

# Foundations

INTRODUCTION TO  
THE BIBLE

Compiled by  
the Center for  
Biblical Leadership

# Foundations



## Introduction to the Bible

John M. Duncan  
for the Center for Biblical Leadership

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ACD  
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All praise and glory are due to the One who gives us life, strengthens our faith, kindles our hope, and lavishes His love upon us. May this exploration of His Word draw our hearts to Him.

John M. Duncan

# Introduction to the *Foundations* Courses

The *Foundations* courses, developed by the Center for Biblical Leadership, are designed to provide believers with a broad understanding of fundamental issues related to both the Christian life in general and membership in the Church of God of Prophecy specifically.

## COURSE LISTING

*Foundations* consists of the following four courses:

**Introduction to the Bible**—This course is designed to give the student a thorough introduction to the nature, history, context, and content of the Bible.

**Spiritual Formation**—This course explores biblical principles and practices that are essential for personal spiritual growth and maturity, including many of the classic Christian spiritual disciplines.

**History of Christianity**—This course provides an overview of some of the major developments, significant movements, and important personalities in Christian history.

**Church of God of Prophecy—Concise History, Doctrine, Polity and Future**—This course serves as an introduction to the history, beliefs, practices, and organizational structure of the Church of God of Prophecy.

Though studying these courses in the order listed above may prove most beneficial, this is not mandatory and may not always be possible. There is no official order to the four courses.

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE

There are a variety of ways in which *Foundations* courses may be used:

**Personal Enrichment**—Most basically, the courses may be read by an individual who simply wishes to increase his or her knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. In this case, the student is not required to register or to complete the examination.

**Options for Credit/Certification**—Any student who wishes to receive official credit or certification of any kind for the completion of a *Foundations* course must take an open-book examination on the subject matter and submit it, along with the accompanying registration form, to his or her state/regional/national office, where the exam will be graded. The registration form and examination can be found in the back of this course book. A score of 90 percent is needed to pass the examination. (See exception below under *Group Study*.)

**Certificate of Completion**—Students who complete and pass all four of the Foundations Course examinations will receive a formal Certificate of Completion from the Center for Biblical Leadership (CBL).

**Teacher's Certificate**—The Teacher's Certificate (which replaces the former Authorized Teacher's License and Certified Teacher's License) is issued by the Center for Biblical Leadership Department to Christian education workers who complete a prescribed course of study, including all four *Foundations* courses. Those students who complete a *Foundations* course in pursuit of their Teacher's Certificate should specify this on their *Foundations* registration form to ensure proper credit. A brochure detailing the requirements for the Teacher's Certificate is available from the Center for Biblical Leadership Department.

**State/Regional/National Credit**—At the discretion of each individual state, region, or nation, students who complete a *Foundations* course may receive state/regional/national credit toward certificates or other forms of acknowledgement that are unique to that state, region, or nation. Students should contact their individual state/regional/national office for more information.

**Ministerial Licensure and Upgrading**—Presently, completion of all four *Foundations* courses plus the Ministry Policy Manual is a prerequisite for acquiring ministerial licensure in the Church of God of Prophecy. (Note: You can purchase the Ministry Policy Manual from the White Wing Christian Bookstore.) Any person intending to pursue licensure should first contact his or her pastor and state/regional/national overseer in order to learn the complete requirements for licensure that may apply in his or her local church, state, region, and/or nation, and to receive approval as a potential ministerial candidate.

Once approved, the ministerial candidate may take the *Foundations* courses at any time. The same requirements concerning registration and completion of the examination apply to a ministerial candidate as to any student. Those students who complete a *Foundations* course in pursuit of their ministerial license should specify this on their *Foundations* registration form to ensure proper credit. Once all four *Foundations* courses and the Ministerial Exam from the Ministry Policy Manual have been successfully completed, a numbered Certificate of Completion will be issued.

Additionally, those ministers who were licensed before the *Foundations* courses became mandatory may choose to upgrade their license by completing the *Foundations* courses. This should be undertaken with the prior approval of the minister's state/regional/national overseer, and may be specified on the *Foundations* registration form.



**Group Study**—Any of these options for use of the *Foundations* courses—personal enrichment, Certified Teacher’s Certificate, or state/regional/national acknowledgment, ministerial licensure, or ministerial upgrading—may be undertaken in either an individual setting or a group study setting. Group studies may be offered in the context of a local church class led by the pastor or another qualified instructor. In the case of a group study, the instructor is responsible for collecting registration forms and examinations from those students who are pursuing credit/certification/licensure, grading the exams, and submitting the proper paperwork to the appropriate state/regional/national office. At the discretion of the instructor, group study examinations may be conducted on a closed-book basis, in which case the score needed to pass is 70 percent.

**Procedures for Processing Foundations Course Exams**—These exams are graded by the State/National/Regional Offices, or if taken in a group study, they are graded by the instructor. The exam grades are recorded on a grade sheet by the State/National/Regional Offices or group study instructor and forwarded to the CBL Department (non-ministerial candidates) and your Area Presbyter (ministerial candidates) for a Completed Foundations Course Certificate. The CBL Department does not grade any Foundations Course exams.

# Foreword

In one sense, it is only a book. It can be found sitting unassumingly on the shelves of booksellers, alongside countless other books—books about athletes and actresses, fad diets and fashion trends, dragons and aliens, science and mathematics, religion and philosophy. A customer casually browsing through the aisles might not give it a second glance.

This book, though, can be found in other places, too—places where it commands a bit more attention, sitting on a bedside table with its pages dog-eared, highlighted, and/or tear-stained. These marks serve as silent testaments to a lifetime of use and to the continual interplay of joy and sorrow, faith and doubt, and struggle and hope. It is a rare book indeed that is able to evoke this kind of devotion and emotion.

Clearly, then, this is no ordinary book. It is different from the others on the shelf in some profound way—but how? What is it about this one particular book that captures the minds and hearts of humanity like no other?

At first glance, it is difficult to imagine. It is a large, unwieldy book, incorporating a variety of literary genres into a structure that is sometimes frustratingly non-linear—hardly the kind of thing that is suitable for casual, escapist reading. Its tiny print, peppered with accent marks and italics and surrounded by marginal references and footnotes, lacks a certain aesthetic appeal. Its language is often difficult, its stories frequently gruesome, its prophecies invariably perplexing. The real wonder is not that people often fail to notice it on the shelf, but that, having noticed it, opened it, and been confronted by its daunting nature, anyone ever picks it up again.

Yet in spite of its shortcomings, this book also possesses strengths that no other can match. Its characters, and particularly its central Character, have challenged, inspired, and captured the imaginations of untold millions for thousands of years, exerting a collective influence much greater than can be claimed by the most accomplished celebrity. Its

instructions regarding the way in which we are to live are marked by the kind of simple yet enduring wisdom that far outlasts the shrill pronouncements of the self-help gurus, fitness experts, and fashion police. It describes events that seem as fantastic and otherworldly to our modern sensibilities as anything devised by writers of science fiction and fantasy, yet its answers to some of the fundamental questions of our existence—Who are we? How did we get here? What are we to do? Where are we going?—possess a simplicity, an elegance, a cohesiveness that causes them to ring far more true than the most advanced hypotheses of the scientists and mathematicians.

But what of the other books of its kind, the books of religion and philosophy that recount humanity's various attempts to wrestle with the nature of its existence and its Creator? Surely many of them possess similar characteristics, and countless people embrace their teachings just as sincerely and passionately. What is it, we must persist in asking, that sets this one book apart?

In the final analysis, it is not the majesty of its prose, nor the logical integrity of its arguments, nor the number of adherents it can claim. It is, rather, the identity of its Author, the One who alone has the power to shape not only the cosmos and the course of universal history, but the human heart. Any honest exploration of this book, this Bible, inevitably requires us not merely to take a volume from a shelf, but to take a step toward Him. It is only in the context of this journey that the cumbersome tome in the religion aisle is transformed into the cherished memoir of faith on the bedside table, and that we are transformed into the image of the One whose mark is evident on every page.

# Chapter One

## The Nature of the Bible

### WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

As we begin our exploration of the nature, history, context, and content of the Bible, the first question we must address is both painfully obvious and deceptively complex: *What is the Bible?* There are many answers to the question, some more helpful than others: It is a book. It is a collection of books. It is *the* Book. It is the Word of God. It is a lamp. It is a sword. Such answers offer hints of the truth, yet they seem insufficient to explain the power, beauty, complexity, significance, and ubiquity of this book that has so radically shaped both the course of human history and the character of countless individual souls. Unless we delve deeper into the mystery of the Bible's nature, we risk settling for an understanding of it that is hindered at best and dangerous at worst. With that in mind, this opening chapter will examine several important themes related to both the essential nature and the internal structure of the Bible.

### What the Bible Is Not

Let us begin our further examination of what the Bible is by first considering what it is *not*:

#### **The Bible Is Not Just a Collection of Colorful Stories.**

The first impression that many Christians (particularly those who are exposed to it as children) have of the Bible is that it is a collection of colorful stories featuring larger-than-life characters and easily discerned moral lessons—a sort of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* meets *Aesop's Fables*. It is perhaps understandable that this is how children are typically introduced to the Bible—after all, it certainly is much less problematic to explain David and Goliath to a child than it would be to explain David and Bathsheba—but the fact remains that many Christians retain something

of this mistaken view of the Bible well into their adolescent years. The tragic result is that they often incorrectly conclude that the Bible really has no more relevance to their adult lives than their childhood bedtime stories. So while the Bible is indeed a book filled with many wondrous stories, we must never mistake it for a storybook.

### **The Bible Is Not Primarily a Book of Rules and Regulations.**

Perhaps the most common mistake that people make regarding the nature of the Bible is to view it as essentially a rulebook—a dry, joyless, painstakingly detailed list of do's and don'ts. Such a viewpoint is not without warrant, as parts of the Old Testament **do** in fact constitute a comprehensive legal code. But, unfortunately, many Christians are led to believe that the New Testament teachings of Jesus and the apostles can essentially be reduced to an extension and refinement of the Old Testament Law, thus creating a body of Scripture that is rule-driven from beginning to end. How tragic it is when we, who are not under law but under grace, view the Bible as nothing so much as a code of law.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Bible Is Not Merely a Systematic Theology Text.**

Just as the Bible is not chiefly a book of rules for proper behavior, neither is it primarily intended to be an exhaustive textbook of proper doctrine and theology. Indeed, most theology texts, in their quest to be truly systematic, are forced to speculate about a great many questions to which the Bible does not provide clear answers.

This is perhaps not surprising when one considers that, whatever else the Bible may be, it is hardly systematic (Leviticus notwithstanding). It virtually ignores large chunks of history, including most of the period from Noah to Abraham, the 400 years between the writing of Malachi and the birth of John the Baptist, most of the first 30 years of Jesus' life on Earth, and the final years of Paul's life (to say nothing of the history of the world beyond the Middle East and the Mediterranean). It says much less about heaven and hell than one would expect, offers no in-depth explanation of the metaphysics behind the Incarnation or the Atonement,

and presents teachings on the end times that are far from easily understandable. In short, though sound theology should certainly be an important issue to Christians, the clear and comprehensive communication of doctrine is obviously not the Bible's primary objective.

### **The Bible Is Not Simply a Book of Maxims and Proverbs.**

The Bible is a book for all people and all times, but it is also a book about specific events in the lives of specific people during a specific period of time. Though we find great comfort, wisdom, and guidance for our lives in letters and speeches that were addressed to people who lived thousands of years ago, we must still recognize that most of the words of the Bible do not exist in a vacuum, but have specific contexts. Some commandments in the Law that were binding for the Children of Israel in the Old Testament were reinterpreted by Jesus in the New Testament. Some of the restrictions that applied to Jewish believers did not apply to Gentiles. Paul did not give the same advice to the Corinthians that he did to the Galatians or Philippians, and were he writing today to the New Yorkers or Londoners or Muscovites, he might emphasize still different points.

In light of this understanding, we should not make the all-too-common mistake of reducing the Bible to a collection of disconnected proverbs and maxims that we freely and liberally apply to any situation. This mistaken approach to the Bible is typified by the phrase "The Bible says . . ." which is employed with alarming regularity by Christians, usually as a means of defending a point they are making, and often with no explanation (or indeed, even knowledge) of the context of the passage. The application of specific biblical truths to our lives should always be accompanied by a broader understanding of God's nature, the nature of the Bible as a whole, and the particular contexts of its individual books. Telling someone "The Bible says we are to be perfect" or "The Bible says God will do anything we ask in His name" without properly contextualizing those statements may lead to confusion, disillusionment, and spiritual harm. The Bible was never intended to be used as a quote book from which to dispense wisdom a verse at a time.

# What the Bible Is

Having considered at length what the Bible is not, let us now examine what the Bible *is*:

## **The Bible Is Part of a Single, Ongoing Story.**

As mentioned previously, the Bible should not be thought of merely as a collection of various stories. Rather, it should be viewed as a single story (or more precisely, as **part** of a single story)—**The** story; **our** story; the great ongoing story of God and humanity that we are even now living out.<sup>2</sup> The story had its visible beginning with the creation of the universe as recorded in Genesis (although in truth, the story originated in the eternal mind of its Author). It was played out across the pages of the Old Testament, continued on through the centuries about which the Bible is silent, and built to a climax in the cross of Christ. It was carried on by the disciples and the early church and wound its way through two millennia filled with colorful characters and intriguing plot twists. It is continuing at this very moment, and will endure in its present form until God finally makes all things new, including the story itself. And, as in all great stories, the characters will indeed live ever after (though not necessarily happily). But this is the one story in which “Ever After” is not followed by “The End,” for it is a story without an ending, just as it is a story with no definite beginning.

As Christians, we are called both to dwell in this story and to let the story dwell in us. There are a number of interconnected ways in which this happens. Perhaps the first step is to recognize and affirm the story’s truth and uniqueness. There are many other stories that have been told throughout human history as attempts to explain the origin, nature, and ultimate aim of life. These range from stories in which there is no spiritual reality to life at all (such as the story advocated by modern rational science), to stories in which there is great spiritual meaning but no personal Creator or Savior (such as the story put forth by Buddhism), to stories in which there are numerous deities and spirits with differing degrees of significance (the Hindu story, for

example).<sup>3</sup> As believers, we acknowledge that none of these other stories (regardless of the partial truths they may contain) is an adequate substitute for the story that is laid out in the Bible and lived out by the Church, the story that names God as its Author.

Beyond simply acknowledging the truth of the story, we must claim it as our own and internalize it so that it becomes a significant part of our identity. To this end, the Bible acts as a sort of family history for believers. It provides a record of God's love and faithfulness toward our ancestors in the faith, which informs our ongoing relationships with Him. As believers, we likewise pass on to our descendants the biblical accounts of our "family history" (in addition to our own personal testimonies and experiences), thus providing future generations with an ever-expanding account of God's continual, purposeful involvement in both the grand sweep of human history and the day-to-day lives of His children.

Affirming the truth of the biblical story and preserving and transmitting its accounts for the benefit of others are undoubtedly essential tasks. But if we truly desire to dwell in the story (and to allow it to dwell in us), more is required: We must allow ourselves to be transformed by the story. The priorities of the Author must become our priorities. The current plights and eternal fates of our "fellow characters" in the story must become matters of great concern to us. The truths that we encounter in Scripture must not only be accepted intellectually, but applied practically. This is the process by which we become living letters,<sup>4</sup> advocates and embodiments of this one true story who long to help others find their own places in the story and forge lasting relationships with its Author.

Finally, once we have been shaped by the story, we are called to help shape the story. As believers, we are invited to aid in the story's advancement toward its end, to contribute to the continuing narrative of God and humanity by embodying the heart of God and working toward the fulfillment of His purposes as they are revealed to us in Scripture. This requires that we avoid the mistake of viewing the Bible



as a static collection of artifacts that has little connection to anything that occurs between the end of the events recorded in Acts and the advent of the events foretold in Revelation. Instead, we must view the Bible's accounts of the past and prophecies of the future as bookends to the rest of the story, including the part in which we live and to which we contribute. Although we do not have the authority to alter the contents of the Bible, we **are** called to work as agents of change within the story to which the Bible introduces us. In other words, as Christians who are engaged with the biblical text, our proper course of action is not to wait passively for the story to end, but rather to continually strive to discern from the Word how we can live our lives in ways that promote the great themes—faith, hope, love, justice, mercy, humility, gratitude, and so on—that God has set at the center of the story. In this way, we assure that the part of the story for which we share some responsibility advances toward the end that God has already declared.

### **The Bible Is Inspired by God.**

It should now be clear that, in an important sense, the Bible is only one element of the larger, ongoing story about the relationship between God and humanity. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the Bible occupies a privileged place within the story. It stands above all other works of history, art, and spiritual thought by virtue of the fact that it is not a product of the imperfect wisdom of man, but of the divine inspiration of God.

The Church of God of Prophecy's official position on the unique nature of the Bible is as follows: "We accept the Bible as God's holy Word, inspired, inerrant, and infallible. We believe the Bible to be God's written revelation of Himself to mankind and our guide in all matters of faith; therefore, we look to the Bible as our highest authority for doctrine, practice, organization, and discipline."<sup>5</sup> This statement gives us much to consider. While we will examine the Bible as a source of *revelation* in a later section, we must now address the concepts of *inspiration*, *inerrancy*, and *infallibility*.

### **The Nature of Inspiration**

The use of the word *inspired* to describe Scripture derives from

2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”<sup>6</sup> The original Greek adjective used in this passage is *theopneustos*, which literally means, “God-breathed.” Thus, when we make the claim that God has inspired the words of the Bible, we are really saying that Scripture was *breathed* by God, that it originated in Him, emanated from Him, and was transmitted by Him through its human authors.

The process by which this transmission of Scripture from God to humanity took place has been a matter of much conjecture among believers throughout Christian history. Theories of inspiration range from the dictation theory, which holds that God dictated Scripture word-for-word and the biblical writers served only as scribes who mechanically recorded what God said, to the intuition theory, which maintains that the authors of the Bible merely possessed unusual wisdom and spiritual insight, and that God had no direct role in the creation of Scripture. Obviously, neither of these extreme positions is satisfactory. The dictation theory allows no room for the individual personalities and writing styles that clearly distinguish the prophets, gospel writers, and epistolers from each other. The intuition theory makes the Bible no more significant than the works of Shakespeare, Plato, or Confucius.

Clearly, the truth about inspiration lies somewhere between the two. That is to say, the process by which Scripture came to be written clearly involved both God **and** humans. Thus Peter could write, “For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21 NIV).<sup>7</sup> Scripture had its origin in *God*, not in humanity’s wisdom and insight. Yet men *spoke* (as opposed to passively recording what God dictated), thus infusing God’s words with some of their own personality and style, so that, for instance, a Pauline letter reads quite differently from a Johannine one. But even in so speaking, they were not acting independently of God’s purposes, for they were “carried along by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>8</sup> It thus becomes clear that Scripture was produced

through a unique synergistic process in which God initiated, guided, and guarded the transmission of His Word, while nevertheless allowing humans to be active, creative participants in the literary process.

### **Inerrancy and Infallibility**

For most of Christian history, the majority of believers have affirmed that the Bible is entirely factual in all of its statements, and is free from spiritual or historical error and contradiction. This claim has traditionally been referred to as the doctrine of *inerrancy*. A related doctrine is that of *infallibility*, which holds that Scripture is a completely reliable and trustworthy guide for faith and living, and that it leads the believer not into deception, but into God's truth.<sup>9</sup> Many Pentecostal and evangelical denominations, including the Church of God of Prophecy, still hold firmly to this position.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, there is much to recommend this view. First, there is the previously mentioned passage in 1 Timothy, which speaks of Scripture as "God-breathed." One would not expect a perfect God to "breathe forth" a Word that is imperfect or misleading. Second, Jesus Himself quoted freely from the Old Testament and referred to the lives of Old Testament figures in a manner that suggests that He considered the Old Testament Scriptures to be entirely factual and historical.<sup>11</sup> Third, the Bible has, throughout history, led millions to salvation and produced positive changes in their character and behavior. This transformative function of Scripture seems to support the claim that it is truthful and reliable. Finally, it may be noted that, although the Bible is a collection of diverse writings produced by a variety of authors over a long period of time, it nevertheless possesses a unity and harmony that suggests divine oversight on the part of God—oversight, which, presumably, would also guard against error.

Nevertheless, over the course of the last two-and-a-half centuries, the claims of modern rational science and the seeming ambiguities uncovered by historical-critical examinations of the Bible have led to increasing debate regarding inerrancy and infallibility. Some have theorized that the Bible is free from error and contradiction only when

it comes to *spiritual* matters, and that some historical or scientific inaccuracies may be present in the text. Others go farther still, insisting that over the centuries, human involvement in the transmission of Scripture has led to discrepancies even concerning spiritual issues, and that, therefore, no part of the Bible can be automatically assumed to be free from error without close scholarly analysis.

Clearly, these widely divergent opinions on the question of inerrancy are the result of differing understandings of the process of inspiration. As a way of explaining apparent discrepancies in the biblical text, some have held that God only inspired the *ideas* of Scripture, allowing its human authors to select the *words* through which they expressed those ideas, and thus creating the possibility of error. Others contend that a perfect God would never allow His perfect Word to be expressed imperfectly, and that He, therefore, must have guided the authors of Scripture in the selection of each word.

Further complicating the issue is the fact that many theologians hold that, strictly speaking, the doctrine of inerrancy only applies to the original manuscript copies of the books of the Bible that the authors penned under the leading of the Holy Spirit. Thus, each time the original texts of Scripture were copied or translated into a new language, typographical errors and misleading translations were possible. Therefore, even if we affirm that the original manuscripts of the Bible were completely inerrant and “divinely proofread” down to the last word, we must admit that it is ultimately impossible for us to ascertain exactly how much the Bible as we know it differs from the original.

Fortunately, in a very important sense, this question is moot. It is true that as members and ministers within the Church of God of Prophecy we should be able to adequately explain and defend the Church’s firm stance on the strict inerrancy of Scripture. Conversely, it is also critical that we seek to understand the rationale behind the differing beliefs of our brothers and sisters from other parts of the body of Christ, even if we may not agree with their conclusions. But in the end, a narrow focus on the arguments surrounding the nature of inspiration, inerrancy,

and infallibility misses a larger point. As one theologian has stated it, “Appellations like infallibility, inerrancy, truthfulness, and veracity are all relational. The biblical text is entirely truthful when it is seen in relation to its divine center, God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. When separated from this center, the text is not perceived in its proper context and then becomes vulnerable to error and misunderstanding.”<sup>12</sup>

In other words, our acceptance of the inspiration and authority of Scripture must ultimately rest not merely on a rational appraisal of its integrity as a document. It must be grounded in our faith in the wisdom and goodness of its Author and our intimate knowledge of Him as He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. As believers who have entered into relationships with Jesus, we are freed to embrace the Bible as God’s Word given to humanity and to allow our trust in Him to inform our trust in the Bible. We can thus confidently seek God’s will and wisdom in the Bible as we have received it, believing that His Spirit will guide our reading of it and our application of its principles even as He guided its authoring.

### **The Bible Is an Important Source of God’s Revelation of Himself to Humanity.**

When we speak of God’s *revelation*, we are talking about the means by which He communicates with humanity concerning His nature, character, and purpose. Although God may occasionally impart revelation to humanity through direct, supernatural communication, He also reveals Himself through His creation, through the life of His Son, through the actions of His people, and, most significantly for our present discussion, through His Word.

It is difficult to imagine how Christianity could have survived through the centuries if believers had not had access to the revelation contained in the Bible. We are dependent on the pages of Scripture for the vast majority of our knowledge concerning the creation of the universe; the origin of life; the history of our ancestors in the faith, the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ; the dynamics of the early church; and the final destiny of humanity. But, most basically, and underlying

all of these other things, the Bible is invaluable to us because of all that it reveals about God.

First, the Bible has much to tell us about the **nature** of God. From the very first words of the Bible, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” we see that God is *eternal*, existing before the creation of the physical world and everything in it. Scripture also reveals that God is an *omnipotent* (all-powerful) being, one who is able to do all things and for whom nothing is impossible. He is also an *omniscient* (all-knowing) God, one who knows all things, who is perfect in knowledge, and who possesses infinite understanding. Finally, God is *omnipresent* (present everywhere). He fills heaven and earth, dwelling near to each one of us and seeing everything that occurs in His creation. Thus, by examining Scripture we learn that we serve a God who has always existed, will always exist, and exists everywhere at once, and a God who knows everything, sees everything, and can do anything.<sup>13</sup>

While it is almost impossible for us to fully comprehend these aspects of God’s nature, they are undeniably impressive and reassuring. Yet on their own, they are not sufficient to present a clear and complete picture of God. Therefore, the Bible also gives us insight into the **character** of God, the simplest summation of which is found in 1 John 4:16: “God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.” Many religious traditions throughout history have claimed to follow a deity who was eternal or all-powerful or all-knowing. The greatest distinguishing characteristic of the One True God is that He is also all-loving.

Scripture offers many other descriptions of God’s character that help us to understand all that is implied in the phrase “God is love.” We are told that He is patient with us (2 Peter 3:9), that He is kind and merciful even to those who are evil (Luke 6:35, 36), that He is forgiving (Ephesians 4:32), and that He cares deeply for each of us individually (Matthew 10:29–31).<sup>14</sup> Thus, by revealing and emphasizing both God’s awesome, divine power and His extravagant, tender love, Scripture produces in us the wonder and gratitude that compel us to follow after Him.

Finally, in addition to helping us understand the nature and character of God, the Bible also illuminates the **purpose** of God. The major thrust of His divine will and of universal history as it is revealed in Scripture might be summarized as follows: God desires that all humanity might live eternally in loving relationship with Him and with each other. This desire is the motive force behind all of Scripture.

As the great drama unfolds, we see the various ways in which humanity rebels against this plan and the tactics that God employs to ensure that His eternal purpose is carried out. In the beginning, Adam and Eve had the opportunity to enjoy the perfect life of loving communion that God desired for them, but their thirst for power and independence led them to disobey their Creator, thus damaging the network of loving relationships that God had set at the center of Creation.

After watching Adam and Eve's descendants drift farther from Him and exhibit more hatred toward each other, God purposed to destroy humanity and start over with Noah and his family. But they proved as susceptible to the lures of evil as Adam and Eve had been, and over a period of time, their descendants grew more wicked until God finally confused their languages and scattered them, leading to the creation of distinct nations.

