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THE BIBLE

WHAT? WHEN? WHY?

by Carol Geisler

What is the Bible all about? Why do Christians care so much about this book? As Christians we read the Bible and talk about it and study it. We preach and teach about the stories we find in it. This important book is also called “Holy Scripture,” “the Scriptures,” or “the Word of God.” Some people call it “the Good Book.” It is really a single book which contains within itself 66 smaller books. The title “Bible” is the English form of the Greek word “biblos,” which means book. In the pages of the little biblos you are reading right now, we are going to learn more about this important Christian book. Before we learn about what makes it so *good*, we will look at the way this book—with its collection of smaller books—is organized.

TWO TESTAMENTS

The Bible is divided into two main parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament. We often talk about a person’s “last will and testament.” A last will and testament is an agreement, which provides for the distribution of a person’s money or property after death. The two main divisions of the Bible, the Old Testament and the New Testament, receive their titles from this idea of an agreement—or as it is more often called—a covenant. Both parts of the Bible are about an agreement or covenant God made with people, something we might call God’s will and testament. God’s covenant is not an agreement providing for the distribution of human wealth or property, and it is not an agreement between two equal parties. This agreement is the decision of God alone. *This covenant or testament is His arrangement for the distribution of forgiveness and the gift of eternal life.*

The smaller books within the two Testaments are divided into chapters and verses. For example, John 3:16 means verse 16 in Chapter 3 of the New Testament book of John. The books of the Old and New Testament did not always have the chapter and verse markings as we see them today. Those divisions were added in later centuries, making it much easier to find the stories and teachings in the Bible. The books of the Old Testament were originally written in the Hebrew and Aramaic languages. The New Testament books were written in Greek.

The books of the Bible were written across a time span of more than 14 centuries. The books of the Old Testament were written in the centuries before Jesus Christ lived on earth. The New Testament books were written in the decades immediately following Jesus’ time on earth. Before we learn more about God’s covenant or testament, we will look at the way the books are arranged within the two divisions of the Old and New.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

It is helpful to think of the entire Bible as a kind of hand-held library of smaller books. Even though most Bibles have an alphabetical list of books in the front, the books themselves are not arranged alphabetically by title or author. The smaller books within the Bible are arranged by the kind of writing they represent, similar to the way non-fiction books are organized on library shelves. There are 39 books in the Old Testament. The first five books are called “the Books of Moses” because they were written by the prophet Moses.

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

These five books are books of history, describing events from the creation of the world until the time God’s chosen people began to enter the Promised Land, the land of Israel. The name of each book indicates something about the topic of the book. Genesis is about beginnings—the beginning of the world and the beginning of the nation of Israel. Exodus is about the *exit* of the people of Israel from Egypt after years of slavery. Leviticus is about rules and ceremonies led by priests from the Israelite tribe of Levi. The book of Numbers begins with a census of the people of Israel. Deuteronomy repeats the commandments of God first given in Exodus and is named from Greek words for “second” and “law.”

The first five books are followed by more books of history. These books tell the story of Israel’s growth as a nation, the reigns of its judges (temporary military and political leaders) and kings, the disobedience of the people toward God, their defeat as a nation, their exile to foreign lands, and their return to Israel.

Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 and 2 Samuel
1 and 2 Kings
1 and 2 Chronicles (read these six titles as First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings,
First and Second Chronicles)
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther

The history books in our hand-held library are followed by a group of books called “the Wisdom Writings” or, more simply, “the Writings.” These are books of wise sayings, songs, and prayers. Job (pronounced with a long “o” as in hope) is the story of a man who remained faithful to God in spite of the loss of his wealth, his property, and his children. The book of Psalms is full of prayers, poems, and songs. Several authors wrote the wise sayings in Proverbs, although most were written by Israel’s great King Solomon, who also wrote Ecclesiastes and the Song that carries his name.

Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon (or the Song of Songs)

The final shelf in the Old Testament library contains the books of the prophets. The prophets brought messages from God to the people of Israel. They told the people to remain faithful to the true God and to turn away from worshiping false gods. The prophets warned the people about God's anger and His judgment against disobedience. They announced God's promise of hope and comfort when the people of Israel were in despair and oppressed by their enemies. The prophets told the people that someday God would send a mighty king to save them. This promised deliverer was called "the Messiah," a Hebrew word meaning "the anointed one." (The Greek word for the anointed one is the "Christ".) In Old Testament times, a man selected to be king was anointed with oil as a sign he had been chosen. The promised Savior, although His Name was not yet known to the prophets, would be the anointed one, chosen by God for His special work.

The first five books on this shelf are called "the Major Prophets" because their books are longer than the others. The name of each book is the name of the prophet who wrote its message. The author of Lamentations is not named but was probably written by the prophet Jeremiah.

Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel

The final twelve books of the Old Testament are called "the Minor Prophets" because their books are much shorter. Some of their names may be difficult to pronounce, but these prophets also carried God's messages of warning and hope to the people of Israel.

Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

Malachi was the last of the Old Testament prophets. About four centuries passed between the end of Old Testament history and the events recorded in the New Testament. As the Old Testament came to an end, the people of Israel returned from exile to their own land. During the centuries between the Old and New Testaments, the Jews were ruled by a series of foreign conquerors. First the Persians, then the Greeks, then a Syrian dynasty ruled Israel. Finally, Israel rebelled and defeated the foreign rulers. For a while the Jews ruled their own land, but civil war weakened the nation and Israel once again fell to a foreign power. The events recorded in the New Testament take place under the rule of that foreign power, the Roman Empire.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

As previously mentioned, the books of the Old Testament were composed over many centuries. The books of the New Testament were written within a time frame of about 50 to 60 years. These 27 books are also arranged according to the kind of writing they contain. The first four books on the New Testament library shelf are called “the Gospels.” The word “Gospel” comes from the Greek word “evangel” which itself comes from two Greek roots meaning “good news.” (We translate evangel as the English word “gospel” which also comes from two old English words “god” and “spel”.) The four Gospels are the good news about the life of Jesus Christ. The Gospels are named for the four men who wrote down their accounts of Jesus’ life. One Gospel writer, Luke, wrote a second volume to his story, the book of Acts. This book tells about the acts (or activities) of the first followers of Jesus. Together these five books fill the history shelf in the New Testament.

Matthew
Mark
Luke
John
Acts

The next 13 books in the New Testament were written by one person, the Christian missionary Paul. Paul was a devout Jew who at first persecuted the followers of Jesus. But one day, as he traveled to Damascus to arrest Christians, God set him on a different path. Paul himself became a Christian and traveled all around the Mediterranean world preaching about Jesus. He wrote letters to the Christian communities that he had begun and to those he hoped to visit. The first nine books are Paul’s letters to these churches. The book of Romans, for example, is a letter to the Christians in Rome. He wrote two letters to the church in the Greek city of Corinth and two to the church in Thessalonica. In his letters Paul teaches the believers about faith in Jesus and about living as Christians.

Romans
1 and 2 Corinthians (First and Second Corinthians)
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 and 2 Thessalonians (First and Second Thessalonians)

Not all of Paul’s letters, or epistles, were written to groups of people. He wrote four letters to individuals. Timothy and Titus were young Christian pastors. Paul wrote to Philemon to encourage him to forgive a runaway slave who had become a Christian and was returning to his master as a fellow believer.

