

In *Beginning Biblical Studies*, Dr. Marielle Frigge, OSB, reveals herself as a superb teacher. Grounded in solid scholarship and written in graceful prose, her textbook informs and guides those unfamiliar with the Bible; in contrast to many textbook writers, she avoids the temptation to overwhelm her readers with data.

—Mary C. Boys, SNJM, Dean of Academic Affairs
Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York

Sr. Marielle Frigge's book is an excellent introduction to the study of the Bible. She presupposes nothing but conveys a great deal. No matter what the students' backgrounds, this introductory text will speak to them all. The glossaries, maps, charts, and other visuals are very helpful. Students and readers who work through her book will have a solid foundation in modern biblical studies.

—Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB, STD
Coordinator, Benedictine Distance Learning

The readability is pitch-perfect. Rarely have I found a textbook author who is so consistent in communicating with entry-level students. The precision and clarity of the author's prose should reassure any professor that his or her students are being challenged to think, yet in a language that they can comprehend. The author maintains a clear recognition of and sensitivity to interfaith and ecumenical distinctions throughout. Well done!

—Donald Rappé
Mount Mary College, Milwaukee

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Beginning Biblical Studies

Revised Edition

Marielle Frigge


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(Left) The Nash Papyrus: © Zev Radovan

Discovered in Egypt in 1898, the Nash Papyrus, dated ca. 150 BCE, was the oldest known text from the Hebrew Scriptures until discovery of the Qumran scrolls. The papyrus contains the Ten Commandments, combining the two versions from Exodus and Deuteronomy (see Ex 20:1–17; Deut 5:6–21), and the beginning of the great prayer, “*Shema’ Israel*” (see Deut 6:4), recited twice daily by Jews to this day.

(Right) Ruins of Herod’s castle: © Mikhail Markovskiy / *Shutterstock.com*

The so-called Northern Palace of Masada, built by Herod the Great ca. 37–31 BCE. Masada is a fortress that sits on a lone mesa rising from the Judean Desert south of Jerusalem. The fortress includes two palaces, one atop the other—a residence and an administrative center—as well as rainwater cisterns, huge storehouses, Roman baths, a synagogue, and apartments, all surrounded by a wall. At the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, in 70 CE about one thousand Jewish rebels occupied the fortress and held off a part of the Roman army for three years. Only after the Romans had built a siege ramp (most of which is still visible) were they able to defeat the Jews inside the fortress.

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FOREWORD

Imagine that a friend comes to you, thrilled after hearing the leader of a new Christian sect declare, “I am the Lamb of God described in the Bible’s book of Revelation, and I will show you the way to the good life and prosperity!”

Or picture this: A farmer receives a mailing from “Reverend Mike” guaranteeing economic security with the pledge, “Are you having problems getting a fair price for your farm produce? Your economic situation will improve! God promises this in Deuteronomy 28:8: ‘The Lord will command the blessing upon you in your barns, and on all that you undertake; he will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.’”

Or again, imagine you hear a frustrated parent threatening a naughty child in the toy store. “You’d better behave, if you want to be a good Christian and go to heaven! Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 5:48—you must ‘be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.’”

None of these incidents is fiction. The biblical references noted above do appear in the Bible, and people have used them as described. People quote the Bible to “prove” all kinds of things. Politicians quote the Bible to support expanding military budgets, while pacifists support antiwar protests using the same book. Death penalty proponents offer arguments from the Bible, and so do those who oppose it. Proabortionists and antiabortionists both use the Bible to support their arguments.

How can the same book lead to clearly contradictory conclusions? How can those who regard the Bible as the foundation of their faith understand and evaluate such claims? Obviously, different believers approach these writings differently. To begin, one needs to understand what the Bible actually contains, the historical contexts in which it was written, its key themes, images, and concepts, and various approaches to its interpretation.

*“Ignorance of Scripture
is ignorance of Christ.”*

— SAINT JEROME

Even people who do not claim Jewish or Christian faith recognize that the Bible has influenced nearly two thousand years of Western civilization. Much of the great art, literature, music, and drama of the Western world have been inspired by the Bible. Numerous critical political events, even wars, have been based on its contents. Many notions foundational to U.S. democracy have their beginnings in biblical laws dating back twenty-five hundred years: the right to a fair trial, fair compensation for labor, equality for all under the law. Understanding the Bible can offer insights into oneself and others as human, as person of faith, as American, or all of these.

