



THE
Bible
FROM
Scratch

WRITTEN & ILLUSTRATED BY
Simon Jenkins





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What's this?

What's this? The Bible explained in cartoons? Whatever would Moses say? Or Habakkuk? Would Elijah have burned it? And would Paul turn in his catacomb to see his life's work reduced to a few scribbles?

Hopefully not. The Bible's characters themselves weren't shy about using different methods of communication to get across what they had to say. Jeremiah smashed crockery. Ezekiel performed weird, one-man plays. David sang songs. Nathan told a trick story. Jesus talked in pictures.

And this drive to popularize has sometimes surfaced in the history of the church, too. St Augustine, heavyweight theologian though he was, took time out to compose pop songs to attack the heretics. And John Calvin, no less, wrote Christian lyrics to Genevan jigs.

This book is humbly offered in the same spirit. It's intended as a beginner's guide to the Good Book, something to help readers start their own explorations in the Bible.

Some thank yous are due: first, to Talitha, my daughter, for keying in all the handwritten text from the original 1987 edition of the book. Also to Nathan, my son, for making the graffiti graphic on page 108. And to Steve Tomkins, for reading the original text and making both serious and mischievous suggestions for improving it.

I also owe a debt of love and gratitude to David Alexander, whose creativity and encouragement during my time as an editor at Lion Publishing brought this book into being.

Simon Jenkins

Inside the Bible from Scratch

Big, black book 9
Around the Bible in 30 days 21

Old Testament

Intro to the Old Testament 26

Moses

The first five books of the Bible have Moses as their starring character and the Exodus as their main event

Intro 52

Genesis 54

Creation 55

Abraham 56

Abraham & Sarah's travels 58

Joseph 59

Exodus 60

The great escape 61

Moses 62

The Exodus 64

10 Commandments 65

Leviticus 66

Numbers 67

The ark 68

Deuteronomy 69

Highlights 70

Historical Books

Books telling the story of the Israelites, from their arrival in Canaan to their forced exile in Babylon... and back again

Intro 72

Joshua 74

Judges 75

Deborah 76

Samson 77

Ruth 78

12 tribes 79

1 & 2 Samuel 80

Samuel 82

King Saul 83

David's soap 84

Solomon 85

1 Kings 86

Elijah 87

Kings of Israel 88

Kings of Judah 89

Baal 90

2 Kings 91

The Exile 92

1 & 2 Chronicles 93

Ezra 94

Nehemiah 95

Disputed books 96

Tobit 98

Angels 99

Judith 100

Esther 101

1 Maccabees 102

2 Maccabees 103

Poetry

A short section of books with poetry, songs, proverbs and deep stuff about life, death, the universe, etc.

Intro 106

Job 108

The Temple 109

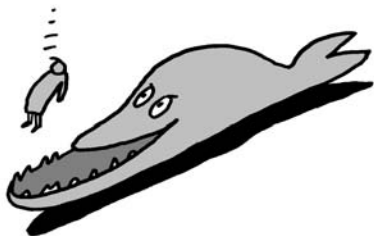


Psalms 110
David 112
Proverbs 113
Ecclesiastes 114
Song of Songs 115
Wisdom 116
Sirach 117

Prophets

The writings of the prophets, who had visions, protested against injustice and forged a new understanding of God

Intro 120
Isaiah 122
Jeremiah 124
Lamentations 126
Baruch 127
Ezekiel 128
The Exile 130
Daniel 132
Hosea 134
Joel 135
Amos 136
Obadiah 138



Who was where? 139
Jonah 140
Micah 141
Nahum 142
Habakkuk 143
Zephaniah 144
Haggai 145
Zechariah 146
Malachi 147

New Testament

Intro to the New Testament 150



Jesus

Not just one, but four versions of the life of Jesus, as told by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

Intro 174
Matthew 176
The 12 disciples 178
Galilee 180
John the Baptist 181
Mark 182

James & John 184
Messiah 185
Miracles 186
Jesus: all a myth? 188
Luke 190
Mary 192
Parables 194
Parties and groups 196
Pharisees 198
John 200
The Herods 202
The Devil 204
Death & resurrection 205
Judas 206
Pilate 207
Gospel highlights 208

The Church

The message of Jesus travels from Jerusalem to Rome in the space of a single book – the book of Acts

