

The B-I-B-L-E, Is That a Book for Me?

In This Chapter

- ◆ A Bible IQ quiz
- ◆ How the Bible can benefit us in practical ways
- ◆ How the Bible went from a bunch of manuscripts to a bunch of different modern translations
- ◆ Some factors to consider when selecting a Bible

Most homes have one or more copies of the Bible. It's the best-selling book of all time, so those copies have to be going somewhere besides hotel room drawers. Yet although the cover says Holy Bible, most people admit that when it comes to knowing what's between those covers, their comprehension is, well, *holey*. They know bits and pieces. They're pretty sure about some of the stories, and they *think* other things they have come to believe might be in there somewhere. But then, those things could have come from *Aesop's Fables* or some bit of mythology they've picked up along the way.

For people who dare approach the Bible to learn more about what's there, sometimes the challenge seems overwhelming. Genesis and Exodus read pretty well, but that next Leviticus/Numbers/Deuteronomy stretch is enough to bring even the best-intentioned Bible readers to their knees.

Our goal in this book is to help you discover what's *really* in the Bible—and what isn't. We want to help you plug the gaps in your holey perspective so you will soon become more wholly informed. We'll try to condense the longer, drier passages and let you spend more time focused on the narratives, the people, and the action that makes the Bible probably the most beloved book ever printed.

Check Your Bible IQ

But before we go too far, let's see how much you *do* know. Take the following short quiz to test your knowledge about how we got the Bible, as well as a bit of what's in it. Some of the multiple-choice questions may have more than one correct answer.

1. We got the word *Bible* from:
 - A. A variation of *Babylon*, which had extensive libraries
 - B. The Hebrew word *biblius*, meaning “scroll that has no ending”
 - C. The Greek word *biblion*, meaning “roll” or “book”
 - D. An acronym for “**B**oy, **I**t's **B**ig, **L**eather, and **E**xpansive”
2. The original language(s) of the Bible are:
 - A. Hebrew, Greek, and Latin
 - B. Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic
 - C. Hebrew, Latin, and Assyrian
 - D. 100 percent King James English
3. Which of the following are *not* books of the Bible?
 - A. Haggai and Philemon
 - B. Zephaniah and Zechariah
 - C. 2 Chronicles and 3 John
 - D. Guacamole and Minestrone
4. *Canon* refers to:
 - A. An overweight 1970s detective played by William Conrad
 - B. Civil War weaponry
 - C. A Greek word for a measuring device
 - D. Writings that are accepted as authentic and inspired scripture

5. The *Apocrypha* is:
- A. A group of writings purported to be scripture but not accepted as such in every tradition
 - B. A British term for drugstore
 - C. A hill in Greece where the Parthenon was built
 - D. A reference to the “four horsemen” in Revelation

Match correct numbers to the appropriate statements:

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 6. Total number of books in the Bible _____ | 1 |
| 7. Number of Old Testament books _____ | 2 |
| 8. Number of New Testament books _____ | 1,500 |
| 9. Approximate number of Bible book authors _____ | 27 |
| 10. Period of years the Bible was written _____ | 176 |
| 11. Number of verses in the shortest chapter in the Bible _____ | 39 |
| 12. Number of verses in the longest chapter in the Bible _____ | 66 |
| 13. The book with the most chapter divisions has _____ of them | 40 |
| 14. Of all the books ever written, the Bible is _____ of a kind | 150 |

Finally, see if you can identify which of the following events are really found in the Bible and which are made up.

For Real	No Way	
_____	_____	15. After the flood, Noah gets drunk and naked.
_____	_____	16. A guy named Balaam has an unsettling conversation with his talking donkey.
_____	_____	17. A dead man touches Elisha’s bones and comes back to life.
_____	_____	18. Elijah calls down fire from heaven and then outruns a chariot down a mountain.
_____	_____	19. Isaiah sees God on a throne surrounded by hovering, six-winged angels.
_____	_____	20. Queen Jezebel is eaten by dogs.
_____	_____	21. After surviving his big fish, a worm gets the better of Jonah.
_____	_____	22. Uzzah touches the Ark of the Covenant and a year later his wife delivers septuplets.