1 and 2 Timothy (First and Second Timothy)
Titus
Philemon

The next eight books are also letters. The books on this Bible shelf are called “the General Epistles.” Paul’s letters above are named for the people who *received* them. With the exception of Hebrews, the letters below are named for the people who *wrote* them. James and Jude were Christian leaders who may also have been Jesus’ brothers. Peter and John were two of Jesus’ disciples. The author of Hebrews is not known, but the book explains the way in which the worship and priesthood of Old Testament Israel served as a preview of the life and work of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews
James
1 and 2 Peter (First and Second Peter)
1, 2, and 3 John (First, Second, and Third John)
Jude

The final shelf in the New Testament library has only one book. This book is a special kind of writing, intended to comfort Christians who faced suffering and persecution because they believed in Jesus. John, the author of the book, wrote it while he was in exile because of his Christian faith.

Revelation

Revelation is so named because in it John wrote down the things that Jesus revealed to him. The chapters of this book are filled with visions and symbols. God allowed John glimpses of heaven and of the future to show Christians that suffering can never separate them from God. They have hope because Jesus rose from the dead and defeated death and the devil. Jesus is more powerful than all of their enemies!

All of these books in the Old and New Testaments together make up one book, the Bible. But why is this book so much more important than other books? Why is it more important than all of the other books which have been written about Jesus or about the Christian faith?

THE GOD-BREATHED BOOK

Many religions of the world have holy books. Sometimes these books were written by a spiritual leader who was the founder of the religion. Some of these sacred writings are said to have come about in miraculous ways, perhaps dictated by an angel or carved onto golden tablets as a secret message that was later discovered and translated.

The words of the Bible did not come down from heaven on golden pages or in a secret book delivered by an angel. The Bible is an amazing miracle, but it is a *quiet* kind of miracle that joins together the words of God Himself with ordinary human language. Even though many men wrote down the words of the Bible, this special book really has only one Author—God. The process by which God gave His words to human writers is called “divine inspiration.” As Christians we believe the words of the Bible are the inspired words of God. Inspired means “breathed into.” God breathed into the writers the words they needed to write. In his second letter to the young pastor Timothy, Paul said, “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Timothy 3:16a).

We do not know what the process of inspiration looked or felt like. Sometimes the writers just say, like the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, “The word of the LORD came to me” (Ezekiel 38:1). Paul said he received his message about Jesus “through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:12b). God told Jeremiah, “Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you” (Jeremiah 30:2b). King David said, “The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; His word is on my tongue” (2 Samuel 23:2). In his second letter, Peter said “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21b).

The men who wrote the Bible were not robots or puppets. They thought about what they wrote and each writer used his own talents and experiences as he was carried along by the Spirit of God. Most of the writers were eyewitnesses and participants in the events about which they wrote. Peter wrote that he and the other disciples were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ majesty (2 Peter 1:16). At the beginning of his Gospel, Luke said he had “followed all things closely for some time past” and decided “to write an orderly account” about the life of Jesus (Luke 1:3).

The biblical writers came from many backgrounds. Moses was raised as a prince of Egypt. David was a shepherd, warrior, and king. Daniel was a highly placed official in the court of a Babylonian king. Luke was a doctor and Matthew was a tax collector. Peter and John were fishermen. Paul was well educated in the Old Testament writings. God used the skills, experiences, and education of each inspired writer. They were carried along by the Spirit of God as they recorded events of history or wrote letters. Because God guided them and spoke through them, their writing was without error. The words of the Bible can be trusted because its words, though composed in ordinary human language, are the words of God.

WHY DO WE HAVE THESE BOOKS?

Why are these 66 books, and no others, included in the two Testaments? No emperor or church leader decided which books should be included in the Bible. There was no special meeting in which bishops or priests voted about which books to keep or which to ignore. The books of the Old and New Testaments were gathered together over many years. They are the books that were recognized as the work of the prophets and of Jesus' disciples. These books were accepted as the Word of God and used by Jews (the Old Testament) and by Christians (both Testaments) through the centuries.

