

Bible 101: A Basic Introduction to the Word of God

In the Bible, which is also called the Sacred Scriptures, God speaks to us through human words. Through the Scriptures and Tradition, God not only reveals to us divine truth but God's very self. That is why we call both the Bible and Jesus Christ (the Second Person of the Trinity) the Word of God. "Through all the words of Sacred Scripture, God speaks with one single Word, his one Utterance in who he expresses himself completely" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC]*, 101).

The word *Bible*, is a derivative of the Greek word *biblios*, which simply means "books." And that is the way we should think of the Bible, as a library of books that is divided into two parts: the Old Testament (before Jesus) and the New Testament (after Jesus' birth).

The Old Testament

The Old Testament closely parallels the scriptures of the Jewish faith (although the Catholic Old Testament contains additional books that are not part of the official Hebrew Scriptures). The Jewish people are called Hebrews, Israelites, Judeans, and Jews at various times in the Old Testament. The Old Testament prepares us for the coming of Jesus Christ, and its covenants (promises), laws, prophecies, and wisdom find their ultimate fulfillment in the life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ. Its books are typically grouped into these sections:

The Pentateuch (a word meaning "five books") tells about the beginnings of God's Chosen People, the Israelites. You'll read about their early stories, their history, and the laws God gave them.

The Historical Books pick up Israelite history from about 1250 BC to 100 BC. You will find accounts of the Israelites' settling the Promised Land, the rise and fall of their kings, their dispersion into Exile, and their eventual return to the Promised Land.

The Wisdom and Poetry Books are a collection of hymns, poems, proverbs, and stories. They use imaginative language to make their points.

The Prophets are people who speak God's Word. In the prophetic books, you will find the recorded prophecies and stories of sixteen of Israel's prophets (there were other prophets told about in other books too). Their words contain condemnation of Israel's idolatry, false worship, and unjust practices. But they also offer many prophecies of comfort and promise for God's People, when they most needed to hear them.

New Testament

The New Testament tells the stories of Jesus Christ's life, Death, and Resurrection and interprets the meaning of those stories for our salvation. Because Jesus and his first followers were Jews, frequent quotations and allusions from the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament) appear in the New Testament. The Old Testament prepares the way for the New, and the New Testament helps us to fully understand the meaning of the Old. The New Testament is typically divided into these sections.



The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. The Gospels (means “Good News”) focus on the person and teachings of Jesus. The four Gospels each offer a slightly different perspective on the meaning of Christ’s life, Death, and Resurrection. Only with all four together do we get the most complete picture of Jesus Christ, the Word of God. “The four Gospels occupy a central place because Jesus Christ is their center” (CCC, 139).

The Acts of the Apostles was written by the same author who wrote the Gospel According to Luke. It shows how the Church was formed and how the first Christians spread the Good News, starting in Jerusalem and ending in Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. These books cover 5 BC to the early AD 60s.

The Letters. The Letters, or Epistles (some written by Paul and his followers, and others written by other Apostles or their followers), are actual letters that describe the new Christian faith, give advice, and offer words of hope to early Christians and the first Christian communities. Sometimes this section is further divided into the Pauline letters, the Pastoral letters, and the Catholic letters.

Revelation. The Revelation According to John is a collection of mystical visions written to encourage the early Christians, who were being persecuted by the Roman Empire.

How Did We Get the Bible?

It would be nice to imagine that God gave us the Bible in one neatly bound book, but the actual process was more complicated than that! Scholars call the result the canon—the official list of sacred books.

The Development of the Old Testament

At first, stories about Israel’s history were passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth. Around 1000 BC people started writing down these stories. The stories, along with laws and poetry, were gradually combined and edited, and the “books,” as we know them, began to take shape in the sixth century BC. Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, but by the fourth century BC, Greek had become the most influential language, and many Jews could speak nothing else. During the third and second centuries BC, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Septuagint) began to take shape. It has more books in it than the present Hebrew canon, which was established in the first century AD. These books (called deuterocanonical) include Tobit, Judith, First and Second Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, and additions to the books of Esther and Daniel. Most Protestant Bibles do not include these books, which Protestants call the Apocrypha. Many Protestants, however, still consider them spiritually useful.

