

# The Bible as Book and as Library

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The title of this book contains within it two ways of referring to its subject matter: **Scripture** and the **Bible**. The first, Scripture, sometimes used in the plural (the Scriptures), comes from the Latin for “writings” (*scriptura*); this in turn corresponds to a common way of referring to sacred writings in **Greek**: *hai graphai* (“the writings”). The second, Bible, comes from the Greek word for “book,” *biblion*. What we are about to explore, then, is a book, or collection, of sacred writings. For this reason, people of faith sometimes call this book the “Sacred Scriptures” or the “Holy Bible.”

Although many people use the terms “Bible” and “Scripture” interchangeably, as we will do, the two terms can suggest different nuances of meaning. For instance, many religious traditions have sacred texts, or “scriptures,” but only Judaism and Christianity refer to their scriptures as “the Bible.” Ironically, however, some people feel that the term “Bible” is more religiously neutral, and perhaps more academic, than the term “Scripture,” with its connotation of holiness or divine inspiration.

In this and the following chapters, we will attempt to look at the Bible, or Scripture, from both an academic perspective and a faith perspective. That is to say, we want to understand it both as a human book and as a sacred text, emphasizing the former in part one, which focuses on the Bible itself, and the latter in part two, which is concerned with the Bible’s interpretation, especially in the Christian churches. Our investigation begins with a consideration of the Bible as both book and library.

## THE BIBLE AS BOOK

As we have just noted, the English word “Bible” originated from the Greek term for “book” (*biblion*), which is derived from the Greek word for the **papyrus** plant (*biblos*). Egyptian craftsmen produced an ancient version of paper by matting together strips of this marshland plant. The dried sheets of papyrus were then glued together in rolls to become a **scroll**. Jeremiah 36 gives a colorful example of how the invention of these materials contributed greatly to the development of the Bible:

In the fourth year of King Jehoiakim, son of Josiah of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Take a scroll [Greek *chartion bibliou*] and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today. (Jer 36:1–2)

Baruch, Jeremiah’s secretary, refers to the process: “He dictated all these words to me and I wrote them with ink on the scroll [Greek *en bibliæ*]” (v. 18).

Even though the angry king burned the document “until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire” (v. 23), Jeremiah dictated another with “all the words of the scroll that King Jehoiakim of Judah had burned in the fire, and many similar words were added to them” (v. 32). From this biblical passage, it is relatively easy to understand the transition from writing on *papyrus* (Greek *biblos*) to naming the finished product a *book* (Greek *biblion*).

Ordinarily, only one side of a papyrus scroll contained writing. (The heavenly visions in Ezekiel and in Revelation specifically mention writing on both sides of the papyrus as a sign of an extraordinary, supernatural message: Ezek 2:10; Rev 5:1.) Scrolls were the ordinary instrument for preserving and reading the sacred texts in synagogues; locating a particular passage required some dexterity with large scrolls. The Gospel of Luke describes the scene in the Nazareth synagogue when “the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to [Jesus]. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . .’” (4:16–17).

Papyrus was not the only material on which ancient writers inscribed texts. After animal skins were thoroughly cleaned and stitched together, they served the same purpose as the more costly papyrus, which only grew in certain regions

(e.g., Egypt, Galilee) and thus often had to be imported. The abundance of sheep and goats in Palestine provided a steady source of durable scrolls called **parchment** (Greek *membrana*). Scribes who produced the collection of Jewish manuscripts (from around the time of Jesus) that scholars today call the **Dead Sea Scrolls** (DSS) used these animal skins, which were durable enough to survive after more than 1,900 years in clay jars.

In Roman times, writing tablets with wax surfaces were framed and hinged together along one edge. Since the frames were made of wood (Latin *caudex*), the set of writing tablets was called a **codex**. This arrangement allowed for writing on both sides. (It was the precursor of the modern book.) Soon sheets of papyrus or parchment were sewn together at the “spine.” By the second century **C.E.**,<sup>1</sup> the books of the Christian Bible were recorded exclusively in this kind of codex, while the Jewish community retained the scroll format. The practicality and economy of a portable document with writing on both sides was eminently suited to the rugged missionary lifestyle of Christian evangelists, and the codex helped Christians to think of their various sacred texts as constituting one book.