Having given His word never to destroy humanity again, God now employed a different approach. Rather than hoping that humanity would choose love and selflessness over wickedness of their own accord, God selected one nation from the descendants of Noah—the nation of Israel—and called its members to enter a covenant relationship with Him. Through one nation's obedience and faithfulness, God purposed to bless all nations.<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, the children of Israel proved to be no more faithful to God than their forefathers had been. The bulk of the Old Testament concerns their failure to faithfully love God and each other. Finally, God enacted a plan that would ensure the fulfillment of His purpose, though at great cost: He sent His Son to die for the sins of humanity, thus providing all people the opportunity to be reconciled to Him and to receive eternal

life, by which they might enjoy perfect, loving relationships with God and one another forever. This divine purpose of redemption and reconciliation that permeates Scripture must also dwell in our hearts as we seek to follow after the God that the Bible reveals to us.

### **The Bible Is Essentially Relational.**

Each of the important truths about the nature of the Bible that we have examined hints at a deeper, oft-overlooked reality: The Bible is, in its essential character, a relational document. Most basically, as part of the overarching, ongoing story of God and humanity, the Bible **portrays** relationships. Its main narrative thrust is to describe the development and dynamics of the relationship between God and His Creation—both in terms of God’s ever-advancing plan of redemption and in terms of His unique interactions with specific people (including Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and his descendants, the nation of Israel, the 12 disciples, and the early church).

As our discussion of inspiration should suggest, the Bible was also **produced** in the context of relationships, namely those between God and the authors of Scripture. The historians, poets, and prophets of the Old Testament, along with the Gospel writers and epistlers of the New, were not chosen to be the communicators of God’s Word because of their literary skill or credentials. It was their relationships with the true Author of the Bible that provided them with the impetus to write, secured God’s blessing upon what they wrote, and convinced others that their writings were truly inspired.

Finally, in its role as a source of revelation concerning God’s nature, character, and purpose, the Bible **promotes** relationships. Jesus Himself affirmed the relational thrust of Scripture when He told the Pharisees that all of the Law and the writings of the Old Testament prophets could be summed up in two commandments: “Love God” and “Love your neighbor” (Matthew 22:34–40). Likewise, one of Jesus’ most significant commands to His disciples was that they should love one another as He had loved them in order that the world might know that they were His disciples (John 13:34, 35). Above all, the life that



the Bible calls us to live as children of God, disciples of Christ, and temples of the Holy Spirit, is a life marked by loving relationships with God and each other.

Just as each of the aspects of the Bible's nature that we have examined rests on a foundation of relationships, all of the distorted views of the Bible that we discussed earlier are distorted precisely **because** they largely overlook the importance of relationships. The colorful Sunday school stories that we learned as children—David and Goliath, Daniel and the lions, Jonah and the whale—were never intended to simply entertain us or provide a clichéd moral lesson. Rather, they are all, at their most basic, stories of the relationships between God and His servants. The seemingly burdensome Old Testament Law, with all of its complex requirements and harsh punishments for wrongdoing, was predicated on the loving relationship between God and His chosen people, the Children of Israel. The profound theological expositions of the New Testament were not intended to produce a scholarly, detached knowledge of the nature of God, but to provide the means by which believers might enter into more meaningful relationships with Him. The individual proverbs and promises that we often commit to memory and quote freely were all originally recorded in the context of a developing network of relationships between God and His followers and were intended to produce a hunger for such relationships in those to whom they were passed down. Relationships serve as the thread that binds together all of these disparate, incomplete views of the Bible's nature and brings coherence among them.

It thus becomes clear that loving relationships are both the central theme of the Bible's pages from beginning to end and the key motivating force behind the Bible's creation and dissemination. Any attempt to understand and apply the teachings of the Bible without acknowledging this fundamental reality must inevitably end in frustration and error.

## WHAT IS IN THE BIBLE?

### **The Two Testaments**

The word *Bible* literally means “books,” and although the Bible is a

single book, it is also a collection of 66 very different books, written over a period of approximately 1,500 years by more than 30 different authors. These books fall into two main divisions: the Old Testament, which consists of 39 books, and the New Testament, which contains 27 books.<sup>16</sup>

Historically, the Old Testament covers a period of several millennia, beginning with the creation of heaven and earth and ending around 400 B.C. It describes the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden and the great flood by which God cleansed the earth of all humanity apart from a single family and then proceeds to follow the exploits of one godly man, Abraham, and his descendants, the Israelites. Through history, prophecy, poetry, and song, the Old Testament depicts the turbulent relationship between God and the children of Israel, whom He had chosen as His own, but who constantly struggled to obey Him.

The New Testament chronicles the life and earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came to earth as a man, died as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity, and was resurrected three days later. The New Testament also describes the growth of the early Christian church and the spread of the gospel throughout the Mediterranean world, largely as a result of the ministry of the apostle Paul.

The relationship between these two Testaments and their respective roles in the lives of believers deserve some consideration. To begin with, it must be admitted that the New Testament has far more important prescriptive and proscriptive roles in the life of the Christian than does the Old. In recognition of this fact, the Church of God of Prophecy has long maintained that the New Testament should serve as the “rule of faith and practice, government and discipline” for its members.<sup>17</sup>

This place of primacy for the New Testament in the life of the believer is evidence of the fact that the nature of the relationship between God and humanity fundamentally changed with the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The Old Testament Law (as explicated in the *Pentateuch*) was given to the children of Israel as part of a covenant with God

whereby they agreed to obey all of His commandments in exchange for His blessing and provision.<sup>18</sup> While parts of the Law (such as the Ten Commandments) are still quite applicable to the lives of believers, this covenant was binding in its entirety only for the Jewish people, and only before the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Therefore, as children of God who have been brought into His family through the blood of His Son, we are not required to observe many of the stringent requirements of the Old Testament Law. In its place, and as a fulfillment of it, we have been given the example and teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, the commentaries of the New Testament apostles on the nature of the Christian life, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We have thus become participants in a new covenant, one that is based not on a strict system of regular animal sacrifices, but on a divine sacrifice that was offered once for all.<sup>19</sup> The New Testament is our guide to living within the context of this new covenant, just as the Mosaic Law was the appropriate guide for the Israelites as they sought to keep the old covenant.

However, the fact that the Law has been superseded by the new covenant does not mean that the entire Old Testament has been rendered obsolete and irrelevant. It is important to reaffirm that both the Old and New Testaments are crucial parts of the larger narrative of God's relationship with humanity and that a proper understanding of this narrative requires intimate familiarity with the content and contexts of both Testaments.

Indeed, the Old Testament contains accounts of crucial events—the Creation, the Fall, the Flood, the Tower of Babel, the Call of Abraham, the Exodus, the Destruction of Jerusalem—without which the larger story fails to hold together. The events of the Gospels and the covenant instituted at Calvary can only be properly understood in light of, and as a response to, Old Testament history. Conversely, other parts of the Old Testament, such as the prophetic books, become more clear and significant with the benefit of New Testament hindsight.

Thus, the two Testaments serve to compliment and reinforce one another in various ways, and although we must take care to perceive the distinct intended functions that they have in the context of the Christian life, we must also acknowledge the unity and integrity of Scripture as a whole. Both Testaments were, after all, inspired and revealed by the same unchanging God, and both are concerned with His eternal purpose of redemption.

## **The Books of the Bible**

The following tables list the books of the Old and New Testaments and the number of chapters in each book. Detailed summaries of each book will be given in Chapter Four (Old Testament) and Chapter Six (New Testament).

## The Books of the Old Testament

<b><u>Book</u></b>	<b><u>Chapters</u></b>	<b><u>Book</u></b>	<b><u>Chapters</u></b>
Genesis	50	Ecclesiastes	12
Exodus	40	Song of Solomon	8
Leviticus	27	Isaiah	66
Numbers	36	Jeremiah	52
Deuteronomy	34	Lamentations	5
Joshua	24	Ezekiel	48
Judges	21	Daniel	12
Ruth	4	Hosea	14
1 Samuel	31	Joel	3
2 Samuel	24	Amos	9
1 Kings	22	Obadiah	1
2 Kings	25	Jonah	4
1 Chronicles	29	Micah	7
2 Chronicles	36	Nahum	3
Ezra	10	Habakkuk	3
Nehemiah	13	Zephaniah	3
Esther	10	Haggai	2
Job	42	Zechariah	14
Psalms	150	Malachi	4
Proverbs	31		

## **The Books of the New Testament**

<b><u>Book</u></b>	<b><u>Chapters</u></b>	<b><u>Book</u></b>	<b><u>Chapters</u></b>
Matthew	28	1 Timothy	6
Mark	16	2 Timothy	4
Luke	24	Titus	3
John	21	Philemon	1
Acts	28	Hebrews	13
Romans	16	James	5
1 Corinthians	16	1 Peter	5
2 Corinthians	13	2 Peter	3
Galatians	6	1 John	5
Ephesians	6	2 John	1
Philippians	4	3 John	1
Colossians	4	Jude	1
1 Thessalonians	5	Revelation	22
2 Thessalonians	3		

## **Literary Divisions of the Old and New Testaments**

In addition to being divided among the two Testaments, the books of the Bible may be further categorized in terms of the literary categories to which they belong: law, history, poetry, prophecy, biography (the Gospels), and letters (or epistles). The following tables give the most common schemes for the literary divisions of the Old and New Testaments.

## Literary Divisions of the Old Testament

### The Books of the Law, or Pentateuch (5)

Genesis  
Exodus  
Leviticus  
Numbers  
Deuteronomy

### The Major Prophets (5)

Isaiah  
Jeremiah  
Lamentations  
Ezekiel  
Daniel

### The Historical Books (12)

Joshua  
Judges  
Ruth  
1 Samuel  
2 Samuel  
1 Kings  
2 Kings  
1 Chronicles  
2 Chronicles  
Ezra  
Nehemiah  
Esther

### The Minor Prophets (12)

Hosea  
Joel  
Amos  
Obadiah  
Jonah  
Micah  
Nahum  
Habakkuk  
Zephaniah  
Haggai  
Zechariah  
Malachi

### The Poetic Books (5)

Job  
Psalms  
Proverbs  
Ecclesiastes  
Song of Solomon

## **Literary Divisions of the New Testament**

### **The Gospels (4)**

Matthew

Mark

Luke

John

### **History (1)**

The Acts of the Apostles

### **The Pauline Epistles (13)**

Romans

1 Corinthians

2 Corinthians

Galatians

Ephesians

Philippians

Colossians

1 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians

1 Timothy

2 Timothy

Titus

Philemon

### **The General Epistles (8)**

Hebrews

James

1 Peter

2 Peter

1 John

2 John

3 John

Jude

### **Prophecy/Apocalypse (1)**

Revelation

## CHAPTER ONE SUMMARY

In this opening chapter, we have examined the nature of the Bible. We began by discussing several common misconceptions regarding the Bible—that it is simply a book of stories, that it is primarily intended to serve as a code of conduct, that it is a comprehensive treatise on theology and doctrine, and that all of its teachings are designed to be



applied independently of their contexts—and pointing out some of the flaws in each of these views.

We then discussed four major characteristics that define the true nature of the Bible. We first noted that the Bible is part of a larger, ongoing story of the relationship between God and humanity, which began at creation and will continue for all eternity. We affirmed the inspired nature of Scripture and explored the concepts of inerrancy and infallibility. We examined the role the Bible plays as an important source of God’s revelation of Himself to humanity. Finally, we discovered a crucial truth that underpins each of these other points: The Bible is relational in its essential nature. It portrays relationships, was produced in the context of relationships, and promotes the creation and maintenance of relationships.

In the second part of the chapter, we took a closer look at the contents of the Bible. We found that the Bible is divided into two parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament. We explored the distinct natures of the two Testaments and discussed the reasons why the New Testament plays a more prominent role in shaping the faith and practice of the believer.

To conclude the chapter, we examined lists of the 66 books of the Bible—39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. We saw that the books of the Old Testament are divided into the Books of the Law, or *Pentateuch* (5), the Historical Books (12), the Poetic Books (5), the Major Prophets (5), and the Minor Prophets (12). Likewise, the New Testament books also fall into several divisions: the Gospels (4), History (1), the Pauline Epistles (13), the General Epistles (8), and Prophecy/Apocalypse (1).

In Chapter Two, we will explore the long and complex history of the Bible, from the authoring of its constituent books, to the delineation of the canon of Scripture as a whole, to the interrelated processes of translation and dissemination that have made it possible for the Bible to transform lives around the world.

## CHAPTER ONE NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>See Romans 6:14.

<sup>2</sup>The language of “story” employed throughout this section is not intended to suggest that the Bible is to be considered somehow “less than factual.” Rather, it is meant to draw attention to the fact that the Bible provides us most essentially not with a code of conduct or a system of theology, but with a narrative of relationships (a narrative of which the rest of human history, including our lives, is an extension).

<sup>3</sup>I owe this comparison of some of the world’s different stories to Brian McLaren, who makes similar comparisons in *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 39–44.

<sup>4</sup>See 2 Corinthians 3:2, 3.

<sup>5</sup>*An Introduction to the Church of God of Prophecy* (rev.) (Cleveland, TN: White Wing Publishing House, 1999), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup>Strictly speaking, Paul was referring here only to the Old Testament scriptures, for the New Testament as we know it did not yet exist; and several of its constituent books had yet to be written. Nevertheless, God’s inspiration as it is portrayed in this passage is generally regarded to be characteristic of the New Testament writings as well, especially in light of passages such as 2 Peter 3:15, 16, where Peter implicitly refers to the letters of Paul as Scripture.

<sup>7</sup>Although Peter uses the word “prophecy” in this passage, his comments have typically been understood to apply to all of Old Testament Scripture and can also be assumed to be true of the New Testament canon. Thus, the claim that “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” is believed to apply equally to all genres of Scripture, not just the books that modern Christians label as “prophecy.”

<sup>8</sup>I owe part of this explanation of 2 Peter 1:21 to an editorial note found in *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), p. 1940.

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<sup>9</sup>This is only one scheme for differentiating between inerrancy and infallibility. There is a lack of consensus on precise definitions of these terms (largely because they do not actually appear in Scripture), and they are applied differently by different groups. Some view the two concepts as being hierarchically related, while others see them as complimentary, overlapping, or even synonymous.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, the interdenominational *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, reproduced in James K. Bridges, ed., *The Bible: The Word of God* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2003), pp. 169–184.

<sup>11</sup>See Matthew 4:1–11; 8:4; 26:53, 54; Mark 11:15–17; Luke 4:18, 19; 24:25–27; John 7:21–24; 8:39–58.

<sup>12</sup>Donald G. Bolesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration, and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 37, 38.

<sup>13</sup>On God's omnipotence, see Job 42:2; Mark 10:27; Luke 1:37. On omniscience, see 1 John 3:20; Job 37:16; Psalm 147:5. On omnipresence, see Psalm 139:7–10; Jeremiah 23:23, 24; Proverbs 15:13.

<sup>14</sup>In light of John's assertion that "God is love," it is interesting to note that many of the characteristics of God found throughout Scripture (e.g. patience, kindness, a forgiving nature) are also used by Paul to characterize love in his famous discourse in 1 Corinthians 13.

<sup>15</sup>See Genesis 12:1–3.

<sup>16</sup>Here, and throughout this book, the figures given for the number of books in the Old Testament (and in the Bible as a whole) apply to the Bible as it is generally used by Protestant Christians. As we will see in Chapter Two, the Bibles that are used by Catholic and Orthodox Christians contain more books in the Old Testament.

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<sup>17</sup>This language is part of the Church's official covenant of membership, which can be found in *Ministry Policy Manual—2004 Edition* (Cleveland, TN: White Wing Press, 2004), p. 361. The wording appears to date back to at least 1913. See A. J. Tomlinson, *The Last Great Conflict* (Cleveland, TN: Walter E. Rogers Print, 1913), p. 195.

<sup>18</sup>See Exodus 19:3–6.

<sup>19</sup>See Hebrews 9:11–28.



# Chapter Two

## The History of the Bible

No other single piece of writing has had a more dramatic and pervasive influence on the course of human history than the Bible. Indeed, it has shaped the cultures and collective consciousness of the Western world in such profound ways that it is easy to forget that the Bible itself has a history, that it did not simply fall from the sky bound in black leather, and that it began with a single pen stroke on a solitary piece of papyrus. In this chapter, we will explore that history, tracing the Bible's evolution from a variety of uncollected historical records, personal letters, poetry, law, and prophetic writings in Hebrew and Greek, to a unified, standardized body of Scripture that has been translated into hundreds of languages and now provides instruction and inspiration to millions of believers around the world.

### AUTHORSHIP

In a very real sense, the story of the Bible began before the creation of the universe in the mind and heart of God. The history of the Bible in its tangible form, however, began with the authoring of its 66 constituent books, which occurred over a period of approximately 15 centuries. The Bible boasts a remarkably diverse group of authors, including kings, prophets, fishermen, a doctor, a tax collector, and a tentmaker. The unity that emerges from this diversity of sources is one of the Bible's most remarkable features and testifies to the divine inspiration that guided its human authors.<sup>1</sup>

The following table lists the books of the Bible and their respective authors (where known) in the estimated order of their composition.

## Authorship of the Books of the Bible

### The Old Testament

<u>Book</u>	<u>Probable Author</u>	<u>Approximate Date</u> <sup>2</sup>
Genesis	Moses	Late 1400's B.C.
Exodus	Moses	Late 1400's B.C.
Leviticus	Moses	Late 1400's B.C.
Numbers	Moses	Late 1400's B.C.
Deuteronomy	Moses	Late 1400's B.C.
Joshua	Joshua, others	Mid-1300's B.C.
Judges	unknown	Late 1000's B.C.
Ruth	unknown	Late 1000's—early 900's B.C.
1 Samuel	unknown	Late 1000's—early 900's B.C.
2 Samuel	unknown	Late 1000's—early 900's B.C.
Psalms	David, others	Late 1000's—early 900's B.C.
Proverbs	Solomon, others	Mid-900's B.C.
Ecclesiastes	unknown	Mid-900's B.C.
Song of Solomon	Solomon	Mid-900's B.C.
Job	unknown	Mid-900's B.C.
Jonah	Jonah	Mid-700's B.C.
Amos	Amos	Mid-700's B.C.
Hosea	Hosea	Late 700's B.C.
Micah	Micah	Late 700's—early 600's B.C.
Isaiah	Isaiah	Early 600's B.C.
Nahum	Nahum	Late 600's B.C.
Habakkuk	Habakkuk	Late 600's—early 500's B.C.
Jeremiah	Jeremiah	Late 600's—early 500's B.C.
Obadiah	Obadiah	Late 600's—early 500's B.C.
Joel	Joel	Early 500's B.C.
Zephaniah	Zephaniah	Early 500's B.C.
Lamentations	Jeremiah	Early 500's B.C.
Ezekiel	Ezekiel	Early—mid 500's B.C.
1 Kings	unknown	Mid-500's B.C.
2 Kings	unknown	Mid-500's B.C.
Daniel	Daniel	Mid—late 500's B.C.

Haggai	Haggai	Late 500's B.C.
Zechariah	Zechariah	Late 500's B.C.
Esther	unknown	Mid 400's B.C.
Ezra	Ezra	Mid-late 400's B.C.
Nehemiah	Nehemiah	Mid-late 400's B.C.
1 Chronicles	possibly Ezra	Mid-late 400's B.C.
2 Chronicles	possibly Ezra	Mid-late 400's B.C.
Malachi	Malachi	Late 400's B.C.

### **The New Testament**

<b><u>Book</u></b>	<b><u>Probable Author</u></b>	<b><u>Approximate Date</u></b>
James	James	A.D. 48/49
1 Thessalonians	Paul	A.D. 51
2 Thessalonians	Paul	A.D. 51/52
Galatians	Paul	A.D. 52/53 <sup>3</sup>
1 Corinthians	Paul	A.D. 55
2 Corinthians	Paul	A.D. 55
Mark	Mark	A.D. mid-50's
Romans	Paul	A.D. 57
Matthew	Matthew	A.D. late 50's—early 60's
Luke	Luke	A.D. late 50's—early 60's
Ephesians	Paul	A.D. 60
Colossians	Paul	A.D. 60
Philemon	Paul	A.D. 60
Philippians	Paul	A.D. 61
Acts	Luke	A.D. 61/62
1 Peter	Peter	A.D. early 60's
Titus	Paul	A.D. 63/64
1 Timothy	Paul	A.D. 64/65
Jude	Jude	A.D. mid-60's
2 Peter	Peter	A.D. mid-60's
Hebrews	unknown	A.D. mid-60's
2 Timothy	Paul	A.D. 67/68
John	John	A.D. 85
1 John	John	A.D. late 80's—early 90's
2 John	John	A.D. late 80's—early 90's
3 John	John	A.D. late 80's—early 90's
Revelation	John	A.D. 95



## CANONIZATION

Each of the Bible's human authors undoubtedly had a sense that the words he was recording—whether they were direct commands or utterances of God, records of the history of God's people, or letters of encouragement and instruction for living the Christian life—were significant and worth preserving. Yet at the same time, few of them had any expectation that what they wrote would comprise part of a larger body of Scripture that would provide guidance to believers throughout history and around the world. It was largely left to others to gather together this material, organize it, standardize it, and ensure that it was passed on to future generations.

Those who undertook this task faced a variety of challenges. Most significantly, they had to grapple with the question of which writings were truly inspired by God, spiritually beneficial, and worthy of inclusion in a larger body of Scripture. Those writings that were accepted as belonging in the Bible are known as the canon of Scripture (derived from the Greek *kanon*, which originally referred to a reed, rod, or ruler. They eventually came to be used in the sense of “a standard”), and the process by which the canon was established is referred to as canonization.<sup>4</sup>

It should be emphasized at the outset of this discussion that, just as the writing of Scripture depended on God's inspiration and guidance of human authors, so, too, the canonization of Scripture must be understood as a process in which the Spirit was active. The composition of the Bible should not be seen simply as the result of arbitrary human decisions or historical chance, but as the result of God's unflagging desire that His nature, will, and purpose be accurately communicated to His followers through His Word.

Obviously, the canonization of the Old and New Testaments took place during two different periods of time, and each has its own unique history marked by its own sets of challenges. We will consider both in turn.

## The Old Testament Canon

When we speak of the history of the Old Testament, we are, of course, simultaneously speaking of the history of the Hebrew scriptures. Hence, the formation of the Old Testament canon actually began at Mount Sinai, where Moses recorded the Lord's words in a book and God Himself inscribed His commandments to the Israelites on stone tablets and instructed Moses to place them in the Ark of the Covenant.<sup>5</sup> Moses later wrote another book of law (presumably the book of Deuteronomy) that was also kept with the Ark, and his successor, Joshua, also recorded a covenant in the "book of the law of God."<sup>6</sup> These writings, which later comprised most of the *Pentateuch*, served as the foundation of the Hebrew scriptures.

Following the establishment of the monarchy, various people (mostly prophets) began to keep records that chronicled the reigns and actions of the kings of Israel and Judah.<sup>7</sup> The prophecies that God gave to Israel through His servants during this period were also recorded and preserved, along with various poems and collections of wise sayings. But although the number of inspired writings was growing, they had not yet been gathered into a single collection.

Nor were they consistently read and valued by the Israelites. In the time of King Josiah, a book of the law (possibly Deuteronomy) was discovered in the temple, where it had apparently lain forgotten for some time. The king was moved with grief and remorse when he heard the words of the book and realized how far his people had drifted from God's commands, and a short-lived period of repentance ensued.<sup>8</sup> But the fact that such an important book could have remained lost without being missed for so long was emblematic of the widespread spiritual decay that had plagued Judah for many years, and of the fact that there was still no coherent and formally recognized body of Scripture guiding the life of the community at this point in its history.

Following the return of the remnant of Judah from exile in Babylon, godly men such as Ezra and Nehemiah urged the Israelites to rededicate

themselves to pursuing a right relationship with God, which necessitated refamiliarizing themselves with His Word. To this end, Ezra and a group of Levites assembled the people of Israel and read to them from “the Book of the Law of Moses,” instructing them in its teachings and reemphasizing its central role in their lives.<sup>9</sup> According to extrabiblical accounts of Jewish history, both Ezra and Nehemiah worked to gather together the records concerning the kings and prophets of Israel.<sup>10</sup> These writings, along with the Law, formed the core of the Hebrew scriptures.

Around the same time that Ezra and Nehemiah were in Jerusalem, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were receiving and recording the last prophecies that are contained in the Old Testament. Thus, by around 430 B.C., the writing of the Hebrew scriptures had been completed. It is believed by both Jews and Christians that the succession of true prophets who spoke for God ended around this time, and thus later works of Jewish history, poetry, and wisdom were not considered equally inspired or worthy of inclusion in the canon.<sup>11</sup>

By the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the shape of the Hebrew scriptures began to solidify. At this point, the core of the canon probably consisted of the five books attributed to Moses, along with the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings (which extended the narrative of the nation of Israel to the time of the exile), and the writings of the prophets. These works were arranged according to a twofold division and were referred to collectively as the Law and the Prophets. The Hebrew scriptures appear to have maintained this basic form for centuries, as references were still being made to “the Law and the Prophets” during the New Testament period.<sup>12</sup>

Later, perhaps around the end of the first century A.D., a third division, known as the Writings, was added to the existing scheme, thus bringing the Hebrew canon to its final form. Among the Writings were works that had been valued by the Jews for centuries, such as the Psalms, along with some whose inspiration had been debated for a time, like Ecclesiastes and Esther.<sup>13</sup> The complete body of Hebrew scripture became known as the *Tanakh*, a word that is a sort of acronym derived

from the first letters of the names of each of the three divisions: *Torah* (Law), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Kethuvim* (Writings).

The Protestant Old Testament canon with which we are familiar is identical in content to the Hebrew canon as embodied in the Tanakh. However, the Old Testament arranges the books in a different order than the original Hebrew scheme, and contains 39 books, whereas the Tanakh has only 24. This is due to the fact that the Jews treat Ezra and Nehemiah as a single work, combine the writings of the 12 minor prophets into one book, and do not divide the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles.

The following chart shows the contents and divisions of the Tanakh.

