

MAKING SENSE OF THE BIBLE

Some books you can take or leave – one way or the other, and it won't make much difference – if any. The Bible is not in that category. If you “leave” it, you've lost the most important body of information in the world – and the key to your access to heaven. If you “take” it (to be the word of God), you labor under the serious responsibility of understanding as much of it as you possibly can.

For many, though, understanding the Bible is a task so seemingly daunting that “making sense of it” lies beyond them – at least **in their minds**. The wonderful fact is, however, if one has a grasp of a few basic concepts of the **plan** of the Bible, he can, in a relatively brief time-period, achieve an understanding of the overall design of the sacred volume, and watch the pieces fall delightfully into place. God has not made his word so difficult to comprehend that it lies beyond the person of average intellect.

The Biblical Claim

At the very beginning, one must understand that the Bible claims to be more than an ordinary book. It professes to be from **God!** More than 3,800 times in the Old Testament the spokesmen asserted that their messages originated from heaven (cf. Exodus 4:12; 2 Samuel 23:2; Jeremiah 1:9). Christ endorsed the Old Testament as the word of God, referring to it as “the scriptures” (John 5:39), “law” (Matthew 5:17-18), etc., and the New Testament writings were treated with equal reverence (cf. 2 Peter 3:2,16). If these claims are true – and they are, being buttressed by a vast range of evidence – then one must give due attention to the Bible.

Old Testament Divisions

The Hebrew people were accustomed to dividing the Old Testament Scriptures into segments for convenience sake. Jesus referred to “the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms” (Luke 24:44), or “the law” and “the prophets” (Matthew 5:17), or “Moses and the prophets” (Luke 16:31), etc.

In modern times, for expediency sake, we categorize the Old Testament as: Law, History, Poetry, Prophecy, with this final segment being viewed as Major and Minor Prophets (due to their relative lengths). A brief consideration of each of these categories can be helpful to the Bible student.

The Law

The first five books of the Bible (Genesis through Deuteronomy, often called the Pentateuch) constitute the Law section.

Genesis is the “book of beginnings,” providing the record of the world's origin, the creation of the human family; man's fall into sin, and the commencement of the unfolding of Jehovah's scheme of redemption. It especially focuses on the roles of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph in the divine plan.

Exodus tells of the giving of the law of Moses to the Israelite people, and how the law defined moral conduct, the regulation for worshipping Jehovah, etc. **Leviticus** gives special emphasis to the implementation of a sacrificial system and a priesthood, all of which previewed, of course, the atoning work of Christ centuries later. **Numbers** is a general record of Israel's wilderness wandering (as a result of their disbelief) for some four decades. And **Deuteronomy** constituted a rehearsal of the law for that second generation that was to enter the land of Canaan following the death of Moses. These documents are wonderfully foundational to the balance of Hebrew history.

Jewish History

The next dozen books are primarily historical in thrust. **Joshua** is the record of Israel's conquest of Canaan, while the book of **Judges** covers the administration of 15 rulers who governed the Hebrews over a span of some three and one-half centuries. **Ruth** contains the delightful story of an ancestor of Christ during this era.

The books of **First** and **Second Samuel** chronicle the legacies of Samuel, the last "judge," and the reigns of Saul and David, the first two kings of Israel's "united" monarchy. The books called **First** and **Second Kings** survey the reign of Solomon, and the division of the nation (into Israel and Judah) following Solomon's death. Then there are the narratives known as **First** and **Second Chronicles**. These documents were intended to rehearse (for the post-Babylonian-captivity generation) the administrations of David and Solomon, and the fate of the Hebrew nation (as it divided and drifted from the divine standard into a state of apostasy). As a judgment from God, Israel (the northern kingdom) was vanquished by Assyria, and Judah was conquered by the Babylonians.

The books of **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** record the three returns of Judah from the 70 years era of Babylonian captivity, while **Esther** details the providential preservation of the Persian Jews during a time of great danger.