Acts 210
The Romans 212
Peter 214
Paul 216



Letters

Intercepted mail from the first Christian churches, complete with revealing, embarrassing and inspiring moments

Intro 220

Romans 222

Paul the traveller 224

Who wrote what? 225

1 Corinthians 226



2 Corinthians 229

Paul arrives in Europe 230

Galatians 232

Ephesians 234

Philippians 236

Colossians 238

1 Thessalonians 240

Letter-writing 241

2 Thessalonians 242

1 Timothy 243

2 Timothy 244

Paul: his last years 245

Titus 246

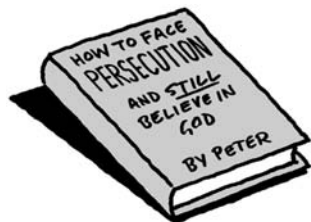
Philemon 247

Hebrews 248

James 250

1 Peter 251

2 Peter 252



1, 2 & 3 John 253

Jude 254

The End

The Bible's showstopping ending, with trumpets, giant choirs, the curtain drawn back on heaven, and every tear wiped away

Revelation 256

The 7 churches 258

Understanding it 259

Big, black book

Once upon a time, the Bible was a big black book with golden-edged pages that required a course in bodybuilding before you could lift it off the shelf.

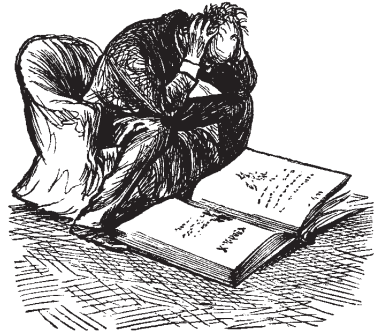
In recent times, though, the Bible's been repackaged and has sunsets and puppy dogs and other marketing-friendly pictures on the cover, and no longer weighs a ton. But even though it now looks like any other bestseller, the Bible still stands out as being a book unlike any other.

For a start, it was produced by two of the world's big faiths: Judaism and Christianity. You can see this in the way the Bible is structured into two "halves": the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old half contains the scriptures (holy writings), of Judaism, while Christians regard both Old and New as their scriptures.

On top of that, a third world faith – Islam – also regards the Bible as a holy book, although Muslims believe that the Bible has been corrupted and is inferior to the Qu'ran.

Books, chapters and verses

When you buy a Bible, you're not buying just one book, you're buying 73 books rolled into one. Take a look at the contents page of the Bible, and you'll find all 73 books listed, some with names that give a clue to what they're about, such as Kings, Song of Solomon and Revelation, but most with the names of the people said to have written them, such as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.



The word "testament" means "agreement". The Bible's first half centers on the agreement God made with Moses and Israel at Mt Sinai, and the second half on the agreement God made available to all people through the death of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament contains 46 books, while the New Testament is smaller, with 27 books.



The Bible was divided into chapters in the 13th century by Stephen Langton, who went on to become Archbishop of Canterbury. It was only broken down into verses after the invention of printing.

Robert Stephanus created the verses of the New Testament in the 1550s, and legend has it that he chopped it all up while riding on horseback between Paris and Lyon... which may explain why some of the breaks happen in unexpected places.



These books were written, edited and collected into the thick volume we know as the Bible over about 1,500 years. During that time, all sorts of material was gathered together: songs, legal contracts, letters, stories, riddles, official histories, poems, family trees and so on. This makes the Bible like a huge warehouse with a vast variety of curious and compelling bits and pieces hidden away on its shelves.

The chart opposite shows how these different materials are structured in the Bible.

Weighing in at close to a million words, the Bible can seem like a daunting read. But as well as being broken down into two testaments and 73 books, each book is broken down into chapters, and each chapter into verses of a sentence or two each. All of which helps you feel you're actually getting somewhere when you start reading it.

Ancient blockbuster

The Bible also stands out for its enduring popularity. Have you ever thought how curious it is that the Bible is still such a bestselling and much-read book? The ink on the pages of the Bible has been dry for almost 2,000 years – that's when the last writer laid down his pen – and yet it's still being read all over the world today. By any terms, that's a huge achievement.

In the last 150 years alone, an estimated 1.6 billion Bibles have been printed. And it's been translated into no fewer than 3,000 languages.

