

THE HOLY BIBLE IN THE ARMENIAN CHURCH



Asdvadzashoonch



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Armenians use several words to refer to the Bible. One of these words is *Asdvadzashoonch*, meaning “breathed by God” which reinforces a theological principle in the Armenian Church that the Bible is a collection of books breathed upon, or inspired by God.

«Ամենայն Գիրք աստուածաշունչք եւ
օգտակարք ի վարդապետութիւն են եւ
ի յանդիմանութիւն եւ յուղղութիւն եւ ի
խրատ արդարութեան:» (2 Տիմ. 3:16)

“All Scripture is God-breathed and
useful for teaching, admonition, cor-
rection, and for instruction in righ-
teousness.” (2 Tim. 3:16)

Another word is *Soorp Keerk*, “Holy Book.” For Armenians, the Bible is “the Holy Book” because it contains revelations about God and invites the readers to a life of holiness.

As part of the Orthodox branch of the Universal Church of Christ, the Armenian Church believes that the books of the Bible were written, edited, compiled, and preserved by divine inspiration. God is the source and origin of the biblical message. As such, God is the author of the Bible. Therefore, another common title for

the Bible among the Armenians is “the Word of God.” Obviously, this does not mean that every word in the Bible was written or dictated by God. Words, by definition, are human. As such, the biblical text is comprised of human words of several languages, such as Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and it contains all the markings of the authors, as well as the culture and time during which the words were written.

The Armenian Bible

The Word of God was proclaimed in Armenia through the preaching of Sts. Thaddeus and Bartholomew and their successors in the first centuries of the Christian era. In the year A.D. 301, when St. Gregory the Parthian succeeded in converting the King of Armenia, Drtad the Third, Christianity became the official religion of Armenia and the first to accept Christianity state religion. Immediately, groups of missionaries were sent all over Armenia to teach and baptize the Armenians. One major obstacle was the absence of an Armenian version of the Bible, because the Word of God was proclaimed in Armenia through the preaching of Sts. Thaddeus and Bartholomew and their successors in the first centuries of the Christian era. The Greek and Syriac versions of the Bible and liturgy that the evangelizers brought with them were used and local priests

translated into Armenian orally.

After the invention of the Armenian alphabet, St. Mesrob Mashdots and his team of monks spearheaded an aggressive evangelical movement to translate not only the books of the Bible, but also the commentaries about them and other theological and liturgical works. Within a few decades a library of Armenian literature was created.

The earliest accounts of the Armenian translation of the Bible are recorded in the writings of the fifth century historians Goriun, Movses Khorenatsi and, Ghazar Parbetsi, who confirm that the translation of the Bible into Armenian went through two phases. The first was initiated by St. Mashdots immediately after the invention of the Armenian alphabet (A.D. 405). The translation process from Syriac began with the Book of Proverbs and was concluded in the capital city of Vagharshabad in Armenia, with the support of the reigning Catholicos Sahag the First.

The Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431) marks the beginning of the second phase of the translation, which continued for several years. Catholicos Sahag and St. Mashdots had already sent several of their disciples who returned to Armenia with “reliable copies” of the books of the Bible.

The Armenian Church observes officially the translation of the Bible every year in October.

The Canon of The Bible

The word “canon” means a measuring rod or a standard of guidance.

The canon of the Bible, thus, is the list containing the names of the books that make up the Bible, which was decided over the course of several centuries.

The earliest reference to biblical books can be found at the time of Moses. In Deuteronomy 31:25-26, we read about Moses commanding his followers to keep the book of law, i.e., the Torah, in the Ark of the Covenant. We know that these books, together with that of Joshua, were kept in the ark and carried with it during the Israelites’ wandering in the wilderness. Solomon is credited with finding a library and collecting the sacred books “about the kings and prophets, and the writings of David, and letter of kings”. (2 Maccabees 2:13).

Beginning around the year 300 B.C., the Jews of Alexandria and in the Diaspora began to use Greek more than Hebrew. This situation necessitated the translation of their Bible, i.e., our Old Testament, into the Greek language. It became known as the Septuagint, a Latin word meaning “seventy.” According to a Jewish tradition, seventy translators, independent of each other, translated the Bible into Greek and ended up with seventy identical translations. The Jewish religious authorities, before Christ, accepted the Septuagint as the official version of the Bible. From the New Testament and other contempo-

rary writings, it is evident that the disciples knew of the Septuagint version of the Bible. Most of the quotations of Christ and the other figures in the New Testament are from the Septuagint version.

