

BIBLE BASICS

Holy Bible is the title used by the Church to refer to a collection of books, letters and prophetic oracles that reveal God, his will and plan to save his people. The English word "Bible" comes from the Greek word *Biblia* and the plural of *biblios* which means "papyrus bark" or "book." The word *Biblia* received its singular sense, i.e. "the Book," when the various books of the Holy Bible were put together and considered one Holy Scripture. Christian believes that these books were written, edited, compiled and preserved by divine inspiration and guidance. The Bible is frequently referred to as the Word of God. This does not mean that God himself wrote the books of the Bible nor that God dictated the Bible word for word to men who were merely his passive instruments. Some of the prophets and apostles who witnessed and experienced God's revelation were inspired to record and preserve it for future generations. As one aspect of God's divine revelation, therefore, he inspired his people to produce Scriptures.

Armenians use various words to refer to the Bible. One of these words is Աստուածաշունչ *Asdvadzashoonch*, meaning "breathed by God" which reinforces a theological principle in the Armenian Church that the Bible is a collection of books breathed upon, or inspired by God. Another word is Սուրբ Գիրք *Soorp Keerk*, "Holy Book." For Armenians, the Bible is "the Holy Book" because it contains revelations about God. It invites the readers to a life of holiness.

As part of the Orthodox branch of the Universal Church of Christ, the Armenian Church believes that the books of the Bible were written, edited, compiled, and preserved by divine inspiration. God is the source and origin of the biblical message. Therefore, another common title for the Bible among the Armenians is "the Word of God." Obviously, this does not mean that every word in the Bible was written or dictated by God. Words, by definition, are human. As such, the biblical text is comprised of human words of several languages, such as Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, and it contains all the markings of the authors, as well as the culture and time during which the words were written.

Interpretation

To understand and interpret the Bible correctly it is essential to consider the background of its writers. Equally important is to identify to whom these documents were addressed and what the problems and conditions of that specific community were at the time. Another important factor is to keep the Bible in its context and consider all its interrelated conditions. Misinterpretation of the Bible has and continues to cause divisiveness in the universal church, allowing heretical movements to spread.

The books of the Bible relate to historical, geographical, scientific, cultural, and many other factors, however, its most essential purpose is to make God's revelation eternal and accessible to all generations. Interpretations begin with the process of peeling off the various layers of available data, and revealing the divine messages contained within and their relevance to our daily lives.

The most reliable interpretations of Scripture are to be found in the writings of the Church Fathers (known as Patristics, from the Latin pater meaning 'father'), both Armenian and the Early Church Fathers, such as St. John Chrysostom.

The Books of the Bible

The books of the Bible are classified into two major groups: Old Testament and New Testament. "Testament" means "treaty", "contract," or "covenant." The Armenian word for it is Կտակարան *Gdagaran* or Ուխտ *Ookhd*. The Bible refers to the agreements that God established with His people.

The books of the Bible beginning with Genesis until the end of Malachi reveal how God manifests His commandments and how people live by these covenants or ignore them. These books, called "Old Testament" by Christians, also contain narration of God's wrath on those who constantly forgot their responsibilities and ignored God's commandments. He told them that the time is approaching when he will reject them as they rejected Him, and invite those who believe in His new covenant to inherit His kingdom (Jeremiah 31:31-37).

When God realized that the time had come to establish the last and eternal "testament," He sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to establish the new covenant, sealed with His blood. The commandments of the New Testament were taught by Jesus Christ, as witnessed and handed down by His apostles.

Thus, the "Old Testament" includes the books recalling the history, revelation and prophecies concerning the old covenants of God, and "New Testament," is comprised of the books, letters and prophetic oracles written concerning God's new covenant through His son Jesus Christ.

OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament can be classified into four groups:

1. **Pentateuch:** this term means "five containers," referring to the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Together these books constitute the Law for which the Hebrew word Torah is commonly used. They offer a review of the history of God's dealing with His people, from creation of the world to the death and burial of Moses and his succession by Joshua. These books record the establishment of Israel as the people of God as well as His commandments.
2. **Historical Books:** this category includes – Joshua, Judges, Ruth, First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, and books of Maccabees. They narrate the history of the people of God, as well as Israel's relationship with God and with her neighboring nations.*

* The Armenian Biblical Canon, like some other Christian Churches (e.g., the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches), includes several books that are not included in the Jewish Old Testament: Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, also called Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, including the Letter of Jeremiah, Additions to Daniel (Song of the Three Youths, Story of Susanna, Bel and the Dragon), 1 Esdras, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, 3 Maccabees, Prayer of Manasses. Some of these books are considered by other churches to be secondary or deuterocanonical. Some portions of these books are considered by other churches to be apocryphal, that is, texts of uncertain authenticity or writings whose authorship is questioned, e.g., portions of the Book of Esther and the Prayer of Manasses. Also, note that in the Armenian Bible, the two books of Samuel and the two books of Kings are called 1, 2, 3, 4 Kings.

3. **Books of Wisdom:** this category includes the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Wisdom, and Sirach (Ecclesiasticus). They examine issues related to the lives of the people of God and their salvation.
4. **Prophetic Books:** this category includes – the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. They contain oracles delivered and written by prophets to whom God had revealed Himself, and who prophesied about future events. These prophetic oracles are about Israel, most of them written hundreds of years before Jesus' birth. They prophesied about His birth, miracles, suffering, crucifixion and resurrection, which were fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as confirmed by the books of the New Testament.

NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament can also be classified into four groups:

1. **Gospels:** These are the first four books of the New Testament – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The term Gospel comes from the archaic English word, "God-Spell" (2 Tim 3:16) (meaning 'good news'). The Armenian word for "Gospel" is Աւետարան *Avedaran*, meaning "bearer of good news." Gospels are the depositories of the good news of our salvation through the events of Jesus' birth, ministry, miracles, passion, crucifixion, death and resurrection.
2. **The Book of Acts:** this book discusses the word of the Holy Spirit through the apostles in the early church. It contains certain historical information that is not recorded anywhere else in the Bible, such as the ascension of our Lord, the descent of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost), and the ordination of the early church ministers, deacons, and priests.
3. **Epistles:** This category includes St. Paul's letters to the Roman, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1st and 2nd Thessalonians, 1st and 2nd Timothy, Titus, Philemon, the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Epistle of James, the 1st and 2nd Epistles of Peter, the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Epistles of John, and the Epistle of Jude. These are actual letters written by the apostles or their disciples. These letters discuss the faith, liturgical practices, moral responsibilities and problems of the early Christian communities.
4. **The Book of Revelation:** this book is also called the Apocalypse, a term which comes from a Greek word meaning "the disclosure of that which is hidden or unknown." This word is used to emphasize that this book unveils facts about heaven and earth, past and present and future. The Book of Revelation combined letters and prophetic oracles using a very rich symbolic language. The main theme of the book is the prophecy about the coming Day of Judgment, and the establishment of the eternal and universal rule of God, once and for all. It is one of the books which entered later into the Canon, thus it is not part of the daily readings of the Armenian Church.

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*Read more of Fr. Vahan's writings on the Bible in [Welcome to the Armenian Church.](#)