
Instant Expert: **The Bible**



INSTANT
EXPERT

THE **BIBLE**

→ Nick Page



Contents

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Introduction

The Bible: it's the most famous book in the world.

It's the most published book. No one knows how many Bibles have been published – the number is in the billions.

It's the most influential book. Whatever you think about it, it's one of the cornerstones of Western civilization. It has had a massive effect on language, culture, laws, art, and society. This book has changed the world.

It's the most widely read book. Every day, every week, millions of people read this book. They hear it read in church. They read it in the privacy of their own homes.

It's the most smuggled book. Many countries around the world ban the Bible, and the Christians in those countries go to enormous lengths to get hold of a copy.

Let's face it: **it's the most important book in history.**

Given all of that, you'd think that reading the Bible is something that everyone should do. But there are some problems...

- **It's big.** This is one big book. It rolls in at around 750,000 words and is divided into sixty-six books, written by at least forty authors.
- **It's weird.** Often the version of the Bible that we are presented with is in a strange, old language. This is because people read from the King James Version, which was created in 1611. But even in modern versions there are strange terms: “covenant”, “tabernacle”, “Pharisee”, and “ark”, to name a few. Often, our response to reading a passage of the Bible is “Huh?”
- **It's boring.** Sometimes the Bible can seem incredibly dull. There are passages that give us the dimensions of buildings, detailed descriptions of ancient religious ritual, complicated family trees, and lists of tribes and clans which read like some kind of ancient telephone directory. Boring or what?
- **It's irrelevant.** It's all about people who died a long time ago and lived far, far away. They dressed in robes and herded sheep. They had names like Mephibosheth and Nebuchadnezzar. What have their lives got to do with today's world?

Those are all common objections. And they do have some truth to them. But let's have a very quick look at them, one by one.

- **The bigness thing.** Yes, it's big. But it was written by many different authors across a period of 1,500 years. It's about life, death, and everything

between. You'd expect more than thirty-two pages and a few cartoons. Anyway, you don't have to read it all at once. We can read as little, or as much, as we like.

- **The weirdness thing.** You don't have to read the King James Version! There are many modern translations available. There are, admittedly, some specific biblical terms but not that many. And while there are, undoubtedly, things in the Bible that are difficult to understand and many passages that are open to different interpretations, the vast majority of the Bible is straightforward.
- **The boring thing.** It's true that there are things that won't thrill us. But for every boring bit there are tons of exciting bits. Yes, you get long family trees (which some cultures find exciting – even though they might not be our kind of “thing”), but you also get songs, drama, stories, sword fights, love poetry, evil villains, virtuous heroes, surprise twists, and prophets wandering around in their underwear (among other things).

And that leads me to...

- **The irrelevance thing.** One of the myths about the Bible is that because it was written so long ago, it can't have anything to say to us. But the people in the Bible are in many ways just like us. Of course they dress differently and act in some strange and unusual ways, but the fundamental

issues they wrestle with face us all. The Bible talks about love, peace, war, happiness, freedom, greed, forgiveness, sex, possessions, truth ... and a whole lot more. All just as relevant today.

All of this is why the Bible is still the world's most published book. Despite the perceived difficulties it still exerts a massive influence on our world.

In which case, it's not a bad idea to get a sense of where the Bible came from, how people use it, and what it's all about.

That's where this book comes in.

This book will help you get an overall understanding of the Bible – what it is, where it came from, what happens in it.

- Chapter 1: *What is the Bible?* gives a brief overview of the Bible and a guide to finding your way around.
- Chapter 2: *What happens in the Bible?* gives an outline of the overall biblical story.
- Chapter 3: *Who wrote the Bible?* looks at issues of authorship and composition.
- Chapter 4: *Who put the Bible together?* explores how the Bible was compiled and who decided the final contents.
- Chapter 5: *The Bible: book by book* tells you more about the various Bible books.

- Chapter 6: *How do we read the Bible?* describes some tools and resources to help you explore the Bible for yourself.

The Bible isn't just for the devout. It was never meant as something that only the holy few could read. It's meant for everyone. And for centuries ordinary people of all creeds and backgrounds have read the Bible for themselves.

So I hope this book will encourage you to give it a go. You never know what you'll find!

1. What is the Bible?

Let's start with the name: the Bible.

It's really a made-up word, an English-language spelling of the Greek words *ta biblia*, which mean, "the books".

It's a reminder that the Bible is not a book, but a collection of books: sixty-six books bound into one volume. It's a one-volume library, containing many different types of writing: poetry, history, laws, prophecy, proverbs and sayings, stories, letters, and more.

The holy books

The first person to use *ta biblia* to describe the scriptures was Clement of Alexandria, writing around AD 215. He was talking about the Hebrew scriptures – the Christian "Old Testament". It was his pupil, Origen, who used "the books" to describe *all* the scriptures – including the Christian ones – in AD 223. But for centuries people didn't call this collection "the Bible". Jerome, writing in the fourth century, used the term *bibliotheca*, which means "library" or "collection of books", and this was the common term used for centuries among Latin speakers.

This collection of books is grouped into two sections:

- The Hebrew scriptures or Old Testament (thirty-nine books)
- The Christian scriptures or New Testament (twenty-seven books)

Some Bibles also have some extra material which is known as the Apocrypha. These books appear in Bibles used by the Catholic and Orthodox churches, but most Protestant Bibles omit them.

The Hebrew scriptures or Old Testament

The first part of the Bible contains the sacred writings of Judaism, written from around 1400 BC to 400 BC.

