

Session 1

Introducing the Bible

In this first session of the course, we will look at some background information about this fascinating book. It is a book of amazing diversity: read the Bible and you will find a mixture of enchanting history, beautiful poetry, remarkable prophecy, great wisdom, simple proverbs and difficult teaching.

No-one can understand modern society without understanding the history and message of the Bible. It is a holy book for Christians, Jews and Muslims and it has played a major part in the development of world civilization and social values. Whether you believe it or not, you cannot ignore it.

Furthermore, it makes extraordinary claims of itself. For example:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.
(2 Timothy 3:16–17)

Question

What do you think “God-breathed” means?

It is only sensible to test these claims for ourselves. If its claims are true, we must read the Bible carefully and thoroughly. This course is designed to help you test the Bible's claims and read it effectively.

A unique book

Record breaker

The Bible is the world's best seller. It has been estimated that between 1815 and 1975, about 2,500 million copies of the Bible were printed. Each year approximately 100 million Bibles or parts of Bibles are distributed. These are staggering numbers when compared with the very few books which ever sell just one million copies. The best-selling novel ever has only sold about 30 million copies over a period of more than 20 years. What is it that makes the Bible consistently out-sell every other book ever produced? It does it every year, and has done so for hundreds of years.

Question
Why do you think the Bible sells in such large numbers?

The Bible also holds the record for being translated into more languages than any other book. Currently at least a portion of the translated scriptures exist in more than 2300 languages, giving 94% of the world's population some access to God's word in their native language. This means that almost any person on earth can have access to the Bible and read or hear the words which have changed the course of history so often. The main groups involved in this work of translation, printing and sale have been the Bible Societies.

Data from the United Bible Societies
(www.biblesociety.org).

No other book is so widely quoted or so widely studied. More books are written about the Bible than any other book.

Survival

The Bible has endured thousands of years of copying by hand, yet it appears to have remained almost unchanged.

It has been burned, banned and outlawed many times. For example, in 1408 England passed the following law:

that no one henceforth on his own authority translate any text of Holy Scripture into English or other language ... and that no book of this kind be read.

Those who did translate it into English (such as William Tyndale) were killed. Others were burnt at the stake for saying the Lord's prayer in English. Only a few years ago, it was a criminal offence in many communist countries to have a Bible in your possession.

Question
Why would owning or translating a Bible be made a criminal offence?

A library of books

The word "bible" comes from a Greek word *biblos* meaning simply "writings". The Bible is not just one book—it is one volume, but it contains 66 separate books written by many different authors. At the front of your Bible you will find a list of these 66 books. You may already know some of the book names and some of the Bible stories. Test yourself in the quick quiz on page 5.

But how do all these books and stories fit together? One of the aims of this course is to help you to gain an overview of the Bible and what it is all about. You can build on your knowledge quickly if you read your Bible regularly.