Poetical Books

There are five books in the poetry section of the Old Testament. This is not surprising in that by means of poetry man expresses the depth of his emotions. The poetic books of the Old Testament reveal much about God and how intense human devotion for the Creator can become. The book of **Job**, largely poetical, has to do with a noble man of the patriarchal era who demonstrated that, in spite of the anguish of human suffering, the Lord is worthy of man's devotion. **Psalms** is a collection of 150 songs (73 of which are attributed to David) that emphasize great truths about Jehovah, his redemptive interest in humanity, and the various authors' relationships with the Lord.

Proverbs represents a collection of wise sayings (many of which were authored by Solomon). They focus on the application of divine wisdom to various life experiences in a world tarnished by sin. The book of **Ecclesiastes**, most likely written by Solomon, argues the case that earthly goals, e.g., the accumulation of human wisdom, wealth, etc., lead only to frustrating dead ends. Real happiness is achieved in serving God. The **Song of Solomon** celebrates the joy of wedded love; it illustrates the value of marriage in cementing male/female relationships.

Books of Prophecy

"Prophecy" is the forth-telling of a message from Jehovah. It may entail the recording of ancient events unknown by personal human experience (e.g., the creation of the Universe). Prophecy may take the form of a survey of current events (with a view to correction), or it may be predictive in thrust, i.e., it may reveal things of the future that only deity could know. As noted earlier, the first five prophetic books are longer.

The book of **Isaiah** foretells judgments to be visited upon Israel due to the nation's transgression of the law of God. Happily, however, it also previews the great spiritual deliverance to be effected ultimately by the work of the Messiah. **Jeremiah** depicts the tender invitation from the Lord to the people of Judah who had dredged themselves deeply into sin. It foretells the coming Babylonian captivity, but also offers hope in view of the eventual era of the new covenant. **Lamentations** is really a sequel to Jeremiah, expressing poetical anguish over the fall of Jerusalem in connection with the Babylonian assault.

The book of **Ezekiel** was written in Babylon during the days of the captivity. It rebuts the testimony of false prophets who argued that Judah's confinement would not last the full 70 years, as Jeremiah had predicted. It also is highlighted with Messianic hope. **Daniel**, likewise written in

the day of the captivity, affirms the sovereignty of the Almighty over the world's super-powers. In spite of the Hebrews' affliction, the kingdom of God will come and triumph over its foes. The concluding twelve books of the Old Testament are called the "Minor Prophets." Some of them address conditions in the northern kingdom of Israel; others are directed principally to Judah. Some are more generic in direction.

The book of **Hosea** is a document of great pathos. Jehovah, with deep love for his people, pleads with northern Israel to return to him from the nation's gross wickedness. Hosea's unfaithful wife is used as the background for the narrative. **Joel**, in a general vein, speaks of the coming "day of the Lord" – under the figure of a locust plague. A happier time will come when the Spirit of God is poured out in the Messianic age.

Amos addresses the kingdom of Israel with stern rebuke. The nation is morally flawed and religiously corrupt. Punishment is coming – upon Israel and other nations; but so is redemption – in the days of the Messiah. The little book of **Obadiah** warns the complacent descendants of Esau (Edom), so unbrotherly to Judah, that Jehovah will bring these arrogant rebels down from their lofty hideouts.

Jonah was the Lord's missionary to the people of Nineveh. The book reveals Heaven's interest in the Gentiles, as well as the Hebrews. Jonah's stubborn resistance was typical of the Israelite people. **Micah**, a contemporary of Isaiah, prophesied against corruption and injustice in Judah.

Nahum is a sequel to Jonah. The latter prophet had warned of Nineveh's impending doom. But the Assyrians had repented, hence had been spared – temporarily. Nahum, a century and a half later, announced the nation's overthrow. The book of **Habakkuk** explores a problem: how can a just God use an evil nation (like Babylon) to punish his people? The answer is to be found in the mysterious ways of providence. Babylon will be used as a divine rod of punishment, but the day of Chaldean destruction is coming as well.

