

12 Need-to-Know Facts about the Bible

Jeffrey Kranz, Bible Geek at OverviewBible.com

1. The Bible's content was written over the course of at least 500 years

If you grew up with a lot of exposure to the Bible, it might be easy to assume the authors of the books of the Bible were like modern journalists: writing things down as they happened. However, this was not the case. The Bible includes stories from the first century CE as well as stories about the beginnings of the cosmos—but most biblical scholars agree that the books we find these stories in reached their present forms between 350 BCE and 150 CE.

Of course, these books reference sources from outside that window. For example, parts of the [Torah](#) rely on oral traditions and writings that are much older than the present form of the Pentateuch, and the Song of Deborah (the fifth chapter in the book of [Judges](#)) is often referred to as one of the oldest works of Hebrew poetry in the Bible.

2. The Bible was written in three languages

Those languages are Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Most of our Old Testament was written in Hebrew, which was the language the original readers spoke. A few bits of the Old Testament were written Aramaic (looking at you, [Ezra](#) and [Daniel](#)). The New Testament was written in Greek, the commonly-spoken language of the time.

If you'd like to learn how to study the Bible in these languages yourself, check out [Zondervan Academic's certificate program](#).*

3. The Bible was written on three continents

Most was written in what is modern-day Israel (Asia). But some passages of Jeremiah were written in Egypt (Africa) and several New Testament epistles were written from cities in Europe.

This is important to keep in mind when reading the Bible: it wasn't written in a single room by a unified group of people. Instead, these writings were accumulated over the centuries and eventually compiled into the volume we call "the Bible" today.

4. The Bible was written by more than 40 traditional contributors (in reality, there were many more)

The books of the Bible are traditionally attributed to [heroes of the Jewish and Christian faiths](#). Moses is given credit for the first five books of the Bible, most of the prophets are given credit for the books named after them, etc.

The reality is a bit messier than this, of course. While many Christians see Moses as a historical figure, [we don't have any evidence that he existed outside the Bible itself](#)—so it's more likely that the books attributed to Moses were written by various religious leaders over the centuries. Similarly, it's unlikely that Jonah wrote [the book of Jonah](#), [Isaiah](#) may have had some help over the centuries, and so on and so forth.

Plus, there are some books whose authors we just don't know, like the New Testament book of [Hebrews](#).

5. Most of the people who wrote the Bible were of Hebrew ethnicity

More than 75% of the Bible's text is in the Old Testament, which was predominantly written by Hebrew prophets and scribes. Likewise, most of the New Testament was written by Christian Jews.

However, there are a few authors who may have been Gentiles. For example, some readings of Collosians 4:14 point to [Luke](#), the traditional author of both the [Gospel of Luke](#) and [Acts](#) as a non-Jew.

6. All Christian Bible canons contain the same 66 “core” books

While Catholic and Orthodox traditions contain a few more books in their Bibles, every major Christian sect acknowledges the 66 books in the Protestant Bible as canonical. Centuries after Christianity had begun, Judaism established their [canonical Hebrew Bible](#). This is identical in content to the Protestant Old Testament today. Christians, however, continued using several significant documents from the [Septuagint](#), a Greek translation of many sacred Hebrew books (such as the works of Tobit and Judith).

During the Reformation, Martin Luther pushed for the Protestant canon to distinguish between books that the Jews had considered canonical and the other books that had been used by Christians along the way. These other books are called the deuterocanon (“second canon”), and were originally pushed to the back of the Old Testament in Protestant Bibles. Eventually these books were dropped from later printed editions of the Protestant Bible, but remain in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles.

7. Chapters and verses were added in the 1200s CE

The original books of the Bible were not divided into chapters and verses. These came about a thousand years after the last book of the Bible had been written. This makes it much easier to tell other people what parts of the Bible you’re referencing!

8. The Bible is a mix of proactive and reactive texts

Each book of the Bible is a product of its time. Some books were written in reaction to certain events, such as [Lamentations](#) being written in reaction to

the fall of Jerusalem. Others were more proactive, prescribing principles or teachings for readers moving forward. ([Proverbs](#) is a great example of this!)

Each book was written to ancient readers (i.e., not us!), and then preserved by tradition over long periods of time. If you keep this in mind, you'll have an easier time understanding various parts of the Bible.

9. We don't have the original documents!

It would be great if we could go read the very first edition of the Gospel of Matthew, or the first scroll of Isaiah—but those documents have been lost to the ages. Instead, we're working with copies of copies of copies of the original works.

Still, it seems these texts were faithfully (if imperfectly) preserved. While we do find [variants in biblical manuscripts](#), on the whole, the message and content has been largely the same for the past few millennia.

10. The Bible is about 611,000 words long (in its original languages)

In those original languages, the Bible's word count is about 611,000. That word count is not going to line up with your Bible though, for a few reasons:

- When translating the Bible from its original languages to English, translators tend to use more words to get across the original author's point.
- Different translations word passages differently, which results in a variation in word count.

But even so: it's interesting to think that while the Bible is longer than *Moby Dick*, it's nowhere near as long a read as the *Harry Potter* saga. You can learn more about just [how long the Bible is here](#).

11. The Bible is non-linear, and the books aren't in chronological order

The Bible is a collection of individual documents pulled together into one series over time. Because of this, the Bible doesn't read like a single timeline—it jumps around. And while the Bible contains many narrative sections, it's not all narrative. The Bible also includes songs, wisdom literature, decrees, and letters written by religious leaders.

12. Each* book of the Bible is a standalone work

This is one of the most important things to keep in mind when reading the Bible: there was no “The Bible” to speak of when each of the individual books was written! Each book was written with its own rhetorical goals in its own time. It wasn't until much later that people started thinking of Genesis and Revelation as parts of “the same” book.

Some of these books are collections of smaller books in themselves (for example, [Psalms](#) is a collection of five smaller “books” of poetry). Others were compiled as parts of larger collections, such as the individual books of the Torah. But while there is some intertextual awareness, it's very important to remember that the authors of the books of the Bible were not consciously contributing to a greater project. This is why when you study the Bible, **it's best to make sure you read each book as a standalone document.**

*EXCEPTIONS: In the Old Testament, you'll find a handful of books with “First” or “Second” in their titles. These books represent “Part 1” and “Part 2” of a single work. So while we have the eight books of 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, originally there were just the four books: Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra–Nehemiah. Why were these books

divided? Because putting them all on one document would make the scroll too heavy for practical use!