

Structure of the Bible

The Bible is divided into two sections: The Old Testament, which consists of 39 individual “books”, and The New Testament, which consists of 27 individual “books”. The Old Testament takes us from Creation to Christ and covers the period from “the beginning” to roughly 400 years before the birth of Christ. It also includes many prophecies fulfilled in the New Testament. The New Testament covers the time from Christ’s birth to the prophesied end of times. The Bible is not one document but rather 66 documents, with the first attempt at compiling them into a single presentation of God’s Word being made in 187 AD. This first compilation was known as the *Muratorian Canon*.

The Old Testament: The Nature of God and Establishment of His Law

TORAH	HISTORICAL	POETRY & WISDOM	MAJOR PROPHETS	MINOR PROPHETS
The first 5 books of the Old Testament (the Torah or Pentateuch) tell of Creation, the delivery of the Jewish people to their Promised Land, and the establishment of the Jewish Law (God’s Law).	These 12 books detail the history of the Jewish people from approximately 1300 BC to roughly 400 BC.	These 5 books of poetry and wisdom demonstrate how the Jewish people expressed themselves to God and to each other. Their shared wisdom is still applicable today.	The 5 books of the Major Prophets (“Major” describing book length, not quality) lay out warnings and prophecies aligned with the Word of God, including the coming of the Messiah.	The 12 Minor Prophets (“Minor” describing book length, not quality) lay out God’s Word of hope and promise to the Jewish people.
GENESIS	JOSHUA	JOB	ISAIAH	HOSEA
EXODUS	JUDGES	PSALMS	JEREMIAH	JOEL
LEVITICUS	RUTH	PROVERBS	EZEKIEL	AMOS
NUMBERS	1 SAMUEL	ECCLESIASTES	DANIEL	OBADIAH
DEUTERONOMY	2 SAMUEL	SONG OF SOLOMON		JONAH
	1 KINGS		*LAMENTATIONS	MICAH
	2 KINGS			NAHUM
	1 CHRONICLES		*While often included with the Major Prophets, Lamentations, is widely believed to be an addendum to Jeremiah	HABAKKUK
	2 CHRONICLES			ZEPHANIAH
	EZRA			HAGGAI
	NEHEMIAH			ZECHARIAH
	ESTER			MALACHI

Note: When you see a reference like Genesis 1:2, this means the Book of Genesis, Chapter 1, Verse 2.

The New Testament: The Nature of Jesus Christ and His Teachings

GOSPELS & ACTS	PAUL’S EPISTLES (Letters)	GENERAL EPISTLES
The Gospels are personal and detailed accounts of Jesus’ 3+ year ministry throughout Jerusalem, Galilee, and the surrounding lands. Both Matthew and John physically accompanied Jesus throughout His ministry.	The Apostle Paul met the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus roughly two years after Jesus was crucified and resurrected, at which time Paul was converted from being a major persecutor of Christians to being one of the greatest proponents of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul spent time being mentored by Jesus (amount of time unknown) and went on three lengthy missions, enthusiastically spreading the Gospel. Paul started many Christian churches, and these epistles are letters to Pastors and members of some of those churches, as well as letters to his colleagues, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.	The 8 General Epistles were mostly written by the Apostles James, Peter, and John. They offer guidance, words of encouragement to early Christians who were being persecuted, and warnings of false prophets. Revelation was written by the Apostle John and describes the return of Christ and His final Judgement.
MATTHEW *	ROMANS	HEBREWS **
MARK	1 CORINTHIANS	JAMES **
LUKE	2 CORINTHIANS	1 PETER **
JOHN *	GALATIANS	2 PETER **
	EPHESIANS	1 JOHN
	PHILIPPIANS	2 JOHN
	COLOSSIANS	3 JOHN **
ACTS [Of the Apostles]		JUDE
		REVELATION

* Eyewitness Testimony
 ** Not included in the *Muratorian Canon* but were added in AD 363 by Council of Laodicea

The book of Revelation describes the 2nd coming of Christ and the prophesied end of times – dates for which are known only by God. It was confirmed as Holy Scripture in 393 AD (Council of Hippo).

The Old Testament

Books, primary writers and dates covered in the Old Testament include:

#	Section	Books	Attributed Writers	Approximate Dates
1.	Torah (Hebrew) Pentateuch (Greek) The 5 Books of Moses	Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy	Moses	From Creation to 1445 BC
2.	History of Israel after Moses	From Joshua through Esther (13 Books)	Joshua, Samuel, Ezra, Nehemiah	1405 BC to 450 BC
3.	Poetic Books	Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon (5 Books)	King David, Solomon, Moses, Asaph, Ethan, Agur, King Lemuel	1445 BC to 538 BC Job maybe 2000 BC
4.	Major Prophets	Isiah through Daniel (5 Books)	Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations (possibly part of Jeremiah), Ezekiel, Daniel	750 BC to 520 BC
5.	Minor Prophets	Hosea – Malachi (12 Books)	Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi	793 BC to 430 BC

The New Testament

The New Testament was written after Christ was crucified and consists of 27 “books” organized as follows:

#	Section	Books	Primary Writers	Dates Written	Description
1.	The Gospels (<i>Gospel</i> means “good news” in Greek)	Matthew Mark Luke John (4 Books)	Matthew, Mark, Luke & John	60 AD to 90 AD	Two of these Gospels (Matthew and John) are written <i>eyewitness</i> testimonies from two of the Apostles who actually walked with Christ during His 3+ year ministry. They describe the actual events of Christ’s ministry, His crucifixion and His resurrection. The remaining two Gospels (Mark and Luke) are biographies of Jesus Christ from learned men who ministered with, and knew quite well, many of the Apostles (especially Peter and Paul).
2.	Acts (Of the Apostles)	Acts (1 Book)	Luke	62 AD to 80 AD	This Book covers the activities of the Apostles from 30 AD through the 60s AD. Acts serves as a bridge between the story of Jesus as told in the Gospels and the early life of Christ’s Church.
3.	Epistles (Letters from the Apostles)	Romans through Jude (21 Books)	13 by Paul, 3 by John, 2 by Peter, 1 by James, 1 by Jude, and 1 unknown (Hebrews)	49 AD to 92 AD	Epistles are letters from the Apostles and their close associates and describe the preaching of the Apostles that led to the spreading of Christ’s church throughout the land (Egypt, Syria, Iran, Greece, Rome, etc.)
4.	The Apocalypse (the End of Days)	The Book of Revelation (1 Book)	John	95 AD	The Apostle John’s prophecy (as told to him by Jesus in a revelation), recounts the time of tribulation and the Rapture of the Church, the Judgment Seat of Christ, the 2 nd coming of Christ physically to Earth, the Battle of Armageddon, the establishment of Christ’s millennial Kingdom on Earth, the Final Judgment Day (White Throne Judgment), and the creation of a new Earth and heaven.

Reading the Bible – What to Read First

While the Bible has the consistency of an historical timeline, we do not recommend reading the Bible from “front” to “back” or from the “beginning” to the “end” like you would most books. While there is no harm in reading the Bible starting with page 1 of the Old Testament, we recommend starting with the New Testament. This approach will introduce you to the Book of Matthew, which is an eyewitness testimony of the acts and words of Jesus Christ throughout His ministry, written by someone who was rumored to be quite meticulous and who was a bookkeeper/tax collector accustomed to taking detailed notes of transactions. It is a great place to start developing your relationship with Jesus.

After reviewing the four Gospels, we suggest reading Acts (of the Apostles) next. After reading the Gospels and Acts, you may want to circle back and read Genesis and Exodus (from the Old Testament) for some historical perspective. At this point, you should know enough about the Bible – especially if you are using the New American Standard Bible (NASB) – to pick and choose what you are inspired to read next. Hint: Many people regard the Book of Daniel as one of their favorites.

Why Are There “Old” and “New” Testaments?

While both the Old Testament and the New Testament are the work of the Holy Spirit and together constitute God’s inerrant Word, it is important to know that Christians today are to be guided by the New Covenant of the New Testament which was initiated by Jesus Christ during the Last Supper with His disciples and cemented through His crucifixion. We say this because while the Old Testament contains critical historical information, especially about creation and the nature of God, we believe it is foremost a foreshadowing of the arrival of Jesus Christ and His new blood Covenant with all nations. For example, under Old Testament Law, blood sacrifices had to be given repeatedly, and only “covered” sin, and were only for people of the Jewish faith. Jesus’s new blood Covenant was for all nations, Jews and Gentiles. His new blood Covenant forgave humanity’s sins and erased them once and forever. This is clearly pointed out in Hebrews 10:11-25

“Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He [Jesus], having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, ‘THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART, AND ON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM,’ He then says, ‘AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE.’ Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin. Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

One of the main reasons we recommend starting your Bible reading with the New Testament is it contains God’s Word that we are to live under and practice today. Certainly, the Law that God gave to Moses to deliver to the Jewish people in approximately 1445 BC establishes precedent that should never be ignored or forgotten, and Jesus reminds of this when He told His disciples and the people gathered to hear His Sermon on the Mount:

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:17-20

Jesus’ last words in the above passage are critical as they introduce to the Jewish people that it is their righteousness, and not their strict adherence to the Law, that will gain them access to the kingdom of heaven. For a people who had counted on the Old Testament Law for over 1,400 years, this was a revolutionary concept, and we believe it began to mark the transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

Yes, the Old Testament Law should continue to be honored, but those of us living today now know it is our faith in Jesus and our living a life guided by His righteousness that will guarantee our access to heaven. Jesus confirms this in Matthew 22:34-40:

“But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ And He said to him, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”

Anchored by the Ten Commandments, there are approximately 613 commandments in the Old Testament Law. Clearly the lawyer was trying to bait Jesus into picking only one that would put all of the other laws of God into a diminished status, but Jesus did not take the bait. Instead, He proclaimed just two new laws to follow, and offered that when taken together, they are what the original Law and the prophecies intended. Again, we believe this helps mark the transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

Its prophecies about Jesus Christ are the second reason we recommend reading the New Testament first as the New Testament explains how many of the prophecies of the Old Testament were fulfilled. We believe the Old Testament will make more sense to you if you know beforehand how its prophecies actually played out. We believe Jesus alludes to this in Luke 24:44-49 when He meets with His Apostles after His resurrection:

“Now He said to them, ‘These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.’” Luke 24:44-49

So, as a member of the 21st century, when you explore the Bible, please always keep in mind that the Old Testament and the New Testament serve two different purposes. The Old Testament is more introductory, historical, and prophetic in nature while the New Testament fulfills much of the Old Testament prophecies and now serves as our instruction guide on how to have a wonderful life now and forever – both of which are only available to us by the grace of God through our faith in His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.