Just think about it. This is an ancient book. How many people go out and buy 2,000-year-old texts from the ancient world for their reading pleasure? ... Sophocles, Plato, the Epic of Gilgamesh, Plutarch, Livy, Ovid... Anyone for Euripides?

How the Bible fits together



The Bible has two major sections...



The **Old Testament** is mostly written in Hebrew and has 46 books

Its books are in four main sections...



Books giving the **Law of Moses** (Genesis to Deuteronomy)



Books telling the story of **Israel and Judah** (Joshua to 2 Maccabees)

Books with **songs, poetry, philosophy and wise sayings** (Job to Sirach)

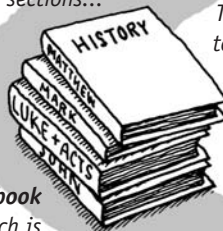


Books of **protest and prophecy** written in the last centuries before Christ (Isaiah to Malachi)



The **New Testament** is written in Greek and contains 27 books

Its books are in three main sections...



The **four Gospels**, telling the story of Jesus (Matthew to John)...

... plus the **book of Acts**, which is about the spread of Jesus' message.

The letters of **Paul, Peter, John** and others to the first churches (Romans to Jude)



The book of **Revelation**, about things to come



Things were different in the days of the Bible... for example, the haircuts...

Hmm... can you do something with the side bits?



And the Bible isn't just ancient, it's oriental. It's not a modern, western book. That's why it can sound foreign to us at first reading. It's full of details such as what to do if you get mildew on your tent flap, how to carry out the interior design of a temple, or the best way to handle a runaway slave.

But even though this book comes to us out of the distant past, it still makes compulsive reading. Part of the reason is that we can see our reflection in the book's characters and stories. This is part of the Bible's power – its stories speak to us. It's one of the reasons why we break the habit of a lifetime and read a 2,000-year-old book.

The Bible is a book that is endlessly retold – especially by being translated into new languages. Aside from the huge translation projects that have brought the Good Book to remote tribespeople around the world, the most famous bits of the Bible have also been “translated” for Cockneys, black rappers, Glaswegians, and even extraterrestrials such as the Klingons.

Here's the creation of heaven and earth from Genesis chapter 1, according to *The Black Bible Chronicles*, a 'hip and holy' version written for the streets of the South Bronx...

Now when the Almighty was first down with His program, He made the heavens and the earth. The earth was a fashion misfit, being so uncool and dark, but the Spirit of the Almighty came down real tough, so that He simply said, 'Lighten up!'

And here's the same passage in *A Glasgow Bible*...

It wis a lang time ago, right enough - thoosans an thoosans o years since. There wis nuthin whaur the earth is the noo - absolutely nuthin at aw.

'Weell noo,' God says tae himsel wan day, 'I'll fix a wee bit dod o land - doon there.'

Meanwhile, one of the gentlest and best-loved passages from the Old Testament is now available to the most bloodthirsty beings in our neck of the Galaxy – the Klingons. Psalm 23 (“The Lord is my shepherd”), brought to us courtesy of the Klingon Language Institute, begins...

QorghwI'wI' ghaH joH'a'e' JIHvaD Dach pagh.

For those not fluent in Klingon, this roughly translates as ‘Caretaker-my he-is great-lord, for-me it-lacks nothing.’

God and his ghost-writers

The true focus of the Bible’s power is not just its ability to tell a good story, or last forever as a bestseller, or engage our imagination. Its power lies somewhere else. And it’s this: the Bible shows us God. This isn’t just any old book. Christians believe the 73 books of the Bible are uniquely the word of God: that is, God speaks to us through them and shows us what kind of God he is.

Christians believe the Bible is the revelation of God. They say we can’t discover the truth about God simply by thinking hard or long enough. We can only know God when he makes the first move. God reveals himself most fully to us in the coming of Jesus into the world, and the written word of God, the Bible, is part of that revelation.

The Catholic Church puts it this way, in a teaching document called *Dei Verbum* (or Divine Revelation): “The books of Scripture firmly, faithfully and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures.”

How does God do this? One word the Bible uses to describe the “how” of revelation is the word *inspired*. Here’s the famous quotation which is often used when people talk about the God-given status of the Bible...

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16

The Greek word used here for “inspired” literally means “God-breathed”. Scripture is God breathing out. Just as when we speak, we are breathing out, so God breathes out his word from the depths of his being. This implies that the Bible has its origins in God himself.