USING THIS BOOK

In no way is this book intended to serve as the only, or even as the major, textbook for an introductory course in biblical studies. It is meant to provide entrance to and support for the most important text, the Bible itself. If a literature teacher wishes to acquaint students with the works of Shakespeare, he or she will surely provide basic historical, cultural, and literary information about Elizabethan England, as well as the author's vocabulary and modes of thought. But to begin to understand Shakespeare's writings, students must study some of the author's own works. I am convinced that any student making an initial acquaintance with the Bible is best served by a similar approach.

For students, therefore, I offer this reassurance: if you have never opened a Bible or heard a single biblical verse, have no fear. This book is written with true beginners in mind and so assumes no knowledge of the contents and origins of the Bible or its major events, characters, and themes. Many a beginning student, at first exposure to the Bible, has remarked to me, "It's like learning a foreign language." For such reasons, each chapter begins with a list of key words and concepts to focus the reader's attention, and brief overviews introduce various sections, followed by further explanation and discussion. Occasional repetition intends to help students learn important new concepts gradually, as the concepts are encountered in various parts of this book and in the biblical texts.

Fellow teachers most likely have classroom experience of what recent research reports. Though twenty-five million Bibles are sold annually in the United States, half of graduating high school seniors identify Sodom and Gomorrah as husband and wife, more than half of Americans

don't know that the Passover account is in Exodus, and 60 percent cannot name even half of the Ten Commandments. Teachers and preachers might debate whether these are the most relevant polling questions, but at the very least, they indicate that many of those millions of Bibles remain unread. Perhaps more distressing is research indicating that even those who attend weekly religious services have difficulty describing the basic salvation story of the Bible. Because of such contemporary realities, in these pages I have attempted to keep the most uninitiated students of the Bible in mind. For them, even a footnote in a study Bible can be useless. For example, what can the following statement possibly mean to someone with no exposure to the Bible: "This verse reflects the postexilic period's growing interest in eschatology"? A foreign language, indeed.

For such reasons, I have presented, in broad strokes, sufficient context to help students begin to read the Bible with some understanding of its major content, intent, and perspectives. Teachers will find, therefore, that a great deal is intentionally not included here, and many issues are presented in brief and simple terms. The book is deliberately brief for another reason: to allow teachers to cultivate student understanding with selected biblical texts best suited to their students, in their specific context. Any course that introduces students to an entire library of sacred books can help them understand its basic background, vocabulary, and content. But "a foreign language" cannot be learned in one course; increased fluency comes with further study and practice. It is my hope that this book can assist those who use it to begin learning the language of the Bible—a language frequently used in Western culture and by more than two billion persons worldwide who regard it as sacred scripture.

STYLE NOTE ON BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL REFERENCES

Biblical book and verse references:

Gen 11:1–9 the first number indicates chapter 11 in the book of Genesis, and numbers after the colon refer to verses 1 through 9 within that chapter (some sources use a comma instead of a colon: Gen 11, 1–9)

Gen 12 book of Genesis, all of chapter 12

Gen 1–3 book of Genesis, all of chapters 1 through 3

Gen 37:1—50:26 book of Genesis, chapter 37 verse 1 through chapter 50 verse 26

Abbreviations for historical periods and dates:

BCE “before the Common Era,” seen in many works as BC (before Christ); BCE refers to time before the birth of Jesus

CE “Common Era,” seen in many works as AD (meaning *anno Domini*, Latin for “year of our Lord”); CE refers to time after the birth of Jesus

ca. Latin for *circa*, meaning “approximately”; dates from ancient times often can be approximated at best

BIBLE AND BIBLES

1

CHAPTER

Key Terms and Concepts

Bible
revelation

Hebrew Scriptures

Tanak
Old Testament
New Testament

The word *bible*, from the Greek *biblia*, literally means “books.” The Bible is actually a kind of library, a collection of many small books containing material that was passed on first by word of mouth, then in writing. In written form, these books were often recopied and edited or reedited over many generations or even centuries.

This “library” of the Bible reflects faith that developed and changed over long periods of time. The material that was passed on and written down contains stories, poems, prayers, and many other kinds of literature about certain events in the lives of an ancient people who came to believe in one God, Yahweh. These ancient Hebrews (also called *Israelites*, and later *Judeans* and *Jews*) believed that their God chose to be revealed in the events and experiences of their life as a community. They described becoming a people as a community of faith through the event of the Exodus, their escape from slavery in Egypt and beginning of a new

life of freedom in Canaan. Through this experience, the people of Israel came to believe that this God wished to be in a special relationship with them, and so they thought of themselves as the “chosen people of God” and named Yahweh “the God of Israel.”

