



Lecture # 1 Part 3

The Structure and Divisions of the Bible

THE BIBLE AND ITS TESTAMENTS: DEFINITIONS

THE BIBLE IN ITS MODERN FORM

THE HISTORICAL REASON FOR THE STRUCTURE OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

After the Vulgate had reigned for a thousand years as the standard Bible of Christendom, it is to be expected that Wycliffe's first English Bible would follow the timeworn divisions of its Latin precursor. As a matter of fact, the fourfold division of the Old Testament and the similar division of the New Testament have been the standard ever since. **As a result, the divisions of the modern English Bible follow a topical rather than an official order (i.e., by rank or office of the writer), in contrast to the Hebrew Bible.** Yet, within that overall topical structure, there is a semi chronological listing of the books from Genesis through Revelation.

THE TOPICAL REASON FOR THE STRUCTURE OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

Because the present structure of the English Bible has been subject to several historical variations, it would be too much to assume that it is God-given. The order as we have it is not, however, purely arbitrary. In fact, the order shows evidence of being purposefully directed, at least insofar as it falls into meaningful categories, because it presents the historical unfolding of the drama of redemptive revelation.

Because redemption and revelation center about the Person of Jesus Christ, it may be observed that the several sections of Scriptures form a **Christocentric structure** ([Luke 24:27, 44](#); [John 5:39](#); [Hebrews 10:7](#)). That is, Christ is not only the theme of both Testaments of the Bible, as mentioned above, but He may also be seen as the subject in the sequence of each of the eight sections of the Scriptures.¹⁶

[Luke 24:27 \(NASB\)](#)

²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

[Luke 24:44 \(NASB\)](#)

⁴⁴ Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."

[John 5:39 \(NASB\)](#)

³⁹ "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me;



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Hebrews 10:7 (NASB)

⁷ "THEN I SAID, 'BEHOLD, I HAVE COME (IN THE SCROLL OF THE BOOK IT IS WRITTEN OF ME) TO DO YOUR WILL, O GOD.'"

Section	Name	Christocentric Aspect	Viewpoint
1	Law	Foundation for	Downward Look
2	History	Christ	Outward Look
3	Poetry	Preparation for	Upward Look
4	Prophecy	Christ Aspiration for Christ Expectation of Christ	Forward Look
5	Gospels	Manifestation of	Downward Look
6	Acts	Christ	Outward Look
7	Epistles	Propagation of Christ	Upward Look
8	Revelation	Interpretation and Application of Christ Consummation in Christ	Forward Look

STRUCTURE AND DIVISIONS OF THE BIBLE

In the Old Testament, the books of the law lay the foundation for Christ in that they reveal how God **chose** (Genesis), **redeemed** (Exodus), **sanctified** (Leviticus), **guided** (Numbers), and **instructed** (Deuteronomy) the Hebrew nation, through whom He was to bless all nations ([Gen. 2:1-3](#)).

Genesis 2:1-3 (NASB)

¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts.

² By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.

³ Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

The historical books illustrate how the nation was being prepared to carry out its redemptive mission. In order for the chosen nation to be fully prepared for the task, it had **to conquer its land** ([Joshua-Ruth](#)), **to be established under its first king**, Saul ([1 Samuel](#)), and later **to expand its empire under David and Solomon** ([2 Samuel-1 Kings 10](#)).



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After Solomon's reign, the kingdom was divided ([1 Kings 11ff.](#)) and later deported to Assyria (721 B.C.) and Babylonia (586 B.C., [2 Kings](#)). However, redemptive hopes were not lost, for God protected and preserved His people ([Esther](#)) so He could cause them to return ([Ezra](#)) and their holy city to be rebuilt ([Nehemiah](#)).

In the law the foundation is laid for Christ; **in the historical books** the nation takes root in preparation for Christ; **in the poetical books** the people look up in aspiration for Christ; **in the prophetic books** they look forward in expectation of Christ. The **law views** the moral life of Israel, **history** records their national life, **poetry** reveals their spiritual life, and **prophecy** depicts their prophetic or Messianic life and expectations.

The gospels of the New Testament bring that **prophetic expectation** to a **historical manifestation** in Christ. There the promised Savior becomes present; the **concealed** becomes **revealed**; the Logos enters the cosmos ([John 1:1, 14](#)) as Christ is made manifest in the flesh.

[John 1:1 \(NASB\)](#)

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

[John 1:14 \(NASB\)](#)

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The gospels give a **fourfold** manifestation of Christ: He is seen **in His sovereignty** ([Matthew](#)), **in His ministry** ([Mark](#)), **in His humanity** ([Luke](#)), and **in His deity** ([John](#)). The manifestation was limited in Jesus' day for the most part, "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" ([Matthew 10:6](#)).

[Matthew 10:5-7 \(NASB\)](#)

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: "Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans;

⁶ but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

⁷ "And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.'