The Development of the New Testament

The language Jesus spoke was Aramaic, but the New Testament was written mainly in Greek. The oldest books in the New Testament are the letters of Paul; First Thessalonians probably was Paul’s earliest letter (c. AD 51). Stories about Jesus and his teachings, passed down orally at first, were eventually written down. The earliest collection of these writings is Mark’s Gospel (c. AD 70). The last book written in the New Testament was probably Second Peter (c. AD 130). As early as AD 160, the Church Father Irenaeus gave his list of approved Christian books and letters that is a very close match to the canon of the New Testament. In AD 367, in response to a debate that arose about which of the many new



Christian books should be considered sacred, Athanasius suggested a list that comprises the twenty-seven books of the New Testament today. Later councils, in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, affirmed this list and closed the canon.

How Did We Get the Catholic Translation of the Bible?

In AD 382 Pope Damasus asked Jerome to offer a standardized Latin translation of the Bible. Working from the Hebrew and Greek, Jerome produced the Vulgate (*editio vulgata*, meaning “common version”), which became the authoritative biblical text for Catholics for centuries. In 1943 Pope Pius XII allowed scholars to use the Hebrew and Greek for subsequent translations. Noteworthy Catholic translations are the New American Bible (NAB); the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB); the Good News Translation, Catholic Edition (GNT); and the New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (NRSV).

Inspiration and Inerrancy

So did a bunch of old guys just decide on their own what would go into the Old and New Testaments? No! The Holy Spirit guided the process from oration to composition to editing to canonization. This is called **biblical inspiration**. The stories that survived are the ones in which God’s People heard God speaking. In time the Spirit inspired human authors to write down these stories and edit them to illustrate their growing understanding of God’s plan of salvation. Finally, the leaders who selected and closed the two canons made their decisions based on what was already happening through the Spirit within God’s People.

God himself is the ultimate author of the Bible because he inspired the human authors of the Scriptures to record the truth God intended to reveal for our salvation. Thus, the Bible is without error in matters of faith and morals when it is correctly interpreted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is called **biblical inerrancy**. Catholics are not troubled by historical inconsistencies, or ancient cosmologies, or cultural differences, or literary devices used by the human authors. We do not look to the Bible to teach science or history; rather we look for the salvific truth God is revealing through the Bible to every new generation.

Interpreting the Bible

Reading, studying, and praying with the Scriptures is a lifelong task that all Christians are called to. But it takes effort to develop the skills and knowledge to properly understand—or interpret—what God is communicating to us through the human words of the Bible. This process of interpreting a biblical passage is also called exegesis.

Making Sense of the Scriptures

The Church teaches us to consider two main “senses” in interpreting the Scriptures (see CCC, 117):

- **The literal sense:** This is the most direct meaning conveyed by the words of the Scriptures and discovered by good exegesis. We might think of it as the meaning the human authors probably intended to convey.
- **The spiritual sense:** Beyond the literal sense, the events reported in the Scriptures can also convey a greater meaning. They are signs or guideposts pointing to God’s plan of salvation. The



Catechism lists three spiritual “senses:” (1) the allegorical sense—we understand the significance of certain events because they point us in some way to Christ (e.g., the Israelites’ crossing of the Red Sea is a sign of Baptism and Christ’s victory over death), (2) the moral sense—events are signs of how we should act morally and justly, and (3) the anagogical sense—events are viewed in light of their eternal significance (e.g., the Church is a sign of God’s heavenly Kingdom).

Looking for both the literal sense and the spiritual sense of a Bible passage or story is one important step for interpreting the Scriptures.

Consider the Contexts

When interpreting the meaning of any particular Scripture passage, it is also important to understand it in light of the larger context in which it was written and within the context of the living Tradition of the Church. Everyone needs help with this. As a start have an edition of the Bible with good notes and chapter introductions, like *The Catholic Youth Bible*® or *Saint Mary’s Press*® *College Study Bible*.