For more than a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, the Israelites repeatedly strayed from and returned to their God, Yahweh. They had many kings who allowed or even encouraged worship of other gods. On the other hand, there were also a few kings who, like the prophets, called for a return to the one God who, they believed, had chosen them. Through centuries of their life with Yahweh, the Israelites came to believe that at some future time, their God would enter into human history in a way that would bring a new and better state of affairs, a time when God would rule, and people would respond to God’s will and ways. This new era, they believed, would be brought about through a

specially chosen agent of God, an “anointed one” (*messiah* in Hebrew; *christos* in Greek).

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son . . .”

— HEBREWS 1:1

After centuries of this hope and expectation, Jesus of Nazareth appeared, proclaiming that the “reign of God,” the awaited time of fulfillment, had arrived. After Jesus’ death (and, according to his followers, his Resurrection), some Jews believed that he was indeed the one they had been hoping for—God’s chosen agent,

the Messiah, bringing a new age of God’s rule. Other Jews could not accept that a self-appointed teacher from Nazareth who had been crucified by the Romans as a political criminal could possibly be God’s chosen agent. Those who did believe thought of themselves as a “new Israel,” a people who had experienced in Jesus a new liberation from slavery—the slavery of sin and estrangement from God. They continued to proclaim this message to other Jews and then to non-Jews (*Gentiles*). In time, these believers’ stories and memories of Jesus and what he meant to them were passed on, first by word of mouth and then in writing.

The Bible, though often considered a single work, is a collection of many books containing many different aspects and accounts of this long journey of faith. Because it involves about two thousand years of continuous experience of one God and ongoing reflection on that experience,

NAMES AND IMAGES OF GOD IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

The Bible portrays a God who is at once transcendent and immanent, that is, a God who is above and beyond human reach and comprehension and also a God who draws near and can be

experienced by and among human beings. Thus, in addition to the revealed name of Israel’s God, Yahweh (“I AM”), the Bible has many different names and images of God, including the following:

Strong One	Most High	Lord of Hosts (Warrior)
Righteous One	Ancient of Days	Shepherd
Compassionate One	Shield	Rock
Faithful One	Nursemaid	Beloved
Holy One of Israel	Redeemer	Fire
God of Our Ancestors	Vinegrower	Breath
Almighty	King	Healer
Midwife	Father	Mother
Judge	Potter	Creator
Lawgiver	Teacher	Lord
Storm	Avenger	Cloud
Protector of Orphans	Lover	Womb-Love

the Bible contains various views of God and names for God: Yahweh, Elohim, El Shaddai, Adonai, El Elyon, and many other names or titles. Similarly, the Bible contains differing points of view on many biblical themes and ideas. The biblical books were written over centuries, in several languages (Hebrew, Greek, and a little Aramaic), by different persons or groups in various times and cultures. As a result, these books also contain many different kinds of literature. In the Bible one can find poetry, religious history, parables, proverbs, myths, legends, sagas, law codes, and prophetic oracles, for example.

For Jews and Christians, God and how God relates to humankind is made known in this collection of books called the Bible. Thus, Jews and Christians regard the Bible as revelation, God's self-manifestation through realities of the created world. The English word *revelation* translates Hebrew and Greek words meaning "uncovering" or "unveiling." The definition given here, "self-manifestation," emphasizes that, in Jewish and Christian understanding, God takes the initiative; God is the one who chooses to be "uncovered" or made known to humankind. The second part of the definition, "through realities of the created world," stresses that God is "unveiled" in and through persons and events of human experience. In the Bible the primary mode in which God is made known is history, the unfolding story of a particular faith community and its reflection upon historical events as revelatory experience of God. Although Christians believe that God is still being made known today through their daily lives, they consider the Bible as the definitive revelation of God and God's will for all creation.

JEWISH BIBLE AND CHRISTIAN BIBLE

The Hebrew Scriptures form the part of the Christian Bible called the Old Testament. *Testament* is another word for *covenant*, a kind of

sacred promise (explained in more detail later in this chapter). The Old Testament contains accounts of the creation of the world, the origin of the Israelites as a "chosen people," and God's interaction with Israel up to about a half-century before the time of Jesus. These books form the entire sacred scriptures, or Bible, for followers of Judaism to this day. For them, there is as yet no new covenant or testament; the covenant given through Moses, the great Hebrew leader, law-giver, and prophet, still stands, and Jews today still await the coming of a Messiah and the promised intervention of God in human history.

