

A Short History of the Bible

The Age of the Bible

The Holy Bible is the greatest of all books. The same divine guidance that set its authors to work to write it has made Christians delve into the mists of the past to learn all about it. We find out more about it every day through the research of learned men, and things that are now hidden from us regarding it doubtless will be revealed in the course of time.

As to its authors and age, we know a great deal. It was written by about forty different men, and as it comes to us it took approximately sixteen hundred years to compose. We know that Moses began it about the year 1500 B.C. and that John, who wrote the last book, Revelation, finished it about the year A.D. 95.

The Bible gets its name from a Greek word that means “the little books.” Gradually, in the course of many years, this word came to stand for something more than “little books,” of which the big Book is composed. It came to mean “the book,” the “holy book,” and finally it came to mean just what it means today—the Holy Book of Books.

This wonderful work is composed of two parts—the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament has thirty-nine books or parts. It contains God’s account of the creation of the world, a history of the Jewish people and God’s dealings with them, a number of books written by the great Jewish prophets foretelling the events of the New Testament, as well as a number of beautiful books of poetry, praise, emotion, and wisdom.

The men who wrote the Old Testament finished it about four hundred years before Jesus Christ was born. The New Testament begins with the birth of Jesus and covers a period of about seventy-five years down to the time when the Gospel was being preached by the men Jesus Himself chose to go out into the world and tell it. The New Testament contains twenty-seven books, four of which are known as Gospels, because they tell the life of Jesus. The word “Gospel” means “good news”—it brings the news of salvation to those who read it.

The Languages and Formation of the Bible

The student of the Bible must not think that the Book as he reads it is in its original form. Not until the art of printing was discovered was it possible to get a Bible such as we have. Instead, readers of the Bible in ancient times used several rolled-up scrolls or many thousands of written pages kept carefully bound together. Of these there were many copies, but not a sufficient number to supply all those who wished to possess a copy. The men who wrote the Bible used three different languages. Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, while portions were written in Aramaic, a language related to Hebrew. The New Testament was written in a form of the Greek language.

A translation of the Old Testament into Greek, called the Septuagint (LXX), was begun 250 years before the time of Christ. Other early translations include Syriac, Aramaic, and Latin. Ancient copies of the earliest translations of the Bible are used to verify the accuracy of manuscripts in the original languages. Today the Bible is available in hundreds of languages—some portions have been translated into over a thousand languages.

The growth of the Bible from two collections of smaller books into one grand whole was a gradual process, but God directed the minds of men to accomplish His purpose. This was called forming the canon of Scripture. “Canon” is a word that means rod or rule. The term, when applied to the Bible, means that it is the rule or standard of God’s word to mankind, in other words, the way God wants man to read what God has to say to him.

The canon of the Old Testament was formed first by the Jews themselves, probably about four hundred years before Christ’s time. Their learned men gathered together all the nation’s sacred writings and under divine guidance made one work of them. After Jesus died, the men whom God had chosen began to write the New Testament books. These works were also gathered together by councils of religious and wise men under the guidance of God. It took several hundred years to get them arranged in their present form.

The chapter and verse subdivisions in the Bible and the descriptive headings of chapters are not part of the original manuscripts. Though the Jews divided their Scriptures (the Old Testament) into similar sections, the division of the whole Bible into the chapters as we know them was made in the thirteenth century by Cardinal Hugo or Archbishop Langton. In the fifteenth century Mordecai Nathan or Joseph Athias divided the Old Testament into chapters and verses, and Robert Stephanus divided the New Testament into verses in 1551. The divisions are not perfect; in fact, they sometimes greatly obscure the meaning.

What the Books of the Bible Contain

The Holy Bible is divided into two main parts called the Old Testament and the New Testament. Each is complete and distinct in itself, but God’s revelation to man and His plan of salvation run through both.

The Books of the Old Testament

The thirty-nine books of the Old Testament are divided into four sub-divisions: the Pentateuch, the historical books, poetry, and prophecy.

The Pentateuch contains the beginning of the history of Israel, including the law given through Moses. It is made up of the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

The historical books contain the further history of Israel up to the time that the writing of the Old Testament was completed. They are made up of twelve books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

The books of poetry record the worship and wisdom of the Hebrews. They include five books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.

The prophetic books contain the warnings and utterances of the Hebrew prophets. There are seventeen books—five written by the major prophets and twelve by the minor prophets. The major prophets, so named because of the quantity of their writing, wrote Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel. The minor prophets wrote Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

The Pentateuch

GENESIS, as its name implies, tells of the beginning of things: how the world was made and man was placed upon it; the fall of man through sin in yielding to temptation; and God's original promise to man of salvation through righteousness. It also tells of the great flood, the dispersion of man through the confusion of languages at Babel, and the beginnings of the nation of Israel. Genesis contains fifty chapters and was written by Moses in the fifteenth century B.C.