## THE BIBLE AS ONE BOOK

Most people come to the reading of the Scriptures with some preconceptions about what they are. Since they are often described by one, singular title—“the Bible”—and since, like most other books, the Bible has a front and back cover, it is understandable that so many people think of the Bible simply as one book. A quick glance at the titles in the Table of Contents might give the impression that the Bible is one book with many chapters. Likewise, religious believers confidently speak of the whole Bible as the “word of God.” This familiar heartfelt expression of faith significantly reinforces the idea that God is the one author of everything contained in its unified pages. And, to be sure, the Bible does tell one grand story of God’s love for

humankind, which theologians have tried to summarize in such biblical words as grace, salvation, the kingdom of God, or **covenant**.

The first page of the Gospel of John from P66 (Papyrus Bodmer II), the earliest relatively complete manuscript of that Gospel, dating from ca. 200 C.E. (Courtesy Fondation Martin Bodmer, Cologny, Switzerland)

1Abbreviation for “Common Era” (i.e., the shared Christian and Jewish era), a scholarly alternative to “A.D.”

However, even after spending only a little time paging through the dozens of individual sections of the Bible, we discover great diversity in writing style and content, suggesting many different human authors and objectives. In addition, the dates implied in these texts range from the beginning of the world to what seems like its end in the not-too-distant future. This variety of historical epochs suggests long periods of use and reinterpretation of earlier documents. Honestly recognizing the complexity of the Bible as a diverse collection prepares us to experience both why it is a treasure of great spiritual value and why it also requires careful study. In fact, the Bible attests to its own diversity.

### THE BIBLE AS MANY BOOKS

The Bible clearly indicates that it contains other books within itself. Frequently, the Bible refers to the “book of the law of Moses” (2 Kgs 14:6) or the “book of Moses” (Mark 12:26). Mention is also made of other specific documents, such as the “book of the words of the prophet Isaiah” (Luke 3:4; cf. 4:17), the “book of the prophets” (Acts 7:42), the book of “Hosea” (Rom 9:25) and the “book of Psalms” (Acts 1:20).<sup>2</sup>

The Gospel of John also refers to itself as a “book” (John 20:30; Greek *biblion*). Likewise, the author of the Acts of the Apostles tightly knits that document to the story about Jesus that the same person had presented “in the first book” (or “account”; Greek *logon*), namely the Gospel according to Luke (Acts 1:1; cf. Luke 1:1–4).

This little journey of discovery alerts us to the truth that the Bible is not really just one book. In fact, we can speak quite appropriately of it as a “library of books.”

2The Bible also refers to other books that, though not included in the Bible itself, were apparently used as sources for the composition of some biblical texts. This phenomenon is mostly associated with descriptions of the deeds of the Israelite monarchy; for example, there is the “Book of the Acts of Solomon” (1 Kgs 11:41), as well as the “Books of the Annals of the Kings of Israel” (1 Kgs 14:19) and the “Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah” (1 Kgs 14:29). There is a similar phenomenon in the NT. Luke 1:1–4 makes mention of more than one previous narrative of what Luke also intends to write as an “orderly account” (v. 3).

### THE BIBLE AS A LIBRARY

In a library, individual books are usually organized according to particular topics. There are sections for science, philosophy, religion, history, art, music, biography, fiction, etc. An educated person has certain expectations about what information would be contained in the books grouped in these various sections of the library. Since library books are not generally organized by the dates they were written, two books by two authors who lived twenty centuries apart can stand side by side. For example, we might find a philosophical work by Plato (430–347 B.C.E.) on the same shelf as a commentary on that work by a modern philosopher and published just last year. Despite the vast difference of time, both books focus on the same literature of Plato. We benefit greatly when we read both works together, even though they were written more than two millennia apart.