In Exodus we read that “When Moses went and told the people all the LORD’s words and laws, they responded with one voice, ‘Everything the LORD has said we will do.’ Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said” (Exodus 24:3–4). The Old Testament books were books of authority for Israel because they were recognized as the writings of Moses and the prophets and as such were also accepted as the inspired words of God. In the centuries before Jesus was born the Jews studied the books of the Old Testament and read them in worship services. When Jesus and the first Christians talked about “the Scriptures” they meant the books of the Old Testament because the books of the New Testament had not yet been written.

Like the Old Testament, the books of the New Testament were gathered together over time. They are the books that impressed themselves on the lives of the earliest believers. In Acts 5 we learn that the disciples were arrested for teaching that Jesus had been crucified and raised from the dead. The disciples testified that they were “witnesses to these things” (Acts 5:32a). The books we now have in the New Testament were recognized and shared among the early Christian communities as the authentic writings of Paul and the eyewitness accounts of Jesus’ own disciples. Because the books were known as the work of the disciples and Paul, the writings had authority. The books were copied and shared among the Christian churches. Copies of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, were often bound together and circulated together in one book. Copies of Paul’s letters were also collected and bound together. Other writings, such as “The Gospel of Thomas” or “The Gospel of Judas,” used the names of disciples but were written many years after those disciples had died. These later writings never had the authority of the New Testament books. Such later works were recognized as false because the teachings found in them contradicted the truth about Jesus handed down by the disciples. The books of the New Testament were shared among the churches as books with authority—the true, eyewitness accounts of the disciples and the inspired Word of God. The New Testament books pointed to Jesus Christ and to everything that His disciples had taught about Him. What was taught about Jesus? What teachings were so carefully preserved and handed down among the Christian communities?

THE BIBLE POINTS TO JESUS

In his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul wrote, “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received” (1 Corinthians 15:3a). What important things did Paul teach them? Paul explains that “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3b-4). When Paul says that Jesus Christ died and was raised from death “in accordance with the Scriptures,” he means that Jesus did everything the Old Testament said He would do. *The central purpose of all of the books in the Old and New Testaments is to direct our attention to Jesus Christ and to the forgiveness and eternal life found only by believing in Him.*

While we would like to know many things about God and might have dozens of questions to ask Him, in the Bible God tells us what we *need* to know. In the Bible God tells us what He wants us to know about Himself and about what He did to save us through the work of Jesus Christ. We need to know about the important things Paul describes in his letter—Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection.

In his story about Jesus’ life, the disciple John wrote: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His Name” (John 20:30–31). *The Bible tells us what we need to know and believe about Jesus in order to receive forgiveness and life in His Name.*

The Bible teaches us about sin—our rebellion and disobedience toward God—and about God’s anger against sin. In the Bible we learn that Jesus, the Son of God, died on the cross and suffered the punishment we deserve for our sins. Jesus was buried but on the third day He rose from the dead. He destroyed death’s power to hurt us and separate us from God. Jesus’ followers saw Him alive after He rose from the dead. They talked to Him, touched Him, ate with Him, and they wrote down what they saw and experienced. Inspired by the Spirit of God, they put their eyewitness testimony about Jesus in writing so that everyone who believes in Him will have “life in His Name.”

When Jesus lived on earth, many of the Jewish religious leaders did not believe He was the Messiah. They read the Old Testament, hoping to find in its pages the secret of how to live their lives to earn eternal life. But because they did not realize that eternal life was a free gift God gave them through His Son Jesus, they could not understand that the Old Testament pointed to Him. Jesus told the religious leaders, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40). The Bible *tells* us about Jesus, but only Jesus Himself *gives* us forgiveness and life!

Both parts of the Bible, the Old Testament and the New Testament, point to Jesus. In the Old Testament we read about God’s promise of a future anointed one, the Savior who would come to die for the sins of all people. In the New Testament we read about the way that promise was kept through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

TESTAMENTS OLD AND NEW

If the whole Bible tells us about Jesus, why do we have *two* Testaments? When God made the world and its first people, Adam and Eve, He saw that His creation was “very good” (Genesis 1:31a). He made a garden where the first man and woman could live. God told them they could eat from all the trees in the garden except the one called “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:17a). Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command. They ruined their relationship with God. The goodness of creation was ruined. Sin and its punishment, death, became a part of the world.