Christian Bibles contain both Old Testament and New Testament; for this reason, some people use the term *Judeo-Christian Bible*. Christians preserve the Old Testament because they believe that these writings prepare for and lead up to the revelation of God in Jesus. The New Testament contains books that proclaim belief in Jesus as the Messiah expected in ancient Judaism, the fullest revelation of God to humanity.

THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES: THE CHRISTIAN OLD TESTAMENT

Jews today refer to their sacred scriptures as the *Tanak*, an anagram formed from the first letter of the Hebrew names for the three major divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures. These sections, in order of importance, are the *Torah* ("Instruction" or "Law"), *Nevi'im* ("Prophets"), and *Kethuvim* ("Writings"). *Torah* is a Hebrew word that most fundamentally means "instruction" or "teaching" but is usually translated into English as "law." The first part of the Hebrew Scriptures is therefore sometimes called the "Law of Moses." In Greek, this first section is called the *Pentateuch*, which means "five books"—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. They contain the most important teachings and beliefs of the Jewish

Bible and so also represent the most significant part of the Christian Old Testament.

Briefly stated, the Torah or Pentateuch presents the origins of human life in general and the beginning of Israel in particular. Genesis contains stories about the creation of the world and the human race. Much of the book focuses on the patriarchs (early ancestors of the Israelites) Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (later renamed Israel), and Joseph, with special attention to Yahweh’s promises to Abraham: that he would be the father of many descendants and that these descendants would inherit the land of Canaan as their own possession. Exodus tells the story of Yahweh’s deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, the people’s long trek through the Sinai

Desert on their way to Canaan, the “Promised Land” of their new freedom, and the covenant relationship established between Yahweh and Israel through God’s spokesman, Moses. Exodus also contains some of God’s teaching that the Hebrews agreed to observe, including the Ten Commandments. Leviticus elaborates many laws concerning community life and public ritual worship (also called *cult*). Numbers contains several census lists (a “numbering” of the people) and additional stories of the Israelites’ journey in the Sinai Desert. The last book of essential instruction, Deuteronomy, is presented in the form of final instructions Moses gives immediately before the Israelites are about to enter Canaan. It repeats, in somewhat different form,

THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES OR TANAK

TORAH (essential instruction, also called “Law”)	NEVI’IM (Prophets)	KETHUVIM (Writings)						
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	<table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; border: none;"> Joshua Judges 1 & 2 Samuel 1 & 2 Kings </td> <td style="width: 5%; border: none; text-align: center;">}</td> <td style="width: 45%; border: none; vertical-align: middle;">Former Prophets</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border: none;"> Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel The Twelve Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi </td> <td style="border: none; text-align: center;">}</td> <td style="border: none; vertical-align: middle;">Latter Prophets</td> </tr> </table>	Joshua Judges 1 & 2 Samuel 1 & 2 Kings	}	Former Prophets	Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel The Twelve Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi	}	Latter Prophets	Psalms Job Proverbs Ruth Song of Songs Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) Lamentations Esther Daniel Ezra–Nehemiah 1 & 2 Chronicles
Joshua Judges 1 & 2 Samuel 1 & 2 Kings	}	Former Prophets						
Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel The Twelve Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi	}	Latter Prophets						

many of the covenant laws found in the book of Exodus; this is why it bears the name Deuteronomy, Greek for “second law.”

The second most important section of the Old Testament, the Prophets, is often described as a commentary on the Torah because the prophets’ major role was to encourage the Israelites to be faithful in their covenant relationship with Yahweh as described in the Pentateuch. This section includes books of the major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) and twelve minor prophets. Three additional writings are included in this section (Baruch, Jonah, Daniel) because they are related in some way to Israel’s prophets.

The third division of the Old Testament, the Writings, contains two major types of material: the so-called historical books and wisdom writings. The historical books are not history in the modern sense but rather religious history: an interpretation of events in Israel’s history intended to bring out their significance for Israel’s faith. Wisdom writings include wise sayings, psalms (poetic prayers), and ancient forms of what might be called religious philosophy.