In the Bible, individual books containing material spanning many decades (in the case of the **New Testament**) or even many centuries (in the case of the **Old Testament**) are joined together in collections. For example, the first five books in the Jewish collection (the Christian Old Testament) are usually associated with Moses, whose story links four of them (all but Genesis) together, yet the books were not written at the same time. Other books from different periods are grouped together because of their association with the ministry of individual Hebrew prophets. A smaller group of writings from various centuries concerns itself with provocative topics of a general nature, such as the challenge of belief in a God of love and justice while believers live in a world where innocent people suffer and their oppressors prosper. The book of Psalms gathers together 150 hymns written over many centuries. **Gospels** attributed to four different Christian authors stand side by side, even though many factors, including date of composition, distinguish them from one another.

The same is true of letters by various Christian missionaries. The profound religious relationship among all of these writings from various time periods is not always immediately evident. The diversity in the Bible with respect not only to date, but also to literary **genre** (type), is thus quite remarkable. As the previous paragraph suggests, the Bible contains historical works, prophetic books, quasi-philosophical writings, hymns, biographies (the Gospels<sup>3</sup>), and letters. There are also legal documents, short stories, collections of proverbs, sermons, records of visions, and other kinds of literature. Within each of these kinds of books, we find numerous additional literary forms, such as the well-known parables.

3The Gospels may be understood as ancient, not modern, biographies.

Having all the books of the Bible gathered together between two covers of one book makes them all available to us at the same time. Even though they have much in common with one another, we should never forget that each book has its own history of development and its own unique perspective. Despite some strong literary ties among them, most of the books in the Bible are quite independent of one another, just like the books in any other kind of library.

### IN SEARCH OF A NAME

What's in a name? We are all sensitive to people who misspell or mispronounce our personal names. Thus, people of Jewish and Christian faith who cherish these collections of religious books are justifiably sensitive to the names other people use to designate their sacred writings. For example, **Jews** organize their 39 books into three collections that they call **Torah** ("tradition" or "law"), **Nevi'im** ("prophets") and **Kethuvim** ("writings"). The whole library of Jewish documents taken together is called **TaNak**, or **Tanakh**, which simply vocalizes an acronym formed from the initial **Hebrew** letter of each collection: **T**, **N**, and **K**.<sup>4</sup> Jews may also call this collection simply "the Bible" or "the Scriptures."

Christians usually refer to it as "the Old Testament" or "the Christian Old Testament" (see further discussion below). Some Christians and biblical scholars who prefer a more neutral term than "Old Testament" designate these same documents as the **Hebrew Bible**, since most of the collection was originally written in Hebrew, though there are several portions in **Aramaic**, the language that gradually replaced spoken Hebrew after the **Babylonian exile** (587–539 B.C.E.).<sup>5</sup>

The cessation of Hebrew as a spoken language and the rise of the empire under Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.E.)—which spread Greek culture, religion, and language—threatened the religious and cultural heritage of Jews scattered around the Mediterranean and further East.<sup>6</sup> Under these circumstances, Jews had to find a way to preserve their sacred text for a new cultural and linguistic reality.

4 Alternate transliterations for the second and third divisions are Nebi'im and both Ketuvim and Kethubim; for the whole, Tanak.

5 Dan 2:4b–7: 28; Ezra 5:3–6:14; Jer 10:11. "B.C.E." means "Before the Common Era."

6 While we today take for granted that the Bible should be translated into every language of the earth so that its message might be accessible to all, this was a new idea two millennia ago. Indeed, even today the Qur'an in its original Arabic is the sole norm for Muslim worship and scriptural study, no matter what the nationality or ethnic background of those who embrace Islam. Only recently has the Roman Catholic Church authorized its worship in vernacular languages after Latin prevailed generally for 1,500 years in the Latin Rite churches.