Here’s another famous quotation about God and inspiration...

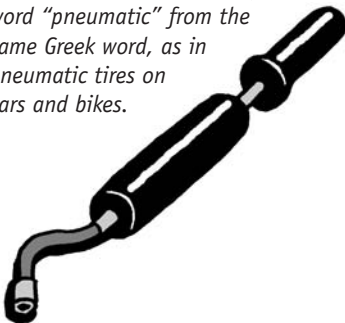
Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man...

(that is, it wasn’t people making theories about God)

... but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1:21

The Greek word for “inspired” is theopneustos: theo = “God” and pneustos = “breathed”. We get the word “pneumatic” from the same Greek word, as in pneumatic tires on cars and bikes.



The Greek word for “carried along” is the same word that is used to talk about a sailing ship being blown along by the wind. There’s the same idea of breath or wind here.

These verses, plus others in the Bible, lead Christians to believe that the writers of the Bible were moved by God’s Spirit, so that what they wrote was inspired by God. That’s why many Christians look at the Bible as a key authority for what they believe and how they should live.

These descriptions work well in talking about the experience of the most striking characters in the Old Testament – people such as Moses or Elijah, who received direct revelations from God. Here’s Jeremiah, for example, one of the greatest prophets...



Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, ‘Now, I have put my words in your mouth...’

Jeremiah 1:9

And here’s Ezekiel, in his famous-but-bizarre vision of the valley of dry bones...

Then the Lord said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones! Hear the word of the Lord!’”

Ezekiel 37:4

In these examples, God breaks in like a radio message and tells the prophet what to say. Many writers in the early days of the church looked at verses such as these and talked about the Bible’s



*How it didn't happen...
remote-controlled
prophets*

writers being like musical instruments played by the Spirit. The instruments might be human, but the music was perfect and was God's.

Other Christian writers haven't been so happy with that picture of God strumming his guitar or tootling his flute, as it suggests the prophets were completely passive, and maybe even possessed, when they gave their prophecies. To change the image, it's as if God was holding the remote control and the prophet had no say in what was happening.

Most Christian commentators have resisted the idea that the Bible was dictated by God, or handed down from a passing cloud. They've balanced the divine side of the Bible by also stressing its human side – that it was written by real, messy human beings. In the past century, Christians have talked more about the human writers of the Bible and have come to appreciate and even enjoy the fact that because they were human beings, their likes and dislikes, their sense of humor and even their bad grammar comes across in what they wrote.

Just as Christians believe Jesus was fully God and fully a human being, so the Bible is inspired by God but is also a human production. It didn't drop out of heaven one day. God's inspiration had to negotiate with the very imperfect characters of David, Mark, Solomon, Paul and the other writers.

Even though the Bible has plenty of instances of prophets being told, 'Hit them with this!' by God, there are huge stretches of the book where this just doesn't happen. Large chunks of the Bible don't have any dramatic, supernatural revelations, in which people hear voices from heaven, or get told what to say, or see fantastic visions.

Take the book of Esther, for instance, which in some versions doesn't even mention the word "God". Or the hundreds of wise sayings and riddles in the book of Proverbs. Or the long family tree which takes up most of the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel. What about these writings? Were they "breathed out" by God – and if so, how were the writers inspired?

Some Christian thinkers have suggested that God's Spirit was flexible in the way he inspired the Bible's different writers. He might have spoken a direct word in the ear of a prophet, they say, but for King Solomon, the Spirit gave him such a strong dose of wisdom that his proverbs were what God wanted to be said. Or in the case of Luke, who carefully collected and researched the story of Jesus, Christian thinkers have argued that the Holy Spirit guided the process so that Luke's Gospel is the word not just of Luke, but of God, too.

So is it true?

How much can we trust the Bible? Can we believe in what it says? Is it possible the Bible contains mistakes, and if so, what does that do to our faith? Do Christians have to accept everything happened just as it says – even the stories which seem a bit implausible – or is there some room for negotiation?

Some Christians believe the Bible is 100 percent free from errors of any kind, saying every single word in the original manuscripts was inspired by God. As one preacher put it: "God said it, that settles it, I believe it!" For many people who hold this view, God created the world in six, 24-hour days, because that is what they read straight off the page in Genesis chapter 1.