For Real	No Way	
_____	_____	23. Wanting to prolong a victorious battle, Joshua commands the sun to stand still—and it does!
_____	_____	24. God causes a shadow to move backward to prove the truth of Isaiah's message.
_____	_____	25. In the course of a single night, Aaron's staff buds, blossoms, and produces almonds.
_____	_____	26. Lot's daughters take turns getting him drunk and having sex with him so they can have children.
_____	_____	27. King Herod takes credit for being a god and is struck down immediately and eaten by worms.
_____	_____	28. After their sister is raped, some of Jacob's sons convince the family of the offender to be circumcised and then kill them while they are incapacitated.
_____	_____	29. Moses spends so much time with God that his head begins to glow.
_____	_____	30. King Solomon's famous wisdom fails him when he gets involved with 1,000 women.
_____	_____	31. During the decline of Israel, things get so bad that people are reduced to eating donkey heads—and each other.
_____	_____	32. Paul dies when bitten by a deadly viper, but comes back to life.
_____	_____	33. A woman named Jael hammers the head of an enemy general to the ground with a tent peg.
_____	_____	34. Jesus brings three dead people back to life.
_____	_____	35. Paul and Barnabas are mistaken for the gods Zeus and Hermes.



Potent Quotables

It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible.

—George Washington

This is one of those tests where you probably have a good idea how well you did as soon as it's over. If you've had a bit of Bible background, you may have zipped through the questions with little problem. But don't be alarmed if you didn't have a clue about many of the questions. That's why this book was written. By the time you finish, you'll have all these answers—and many more. But if you can't wait, the quiz answers are provided at the end of this chapter.

What's in It for Me?

Of course, the stories and events are only a small portion of what's in the Bible. The big picture shows how God has interacted with people throughout history. The accounts of God's justice and judgment are there, as some people like to point out. But so are the numerous examples of God's love, mercy, and forgiveness. Until we view the Bible as a whole, it's difficult to develop a valid perspective. If we start with what we *want* to believe, it's not usually too much trouble to find a few verses to back up our opinion. Taking a verse or two out of context, however, doesn't necessarily lend validity to a shaky premise.

It is far better to approach the Bible objectively, read it thoroughly, and refrain from forming strong opinions until we've seen it in its entirety. If we stay in the Old Testament, for example, we're much more likely to have an eye-for-an-eye mentality about justice. But if we add the teachings of the New Testament, we are challenged to "raise the bar" in our interactions with others. It is more of a challenge to attempt a basic comprehension of the entire Bible, but it's better than continually emphasizing certain portions of the Bible while ignoring the rest.



Potent Quotables

All things desirable to men
are contained in the Bible.

—Abraham Lincoln

When it comes to reading the Bible, some people approach it as completely true, inspired, and authoritative. It is literally "God's word," God's message to humankind. Such people read the Bible to find guidance, wisdom, promises to cling to, comfort through trying times, and hope for the future. Even those who doubt that the Bible is divinely inspired will agree that it is an important and influential book.

Bible Knowledge Can Make You a More Literate Person

The Bible has been a cultural influence for hundreds of years and is reflected in art, literature, and music. Whether you're reading *Pilgrim's Progress* (published in 1678), listening to Handel's *Messiah* (written in 1741), or attending the latest production of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, you'll get more out of the experience if you're familiar with the original source. People can ignore the Bible's teachings if they want to, but its stories, parables, and poetry will always be part of our cultural heritage. We lose out if we ignore such a treasury.

Bible Knowledge Can Make You a More Authoritative Person

The Bible might or might not be the most quoted book, but it's almost certainly the most misquoted one. How many times have you listened to a discussion of politics, abortion, homosexuality, gender roles, or some other hot topic, only to hear one of the participants



Potent Quotables

The Bible is worth all other books which have ever been printed.

—Patrick Henry

raise his voice and say, “Well, doesn’t the Bible say ...”? Very frequently, the answer is a resounding *no!* Using the Bible as a last-ditch defense for one’s latest whim isn’t very impressive. On the other hand, the ability to cite a specific quote or an applicable example goes a long way to support an opinion. An awareness of what’s in the Bible helps us speak with authority rather than settling for off-the-top-of-the-head speculation.