After Christ died and rose again, the disciples were commissioned to carry the account of His manifestation "to the end of the earth" ([NKJV](#)) as told in the book of [Acts](#). There is recorded propagation of faith in Christ as He had commanded: "And you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" [Acts 1:8 \(NASB\)](#).

The gospels give the **manifestation** of Christ, **Acts** the **propagation** of faith in Him, and **the epistles** the **interpretation** of His person and work. **The gospels** and **Acts** record the deeds of Christ and His disciples, but **the epistles reveal** His doctrine as it was taught by the apostles. **The former** ([Old Testament](#) and [The Gospels](#)) give the historic foundation for New Testament Christianity; **the latter** ([Acts](#) and [The Epistles](#)) give the *didactic interpretation* and *application* of it.



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The climactic chapter of Christocentric revelation comes in the final book of the New Testament, The Book of Revelation, where all things are brought to a consummation in Christ. The “Paradise Lost” of Genesis becomes the “Paradise Regained” of Revelation. Whereas the gate to the tree of life is closed in Genesis, it is opened forevermore in Revelation.

All things are to be summed up in Him (Colossians 2:9), for all things were made by Him, redemption was accomplished through Him, and it is only fitting that all things should be consummated in Him (Ephesians 1:10).

Colossians 2:9 (NASB)

⁹ For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form,

Ephesians 1:10 (NASB)

¹⁰ with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Bible is a *biblos*, a single book. It has two Testaments, better called covenants or agreements between God and His people. Those two parts of the Bible are inseparably related: the New Testament is in the **Old concealed**, and the Old Testament is in the **New revealed**.

Down through the centuries the Bible has been subdivided into sections and has had several different arrangements of its books. The Hebrew Bible came to have a **threefold division (Law, Prophets, and Writings)**, so categorized according to the official position of the writer.

However, beginning with the Septuagint and continuing in the Latin and modern English translations, the Old Testament has been given a **fourfold topical structure**. The New Testament was also given a **fourfold topical arrangement** of Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation.

When viewed carefully, those sections of the Bible are obviously not arbitrarily put together. Instead, they form a meaningful and purposeful whole, as they convey the progressive unfolding of the theme of the Bible in the person of Christ. **The law** gives the *foundation* for Christ, **history** shows the *preparation* for Him. In **poetry** there is an *aspiration* for Christ and in **prophecy** an *expectation* of Him. The Gospels of the New Testament record the historical *manifestation* of Christ, the Acts relate the *propagation* of Christ, the Epistles give the *interpretation* of Him, and in Revelation is found the *consummation* of all things in Christ.



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NOTES

1. Thirteen of the thirty-three times *diathēkē* occurs in the New Testament it is translated “testament” in the King James Version (*Englishman’s Greek Concordance*, p. 144). Technically, however, the English term “testament” requires action on the part of one person only (the one making the testament or will). The heir’s agreement is not necessary to the disposition of the testament. That is not true of a covenant.
2. Except in [Heb. 9:6–7](#), where the context indicates that the wider sense of *diathēkē* is demanded, namely, “will,” or “testament.” See Preface, *The Holy Bible, American Standard Version* (1901).
3. Cf. [Heb. 8:3](#): “When He said, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete.”
4. Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, [Ps. 106:3](#) in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2d series, vol. 8.
5. W. Graham Scroggie, *Know Your Bible*, 1:12.
6. See discussion in section # 14.
7. R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, pp. 146 ff.
8. According to Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism*, p.256, the numeration 22 arose not from a smaller canon but from the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. It is to that extent artificial, while the numeration 24 is more straightforward If so, the numeration 24 must be older not younger than the numeration 22, and must likewise go back at least to the first century BC." Also see the discussion in Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence*, especially 53–56.
9. Psalms was the first and largest book in this portion of the Hebrew Scriptures and may have become the unofficial nomenclature for the entire section; hence, it could be used here as a reference to the section as a whole.
10. Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.8, William Whiston, trans.
11. “The Prologue of the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach,” in *Apocrypha* (RSV), p. 110.
12. This is the general consensus, as held by Joseph Angus, *The Bible Handbook*; Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*; *The Jewish Encyclopedia*; et al.
13. For example, the Gospels were sometimes placed in other sequences, and on some occasions the General Epistles appeared before the Pauline. Cf. Brooke Foss Westcott, *General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*; also see his *The Bible in the Church*, Appendix B, pp. 302–11.
14. In the Eastern Church the tendency was to classify them as fourteen Pauline Epistles (including Hebrews) and seven General; the Western church tended to follow the classification as presented above.
15. For a brief discussion of the acceptance of the LXX by Christians and the rejection of it by Jews see chaps. 27 and 28; F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, pp.50–52. |
16. It should be noted that a similar Christocentric structure has been presented in many works, e.g., Norman L. Geisler, *Christ: The Theme of the Bible*; W. Graham Scroggie, *Know Your Bible*.