Like a disease passed down through families, we inherit the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve. In our own lives we also disobey God's commands every day. The punishment for our disobedience is death and eternal separation from God. But God loved the world and the people He created. He loves you! He would not allow the ruin to go on forever. He planned to return everything to the goodness He intended. The Old Testament tells us how God's plan was set in motion. God made a covenant or agreement (His will and testament) with a man named Abraham. Through Abraham and his descendants God promised to bless all people. Abraham's descendants were the children of Israel. And from among them, the Messiah, the promised Savior for all people, would be born.

The people of Israel often disobeyed God and turned away from Him. But God did not turn away from His covenant promise. God said, "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel . . . I will remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:31b, 34b). The books of the "new covenant," or the New Testament, tell us the story of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's covenant plan. Jesus, the Son of God and the promised Messiah, became a human being. He was born a Jew, a descendant of Abraham.

God's new covenant plan is for us, too. We disobey God. We turn away from Him to follow what we want to do instead of what God wants us to do. Jesus was punished for our sin and disobedience. When we hear what Jesus did for us, God's Spirit works in our hearts. He leads us to be sorry for our sins and to trust in Jesus. Because of Jesus, God will remember our sin no more. We receive forgiveness and eternal life. When Jesus returns on the Last Day, our bodies will be raised up from death just as He was raised up and we will be with Him forever!

GOD'S WILL AND TESTAMENT

A last will and testament goes into effect with the death of the person who made the agreement. That is what happened with God's testament. Jesus is God in human flesh. Jesus was innocent, but according to God's plan, He was arrested, put on trial, and sentenced to death. Before He was arrested, Jesus ate the Passover meal with His disciples. He took the cup of wine and told them, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood" (1 Corinthians 11:25b). Jesus had no sins of His own for which He had to die. He carried our sins in His own body to the cross. His blood was poured out as He suffered the punishment we deserve. He came alive again, defeating the power of sin, death, and the devil. We cannot earn God's forgiveness. God forgives us as a free gift because Jesus paid the price with His death on the cross. This is called grace, which is God's favor toward us, favor we do not deserve. *Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, God's great riches of forgiveness and eternal life are inherited by everyone who trusts in Him.*

What is the Bible about? The Bible is full of prayers and proverbs, songs and stories. The Bible tells us about life with God and about our relationships with other people. But above all else, the Bible is concerned with the Person and work of Jesus Christ. From beginning to end, the Bible shows us the unfolding plan of God to bring rebellious and disobedient people—you and me—back to Himself through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son. What is the Bible about? The Bible itself gives us an answer to that question. In the words of John's Gospel, the story of Jesus was written "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His Name."

As you read the Bible you will learn more about Jesus and about God's love for you. You will have many questions as you read, but you will find many answers, too. Here are some verses from the Bible about important topics. Read the verses below and look them up in a Bible. Read other verses and learn more about God's love for you!

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TELL US ABOUT . . .

. . . **Jesus Christ?**

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God’” (Matthew 16:15-16).

“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His Name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46b-47).

. . . **forgiveness?**

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

“I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and You forgave the iniquity of my sin” (Psalm 32:5).

“For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:11-12).

. . . **God’s Word?**

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

“No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21).

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My Word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:10-11).

. . . **facing sickness or death?**

“But He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die’” (John 11:25-26a).

“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

. . . being afraid or worried?

“The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” (Psalm 27:1).

“Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27).

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1).

. . . faith?

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

“By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).

. . . prayer?

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Romans 8:26).

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you”
(1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

“The LORD is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth” (Psalm 145:18).

NOTES

AUTHOR BIO

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