## **The Hebrew Scriptures (*Tanakh*)**

### **The Law (*Torah*)**

Genesis  
Exodus  
Leviticus  
Numbers  
Deuteronomy

### **The Prophets (*Nevi'im*)**

#### **The Former Prophets**

Joshua  
Judges  
Samuel  
Kings

#### **The Latter Prophets**

Isaiah  
Jeremiah  
Ezekiel  
The Twelve

### **The Writings (*Kethuvim*)**

#### **The Poetical Books**

Psalms  
Proverbs  
Job

#### **The Five Rolls (*Megilloth*)**

Song of Solomon  
Ruth  
Lamentations  
Esther  
Ecclesiastes

#### **The Historical Books**

Daniel  
Ezra–Nehemiah  
Chronicles

At some point after the birth of the Christian church, the early believers recognized that, in spite of the fact that they now lived under grace and not under law, the Hebrew scriptures still retained the marks of God's inspiration and had an important role to play in the lives of believers. The largely Jewish makeup of the early church, the presence of messianic passages in the Hebrew scriptures that predicted Jesus' coming, and the fact that Jesus and His followers often cited the Law and the Prophets were undoubtedly all factors that contributed to Christian acceptance of the existing Hebrew canon.<sup>14</sup>

# The Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

In addition to the books that are found in the Jewish Tanakh and now comprise the Protestant Old Testament, there exist a number of works that were introduced in some early translations of the Hebrew scriptures (notably the Greek Septuagint and the original Latin Vulgate), and which were subsequently included in many translations of the Bible until the late nineteenth century. These books are collectively referred to by Protestant Christians as the *Apocrypha*, meaning “of questionable authenticity,”<sup>15</sup> while Catholics refer to them as *deuterocanonical*, meaning “second canon,” because they are considered to be a part of the canon, but are nevertheless distinguished from the books that comprised the Hebrew scriptures.<sup>16</sup>

For a variety of reasons, including historical inaccuracies, questionable theological statements, and the fact that they were written during the Intertestamental period (the time between the end of the prophetic succession and the coming of John the Baptist), most Protestants have historically considered these books to lack divine inspiration, and they are thus excluded from the present Protestant canon. They were, however, typically present in all important Protestant translations, including the King James Bible, until the 1880’s, though they were most often placed in a separate section between the two Testaments. This was in contrast to the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles, where the deuterocanonical books are interspersed with the other Old Testament works.

The following table lists the most widely recognized apocryphal/deuterocanonical works.

## The Old Testament Apocrypha

**1 Esdras**—A historical narrative that covers much of the same ground as the books of 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.<sup>17</sup>

**2 Esdras**—An apocalyptic work, similar in some ways to the book of Revelation.<sup>18</sup>

**Tobit**—A brief historical account concerning Tobit, a Jew who was taken into captivity following the Assyrian conquest of Israel, and his son Tobias.

**Judith**—A brief story about a Jewess named Judith who managed to outsmart Holofernes, a general of King Nebuchadnezzar.

**Additions to Esther**—Additions to the book of Esther, which more explicitly connect the events of Esther to the traditions of the Jewish faith.

**The Wisdom of Solomon**—An example of wisdom literature attributed to Solomon and similar to the book of Proverbs.

**Sirach**—Another example of wisdom literature, similar in some ways to the book of Proverbs. Also known as Ben Sira or Ecclesiasticus.

**Baruch (including the Letter of Jeremiah)**—A series of writings set in the period of the prophet Jeremiah and his secretary, Baruch. The final chapter consists of a letter attributed to Jeremiah, which warns against idolatry.<sup>19</sup>

**The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men**—An addition to the book of Daniel that recounts the prayer of Azariah (Abednego) and the song of the three young Hebrews when they were cast into the furnace by Nebuchadnezzar.

**Susanna**—An addition to the book of Daniel regarding a woman named Susanna who was falsely accused of adultery and condemned to death until Daniel proved her innocence.

**Bel and the Dragon**—An addition to the book of Daniel in which Daniel demonstrates the superiority of God over Bel (the god of Babylon) and slays a dragon.

**The Prayer of Manasseh**—A prayer of repentance attributed to Manasseh, one of Judah’s most wicked kings. His repentance is referenced in 2 Chronicles 33.<sup>20</sup>

**1 and 2 Maccabees**—These two books contain much of the history of the Jewish people during the period between the return from exile and the coming of Jesus, an era about which the Protestant canon is silent. We will discuss the history of this period in further detail in Chapter Five.

In addition to these works, which are sometimes referred to as the “Apocrypha Proper,” the Septuagint and some Orthodox Bibles also contain Psalm 151, which is attributed to David and references his encounter with Goliath, and 3 and 4 Maccabees.<sup>21</sup> But these three works are absent from the Vulgate, the Catholic Bible, and all notable Protestant translations.

In addition to the Apocrypha, there are a variety of other writings that are referred to by Protestants as the *pseudepigrapha*, meaning “false inscriptions.” These books were often falsely attributed to prominent Old Testament figures in order to lend them authenticity but were never accepted as canonical or deuterocanonical by any major branch of Christianity. Some notable Old Testament pseudepigrapha are the Book of Jubilees, the Psalms of Solomon, the Odes of Solomon, 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch, the Life of Adam and Eve, Joseph and Asenath, the Apocalypse of Moses, and the Sibylline Oracles.



# The New Testament Canon

In its earliest days, Christianity was not a Scripture-centered religion in the same way that Judaism was. Rather than relying primarily on a body of written material for spiritual guidance, the infant church instead practiced oral transmission, recounting the words and deeds of Jesus and the apostles to others as a means of passing on the faith. But as the years passed, it became necessary to ensure the long-term preservation of this communal knowledge, and people soon began to record Christian teachings in written form.

In making judgments regarding the value of the various documents that thus began to appear, the chief criterion appears to have been apostolic authorship. If it could be convincingly demonstrated that a document was the work of a disciple who had enjoyed close fellowship with Jesus (such as Peter, Matthew, or John), an apostle of the early church (such as James or Paul), or, at the least, a family member or close personal associate of one of the apostles (such as Mark, Luke, or Jude), then the material was judged to be inspired by God and beneficial to the church.

Collections of these apostolic writings soon began to circulate among the believers. Of the 27 New Testament books, all but Acts and Revelation were accepted into the canon as constituent parts of such collections. Thus, the New Testament may be properly viewed not just as a collection of individual books, but as a compilation of three smaller collections.

The first of these to appear was a collection of several of the apostle Paul's letters. The earliest known examples contained 10 of the 13 canonical letters of Paul, with 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus being added by the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. Still later, the Epistle to the Hebrews became attached to this collection as well although even at this early date many doubted that Paul was its author. Hebrews did not gain widespread acceptance as a canonical work until the 4<sup>th</sup> century, probably because of its unique style and content and the lack of clear

evidence of apostolic authorship. Nevertheless, the undeniably beneficial spiritual character of the book eventually secured it a place in the canon.

The second major collection of material to appear was a set of the four Gospels. Once oral traditions about Jesus began to be recorded, a variety of gospels, or biographies of Jesus, were produced. Originally, local groups of believers often chose to adopt only one of these gospels for use within their particular communities. However, as the early Christians slowly became exposed to several different gospels, it became evident that no single gospel sufficed to give a complete picture of Christ's life and ministry. On the other hand, some early gospels contained teachings that were clearly contradictory to or inconsistent with the bulk of the traditions concerning Jesus.

Thus, it became clear that neither reliance on a single gospel nor indiscriminating acceptance of all the available gospels was preferable. The obvious solution was to adopt a uniform collection of gospels that complimented one another without introducing irresolvable contradictions, thus enhancing the believers' understanding of Christ. By the late 2<sup>nd</sup> or early 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., the resulting collection, comprising the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, had gained widespread acceptance as part of the developing canon of New Testament scripture.<sup>22</sup>

The third group of writings that found its way into the New Testament canon was a collection of the seven shorter General Epistles (i.e. excluding Hebrews). Unlike the Pauline epistles, several of these letters were very slow to gain universal acceptance, with only 1 Peter and 1 John being widely known and used before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Nevertheless, the other letters gradually gained credence, and by the time of Eusebius in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, the seven epistles were known as a group.<sup>23</sup>

As mentioned previously, neither Acts nor Revelation was part of a larger body of material prior to their acceptance into the canon. Acts gained prominence both because it was clearly intended to serve as a companion piece to the Gospel of Luke and because its accounts of the ministry of the apostles served as an important bridge between the Gospels and the

Pauline epistles. Likewise, Revelation was valued both for its Johannine authorship and its unique eschatological content, which informed the hopes and beliefs of the early church. By the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, both Acts and Revelation had become important parts of the developing body of Christian literature.<sup>24</sup>

The New Testament canon continued to coalesce and take shape throughout the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. as various individuals and councils sought to define its contents more precisely. There was broad agreement about the canonicity of the four Gospels, Acts, the Pauline epistles, 1 Peter, and 1 John, but it seems that there was some uncertainty among various groups about the authority and inspiration of the remaining books. In addition, there were a variety of other works that were embraced as canonical by some. Indeed, just as with the Old Testament, there is a large body of apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature associated with the New Testament. These books include the Acts of Paul, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Didache, some of which were used by the early Christians for years and appeared in provisional lists of canonical books.

The earliest surviving list of canonical Christian works that corresponds exactly to the 27 books of the New Testament is found in the 39<sup>th</sup> Festal Letter of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, which was issued on Easter, 367 A.D. This same list of books was later acknowledged by the North African ecclesiastical councils of Hippo (393 A.D.) and Carthage (397 A.D.) and was largely unchallenged thereafter. Although it is true that no ecumenical council ever addressed the subject of the New Testament canon, it is noteworthy that, unlike in the case of the Old Testament, the Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox New Testaments are identical, and no additional early Christian writings are now recognized as inspired or canonical by any major stream of Christianity.

## TRANSLATION AND DISSEMINATION

Since the time of the Tower of Babel, humanity's relationships with God and one another have been complicated immensely by the issue of

language. Such complications are particularly evident in the area of biblical studies. Thus, a crucial part of understanding the history of the Bible is examining the means by which it was translated both into multiple languages and into contemporary idioms, thereby enabling people around the world to read and understand God's Word without having to master the original languages. We must also consider the related issue of the dissemination of the Bible, including developments such as the invention of the printing press, which transformed the Bible from a book that was the domain of scholars and clergy to one that could be found in every home.

## **Original Languages**

The vast majority of the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, the language of the Israelites. While this was the language spoken by most of the significant figures in the Old Testament, it should be remembered that Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Noah and his family spoke the original, pre-Babel human language, and that even the patriarchs probably spoke Semitic dialects that differed significantly from the Hebrew that was in use by the time of Moses. Thus, it is possible that all of the dialogue in the Book of Genesis originally took place in languages other than Hebrew, so that even the original manuscript of it is, in reality, a translation of oral tradition. Additionally, there are various other parts of the Old Testament (including particularly the exilic literature) where dialogue that probably originally took place in some other language (such as Babylonian or Persian) may have been rendered into Hebrew by the Old Testament authors. Finally, there are brief passages of the Old Testament that were originally written in Aramaic (Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26, Daniel 2:4–7:28) or Chaldean (Jeremiah 10:11) rather than Hebrew.

None of the original Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament have survived. The oldest manuscripts and fragments we have are those that were discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran in the 1940's and 1950's. The estimated dates of composition of these manuscripts are between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. and the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. Between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., a complete Hebrew text of the Old Testament,

known as the Masoretic Text, was compiled from the available manuscripts. The Masoretic Text is still the officially accepted text of the Tanakh within Judaism and has also served as the basis for many translations of the Old Testament from Hebrew into other languages.

The New Testament was originally written in Greek, the dominant language of the region following the conquests of Alexander the Great. Again, it should be noted that much of the dialogue recorded in the Gospels did not actually take place in Greek. Rather, Jesus and many of the Jews of His day probably spoke Aramaic, the common language of Palestine during the period. Isolated Aramaic words and phrases, such as *talitha kourm*, *ephphatha*, and *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani* appear in the New Testament (Mark 5:41; 7:34; 15:34).<sup>25</sup> Finally, there are also isolated New Testament examples of Latin, which along with Greek, was one of the languages of the Roman empire (e.g. *denarii* in Matthew 18:28).

As with the Old Testament, none of the original manuscripts of the New Testament have survived. Among the earliest extant New Testament manuscripts in Greek are those contained in the Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus, both of which were probably compiled during the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

## **Ancient Translations**

The Old Testament Scriptures were written in Hebrew, by Hebrew-speakers, for Hebrew-speakers. They were intended to convey the story and worldview of Israel to new generations of Israelites. It is unlikely that their authors ever envisioned the possibility that they would, one day, need to be translated into other languages. Similarly, the New Testament was written in Greek during a period in world history in which Greco-Roman culture was dominant. Its authors undoubtedly assumed that the Greek language would remain the dominant tongue of the region indefinitely. But in each case, these expectations proved false, and the need for translations of both the Old and New Testaments into other languages quickly arose. We will now examine some of the most significant ancient translations of the Scriptures.

## **The Septuagint (c. 3rd–1st centuries B.C.)**

One of the earliest and most significant translations of Scripture is known as the Septuagint, which is derived from the Latin word *septuaginta*, meaning “70,” and is often signified by the Roman numeral for 70, LXX.<sup>26</sup> This was a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament that was made at Alexandria, Egypt, between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries B.C. for the benefit of local communities of Greek-speaking Jews who no longer remembered the Hebrew of their ancestors. The Hebrew sources that were used appear to have been older than the Masoretic Text, as the two works diverge in many places. In fact, the Septuagint agrees much more closely with the earlier Hebrew manuscripts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Septuagint was the version of the Old Testament Scriptures that was used by the early church in presenting the gospel to Gentiles and Greek-speaking Jews, and many New Testament quotations of Old Testament passages are taken from the Septuagint rather than from Hebrew manuscripts. The oldest extant versions of the Septuagint are found in the 4<sup>th</sup>-century Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus, which, as mentioned previously, also contain the earliest surviving manuscripts of the New Testament.

## **The Vulgate (c. A.D. 405)**

During the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. Latin slowly began to replace Greek as the predominant language of the Roman Empire. The need thus arose for translations of the Bible in Latin. A variety of early Latin translations began to appear by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, but these versions all translated the Old Testament directly from the Greek Septuagint rather than from the original Hebrew, leading many to consider them unreliable. Damasus, the bishop of Rome (366–384) entrusted his secretary, Jerome, with the task of producing a standardized Latin translation of the Scriptures from the original languages. Jerome completed this task around A.D. 405 and the resulting translation became known as the *Vulgate*, meaning “common version,” so named because it was written in popular (not scholarly) Latin.

The Vulgate served as the standard Bible of the Western church for centuries and was the translation through which the gospel spread to Western Europe. In the wake of the Reformation, with its intense doctrinal and canonical disputes, the Catholic Church declared the Vulgate to be the only authoritative version of the Bible at the Council of Trent in 1546. Indeed, it was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Bible translations other than those that could be traced back directly to the Vulgate were deemed permissible for use by Catholic Christians.

## **Other Ancient Versions**

In addition to Greek and Latin, the Scriptures were translated into a variety of other languages during the first few centuries A.D. Many of the Jews who returned from captivity in Babylon spoke Aramaic rather than the Hebrew of their ancestors, necessitating the eventual development of Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew scriptures. Such paraphrases were called *targumim*, and though they were originally given orally in the synagogues, authoritative written targumim of the Law and the Prophets (though not the Writings) were later produced.

A translation of the Scriptures was also made in Syriac, another form of Aramaic spoken by Jewish communities in northern Mesopotamia. This Syriac Bible was known as the Peshitta and reached its finished form early in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (though Syriac translations of the Old Testament and the Gospels go back much further). The missionary-minded Syriac church carried the gospel as far as India and China.

A Christian community developed in Egypt during the first century A.D. though it is not certain which of the early apostles carried the gospel there. Later, the Septuagint and Greek New Testament were translated into Coptic, the native language of the Egyptians. The modern-day Coptic Church in Egypt still uses this same translation.

A final notable ancient version of the Bible is the Gothic translation. Gothic was the language of the Ostrogoths, who lived to the north and west of the Roman Empire, and who were evangelized in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>

centuries. The Gothic translation of the Bible was the first to appear in a Germanic language.

## **Visionaries and Reformers**

For nearly a millennium and a half after the birth of Jesus, every copy of the Old and New Testament Scriptures was made by hand. Scholars such as Jerome and the elders who worked on the Septuagint labored with pen and parchment to produce their massive volumes. This labor-intensive procedure ensured that very few copies of the Bible could be produced, and these were mainly available only to churches and monasteries due to their prohibitive cost.

While the scarcity of Bibles was one obstacle to the continued transmission of the gospel, another was the lack of translations in the common tongues of Europe. Though Latin and Greek had been dominant world languages for centuries, by the middle of the second millennium, they were not commonly known by the general populace of Western Europe and demand began to grow for translations of the Scriptures into languages such as German and English.

We will now examine some of the key figures who helped to address these two major issues, thus paving the way for the further spread of the gospel.

### **Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1398–1468)**

In the 1440's, a German inventor and printer named Johannes Gutenberg invented a new kind of moveable metal type, which he used in conjunction with a unique printing press of his own devising to print books much more quickly and efficiently than had been possible before. In 1455, Gutenberg used this new press to produce a Vulgate Bible, the first printed version of the Scriptures. Printed editions of the Hebrew Old Testament, Septuagint, and Greek New Testament soon followed. As a result of Gutenberg's pioneering efforts, Bibles would eventually be mass-produced and available at a reasonable cost to every believer.



## **John Wycliffe (c. 1325–1384)**

Although men such as Caedmon, Bede, and Alfred the Great had translated portions of Scripture into Old English prior to A.D. 1000, no complete English version of the Bible existed until the late 14<sup>th</sup> century when one was produced through the efforts of a preacher and scholar named John Wycliffe. Wycliffe was a social reformer who desired to see the hierarchical system through which church and state dominated the common people of Europe replaced by an emphasis on each person's individual responsibility to and relationship with God.

Such an approach required that the Bible be available to the masses in their own languages, so around A.D. 1380, Wycliffe and his supporters began the task of translating the Latin Vulgate into English. The first Wycliffe Bible was completed shortly before Wycliffe's death in 1384, with significant portions of it being translated by an associate of Wycliffe's, Nicholas of Hereford. This edition was a strictly literal translation from Latin, with little attention being given to the readability of the resulting English text. A later edition, produced after Wycliffe's death by his secretary, John Purvey, corrected this shortcoming.

The Church suppressed the Wycliffe translation in 1408 in a document that came to be known as the Constitutions of Oxford. This document forbade the translation of the Scriptures into English without express permission. Wycliffe himself was condemned as a heretic after his death, and his body was exhumed and burned on the orders of Pope Martin V. But the work he had begun would live on, both through those who soon undertook further translations of the Bible into English, and ultimately through the Wycliffe Bible Translators, an organization that has as its mission the translation of the Scriptures into every language on earth.

## **Martin Luther (c. 1483–1546)**

While Wycliffe is sometimes called “The Morning Star of the Reformation” and viewed as an important precursor to it, Martin Luther was its true catalyst. Like Wycliffe, Luther considered the

availability of the Word of God to the common man to be of the utmost importance. Accordingly, he undertook a translation of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures into German in the early 1520's. The complete German Bible was first published in 1534. Because of its widespread circulation among the Germanic language-speaking peoples of the Holy Roman Empire, Luther's Bible actually served to facilitate the emergence and standardization of the modern German language. In its revised form, it is still the most popular and widely known German translation.

## **The English Bible From Tyndale to King James**

As the Reformation began to gather strength in Europe, men who were sympathetic with the ideas of Wycliffe and Luther continued to pursue the project of making the Bible widely available in English. In less than a century, from 1526 to 1611, several significant English versions of the Bible were successively produced, beginning with the work of William Tyndale and culminating in the King James Version, which would prove to be the prevailing English Protestant translation for over three hundred years.

### **William Tyndale (c. 1495–1536)**

William Tyndale, a preacher, Reformer, and Oxford scholar, began translating the New Testament into English in 1524. Unlike John Wycliffe, Tyndale translated from the original Greek rather than Latin. His New Testament was also the first English version to circulate in printed form, utilizing Gutenberg's technology, rather than as a handwritten manuscript.

Upon completing the New Testament, Tyndale set to work translating the Old Testament. He completed the first 14 books, along with the Book of Jonah, though only Jonah and the *Pentateuch* were published during his lifetime. Tyndale was executed as a heretic in 1536, leaving others to continue the work that he had begun.

It is hard to overstate the impact that Tyndale had upon the subsequent development of the English Bible. Tyndale coined some very familiar

biblical words in English during the process of translation (such as *atonement*), and his wording was retained to a great degree by the translators who produced the King James Version and each successive revision of it. In short, the language that we think of as “biblical English” is largely the English of William Tyndale.

### **The Coverdale Bible, the Matthew Bible, and the Great Bible (1535, 1537, 1539)**

In 1535, shortly before Tyndale’s death, one of his associates, Miles Coverdale, issued the first complete, printed Bible in the English language. The Coverdale Bible contained Tyndale’s New Testament and *Pentateuch*, with the remainder of the Old Testament being translated from the Latin and German versions.

Another of Tyndale’s helpers, John Rogers (who wrote under the pseudonym of Thomas Matthew), published another version based on Tyndale’s work in 1537. In addition to the Tyndale New Testament and *Pentateuch*, the Matthew Bible incorporated Tyndale’s translations of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and the Books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, which until that point had remained unpublished. The remainder of the Matthew Old Testament was taken from Coverdale’s translation.

Following King Henry VIII’s break with the Catholic Church in 1534, those who translated the Bible into English were no longer threatened with censure or punishment as John Wycliffe and William Tyndale had been. In fact, in 1538, the king himself decreed that a large Bible, in English, should be placed in every parish church in the nation. The Bible that was produced in response to this decree was the work of Miles Coverdale and was a revision and compilation of his own and Matthew’s work (and thus, by extension, of Tyndale’s). This version was completed in 1539 and was known as the Great Bible. Though the majority of this Bible quickly passed out of use as new versions emerged, the Psalter contained in the Great Bible is still found in the Book of Common Prayer and is used in the Anglican Church to this day.

### **The Geneva Bible and the Bishops’ Bible (1560, 1568)**

Queen Mary I of England (1553–58) attempted to reverse her father’s

policies and return the nation to Roman Catholicism. To this end, she persecuted many Protestant Christians, causing some to flee England and take refuge in Geneva, Switzerland, where a burgeoning Protestant community existed under the leadership of men like John Calvin and John Knox. There, in 1560, a group of scholars completed work on a new, English Protestant translation of the Bible, which would become known as the Geneva Bible.

The Geneva Bible is historically significant in several ways. It was the first English Bible to be translated completely from the original Hebrew and Greek, as well as the first to divide chapters into verses. It was also the first Bible to use italics and the first to include marginal commentary, much of which was intended to promote Calvinist and Puritan doctrinal positions.

The Geneva Bible remained popular among the general populace for many years and was preferred by many to the King James Version upon the latter's release in 1611. Indeed, when the Pilgrims left Europe in 1620 to seek religious freedom in the New World, it was the Geneva Bible that they brought with them aboard the Mayflower.

Though England had returned to Protestantism following the death of Mary I, the Anglican Church did not approve of the particularly Calvinist/Puritan character of the Geneva Bible, so its leaders sponsored the creation of a rival translation. This version was produced by a group of bishops working from the original languages and thus became known as the Bishops' Bible. It was published in 1568, but despite the best efforts of the Anglican Church, it never became as popular as the Geneva Bible.

### **The King James Version (1611)**

In 1604, King James I of England entrusted a group of scholars with the task of producing a new English translation of the Bible that would correct some of the inconsistencies in the Great Bible and the Bishops' Bible, while avoiding the sectarian emphasis of the Geneva Bible.<sup>27</sup> The translators, working in six teams, produced translations of both

Testaments, as well as the Apocrypha.<sup>28</sup> They used the 1602 edition of the Bishops' Bible as their main point of reference, while also drawing from the Tyndale, Coverdale, Matthew, and Geneva Bibles, as well as texts in the original languages. The teams completed their work in 1611.<sup>29</sup> The translation that they produced was referred to in England as the Authorized Version but is better known around the world as the King James Version.

Though it initially met with resistance from some who preferred the Geneva Bible, the King James Version soon gained widespread acceptance, and with good reason. To begin with, the translation was relatively free of divisive, sectarian-based claims and interpretations of Scripture, a fact that helped to preclude any major ecclesiastical or doctrinal controversies. In addition, the King James Version was considered to be a literary masterpiece. Though its language was in large part drawn from Tyndale's text, the translators of the King James Version gave it its own unique style and power, and its prose and poetry often evoked intense feeling in its readers. This combination of theological and literary appeal ensured that the King James Version would remain widely used for generations to come.

Indeed, the influence and staying power of the King James Version is without equal. For more than 300 years, it remained the dominant English Protestant translation of the Scriptures, losing ground to other versions only in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, amid a flurry of new critical scholarship in the field of translation and increasing frustration with the King James Version's archaic language among new generations of believers. The inescapable truth is that, for many Christians over the centuries (and even today), the King James Version has been, quite simply, "The Bible."

## **English Translations and Revisions Since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

The following chart lists and briefly describes some of the notable Protestant Bible translations and revisions undertaken in the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>,

and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Several of the most prominent translations produced during this period are descendants of the Tyndale/King James line. Others, like the New International Version, are new scholarly translations that are not a part of the dominant English Bible lineage. Finally, there has been a proliferation of simplified versions and paraphrases that have sought to render the Bible into more easily understandable forms, thus aiding in introducing new generations to God's Word.

## **Notable English Bible Translations Since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

### **Scholarly Versions**

**Revised Version (RV)** 1894—The first notable revision of the KJV, produced by British scholars at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its New Testament was translated from a better Greek text than was available to the King James translators.

**American Standard Version (ASV)** 1901—An American revision of the KJV undertaken in conjunction with the British RV, and largely identical to it. Both the RV and ASV failed to gain much popularity, largely because their language lacked much of the rhythm and flow of the KJV.

**Revised Standard Version (RSV)** 1952—A further American revision of the ASV, the RSV was the first serious challenger to the KJV and was highly regarded for its combination of readability and accurate scholarship. The final revision of the RSV (1973) was approved for use by Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Greek Orthodox believers, making it the first modern Bible to be embraced by all three major streams of Christianity.

**New American Standard Bible (NASB) 1971**—The NASB was produced as a revision of the ASV and was intended to serve as an alternative to the RSV. It is widely recognized as the most literal, word-for-word translation among 20<sup>th</sup>-century versions and is often praised for its lack of theological commentary and interpretation, but it is not considered to be a particularly readable translation compared to some other modern versions.

**New International Version (NIV) 1978**—The NIV represented a wholly new English translation by the International Bible Society, distinct from the Tyndale/King James tradition. The goals of its translators were to produce a highly readable version in modern English, while also preserving evangelical theology, which they saw as being threatened by translations like the RSV. The NIV has become the most popular modern translation of the Bible. It is less literal in its word choice than some other translations but is still generally considered to be a scholarly version rather than a simplified version.

**New King James Version (NKJV) 1982**—The NKJV was intended to maintain the essential content of the King James Version while making stylistic alterations in the areas of vocabulary, spelling, and grammar (e.g. replacing archaic pronouns such as “ye,” “thou,” “thy,” and “thine” with their modern equivalents). While some view the NKJV as a good compromise between the original KJV and other modern translations, others criticize the fact that the NKJV translators relied almost exclusively on the same Hebrew and Greek texts that were used in the translation of the KJV rather than taking advantage of earlier, more highly regarded texts that were unknown in 1611.