This view of the Bible has been hugely popular among some Christians around the world. In its most extreme form, it is

The prize for the strangest and yet most precise dating of the moment of creation goes to Archbishop James Ussher, Anglican Primate of Ireland. In 1650, he declared that his calculations showed the creation to have happened at 12 noon on 23 October 4004 BC. This was based partly on counting the 'begats' in the Bible and on a symbolic numbering scheme.



antagonistic to the findings of modern science, and Charles Darwin in particular. This is the view which comes closest to saying the human writers of the Bible were mere keyboards which God used to key in the messages he wanted, word for word.

Catholic Christians, along with many others, are cautious about claiming the Bible is literally true, word for word. The Catholic church has some important things to say about the truth of the scriptures. The following points are taken from *Dei Verbum* ("The Word of God"), a major teaching document of the Second Vatican Council.

1. The essentials – the church says the Bible is without error when it talks about the truths God has revealed for our salvation. Here are the words of *Dei Verbum*...

Since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings.

2. Interpreting wisely – when reading different parts of the Bible, it's important to remember what kind of writing we're looking at. Some of the writers are recounting history, while others are detailing family trees, setting out law codes, writing poetry, giving prophesy or penning a letter to friends. These types of writing are different, and they need different ways of reading, too. So when a poet says...

**He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.**

Psa.lm 91:1

... it doesn't mean that God literally casts a shadow on the ground! We need to read poetry as poetry and understand how it uses metaphors and images. As Dei Verbum says...

For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another.

We also need to understand that our modern eyes are looking at an ancient text. The biblical writers had a very different understanding of science, and their culture was very different from ours, too. This means that what looks to us like a mistake in the Bible is sometimes down to the writer's different understanding of science, history or culture. Hopefully, *The Bible from Scratch* will help explain some of the big differences between the Bible writers and us, and will help you read and understand them better.

3. The Bible and Tradition – Catholic Christians have sacred Tradition in helping to understand the Bible. In fact, sacred Tradition and the Bible go hand in hand in communicating God's revelation to us. The church believes it continues to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to preserve, teach and interpret the Bible in every new generation.

On a practical level, this means there are plenty of resources to help us with any questions we have about the Bible, including Catholic books and websites, and parish priests and teachers. We shouldn't be afraid to use the rich resources the church has to offer us.

Handle with care

If you believe that the Bible came from God – however you think that happened – then you should approach reading it with care. God is on the other end of the line, and God is hugely unknown, mysterious, creative and wild. You simply do not know what might happen if you start reading with an open mind and expectant heart.

Here's some good advice from a 7th-century Christian, Isaac of Nineveh, about what to do before opening this wonderful book...

Never approach the words of the mysteries that are in the scriptures without praying and asking for God's help. Say, "Lord, grant me to feel the power that is in them." Reckon prayer to be the key that opens the true meaning of the Scriptures.

- Isaac of Nineveh

Around the Bible in 30 days

This short reading course is designed to help you **get started** in the Bible. Or if you're stuck, to help you get restarted. It introduces **30 significant** Bible passages that will take you quickly from Genesis to Revelation. Just think. If you read one a day, it'll take you a month. Unless it's February.

□ 1. 'Let there be light!'

Genesis 1:1 – 2:4

The Bible opens with a majestic description of God as creator of everything. Humankind is seen as the peak of God's creation.

□ 2. The Garden of Eden

Genesis 2:5 – 3:24

This second creation account focuses on Adam and Eve. Chapter 3 describes 'The Fall', when God's good creation is spoiled.

□ 3. God tests Abraham

Genesis 22:1–9

Abraham (see page 56) was the father of the Jewish race. Here God tests his loyalty severely.



□ 4. The burning bush

Exodus 2–3

Centuries after Abraham, the Israelites are slaves in Egypt. Moses (see page 62) is here called by God to help free the slaves.

□ 5. The great escape

Exodus 14

The Israelites slaves have been set free. But they are pursued by the Egyptians and trapped against the sea (see page 61).

□ 6. At Mt Sinai

Exodus 19:1 – 20:21

Moses' people reach Mt Sinai in the desert. Here God makes an agreement with them and gives them his law.

□ 7. 'Be holy...'

Leviticus 19

In this chapter of laws, God wants his people to reflect his character. The laws have a special concern for the poor and powerless.