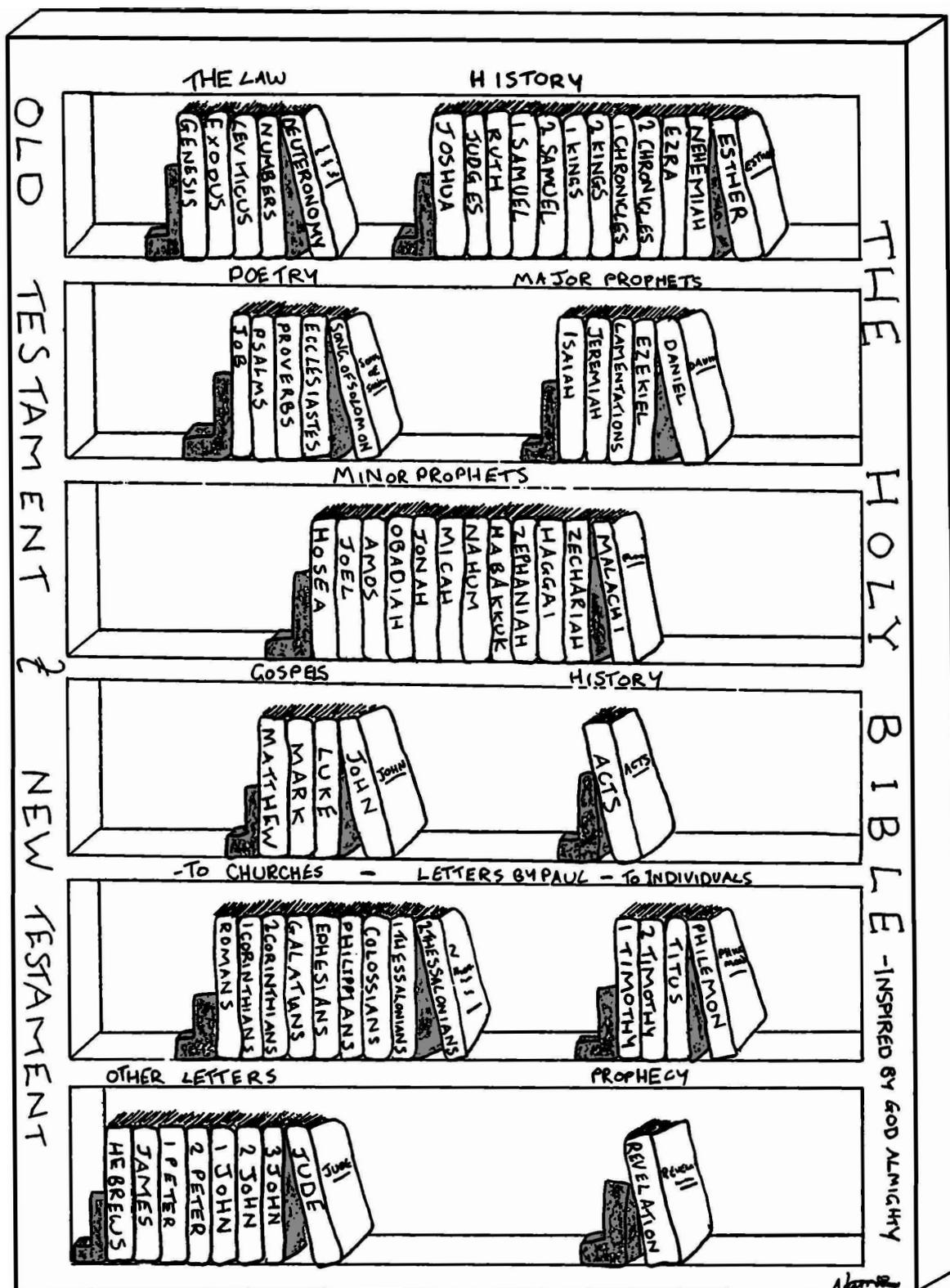


Figure 1.1: The Bible is a library of smaller books.

Test yourself

Genesis	Who was the first man?
	Who survived the great Flood?
Exodus	Includes the 10
Psalms	Written mainly by King
Daniel	Daniel was thrown into a den of
Matthew, Mark,	and
.....	A book of symbols

What Bible stories do you already know?

List other Bible stories you can recall. Do you know where they are found in the Bible?

Story

Reference

- The 66 books were written by about different authors of many different occupations: kings, shepherds, prophets, herdsman, teachers, lawyers, doctors, and so on.
- These authors lived in different countries and wrote over a period of years.
- The Bible was originally written in three languages. These were:
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.

Remarkably, despite this diverse background, the Bible message is consistent.

Testaments

The bookcase on page 4 shows the 66 books of the Bible divided into two sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament. A testament was a covenant or an agreement. So the two parts of the Bible simply record two covenants, each between God and men.

The *Old Testament* tells of events from the creation of man to about 400 years before Jesus Christ was born. It gives God's word as it related particularly to the people of Israel. In contrast, the *New Testament* records God working with people through his son, Jesus Christ. In the New Testament it becomes clear to all that God's promises are to all people, not just to Jews.

Many Christians read only the New Testament. After all, does not the very name *Christians* indicate that only records about Jesus Christ are of use to them? This is a tragic error. It is not possible to fully understand the New Testament without also reading the Old Testament. Jesus said:

You diligently study the Scriptures [the Old Testament] because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the scriptures that testify about me. (John 5:39)

Finding the passage

In these notes (and in most books about the Bible) we use a shorthand way of describing Bible passages. The Bible is a big book and locating a particular passage can be difficult. Each book of the Bible has been divided into chapters and each chapter has been further divided into verses.