The following are elements to consider when interpreting the Scriptures:

- **The historical and cultural context** To understand the human author’s intention in a specific Scripture passage, it is important to know the historical situation and cultural biases during the time the author or editor wrote.
- **The literary form or device used** Was a certain book or passage intended to be history, poetry, prophecy, a letter, a Gospel, or another literary form? Did the passage use metaphors, parables, symbols, or other literary devices? How were these forms and devices used during the time the author or editor wrote?
- **The unity of the whole Bible** It may be tempting to look at a single verse or Scripture passage and presume we know everything there is to know on that subject without reading further. But it is necessary to read the Scriptures within the context of the whole chapter or book. In fact, the old saying “use the Bible to interpret the Bible” calls us to see specific Scripture passages within the larger context of God’s message throughout the whole Bible.
- **The Sacred Tradition of the Church** In order to understand God’s Word, we must read it within the living Tradition of the Church. We interpret the Bible in light of what we know to be true about our faith and in light of God’s whole plan of salvation. In the Catholic Church, bishops have been given the ultimate responsibility for properly interpreting the Bible, although Scripture scholars and others share in this responsibility. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*—which has an extensive scriptural index—can help to show how the Church’s doctrine is rooted in the Scriptures or helps us to interpret certain biblical stories and teachings.

Biblical “Criticisms”

The work of biblical scholars can also help us in interpreting the Bible. In their work of exploring the meaning of the Bible, scholars sometimes apply different critical techniques, such as textual criticism, source criticism, redaction criticism, literary criticism, historical criticism, and canonical criticism. These scholarly techniques are not criticisms in the negative sense, but in the positive sense of applying a thoughtful and thorough method of analysis to the biblical texts. These critical techniques usually give us deeper insight into the literal sense of the Scriptures and the intent of the human author, but by themselves, they are not enough to fully interpret the Bible.



What Are Some Common Myths about the Bible?

Myth 1: The Bible provides all the answers to life's questions.

Fact: Some people wish the Bible were the answer book for our faith, but the Bible doesn't tell us what to do in every situation in life. Instead of preaching on hundreds of rules, Jesus focused on one law—to love God and others—as a way to live. In addition to the Bible, Catholic Christians believe that God also has given us the sacred Tradition of the Church to help us with life's questions.

Myth 2: We know who wrote each book of the Bible.

Fact: The real author of a book in the Bible isn't necessarily the name associated with it. For instance, both the Letter to the Romans and the Letter to the Ephesians say that Paul is the author. Paul was certainly the author of Romans (Pauline letter), but probably not of Ephesians (Deutero-Pauline letter). A common practice in biblical times was to write using the name of a famous person. Today we may consider this fraud, but at that time it was a way to say, "I'm a follower and admirer of a certain famous person." This practice is called pseudonymous writing.

Myth 3: The events in the Bible happened in the order that they appear.

Fact: People often start reading the Bible, beginning with Genesis, and expect to find a seamless timeline of biblical history. Even though the Books of Genesis through Second Kings appear to be laid out chronologically, the story line is actually interrupted with stories that are repeated (see Genesis 1:1—2:3 and 2:4–25) and with genealogies and laws that often prove discouraging to the reader. Then the next set of books, First and Second Chronicles, begin by telling some stories all over again. This sometimes confusing order occurs because there were so many authors and they sometimes had different versions of the same stories. Even a single book like Genesis has several sources. When the stories were eventually collected and edited, they were put side by side in the order we now have in the Bible.

Myth 4: The Bible predicts the future and tells us when the world will end.

Fact: Wonderful verses in the Old Testament point ahead to the time of Jesus. And verses throughout the Bible assure us that God will be with us in all our future days. However, the Bible is not a prediction book. Books like Daniel and Revelation seem to mysteriously hint at something, but they are a particular kind of apocalyptic literature that uses code language to say more about the time in which they were written than about the future. Don't expect to find in the Bible clues about when the world will end. Jesus told us that only the Father knows the day and the hour (see Mathew 24:36).

Myth 5: God dictated the Bible to humans, who wrote it down word for word.

Fact: God did author the Scriptures by inspiring humans to write the truth that God intended. But at the same time, those writers and editors remained true authors with all the limitations and experiences that accompany being human in a specific time, place, and culture. Though we can always trust the truth the Bible teaches, we cannot expect the Bible to be a science or history book. If occasionally the Bible



doesn't seem to coincide with what we expect today from scientific or historical truth, it doesn't mean that God's truth doesn't shine through the Bible. However, to discern God's truth, we need to understand the contexts in which the authors were writing.

A Good Basic Bible Reference Library

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Most of the content in this article has been adapted from *Saint Mary's Press® Essential Quick Charts: Bible Basics* (2007), written by Gary Dreier.