### **The Septuagint (LXX)**

About 250 B.C.E., Greek-speaking Jewish inhabitants of Alexandria in Egypt took the bold step of translating their Hebrew scriptures into Greek. The *Letter of Aristeas* (written around 120 B.C.E.) offers a defense for the evolution of the Greek translation that came to be known as the **Septuagint** (a Latin expression for "seventy"). This name and its customary abbreviation, **LXX** (the Roman numerals for 70), stem from the sacred legend, recorded in the *Letter of Aristeas*,<sup>7</sup> that seventy Jewish scholars produced the translation independently of one another under the inspiration of God and without any error or confusion.

Although scholars today provide a more nuanced theory for the growth of the Septuagint as a long-term process, the existence of this Greek translation facilitated the popular acceptance of other inspirational Jewish books written in Greek rather than in Hebrew. These include the Wisdom of Solomon, Judith, Baruch, the Letter of Jeremiah, 1–2 Maccabees, and some short Greek additions to Esther and Daniel. (Today, these books are included in some Christian Bibles, but not in the Jewish Bible; see the tables below and the discussion in chapters three and six.)

Jesus read from the Hebrew Scriptures in the synagogue of Nazareth, but soon after his death and resurrection disciples like Paul of Tarsus evangelized Jews, converts to Judaism ("proselytes"), and non-Jews in many Greek-speaking cities of the Mediterranean world. The Christian church was born with a "Bible" in its cradle, namely, the Greek Septuagint. The twenty-seven Christian documents that came out of that period of growth of the early church are treasured today as the New Testament. They were originally written in Greek, and when those documents quote from the Jewish Scriptures, they clearly demonstrate a preference for the LXX version rather than the original Hebrew text.

### **Old Testament, New Testament**

The Christian Bible has two divisions, or **testaments**. As noted above, Christian tradition designates the books of Tanakh with the term "Old Testament" in light of the customary name of its own collection of twenty-seven documents

as the "New Testament"—from a Latin word (*testamentum*) that can mean "covenant."<sup>8</sup> The literary and theological relationship between the Jewish and Christian collections—the two parts of the Christian Bible—explains both the origin and the significance of these related titles.

7A second-century B.C.E. Jewish document considered to be one of the OT pseudepigrapha (see chapter five).

8Henceforth in this book, Old Testament and New Testament are generally abbreviated OT and NT.

"Covenant" (Hebrew *berit*; Greek *diathkē*) is one of the most significant concepts in the experience of Jewish and Christian faith. This important term links together the salvation stories associated with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. Indeed, the collections of Jewish and Christian writings arose over centuries as the respective communities described, commented upon, and propagated the realities of successive covenants. When Jer 31:31 speaks of God establishing a "new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah," the foundation was laid in the minds of later generations for some new revelation that would add to what was not yet present in the former experiences of covenant. Thus, the Christian writings characteristically refer to the "Scripture(s)" (Tanakh) being "fulfilled," that is, brought to completion in some new way by a person or event in Christian experience (e.g., John 19:24, 36; cf. Luke 24:27, 44–45).

As if to echo the words of Jeremiah, in the Gospel tradition Jesus explicitly refers to the “new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20; cf. 1 Cor 11:25). Paul speaks of old and new covenants (2 Cor 3:6, 14). Even more explicitly alluding to Jer 31:31, the Letter to the Hebrews contrasts the former covenant with Israel with the Christian experience of Jesus as mediator of a “better” (7:22; 8:6), and “new” (9:15) covenant.

So as to address a perceived disparaging tone in the comparison of “old” and “new” covenants, academic scholars and Christians concerned about Jewish-Christian dialogue sometimes suggest more neutral terms such as Two Testaments, though this still involves speaking of the **First Testament** and the **Second Testament**. In reality, the Christian Bible “shares” the Tanakh with the continuing religious community of Judaism today as one of its two parts. Even Augustine’s assertion, centuries ago, that the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old is made manifest in the New, supports this “shared” understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. One Christian scholar, Philip Cunningham, suggests rewording Augustine’s formula in this way: “In the Shared Testament, the rabbinic texts and the Christian Testament find their perpetual foundations; in the Christian Testament, the Shared Testament is intensely read anew in Christ” (*Sharing the Scriptures*, p. 18).