When we give a Bible reference we give the book, chapter and verse. For example, **Jeremiah 30:3** refers to verse three of chapter thirty of the book of Jeremiah. Some very short books have only one chapter and so they are referred to just by verse numbers. For example, **Jude 24–25** refers to verses 24 and 25 of the book of Jude.

To find a passage in the Bible, use the index in the front section of your Bible to find the page number of the book you require (e.g., Jeremiah). Turn up the book, then look for the required chapter and verse. To become proficient at moving from one passage to another, memorise the order of the 66 books of the Bible.

Variety

The Bible contains a great variety of different types of literature. The bookcase shown on page 4 divides the books in each testament into categories: law, history, poetry, prophecy, letters, etc. These summarise the type of literature found in each book.

Law	The five law books are at the front of your Bible. They contain the early history of God’s people as well as the laws he gave to Moses for Israel.	e.g., Leviticus 19:13–14
History	The Old Testament contains much of the history of Israel. In the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles gives the history of the early Christians.	e.g., 2 Kings 24:8–12
Poetry	Five of the Old Testament books are largely poetic. For example, you may know some of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd”. Bible poetry does not rhyme (even in the original languages). It is classified as poetry because of its structure.	e.g., Psalm 23:1–3

- Prophecy** Human beings cannot foretell the future. If they could, we would not have insurance companies and bookmakers. Yet the Bible is full of forecasts or prophecies. Some books contain mostly prophecy; these are in the sections labeled “Major Prophets” and “Minor Prophets” in the bookshelf. (The minor prophets are smaller books, not less important!) In these books, God foretold much of the history of Israel and nearby nations. Revelation, the last book of the Bible, is also a book of prophecy. e.g., Jeremiah 30:1–3
- Gospels** The four gospels are records of the life of Jesus. They contain parallel accounts of many things Jesus did and said, although each of them contains information that the others omit. The word “gospel” means “good news”. e.g., Mark 12:41–44
- Letters** Much of the New Testament consists of letters. Most of them were written by the apostle Paul to churches and individuals. e.g., Galatians 1:1–11

A summary of each of the books of the Bible is found in *The Bible Readers’ Handbook*.