Christians call this section the Old Testament, but the Jewish name is the Tanakh. In the Jewish "Bible" the individual books are organized into three sections: Torah (the Law), Nevi'im (the Prophets) and Ketuvim (the Writings). The first letters of each section – TNK – give the acronym Tanakh.

The Christian Old Testament contains the same books, but arranged differently. (In Christian Bibles the books are arranged into the Law, Histories, Wisdom, and Major and Minor Prophets.)

Since the action of the Old Testament covers a period of many thousands of years, dating the composition is difficult. The oldest parts of the Old Testament were probably written around 1100 BC,

although they describe events that took place many centuries earlier.

The Old Testament is written almost entirely in Hebrew, but it does contain some small parts in a different language – Aramaic. This language was spoken in the region after the Jews returned from their exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC. Although Hebrew remained the language of their religion, the people of Jesus' time spoke Aramaic.

Torah

The first five books of the Bible – Genesis to Deuteronomy – are known by several names. The Jewish name is Torah, which means “Instruction”, but you might also hear them called “the Pentateuch”, “the Law” or “the Books of Moses”. These books contain the core material of Judaism. As well as tales of Jewish ancestors, the Torah contains the Jewish religious, legal, and ethical code. According to rabbinic tradition these are contained in 613 *mitzvot*, or commandments: 365 restrictions and 248 positive commands. In synagogues, the Torah is read from a Sefer Torah, or Torah scroll, a specially prepared parchment scroll written by a trained scribe.

The New Testament

The second section of the Bible is called the New Testament. This is the collection of Christian scriptures. These writings fall into three main groups: Gospels and Acts; letters from early church leaders such as Paul, Peter, and John; and Revelation, which was probably sent as a letter, but which, with its visionary, apocalyptic language, stands alone.

Unlike the Old Testament, the books of the New Testament were written over a short period of time, between around AD 50 and AD 90.

Testament

Testament means “promise”. For Christians the “Old Testament” is the promise given by God to the Jews; the “New Testament” is the promise given through Jesus. This word was first used by Christians to describe the Tanakh around the end of the second century AD.

The New Testament was originally written in Greek. Jesus and his disciples spoke Aramaic – and some of their original words remain in the New Testament. But the New Testament was written for a wider audience: for Gentiles (the non-Jewish inhabitants of the Roman empire), and, since the time of Alexander the Great, the common language of the Mediterranean region was Greek. The type of Greek they spoke – found in the New Testament – has since been called *koine*, or

common Greek. This was the everyday language of ordinary working people: traders, housewives, and shopkeepers.

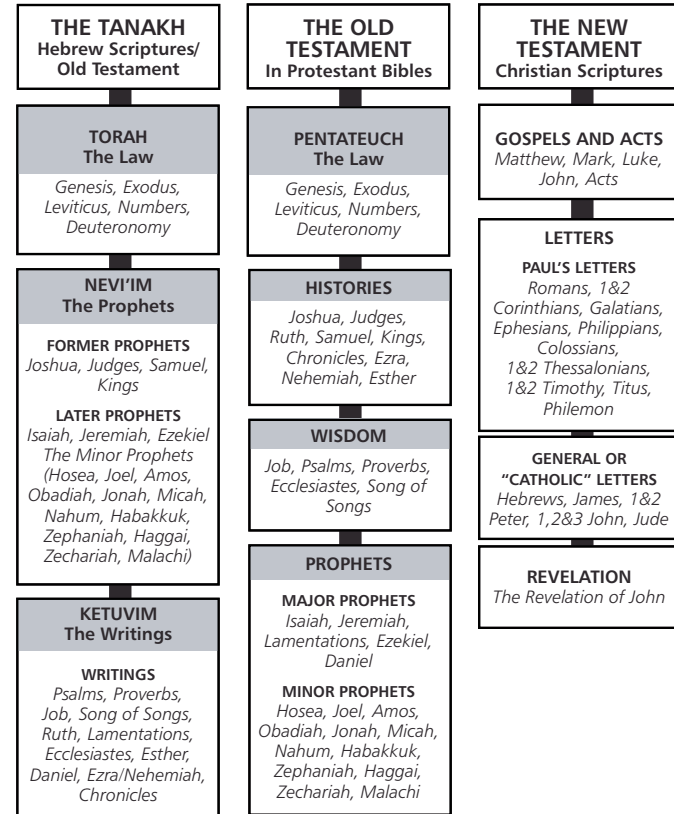
As well as bits of Aramaic, there are also a few Latin words in the New Testament, but these are mainly technical and military terms such as centurion, *denarius* (the Roman coinage), and *mille* (the Roman mile). They remind us that Jesus lived in a land under military occupation.

The Apocrypha

Some Bibles also include a section known as the Apocrypha. These books are found in the Bibles of the Catholic and Eastern churches – but not in Jewish or modern Protestant Bibles. These books were mainly written in Greek and they come from the “gap years” between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New, when Greek rulers sought to impose Greek culture onto the Jews. The Catholic and Eastern churches view these writings as authoritative, but at a lower level than the other books of the Hebrew scriptures.

Finding your way around

The books of the Bible are not organized alphabetically, but in collections of different types. In the Christian Bible they are grouped as follows:



Each book of the Bible is subdivided into chapters and verses. These are useful for referring to specific parts of the Bible and for finding your way around. But we should remember that these were added much later. The chapter numbering system we use today dates from the thirteenth century, and the verse subdivisions date from the sixteenth century.