

THIS IS THE BIBLE - INTRODUCTION

A BOOK OF BOOKS

Did you know the Bible is the oldest book in the world? The earliest part of it, called Genesis or “Beginnings”, dates back to at least 2000 BC. This makes it much older than the Koran, or the writings of Confucius. It is also the best selling book in the world, far outstripping the latest novels, with 2.5 billion copies sold since 1815. It has been translated into more than 2,200 languages and dialects. So, if you have not had time to look at it yet, maybe it deserves your attention.

Actually, the Bible is not just one book; it is a compendium of 66 books, written over the centuries by 36 different men living in very different cultures and societies. It is broadly divided into two parts – the **Old Testament**, written before the time of Jesus Christ, and the **New Testament**, belonging to the last half of the first century AD. ‘Testament’ is an old English word that means ‘covenant’ or ‘promise’. The old one belonged to the people of Israel – God promised them they could be His special people if they obeyed His commandments. Sadly they failed to do this, and so He made a new promise, which was widened out in the time of Jesus to include non-Jews as well. However, this does not mean that the Old Testament can now be ignored. It contains many valuable lessons and instructions, which are universal in application; indeed, the New Testament is full of references to and allusions from the Old.

How did such an ancient book come to be preserved, and translated into so many languages? It is a fascinating story. The books of the Old Testament were originally written in Hebrew, the language of the Jewish people. As their greatest national treasure, they were carefully copied and taught to the children of each generation. The oldest Hebrew copies of the Old Testament books date right back to the time of Jesus. They were translated into Greek around 300 BC, a version known as the Septuagint. The New Testament, on the other hand, was written in Greek. Thousands of copies of New Testament manuscripts exist, some fragments going back to the Second Century AD. The Hebrew and Greek texts were translated into Latin, the language of the Roman Church, around 400 AD, and then into European tongues such as German and English in the 14th to 16th centuries AD. The distribution of the Bible was aided greatly by the invention of printing. There were many attempts to prevent its spread by those who wanted only priests to be able to read it. But it can now be found in every country of the world.

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Besides its antiquity, there is something else that makes the Bible a unique book. It claims to be nothing less than the revelation of the Creator to the people He created. It says it is the words of God Himself. Now, you may not agree there is a Creator, but once you start to read this book you will soon see that if there was one, this is the kind of book He would write. It starts off by explaining in a simple, condensed narrative how the globe was once in a state of chaos. In a series of swift creative acts God channelled the raw energy of His presence into brilliantly designed and self-replicating life forms that filled the earth. At the pinnacle of the pyramid of life was mankind. Adam, the first man, had the capacity to respect and love God, and to reach up towards his perfection. Placed in a delightful world, he was left to choose whether to obey and honour God, or to follow his own desires. Sadly, he and his wife chose to disobey, and found themselves excluded from close companionship with God. However, on that dismal day of judgment a merciful God left them with the hope that one day their paradise might be regained. This would be made possible through the sacrificial love of a descendant of Eve.

After that unpromising start the races of mankind spread outwards into the earth after a great flood. The narrative focuses down onto the family of a great believer called Abraham, the father of the Jews and the Arabs. The biography of this remarkable man occupies much of the first book of the Bible, his outstanding characteristic being an unshakeable trust in God through

the severest trials. His descendants through his son Isaac became the nation of Israel, delivered from slavery in Egypt by Moses and welded into a people who were committed to keeping the commands of God. The epic journey to the Promised Land and the Law that God gave the Israelites to ensure their peace and prosperity occupy the next four books. The lives of their Judges and Kings come next – not dry narrative but spiced with the comments of God Himself on their failures and triumphs, so that we can learn from their example. There are books of poetry, too, such as the Psalms, and condensed wisdom in the Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Unhappily, like Adam, the Israelites failed to live up to their early promise. In spite of constant reminders from the Prophets - great teachers like Isaiah and Daniel and Ezekiel who brought them the words of God - they were eventually driven from their land. But God promised that in the distant future He would restore them to their land, and give them an immortal king who would rule from Jerusalem and bring justice and peace to the earth. That hope, the coming of the Kingdom of God on the earth, now spills over into the New Testament.

The New Testament is the story of the coming of Jesus, whose name means 'Saviour'. Here at last was the promised descendant of Eve who would reverse the Curse that came upon mankind because of sin. The gospels give four complementary accounts of the life of Jesus. He was conceived by the power of God's creative spirit without a human father, and born in the humblest of circumstances. The one who was destined to rule the world began his career as a carpenter in a remote Israelite village. At the age of thirty he left his family behind and set out with a band of followers to tell people the way to the Kingdom of God. He dismissed as irrelevant the accumulated traditions of the Jewish lawyers, and insisted on a simple but heart-searching creed of love for God and love for man. He lived out in his own life the ideals he taught, wearing himself out in acts of compassion and healing. No one was too poor or despised to feel his touch. But as he exposed the hypocrisy and self-seeking of the Jewish religious leaders, their hatred for this unofficial preacher grew. At last he found himself betrayed, handed over to pretence of a trial, and delivered to the Roman authorities for a cruel and shameful execution by crucifixion.

First impressions can be misleading. What seemed an ignominious end turned out to be a beginning. Amazingly (and this is where the Bible really begins to grip you) the downfall of God's Son, and his rejection by the people he came to save, was already outlined beforehand in the Old Testament prophets. It was known before to God! Now comes the good news. A man without any sins had no reason to be held in the grave. Justice required his resurrection to a new life, rewarded now by the immortal nature that belongs to God Himself. Jesus walked out of the tomb. He has conquered death. And though we truly are sinners, if we believe in him, and follow in his steps with our own crosses, God is prepared to count us as part of him, the body of which he is the head. So we too, through God's mercy, can look forward to eternal life in the Kingdom of God. The preaching of that good news by Jesus' followers occupies the rest of the New Testament. The Acts of the Apostles sketches the heroic years in which the gospel was carried from Jerusalem out into the Roman Empire, at first to Jews, and then to those of other races. The Letters apply the principles taught by Jesus to practical situations. The Revelation, the last great book of the Bible, outlines, like the Old Testament prophets did, the world events that would lead to the Second Coming of Jesus. It ends with a beautiful picture of the faithful followers of Jesus walking up to the Tree of Life in the garden from which Adam was driven out, restored to fellowship with God through the sacrifice of His Son.