

# HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

## **What is the Bible?**

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A collection of 66 different books authored by around 40 different people over nearly 2000 years. The Bible itself claims to be the word of God to humanity – its ultimate inspiration and authorship coming from the Holy Spirit (see 2 Peter 1:20-21 and 2 Timothy 3:16)

## **How is the Bible Arranged?**

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The major division in the Bible is between the Old Testament (covering God's dealings with His people prior to Jesus Christ) and the New Testament (covering since Christ's coming).

Within these two major divisions, the books are arranged by type of literature:

### Old Testament

- *Books of History/Law*  
Genesis to Ezra
- *Books of Poetry/Wisdom/Song*  
Job to Song of Solomon
- *Books of Prophecy*  
Isaiah to Malachi

### New Testament

- *Books of History*  
Gospels (giving eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life) to Acts (covering the early church after Jesus' resurrection)
- *Letters (or 'Epistles')*  
(from various Christian leaders to churches or individuals) Starting with the many letters of the Apostle Paul (Romans to Philemon) and moving through to letters named Hebrews, James, Peter, John & Jude.
- *Book of Prophecy*  
Revelation

Most Bibles will have a table of contents page at the beginning listing where you can find the individual books.

## **Chapters and Verses**

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The current system of chapters and verses was developed by the 1500's to make it easier to locate and reference specific passages. References are given in the form of: Book chapter\_number:verse\_number(s). For example: "2 Timothy 3:16" means:

- The 2<sup>nd</sup> letter of Paul to Timothy
- Chapter 3
- Verse 16

Sometimes these are given in abbreviated form (eg: 2 Tim 3:16; or 2Ti 3:16)

## **Where To begin?**

As the Bible is in fact a library of 66 different books – it is not generally best to proceed from the start to the finish as if it were single book. A good place to start is to read the historical books for background, eg: Genesis & Exodus from the Old Testament and a Gospel (eg John or Luke) and Acts from the New Testament. This will give the minimal background to begin to read and understand the other parts of the Bible - moving from the other historical books, to the teaching parts (Wisdom (OT)/ Letters (NT)) and finally to the prophetic books.

## **How do I Interpret the Bible?**

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The Bible can be confusing to a new reader. It is important that several recognised principles of Scriptural interpretation are followed for the Bible to be correctly understood. These include:

- looking at the immediate context
- taking account of the kind of literature this is (prose, poetry, parable, figure of speech, song, law, proverb, symbol, etc)
- allowing the clearer parts of the Bible to interpret the less clear (this includes allowing the New Testament priority in interpreting the Old Testament)

## **Why so Many English Translations?**

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The Bible teaches that it is directly inspired by God – hence the original copies (in the Greek or Hebrew) of the books are infallible and inerrant. The Bible is translated into many languages, yet remains the Word of God in so much as that translation faithfully conveys the original meaning. There are translations that are more word-for-word (such as the *King James Version*; *English Standard Version*; *New American Standard Bible*; etc.), while others seek to convey the overall meaning (such as the *New International Version*). Paraphrase versions (such as the *Living* and *Good News* bibles) should be used cautiously as they are basically an interpretation rather than proper translation.

## **Further Help**

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There are many commentaries and other helpful tools available. There are also translations of the Bible into other languages. Some useful websites include:

- <http://www.biblegateway.com>
- <http://bible.crosswalk.com>
- <http://www.studylight.org>
- <http://unbound.biola.edu>

There are also many sites that provide a basic outline of Christian teaching - eg:

- <http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au/2wtl/>
  - [http://www.the-highway.com/ultimate\\_questions.html](http://www.the-highway.com/ultimate_questions.html)
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