

QUESTION 1

What Is the Bible?

Most people who pick up this book will be familiar with the Bible. Yet, I am including this first, basic question for two reasons: (1) There will be some people who happen upon this book who have little to no knowledge of the Christian Scriptures. If that describes you, there is no better place to start than right here. (2) Even people who have spent many years reading the Bible can benefit from returning to the fundamentals. It is my hope that the answer below will be understandable to people ignorant of the Bible but not so simplistic as to be of no benefit to those already well versed in the Christian Scriptures.

Overview of the Bible

The Bible is a collection of writings that Christians consider uniquely inspired and authoritative. While it is one unified book, the Bible is also a compilation of sixty-six smaller books, or literary works. These works, produced by men of various historical time periods, backgrounds, personalities, and cultures, claim the Holy Spirit as the ultimate authority and safeguard behind their writing. As 2 Timothy 3:16 asserts, “All Scripture is God-breathed.”

The Bible can be divided into two large sections—the Old Testament and the New Testament. The word *testament* comes from the Latin word *testamentum*, meaning “covenant” or “agreement.” Thus, in its basic division, the Bible records two covenantal relationships between God and humanity. The first (old) covenant relationship was ratified at Mount Sinai between God and the Jewish nation (Exod. 19–31). This covenant was anticipatory and pointed to a new covenant, promised in Jeremiah 31:31, when God would draw a people to himself from all nations and write his words on their hearts (Isa. 49:6). In fact, this new covenant was in reality nothing other than a fulfillment of the many saving promises God had made throughout history—that Satan would be crushed by a human descendent of Eve (Gen. 3:15), that through Abraham’s offspring all the nations of the world would be blessed (Gen. 22:18), etc.

Within the Old Testament are thirty-nine books of various genres (historical narratives, proverbs, poetry, psalms, etc.). The New Testament contains twenty-seven books, again made up of various literary types (historical narratives, letters, parables, etc.) See question 2 for more information on the organization of the Bible (that is, order of books, origin of chapter and verse divisions, etc.). Also, see the latter half of this book for interpretive approaches to specific biblical genres.

The Purpose of the Bible

The Bible itself is evidence of one of its main claims—that is, that the God who made the heavens, earth, and sea, and everything in them is a communicator who delights to reveal himself to wayward humans. We read in Hebrews 1:1–2, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.”

These verses in Hebrews point to the culmination of biblical revelation in the eternal Son of God. This Son became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, forever uniting God and man in one person—100 percent God and 100 percent man (John 1:14). The prophecies, promises, longings, and anticipations under the old covenant find their fulfillment, meaning, and culmination in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:20, “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ.”

The purpose of the Bible, then, is “to make [a person] wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). The Bible is not an end in itself. As Jesus said to the religious experts in his day, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39). So, under divine superintendence, the goal of the Bible is to bring its readers to receive the forgiveness of God in Christ and thus to possession of eternal life in relationship with the triune God (John 17:3).

Basic Story Line of the Bible

The Bible explains the origin of the universe (God made everything, Gen. 1–2). The Bible also reveals why there is sin, disease, and death (humans rebelled against God and brought sin and decay into the world, Gen. 3:1–24). And, the Bible promises that God will send a Messiah (Jesus) who will defeat death and Satan and ultimately renew all things (Gen. 3:15; Rev. 22:1–5).

God prepared for the coming of this Messiah by focusing his revelatory and saving work on the descendants of Abraham—that is, the Israelites or the Jews. Even as God gave his holy laws and sent his prophets to the one nation Israel, it was clear that he planned a worldwide blessing flowing forth from the Jews at a future time. God promised Abraham, “*All peoples on earth will be blessed through you*” (Gen. 12:3, my emphasis). Likewise,

in the book of Isaiah, we read of God speaking prophetically to the coming Messiah: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. *I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth*” (Isa. 49:6, my emphasis). According to the Bible, Jesus has now inaugurated this worldwide salvation, which will be consummated at his return. While all persons are justly condemned under God’s holy wrath, Jesus’ death on the cross provides forgiveness for those who trust in him. A person becomes a part of God’s people—a subject of King Jesus’ domain—by turning away from his rebellion and trusting in the Savior’s substitutionary death for his sin. As we read in John 3:36, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”

The consummation of God’s salvation is yet to be revealed. The Bible teaches that Jesus certainly will come again (1 Thess. 4:13–18). While scholars debate some of the specifics concerning Jesus’ return, the Scriptures are clear that death and sin (now already defeated by the cross) then will be done away with forever (Rev. 20:14–21:4). All who have received God’s forgiveness in Christ will dwell with God forever in endless joy (John 14:2–3; 17:24). Those who have remained in rebellion against God will not be given a postmortem, second chance at repentance; they will be punished through eternal separation from God (John 3:36; Matt. 25:46).

Functions of the Bible

Under the overarching purpose of revealing God and bringing people into a saving relationship with him through Jesus Christ, there are a number of related functions of the Bible, including the following.