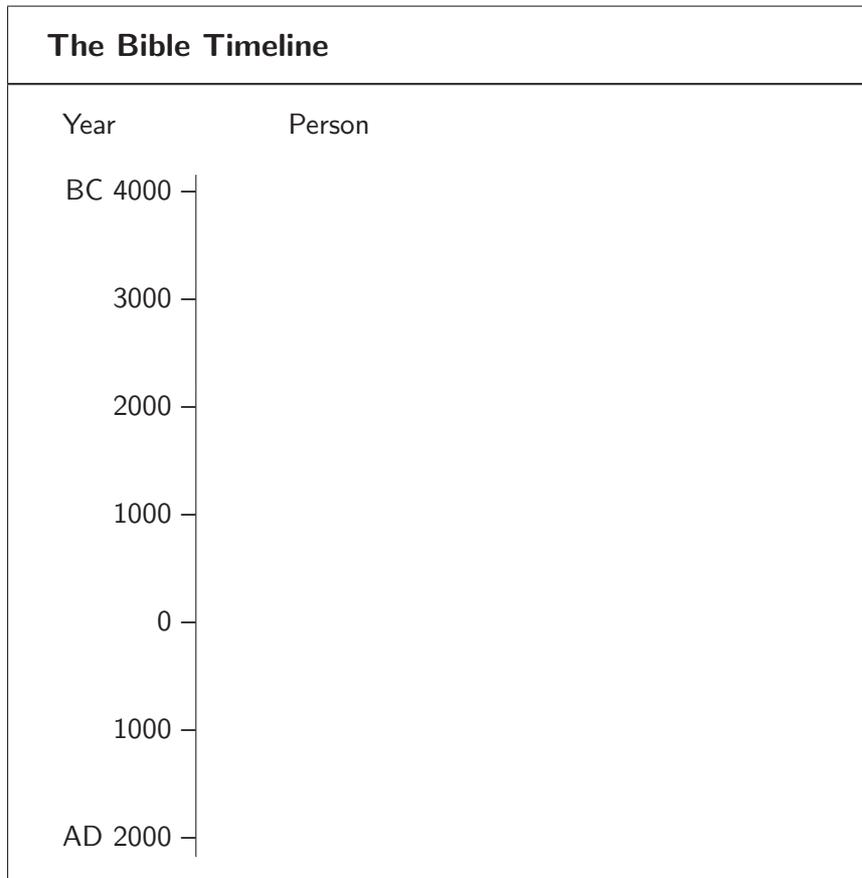
The Bible timeline

The Bible contains quite a lot of information about when events happened. When archaeological information is also taken into account, a fairly detailed chronology of the Bible can be obtained from about the time of Abraham. Before Abraham, there is insufficient information to accurately date any event.

The historical events described in the Old Testament take place over a period of several thousand years. A much shorter time is covered by the New Testament—only about 100 years. Bible history is highly selective. There are long periods about which the Bible says relatively little (such as the time between Adam and Noah), and short periods about which the Bible says a lot (such as the last week of Jesus’ life).

The charts in *The Bible Readers’ Handbook* show more detailed timelines for the Old Testament, New Testament and the ministry of Jesus.

Try putting the following people on the chart below: Jesus, Moses, Adam, Noah, David, Abraham, you.



Bible geography

When the Bible describes the geography of the events it records, it is helpful to look at a map to see where the places were. Almost all of the Bible concerns Israel or neighbouring countries in the Middle East. Of course, modern atlases of the same area aren't particularly helpful because many of the towns and cities have different names or may have ceased to exist altogether. Many Bibles contain maps as an appendix, and some simple maps are found in *The Bible Readers' Handbook*.

Bible places

Find the following places on the maps in *The Bible Readers' Handbook*.

- Israel
- Mediterranean Sea
- Dead Sea
- Galilee
- Jerusalem
- Egypt
- Babylon

Why read the Bible?

Although the Bible has 66 different books, and many thousands of verses, it has a consistent theme. This theme is the relationship between God and human beings—a theme of love and salvation. Through the lives of individuals and nations this theme develops.

Most people who set out to read the Bible seriously soon find it a disturbing book. The Bible claims to be the actual word of God, who created and sustains the universe. As a result, the Bible lays down rules for living and outlines the consequences of obedience and disobedience. No wonder the Bible has a real impact on any serious reader.

The Bible . . .

- makes us wise for salvation.
2 Timothy 3:14–17
- gives us hope
Romans 15:4
- is the power of God for salvation
Romans 1:16–17
- must be read if we want our prayers heard
Proverbs 28:9
- provides direction for daily living
Psalm 119:105; Joshua 1:8.

Make no mistake—the Bible *can change your life*. Not the Bible itself, of course, but its message. In the Bible, God has revealed himself as righteous and holy. By contrast we are all unholy sinners. And in the Bible, God offers us the way of escape from our sin, the saving blessing of Jesus Christ. Jesus has called people to him for 2,000 years and offered them life in a hopeless world.

A sinner is someone who disobeys God's commandments.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

(Matthew 11:28–30)

This invitation gives meaningful direction to people's lives. People who turn to God in faith and respond to the call of Jesus Christ are changed. They are not immediately made perfect, but they are made free of fear and guilt. Take the opportunity over the years ahead to read the Bible, learn more of God and his son, and follow him.

Further reading

- *The Bible, the Lord Jesus and You* by John S Roberts.
- *The 66 books of the Bible* by Norman Owen.

Ask the presenter if you wish to borrow a copy of either of these books.

Homework

1. Find the book of Mark
 - (a) In what testament of the Bible is Mark found?

 - (b) What sort of book is Mark?

2. Read Mark 1:1–8
 - (a) What was John the Baptist’s main message?

 - (b) How did the people respond to John’s message?

 - (c) What was unusual about John?

3. Mark begins this section with a quotation from a prophecy of Isaiah.
 - (a) In what testament of the Bible is Isaiah found?

 - (b) What sort of book is Isaiah?

4. Find the prophecy quoted by Mark and read it.
[Hint: look at the footnotes]
 - (a) Explain how John fulfilled the prophecy.
[Hint: “the Lord” is Jesus]

 - (b) Why doesn’t Mark quote it accurately?

5. Read the rest of Mark chapter 1. Write down any questions you have for discussion at the next class.