Perhaps sensitivity is best exercised by taking into account the religious context of discussion. Differing Jewish and Christian titles such as Tanakh, Old Testament, and New Testament make eminent sense within their respective faith communities. These terms do have a biblical basis for their origin and usage. The use of these tradition-specific terms, even in scholarly discussion, acknowledges how the diverse faith groups have traditionally thought of their own documents.

### CANONS

A collection of sacred texts forms a standard or norm for a particular religious community. The Jewish and Christian communities use the term **canon** (Greek *kanōn*) for their respective official lists of individual books they consider inspired and sacred. The root meaning of this term is “measuring stick”; hence, the canon is the standard that guides a tradition’s belief and behavior. (Though a *canon* of biblical books is quite different from a *cannon* used in military combat, biblical canons have led to a lot of heated debate over the centuries.) As chapter six explains in some detail, each faith community had its own process and criteria for the inclusion or exclusion of individual books in their different lists.

Jewish practice since at least the rabbinic era includes twenty-four books in Tanakh (thirty-nine as counted in the Christian Bible), while Christian practice since the late fourth century includes twenty-seven books in the NT.<sup>9</sup> But Christian Bibles contain different numbers of books in their OTs. Students who come to the Bible for the first time often ask why the Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Bibles do not agree on the number of books in the OT. A glance at the various canons of Jewish writings in the list provided in the table clarifies the matter.

While the Roman Catholic Church follows the (longer) Septuagint list as the basis for its OT, churches that follow the Reformation of the sixteenth century have opted to use the (shorter) Hebrew canon as the basis for their translations.

They designate the additional Septuagint books written in Greek the (OT) **Apocrypha**, from the Greek word for “concealed” or “hidden.” Catholics acknowledge the inspired status of these books but designate them the **deuterocanonical** (“secondarily canonized”) books because they were not originally included in Jerome’s Latin **Vulgate** translation of OT books that had been the official Bible of the church from the fourth to the sixteenth centuries. Many ecumenical editions of the Christian Bible contain the apocryphal/deuterocanonical books in recognition of their canonical status for Catholic and Orthodox Christians, and in order that others may consult them. The following tables exhibit the various canons of the OT/Hebrew Bible:

<sup>9</sup> There are minor exceptions. A small part of the Syrian Orthodox tradition (the Nestorian Church) has never accepted the books of 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Jude, and Revelation, and the Ethiopic Church’s “broader” NT canon has 35 books (compared to its “narrower” 27-book canon).

The Jewish Scriptures (24 Books)		
Torah	Prophets	Writings
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Joshua Judges Samuel (1-2) Kings (1-2) Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel The Twelve Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi	Psalms Proverbs Job Song of Songs (Song of Solomon) Ruth Lamentations Ecclesiastes Esther Daniel Ezra-Nehemiah Chronicles (1-2)

The Protestant Old Testament (= the Jewish Bible counted as 39 books)		
Pentateuch	Historical and Poetic Books	Prophetic Books
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Joshua Judges Ruth 1-2 Samuel 1-2 Kings 1-2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther  Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Songs (Song of Solomon)	Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi

The Orthodox Old Testament (= the Jewish Bible in the LXX + ca. 10 additional LXX books [in italics])		
Historical Books	Poetic and Didactic Books	Prophetic Books
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy Joshua Judges Ruth 1–2 Kingdoms (1–2 Samuel) 3–4 Kingdoms (1–2 Kings) 1–2 Chronicles 1 Esdras 2 Esdras (Ezra, sometimes also Nehemiah) Nehemiah Esther (with the six additions) Judith Tobit 1–3 Maccabees	Psalms (incl. Ps. 151) Job Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Songs (Song of Solomon) Wisdom of Solomon ( <i>Wisdom of Sirach</i> )	Hosea Amos Micah Joel Obadiah Jonah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi Isaiah Jeremiah Baruch Lamentations Letter of Jeremiah Ezekiel Daniel <sup>10</sup> Also: 4 Maccabees. In an appendix Prayer of Manasseh. In an appendix 3 Esdras. In Slavonic Bibles of the Russian Orthodox Church. In an appendix