Martin Luther, reacting to the Roman Catholic tradition, rejected the Latin as the base text for the translation of the Bible and followed the example of Jerome in separating all the books, which were in the Septuagint and not in the earlier Hebrew manuscripts. He called these books that were missing in the Hebrew manuscripts “Apocrypha,” a Greek word for “hidden.” These books are accepted by the Armenian Church and all the Orthodox and Catholic churches as part of the Canon of the Bible.

The Books of The Bible

The books of the Bible are classified into two major groups: Old Testament and New Testament. “Testament” means “treaty,” “contract,” or “Covenant.” The Armenian word for it is *Gdagaran*. The Bible refers to the agreements that God established with His people. In the first two chapters of Genesis, for example, God’s first “testament” was with Adam and Eve.

He gave them the authority over all the beasts and creatures and in return commanded them to not eat from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Adam and Eve chose to ignore God’s commandment, which established a prec-

edent for mankind. As we continue reading the book of Genesis and the rest of the Bible, we realize that the people have perpetually broken God's commandments and violated the rules of their agreements with Him.

The books of the Bible beginning with Genesis until the end of Malachi contain a progressive revelation of God and His commandments and covenant with mankind through the people of Israel.

In the fulness of days, He sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to establish the new covenant, sealed with His blood. The commandments of the New Testament were taught by Jesus Christ, as witnessed, and handed down by His apostles.

Thus, the "Old Testament" includes the books recalling the history, revelation and prophecies concerning the old covenants of God, and the "New Testament," is comprised of the books, letters and prophetic oracles written concerning God's new covenant through His Son Jesus Christ.

Old Testament

The Old Testament can be classified into four groups:

1. **Pentateuch:** this term means "five containers," referring to the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Together these books constitute the Law for

which the Hebrew word Torah is commonly used, which means “Teaching” or “Instruction.” They tell the story of God’s interaction with His people, from the creation of the world to the death and burial of Moses and his succession by Joshua. These books record both the establishment of Israel as the people of God and the giving of His commandments.

2. **Historical Books:** this category includes – Joshua, Judges, Ruth, First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, First and Second Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, and the books of Maccabees. They narrate the history of the people of God, as well as Israel’s relationship with God and with her neighboring nations.
3. **Books of Wisdom:** this category includes – the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Canticle of Canticles (Song of Songs), Wisdom, and Sirach (Ecclesiasticus). They examine issues related to the lives of the people of God and their salvation, contain practical guidance for life, and the songs and prayers of God’s people (Psalms).
4. **Prophetic Books:** this category includes – the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea,

Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. They contain oracles delivered and written by prophets to whom God had revealed Himself, and who prophesied about future events. Many of these prophetic oracles are about the Messiah, most of them written hundreds of years before Jesus' birth. They prophesied about His birth, miracles, suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection, which were fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as confirmed by the books of the New Testament.

The New Testament

The New Testament can also be classified into four groups:

1. **Gospels:** this category includes the first four books of the New Testament – the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The term Gospel comes from the archaic English compound word, “God-Spell” meaning “Good News.” The Armenian word for “Gospel” is “*Avedik*” meaning “*Good News.*” *Avedaran* is the Gospel Book, meaning *a book that contains the four gospels.* Gospels are the depositories of the good news of

our salvation through the events of Jesus' birth, ministry, miracles, passion, crucifixion, death, and resurrection.

2. **The Book of Acts:** this book discusses the work of the Holy Spirit through the apostles in the early Church. It contains certain historical information that is not recorded anywhere else in the Bible, such as the ascension of our Lord, the descent of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost), and the ordination of the early church ministers, deacons, and priests.
3. **Epistles:** this category includes St. Paul's letters to the Romans, First and Second Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, First and Second Thessalonians, First and Second Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Epistle of James, the First and Second Epistles of Peter, the First, Second and Third Epistles of St. John, and the Epistle of Jude. These are actual letters written by the apostles or their disciples to early Christian communities or individuals. These letters discuss the faith, liturgical practices, moral responsibilities, and problems of the early Christian communities.
4. **The Book of Revelation:** this book is also called the Apocalypse, a term which

comes from a Greek word meaning “the disclosure of that which is hidden or unknown.” The Greek word “apocalypse” is used in the title verse of the book, “the apocalypse of Jesus Christ” to emphasize that this book unveils facts about heaven and earth, past and present and future. The Book of Revelation combines letters and prophetic oracles using a very rich symbolic language. The main theme of the book is prophecy about the coming Day of Judgment, and the establishment of the eternal and universal rule of God, once and for all.

