

God's Plan Fulfilled

a guide for understanding the new testament

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Indianapolis, Indiana

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An Overview of the New Testament

The Bible is more like a library of books
than a single volume.

It is all too easy to think of the Bible as one book. In fact, some refer to it as “the Good Book.” You can even buy a Bible that is titled *The Book* (NLT). But the Bible was not originally one book. The word *Bible* originally meant “little books”—over sixty-six little books when the word was first coined.

The Bible is actually more like a library of books than a single volume. It is divided into two sets of books called the Old Testament and the New Testament. For Protestants, the Old Testament contains thirty-nine books. The Old Testament of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches includes some additional documents called the Apocrypha.¹ The New Testament, in all traditions, is made up of twenty-seven books.

Initially, these writings were not bound together, but were written in different places, by different authors, for different purposes over as many

At a Glance

- The books of the New Testament are best read individually. Each author used words in a unique way to address different situations.
- The New Testament contains several different genres. The ancient genres are different from our genres today.

as one thousand years. Eventually, they came to be grouped together in various ways and were recorded on scrolls. At some point, after all the books of the Bible had been written, Christians gathered them together into one big book—more like the Bible as we now know it.

We mentioned that the Bible is more of a library than an individual book. In a library, of course, there are many different kinds of books—novels, history books, science books, magazines, and scholarly journals to name a few. These different types of literature are called genres. No one would read a comic strip in the same way as a math book, nor would anyone read a novel in quite the same way as a history of World War II. We have learned over the years to have different expectations of a comic play and a book on the Holocaust.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

The New Testament canon—the group of early Christian writings considered authoritative for Christians—took several hundred years to reach its current form. The books themselves were written in a different order than they appear in our Bibles.

Paul's letters were collected first and began circulating among churches. By the late A.D. 100s, the mainstream church had accepted four gospels—and only those four gospels—as Scripture.

Other books were debated over time as to which were to be considered Scripture. Some were accepted; others were not. The first known canon (or list) of authoritative books that corresponds to those in our Bibles today was made in A.D. 367.

The same is true of the library of the New Testament. Of its twenty-seven books, there are at least four different kinds of basic genres in use, probably more. The first four books—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are called *gospels*. Each in its own unique way presents what it considers to be important events and teachings from Jesus' life on earth.

The fifth book, Acts, looks like a history book to us, although we should not assume that ancient history writing followed the same rules used by modern historians. This book takes us from Jesus' last days on earth to a time over thirty years later when Paul arrived in Rome to stand trial before the emperor.

There are also a number of letters (or epistles) in the New Testament. Thirteen of these have Paul's name on them. There is also an anonymous

epistle named Hebrews, which may actually be an early Christian sermon. The remaining seven letters are called the “Catholic” or “General” Epistles, since they seem to have a general audience in mind.

The final book of the New Testament is of a genre completely unfamiliar to most of us. It is an apocalypse, and to many it will no doubt seem an extremely strange book. The word *apocalypse* means that the book is the revelation of hidden things, which is why it is also called the book of Revelation. We will have to learn a whole new set of expectations from the ancient world if we want to hear this book as it was first heard.

As you are perhaps beginning to see, reading the Bible for what it originally meant is a lot more involved than many people think. It involves learning a whole new set of assumptions about things that seem obvious to us—like what it means to be the author of a letter. Before we are done, we will have to shift our thinking on matters as basic as what a father is or what it means to be poor. This shift is necessary if we want to have any chance of understanding what Jesus or Paul or any of the New Testament personalities were really saying.

<p style="text-align: center;">Basic Genres of the New Testament</p> <p>Gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, John</p> <p>History Acts</p> <p>Letters/Epistles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pauline Epistles<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon• Hebrews (possibly a sermon)• General Epistles<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, Jude <p>Apocalypse Revelation</p>

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. What are the two parts of the Christian Bible?
2. What section do Roman Catholics and other Christian traditions include that Protestants do not?
3. What are the four basic genres in the New Testament?

4. If some artistic license were taken for the genres of ancient history or biography writing, can we consider them legitimate today?
5. Into what genre might Hebrews actually fit?
6. Which letters are included among the Pauline Epistles? Which books are included in the General Epistles? Which book was an apocalypse?