The Catholic Old Testament (= the Jewish Bible [plus minor additions] + 7 deuterocanonical books [in italics] = 46 books)		
Pentateuch	Historical and Wisdom Books	Prophetic Books
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Joshua Judges Ruth 1–2 Samuel 1–2 Kings 1–2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Tobit Judith Esther (incl. the six additions) 1–2 Maccabees  Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Songs (Song of Solomon) Wisdom of Solomon Sirach ( <i>Ecclesiasticus</i> )	Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Baruch (incl. Letter of Jeremiah) Ezekiel Daniel <sup>11</sup> Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi

## NAMES AND CONTENTS OF BOOKS

While most traditional names or titles of biblical books may offer some limited information about the contents of the book, many do not. The names arose in various ways. Sometimes the titles of individual books of the Bible come from the first word of the book. For instance, the name of the first book in Tanakh is *Bereshith*, from the first word in Hebrew (meaning “in the beginning” of something). Christians usually refer to this same book with the Septuagint title “Genesis,” which is not a translation of *Bereshith* but a reference to the initial story of the “generations of the heavens and earth when they were created” (Gen 2:4). The last book in the NT begins with the Greek word *apokalypsis*, giving rise to the naming of the book as **Apocalypse** when transliterated, or as “Revelation” when translated into English.

At other times, the title of a biblical book designates a collection of similar items, such as the book titled Psalms, which contains 150 examples of the same type of literature. While there is a variety of psalms (e.g., praise, lament, thanksgiving), they all follow the general format of a hymn written in poetic **parallelism**, or “thought rhyme.” Often, the name of a biblical book bears relation to the principal character in the book, such as Hosea or Amos, or to the alleged author of the work, such as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. However, a name does not immediately settle the question of authorship, or of content. Names can be misleading in a number of ways. For instance, the Acts of the Apostles is not really about the “twelve apostles.” Rather, it focuses principally on Peter, one of the original Twelve, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, who was not part of the original group of Twelve with Jesus.

The content of individual books ranges from the words and ministry of individual prophets, such as Jeremiah, to the grand panorama of Israelite history sketched in 1 and 2 Kings. The apostolic letters attributed to Paul, James, Peter, and John give insight into the early decades of the Christian community. On the other hand, Ecclesiastes deals with issues of good and evil that transcend any particular century of human history and even the limited boundaries of specific religious groups.

It is obvious that a book’s title is not always the key to understanding the full scope of what may lie between its covers. For instance, the Song of Songs does not discuss music, nor is it a hymn itself (though it may have been composed from the lyrics of some local wedding songs). Rather, the repetition of the word “song” in the title expresses the superlative degree in Hebrew. A more accurate translation of the title would be “The Greatest Song.”

The titles of groups of biblical books may also be somewhat misleading. For example, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible are grouped under the Hebrew term *torah*, which is best translated as “tradition.” In Christian writings, under the influence of the LXX translation of *torah* into Greek as *nomos* (“law”), this same group of books is referred to as “law.” We would expect a modern library with a section devoted to “law” to be stocked with materials on legal matters for the sake of lawyers, judges, and other interested persons. While at least four of the five books of the *torah* do contain some “laws,” much more is present there, making it inaccurate to think of those books as if they were simply legal codes. Rather, “the law” begins by reflecting on the origins of the earth and the human family before extolling the family traditions of Israel’s ancestors.

Finally, a word about the section “subheads” that appear in many Bibles within the text itself. Apart from the brief letter that Paul the apostle wrote to Philemon, and some of the other letters in the NT, most books in the Bible today cover many pages in length. We are accustomed to using the editorial headings that divide each book into smaller, more manageable portions to help us follow the development of the story, or to call our attention to significant topics, such as “The Ten Commandments” or “The Baptism of Jesus.” However, these are not part of the biblical text, and it is important to realize that these good efforts to help readers may reflect modern concerns or the perceptions of translators and editors more than the intentions of the original authors.