Zephaniah's ministry was just before king Josiah's great reformation in Judah. The prophet warned of punishment to come – upon the people of the Lord and their heathen neighbors. Only in the coming Messiah would true deliverance be effected. **Haggai** preached in the post-captivity period encouraging the Jews to rebuild their temple. **Zechariah** accompanied Haggai, only his message urged Judah to rebuild their shattered lives by adhering to God's law. **Malachi**, in the final era of Old Testament history, attempted to stir the Jews from a state of spiritual laziness. His message concludes with a preview of the Messiah's forerunner, John the Baptist.

Value of the Old Testament

The thrust of the Old Testament is to demonstrate the development of God's plan of redemption, as such was worked out through the Jewish people and their interaction with other nations. Old Testament history is, therefore, highly selective. The value of the Old Testament is seen in: its **prophetic preparation** for the coming of Christ (Galatians 3:24), its **great moral lessons** that are timeless (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:6,11), and its cultivation of an awareness of the heinous **nature of sin** (Romans 7:7,13).

The Old Covenant, as a binding legal system, was restricted to the nation of Israel (Deuteronomy 5:1-5), and was abrogated with the death of Christ on the cross (Galatians 3:25; Ephesians 2:11ff; Colossians 2:14ff).

Four Silent Centuries

As the Old Testament ends, revelation from Heaven ceases. Four hundred years pass before the Savior is born. Many developments occurred during this era, e.g., the Jewish sects, the synagogue, the rise of Greek culture, etc. Much providential preparation was being done in view of the arrival of God's Son (Galatians 4:4).

New Testament Divisions

The 27 books of the New Testament easily divide themselves into four sections. Each segment has divinely-designed purpose and is marvelously correlated with the others.

Biographical Documents

The first four books of the New Testament are biographical in nature – though none of these professes to be a complete biography of Jesus Christ. Each is divinely selective in its aim, yet it supplements its Gospel companions.

There were three prevailing cultures in first century Palestine. It is not surprising, therefore, that there should be a Gospel narrative directed to each of these populations. The Gospel of **Matthew** is intended to influence the Jews. It emphasizes the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah of Old Testament prophecy; thus, there is a significant appeal to the text of the Hebrew Scriptures. **Mark**, a close companion of Peter, penned a narrative adapted to the Roman mind; he stresses the urgency with which Christ “served” his heavenly Father. The concept of servitude was keen in the Roman world.

Luke’s Gospel account was fashioned for the Greek culture, and its aim is to highlight the human nature of the Lord Jesus. In Greek thought, “man” was exalted. The book of **John** is altogether unique. It is cosmopolitan in appeal and provides strong evidence that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Thus, there is an emphasis on the “signs” (miracles) Christ performed.

The Book of Church History

The book of **Acts** is an abbreviated history of the church of Christ for about the first 30 years of its existence. The record begins with the ascension of Jesus back to heaven, and concludes with Paul’s first Roman imprisonment. The church had its commencement on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), 50 days following the Lord’s resurrection.

The Acts account may be divided roughly into two segments – the labors of Peter and John among the Jews in Jerusalem (1-12), and the ministry of Paul among the Gentiles (13-28) – with three missionary campaigns and the voyage to Rome.

Letters to Churches and Individuals

The next section of the New Testament embraces a series of epistles (letters) written to various congregations of the Lord’s people, or to certain individuals. Paul is known to have written 13 of these books (Romans through Philemon), John wrote three short letters, Peter penned two epistles, while James and Jude authored one each; the book of Hebrews remains anonymous, though many speculate regarding its authorship.

Romans was directed to the saints in the city of Rome. Paul discussed God’s great plan for saving man by means of “the faith” system, i.e., the message of the good news concerning salvation through Christ.

