

Journey of Faith



In Short:



- The Bible has a unique nature, history, and structure.
- Scripture is the sacred and inspired word of God.
- Catholics consider context when reading and interpreting Scripture.

• What might you have risked smuggling in if you were in Avram's situation? Why?

• Why might the Gospel of John been so precious to Avram and Wurmbrand?



What Is the Bible?

The **Bible** ("little books" in Greek) is a collection of writings—a library—about God, his relationship with humankind, and how he wants us to relate to him and each other. As a whole, it serves as a record of **salvation history**: the Father's saving plan and works as recounted through time, people, and events, beginning with Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis and ending in the new heaven and earth and fulfillment of God's kingdom in the Book of Revelation.

Who Wrote the Bible?

Many Bible stories and records were passed by word of mouth through oral tradition long before anyone wrote them down. These stories, also called Scriptures, were all written for different reasons but have the common purpose to try to share the story of God's relationship with his people. Eventually, people recognized a need to write them down. The books of the Bible were written at various times between 900 BC and AD 100.

The Bible

In his book, *In God's Underground*, Richard Wurmbrand tells of his imprisonment in Romania for his religious views. One day, the guards brought in a new prisoner named Avram. Avram was badly injured and in an upper-body cast. After the guards left, his hand disappeared beneath the cast and emerged with a small, tattered book:

"Avram lay there quietly turning the pages, until he became conscious of the eager eyes fixed on him. 'Your book,' I said. 'What is it? Where did you get it?' Avram closed the book. 'It's the Gospel according to John,' he said." He had managed to conceal it under his cast at the time of his arrest. Avram held out the book. Wurmbrand says, "I took the little book in my hands as if it were a live bird. No life-saving drug could have been more precious to me...."

The authors came from different backgrounds and wrote in a variety of languages and styles. Catholics believe and teach that each book was **divinely inspired**. This means we believe the Holy Spirit guided the authors' work to ensure they expressed the message, the truth, that God wanted shared. Saying that God is the author of the Bible doesn't mean God dictated the Bible word for word.

How Is the Old Testament Organized?

The Old Testament books trace the relationship between the Israelites and the one God and Creator who acts in human history, guiding it with plan and purpose.

The Pentateuch ("five books" in Greek) is the first five books of the Bible and also is known as the **Torah** ("Law" in Hebrew, specifically the Law of Moses). It tells of the Israelites' journey as God's Chosen People through Abraham's path to Canaan and the exodus from slavery in Egypt.

The Historical Books cover the period from the Israelites' entry into the Promised Land around 1225 BC to the end of the Maccabean wars around 135 BC. Their view of world events sees God's guiding hand in everything.

The Wisdom Books are an artistic yet instructional search into the meaning of life. The authors use poetry, proverbs, sayings, and songs to face problems and questions of our origin and destiny, suffering, good and evil, right and wrong.

The Prophetic Books are the words of those who speak for God about important situations concerning God's Chosen People. Central to the prophets are themes of repentance and expectation of the Messiah.

How Is the New Testament Organized?

For years after his resurrection, missionaries spread the news about Jesus by word of mouth. Eventually, Christians decided to preserve their heritage in writing.

Most of the New Testament books were written by the end of the first century. The writings don't tell who Jesus was but who he is. Each book reveals a unique aspect of Jesus, guides the Church and Christian living, and has the power to change lives today.

The Gospels—Gospel means "good news." The four Gospels were written for different communities, but all record the words and deeds of Jesus, tell the story of his passion and death, and explain what they mean in light of his resurrection.

- The Gospel of Matthew focuses on Jesus' teachings.
- The Gospel of Mark tells about the public ministry and humanity of Jesus.
- The Gospel of Luke reveals Jesus' concern for the poor and women.
- The Gospel of John leads us into the mystery of Christ.

The Acts of the Apostles is an account of how the early Church lived and grew.

The Pauline Epistles consist of thirteen letters from St. Paul to local churches and the Letter to the Hebrews.

The Catholic Letters are seven letters by other apostles to the universal Church.

The Book of Revelation is a message of hope for persecuted Christians, promising Christ's ultimate triumph—not a prediction of the future.

Two Testaments, Two Covenants

The word **testament** means “agreement” or “covenant.” The concept of **covenant** is central to the Bible. The Old Covenant was established between God and our Jewish ancestors, beginning with Abraham. The New Covenant was established by and in Jesus Christ. The New Covenant fulfills and is a continuation of the Old. It extends God’s law and salvation to Gentiles (non-Jews).

You have practiced looking up Bible verses in earlier lessons. Your Bible’s table of contents will help you determine each book’s respective testament and, likely, page number. The Old Testament comes first because its events occurred earlier. It is three times the size of the New Testament because it covers more books and more time. While the New Testament covers less than 100 years, it is far more important to Christians than the Old Testament.

Locate the passages below. First find the book, then the chapter, and finally the verses. What are some features and promises of the two covenants?

Exodus 19:3–8

Jeremiah 31:31–34

Luke 22:19–20

Hebrews 8:7–12

Where Did the Bible Come From?

By the middle of the first century AD, Christians had adopted the forty-six Old Testament books in the Greek translation. In the sixteenth century, Protestants adopted only the thirty-nine books in the Hebrew translation. In the year 393, bishops drew up the list of books in the New Testament. It included twenty-seven books that were widely used and accepted as inspired throughout the first centuries of Christianity. To be considered inspired, a book’s content also had to be consistent with the message of Jesus as passed on by eyewitnesses.

Faced with alternate versions emerging out of the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent (1545–63) declared the list to be the **canon** (authentic and established collection) of sacred **Scripture** (in Latin, “writings”). This official declaration assured the faithful that the Catholic Scriptures were, indeed, sacred.

- *The canon of Scripture is a major part of the Church’s legacy. What possessions or traditions are part of your family’s heritage?*



How Do Catholics Read and Interpret Scripture?

The Bible’s main purpose and intent is to impart the story of our relationship with God, not to detail historical events (although we do read about events in salvation history).

When we focus only on the words themselves (literal or surface reading), we can lose the deeper meaning behind those words. As you read passages from your Bible, ask yourself:

- What is the meaning and context of this passage?
- In what style or genre was it written?
- What historical or cultural influences are reflected here?
- What was the author’s purpose or intent, given that he or she was inspired by the Holy Spirit?

Shouldn't We Take the Bible Literally?

Some Bible passages are to be read literally. When we read that Jesus is the Messiah, those words should be taken literally. When Jesus says to eat his body and drink his blood, he is not speaking metaphorically (John 6:53–57). When we read about Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, we realize these were real events.

This doesn't mean every passage contains literal facts—only that each portion of the Bible conveys something real and important—a truth—about God or the Church. The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), a document from the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), states that “the books of scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach the truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred scriptures” (11). In other words, the Bible is **inerrant**—incapable of being wrong—especially when it comes to salvation, faith, and morals. The Bible isn't to be read as a science or history book. It's a religious book with religious meaning.

Catholic teaching evolves and expands to address new situations and guides us in our interpretations and reflections on biblical texts. This makes it possible to accept scientific theories and historical conclusions without fear of contradicting God's word. When we read the Bible or hear it proclaimed at Mass, we can receive the message as God's will for our lives and communication from the one who loves each of us.

Choose and read a passage from the Bible, perhaps the Gospel for the coming Sunday.

What message of comfort, hope, or challenge do you find there?



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