## CHAPTERS AND VERSES

When we write a letter to a friend, we do not usually group the paragraphs into “chapters.” Nor do we number the sentences as “verses.” If we did so, people might think us a bit pretentious or odd. But that is precisely what we find when we open our Bible to read Paul’s letters to the Romans or Galatians. Paul would most certainly have considered that behavior as unusual as we do today. He wrote in a straightforward fashion with passion and powerful rhetorical skill. But hundreds of years later, practically every sentence of his letters, and the rest of the Bible, had become so important in church debates that it became convenient to number them in order to keep straight which verse the debaters were talking about.

### Historical Development

Divisions in biblical manuscripts had a rich history even before the rise of the current system that has held sway for the past five hundred years. Early Jewish and Christian religious leaders and scholars divided the books of the Bible into sections according to various methods. Our modern system of chapter divisions dates back to the Middle Ages and Stephen Langton (d. 1228), a lecturer at the University of Paris working with the Latin Bible, or Vulgate. His system was diffused more widely through a **concordance** (alphabetical index) to the Latin Vulgate that was produced by Cardinal Hugo of St. Cher (d. 1263). Gradually, the same system was used with Bibles in other languages.

But it would be another two hundred years before the further subdivision of the text into verses started appearing in various ways. In 1440, Rabbi Isaac Nathan numbered verses in the Hebrew Bible for his Hebrew concordance. However, Robert Stephanus (Estienne) was the first person to issue the whole Bible (including the Apocrypha) with the current system of verses in his edition of the Latin Vulgate at Geneva in 1555.

The use of punctuation to separate chapters and verses in biblical references has varied over time and still varies around the world. The standard form in the United States now is to divide chapter and verse by means of a colon (e.g., Gen 1:1, referring to

the first verse of the first chapter of Genesis [Genesis 1]), though occasionally a period is used (e.g., Gen 1.1). It is also standard practice to indicate a continuous passage (set of verses) with a hyphen (e.g., Gen 1:1–3, referring to the first three verses of Gen 1) and to separate a list of noncontinuous verses with commas (e.g., Gen 1:1, 3, 5, referring to verses 1, 3, and 5 of Gen 1).<sup>12</sup>

### Modern Uses and Cautions

Some people familiar with the Bible can quote “chapter and verse.” This is an advantage for locating a familiar or beloved text quickly, such as Psalm 23, which begins, “The Lord is my shepherd.” In the case of a psalm, dividing a short section of Scripture into verses is not a great problem because a psalm is generally a short unit unto itself with a clear beginning and ending. The parallelism, or “thought rhyme,” characteristic of Hebrew poetry often quite naturally divides the thoughts from one another. But when a letter of Paul with a complicated theological discussion (such as Rom 9–11 or 1 Cor 12–14) is chopped into chapters and verses, the modern divisions often do not respect Paul’s original line of thought. (See, for example, 1 Cor 11:1, which is actually the conclusion to chapters 8–10!) Such inappropriate divisions of the text may significantly interfere with our correct comprehension and interpretation of a biblical text.

<sup>12</sup>There is also a variety of abbreviations for the biblical books; U.S. scholarly standards are provided in the front of this book.

The medieval chapter divisions occasionally correspond appropriately to movement within the biblical text, such as Matt 5:1, when Jesus goes up the mountain to teach. But the subsequent division of this “Sermon on the Mount” into chapters two more times (as Matt 6 and 7) makes it clear that the traditional system is primarily of utilitarian value and should not dissuade us from searching out the more intrinsic points of division within each biblical document in the course of our study.