EXODUS gets its name from the fact that it tells of the departure or exodus of the nation of Israel from Egypt. It also tells of their wandering in the wilderness and the giving of the law by God through Moses. Like the rest of the Pentateuch, Exodus was written by Moses in the fifteenth century B.C. It has forty chapters.

LEVITICUS is a continuation of the history told in the book of Exodus. It takes its name from the Levites: it contains the ceremonial and religious law, the performance of which was entrusted to the tribe of Levi. It contains twenty-seven chapters and was written by Moses.

NUMBERS is so named because it gives the census or numbering of the people of Israel. It also tells of the history of Israel on their journey after leaving Egypt. It contains thirty-six chapters and was written by Moses.

DEUTERONOMY gets its name from the fact that it contains a second account of the giving of the law. With minor exceptions—notably the account of his death—the book was written by Moses. It consists of thirty-four chapters.

The Historical Books

JOSHUA tells of the entrance of the Israelites into the promised land and the conquest of the land. It contains twenty-four chapters.

JUDGES tells of the troubled times through which the Israelites passed after the death of Joshua. God raised up leaders and reformers for the ruling and leading of the nation. It contains twenty-one chapters.

RUTH contains in its four chapters some history of great value regarding the early ancestry of Jesus, but it is chiefly remarkable for the story of Naomi and of Ruth and Boaz.

SAMUEL takes its name from the prophet who plays a key role in the first book. The two books contain historical matter of great importance, including the careers of the first two kings of Israel: Saul and David. The first book contains thirty-one chapters and the second twenty-four.

KINGS is a pair of books that continues the history of Israel from the reign of King Solomon, through the period of the divided kingdom, and into the exile of both kingdoms. It covers a period of about 425 years. The first book contains twenty-two chapters and the second twenty-five.

CHRONICLES are the records of the royal and religious history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. These two books cover some of the same events as Samuel and Kings, but from a different perspective and with a focus on Judah. They contain twenty-nine and thirty-six chapters respectively.

EZRA, named for its writer, picks up the history of the Jews beginning with the return from the exile and goes over a period of about eighty years, telling of the rebuilding of the temple and the religious reformation of the people.

NEHEMIAH continues the history of the Jews after their return from exile. It contains thirteen chapters and, like the book of Ezra, was named for its writer. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were probably written around 450 B.C.

ESTHER takes its name from its principal figure, the beautiful Hebrew queen of King Ahasuerus. It tells of her elevation to the throne and how she overthrew the conspiracy formed by Haman for the slaughter of the Jews. It contains ten chapters and was written about 470 B.C.

Poetry

JOB is the story of a patriarch by that name who was tested by God. Its forty-two chapters of wisdom explore questions concerning the sovereignty of God and the problem of suffering.

PSALMS express every form of sorrow, joy, repentance, aspiration, prayer, or hope. The book is a collection of one hundred fifty “songs” (the word “psalm” comes from the Greek word that means song) written by several different authors over a long period of time. Ever since ancient times, the book of Psalms has been further divided into five books.

PROVERBS is a book of godly wisdom, most of which was recorded by Solomon early in his reign, which began in 970 B.C. It calls its reader to discipline and morality, gives practical advice, and makes astute observations. It contains thirty-one chapters.

ECCLESIASTES is another book of wisdom attributed to Solomon, this one probably written late in his life around 935 B.C. Its title means “the teacher” or “the preacher.” It contains twelve chapters expressing the meaninglessness of life apart from God.

THE SONG OF SONGS is a remarkable love poem written by Solomon. Its title means “the ultimate song.” It has traditionally been viewed as an allegory, expressing the love between Christ and the church but can also be seen as a celebration of marital love. It contains eight chapters and was probably written early in Solomon’s reign.

Prophecy

ISAIAH, like all the prophetic books, takes its name from its author. The book is rich in prophecy regarding the coming of Jesus the Messiah. It contains sixty-six chapters and was written about 700 B.C.

JEREMIAH calls the people of Judah to turn away from their idol worship and other sins. Its fifty-two chapters were written over several years leading up to their exile in 586 B.C.

LAMENTATIONS is a lament, a song of mourning, over the sins of Judah. It contains five chapters, written by Jeremiah, probably toward the end of his career.

