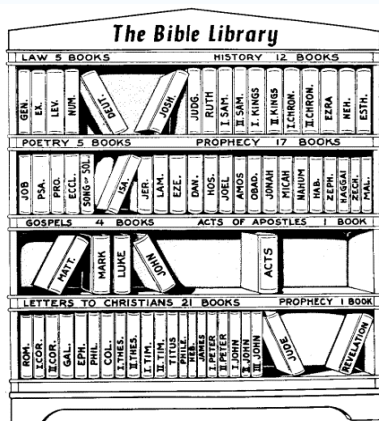




A Guided Tour of the Bible

The Bible, as we know it today, is the end product of a long process of writing, editing and selecting of literature concerned with Judaism and Christianity. It has a long literary history. The Bible reflects historical situations, human events, humanity's reactions to these happenings, and the belief that God was involved in these events.



The Bible is divided into two sections: the Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT). The Old Testament (also called the Hebrew Bible) was written before Jesus' birth, is written in Hebrew and in the Catholic tradition contains 46 books.

It is easier to understand the Bible as a library rather than one book and this will help in understanding the layout of the OT especially. The OT can be divided into four sections: Law, History, Poetry and Prophecy. It is a collection of texts of many different genres spanning a time from approximately 1400 BC to

150BC.

Law: The first five books of the bible constitute a unit in themselves and are known in the Jewish tradition as the *Torah* (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). These books contain the accounts of Creation, the 'Fall', Noah, the story of Abraham, Jacob and Joseph, Moses and the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, the 10 Commandments, and many laws on rituals, ceremony and behaviour.

History: This section of the OT contains books written by those who were profoundly influenced by the history of their people and who saw a religious lesson in it. These books are seen as accounts of the events in the history of Israel. They cover the life of the Jewish people from the time they entered the Promised Land, c. 1400 BC to c. 150 BC (books such as Joshua, Judges, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Judith and Esther fall into this category). Finally, the books of the Maccabees cover the last period of the Old Testament history of the Jewish people, as they were fighting for independence several hundred years before Christ.

Prophecy: This part of the OT contains books on the Major Prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezekiel and the twelve Minor Prophets, from Hosea through to Malachi. The main role of the prophets was not to predict the future but to "speak for God" on the issues of the day. Therefore these books should be interpreted in relation to the situation at the time of writing (*Sitz im leben*), the times and places in which people lived and worked. The primary message to God's people dealt with the current situation and that alone, so when interpreting the prophetic books

for our benefit, we should first learn what the initial intent of that message was:
What problems of his time was a particular prophet addressing?

The Wisdom Books (Poetry): The Poetical and Wisdom Books — Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon were written and collected at widely different times and consist of a number of literary types: love poetry (the Song of Solomon), prayer (Psalms), and wisdom literature (Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes). ‘Wisdom literature’ describes works that do not focus on the nation Israel, its history or on the covenant binding together God, the people Israel, and the land of Israel. Wisdom books share as their focus, reflection on universal human concerns, especially the understanding of individual experiences.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament contains 27 books which include the four accounts about Jesus’ life. It was first written in the language used throughout the Roman Empire - Greek. The NT was written in a relatively narrow span of time, probably less than a century, from c. AD 50 to c. AD 125. The authors of the gospels wrote the accounts of Jesus’ life for a particular community, for example Matthew was writing for Jewish-Christians, and Mark was probably writing for Roman-Christians etc. The gospels contain the authentic insights of the evangelists. Matthew, Mark and Luke are the three *synoptic* (similar) gospels and were written between 70 AD and 100 AD. There is much debate among scholars as to the exact sources used by the evangelists but the general consensus is that Mark was written first.



The Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke, continues the story of the first Christians after the death of Jesus, and it is followed by a large collection of letters. These books are for the most part doctrinal in character Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I and II Thessalonians (written by St. Paul). The remaining letters were written by Peter, James and John. These letters instruct the various church communities about Christianity. They were, for the most part, very informal and dealt with current situations within the church. Finally there is a book of prophecy, *Revelation* which is classed among the apocalyptic literature of the Bible.

Accessing these texts is not as daunting a task as it may seem. Discovering the world of the Bible, the politics of the time, the problems faced by society at the time, helps to give us a further understanding of what this collection of writings is about and how it can help us today in our daily lives.

Useful websites: www.bible.org www.biblegateway.com www.bible.crosswalk.com

Law, Philip, ed., *Testament: The Bible Odyssey* (London: Continuum, 2005).