Bible readings during Holy Badarak

The Scriptural readings in the Armenian Church are compiled in a large book called the *Jashots Keerk*, Armenian for ‘Lectionary.’ The *Jashots Keerk* contains all the selections that are read at the Noon Hour or *Jashoo Zham* and includes non-Scriptural material such as the calendar, as well as homilies and prayers, and so on, that are read on special occasions. It does not include selections that are read during the different offices or hours, during special services and the sacraments.

The Armenian *Jashots Keerk* is based on the fourth-century lectionary of the Church of Jerusalem. Over the centuries the fathers of the

Armenian Church enriched the lectionary with additional selections. The major additions were made in the 12th century.

The *Jashots Keerk* begins with Armenian Christmas (January 6) and ends with January 5. On fasting days (Wednesdays, Fridays, special fasts preceding major feasts and Lent) there are no readings from the Old Testament. On all other days the readings include passages from the Old Testament, particularly from the prophets as well as from the Apostolic epistles, and the four Gospels. On the first four days of the Fast of the Catechumens, which falls during the third week before the beginning of Lent, there are no Scriptural readings at all. During the course of the year, the entire New Testament, with the exception of St. Paul's letter to Philemon and the Book of Revelation, is read more than twice.

The Scriptural readings for all other occasions are to be found in the Book of Hours [*Zhama-keerk*] and the Book of Rituals [*Mayr Mashdots*]. All of these selections were made centuries ago by the fathers of the Armenian Church. Thanks to these arrangements, on a given day or during a given service the same selections are read in the Armenian churches throughout the world.

Armenians and the Bible

The fifth century historian, St. Yeghishe, sums up the role that the Bible plays in the life of the Armenian people by stating that, *“We recognize the gospel as our father and the apostolic universal church as our mother. Let no one separate us from them.”*¹ In other words, the Armenian people cannot exist without the Holy Bible and the Church.

The role of the daily reading of the Bible in Armenian spirituality is likened to the function of water or rain in the life of trees. St. Gregory of Nareg states, *“Indeed, what kind of water nourishes a tree and makes it fruitful and filled with leaves, the way the readings of the divine books do to the mind? Or what kind of rain nourishes plants the way the Holy Scriptures does the souls of those who love God?”*²

Unceasing reading of the scriptures, which some may find repetitious, is the only way to explore their deeper meaning. The eighth century father of the Church, Krikor of Arsharoonik, teaches his disciples saying, *“In order that my repetition of the same words of salvation does not bore you, remind yourself of the feather of a peacock. The more you explore it the more its gorgeous beauty makes you forget what you saw earlier. Likewise, the mystery of the scriptures, the more you repeat it the more it clarifies the mystery of our salvation.”*³

The fundamental role that the Holy Bible

continues to play in the ethos of the Armenian people was translated into liturgical expressions and public celebrations. The Book of Psalms, for example, remains throughout the centuries the main hymnal and book of prayer of the Armenian Church. Almost all the Armenian prayers and hymns are either anthologies of biblical verses, or commentaries and reflections concerning biblical events.

Scripture readings are incorporated into the daily services of the Armenian Church readings as well as in the Divine Liturgy. The biblical text has been divided into passages that are assigned for daily readings, according to the feast or theme of the day. As mentioned above, the collection of these biblical passages based on their sequence of reading during the liturgical calendar is called "Lectionary". One of the important didactic parts of the Divine Liturgy in the Armenian Church is the audible reading and proclamation of the word of God from the Bible. This is traditionally followed by the sermon, which serves as a commentary on the biblical readings of the day.

Asdvadzashoonch - the breath of God is an essential part of the Christian life. Although it is the Book of Books, we should not think of the Word of God as a collection of messages confined to the pages of a book. Living by the wisdom of the Bible in every area of our life, we should, in the words of St. Francis of Assisi, "preach the Gospel at all times—and use words only if necessary."

NOTES

NOTES

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Adopted from “The Armenian Church FAQ” and
“Welcome to the Armenian Church”

1. Eghishe, Matenagrutiwnk (Venice, 1859), p. 51.
2. Grigor Narekatsi, Meknutiwnk Erg Ergo Solomoni (Beirut, 1963), p. 276
3. Grigor Arsharuni, Meknutiwn Araradsots (Venice, 1964), p. 96.

Cover Image: Armenian Gospel Book from Constanti-
nople (circa 1620-1630) Photo: Embassy of Armenia



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