Bible Knowledge Can Make You a More Virtuous Person

The Bible is filled with good and practical instruction:

- ◆ Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
- ◆ Turn the other cheek when someone strikes you.
- ◆ Share with those in need.
- ◆ Care about the “overlooked” people in society: children, widows, orphans, the sick and hungry, those in prison, and so on.
- ◆ Drop the façade of hypocrisy and be authentic.
- ◆ Respect others—even bosses and government leaders.
- ◆ Don’t hold grudges.
- ◆ Be slow to become angry.

Not only will taking such advice make you more virtuous, but you’ll very likely be happier and healthier as well.

Bible Knowledge Can Make You a More Spiritual Person

The search for spirituality is as intense today as it has been in years. Eastern philosophies and New Age religions promise enlightenment and have attracted numerous seekers, many of whom—assuming they know what’s in the Bible—overlook or reject Judaism and Christianity. It’s too bad that scripture has so often been used to support unloving, judgmental, and condemning attitudes and actions. A thoughtful reading of the Bible offers a much more complete and balanced picture of God—as well as Jewish and Christian teachings.

Reading the Bible will stretch our mind and expand our thinking. It offers profound insight into the realm of the invisible and the unseen. It helps us separate truth from mythology. We come to see God less as a tyrant and more as a loving parent, counselor, and friend.

And the Bible helps us see ourselves more clearly as well. We discover that our shortcomings have been shared by many others—some of them great “heroes” of faith. We won’t

even get out of Genesis before we witness murder, deceit, betrayal, rape, incest, gang violence, drunken escapades, seduction, and numerous other dysfunctions. Part of the greatness of the Bible is its willingness to show the darker side of humanity, as well as our potential for godliness.

The Bible teaches that we have value. We have God-given abilities. The better we understand how to relate to the Bible, the more we can learn to benefit from its teachings instead of remaining resistant or apprehensive.

Has Bible Content Changed over the Years?

The Bible has come down to us across the millennia surprisingly intact. Copies of the entire New Testament have been found that date within 250 years of writing. If equitable standards of authenticity are used, the reliability of New Testament writings is less questionable than most secular works of the same era.

As for the Old Testament, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 uncovered manuscripts of Old Testament books that predated existing copies by 1,000 years or more. And when the existing Hebrew manuscripts were checked against the earlier ones, the faithfulness of the text was confirmed. That's pretty amazing!

How Did We Get Our Bible from a Bunch of Manuscripts?

When you walk into a bookstore and pick up a Bible, what exactly are you buying? The words are neat, easy to read, and contained within nice, even margins. It's hard to imagine the original work that the 40 or so Bible authors put into their original writing, followed by generations of faithful people making copy after copy by hand until the words could be reproduced mechanically. The timeline that follows shows some of the steps that got these texts from their hands into yours. Some of the dates are approximate.

1400 to 400 B.C.E. This was the period during which the Old Testament writers lived and worked. Documents were written on leather or papyrus, which aren't exactly conducive to a long shelf life. Traditionally, the Jews held such respect for the text that they would bury copies that had aged to the point of impaired legibility. The original manuscripts were copied with meticulous care, as were those copies. A system of checking was devised to count characters and sections. As with all literature of this time period, the originals are long gone. But with scripture, the transfer from copy to copy was made with exacting care and precision.



Potent Quotables

It is impossible to enslave mentally or socially a Bible-reading people. The principles of the Bible are the groundwork of human freedom.

—Horace Greeley



Manna from Heaven

B.C.E., for **Before Common Era**, has come into use in recent years to replace B.C. (**Before Christ**). Similarly, C.E. (**Common Era**) is replacing the old A.D. (*Anno Domini*, or Year of Our Lord).

285 B.C.E. The Hebrew (Old Testament) scriptures were translated into Greek. One legend says that 72 scholars got the job done in 72 days, but it actually took much longer. The completed translation is known as the “Septuagint,” from the Latin word for 70. This version was very popular with the early church as well as the Jews outside of Palestine, who no longer spoke Hebrew.

50 to 90 C.E. The New Testament was written during this time period.

95 C.E. The historian Josephus identified the Old Testament canon (works officially accepted as scripture) as the 39 books we have now. Some people believe Ezra had collected them all as early as the fifth century B.C.E.