**New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) 1989**—The NRSV was a major revision of the RSV that employed the most accurate available texts in the original languages and also removed much of the RSV’s archaic language, as the NKJV had done for the KJV. The NRSV is

also distinguished by being one of the earliest major translations to use gender-inclusive language.

**English Standard Version (ESV) 2001**—The English Standard Version is the newest major version in the Tyndale/King James tradition. It was based on the RSV and addressed some of the same issues of accuracy and archaic language that the NRSV had sought to correct while rejecting the NRSV's use of gender-inclusive language and generally tending to be more theologically conservative. The English Standard Version is viewed by many as an attractive compromise between the accuracy and literalness of the NASB and the readability of the NIV.

### **Amplified and Simplified Versions and Paraphrases**

**A New Translation of the Bible by James Moffatt 1928**—The Moffatt Bible is one of the earliest examples of a complete simplified Bible. Its language is highly colloquial and easy to read, thus allowing readers to quickly gain a broad sense of the meaning of difficult passages, but it also contains some unorthodox interpretations and conjectures that limit its usefulness as a translation.

**J.B. Phillips New Testament in Modern English 1958**—The Phillips New Testament is a paraphrase produced by an Anglican minister. Its language is much more casual and conversational even than Moffatt's, thus allowing readers to experience familiar passages in a fresh way.

**The Amplified Bible (AMP) 1965**—The Amplified Bible, rather than attempting to simplify biblical language, actually complicates it by inserting parenthetical clarifications, expanded word meanings, and other information directly into the text. This makes it a useful tool for study but limits its readability.

**New English Bible (NEB) 1970**—The New English Bible is a British translation that began as a revision of the RV but soon developed into



an entirely new version. It is an early example of a “thought-for-thought” rather than word-for-word, approach to translation.

**The Living Bible (LB)** 1971—Like the Phillips New Testament, the Living Bible is a paraphrase produced by one man, Kenneth N. Taylor. Upon its publication in the early 1970’s, it became extremely popular with both young Christians and new believers because of the relative ease with which it could be understood.

**The Good News Bible, or Today’s English Version (GNB or TEV)** 1976—The GNB, which was formerly known as Today’s English Version, is a simplified version using contemporary English. Its production was motivated by requests from Christians in Africa and Asia for a new translation that would be more easily understandable to non-native English speakers. The translators of the GNB sought to achieve what they called “dynamic equivalence,” by which they meant a “thought-for-thought” correspondence to the original languages that would produce in readers the same effect that the original text had on its audience.

**The New Century Version (NCV)** 1987—The NCV is another simplified, “dynamic equivalency” version. It evolved from earlier, even more simplistic translations designed for children and for the hearing-impaired, who often found it difficult to understand idiomatic English.

**The Contemporary English Version (CEV)** 1995—The CEV is a simplified version that was produced in response to research concerning contemporary speech and reading patterns in the English language. A notable feature of the CEV is that terms which are strictly biblical in nature are often replaced by alternate phrasings more clear in meaning to those without any religious upbringing.

**The New Living Translation (NLT)** 1996—The NLT began as a revision of the Living Bible but soon grew into an entirely new, simplified translation (not a paraphrase, as the Living Bible is). The

NLT follows the “dynamic equivalence” principle used in the GNB and NCV, and its language tends to be quite warm and casual in tone.

***The Message (MSG)*** 2002—The Message is a contemporary paraphrase of the Bible authored by Eugene Peterson. It seeks to recreate the tone and rhythms of the original texts, which were written not in scholarly literary forms, but in what might be considered “street language.” The Message uses earthy language and unexpected metaphors to bring an entirely fresh perspective to the reading of the Word.

## A Global Book

Lest our detailed exploration of the history of English translations obscure the fact that the Bible is indeed a global book, we should briefly consider the multiplicity of Bible translations that have been made in other languages. As of the time of this writing, the entire Bible has been translated into over 400 languages worldwide, and the New Testament into over 1,000 additional languages, with partial translations existing in more than 2500 other languages.<sup>30</sup>

One of the most historically significant non-English translations is the Reina-Valera Bible, the first complete translation of the Scriptures in Spanish and the most widely used by Spanish-speaking Protestants for hundreds of years. The Reina-Valera was produced by Casiodoro de Reina, a Spanish Protestant living in Switzerland in 1569. It has undergone several revisions since then, with the most recent being in 1995. Much like the King James Version, the Reina-Valera has such historical, literary, and sentimental weight that it is virtually synonymous with “the Bible” to many of its readers.<sup>31</sup>

Notable Protestant translations in other languages include the Van Dyke translation (Arabic, 1860), the WBTC version (Bengali, 2001), the

Chinese Union Version (Chinese, 1919), the Bible of Kralice (Czech, 1593), the NBG (Dutch, 1951), the Louis Segond version (French, 1880), the *Vizsolyi Biblia* (Hungarian, 1590), the Japanese Interconfessional Bible (Japanese, 1987), the RNKSV (Korean, 2001), the Word of Life New Testament (Russian, 1991), the Jurij Dalmatin translation (Slovene, 1584), the Union Bible (Swahili, 1950), and the Gustav Vasa Bible (Swedish, 1541).

## **Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles**

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not briefly examine the Bibles used by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians, who together comprise over 60 percent of believers worldwide.

### **Catholic Translations**

The three most significant post-Vulgate Roman Catholic translations are the Douai Bible, Jerusalem Bible, and New American Bible. The Douai Bible, alternately known as the Douai-Rheims or Rheims-Douai Bible, was originally published in 1610. It was the first explicitly Catholic translation in English and was based on the Latin Vulgate rather than the original languages. The translation was done by English Catholic scholars at Douai and Rheims in France, where they were living because of the anti-Catholic policies of the English monarchy.

Though the Douai Bible was an accurate translation, its readability was hindered by the retention of Latin phrasing from the Vulgate. As an attempt to address this shortcoming, Richard Challoner, a Catholic bishop and former Protestant, greatly revised the Douai Bible in the mid-1700's, in some cases borrowing wording from the King James. The resulting translation, though still called the Douai or Douai-Rheims, was vastly different from the original. Nevertheless, Challoner's version is the Douai Bible with which most Catholic Christians are familiar, and it remained the only English translation approved for use by the Catholic Church until the 1940's.

The Jerusalem Bible was the first Catholic translation to be based on the original languages rather than the Vulgate. It was originally a

French translation, *La Bible de Jérusalem*, produced by Catholic scholars at L'École Biblique in Jerusalem in 1961. The English version was published in 1966.

The Jerusalem Bible is a critical, scholarly version of the Bible that is renowned for its detailed introductions and footnotes, but it is not a strictly literal translation, opting instead for “dynamic equivalence” to increase understanding. It is widely considered to be one of the finest translations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is used by many Protestants as well as Catholics.

The New American Bible began as a new revision of the Douai Bible for an American audience but soon developed into a distinct translation that utilized the original languages. It was first published in 1970 and subsequently underwent several revisions, the latest of which (2000) is currently the basis of the lectionary used by Catholic churches in the United States.

## **Eastern Orthodoxy**

The Greek Septuagint serves, to this day, as the Old Testament of Greek Orthodox churches. Other Eastern Orthodox churches use Old Testaments that were translated into their own native languages from the Septuagint or the Syriac Peshitta rather than the Hebrew texts. The Orthodox New Testament derives from a group of Byzantine manuscripts in Greek that are not as ancient as the texts that are now typically favored by other translators. These manuscripts are closely similar to the ones used by the King James translators, prior to the discovery of the Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus.

Because the Eastern Orthodox tradition emphasizes communal readings and interpretation of Scripture rather than individual study, there has not historically been as great a concern among the Orthodox churches with producing specifically Orthodox translations as there has been among Catholics and Protestants. English-speaking Orthodox believers have often used the King James Version (in an edition that includes the

deuterocanonical books of Orthodoxy) since its New Testament derives from the same Greek texts that are used in Greek Orthodox liturgy. More recently, an Orthodox Study Bible in English has been produced, using the NKJV translation of the New Testament and translating the Old Testament into English from the Septuagint. This version also features extensive notes and study aids that are specifically Orthodox in character.

## **A Final Word Concerning Translations**

The preceding section is intended primarily as a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, guide to Bible translations. That is to say, its function is to provide a history of notable translations, not to dogmatically defend the use of certain translations while censuring the use of others. Some Christians may prefer to rely on a single translation that has served them well while others may choose to read a selection of different translations for a broader perspective, but such decisions should remain a matter of individual choice, not strict ecclesiastical policy.

However, this is not to suggest that all translations are the same. Each one clearly has certain advantages and disadvantages. Some are more literal, making them more suitable for scholarly study while others are more readable, making them preferable to many for devotional use. Some have the advantage of being produced by the most advanced scholarship while others have the weight of centuries-long usage behind them. Some advance specific theological positions while others are more ecumenical. All of these factors, and more, must be weighed by the individual reader.

It must be clearly emphasized that no single translation is perfect. No translator had access to the original manuscripts of the prophets and apostles, and each relied heavily on the work of others who came before, often consulting various existing Bible translations for help even as they sought to replace them. Ultimately, the value of any Bible translation is determined not by the quality of the human scholarship that produced it, nor by the degree to which it is embraced by any particular group, but by the inspiration of the Spirit that lies behind it. We must trust God to guard the transmission of His Word even as we

trust that He guarded it in the distant past. Surely the One who guided the translators of the Septuagint in their efforts to make His Word available to the Greeks may also direct the hand of the author who seeks to paraphrase the Scriptures for a new generation. Any translation that is used by the Lord to lead people to Himself should be gratefully embraced by His church.

## CHAPTER TWO SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have surveyed the history of the Bible. We began by listing the human authors of the Bible's constituent books, along with the approximate date of each book's composition. We then discussed in detail the centuries-long process by which the canon of Scripture reached its final form. We surveyed the development of the Hebrew scriptures during the Old Testament period and beyond, discussed some of the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal works that were produced during the Intertestamental period, and examined the coalescence of the New Testament canon from smaller collections of the Gospels and epistles.

Finally, we took a detailed look at the history of the translation and dissemination of the Bible, beginning with the original Hebrew and Greek texts and continuing to the present day. We discussed ancient versions like the Greek Septuagint, Latin Vulgate, and Syriac Peshitta. We considered the impact of visionaries like Johannes Gutenberg, John Wycliffe, and Martin Luther on the spread of the Scriptures. We then traced the development of the English Bible from the early work of William Tyndale, to the monumental King James Version, to the proliferation of modern translations and paraphrases in the last century and a half. Having thus thoroughly explored the history of English Protestant translations, we closed the chapter by briefly examining some important non-English, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox Bibles.

In Chapter Three, we will continue our exploration of the Bible by examining some of the key geographical, socio-political, and religious features that defined the landscape of the Old Testament world.

## CHAPTER TWO NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>As we emphasized in Chapter One, God inspired the human authors of the Bible, and thus, in an important sense, must be considered the true Author of all Scripture. Furthermore, we should also recognize that some parts of the Bible (notably the Mosaic Law and many of the prophetic passages in the Old Testament) are, in fact, direct transcriptions of God's own words, which were merely recorded by those to whom they were spoken.

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that many of the Bible's historical books were probably written years, decades, or even centuries after the occurrence of the events they record.

<sup>3</sup>The date of writing of Galatians is particularly unsure, largely because the term "Galatians" could refer to a number of different churches spread over a large geographic region, and thus Paul's specific intended audience is unclear. Galatians may have been written as early as A.D. 48/49 or as late as A.D. 56/57.

<sup>4</sup>As we will see, the precise makeup of the canon is viewed differently by various groups of believers, and thus it may be necessary to distinguish between "the Protestant canon," "the Catholic canon," "the Orthodox canon," and so forth.

<sup>5</sup>Exodus 24:4–7, 12; 25:21; 31:18; 34:1–28.

<sup>6</sup>Deuteronomy 31:24–26; Joshua 24:25, 26.

<sup>7</sup>See 1 Samuel 10:25; 1 Chronicles 29:29; 2 Chronicles 20:34; 26:22; 32:32.

<sup>8</sup>2 Kings 22:1–23:25; cf. 2 Chronicles 34:1–33.

<sup>9</sup>Nehemiah 7:73–8:18. It is not entirely clear what the "Book of the Law of Moses" was. It may have been Deuteronomy, a compilation of the laws of Exodus and Leviticus, or perhaps even the entire *Pentateuch*.

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<sup>10</sup>Rabbinic tradition (as recorded in the Talmud and midrash literature) suggests that Ezra played a prominent role in gathering together and arranging the materials that became part of the Hebrew canon. On Nehemiah's establishment of a library collecting works related to the kings and prophets, see 2 Maccabees 2:13.

<sup>11</sup>For evidence that this understanding existed even in the pre-Christian period, see Josephus' *Against Apion* 1.41, where it is stated that, "From Artaxerxes to our own times a complete history has been written, but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets." See also 1 Maccabees 4:45, 46 and 9:27, where it is implied both that the people were aware that the prophets had ceased activity, and that they awaited the arrival and instruction of a new prophet.

<sup>12</sup>See Matthew 5:17; 7:12; 22:40; Luke 16:16; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; Romans 3:21.

<sup>13</sup>Jesus Himself refers to the Psalms in Luke 24:44. There are no New Testament references to Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Ecclesiastes, or Song of Solomon, which lends credence to the idea that the Writings as a whole were not accorded the same level of respect as the Law and the Prophets during the period of Jesus' life.

<sup>14</sup>Some notable examples of messianic passages in the Old Testament include Isaiah 7:14; 9:6; 53:3–7; Micah 5:2; Zechariah 9:9. For examples of Jesus and His followers quoting from and alluding to the Old Testament, see Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:14–21; John 3:14, 15; Acts 7:2–50; Hebrews 11.

<sup>15</sup>The original meaning of the Greek word *apocrypha* is "hidden," but it is not entirely clear why this type of literature was referred to in this way. The alternate meaning, "of questionable authenticity," is now more widely assumed, particularly by Protestants.



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<sup>16</sup>It should be noted that there are also some books that Catholic Christians view as apocryphal. These include the books that Protestants generally refer to as pseudepigraphal, as well as some books that most Orthodox Christians would claim are deuterocanonical, like 1 Esdras and 3 Maccabees.

<sup>17</sup>The book of 1 Esdras is found in the Septuagint, the original Vulgate, the Apocrypha section of the original 1611 King James Version, and most Orthodox Bibles, but it was relegated to an appendix in the Catholic Bible following the Council of Trent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and later removed altogether.

<sup>18</sup>The book of 2 Esdras is found in the original Vulgate, the Apocrypha section of the original 1611 King James Version, and the Russian Orthodox Bible, but it is absent from the Septuagint and the Greek Orthodox Bible. It was relegated to an appendix in the Catholic Bible following the Council of Trent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and later removed altogether.

<sup>19</sup>In Orthodox Bibles, the Letter to Jeremiah is a distinct book, separate from Baruch.

<sup>20</sup>Like 1 Esdras, the Prayer of Manasseh is found in the Septuagint, the original Vulgate, the Apocrypha section of the original 1611 King James Version, and most Orthodox Bibles, but it was relegated to an appendix in the Catholic Bible following the Council of Trent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and later removed altogether.

<sup>21</sup>The book of 4 Maccabees is now generally relegated to the appendix of Orthodox Bibles due to its use of pagan philosophy.

<sup>22</sup>John had been the slowest of these to gain acceptance from the early Christians, in part, because it was so different from the Synoptic Gospels in content and tone, but possibly also because it had been embraced by many Gnostics, whose theology clashed with that of the apostles.

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<sup>23</sup>See Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica* 2.23.25.

<sup>24</sup>The canonization of Revelation was not without controversy as there was considerable disagreement about whether its contents were literal or allegorical. Some parts of the church, especially in the East, did not accept Revelation as divinely inspired until the late 4<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>25</sup>In Matthew's version of Jesus' cry to God from the cross (27:46), the first two words are given in the Hebrew form *Eli* rather than the Aramaic *Eloi*.

<sup>26</sup>The name derives from the tradition that 70 elders were involved in the translation process.

<sup>27</sup>The number of scholars who produced the King James translation is a matter of debate. Though 54 translators were appointed, most sources hold that only 47 did the actual work of translation.

<sup>28</sup>As noted previously, the Apocrypha appeared in the original 1611 King James Version though it was located between the Old and New Testaments rather than being incorporated into the Old Testament. It continued to appear in subsequent revisions and reprintings (with occasional interruptions) until the 1880's.

<sup>29</sup>Revisions of the original King James Version followed in 1629, 1638, 1762, and 1769, but the text of even this latest revision is virtually identical to that of the 1611 edition.

<sup>30</sup>This information was taken from the Wycliffe Bible Translators website, [www.wycliffe.org](http://www.wycliffe.org), on March 17, 2006.

<sup>31</sup>Spanish translations of more modern English versions, including the NIV, NASB, and NKJV, are also widely available.



# Chapter Three

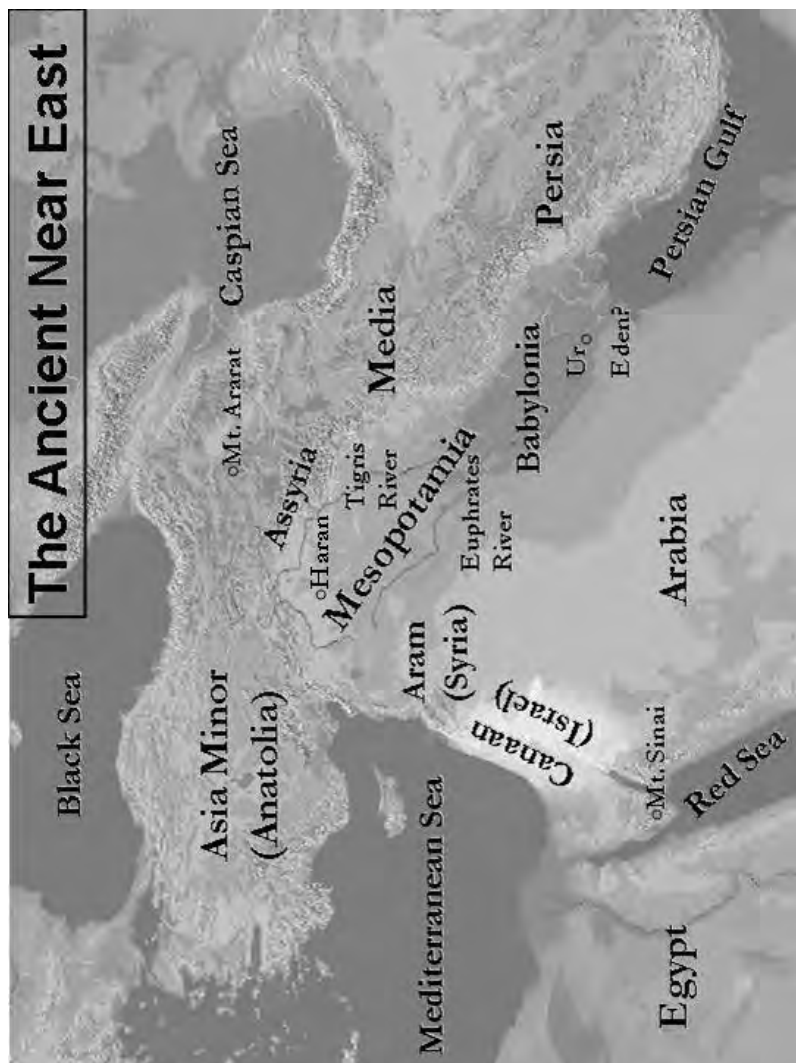
## The Context of the Old Testament

Before delving into the specific content of the books of the Old Testament, it is necessary to establish the contextual framework within which the events they record occurred. In this chapter, we will briefly survey the physical and political geography of the Ancient Near East, examine the major human cultures that played prominent roles in the events of the Old Testament, and explore the nature of religious life in pre-Abrahamic times, under the covenant that God made with the patriarchs, and under the Mosaic Law.

### GEOGRAPHY

The events of the Old Testament occurred within an area that is referred to generally as the Ancient Near East, comprising modern Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, and Iran. The following map will allow you to familiarize yourself with this region, which will, in turn, increase your ability to understand the complex accounts of the Old Testament. The accompanying capsules provide information regarding locations that are particularly prominent in the biblical narrative.

# The Ancient Near East



**Assyria**—A kingdom in northern Mesopotamia that flourished from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Assyria conquered Israel in 722 B.C. and deported its inhabitants, leading to the dissolution of the northern kingdom. The Assyrian capital of Nineveh was evangelized by the prophet Jonah, and its eventual destruction was foretold by the prophet Nahum.

**Babylonia**—An ancient empire located between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in southern Mesopotamia. Around 587/586 B.C., the Babylonians conquered the kingdom of Judah, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, and took many of its inhabitants into captivity. The Babylonian capital, Babylon, was one of the most impressive cities of the ancient world.

**Canaan (Israel)**—The land that God promised to Abraham and his descendants. Its boundaries were the Mediterranean to the west, the Jordan River to the east, the Sinai Peninsula to the south, and the kingdoms of Syria and Phoenicia to the north. This area contained much fertile farmland in its river valleys and coastal plains and was renowned for its bountiful fruit, milk, and honey. It was known as Canaan after its inhabitants, the Canaanites (descendants of Noah's son Ham), prior to the Israelite conquest of it under Joshua. Thereafter, it became known as Israel.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, the land was divided into two separate kingdoms. The northern kingdom, which consisted of 10 of the original 12 tribes descended from Jacob's sons, retained the name Israel. The southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin collectively became known as the nation of Judah.

**Eden**—The story of the Old Testament (and indeed, of humanity) begins in the Garden of Eden, which is thought to have been situated somewhere near the intersection of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, which is located in modern-day Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

**Egypt**—An ancient nation located at the northeast corner of the continent of Africa. Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers,

and the rest of the descendants of Jacob relocated there to escape the effects of a widespread famine. The Israelites were later enslaved by the Egyptians and remained there until the time of the Exodus under the leadership of Moses.

**Haran**—A city in northern Mesopotamia. It was from Haran that Abraham set out in obedience to God’s call to follow Him to the land of promise.

**Jordan River**—This river formed the eastern boundary of the Promised Land. Joshua and the Israelites passed through the Jordan to begin their invasion of Canaan after God parted its waters, just as He had parted those of the Red Sea 40 years earlier.

**Media**—An Indo-European nation located east of Mesopotamia and north of Persia. Media was successively allied with or assimilated into Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia in the Old Testament period.

**Mesopotamia**—Historically, the broad name for the entire region between and around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. It is here that most of the events of the early chapters of Genesis are set. Eden, Babel, and Ur were all located within the boundaries of Mesopotamia, and although Scripture does not explicitly confirm this, it would seem that Noah probably lived there before the Flood as well. Several prominent cultures successively occupied parts of Mesopotamia during the Old Testament period, including the Sumerians, Elamites, Babylonians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Medo-Persians.

**Mount Ararat**—This mountain, located in eastern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), is identified by Scripture as the place where Noah’s Ark came to rest following the Flood (Genesis 8:4).

**Mount Sinai**—A mountain located in the south-central part of the Sinai Peninsula, which connects Egypt and Israel. It was here that God gave the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law to Moses and the Israelites.

**Persia**—An ancient empire located southeast of Mesopotamia and roughly corresponding to modern-day Iran. The armies of Persia captured Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., thus freeing the exiles of Judah from Babylonian captivity and setting the stage for their eventual return to Jerusalem.

**Red Sea**—The sea that separates the Arabian Peninsula from the east coast of Africa. As recorded in Exodus 14, God divided the waters of part of the Red Sea between the mainland of Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula (the modern-day Gulf of Suez) so that Moses and the Israelites could pass through on dry land.

**Ur**—A city in the ancient empire of Sumeria in southern Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). Ur was the birthplace of Abraham.

## POLITICS AND CULTURE

In the beginning, God created one man, Adam. After humanity's initial disobedience of God and the resulting spread of wickedness throughout creation, God began again with another man, Noah. From the descendants of Noah emerged 70 distinct nations that, following the scattering of humanity from Babel, began speaking different languages and developing unique cultures.<sup>3</sup> From that point on, the Old Testament narrative is a story of competing and clashing societies and worldviews. It is important that we briefly examine some of the prominent people groups of the Old Testament period so that we may gain a fuller understanding of the political and cultural dynamics that affected the course of biblical history.

### The Israelites

The Israelites, variously known as the Hebrews or (in the New Testament and in modern times) the Jews, are the descendants of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. Abraham, in turn, was descended from Shem, one of the sons of Noah, and hailed from the city of Ur in



ancient Sumeria. The Israelites are the leading actors in the Old Testament drama; they are the people with whom God established a special covenant, promising to bless them, to make them a blessing to all nations, and to give them the land of Canaan as an inheritance if they would obey His commands.<sup>4</sup> The majority of the Old Testament consists of an account of the complex and often tumultuous covenant relationship between God and the Israelites. The remaining people groups that we will now examine are most significant to us in terms of how they interacted with and affected Israel.

## The Egyptians

The Egyptians are descendants of Ham, the son of Noah, and have occupied an area in the northeast corner of Africa, centered on the Nile River valley for millennia. Indeed, Egypt is perhaps the oldest continually existent nation in the world, and it possesses a rich, multi-faceted culture and a complex, colorful history.

From roughly 3000–mid 300's B.C., Egypt was ruled by a series of dynasties that varied greatly in power and influence. The periods of greatest strength and stability during this span of time are referred to by historians as the Old Kingdom (c. 2750–2200 B.C.), Middle Kingdom (c. 2050–1650 B.C.), and New Kingdom (c. 1550–1100 B.C.), while the intervening spans of relative weakness and instability are known as the First Intermediate Period (c. 2200–2050 B.C.) and Second Intermediate Period (c. 1650–1550 B.C.).<sup>5</sup>

There are references to Egypt scattered throughout the Old Testament, from the time of Abraham's visit during the Middle Kingdom era (Genesis 12:10), to the deposition of King Jehoahaz of Judah by the pharaoh Neco shortly before the Babylonian exile (2 Chronicles 36:2–4). But the period during which the Egyptians are most significant to the biblical narrative is the span of approximately four and a half centuries from the time of Joseph's arrival as a slave to the Exodus under Moses' leadership.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph probably came to Egypt sometime during the Second Intermediate Period with his father and brothers joining him several years later and settling in the land of Goshen. It was most likely the shift in dynastic power accompanying the beginning of the New Kingdom that led to the enslavement of the Israelites by the Egyptians as recorded in Exodus 1:8–14. Following the end of the New Kingdom, Egypt again experienced a prolonged period of weakness, and by the end of the Old Testament period, it had been subsumed by the Persian Empire.

