Christian historians support many of the historical references and events of the Bible
- Archeological evidence also supports the historical accuracy of the Bible

Here's a short quiz about the previous 3 sections:

Roughly how many authors wrote the Bible? _____

What are the 3 marks of Canonicity?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

As a body of evidence for the New Testament, how many ancient version texts have been catalogued? _____

Summary

- We learned about the basic structure of the Bible, its uniqueness, how we got the Bible, and that it is reliable from a translational and historical perspective.
- Make a commitment to start spending time daily in the Word. Start with 10-15 minutes.
- A great place to start reading would be in one of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John).
- YouVersion is a Bible app that you can download to your phone or tablet. It has multiple Bible translations available as well as daily verses and reading plans. The ESV or the NIV are good translations to begin with if you don't know where to begin.

Memorize: 2 Timothy 3: 16