EZEKIEL was the prophet to the exiles in Babylon. He spoke of God’s judgment on Israel and other nations but also predicted the future blessings of God and salvation of His people. It was written during the captivity, approximately 571 B.C. There are forty-eight chapters.

DANIEL was a Jew in exile in Babylon who was blessed by God for his faithfulness. The book also speaks of the sovereignty of God over people of all nations. Half of it is history and half prophecy. It contains twelve chapters and was written around 535 B.C.

HOSEA is the first of the books by the minor prophets. In its fourteen chapters it expresses God’s love for His sinful people, Israel. It was written around 715 B.C.

JOEL wrote to Judah around 800 B.C., calling the people to repent and warning them about God’s impending judgment. He foretold the coming of the Holy Spirit on all believers. The book has three chapters.

AMOS called on the people of Israel to turn from their idolatry and oppression of the poor. There are nine chapters, and it was written around 750 B.C.

OBADIAH is only one chapter. It teaches, through the example of Edom, that God will punish those who trouble His people.

JONAH tells the remarkable story of the prophet who didn’t want to tell Israel’s enemies about the graciousness of God. He was caught in a violent storm at sea, swallowed by a great fish, and yet preserved alive by God to carry out his mission. It has four chapters and was written around 785 to 760 B.C.

MICAH warns Israel and Judah of coming judgment and offers pardon for those who repent. The prophet also foretold the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. It was written at the end of the eighth century or the beginning of the seventh century B.C. There are seven chapters.

NAHUM speaks of God’s sovereign judgment of Nineveh in order to offer comfort to Judah. The events described took place around 663 B.C., and it has three chapters.

HABAKKUK speaks of God’s sovereignty over the nations. It is ultimately a source of hope for Judah that God directs the Babylonians as He wishes. Its three chapters were written sometime around 600 B.C.

ZEPHANIAH was written by a prophet of royal bloodline. He foretells the day of wrath and the reward of the good. The book contains three chapters directed toward the people of Judah, probably written around 621 B.C.

HAGGAI contains two chapters calling those who returned to Jerusalem from exile to complete the rebuilding of the temple. It was probably written around 520 B.C.

ZECHARIAH contains many allusions to the coming of Jesus the Messiah. This gives hope to the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from exile. The first eight chapters were probably written around 520 B.C., and chapters nine through fourteen around 480 B.C.

MALACHI was the last book of the Old Testament to be written, around 430 B.C. Its four chapters contain more prophecies about the Messiah and call the Jews in Jerusalem to turn from their sins and renew their relationship with God.

The New Testament: Division into Four Parts

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament is divided into four parts—the historical books, which include the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles; the letters of Paul; the general letters; and Revelation, a prophetic book.

The historical books are the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and the Acts of the Apostles.

Paul's letters were written to churches or individuals in order to correct or encourage them. They are Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Philemon.

The general letters were not addressed to a particular person or persons. They are Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude.

The New Testament prophetic book is Revelation.

The Historical Books

The historical books of the New Testament differ from those of the Old Testament in that they tell of the life of Jesus and the spread of the faith He founded. It was first offered to the Jews by Jesus Himself, then extended to the other races of the earth, known as the Gentiles, by the men He commanded to do the work.

The first three Gospels are called Synoptic Gospels because they agree on many of the details of Christ's life, as if He were seen "with one eye" (synoptic comes from the Greek, meaning "with an eye"). Yet, though they agree at all essential points, each Gospel has a particular perspective and emphasis.

MATTHEW was the Gospel written for the Jews. It shows Jesus as the Messiah and King, in whom were fulfilled all the great Old Testament prophecies. Matthew, its author, was a Jew and a disciple of Christ. It was written about A.D. 60 and has twenty-eight chapters.

MARK was the Gospel written for the Gentiles, especially the Romans. It presents Jesus as the Son of Man. Tradition maintains that its author was John Mark, who accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys, and that he received some of his information from Peter. It was written sometime between A.D. 55 and 65, and it has sixteen chapters.

LUKE was the Gospel written for the Greeks. Its author was Luke, who seems to have been a physician of Gentile birth and a frequent companion to Paul. He probably wrote his Gospel around A.D. 70 with an emphasis on presenting the historical events systematically. He also stressed the humanity of Jesus and His sacrifice on our behalf. It contains twenty-four chapters.

JOHN was written by "the disciple whom Jesus loved," the Apostle John, an eyewitness to the events of Jesus' ministry. He emphasized that Jesus is the Son of God, and that by believing in Him one might have eternal life. It was written later than the other Gospels, around A.D. 85–90. It contains twenty-one chapters.