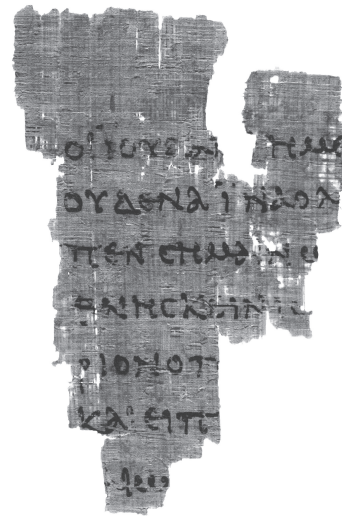
NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament is the specifically Christian portion of the Christian Bible. It is sometimes called the Second Testament because for Jews, the Hebrew Scriptures are not “old”; rather, they present the first and only testament, the covenant that still guides believing Jews today. The New Testament consists chiefly of four Gospels and a number of letters (also called *epistles*) but also includes the lengthy Acts of the Apostles and a work much discussed today, the book of Revelation.

At the beginning of the New Testament one finds the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The word *gospel* means “good news,” indicating that these books intend primarily to proclaim faith that Jesus is the Messiah the Jews

had hoped for, and more—a universal savior, sent by God to offer humanity a new way of being with God. These accounts contain some memories of actual events in the life of Jesus, but they are above all concerned with proclaiming faith in Jesus as the Messiah (Christ) of God who begins God’s reign.

Following the Gospels is the longest book of the New Testament, Acts of the Apostles. Acts presents an account of how the early Christian community grew, carrying out its mission to proclaim Christian faith first in Jerusalem and then to the whole known world. The letters, by the apostle Paul and other early followers of Jesus, were written for the instruction of various Christian communities that were established in the first century CE. The last book of the New Testament, Revelation (*Apocalypsis* in Greek), was written during a Roman persecution of Christians at the end of the first century. It is a highly symbolic, visionary account of the struggle between the powers of evil and Christ and his followers and the ultimate triumph of God’s reign.



Credit: © Zev Radovan, biblelandpictures.com

A fragment of John’s Gospel from the Rylands Papyrus, dated ca. 125 CE and the oldest-known New Testament manuscript.

THE CHRISTIAN BIBLE

OLD TESTAMENT		NEW TESTAMENT
<p>PENTATEUCH (Hebrew TORAH, Instruction or “Law”) Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy</p> <p>WRITINGS <i>Historical books</i> Joshua Judges Ruth 1 & 2 Samuel 1 & 2 Kings 1 & 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah ** Tobit ** Judith * Esther ** 1 & 2 Maccabees <i>Wisdom books</i> Job Psalms Proverbs Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) Song of Songs (Song of Solomon) ** Wisdom (Wisdom of Solomon) ** Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)</p>	<p>PROPHETS Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations ** Baruch Ezekiel * Daniel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi Eastern Orthodox add: 1 Esdras 3 Maccabees 4 Maccabees Psalm 151</p>	<p>GOSPELS Matthew Mark Luke John</p> <p>ACTS Acts of the Apostles</p> <p>LETTERS Romans 1 & 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 & 2 Thessalonians 1 & 2 Timothy Titus Philemon Hebrews James 1 & 2 Peter 1, 2, & 3 John Jude</p> <p>APOCALYPTIC Revelation</p>

* Sections of this book only in Catholic Bible

** Books only in Catholic Bible

SUMMARY

PROTESTANT BIBLE	CATHOLIC BIBLE
<p>OT: 39 books (same content as Hebrew Scriptures)</p> <p>NT: 27 books</p> <p>Total: 66 books</p>	<p>OT: 46 books (same content as Greek canon, explained in chapter 2)</p> <p>NT: 27 books</p> <p>Total: 73 books</p>

Notice that though the order and grouping of books differ from that of Christian Bibles, all of the content of the Hebrew Scriptures is included in the Old Testament section of both Protestant and Catholic Bibles; Catholic Bibles

contain additional material found in the Greek collection of Old Testament books (see chart, “The Christian Bible”). Further variations in the content of Christian Bibles will be outlined in chapter 2.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Explain what Christians mean by referring to the Bible as “revelation.”
2. Explain what a member of the Jewish faith today would describe as his or her Bible.
3. In a Christian Bible, what are major differences in content between the Old Testament and the New Testament?
4. Explain the basic difference in content between a Catholic Bible and a Protestant Bible.
5. The sidebar earlier in this chapter lists many different names and images of God in the Bible. Choose three of these and describe what the image or name implies about what God is like or how God acts.