397 C.E. A meeting of Church leaders known as the Council of Carthage acknowledged the 27 books of the New Testament as we know them. Most of the books had already been treated as scripture for many years, but a half dozen or so warranted further discussion and final approval.

400 C.E. The entire Bible was translated into Latin, primarily by Saint Jerome. This version is known as the “Vulgate,” meaning “written in the language of the people.” (In the West, Latin *was* the language of the people!)

The Early and High Middle Ages (the fifth through the fourteenth centuries) Intense scholarship and study took place during this time, but little took place in the way of Bible translation. The Bible of the Christian Church was still the Vulgate.

1380 C.E. An English theologian named John Wycliffe began a translation of the Bible into English. His friends completed the translation after his death.

1456 C.E. The Gutenberg Bible was printed. It was an edition of the Vulgate, significant as the first major work printed with movable type.

1525 to 1530 C.E. William Tyndale, a scholar involved in the reform movement, translated the New Testament and the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) into English despite persecution. He was martyred before he could complete the Old Testament.

1548 C.E. Members of the Council of Trent voted to accept the 12 books of the Apocrypha as part of the biblical canon—a decision that was rejected by the reform movement.

1611 C.E. King James I of England commissioned a translation of the Bible that would become the primary Bible of English-speaking people for more than 300 years.

1782 C.E. The first English Bible was printed in America. It was known as the Aitken Bible.

1881–1884 C.E. A group of English and American scholars assembled to translate The Revised Version of the Bible, using manuscripts that had not been available at the printing of the King James Bible.

1900–1901 C.E. The American Standard Version of the Bible was translated.

1978 C.E. The New International Version of the Bible was completed.

These are only a few of the highlights in the history of Bible publishing. In recent years, a proliferation of Bible versions has hit the shelves. Not long ago your choices were confined to two or three versions with a couple of color options. These days, however, choosing a Bible that's right for you can be a major, time-intensive project.



Potent Quotables

Bible reading is an education in itself.

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson



Manna from Heaven

Some important Old Testament dates include the following:

- ca. 1280 B.C.E. The Exodus from Egypt
- ca. 1050 B.C.E. The monarchy established under King Saul
- ca. 1010 B.C.E. King David ascends the throne
- ca. 930 B.C.E. King Solomon dies; the divided monarchy begins: Israel lasts until 722, Judah until 586
- 722 B.C.E. The fall of Samaria and end of the northern kingdom
- 701 B.C.E. Sennacherib besieges Jerusalem
- 612 B.C.E. The fall of Nineveh, capital of Assyria
- 597 B.C.E. The fall of Jerusalem
- 586 B.C.E. Jerusalem is destroyed
- 539 B.C.E. The edict of Cyrus
- 516 B.C.E. The restored Temple is opened
- 458 B.C.E. Ezra arrives in Jerusalem
- 445 B.C.E. Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem
- 323 B.C.E. Alexander the Great dies
- 167 B.C.E. Antiochus Epiphanes profanes the Temple; the Maccabean revolt begins
- 63 B.C.E. Pompey reaches Jerusalem; Judea becomes a Roman protectorate

Choosing the Best Bible from All the Good Books

Selecting a Bible depends on how you're going to use it. Bibles can be very expensive or quite affordable. And as in most things, you tend to get what you pay for.

Translation vs. Paraphrase

If you're looking for authenticity, it's best to make sure you have a translation rather than a paraphrase. Some of the most common translations are the King James Version (KJV), the New King James Version (NKJV), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the New American Standard Version (NAS), and the New International Version (NIV).

Translations take great care to give you a precise interpretation from the original texts, and some of the more current ones are quite readable. But if you're looking purely for "a good read," you may want to go with a paraphrase, such as *The Living Bible* (TLB). Because paraphrases aren't quite as true to the original, they can update certain phrases, throw in a little slang now and then, and generally provide a looser, more familiar writing style. Inevitably, they also bring perspective to the texts that may not have been present originally.

Familiarity vs. Contemporary Feel

Some people grew up hearing frequent quotes from the King James Version, and they may even recall certain passages from memory. If they come back to the Bible after several years and use a more contemporary version, those same passages may not sound familiar at all.



Potent Quotables

The Bible is an inexhaustible fountain of all truths. The existence of the Bible is the greatest blessing which humanity ever experienced.