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES takes its name from the fact that it is a history of the doings of the apostles during the first generation after the crucifixion of Jesus. It sets forth the coming of the Holy Spirit and the spread of the church under Peter and Paul. Luke wrote it as a second volume of history along with his Gospel. It contains twenty-eight chapters and was written about A.D. 70.

Paul's Letters

ROMANS is the first of Paul's letters as they are arranged in the Bible. It was written to Christians in Rome and emphasizes "the righteousness that comes from faith." It was probably written while Paul was in Corinth in A.D. 57, and contains sixteen chapters.

CORINTHIANS. These two books were written to the Christians at Corinth in Greece. In the first Paul addressed certain errors among the Corinthians and emphasized unity in the church, the body of Christ. It was written in A.D. 55 from Ephesus and contains sixteen chapters. In the second letter Paul defended his own authority and refuted the false teachers in Corinth. It was written from Macedonia in A.D. 55–57 and has thirteen chapters.

GALATIANS was written to the Christians in the province of Galatia, in Asia Minor. Its chief theme is the freedom of the Gospel as opposed to the bondage of the law. It was written in A.D. 49 from Antioch. It has six chapters.

EPHESIANS is an encouraging letter. In it, Paul taught that Christians have been saved by grace and are spiritually seated with Christ. Therefore, they should walk accordingly so that they can stand against the tactics of the Devil. It contains six chapters and was written about A.D. 60 while Paul was a prisoner in Rome.

PHILIPPIANS was written to the church in Philippi. It offers them thanks for the kindnesses bestowed upon the writer and strengthens them by explaining true joy in Christ. It was written from prison in Rome about A.D. 61 and contains four chapters.

COLOSSIANS dwells on the completeness of the church in Christ and gives warnings against heresies that try to add something to the Gospel. It was written about A.D. 60 from prison in Rome to the churches in Colossae, in Asia Minor.

THESSALONIANS. These two books were probably Paul's first letters. They were written from Corinth in A.D.

51–52 and addressed to the church in Thessalonica in Greece. In the first letter Paul commended the young church's faithfulness and corrected misconceptions about the return of Christ. In the second he taught about events that will precede the second coming and advocated patience. They contain five and three chapters respectively.

TIMOTHY. These two books are letters written to Paul's helper and disciple, Timothy. Both are beautiful examples of encouragement and wisdom passed from a mature leader to his young protégé. The first letter, probably written from Rome or Macedonia about A.D. 64, emphasizes the administration and discipline aspects of church leadership. The second letter, probably written in A.D. 66 or 67 from Rome, gives final instructions and encouragement to Timothy. It was probably the last of Paul's letters before his execution in Rome. The two letters have six and four chapters respectively.

TITUS was written at about the same time as 1 Timothy and has a similar purpose—to instruct and encourage a young church leader. Titus oversaw the churches on the island of Crete. This letter has three chapters.

PHILEMON was written to a person of that name in Colossae. It has one chapter and was written about A.D. 60 from Rome. In it, Paul encourages Philemon to forgive his runaway slave Onesimus and treat him as a brother in Christ.

The General Letters

HEBREWS is a doctrinal letter that primarily calls attention to the priesthood of Jesus. It encourages Jewish Christians by explaining that Jesus was the consummate High Priest who fulfilled the requirements of the sacrificial system. It has thirteen chapters and was probably written before A.D. 70.

JAMES takes its name from its author, the brother of Jesus. The letter emphasizes that true faith will be demonstrated in right behavior. It contains five chapters and was probably written before A.D. 50.

PETER. These two books take their name from their author, the Apostle Peter. In the first letter, probably written from Rome about A.D. 62–64, he encouraged patience under persecution. It has five chapters. In the second letter, written three years later, he advocated mature holiness and warned against false teachers. It has three chapters.

JOHN. These three letters were written by the same author as the fourth Gospel. He wrote them between A.D. 85 and 90, probably from Ephesus. In the first he assured Christians of God's love, encouraged love for one another, and countered false teaching. In the second he taught the same and also emphasized truth. In the third letter he commended a man named Gaius for his hospitality toward itinerant missionaries. The first letter has five chapters while the second and third letters each have one chapter.

JUDE takes its name from its author, the brother of Jesus and James, and admonishes all Christians to stand firm in the faith. It contains one chapter and was written about A.D. 65.

The Prophetic Book

REVELATION was written by the Apostle John, who also wrote the Gospel and letters that bear his name. It has twenty-two chapters and was written about A.D. 95 from the island of Patmos. In beautiful, symbolic language it encourages and warns believers concerning the events leading up to the end of this age and the coming of "a new heaven and a new earth." Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!