## **The Canaanites**

The Canaanites were the descendants of Canaan, a son of Ham and grandson of Noah. Noah cursed Ham and Canaan (and, by implication, the Canaanites as well), following a bizarre occurrence recorded in Genesis 9. At the same time, Noah blessed and commended his son Shem, from whom the Israelites later descended. This incident foreshadowed the enmity that would ensue between the Canaanites and the Israelites throughout much of the rest of the Old Testament.

As they grew in numbers over the course of successive generations, the Canaanites began to divide themselves into distinct nations, including the Amorites, Girgashites, Hittites, Hivites, and Jebusites, among others. Many of these groups settled in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, which thus became known as the land of Canaan. The Canaanites established an advanced civilization that dominated this region from the 21<sup>st</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.

At the time of His covenant with Abraham, God promised the land of Canaan to his eventual descendants, the Israelites. Following their long enslavement in Egypt and 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites finally entered into Canaan and began their God-aided conquest of the Canaanite nations. Though the Canaanites were not utterly destroyed (and indeed, various groups of them continued to play minor roles throughout the remainder of the Old Testament narrative), their days as a coherent, powerful civilization were ended by the Israelite invaders.

## **The Philistines**

The Philistines were a seafaring warrior people who are thought to have migrated to Canaan from the Mediterranean island of Crete. A Philistine settlement existed at Gerar during the time of the patriarchs, and the Philistine kings had cordial interactions with both Abraham and Isaac.<sup>7</sup> But around the 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Philistine armies moved further into Canaan and became a threat to Israel. They occupied the five cities of Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza, and the surrounding areas, a region that became known as Philistia.<sup>8</sup> The Philistines' ascendance during this period was largely due to their mastery of iron work, which allowed them to forge advanced weaponry, making them formidable soldiers.

The Philistines remained a constant threat to Israel during the time of the judges and the early years of the monarchy, and the two nations warred intermittently throughout this period. Samson, in particular, had several memorable encounters with the Philistines, and during the time of Eli, Philistine forces even succeeded in stealing the Ark of the Covenant, though it was soon returned to Israel. During Saul's reign, the Philistines again posed an imminent threat but were repelled after David defeated the Philistine champion, Goliath. By the end of David's life, the Philistines' power and influence had waned considerably; and near the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Philistia was absorbed into the Assyrian Empire.

## **The Assyrians**

The Assyrians were a fierce, warrior people who established a kingdom in northern Mesopotamia around 1300 B.C. and dominated the ancient world between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. The Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I (1120–1100 B.C.) built a strong empire during the time of the biblical judges, but Assyria experienced weakness under his successors, allowing the united kingdom of Israel, led by David and Solomon, to thrive.

In the 800's B.C., Assyria again rose to prominence under Ashurnasirpal and his son Shalmaneser III. It was during this period that Assyria began to come into conflict with the northern kingdom of Israel (which had by this time separated from Judah). The balance of power in the region then shifted back and forth for almost a century before the Assyrians again began threatening Israel's borders. Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 B.C.) began retaking territory that had previously belonged to Assyria and began forcing the kings of Israel to pay tribute to the Assyrian rulers.

Around 725 B.C., Hoshea, the last king of Israel, stopped paying tribute to Assyria and sought a secret alliance with Egypt. When the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser V, learned of this, he attacked the Israelite capital of Samaria. After a protracted siege, the city finally fell in 722 B.C., and tens of thousands of Israelites were taken into captivity in Assyria.<sup>9</sup> This effectively marked the end of the northern kingdom of Israel, as most of the captives were later scattered, never to return to their homeland.

Although this episode might be seen simply as a case of a stronger nation overthrowing a weaker one that had angered its rulers, the real cause of Israel's downfall was their disobedience to God. Likewise, although the Assyrians were used as a vehicle of God's judgment, their wickedness insured that their good fortune would not last. The Assyrian capital of Nineveh was destroyed in 612 B.C. by the combined forces of the Babylonians and the Medes, thus effectively ending Assyria's long reign as an important and powerful nation.

## **The Babylonians**

The Babylonians were the inhabitants of a powerful empire between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in southern Mesopotamia, with its capital at Babylon. They struggled against the Assyrians for hegemony in the Ancient Near East during much of the Old Testament period.

The first historically significant ruler of Babylonia was Hammurabi, who came to power shortly after 1800 B.C., and who is famous for

developing one of the earliest codified systems of law that has been preserved. Under Hammurabi's leadership, the borders of Babylonia were expanded and its position as a powerful empire secured.

Shortly after 1300 B.C., however, the Assyrians achieved ascendance in Mesopotamia, and the Babylonians became a minor political player in the region. Complete Babylonian independence from the Assyrians was not secured until 626 B.C., under the leadership of Nabopolassar, who was later succeeded as king by his son, Nebuchadnezzar.

During Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Babylonia achieved its greatest strength and prominence. The king began conquering neighboring nations and used the spoils of war to greatly enhance the splendor of the city of Babylon. Shortly before 600 B.C., the Babylonians invaded Judah for the first time, forcing Jehoiakim, king of Judah, to become a vassal of Nebuchadnezzar. Further invasions followed, with the last coming about 588 B.C., following an attempted rebellion by King Zedekiah of Judah. The Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem, finally capturing the city in 587/586 B.C. They destroyed the temple and took many of the inhabitants of Judah to Babylon as captives. The people of Judah thus reenacted the drama of disobedience to God and subsequent enslavement to a pagan power that had been played out over a century earlier between the Assyrians and the northern kingdom of Israel.

Like the Assyrians, though, the Babylonians were not to maintain their power for very long after being used as God's instrument. In 539 B.C., the Babylonians, then under the leadership of King Belshazzar, were defeated by the armies of Cyrus the Persian. This proved to be an important event in the history of the Israelites, as the sudden defeat of their captors eventually paved the way for the return to Judah of many of the exiles.

## **The Medes and Persians**

The Medes and Persians were Indo-European peoples who dwelt east and south of Mesopotamia. Their histories are woven together and also

intersect with those of Assyria and Babylonia. The Medes rose to prominence first, gaining prosperity as part of the Assyrian Empire in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., and then joining with the Babylonians to overthrow the Assyrians in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century. The Medes thus reached the height of their power around the same time that Nebuchadnezzar ruled Babylonia, and Media dominated neighboring Persia during this period.

The balance of power in the region shifted following the accession of Cyrus II to the Persian throne. In 549 B.C., Cyrus defeated Media and established the Persian Empire. Somewhat confusingly, Media itself remained the most prosperous and important region within this new empire, and thus the two peoples were often referred to collectively as “the Medes and Persians,” or “Medo-Persians” because of the political and cultural overlap between the two nations.

In 539 B.C., the Persians defeated the Babylonians, thus ridding themselves of their last major rival for regional hegemony (and, as mentioned previously, setting the stage for the return of the captive Israelites to Judah). They eventually extended their empire throughout the Ancient Near East, from Egypt and the Aegean in the west to the borders of India in the east. The Persians remained the foremost power in the ancient world until 330 B.C. when their empire fell to Alexander the Great.<sup>10</sup>

## RELIGION

Clearly, any attempt to explore the broad cultural landscape of the Old Testament must include a focus on religion and spirituality. Indeed, the story of the Old Testament is, in the final analysis, the story of humanity’s (and more specifically, the Israelites’) ongoing relationship with the true God. As we explore the content of the Old Testament in the next chapter, we will learn more about the specific people and events that shaped the course of this relationship. For now, we will concern ourselves with a broader investigation of the evolving nature and function of religion during the Old Testament period.

## Early Interaction Between God and Humanity

In the beginning, the relationship between God and humans was not systematized in ways that we normally associate with the word *religion*. There were no comprehensive lists of doctrines to be upheld, no codes of conduct to be followed, no prescribed rites of worship. Indeed, prior to the Fall, it would seem that the only real spiritual requirements for Adam and Eve were gratitude for the blessings that God had bestowed on them and a willingness to value and maintain their relationships with Him and with each other.

Obviously, the Fall altered this situation profoundly. Simple, innocent obedience and contentment were rendered impossible. But although we know that God informed Adam and Eve of the terrible consequences that their sin and selfishness had brought about (Genesis 3:14–19), we have no record of what else He may have told them about how they were now to live. Indeed, details are scarce regarding precisely what “following God” involved during the entire pre-Abrahamic period.

Yet we know that some sort of standard existed. We know that Abel and Noah and Job lived in a way that was pleasing to God. We know that Cain and the victims of the Flood and the builders of Babel incurred His displeasure and wrath.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, God was in some way communicating His desires to humanity during this period, but more often than not, His admonitions went unheeded.

## The Covenant of the Patriarchs

With God’s calling of Abraham, the basis for a more formal covenant relationship between God and humanity was established. God promised to bless Abraham and his descendants, to multiply them, and to give them a new homeland. The patriarchs responded to this promise by demonstrating their allegiance to God in various ways: by following Him where He led, building memorial altars, offering animal sacrifices, promising God a tenth of their possessions, ridding themselves of idols,

and, most significantly, practicing ritual circumcision of all males.<sup>12</sup> Circumcision was the one rite that God specifically prescribed for all descendants of Abraham as a condition of the covenant, and it served as a physical representation of the Israelites' unique status among the nations as the chosen people of God.

## **Religion Under the Mosaic Law**

Notwithstanding the covenant relationship between God and the patriarchs, Israelite religion did not reach its fully developed form until after the Exodus from Egypt. At Mt. Sinai, God formalized the covenant relationship between Himself and Israel by giving Moses a detailed set of instructions regarding how the people of Israel were to live. The most important of these instructions were the Ten Commandments, a set of admonitions that were intended to establish the framework for the maintenance of proper relationships with both God and one another. A variety of other commands were also given, touching on many diverse matters such as dietary restrictions, specifications for animal sacrifices, the celebration of religious festivals, and rituals of purification.

In addition to this content of the covenant, God also presented the Israelites with instructions regarding how and where their religious faith was to be publicly enacted. He gave them specifications for the building of a tabernacle, which was to serve as His symbolic dwelling place among them, and He established a priesthood to oversee the offering of sacrifices and to serve as mediators between God and the people. In later years, the moveable tabernacle of the wilderness was replaced by a permanent temple in Jerusalem, but its function was much the same.

Thus, the religious life of the Israelites from this point forward may be seen as one that was highly regulated and routinized, with the Law, the tabernacle, and the priesthood all serving (to some degree) as structures that hindered the people from communing directly with God as their ancestors had once done. Yet, paradoxically, these structures also



served as means of keeping God at the forefront of the people's collective consciousness, with each rite, each sacrifice, each recital of the Law providing a reminder of Israel's unique status as God's chosen people. This tension between liberation and legalism, between election and alienation, is a major feature of Israelite religion as it is portrayed throughout Scripture.

## **Foreign Religions and False Gods**

Finally, in completing the picture of Old Testament religion, we must discuss those religions that developed as competitors to the worship of the true God—religions that played a significant role in the eventual downfall of the Israelites. Such religions are not mentioned in the pre-Abrahamic portion of the Old Testament, and it may be hypothesized that they did not begin developing in earnest until after the time of the Tower of Babel when the geographic isolation of various groups and the emergence of distinct cultures based around new languages would have provided fertile soil for the development of new belief systems.

Each of the major nations we have studied had their own religion and their own god (or, more often, several different gods). The Egyptians worshipped a variety of deities (including Amun, Atum, Ra, and Osiris), many of whom were associated with elements of nature (sun, wind, water) or with animals. The Canaanites, likewise, were a polytheistic people, worshipping one of the many deities known as Baal, among others. The Philistines worshipped the ancient fertility god Dagon, who was said to be the father of Baal. The head of the Assyrian pantheon was Ashur, the sky god, while the chief deities of Babylonia were Ea and later Marduk. The Persians embraced the teachings of Zoroaster, who advocated the worship of a single, abstract deity, Ahura Mazda.

As the Israelites began coming in contact with these religions (and many others), they were often swayed to adopt some of their deities and practices (either at the expense of worship of the true God or coexistent with it). Alternately, they sometimes worshipped idols of

their own making, such as the household gods that Laban and his daughters possessed (Genesis 31:19–35; 35:2–4) or the golden calf that the Israelites erected at the foot of Mt. Sinai (Exodus 32). In all these ways, they demonstrated unfaithfulness to the God who had chosen them, blessed them, and delivered them from their enemies. This obsession with other religions and other gods led to extensive spiritual decay among the people of Israel, and it was also, more than any other factor, responsible for the judgment of God that eventually resulted in the overthrow of Israel and Judah and the exile of their people.

## CHAPTER THREE SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have briefly surveyed the geographical, socio-political, and religious landscape of the Old Testament period. We discussed important locations in the Ancient Near East, including the nations of Assyria, Babylonia, Canaan, Egypt, Israel, Media, Mesopotamia, and Persia, the cities of Haran and Ur, and physical features such as the Garden of Eden, the Jordan River, Mt. Ararat, Mt. Sinai, and the Red Sea.

We proceeded to examine some of the major societies that achieved prominence during the Old Testament period. We began with the Israelites, God's chosen people whose turbulent relationship with Him is the focal point of the Old Testament narrative. We then surveyed several other nations that played significant roles in this period through their interactions with Israel: the Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Medo-Persians.

Finally, we explored the multiple expressions of religion found in the Old Testament, including the worship of false gods, pre-Abrahamic responses to the creator God, the covenant relationship between God and the patriarchs, and, most significantly, the complex and often conflicted religious life of the Israelites as it developed following the giving of the Law.

Having thus set the scene, in Chapter Four we will delve into the literary, historical, and theological content of the 39 books of the Old Testament.

## CHAPTER THREE NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Later, under Roman rule, and for much of its subsequent history, this land as a whole was known as Palestine, on which see the discussion of New Testament geography in Chapter Five.

<sup>2</sup>See Genesis 2:14. It should be noted that, because of our uncertainty regarding the manner in which the geography of the earth was altered by both the Flood (Genesis 6–8) and what the Bible refers to as “the division of the earth” (10:25), which may have coincided with the scattering of nations from Babel (11:8), it is difficult to ascertain how closely biblical descriptions of the particularities of the earth’s physical geography prior to the time of Abraham correspond to that of the present day. For example, prior to the flood, the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers may have had drastically different courses or converged at a different point. Thus, the assertion that Eden was located near the intersection of the two rivers does not necessarily mean that it was situated near the head of the Persian Gulf, where the rivers meet today, nor even that the Persian Gulf as we know it existed at the time.

<sup>3</sup>On the 70 nations, see Genesis 10.

<sup>4</sup>On the advent of the covenant, its subsequent development and reaffirmation, and its formal codification and confirmation, see Genesis 12:1–7; 15:1–21; 17:1–27; 22:15–18; 26:24; 28:10–15; 35:1–15; Exodus 3:1–17; 19:1–31:18.

<sup>5</sup>There is a great deal of speculation and disagreement involved in attempts to precisely fix dynastic lengths in ancient Egyptian history, but these approximations give the reader a general idea of the time frames involved.

<sup>6</sup>Exodus 12:40, 41 tells us that the Israelites stayed in Egypt for 430 years. Prior to their arrival, Joseph spent an unspecified amount of time finding favor with Potiphar and serving in his household, was

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imprisoned for two years, and oversaw the preparations for the famine through seven years of plenty. In addition, the Israelites did not make the journey to settle in Goshen until after they had traveled to Egypt twice for grain during the years of the famine. Thus, the total length of time between Joseph's arrival and the Exodus was probably somewhere between 440 and 450 years. However, there is considerable debate about when the Exodus itself occurred, due to inconclusive biblical and archaeological evidence. The two leading theories place the Exodus in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and toward the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C., either of which would locate it in the New Kingdom period.

<sup>7</sup>See Genesis 20, 21, 26. Both Abraham and Isaac interacted with a king named Abimelech, but the chronology makes it unlikely that it was the same ruler. The Abimelech in the time of Isaac may have been a descendent and namesake of the one who made a treaty with Abraham. Alternatively, "Abimelech" may have been a title that was applied to all the kings of the Philistines (much as "Pharaoh" was applied to the Egyptian rulers) rather than a proper name.

<sup>8</sup>The name *Palestine*, which was later applied to the entire land that was once known as Canaan, is also derived from *Philistine*.

<sup>9</sup>It is unclear whether the final defeat of Samaria was accomplished by Shalmaneser V, or by his immediate successor, Sargon II.

<sup>10</sup>The defeat of Persia by Alexander marks the beginning of the Hellenistic (Greek) period of ancient history. This era (and the Roman era that followed it) will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

<sup>11</sup>See Genesis 4:1–5; 6:5–8; 11:1–9; Job 1:1, 8.

<sup>12</sup>See Genesis 12:1–7; 15:9–11; 17:9–27; 22:13; 28:18–22; 35:1–7.



# Chapter Four

## The Content of the Old Testament

In this chapter, we will explore the literary, historical, and theological content of the 39 books of the Old Testament, tracing the story of God and humanity from its beginning at Creation through the crises of the Fall and the Flood, the establishment of God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants, and the nation of Israel’s subsequent history of deliverance, conquest, failure, repentance, spiritual decay, exile, and restoration.

### THE PENTATEUCH

The first five books of the Old Testament are collectively referred to as the *Pentateuch*, which means “five volumes.” According to tradition, they were authored by Moses.<sup>1</sup> These books lay the historical and theological groundwork for the rest of the Old Testament and, indeed, the rest of the Bible.

### **Genesis**—The Book of Beginnings (50 chapters)

The word *genesis* means “beginnings,” and it is with beginnings that the first book of the Old Testament is chiefly concerned—the beginning of the universe, the beginning of life, the beginning of sin, and the beginning of God’s work to restore His fallen children. The early chapters of Genesis deal with a few events of incredible significance for all of humanity: Creation, the Fall, and the Flood. Beginning with chapter 12, the focus shifts to the story of a single family—Abraham and his descendants—as God sets into motion His plan to redeem His creation.

### **Creation (Genesis 1, 2)**

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” So begins the magnificent drama of God and humanity that is still moving toward

its thrilling conclusion, and, perhaps, never have so few words conveyed such an unfathomable reality. The first two chapters of Genesis recount the manner in which God brought the universe into being—how He created everything out of nothing. For six days He unleashed His boundless creativity, speaking into existence light and darkness; land, sea, and sky; trees and plants; sun, moon, and stars; birds, fish, and animals; and, finally, His crowning achievement—man, who was created in the very image of God. He named the first man Adam and created the first woman, Eve, from Adam’s rib because He saw that it was not good for the man to be alone. On the seventh day, God rested, and throughout the ages His children have continued to set aside one day of the week to worship Him in remembrance of this.

### **The Fall (Genesis 3)**

Adam and Eve took up residence in the beautiful Garden of Eden, which they tended and from which they received sustenance. God provided them with this idyllic existence, with only a single restriction: they were not to eat of the fruit of one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But Satan, in the guise of a serpent, persuaded Eve to do exactly that by telling her that she would become like God by eating the fruit. Eve, in turn, convinced Adam to try some, and humanity’s rebellion against its Creator had begun. Adam and Eve’s disobedience led to their expulsion from the Garden, the introduction of pain, hardship, and mortality into the human experience, and the creation of a rift between humankind and God as a result of sin. God’s immediate response was to set in motion a plan that would bridge this chasm, and He promised the serpent that he would eventually be crushed by One who was an offspring of the woman. The remaining 1,186 chapters of the Bible record God’s continual efforts to restore His people, in spite of the fact that they often seemed determined to run farther from Him.

### **Noah and the Flood (Genesis 6–9)**

It did not take long for man’s sinful nature to manifest itself. Adam and Eve’s firstborn son Cain murdered his brother Abel out of jealousy, shedding the first human blood on the earth (Genesis 4). As generations

passed, humanity's wickedness only increased. Finally, God became so grieved by the evil in people's hearts that He decided to destroy all that He had created with a great flood. However, He elected to spare one righteous man and his family. Noah, along with his wife, his sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and their wives, escaped the flood's destruction in a wooden ark. They took with them pairs of animals by which the earth might be repopulated. God brought Noah and his family safely through the flood, and He put a rainbow in the clouds as a symbol of His covenant with Noah, promising that He would never again destroy the world with a flood.

### **Abraham (Genesis 12–22)**

Centuries passed as mankind slowly recovered from the brink of annihilation. But it soon became clear that the descendants of Noah were no more faithful to God than the descendants of Adam and Eve had been. Humankind soon began to demonstrate their self-reliance once again. They decided to build a great city and a tower that would reach to the heavens so that they might gain fame for themselves. Having promised Noah that He would not destroy humanity again, God instead caused them to speak different languages and scattered them across the earth (Genesis 11).

Then God once again chose a righteous man to advance His purposes. He called a man named Abram from the land of Ur, telling him to leave his homeland and family and travel to a land that God would show him. Abram took his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and set out for the land of Canaan. God promised to give that land to Abram's descendants and to make of him a great nation. It is with the history of that nation that the rest of the Old Testament is concerned.

Upon their arrival in Canaan, Abram and Lot both prospered. Eventually, they agreed to separate to decrease the strain on the land and the tensions between their herdsmen. Lot chose to relocate to the fertile plain of the Jordan, near the city of Sodom, while Abram went to live at Hebron. Despite this temporary partitioning of the territory, the Lord



assured Abram that all the land he could see in every direction would eventually belong to him and his offspring alone.

Nevertheless, Abram spotted what appeared to him to be a serious flaw in God's plan: he **had** no offspring. God attempted to ease his fears, promising him that his descendants would be as countless as the stars. Abram and Sarai, however, found it difficult to reconcile God's assurances with the harsh realities of their inability to conceive and their advancing ages. So they decided to speed the process along with the aid of Sarai's maidservant Hagar. Hagar became pregnant and gave Abram his first son, Ishmael.

This solution, however, was not what God had in mind. Thirteen years later, He appeared to Abram again, reemphasizing His promise and renaming Abram in the process. He was now to be known as *Abraham*, "father of many," and his wife was to be called Sarah. God established a new covenant with Abraham, requiring the circumcision of every male of Abraham's household, a practice that his descendants were also to carry out. God told Abraham that His covenant would be established, not with Ishmael, the son of Abraham's own efforts, but with a son that Sarah would bear him—Isaac, the son of God's promise.

Soon thereafter, Abraham and Sarah were visited by three divine messengers who promised them that they would soon have a child, eliciting laughter and disbelief from Sarah. The visitors also foretold the impending destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which were havens of wickedness. Abraham pleaded with the Lord to spare Sodom because Lot and his family lived there, and the Lord agreed to relent if there were even ten righteous people in the city. But ten such people could not be found, and the angels warned Lot and his family to flee to safety and not to look back. Fire and brimstone from heaven consumed Sodom and Gomorrah, and while Lot and his daughters escaped unharmed, his wife turned to look at the destruction and was turned into a pillar of salt.

Finally, when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90, their son Isaac, the child that God had been promising for decades, was born.

Almost immediately there was turmoil in the household, with Ishmael mocking young Isaac and Sarah growing disdainful of Hagar and her son. Sarah begged Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away, and, after receiving confirmation from God, he did so. Mother and son wandered into the desert where Ishmael grew close to death. But God provided water for them and promised Hagar that Ishmael would also be the father of a great nation.

At this point, it must have seemed to Abraham that all his troubles were behind him. God had finally blessed him with the son He had promised, and there was peace in his home at last. But God shattered this tranquility by instructing Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering. Though Abraham must have been swept by feelings of anger, sorrow, fear, and doubt, he set out in obedience, intending to kill the son for whom he had waited so long. But God intervened, providing a ram for the sacrifice and commending Abraham for his obedience. Isaac would live, and God's covenant with Abraham would live on with him and his descendants.

### **Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 24–35)**

Years passed. Sarah died, and Abraham grew old. Desiring to see his son married before his own death, Abraham instructed one of his servants to return to Abraham's homeland and find a wife for Isaac from among his relatives. The servant traveled to the town of Nahor, where he prayed that God would reveal His choice for Isaac's bride by having her provide water for him and his camels. As he finished his prayer, a woman came to the village well and provided water at his request, just as he had prayed. The woman was Rebekah, a great-niece of Abraham, who returned to Hebron with Abraham's servant to become the wife of Isaac.

Rebekah was barren initially as Sarah had been. Isaac prayed to God on her behalf, and she soon became pregnant. During her difficult pregnancy, God told her that two nations were warring within her, and that the older child would be the servant of the younger one. She

delivered twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau grew up to be a hunter and outdoorsman and was greatly loved by Isaac. Jacob was quieter and more reserved, and he was Rebekah's favorite. One day, as Jacob was preparing some stew, Esau returned from the hunt and begged his brother to share his food. Jacob demanded that Esau first relinquish his claim to his rights as the firstborn, and Esau agreed.

Isaac and his family eventually settled at Beersheba, where God reiterated the promise He had made to Abraham, assuring Isaac that he and his descendants would be blessed. When Isaac grew old, he summoned Esau and told him to prepare a meal for him, after which Isaac planned to bestow his blessing on his firstborn son. Rebekah and Jacob quickly hatched a plot by which Jacob, masquerading as Esau, received Isaac's blessing instead. Jacob thus obtained both his brother's birthright and his blessing, and although he was the younger son, it was through him and his offspring that God would bring His promise to Abraham to fulfillment.

Fearing Esau's anger, Jacob fled to the home of Rebekah's brother Laban. During the journey, Jacob had a dream in which he saw angels ascending and descending a stair to heaven. The Lord appeared and promised to be with him as He had been with Abraham and Isaac, assuring Jacob that his descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth. Jacob made a vow to serve the Lord if He proved Himself faithful, and he anointed a stone to mark the spot of his covenant with God. He named the place *Bethel*, meaning "the house of God."

Jacob began working for Laban and quickly fell in love with his daughter Rachel. After working seven years to earn her hand in marriage, Jacob was tricked by Laban into marrying his older daughter Leah instead. Jacob quickly married Rachel as well, though it cost him another seven years labor. Though Rachel was Jacob's beloved, she remained barren while Leah bore six sons—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun—and a daughter, Dinah. Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob two sons, Gad and Asher, and Rachel's maid Bilhah

gave him two more, Dan and Naphtali. Finally, Rachel's prayers were answered, and she bore Jacob a son, Joseph.