—Immanuel Kant

If you're looking to take up where you left off, the King James Version might be the only translation that provides the familiarity you seek. More recent versions have their advantages and use more contemporary language, but they may not sound right at first. And for some people who have always used the King James Version, nothing else ever seems to "feel" right.

Basic Bible vs. Study Bible

If your goal is simply to read through the Bible and see what's there, you can get a copy without any "bells and whistles"—simply straight text from Genesis to Revelation. But if you are a curious type who is likely to have questions as you go through, you may want to consider getting a study Bible. Such Bibles come in any of the translations or paraphrases you want, but the added feature is a plethora of footnotes, maps, charts, and other aids to

your Bible reading. A good study Bible saves a lot of trips to the dictionary, atlas, concordance, and so forth when you get to a confusing passage. In addition, many study Bibles are targeted to a specific demographic (students, men, women, and so on) or topic (prophecy, end times, praise, and so on). The drawbacks of study Bibles are cost (they're usually considerably more expensive) and size (all those notes take up space and add weight to the Bible).

Other Factors

If you tend to travel a lot and think you'll want to do your Bible reading on the road, you might consider a travel Bible. They're a little harder to find, so you might have to ask around. But you can find very compact New Testaments or entire Bibles that don't take up a lot of space. Some even have fold-around snaps to protect the Bible from getting too banged up.

If eyesight is a consideration, you can find large-print Bibles. Even standard Bibles have a variety of type sizes and fonts, so be sure to look at several options before you buy one.

Soft-cover (paperback) Bibles are considerably cheaper than hardcover Bibles. However, even with moderate use, many of these tend to tear and deteriorate relatively easily. It may be well worth the extra cost to acquire a hardcover or leather-cover Bible if you plan an ongoing commitment to Bible reading.

Another consideration is the size of the margins. Some people treat the Bible as if the book itself is sacred. Others take the view that it's what we internalize from the Bible that changes lives. They do whatever helps them get to know the Bible better—underlining, taking notes in the margins, highlighting, or whatever. Some Bibles are printed in loose-leaf form and/or with extra wide margins just for this purpose.

Go Shopping!

If you have a copy of the King James Version lying around and it just doesn't make any sense to you, remember that you have other options. Get out and see what else is available, and take your time in making a choice. Read the same passage in several different versions and see what hits your fancy. Go to more than one store and look around. Because so many kinds of Bibles are available, no bookstore is likely to have a complete selection. Don't be afraid to ask for what you want. If it's not there, it can probably be ordered.

When it comes to Bible shopping, you will probably benefit by seeking out a Christian/family bookstore rather than the nearest big chain bookstore. The selection is likely to be much more diverse, and store personnel can probably answer more questions and offer better advice. When you find exactly what you want, you can always shop around for the best price. Many mail-order catalogs offer attractive prices on Bibles as well. (And if price is your *primary* concern, your local library is likely to have a good assortment of Bibles.)

When you get your hands on a Bible you like, get ready to put your heart into it. In Chapter 3, we're going to dive into Genesis, and we won't come up for air until we get through Revelation. Expect a lot of surprises along the way. It's likely to be a trip you won't forget. First, however, Chapter 2 explains how your Bible is laid out and prepares you for some of the problems you might encounter as you begin to acquire a basic knowledge of the Bible.

But before we get out of this chapter, here are the quiz answers we promised you:

1. C
2. B—Aramaic was probably the colloquial language of Palestine and the primary language of Jesus. It was used occasionally in both the Old and New Testaments.
3. D
4. C and D
5. A—The other responses refer to *apothecary*, *Acropolis*, and *apocalypse*.
6. 66
7. 39
8. 27
9. 40
10. 1,500
11. 2
12. 176
13. 150
14. 1
- 15.–35. The events described in #22 and #32 have been altered, so they are untrue. But all the others are found in the Bible, as we will see as we go through this book.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ In spite of its stodgy reputation, the Bible is actually a pretty cool book.
- ◆ Knowledge of the Bible has a number of benefits—spiritual, intellectual, and moral.
- ◆ In spite of the antiquity of biblical writings, they remain trustworthy because of the care with which they have been transmitted.
- ◆ Choosing the right Bible can make a significant difference in Bible reading.