Modern attention to the narrative and rhetorical quality of biblical documents enhances our appreciation of the literary skill of the original authors. The study of the narrative character of biblical documents gives attention to the natural progression of the story line in the document and may clearly indicate divisions in the text that do not coincide with traditional chapter and verse divisions. Modern commentators emphasize literary elements within the text, such as movement from place to place, repetition of the same idea at a later time, and shifts in content and tone. Consequently, outlines in modern commentaries (and even in study Bibles) regularly disagree with traditional chapter and verse divisions.<sup>13</sup>

### CONCLUSION: “WE ARE HERE TO SERVE YOU”

Libraries are so vast and specialized that we would be foolish to think we could navigate a new one easily. That is why we often need the assistance of a librarian to locate quickly the information we are seeking. What is the role of the contributors to this book? We are like librarians who have some familiarity with what you can discover in the Bible. Our goal is to help you find your own way. You may have many questions as you begin your biblical study, and we will provide answers to some of them. But, like any library, the Bible contains answers to many questions you have not yet imagined. We hope to point you in the direction of some of those interesting questions and answers.

One cannot judge a book by its cover, nor understand its contents solely by looking at its title. One must be ready to sit down with it for a while before being able to understand what importance it might hold. This ecumenical introduction to the Bible will help you find your way around the library of the Bible. A good study Bible prepared by a team of scholars—such as *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, *The Catholic Study Bible*, or *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*—is also a helpful resource. But when all is said and done, you can only know the breadth and depth of Sacred Scripture by taking the time to read through its many books reflectively.

<sup>13</sup>Readers who have a computer version of the Bible may wish to test their own ability in analyzing the structure of biblical texts. They can print out a few chapters of Exodus or Romans or Matthew, deleting the customary chapter and verse numbers. They can then set about trying to discover the inner dynamic of the biblical passages without the distraction of the later editorial divisions. This little experiment often gives new insight into familiar passages, as well as others that are less widely known.

### FOR FURTHER READING AND STUDY

1. Aageson, James W. *In the Beginning: Critical Concepts for the Study of the Bible*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2000. A collection of sixteen short essays introducing critical thinking about the Bible, the interpretation of biblical texts, and the role of the Bible in religious communities.
2. Barrera, Julio Trebolle. *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible: An Introduction to the History of the Bible*. Translated by Wilfred G. E. Watson. Leiden: Brill/ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. An interdisciplinary discussion of the formation of the Hebrew Bible and of the authoritative Christian and Jewish texts it generated.
3. Brown, Michael Joseph. *What They Don’t Tell You: A Survivor’s Guide to Biblical Studies*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000. A popular introduction to the academic approach to Scripture and to the integration of that approach with the Christian faith.
4. Coote, Robert B., and Mary P. Coote. *Power, Politics and the Making of the Bible: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990. A study of the Bible in its relation to the larger history of the biblical and early Christian period from 1250 B.C.E. to 550 C.E.
5. Cunningham, Philip. *Sharing the Scriptures*. A Stimulus Book, vol. 1. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 2003. A booklet on the role of the Bible in Jewish-Catholic relations.

6. Metzger, Bruce, and Michael Coogan, eds. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. A useful, encyclopedia-like, one volume reference work with articles on such topics as books and bookmaking in antiquity, chapter and verse divisions, the canon, covenant, and much more.
7. Riches, John. *The Bible: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. A brief, popular account of the formation of the Bible as canonical literature with particular emphasis on the history of interpretation over the past 2,000 years.
8. Rogerson, John. *An Introduction to the Bible*. New York: Penguin, 1999. A survey of the history and composition of the books of the OT and the NT, including contemporary issues of the Bible's relationship to matters such as science, the life of Jesus, and fundamentalism. , ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. A beautifully crafted history of the composition and interpretation of the Bible.
- 10. SOME RECOMMENDED STUDY BIBLES**
11. *The Catholic Study Bible*, edited by Donald Senior et al. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
12. *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, edited by Wayne A. Meeks et al. New York: Oxford, 1993.
13. *The Jewish Study Bible*, edited by Adele Berlin and Mark Zvi Brettler. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
14. *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, edited by Walter Harrelson. Nashville: Abingdon, 2003.