Following the birth of Joseph, Jacob and his large family returned to his homeland. On the way, he had another unusual nighttime encounter with the Lord. This time Jacob wrestled with God until daybreak, refusing to let go until the Lord had blessed him. God renamed him Israel, meaning "he struggles with God." After a brief and emotional reunion with Esau, Jacob returned to Bethel, where he built an altar to the Lord and received further assurance from God that his descendants would inherit the land that had been promised to Abraham. As they journeyed on from Bethel, tragedy struck. Rachel went into labor and died while giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. Shortly thereafter, Isaac, Jacob's father and the son for whom Abraham and Sarah had waited so long, and who had been spared from the sacrificial altar, also died, at the age of 180.

### **Joseph (Genesis 37–50)**

Having lost both his wife and his father, Jacob's chief delight was in his son Joseph, the firstborn of his beloved Rachel. Jacob's clear favoritism toward Joseph angered his brothers, and their hatred of him was intensified when Joseph told them about his dreams, which contained indications that he would rule over the rest of his family. The brothers sold Joseph to passing slave traders and allowed Jacob to think he had been killed by wild animals.

Joseph was sold into the household of Potiphar, a captain of the guard in the service of the Egyptian Pharaoh. Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce Joseph, and, when he refused her advances, she concocted a lie that resulted in Joseph's imprisonment. While in prison, Joseph interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. Two years later, he was summoned by Pharaoh to interpret two dreams that had troubled him. Upon hearing Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph informed him that there would be seven prosperous years in Egypt, followed by a seven-year famine. Pharaoh rewarded Joseph by appointing him to

oversee all the preparations for the famine. Egypt built up a great surplus of food due to Joseph's skillful management.

Eventually, the effects of the famine were felt in Canaan as well. Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy food, and they were brought before Joseph, whom they did not recognize. Joseph subjected them to a series of trials and demands before finally revealing to them that he was their brother whom they had sold into slavery. Joseph invited his brothers to relocate to Egypt with all their households. Seventy members of the family settled in the land of Goshen, and Joseph was tearfully reunited with his father Jacob. In time, Jacob died and was carried back to Canaan to be buried with his forefathers. When Joseph died, his remains were buried in Egypt, but he left a dying wish that his bones be carried back to Canaan when the people of Israel left Egypt.

## **Exodus—Israel's Journey Out of Egypt and the Establishment of the Covenant (40 chapters)**

The Book of Exodus picks up the story of Genesis three and a half centuries after the death of Joseph. From the initial band of 70, the children of Israel had grown to a population of more than half a million, but they were now slaves of the Pharaoh, forced to spend their days laboring on the Egyptians' massive architectural projects. Exodus is the account of God's deliverance of Abraham's descendants from bondage in Egypt, and His establishment of a lasting covenant between Himself and the nation of Israel. The book's central figure is Moses, the man whom God appointed to lead the people out of captivity.

### **The Early Life of Moses (Exodus 1, 2)**

As the children of Israel grew in numbers and strength, Pharaoh became concerned that they might eventually threaten his authority. He first enslaved them; he then ordered that all male Hebrew children be killed at birth in an attempt to regulate the population growth. A Levite woman named Jochebed, the wife of Amram, took her infant son and hid him in a basket that she placed along the bank of the Nile River. The baby was discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, who allowed his

mother to nurse him and later took him to live at the royal court. She named the child Moses.

As he grew older, Moses became angered by the plight of his people. He struck and killed an Egyptian, who was beating an Israelite slave, and was subsequently forced to flee to Midian. There he met and married a woman named Zipporah and spent the next 40 years tending the flocks of her father, Jethro.

### **The Call of Moses and the Plagues on Egypt (Exodus 3–11)**

One day, while tending sheep in the desert, Moses saw a bush that was burning without being consumed by the flames. God spoke to Moses from the bush and told him that He was going to use him to lead Israel out of Egypt into Canaan, the land that God had promised to Abraham. Moses protested his inability and unworthiness, but God countered each of his objections and assured Moses that He would be with him and accomplish His purposes through him.

Moses and his brother Aaron confronted Pharaoh, demanding that he allow the Israelites to journey into the desert to make sacrifices to God. When Pharaoh refused, God unleashed a series of plagues on Egypt. The Nile River was turned to blood. Frogs, gnats, and flies overran the Egyptians' dwelling places. All their livestock was stricken with a fatal disease. Festering boils broke out on the people's skin. A deadly hailstorm destroyed their crops. A locust swarm ravaged the land. Total darkness blotted out the sun. But even in the face of such devastation, Pharaoh continually refused to relent. Finally, God told Moses that He was preparing to send a tenth and final plague—the death of every firstborn son in Egypt—after which Pharaoh would finally release the Israelites.

### **The Passover and the Exodus (Exodus 12)**

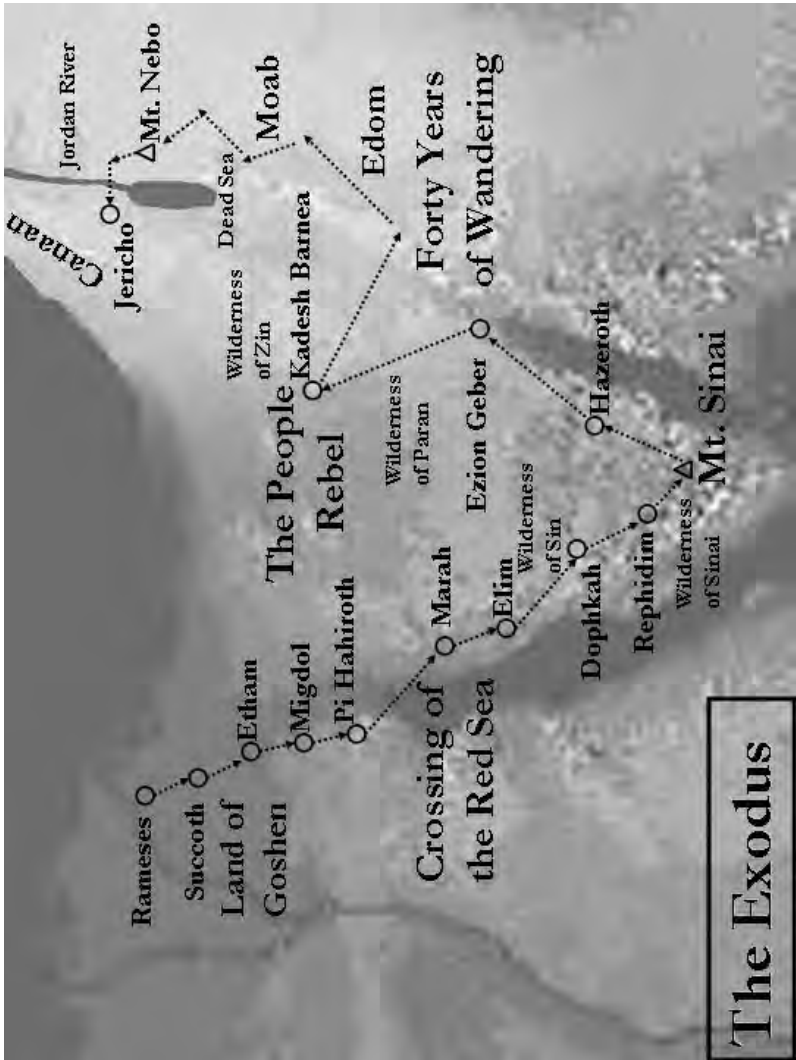
The Lord instructed all the Israelites to kill a lamb, to eat the meat along with herbs and unleavened bread, and to smear some of the blood on the doorposts of their homes. This blood would signal the angel of death to pass over the house on his mission of extermination.

God told Israel that they were to observe this day as an annual celebration from then on, and it became known as Passover, the most important of the Jewish holy days.

On the night of the first Passover, God caused the death of every firstborn son and firstborn animal in Egypt, but the homes and flocks of the Israelites were spared. The grief-stricken Pharaoh finally agreed to let Israel go, and Moses led over six hundred thousand men (plus women and children) into the wilderness. Four hundred and thirty years to the day since Jacob and his family had settled in Egypt, his descendants took the bones of his beloved son Joseph and set out to reclaim the land that God had promised to their ancestor Abraham.

### **The Journey to Sinai (Exodus 13–18)**

Though they had finally been freed from slavery, the Israelites' troubles were far from over. Pharaoh soon had a change of heart and pursued them into the desert with his armies. The Egyptians caught up with them at the Red Sea, but God caused the waters of the sea to part, allowing Israel to pass through on dry ground. When Pharaoh and his chariots attempted to follow, they were swallowed by the sea and drowned.





God led the Israelites further into the wilderness, guiding them by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. The people quickly began to complain about the lack of food and water, and some wondered if they had made a mistake in leaving Egypt. But God showed mercy despite their frequent discontent. He provided manna, a bread-like substance that rained down on the earth every morning, and miraculously caused water to flow from a rock to quench the people's thirst.

The needs of the people continued to grow more difficult to manage, and Moses was forced to hear all the disputes that arose among them. His father-in-law, Jethro, advised Moses to appoint officials from among the people who would oversee smaller groups of people and handle minor cases. Only the most difficult and important matters would be brought before Moses.

### **The Establishment of the Covenant (Exodus 19–24)**

After three months of journeying through the desert, the Israelites arrived at Mt. Sinai, and Moses ascended the mountain to meet with the Lord. God promised the Israelites that if they would obey the commandments He was preparing to hand down, they would be set apart from other nations as His treasured possession. The Lord then proceeded to issue a series of laws and guidelines to Moses, beginning with the most important—the Ten Commandments.

## The Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments form the core of the Law that God gave the Israelites. They are found in Exodus 20:1–17. The first four commandments address the people’s relationship with God, while the remaining six deal with their relationships with one another (the parenthetical numbers indicate where each commandment begins):

<sup>1</sup>And God spake all these words, saying,

<sup>2</sup>I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

<sup>3</sup>(1) Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

<sup>4</sup>(2) Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

<sup>5</sup>Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.

<sup>6</sup>And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup>(3) Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

<sup>8</sup>(4) Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

<sup>9</sup>Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work:

<sup>10</sup>But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates:

<sup>11</sup>For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

- <sup>12</sup>(5) Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.
- <sup>13</sup>(6) Thou shalt not kill.
- <sup>14</sup>(7) Thou shalt not commit adultery.
- <sup>15</sup>(8) Thou shalt not steal.
- <sup>16</sup>(9) Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.
- <sup>17</sup>(10) Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.

The Lord gave Moses further instructions concerning personal injuries, property theft, social responsibility, the observance of the Sabbath and religious feasts, and other matters. Moses wrote down the words of the Lord and read them to the people, who agreed to obey them. Moses sealed the covenant between God and Israel by offering burnt sacrifices and sprinkling the people with the blood of the sacrificial animals. The Lord then called Moses to return to the top of the mountain for further instruction, and Moses remained there for 40 days and nights.

## **God's Instructions and the People's Disobedience (Exodus 25–32)**

The Lord proceeded to give Moses directions for the construction of a tabernacle, which would serve as God's dwelling place among His people. God carefully described exact specifications for the dimensions of the tabernacle, the materials that were to be used in its construction, and the fixtures that were to be fashioned for it—altars, tables, lampstands, basins, and the Ark of the Covenant (the sacred chest that was to contain the written record of God's covenant with Israel). God also told Moses that Aaron and his sons were to serve the Lord as priests in the new tabernacle, and He gave instructions regarding their consecration and the garments that they were to wear. The Lord then inscribed the Ten Commandments on two tablets of stone and gave them to Moses.

While Moses was on the mountain, the people had fashioned a golden idol in the shape of a calf and were worshipping it. God informed Moses of this and threatened to destroy them; but Moses pleaded with Him to spare the people, and God relented. When Moses descended the mountain and found the people dancing before the calf, he smashed the two tablets of the Law in anger and destroyed the idol.

### **God's Restoration and the Construction of the Tabernacle (Exodus 33–40)**

When Moses returned to speak to the Lord, God told him that He would not go with Israel into Canaan because of their disobedience. Moses pleaded with God not to send them anywhere unless His presence went with them. God agreed and then allowed Moses to see His glory. He created two new tablets to replace the ones that had been broken, and He reaffirmed His covenant with Israel. When Moses returned to the people, his face was radiant from his encounter with God.

The remainder of Exodus describes how the Israelites constructed the tabernacle in accordance with the instructions that God had given Moses. When it was completed, the glory of the Lord filled the tent and hovered over it.

The narrative of Moses and the children of Israel is continued in the Book of Numbers.

### **Leviticus—God's Instruction Manual for Israel (27 chapters)**

Leviticus contains the Lord's instructions to Moses concerning many practical aspects of the Law under which Israel was to live. Much of the book involves detailed prescriptions for carrying out the various types of sacrifices and burnt offerings that were required. Leviticus also addresses such topics as clean and unclean foods, purification from various diseases, unlawful sexual relations, regulations for the priesthood, and the observance of feasts and holy days.

The one notable narrative passage in Leviticus concerns Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu, who were killed by fire from heaven because they offered up unauthorized fire to the Lord. This incident serves as stark proof of how critically important it was for Israel to abide by the comprehensive legal code that Leviticus contains.

## **Numbers—Wandering in the Wilderness (36 chapters)**

The Book of Numbers gets its name from the census of the people of Israel, which is recorded in its first four chapters. Chapters 5–9 contain ceremonial details and instructions for the priesthood, material that is in the same vein as much of Leviticus. Finally, in chapter 10, Numbers picks up the narrative of the children of Israel where Exodus left off—with the people preparing to depart from Mt. Sinai. They were probably no more than two weeks' journey from the land that had been promised to them, but they would not reach their destination for another 40 years. Numbers is a tragic tale of rebellion and punishment—the painful account of a generation's long, aimless death march through the wilderness.

### **The People's Complaint and the Appointing of the Elders (Numbers 11)**

Soon after setting out from Sinai, the people began to complain about the lack of variety in their diet. Despite the Lord's miraculous provision, they were tired of eating only manna. Moses responded to their grumbling by pleading with God to provide assistance for him because he could no longer address the needs and demands of the people by himself. God told Moses to gather 70 of the elders of Israel, and He placed upon them the same spirit that was upon Moses, that they might assist him in bearing the burden of leadership. The Lord also sent quail in response to the people's demand for something besides manna, but He was angered by their bitterness and ingratitude.

### **The Exploration of the Land and the People's Rebellion (Numbers 13, 14)**

When the Israelites reached a place called Kadesh Barnea, God

instructed Moses to send 12 men (one from each tribe) to explore the land of Canaan before Israel attempted to invade and possess it. The spies brought back a report of a land that was bountiful and pleasant, but one that was also inhabited by fierce and powerful peoples. Ten of the spies insisted that the land could not be taken, while only Joshua and Caleb insisted that the Lord would enable Israel to overcome the Canaanites. The people sided with the ten pessimistic spies, despaired of ever entering the Promised Land, and began to discuss a return to Egypt. Because of their continued disobedience, the Lord vowed that none of the Israelites over the age of 20 would enter Canaan except for Joshua and Caleb, who had proven themselves faithful. The rest were doomed to die in the desert.

### **Moses' Sin (Numbers 20)**

After wandering in the wilderness for nearly 40 years, a new generation of Israelites returned to Kadesh Barnea and began preparing to invade Canaan at last. Once again, the people found themselves without water and began to complain bitterly. God instructed Moses to speak to a rock in order to cause it to bring forth water, but Moses struck the rock with his staff instead. Because of this failure to obey, God told Moses and Aaron that they would not be allowed to enter the Promised Land.

### **The Bronze Serpent (Numbers 21)**

Soon thereafter, the people began to grumble once more about the lack of food and water. This time God sent poisonous snakes into their midst, and many of the people died. Moses prayed for mercy, and God instructed him to fashion a snake out of bronze and put it on a pole. Anyone who had been bitten could look upon the bronze snake and be healed.<sup>2</sup>

The remaining chapters of Numbers contain the strange story of Balaam and the donkey, the account of a second census, and various laws concerning feasts, offerings, and inheritances (among other things) that were handed down as the Israelites prepared to enter the Promised Land. These themes of instruction and preparation carry over into the final book of the *Pentateuch*, Deuteronomy.

## **Deuteronomy—Moses’ Farewell Address (34 chapters)**

The Book of Deuteronomy records Moses’ lengthy final speech to the Israelites before his death and their entry into the Promised Land. In it, he reminds the Israelites of their history since leaving Egypt, recounting many of the events recorded in Exodus and Numbers. He goes on to reemphasize many of the laws that were handed down in Leviticus.<sup>3</sup> Moses urges the Israelites to remain faithful to the God who brought them out of Egypt and issues what Jesus would later deem the greatest commandment in the Old Testament: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.”<sup>4</sup> Moses closes his address by affirming Joshua as his successor and bestowing his blessing on each of the 12 tribes.

Following this farewell speech, Moses ascended Mount Nebo, where he was allowed to look out over the Promised Land, which he would never enter. Moses died and was buried by the Lord, and Joshua succeeded him as leader of the Israelites.

## THE HISTORICAL BOOKS

The next 12 books present the history of the nation of Israel after the death of Moses. Collectively, they tell a colorful story of priests, prophets, judges, and kings. They trace the development of Israel from a collection of tribes to a united kingdom, chronicle the division of the kingdom and the eventual defeat and captivity of both Israel and Judah, and close with the people’s hope-filled return from exile.

## **Joshua—The Conquest of the Promised Land (24 chapters)**

The Book of Joshua details the Israelites’ successful invasion, conquest, and division of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua, Moses’ successor. The author of Joshua is unknown though it may have been Joshua himself. The book depicts a high-water mark in the history of Israel, a period during which the people obeyed God faithfully, and He blessed them richly in return.

Following the deaths of Moses and the rest of the generation that had disobeyed God, the Israelites finally moved into the land that God had promised to their ancestors. Though it would take years for them to subdue all their enemies, they received a vivid demonstration of God's power at the site of their very first battle: Jericho. God issued an unorthodox battle plan ("March in circles for seven days, blow some trumpets, and yell"), but Israel obeyed and God caused the walls of the mighty city to crumble. The Israelites put to death all of Jericho's inhabitants except for the family of a prostitute named Rahab, who had spared the lives of two Israelite spies, and who was to become an ancestress of Christ.

As long as Israel obeyed God, they were victorious over their enemies, regardless of the odds against them. Conversely, the few setbacks they suffered (notably the defeat at Ai) came when they disobeyed God's instructions. After years of fighting, they defeated their last enemy, and God's centuries-old promise to Abraham was finally fulfilled.

The remainder of the Book of Joshua describes the division of the land among the 12 tribes of Israel. The descendants of Levi were called to serve in the tabernacle as assistants to the priests, and, therefore, were not given their own territory in which to settle. However, the tribes descended from Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, each received an allotment of land, thus making the total number of territories within the new nation of Israel equal to the number of Jacob's sons. Two tribes, Gad and Reuben, along with half of the tribe of Manasseh, elected to settle on the east side of the Jordan River, while the other tribes received land between the river and the Mediterranean.





As Joshua's death approached, he assembled the Israelites at Shechem and led them in renewing their covenant with God, pledging that he and his household would faithfully serve the Lord. Having completed his work, Joshua died and was buried. The Israelites also buried the bones of Joseph, laying him to rest at last in the land of his forefathers.

# Judges—Courageous Leaders in a Time of Turmoil

(21 chapters)

The Book of Judges depicts a violent and turbulent period in the history of the Israelites. After the death of Joshua and the rest of the generation that had conquered the land of Canaan, the children of Israel turned from the Lord and began worshipping other gods. This initiated a centuries-long cycle in which God would punish Israel for their unfaithfulness by allowing foreign peoples to invade and oppress them, Israel would repent for its sins, and God would bring deliverance in the form of a charismatic leader. These leaders were referred to as “judges,” though their actual function was closer to that of a freedom fighter than that of a courtroom judge. Tragically, the people’s repentance always proved to be short-lived, and the cycle would repeat itself. The final five chapters are particularly grim, as Israel spirals downward into wickedness and anarchy. The last words of the book sum up this dark chapter of Israel’s history: “Everyone did as he saw fit.”

The following chart summarizes the careers of Israel’s judges.<sup>5</sup>

<b>The Judges</b>	
<b>Othniel</b> (Judges 3:7–11)	The first judge. Delivered Israel from the Mesopotamians.
<b>Ehud</b> (Judges 3:12–30)	Killed King Eglon and delivered Israel from the Moabites.
<b>Shamgar</b> (Judges 3:31)	Delivered Israel from the Philistines.
<b>Deborah and Barak</b> (Judges 4, 5)	Delivered Israel from Jabin, Sisera, and the Canaanites. Deborah was the only female judge.

<b>Gideon</b> (Judges 6–8)	Delivered Israel from the Midianites, whom he defeated with an army of only 300 men.
<b>Abimelech</b> (Judges 9)	Tyrannical judge who murdered 70 of his brothers, sparking a period of civil war.
<b>Tola</b> (Judges 10:1, 2)	Led Israel for 23 years.
<b>Jair</b> (Judges 10:3–5)	Led Israel for 22 years.
<b>Jephthah</b> (Judges 10:6–12:7)	Delivered Israel from the Ammonites. Made a rash vow that required him to sacrifice his own daughter.
<b>Ibzan</b> (Judges 12:8–10)	Led Israel for seven years.
<b>Elon</b> (Judges 12:11, 12)	Led Israel for ten years.
<b>Abdon</b> (Judges 12:13–15)	Led Israel for eight years.
<b>Samson</b> (Judges 13–16)	A Nazirite, set apart by God to pursue purity, and a man of extraordinary strength. Had an unfortunate weakness for foreign women, notably a temptress named Delilah. Delivered Israel from the Philistines, but sacrificed his own life in the process.

## **Ruth**—A Portrait of Devotion (four chapters)

The Book of Ruth is a short historical account set during the period of the judges. The author is unknown, but the references to King David show that the book was written well after the events that it records. The story revolves around the relationship between two women—Naomi, a woman from Judah who moved with her family to Moab to avoid famine, and Ruth, Naomi’s daughter-in-law and a Moabitess. Following the death of Naomi’s husband Elimelech and both of her sons, she made plans to return alone to Judah, but Ruth insisted on accompanying her, despite the fact that it meant leaving her own homeland.

When they arrived in Judah, Ruth happened to meet Boaz, a kinsman of Elimelech. Naomi encouraged Ruth to pursue Boaz, and when Boaz learned of her interest, he quickly made arrangements to purchase the estate of Elimelech and make Ruth his wife. Ruth and Boaz had a son, Obed, who was a great comfort to Naomi after the loss of her husband and sons, and who was to become the grandfather of King David. Thus Ruth, although not one of God’s chosen people by birth, was blessed by Him and because of her faithfulness to Naomi, she became an ancestress of Christ.

## **1 Samuel**—The Final Judge and the First King (31 chapters)

The two Books of Samuel (which were originally a single work) focus on the lives of three monumental figures in Israel’s history: Samuel, the last of the judges and first of the prominent prophets; Saul, Israel’s first king; and David, a shepherd, poet, musician, warrior, and king who would become Israel’s most celebrated figure.

### **The Birth and Call of Samuel (1 Samuel 1–3)**

Samuel’s mother, Hannah, was barren for years and prayed fervently for God to give her a son. God granted her request, and Samuel was born. Hannah pledged that her son’s life would be dedicated to the Lord, and she took him to live with Eli the priest at the tabernacle at

Shiloh. One night, while lying in bed, Samuel heard a voice calling his name. At first, he thought it was Eli, but when the old priest denied having summoned him, he realized it was the Lord speaking. God revealed that He was going to carry out judgment against Eli and his family because of the wickedness of Eli's sons. But the Lord was with Samuel and caused him to be greatly respected by the people of Israel.

## **Conflict With the Philistines and the Request for a King (1 Samuel 4–8)**

During a battle with the Philistines, Eli's sons were killed and the Ark of the Covenant was captured. When the news reached Eli, he died as well, fulfilling God's promise that his household would be destroyed. God afflicted the Philistines for stealing the Ark, and it was eventually returned to Israel.

Samuel became judge over Israel, but when he grew old, the people refused to follow the leadership of his sons who were corrupt. Instead, they asked Samuel to anoint a king to rule over them, as was the custom of the neighboring nations. Samuel cautioned them against this, telling them that a king would impose restrictive laws and require tribute, but the people were insistent. The Lord finally told Samuel to give them what they wanted, assuring him that the people's discontentment was not an indication of a failure on Samuel's part, but of their rejection of God as their King.

## **Saul's Turbulent Kingship (1 Samuel 9–15)**

The Lord instructed Samuel to anoint a Benjamite named Saul as Israel's first king. After Saul led a daring military campaign to liberate the city of Jabesh Gilead from the Ammonites, all the people of Israel confirmed him as their king. Having thus granted the people's request, Samuel stepped down as Israel's leader, but he warned the people that their first allegiance must still be to the Lord and that both they and their king would be punished if they failed to obey Him.

Tragically, Saul's reign was marred by the kind of disobedience that Samuel had warned against. During one military campaign, Saul grew

impatient and offered an unauthorized burnt sacrifice instead of waiting for Samuel to arrive, as he had been instructed. On another occasion, Saul ignored God's clear command to completely destroy the Amalekites and their livestock. He allowed their king to live and kept many of the animals, intending to use them for sacrifices. Because of these failures, God rejected Saul as king, and Samuel ceased advising him.

## **David's Rise to Prominence and Saul's Jealousy (1 Samuel 16–26)**

Following Saul's disobedience, God told Samuel to travel to the home of a man named Jesse for the purpose of anointing one of his sons as the next king. God's choice turned out to be the least likely candidate out of Jesse's eight sons: David, the youngest, a shepherd and musician. Samuel anointed David, signifying that God's favor was upon him though he would not claim the throne of Israel for many years. Soon thereafter, David was summoned to live in the royal court by Saul, who was seeking a skilled musician to help soothe his spirit. Little did Saul know that the young harpist would soon become the chief source of torment in his life.

Saul and the Israelites were at war with the Philistines, whose champion was a giant named Goliath. None of the warriors of Israel were willing to do battle with the giant, but David convinced Saul to let him face Goliath, assuring the king that the Lord would protect him. Saul relented, and David killed Goliath with a sling and stone. The people of Israel immediately embraced David as a hero, and Saul quickly became bitterly jealous. David married Saul's daughter Michal, and the king's son Jonathan became his closest friend. Saul grew to hate David and spent the next several years trying in vain to kill the young man that God had appointed to succeed him.

David, aided by Jonathan, fled from Saul and lived as an outlaw, eventually gathering a group of men to aid him in his fight for survival. Saul doggedly pursued him, but the Lord protected David. Twice David had an opportunity to kill Saul, but he refused to harm the man the Lord had anointed to be king. He determined to wait for God to fulfill His plan.