- *Conviction of Sin.* The Holy Spirit applies God’s Word to the human heart, convicting people of having failed to meet God’s holy standard and convincing them of their just condemnation and need for a Savior (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 3:22–25; Heb. 4:12–13).
- *Correction and Instruction.* The Bible corrects and instructs God’s people, teaching them who God is, who they are, and what God expects of them. Both through a believer’s individual study and through the church’s gifted teachers, God edifies and corrects his people (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 119:98–99; Matt. 7:24–27; 1 Cor. 10:11; Eph. 4:11–12; 2 Tim. 3:16; 4:1–4).
- *Spiritual Fruitfulness.* As the Word of God takes deep root in true believers, it produces a harvest of righteousness—a genuine manifestation of love for God and love for others (Mark 4:1–20; James 1:22–25).

- *Perseverance.* Empowered by the Holy Spirit, believers hold fast to the saving message of the Scriptures through the trials and temptations of life. Through this perseverance, they gain increasing confidence in God's promise to keep them until the end (John 10:28–29; 1 Cor. 15:2; 2 Cor. 13:5; Gal. 3:1–5; Phil. 1:6; Col. 1:23; 1 Tim. 3:13; 1 John 2:14).
- *Joy and Delight.* To those who know God, the Bible is a source of unending joy and delight. As Psalm 19:9–10 attests, “The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.”
- *Ultimate Authority in Doctrine and Deed.* The Bible is the ultimate authority for the Christian in terms of behavior and belief (Luke 10:26; 24:44–45; John 10:35; 2 Tim. 3:16; 4:1–4; 2 Peter 3:16). The correctness of all preaching, creeds, doctrines, or opinions is decisively settled by this question: What does the Bible say? As John Stott notes, “Scripture is the royal scepter by which King Jesus governs his church.”¹

Chronology of the Bible's Composition

The first five books in the Old Testament, the books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), most likely were written around 1400 B.C.² As the books describe events from thousands of years prior, however, it is almost certain that many oral and written sources underlie our current text. Of course, Moses' selection or editing of such sources took place under God's superintendence. The last book in the Old Testament, Malachi, was written around 430 B.C. So, the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament were composed more than a thousand-year span by about forty different authors. (Some books in the Old Testament were written by the same author—Jeremiah and Lamentations, for example. Other books, such as 1 and 2 Kings, do not explicitly cite an author. Still other books, such as the Psalms or Proverbs, cite multiple authors for various portions.) The Old Testament was written in Hebrew with a few small portions in Aramaic (Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26; Dan. 2:4b–7:28; Jer. 10:11).³

The first book of the New Testament (possibly James or Galatians) likely was written in A.D. mid- to late 40s. Most of the books in the New Testament were written in the 50s and 60s. The last book of the New Testament, the book of Revelation, also called the Apocalypse of John, probably was written

1. John R. W. Stott, *John Stott on the Bible and the Christian Life: Six Sessions on the Authority, Interpretation, and Use of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006). The quote is from the first DVD lecture, “The Authority of Scripture.”

2. Some scholars think Job predates the books of Moses.

3. Also, two words in Genesis 31:47 are in Aramaic—*Jegar-sahadutha* (“heap of witness”).

around A.D. 90. The New Testament was written in Greek, the *lingua franca* of its day, though it contains a few transliterated Aramaic and Latin words.

FIGURE 1: TIME LINE OF BIBLICAL EVENTS AND BOOKS	
Adam and Eve	<i>l.t.a.</i> ⁴
Noah	<i>l.t.a.</i>
The calling of Abraham	2000 B.C.
The exodus	1446 B.C. (first books of the Bible written by Moses)
The monarchy begins	1050 B.C. (God chooses Saul)
King David	1010–970 B.C.
King Solomon	970–930 B.C.
The divided kingdom	931 B.C. (Israel and Judah divided)
The Assyrian exile	722 B.C. (destruction of Samaria)
The Babylonian exile	586 B.C. (destruction of Jerusalem)
The Persian period	537 B.C. (return of Jews under Cyrus)
Second temple finished	515 B.C.
Nehemiah/Ezra	mid-400s B.C.
Malachi (last Old Testament book)	430 B.C.
Intertestamental period	430 B.C.–A.D. 45
Jesus' birth	7–4 B.C.
Jesus' ministry	A.D. 27–30
Jesus' crucifixion	A.D. 30
First New Testament book(s) written	A.D. 45
Revelation written	A.D. 90 (last book of the New Testament)

4. *L.t.a.* stands for “long time ago.” While I believe that Adam and Eve were historical persons, I will not venture to guess the year that God created them. It was (we can all agree) a long time ago.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is one new thing that you learned about the Bible? (Or, possibly note a previously known fact that struck you afresh.)
2. One purpose of the Bible is to bring persons into a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Has that purpose been accomplished in your life? How do you know?
3. How would you rank your knowledge of the Bible on a scale of 1 to 10? How did you learn about the Bible? (Or, why do you not know much about the Bible?)
4. Have you read the entire Bible? If not, consider committing to do so over the next year.
5. Do you have a general question about the Bible that this section failed to answer? What is it?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

The Bible. (There is no better way to learn about the Bible than to read it for yourself. See question 7 for suggestions of which English translation to read.)

Carson, D. A. *For the Love of God: A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God's Word*. Vols. 1 and 2. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998, 1999. (These devotional books include one-page readings for each day and a Bible-reading plan that takes you through the Old Testament once and the New Testament twice in one year. Carson's writing is faithful and insightful, though challenging for persons with little biblical knowledge.)