The letters known as **1 Corinthians** and **2 Corinthians** were sent to a troubled church in Corinth (in southern Greece). The first letter deals with theological and moral problems plaguing that congregation, while the second epistle largely contains a defense of Paul’s apostleship against a faction opposed to his influence. **Galatians** was written to a group of churches in Asia Minor, most likely those established by Paul on his first missionary journey. It argues against a Judaistic ideology that attempted to bind Moses’ law upon the Gentiles.

The book of **Ephesians** was dispatched by Paul to the church in Ephesus. It focuses upon God’s eternal plan for human redemption by means of the “in Christ” relationship. **Philippians** was addressed to Paul’s favorite church. It expresses great joy for these brethren and urges them toward unity on the basis of serving one another. **Colossians** deals with a heresy in the church of Colossae (in Asia Minor). The book exalts the deity of Christ and rebukes false worship. The little book of **Philemon** has to do with a runaway slave, Onesimus, whom Paul converted in

Rome. It contains the seeds for the abolition of slavery. These four books were penned during Paul's Roman confinement (Acts 28).

The two Thessalonian epistles were addressed to the church in Thessalonica (in Macedonia, Greece). **First Thessalonians** dealt with Paul's apostleship, admonitions for Christian living, and issues related to the return of Christ. **Second Thessalonians** sought to correct a misunderstanding of the first treatise; the Lord's second coming would not occur before a significant apostasy from primitive Christianity developed.

First Timothy, Titus, and 2 Timothy (in that order) were written to help churches qualify for greater maturity in leadership. **First Timothy** deals with the qualifications of elders and deacons, as well as the responsibilities of an evangelist like Timothy, one of Paul's closest companions. The letter to **Titus** instructs this brother on how to set in order certain matters that were yet lacking in the churches on the island of Crete. **Second Timothy** was written from Paul's final Roman confinement, as he was awaiting execution. It offers warm words of instruction and encouragement to his young "child in the faith."

Hebrews was written by an inspired writer whose aim was to curb the defection of some Jewish Christians who were being encouraged by false teachers to abandon the teaching of Christ and return to the Mosaic dispensation. The book highlights the "better" way of the covenant of Jesus.

James, written by Christ's half-brother, is a practical little book, revealing the value of the Lord's gospel message for the everyday trials of Christian living.

The two epistles of **Peter**, written to Christians dispersed throughout the Mediterranean world, are designed to inoculate the child of God against the rigors of persecution, and to warn against the pernicious efforts of false teachers. The three epistles authored by **John** are intended to:

- a. refute gnostic errors (a first century heresy that assaulted the nature of Christ);
- b. commend faithful Christians, like the elect lady (2 John) and Gaius (3 John); and
- c. issue a warning about church dictators, e.g., Diotrephes (3 John)

Jude, written by another of Christ's half brothers, also warns about false teachers and the danger of apostasy.

A Book of Prophecy

The book of **Revelation** presents a fitting conclusion to the New Testament record. It reflects a series of visions seen by John on the island of Patmos. The message of the book is "victory." All who "overcome," thus maintaining their faith, will share in the great victory of the Lamb, who will ultimately triumph over all enemies of truth.

The Value of the New Testament

The Gospel records document the identity and mission of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. They produce faith in the honest heart. Acts demonstrates how people became Christians under the guiding hands of inspired men. The epistles protect against false doctrines and help mature God's children in the faith. Revelation promises a glorious eternity, in spite of the persecutions of this life.

Amazing Coordination

One of the truly astounding features of the Bible is the fact that these 66 documents, written over a span of some 1,600 years (from at least 1500 B.C. to A.D. 100), all fit together in such a stunningly coordinated pattern. Every book has its place and its unique contribution to make to the body of sacred literature. Each narrative, either directly or indirectly, is Christological in its thrust. A magnificent chorus of three-score, and six masterpieces; collectively provide evidence of our great Creator, and his redemptive love for humanity.