## **The Downfall and Death of Saul (1 Samuel 27–31)**

Once more, Israel went to war against the Philistines. Saul was fearful because of the might of the Philistine army, and when God did not answer his prayers for reassurance, he decided to consult a witch. Saul asked her to summon the spirit of Samuel (who had died not long before), and he asked the prophet for advice. Samuel rebuked Saul for disturbing his spirit and told him that he would be killed in battle and that David would ascend to the throne. In the ensuing battle, Jonathan and Saul's other sons were killed, and Saul was mortally wounded. When his armor-bearer refused to kill him, Saul fell on his own sword, ending his life.

## **2 Samuel—The Life of David (24 chapters)**

The Book of 2 Samuel picks up where 1 Samuel left off and details the life and kingship of David following the death of Saul.

### **David's Triumphs (2 Samuel 1–10)**

In spite of Saul's hatred for him, David mourned the deaths of the king and his son Jonathan. He was confirmed as king by the men of Judah, but he soon found himself opposed by Ish-Bosheth, one of Saul's surviving sons, who claimed the throne of Israel. After years of civil war between the houses of Saul and David, Ish-Bosheth was murdered by his own men, and David became king of all Israel and Judah.

Soon thereafter, David captured the city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites and established his capital there. He brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem from Kiriath Jearim, where it had been since the time of Samuel, and made plans to build a temple to house it. God revealed to David through the prophet Nathan that he was not to build the temple, but He promised that David's son would build it instead.

David continued to prosper, winning great military victories over the Philistines, Ammonites, and Arameans, and gaining the love and respect of the people of Israel. But his successes would soon be overshadowed by tragedy.

## **David's Sins (2 Samuel 11, 12)**

David had an affair with a beautiful woman named Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, a soldier in David's army. When Bathsheba became pregnant, David tried to cover up his sin by summoning Uriah back to Jerusalem, hoping that he would sleep with Bathsheba and thus believe the baby was his. But Uriah refused to accept any comfort while his comrades were fighting for their lives, so David orchestrated his death by having him sent to the front lines of the battle. With Uriah out of the way, David married Bathsheba, and she gave birth to their son.

The Lord was greatly displeased with David's actions, and he sent the prophet Nathan to the king with a message of rebuke. David repented, but Nathan told him that his infant son would die as a result of his sins and that someone close to David would soon betray him, just as he had betrayed Uriah. But in His mercy, God allowed David and Bathsheba to have another son, Solomon, who would be the one to build the temple of the Lord.

## **David and Absalom (2 Samuel 13–18)**

In spite of David's repentance and God's forgiveness, the consequences of David's sins would continue to play themselves out in the lives of his family members. David's firstborn son, Amnon, lusted after his half-sister Tamar, raped her, and then rejected her. When David did nothing to punish his son, Tamar's brother Absalom murdered Amnon.

Absalom fled from Jerusalem but returned when it became clear that David did not intend to punish him either. Absalom then launched a rebellion against David, just as Nathan had predicted. He turned several of David's own advisers against him, publicly slept with the king's concubines, and finally forced David to flee Jerusalem. Absalom was eventually captured and killed, and although David was restored to his throne, the death of his son was a source of great grief to him.

The Book of 2 Samuel stands as a clear illustration of the ways in which disobedience to God can result in a rapid reversal of fortune.



David's kingship, which began with such promise, was marred by the consequences of his sinful actions, consequences that were passed on to his descendants and, by extension, to all of Israel as the remainder of the Old Testament makes painfully clear.

## **1 Kings—The Reign of Solomon and the Division of the Kingdom (22 chapters)**

First and 2 Kings (which, like 1 and 2 Samuel, were originally one book) trace the long, slow, downward spiral of the nation of Israel from its apex in Solomon's time to the dissolution of the kingdom and the eventual exile of God's people from the land that He had given to them.

### **Solomon's Rise to Greatness and the Building of the Temple (1 Kings 1–9)**

David ruled over Israel for 40 years. As the king neared the end of his life, he had his son Solomon anointed as his successor. Following David's death, God appeared to Solomon and told him to ask for whatever he wanted. Solomon pleased the Lord by replying that he desired wisdom in order that he might be able to discern good from evil and govern the nation effectively. The Lord granted his request, and Solomon's great wisdom soon became widely known. Emissaries from many nations came to him seeking counsel. Furthermore, because Solomon's request had not been a selfish one, the Lord promised to bestow on him wealth and power as well, and the nation flourished.

Solomon soon set out to accomplish the task that his father had longed to undertake: the construction of a temple to serve as the Lord's dwelling place among His people. The king conscripted tens of thousands of laborers and gathered the finest building materials from around the world. After seven years, the temple was finally completed. The Ark of the Covenant was placed inside, and Solomon held a great dedication ceremony to commit the temple to the Lord, sacrificing thousands of animals and praying for the Lord's blessings.

God appeared to Solomon and promised that His name would always inhabit the temple. Likewise, He told Solomon that he and his descendants would be established on the throne of Israel forever as long as they remained faithful and obedient to Him. But He also warned Solomon that if Israel and its leaders ignored His commandments or worshipped other gods, He would abandon the temple, the king, and the nation. At this moment of triumph, celebration, and prosperity for Solomon and Israel, such a fate must have been difficult to fathom. But it would soon become all too real.

## **Solomon's Sins and the Division of the Kingdom (1 Kings 10–12)**

Solomon's two great weaknesses were his love of wealth and his passion for women. In both areas, he failed to exercise the wisdom that God had granted him. The king was extravagant in his use of money and resources to the point of wastefulness and constructed an opulent palace for himself that took nearly twice as long to build as the temple.

More serious, however, was Solomon's penchant for foreign women. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines, many of whom worshipped other gods. Eventually, the king was persuaded by his wives to build shrines and altars dedicated to their gods, and Solomon himself worshipped some of these deities. Because of this failure to remain faithful to the Lord, God informed Solomon that He would take the throne away from Solomon's son and give it to one of his subordinates. But He promised to leave one tribe under the leadership of Solomon's descendants because of His love for David.

Events quickly unfolded just as the Lord had foretold. Solomon died, and his son Rehoboam succeeded him as king. A man named Jeroboam, who had been an official of King Solomon, led a contingent of Israelites to meet with Rehoboam, asking him to lighten the load of labor and tribute that Solomon had placed upon the people. When Rehoboam refused, ten of the tribes that comprised the nation rebelled, taking Jeroboam as their king and retaining the name Israel. Only Judah

and Benjamin remained loyal to Rehoboam and the house of David. These two tribes collectively became known as the nation of Judah.

From this point on, the Books of Kings recount the separate histories of the two kingdoms. Neither Jeroboam nor Rehoboam served the Lord faithfully, and both Israel and Judah fell into sinfulness and idolatry. Israel was ruled by a series of wicked kings, none of whom followed God. Judah was blessed with a handful of godly leaders, but over time the nation as a whole failed to remain faithful to the Lord. In response to His people's continual waywardness, God began to raise up prophets. These men served as the Lord's personal messengers, condemning sinfulness, pleading for repentance, and warning of the dire consequences of continued disobedience.

### **The Ministry of Elijah (1 Kings 17–22)**

The first prominent prophet was a man named Elijah, who ministered in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah. King Ahab had married a woman named Jezebel, a Sidonian princess who worshiped a false god, Baal.<sup>6</sup> Ahab was swayed by his wife's beliefs, and he built a temple to Baal in Israel, greatly angering the Lord. Elijah prophesied that there would be a drought in Israel for several years because of Ahab and Jezebel's idolatry and that it would not rain again until the Lord made an announcement through the prophet. God sustained Elijah during this time, providing water from a brook and causing ravens to bring him food. Later, Elijah stayed with a widow and her son, who were on the verge of running out of food and starving to death. The woman agreed to make Elijah a piece of bread out of her last bit of flour and oil, and God rewarded her faith by supernaturally replenishing her provisions until the drought ended. When the woman's son died, Elijah pleaded with the Lord and the boy was restored to life, leading the woman, who was not a Jew, to express her faith in Elijah's God.

After three years of drought and famine, Elijah summoned all the people of Israel to Mount Carmel, along with Ahab and the 450

prophets of Baal. He proposed a challenge: Both he and the prophets of Baal would prepare an altar with a sacrifice, and the god who responded by igniting the sacrifice with fire from heaven would be recognized as the true God. After the prophets of Baal spent hours trying in vain to get a response from their god, Elijah drenched his altar and his offering with water. He then prayed to the Lord, and God responded by sending fire that consumed the entire altar along with the sacrifice. The people acknowledged that Elijah served the true God, and the prophets of Baal were put to death. Then the Lord further revealed His power by bringing rain, ending the long drought.

Elijah's victory at Mount Carmel angered Jezebel, and she sought to kill the prophet. Elijah fled into the desert and grew greatly discouraged, even praying that the Lord would take his life. But an angel appeared to feed him, and God later spoke directly to Elijah in a gentle whisper, offering him encouragement. The Lord also instructed Elijah to anoint a young man named Elisha, who became his companion and helper.

Some time later, Ahab and Jezebel had a man named Naboth wrongfully accused and put to death so that they could take possession of his vineyard, which he had refused to sell. The Lord instructed Elijah to inform Ahab that he and his entire family would be killed because of Naboth's murder and that birds and animals would feed on their bodies and lick their blood. Shortly thereafter, Ahab was killed in battle at Ramoth Gilead, and his son Ahaziah succeeded him.

## **2 Kings**—The Slow Deaths of Two Kingdoms (25 chapters)

The histories of Israel and Judah continue without interruption in 2 Kings, which begins with the commissioning of a new prophet to carry the word of the Lord to His wayward people.

### **The Ministry of Elisha (2 Kings 2–8)**

When Elijah completed his ministry, he did not die but was carried up to heaven in a chariot of fire by a whirlwind. Elisha succeeded him,

and received a double portion of the spirit that had been upon Elijah. Elisha's ministry was marked by a series of remarkable miracles. He caused an indebted woman's supply of oil to increase until she had enough to sell, enabling her to pay her creditors. He raised the dead son of a Shunammite woman who had befriended him. He cleansed an Aramean soldier named Naaman of leprosy. In all these things, the prophet consistently showed himself to be a friend of the poor and oppressed, the common people of Israel.

But Elisha also involved himself in the affairs of rulers and nations. His ministry spanned the reigns of Joram, Jehu, Jehoahaz, and Jehoash, a period during which Israel was continually threatened by the neighboring nation of Aram (the area known today as Syria). Elisha aided and advised the rulers of Israel in their battles against the Arameans, but he never shied away from speaking out against their sinfulness. Nevertheless, Israel's leaders continued to rebel against the Lord, and the kingdom fell into spiritual decay.

### **The Decline and Fall of Israel (2 Kings 9–17)**

The Lord instructed Elisha to anoint Jehu as the next king of Israel and to commission him to destroy the household of Ahab. Jehu killed all Ahab's male descendants and ordered the death of Jezebel, thus fulfilling God's vengeance for the murder of Naboth. But neither Jehu nor any of the successive kings of Israel followed the Lord, and the nation's fortunes continued to decline.

Finally, in response to their persistent sinfulness and idolatry, God allowed the people of Israel to be conquered and enslaved by the Assyrians. They were taken into exile and began to intermarry with other nations so that over time the Israelites of the northern kingdom ceased to exist as a distinct people group. From this point on, the Book of 2 Kings records only the history of the Israelites who remained in the southern kingdom of Judah.

### **Hezekiah, Manasseh, and Josiah (2 Kings 18–23)**

Unlike Israel, Judah had occasionally had leaders who were commended

for doing what was right in the eyes of God, including Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Amaziah, Azariah, and Jotham. Unfortunately, even these righteous kings had serious spiritual failings, and none of them had removed the high places that were dedicated to the worship of other gods. But at this critical point in Judah's history, as the Assyrians overran Israel and threatened Judah's own borders, the throne passed to a man named Hezekiah, who would prove to be the greatest and most godly king to date.

Hezekiah, unlike his predecessors, destroyed the idols and shrines that had been constructed for the worship of pagan deities. He cleansed the temple and called for a time of repentance. He interceded with God on behalf of the nation, and the Lord's angels decimated the Assyrian army, thus sparing Judah from the fate that had befallen Israel. Later, Hezekiah grew gravely ill and was told that he would not recover, but he pleaded with the Lord to remember his acts of faithful service and to have mercy. God answered his prayer, restored his health, and allowed him to live another 15 years.

Tragically, Hezekiah's son and successor, Manasseh, did not follow in his father's footsteps. Indeed, he proved to be the most wicked king in Judah's history. He rebuilt the high places and altars to Baal that Hezekiah had destroyed, practiced divination and sorcery, and offered his own sons as human sacrifices. Because of Manasseh's sins, God resolved to bring about the destruction and enslavement of Judah, just as He had done to Israel.

But Judah had one more shining moment before its tragic downfall: the reign of King Josiah, the grandson of Manasseh. Josiah followed the Lord, wholeheartedly, as Hezekiah had done. During his reign, a book of the Law (possibly Deuteronomy) was discovered in the temple. The king grieved when he realized how far the people of Judah had strayed from God's commandments to Moses and the children of Israel. Josiah read the book before the people of Jerusalem and renewed the covenant between God and Israel. He also destroyed the idols that Manasseh had erected. But regardless of Josiah's righteous acts, Judah's fate had already been determined.

## **The Decline and Fall of Judah (2 Kings 23–25)**

Josiah was followed by a series of weak, wicked kings. Meanwhile, the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar were gaining strength. The armies of Babylon invaded Judah during the reigns of Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin, taking many of the people captive, including the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar allowed only the poorest and weakest inhabitants of Judah to remain in their homeland, and installed Zedekiah as a puppet king over them.

When Zedekiah attempted to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonians returned and laid siege to Jerusalem for 18 months. Many of the inhabitants starved to death as a result, and the city finally fell. Nebuchadnezzar's armies burned most of Jerusalem to the ground, including the temple of the Lord and the royal palace. The rest of the people were taken into captivity in Babylon, and for 70 years the Lord's chosen people remained enslaved, and His house lay in ruins.

The following chart summarizes the history of the reigns of the rulers of Israel and Judah as recorded in the Books of Kings.

## **Rulers of Israel and Judah**

### **United Kingdom**

**Saul**—c. 40 years

**David**—c. 40 years

**Solomon**—c. 40 years

### **Divided Kingdom**

#### **Israel**

**Jeroboam I**—22 years

**Nadab**—2 years

**Baasha**—24 years

**Elah**—2 years

**Zimri**—7 days

**Omri**—12 years

**Ahab**—22 years

**Ahaziah**—2 years

**Joram**—12 years

**Jehu**—28 years

**Jehoahaz**—17 years

**Jehoash**—16 years

**Jeroboam II**—41 years

**Zechariah**—6 months

**Shallum**—1 month

**Menahem**—10 years

**Pekahiah**—2 years

**Pekah**—20 years

**Hoshea**—9 years

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**Assyrian Invasion**

**(c. 722 B.C.)**

#### **Judah**

**Rehoboam**—17 years

**Abijah**—3 years

**Asa**—41 years

**Jehoshaphat**—25 years

**Jehoram**—8 years

**Ahaziah**—1 year

**Athaliah**—7 years

**Joash**—40 years

**Amaziah**—29 years

**Azariah**—52 years

**Jotham**—16 years

**Ahaz**—16 years

**Hezekiah**—29 years

**Manasseh**—55 years

**Amon**—2 years

**Josiah**—31 years

**Jehoahaz**—3 months

**Jehoiakim**—11 years

**Jehoiachin**—3 months

**Zedekiah**—11 years

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**Babylonian Invasion**

**(c. 587/586 B.C.)**



## **1 Chronicles**—A Priestly Account of David’s Reign (29 chapters)

The two Books of Chronicles (which, like those of Samuel and Kings, were originally a single work) cover much of the same historical ground as the Books of 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, but from a distinctly different perspective. In Chronicles the emphasis is on Israel’s political, social, and religious history as a nation. Structures and institutions, especially the monarchy and the temple, are emphasized much more than individual personalities.

The first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles consist of a series of genealogies that begin with Adam and trace the descent of the 12 tribes of Israel. The remaining, narrative portion of the book opens with the death of Saul and closes with the death of David, roughly paralleling the events of 1 Samuel 31 through 1 Kings 2. This account of David’s life focuses primarily on his large-scale accomplishments as king—his military exploits, the return of the Ark to Jerusalem, and the preparations for the building of the temple. His personal life is largely ignored by the writer of Chronicles. For example, Uriah, Bathsheba, and Absalom are all completely absent from the narrative.

## **2 Chronicles**—A Priestly Account of the Reigns of the Kings of Judah (36 chapters)

The Book of 2 Chronicles depicts the reign of Solomon and the history of the southern kingdom of Judah. It covers much of the same ground as the Books of 1 and 2 Kings although it focuses chiefly on the construction and dedication of the temple and the religious reforms of the righteous kings of Judah, particularly Hezekiah and Josiah. The rulers of the northern kingdom of Israel are virtually ignored by 2 Chronicles, as are the prophets Elijah and Elisha. After recounting the fall of Jerusalem, 2 Chronicles closes with an account of the decree issued by King Cyrus of Persia allowing the exiled people of Judah to

return to Jerusalem, which sets the stage for the events recorded in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

### **Ezra**—The Captives Return Home (ten chapters)

The Book of Ezra tells of the return of the Israelites to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon.<sup>7</sup> After the Babylonians were overthrown by the Persians (as recorded in the Book of Daniel), King Cyrus of Persia issued a proclamation allowing the captives from Judah to return to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the temple of the Lord. Tens of thousands of Israelites under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua returned to Jerusalem for this purpose, but they quickly became discouraged by the opposition of neighboring peoples and work on the temple ceased. It was at this point that the people were called to repentance and renewed action by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, and following a decree by King Darius of Persia, who forbade any further interference by provincial officials, the temple was completed.

Several decades later, King Artaxerxes of Persia sent Ezra, a priest and scribe, to oversee the affairs of the temple and to instruct the people in the Law of God. Upon Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem, he was greatly troubled by the fact that many of the Israelites had intermarried with neighboring peoples. This was particularly distressing since Israel's obsession with foreign gods had led directly to the exile from which they had only recently returned. Ezra called the people to repentance, and the men of Israel sent their foreign wives away.

### **Nehemiah**—Rebuilding the Wall (13 chapters)

Nehemiah was a Jew who grew up in captivity in Babylon. He served as the royal cupbearer for King Artaxerxes, who had sent Ezra to Jerusalem. When Nehemiah learned that Jerusalem was still in a state of disrepair, he asked the king for permission to go and oversee the rebuilding of the city's walls. Artaxerxes agreed and appointed Nehemiah governor of the province of Judah. Though he faced stiff opposition from local

officials, Nehemiah oversaw the rebuilding of the wall, the registration of the returning populace, and (along with Ezra) the renewal of the people's covenant with God. The events at the end of the Book of Nehemiah are chronologically the last recorded in the Old Testament.

## **Esther**—The Queen Who Saved Her People (ten chapters)

The Book of Esther is a historical narrative that is set during the reign of King Xerxes of Persia, who ruled between Darius (who issued the decree concerning the rebuilding of the temple in Ezra 6) and Artaxerxes (who sent both Ezra and Nehemiah to Jerusalem). Esther was a young, Jewish woman who earned the favor of King Xerxes and became his queen though he did not know she was a Jew.

The Book of Esther recounts how Haman, one of the king's officials, convinced Xerxes to authorize the extermination of all the Jews in the kingdom. Haman's plot was fueled by his hatred of Esther's cousin, Mordecai, who had refused to bow before Haman in reverence. Mordecai learned of Haman's plot and convinced Esther to beg the king to spare her people. The king honored Esther's request, had Haman hanged, and issued a decree permitting the Jews to protect themselves from any who tried to harm them during the two days that Haman had appointed for their execution. The Jews established the annual feast of Purim on these two days to commemorate Esther's courage and God's deliverance.

## THE POETIC BOOKS

The following five books are grouped together based not on common authorship or similarity of content, but because they share a poetic style. Some of the most beautiful and moving passages in the Bible are found in these prayers, hymns, songs, proverbs, reflections, and poems.

## **Job**—The Suffering of an Innocent Man (42 chapters)

The Book of Job is a literary masterpiece—one of the most beautiful

pieces of writing in the Bible. It is also the classic treatment of the problem of the suffering of the innocent. The Book of Job opens with the account of a conversation between God and Satan during which God praises the righteousness of a man named Job. Satan asks for permission to test Job's faithfulness by removing his prosperity, and God grants his request. Soon thereafter, all of Job's livestock is stolen or destroyed, his children are killed, and his body is stricken with painful sores. Yet Job continues to praise God.

The majority of the Book of Job consists of a series of speeches by Job and four of his friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu). These men offer their own opinions on the reasons for Job's suffering and generally conclude, despite Job's protests, that he is being punished for some wrongdoing. Finally, God Himself speaks up, rebuking the men for their idle words and contrasting their limited human perspective with His own all-knowing, all-powerful nature. Job and his friends repent for presuming to know the mind of God, and God restores Job's fortunes, blessing him with more children and giving him greater wealth than he had possessed before his trials.

## **Psalms**—Songs of Praise and Pleading (150 chapters)

The Book of Psalms is the longest book in the Bible. It is also one of the most beloved and widely known. The New Testament quotes from the Psalms more than from any other Old Testament book. This remarkable work is situated in the middle of the Bible, and in spiritual terms it is equally central.

Psalms consists of 150 songs, divided into five "books" or groupings. It was not originally a single work, but was compiled at some later time, probably for use as a temple hymnbook. Indeed, the content of the Psalms seems to span much of Old Testament history, as Psalm 90 was written by Moses, and Psalm 137 clearly belongs to the period after the Babylonian exile. Accordingly, the Psalms are attributed to various authors, with David having written the most (73), and several remain anonymous.

Thematically, the Psalms are quite diverse. There are formal hymns and liturgies, songs of personal and communal thanksgiving, and songs for use on feast days, which stand alongside petitions for God to destroy the wicked. Cries of sorrow and desperation are juxtaposed with promises of the coming Messiah. Yet in spite of the varied nature of its authors and topics, there is a certain internal consistency that holds the Book of Psalms together. Taken together, they paint a complex, stirring picture of the relationship between God and man, vividly portraying the extremes of emotion that defined the authors' lives, as well as our own.

### **Psalm 23**

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is the most well-known of all the Psalms and one of the most famous chapters in the entire Bible. It is also a sort of "Psalms-in-miniature," communicating several of the Book's important themes—the Lord's righteousness, His presence and provision in our lives, the darkness and pain of life in this world, and the promise of eternal life through Christ—in only six verses.

<sup>1</sup>The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup>He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:  
he leadeth me beside the still waters.

<sup>3</sup>He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the  
paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup>Yea, though I walk through the valley of the  
shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou  
art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup>Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of  
mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil;  
my cup runneth over.

<sup>6</sup>Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the  
days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of  
the Lord for ever.

## **Proverbs—Wisdom for Living (31 chapters)**

The Book of Proverbs is a collection of short moral and practical exhortations that aims to equip the reader to lead a godly life. Solomon is generally considered to be the primary author of Proverbs although chapters 30 and 31 are specifically attributed to others. Proverbs promotes a lifestyle that is marked by wisdom, honesty, justice, industry, self-control, and holy living, often drawing contrasts between the lives of those who pursue these noble ideals and those who embrace their shameful opposites—folly, dishonesty, partiality, laziness, license, and wickedness.

## **Ecclesiastes—The Search for Meaning in Life (12 chapters)**

Ecclesiastes is an example of biblical Wisdom Literature. In it, an unidentified author reflects on his attempts to come to grips with the meaning of life. He laments the ultimate futility of earthly pursuits, the unfairness of life, the uncertain nature of the future, and the inevitability of death. Nevertheless, he ultimately concludes that enduring faith in and obedience to God is the only hope of man in this fallen world, a lesson that is certainly just as relevant now as when it was first recorded.

## **Song of Solomon—A Celebration of Love (eight chapters)**

The Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs, is a poem that beautifully portrays the bliss of wedded love. While its primary purpose is a literal depiction of the romance between Solomon and his bride, it has also provided spiritual insight for many who see analogies between the love of the lover for the beloved and the love of God for His children.

## THE MAJOR PROPHETS

These five books were written by men who were called by God to prophesy to Israel and Judah, following in the footsteps of Elijah and

Elisha. Their mixture of historical narratives, lengthy discourses, and mysterious visions can be quite confusing at times. Yet they contain clear evidence of God's heart of compassion toward His children, as well as important prophecies regarding both the coming of the Messiah and the end of the present age.

## **Isaiah**—Adviser to Kings, Prophet to Nations (66 chapters)

The Book of Isaiah is the first and lengthiest of the major prophets and is considered by many to be one of the literary high points of the Old Testament. Its author, Isaiah the son of Amoz, lived in the southern kingdom of Judah and prophesied during the reigns of Azariah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.<sup>8</sup> Chapter 6 recounts how God called Isaiah through a dramatic vision to be His representative to the rulers and people of Judah. Very little is known of the prophet's personal life, but tradition records that he was killed by being sawed in half by the wicked King Manasseh.

Isaiah's prophecies touch on events that cover a span of over 200 years, a fact that makes the book particularly challenging to understand. The first 35 chapters deal mostly with the contemporary situation in Judah, beginning at a time when the nation was quite prosperous. Isaiah issues warnings concerning Judah's potential fate if they continue to disobey the Lord, warnings that reached a crescendo as the powerful Assyrian nation prepared to invade the land. This invasion marked the end of the northern kingdom of Israel, but Judah survived.

The second major section of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66, addresses events that would take place far in the future—the Babylonian invasion and God's eventual deliverance through Cyrus the Persian. This chronological gap has led many to suggest that this portion of Isaiah was, in fact, the work of another, later author. However, it is also certainly possible that, in this portion of the book, Isaiah was simply foretelling events far beyond the span of his own life as God revealed them to him.

The Book of Isaiah is also notable for its many Messianic prophecies.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the New Testament writers quote Isaiah more than all the other

Old Testament prophets combined, often in reference to these Messianic passages. Most significantly, Luke 4:17–21 records an incident in which Jesus read a passage from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue then informed the crowd that He had come in fulfillment of that scripture.

## **Jeremiah**—A Reluctant Prophet in a Time of Despair (52 chapters)

Jeremiah prophesied in Judah after Isaiah, from the days of King Josiah through the time of the exile. The Book of Jeremiah paints a picture of him as a prophet who was fully human and who freely expressed his feelings. He occasionally lashed out at God, and he often seemed insecure and reluctant regarding his role as a prophet to kings, yet he confessed that God's words were like a fire within him that he had no choice but to release.

Jeremiah's prophecies foretold the swift-coming and unavoidable judgment and destruction of Judah. The people's sinfulness and idolatry had raged unchecked for years, and God was determined to impose His punishment in spite of their belated pleas for forgiveness. Jeremiah discounted the promises of false prophets who said that God would spare Judah from the Babylonians, and he told the people that they would be taken into captivity for 70 years. But the prophet also spoke of God's mercy, calling the children of Israel to repent and promising eventual restoration for those who returned to the Lord.

Jeremiah is often referred to as “the weeping prophet,” and he certainly had sufficient cause to shed many tears. He witnessed the terrible suffering inflicted upon the people of Judah by the armies of Babylon and saw the temple of the Lord burned to the ground during the sack of Jerusalem (an episode that he relives in the Book of Lamentations). Jeremiah also faced great personal trials, suffering persecution, imprisonment, and exile at the hands of the wicked kings of Judah, who were angered by his prophecies of their impending demise.

## **Lamentations**—Poems of Anguish and Sorrow (five chapters)

Lamentations is a Book of poetry that is typically attributed to the



prophet Jeremiah. It consists of five poems that describe the terrible aftermath of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The author mourns the catastrophic loss of life, confesses that Judah's sinfulness was responsible for her downfall, and prays to God for mercy and restoration.

## **Ezekiel**—A Prophet in Exile (48 chapters)

Ezekiel was a prophet who was taken into exile in Babylon, along with the deposed King Jehoiachin, years before the final fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel prophesied to the exiled Jews in Babylon at about the same time that Jeremiah was prophesying to the Jews in Jerusalem, who were now under the rule of King Zedekiah. Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel foretold the impending destruction of Jerusalem as a result of Judah's sins.

The Book of Ezekiel is filled with strange imagery and mysterious, apocalyptic visions that serve to illustrate its central theme: the power, glory, and transcendence of the Lord. Its contents can be divided into four sections. The first three chapters recount God's calling of Ezekiel, beginning with the prophet's vision of four living creatures and four wheels, after which the Lord appears to him in His glory. Ezekiel is instructed to eat a scroll containing God's words and then to proclaim His message to the people of Israel.

Chapters 4–24 contain a series of prophetic warnings concerning the decaying spiritual state of Judah and predictions of God's impending judgment. In Chapter 10, Ezekiel has another vision of the wheels and the four living creatures (whom he now recognizes as angels). This time they appear near the temple, and as Ezekiel watches, the glory of the Lord departs from His house, signifying His abandonment of the people of Israel to the destruction that they have chosen by their disobedience.

In the third section, Chapters 25–32, the focus shifts to neighboring nations, as Ezekiel prophesies against Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, and Egypt. God promises to send judgment on these

nations because they rejoiced at the misfortunes of His chosen people and sought to take advantage of the weakness of Israel.

In Chapter 33, Ezekiel learns that his prophecies have come to pass and Jerusalem has fallen. The remaining chapters of Ezekiel offer a glimpse of hope as the Lord reveals His plans for the eventual restoration of Israel, most famously through the vision of the dry bones that return to life. Finally, Ezekiel is shown a vision of a new temple that God would someday return to and inhabit. Nevertheless, for hundreds of years, the glory of the Lord would be absent from His house.

## **Daniel**—A Witness to Kings (12 chapters)

The Book of Daniel is the last of the Major Prophets. It recounts the life of Daniel, a young man who was carried into captivity in Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. The first part of the Book of Daniel consists of stories of his exploits and God's miraculous provision for him and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The four young men were groomed for service in the king's palace, but they refused to defile themselves by eating the king's food. They had only water and vegetables, yet were stronger and healthier than the other young men in the king's service, and they quickly gained favor in the kingdom. While their integrity and wisdom were admired, however, their unswerving faith and devotion to God led to conflict with the secular rulers they served.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into a furnace by Nebuchadnezzar because they refused to worship an idol, but an angel of God appeared in the midst of the fire with them, and they were unharmed, leading Nebuchadnezzar to recognize God's power. Daniel faced his own test of faith later under the reign of Darius the Mede. Darius was a regional ruler in the service of Cyrus, King of Persia, who had overthrown Nebuchadnezzar's wicked son, Belshazzar, and assumed control of the former Babylonian kingdom. After breaking a royal decree by praying to God rather than praying to Darius, Daniel

was thrown into a den of lions. God protected and delivered Daniel, and, once again, a secular king's eyes were opened to the power of God.

The second half of the Book of Daniel contains a series of prophetic visions that depict a succession of mighty empires and tyrannical rulers. These chapters contrast the temporary might of world powers—including Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome—with the eternal nature of God's Kingdom. This section of Daniel also contains apocalyptic prophecies that echo the tone of the Book of Revelation.

## THE MINOR PROPHETS

The remaining 12 books of the Old Testament are referred to as the Minor Prophets, a designation that refers only to the fact that these books are briefer than those of the Major Prophets. In terms of content, these books are certainly not “minor,” as they touch on topics ranging from the Lord's love for unfaithful Israel to God's compassion toward non-Jewish peoples, from the coming of the Messiah to the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

### **Hosea**—Israel's Unfaithfulness and God's Unfailing Love (14 chapters)

The Book of Hosea is the first of the Minor Prophets. Hosea prophesied to the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. His Book recounts his marriage to an unfaithful wife, Gomer, and compares his love for her to God's unfailing love for the people of Israel in the face of their own infidelity.

### **Joel**—The Day of the Lord and the Coming of the Spirit (three chapters)

Joel prophesied to Judah in the wake of a devastating locust plague, and he used that natural imagery to foreshadow the terrible day of the

Lord's judgment that was to come. Joel also foretold the pouring out of God's Spirit on all people (2:28, 29), a prophecy that came to fulfillment on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

### **Amos**—Israel's Injustices and God's Judgment (nine chapters)

Amos was a shepherd from Judah who prophesied in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reigns of Uzziah in Judah and Jeroboam II in Israel. Amos denounced the moral failures of the people, as well as the social injustices that were being suffered by the poor at the hands of the rich. Amos saw a nation that had become self-absorbed, materialistic, and complacent, and he promised that the Lord would bring swift judgment.

### **Obadiah**—A Prophecy of Judgment against Edom (one chapter)

Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament. In it, Obadiah delivers a prophecy of judgment against the nation of Edom (the descendants of Esau) because of their pride and their failure to show compassion to Israel in the midst of its misfortunes. Obadiah prophesied that Israel would ultimately be restored, but that Edom would be utterly destroyed.

### **Jonah**—The Great Fish and the Fate of Nineveh (four chapters)

The Book of Jonah is undoubtedly the best known of the writings of the Minor Prophets. Unlike the others, it is not a collection of prophetic utterances, but rather a brief, historical narrative. Jonah was commanded by God to preach repentance to the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. He refused and attempted to flee by ship, but he was caught in a storm, thrown overboard, and swallowed by a great fish that God had prepared for the purpose. After repenting, Jonah was spit out by the fish and continued on to Nineveh. The people accepted his message and repented,

but Jonah grew angry at God for allowing the wicked city to escape punishment so easily. God responded by instructing Jonah about the value of life and the importance of compassion.

### **Micah**—A Dark Present and a Bright Future (seven chapters)

Micah prophesied during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah in Judah. He pronounced judgment on both Israel and Judah, foretelling the destruction of their capital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem.

However, Micah's oracles also contained the promise of the coming Messiah, who would bring deliverance and peace.

### **Nahum**—A Prophecy of Judgment against Assyria (three chapters)

Unlike most of the other Minor Prophets, Nahum directed his prophecy not to his own nation, but to a foreign power, Assyria. The Assyrians had already defeated the kingdom of Israel and carried its inhabitants into exile and were now threatening Judah. Nahum foretells the utter destruction of the Assyrian kingdom and its capital city of Nineveh, whose repentance in the time of Jonah proved to be short-lived.

### **Habakkuk**—The Questioning Prophet (three chapters)

The Book of Habakkuk records an intriguing dialogue between a prophet and God. Habakkuk questioned the Lord about the wickedness that was so prevalent in Judah. He asked how a righteous God could allow it. When God told Habakkuk that He was raising up the Babylonians to punish Judah, the prophet wondered why God would use a wicked, pagan nation to punish His own people. The Lord assured Habakkuk that Babylon would eventually reap destruction as a result of its wickedness and that the righteous would ultimately have life because of their faith.

### **Zephaniah**—A Prophecy of Destruction and Desolation (three chapters)

Zephaniah prophesied in Judah during the reign of Josiah. He warned

of the swift approach of the Day of the Lord, a time of judgment and destruction that would devastate many nations, including Judah. However, the Lord also emphasized through Zephaniah that those who trusted in His name would be restored.

## **Haggai**—A Call to Rebuild the Lord’s House (two chapters)

Haggai prophesied to the remnant of the children of Israel after their return to Jerusalem from Babylonian captivity. The people had abandoned their efforts to rebuild the temple in order to work on their own houses, and God had responded by sending drought and poor harvests. Haggai called the people to attend to the Lord’s house first, and they quickly responded by beginning to rebuild the temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel.

## **Zechariah**—Visions of a Glorious Future (14 chapters)

Zechariah delivered his prophecy soon after Haggai’s, just as construction on the new temple was beginning. He issued a call for the people to not only honor the Lord with their building project, but to return to Him with their hearts. Much of the rest of the Book of Zechariah is filled with visions and prophecies concerning the eventual coming of the Messiah and the glory that awaits God’s children at the end of the present age.

## **Malachi**—A Final Plea for Repentance (four chapters)

Malachi’s Book is the final one in the Minor Prophets, and his was the last voice of prophecy to be heard in Israel for over 400 years. Malachi addressed a people that had grown increasingly apathetic and complacent, replacing the unspeakable wickedness of their ancestors with half-hearted service and spiritual neglect. Malachi urged the people to serve God diligently and to be faithful in giving tithes and acceptable sacrifices. The Old Testament closes with a promise that God will send “the prophet Elijah” before the Day of the Lord comes, a prophecy that was to be fulfilled with the coming of John the Baptist.

## CHAPTER FOUR SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have surveyed the contents of the 39 books of the Old Testament. We looked first at the *Pentateuch*, which comprises the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These books contain many important historical narratives, including the stories of Creation, the Fall, Cain and Abel, the Flood, the Tower of Babel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and the Exodus from Egypt. The Law of Moses (including the Ten Commandments), which was given to the Israelites by God at Mt. Sinai, is also recorded in the *Pentateuch*.

We then examined the 12 Historical Books of the Old Testament: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. These books tell the story of the nation of Israel, including the invasion of Canaan, the rule of the judges, the ministry of Samuel, the kingships of Saul, David, and Solomon, the division of the kingdom, the histories of the kings of Israel and Judah, the overthrow of Israel by Assyria, the overthrow of Judah by Babylon, and the return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Next, we explored the Poetic Books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. These books share a poetic style, but their contents and tone vary widely, ranging from the confident wisdom of Proverbs to the disillusioned searching of Ecclesiastes, and from the mournful laments of Job to the rapturous delight of Song of Solomon, with the Psalms encompassing all of these moods and more.

We proceeded to discuss the five books of the Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Isaiah contains many of the Old Testament's Messianic prophecies. Jeremiah and Ezekiel both contain warnings of impending judgment against Judah, while Lamentations records Jeremiah's sorrow following the destruction of Jerusalem. Daniel gives us insight into the lives of the exiles under both the Babylonian and Persian empires and also contains prophecies of an apocalyptic nature.

Finally, we briefly looked at the last 12 books of the Old Testament, the Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. These short prophecies touch on many important topics, including the coming of the Messiah (Micah, Zechariah, Malachi), the Holy Spirit (Joel), God's unfailing love and mercy (Hosea, Jonah), God's concern with justice (Amos), the impending judgment of Israel (Amos, Habbakuk, Zephaniah), and the eventual destruction of Israel's enemies (Obadiah, Nahum, Habbakuk).

We will now shift our focus to the world of the New Testament. In Chapter Five, we will begin our study of the New Testament period by establishing the geographical, political, cultural, and religious context within which the events of the New Testament occurred.



## CHAPTER FOUR NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>There is also scriptural evidence to support the claim that Moses wrote the *Pentateuch*. References to “The Law of Moses” or “The Book of Moses” are found throughout the rest of the Bible (e.g. Joshua 8:31; 1 Kings 2:3; 2 Chronicles 25:4; Ezra 3:2; Nehemiah 13:1; Daniel 9:11; Luke 2:22; Acts 28:23; 1 Corinthians 9:9), suggesting that Moses was the one who recorded the commandments of God that are found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Jesus Himself even used the phrase “the book of Moses” when referring to the written account of the burning bush in Exodus 3 (Mark 12:26). However, it is less clear that Moses wrote Genesis, and it is certainly impossible that he wrote the last few verses of Deuteronomy, which record his death and Israel’s subsequent mourning.

<sup>2</sup>Jesus would later refer back to this incident, comparing Himself on the cross to the snake on the pole, each a source of healing and grace for sinful people (John 3:14, 15).

<sup>3</sup>The fact that Moses’ speech is intended to serve as a recapitulation of the Law is indicated by the title *Deuteronomy* itself. The word literally means “second law.”

<sup>4</sup>Deuteronomy 6:5, cf. Matthew 22:36–38.

<sup>5</sup>Eli and Samuel, who are often considered to be the last of the judges, are not included in this list, as they do not appear in the Book of Judges.

<sup>6</sup>The name *Baal*, meaning “Lord,” was actually applied to a variety of different deities during the Old Testament period. Most significantly, it was the name given to the chief deity of the Canaanites and Phoenicians, who was considered to be the god of rain and fertility. It is generally this Baal that is referred to during the periods of the judges and kings although in instances where the word *Baal* forms part of a

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longer title, as in *Baal-Zebub* (2 Kings 1:2) or *Baal of Peor* (Deuteronomy 4:3), a different deity may be indicated.

<sup>7</sup>While it was Judah, the southern kingdom, that was overthrown by the Babylonians, the Jewish people who returned from exile are generally referred to by the original name of Israel. The population of the northern kingdom of Israel, which fell to the Assyrians, was scattered although a remnant would eventually combine with others to make up the people group that came to be known as Samaritans.

<sup>8</sup>In the Book of Isaiah, Azariah is referred to as Uzziah.

<sup>9</sup>E.g. 7:14; 9:6, 7; 53.



# Chapter Five

## The Context of the New Testament

Just as was the case with the Old Testament, we must consider the contextual framework for the events of the New Testament before exploring the specific content of its books. In this chapter, we will survey the geography of the New Testament world, explore the political and social history of the Intertestamental period, and examine the diversity of beliefs, hopes, and practices that characterized Jewish religion during the time of Christ.

### GEOGRAPHY

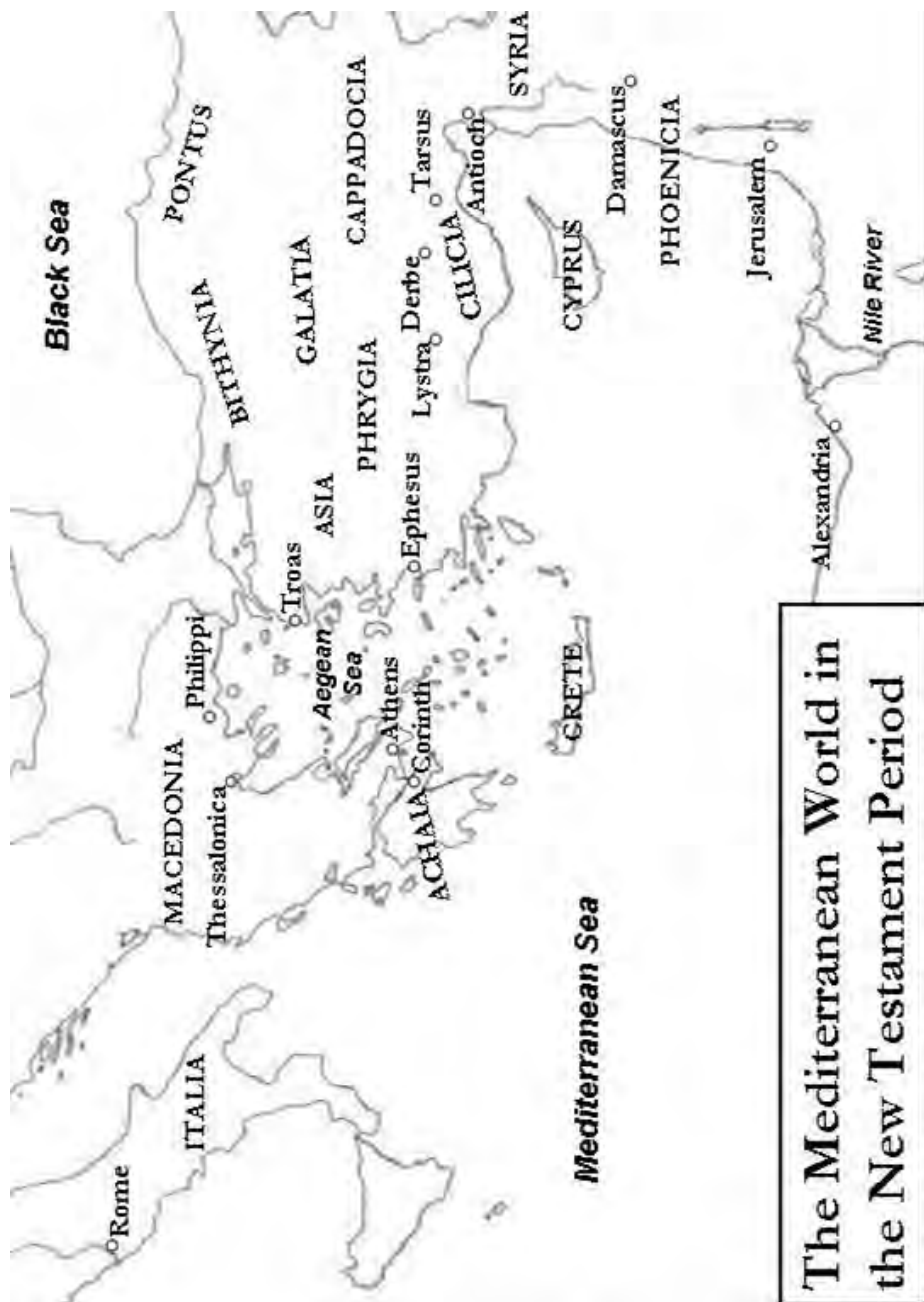
The events of Jesus' earthly life occurred within a geographical area corresponding roughly to the modern nations of Israel and Jordan and the Old Testament kingdom of Israel. During the Roman period, this region was known by several different names, and its constituent parts were also delineated and administrated in a variety of ways. For simplicity's sake, we will refer to the area as Palestine though this name was not applied to the region by the Romans until A.D. 135, shortly after the New Testament period had ended.

Following the death and resurrection of Christ, the remainder of the New Testament drama was played out on a wider stage as the gospel began to spread throughout the Mediterranean world. As recorded in the Book of Acts, the apostle Paul's journeys took him to Syria, Cyprus, Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), Achaia and Macedonia (modern-day Greece), Malta, and, ultimately, Rome. Many of the cities in these areas in which Paul established churches became important centers for the further spread of the gospel.

The following maps will allow you to familiarize yourself both with New Testament-era Palestine and the larger Mediterranean region, which

will, in turn, increase your ability to understand the accounts of the Gospels and Acts. The accompanying capsules provide information regarding locations that are particularly prominent in the biblical narrative.





**The Mediterranean World in  
the New Testament Period**

## Regions of Palestine

**Decapolis**—The word *Decapolis* means “ten cities” and referred to a region located on the eastern side of the Jordan River, north of Perea and east of Galilee and Samaria. Most of the cities of the Decapolis were founded during the Hellenistic (Greek) period, and during Christ’s lifetime, the area was largely inhabited by Gentiles.

Jesus ministered occasionally in the Decapolis, most notably when He delivered a demon-possessed man by casting the evil spirits into a herd of pigs.<sup>1</sup>

**Galilee**—A large region in northern Palestine, located west of the Jordan River and north of Samaria. It was unofficially divided into Upper Galilee, which was quite mountainous and sparsely inhabited, and Lower Galilee, which was more fertile.

The Canaanites retained partial control of Galilee for a lengthy period after the Israelite conquests under Joshua, and for centuries the region was inhabited by a mixture of Jews and other groups. This resulted in the development of a distinct Galilean sub-culture that apparently caused some of the Jews of Judea to treat Galilean Jews disdainfully.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus grew up in Galilee, and much of His public ministry, including His first miracle, the calling of the disciples, and the Sermon on the Mount, took place within its borders.

**Judea**—A mountainous, arid region in southern Palestine, bordered on the north by Samaria, on the west by the Mediterranean, and on the east by the Dead Sea. It corresponded roughly to the Old Testament kingdom of Judah, from which the word *Judea* is derived.

Both Jesus’ birth and His crucifixion occurred in Judea. The Gospel of John gives us much insight into Jesus’ Judean ministry, a topic about which the Synoptic Gospels are virtually silent.

**Perea**—Perea was located on the eastern side of the Jordan River, south of the Decapolis and east of Samaria and Judea. It encompassed much of the land that had once belonged to the tribes of Reuben and Gad.

Though the name *Perea* itself is absent from the Gospels, John implies that it was here that Jesus and His disciples sought refuge immediately after the Jews' attempt to stone Jesus, and before the death of Lazarus.<sup>3</sup> In addition, references in Matthew 4:25 and Mark 3:8 to followers of Jesus who came from "beyond Jordan" probably refer to inhabitants of Perea.

**Samaria**—Samaria was located between Galilee and Judea in central Palestine, west of the Jordan River. It was blessed with fertile soil, allowing its inhabitants to enjoy bountiful harvests.

In Old Testament times, the city of Samaria served as the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. After the Assyrian conquest and the deportation of many Israelites, the region was settled by pagans, as recounted in 2 Kings 17. These foreigners intermarried with the remaining Jewish population, and the resulting people group eventually became known as Samaritans.

Because the Samaritans were of mixed Jewish and Gentile descent, and because they insisted on maintaining certain religious traditions that were not based on an orthodox interpretation of the Jewish Law, they were reviled by the pious Jews of Jesus' day, many of whom studiously avoided even passing through Samaria. Jesus subverted these attitudes in His encounter with the woman at the well (John 4:1–42).

## Cities and Features of Palestine

**Bethany**—A village on the outskirts of Jerusalem in Judea. It is significant in the New Testament as the home of Jesus' close friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus and was the site of Jesus' final public miracle before His crucifixion.



**Bethlehem**—A city located south of Jerusalem in Judea. It was the birthplace of King David, and, because of Joseph’s descent from David, it also became the birthplace of Jesus, just as was prophesied in the Old Testament (Micah 5:2).

**Capernaum**—A city on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee that served as Jesus’ base of operations during much of His public ministry. Jesus called several of His disciples in and around Capernaum, taught in the city’s synagogue, and performed a number of miracles there.<sup>4</sup>

**Caesarea Philippi**—A city located to the north of Galilee and the Decapolis near Mount Hermon, which is thought by many to have been the site of Jesus’ transfiguration. The city was the northernmost frontier of Jesus’ ministry as recorded in the Gospels and is significant chiefly as the site of Peter’s confession that Jesus was indeed the Son of God (Matthew 16:13–20).

**Jerusalem**—The most holy city to the Jews from the time of David until the present day. Jerusalem was the capital of the united kingdom of Israel and later of the kingdom of Judah in the Old Testament and was an important city in central Judea in the time of Christ.

Though much of Jesus’ public ministry took place in Galilee, the Gospel of John records that He attended many of the important Jewish feasts in Jerusalem and proclaimed His teachings to the populace, bringing Him into conflict with some of the Jewish priests and religious leaders. These clashes eventually led to Jesus’ crucifixion on the hill of Golgotha, just outside Jerusalem.

**Jordan River**—The Jordan River ran throughout much of Palestine, from the Sea of Galilee in the north to the Dead Sea in the south. Historically, it formed the eastern border of the land of Israel, though the tribes of Reuben and Gad, along with half of the tribe of Manasseh, settled on its eastern banks. In the New Testament, the Jordan was the site of John the Baptist’s ministry, including his baptism of Jesus.

**Mount of Olives**—A round hill located just outside of Jerusalem. The Garden of Gethsemane was located on its slopes, and it was here that Jesus took His disciples to pray on the night that He was arrested. According to Acts 1:11, the Mount of Olives was also the site of Jesus' ascension.

**Nazareth**—A village in the hills of Galilee. It was the hometown of Joseph and thus became the boyhood home of Jesus. The people of Nazareth, however, rejected Jesus' ministry, and He chose to make Capernaum His base of operations instead.<sup>5</sup>

**Sea of Galilee**—The Sea of Galilee is actually a fresh-water lake, not a true sea. It is also referred to in Scripture as the Lake of Gennesaret and the Sea of Tiberias.<sup>6</sup> The Jordan River feeds into the north end of the lake before flowing out in the south and continuing on to the Dead Sea.

The Sea was the site of many notable events in Jesus' ministry. He called four of His disciples along its shores, preached to crowds from a boat in its shallows, calmed a storm and walked on water in the middle of the lake, and caused two miraculous catches of fish to be drawn from its waters.

## Cities of the Mediterranean World

**Antioch**—The capital of the Roman province of Syria. The period of persecution that was ignited by the stoning of Stephen led many of the early Christians to flee from Jerusalem to Antioch, and, eventually, a thriving community of believers was established there. It was at Antioch that the word *Christians* was first used in reference to those who followed Jesus (Acts 11:26), and Paul and Barnabas also used the city as a base of operations for their missionary journeys.

**Athens**—The capital of modern Greece and one of the great cultural and intellectual centers of the ancient world. Though the high point of

its influence came during the first millennium B.C., Athens still had great significance during the New Testament period. The apostle Paul visited Athens on his second missionary journey, debating with some of the city's Epicurean and Stoic philosophers and defending the faith before the Council of the Areopagus.

**Corinth**—An important Greek seaport that served as the capital of the Roman province of Achaia during the New Testament period. Paul stayed at Corinth for an extended period of time during his second missionary journey, and two of his canonical epistles are addressed to the church he helped to establish there.

**Damascus**—The capital of both ancient and modern Syria. Damascus is considered by some to be the oldest continually inhabited city in the world. It was while traveling to Damascus to persecute the early church that Saul of Tarsus was blinded by God and converted to the Christian faith.

**Ephesus**—A port city in western Asia Minor, and the largest city in the Roman province of Asia in the New Testament period. The apostle Paul spent approximately three years in Ephesus during his third missionary journey and addressed one of his canonical epistles to the Ephesian believers.

**Philippi**—A Roman colony in the province of Macedonia. The apostle Paul visited Philippi during his second missionary journey and was imprisoned there along with Silas. He later wrote an epistle to the Philippian believers during his imprisonment at Rome.

**Rome**—The modern-day capital of Italy, the capital of the Roman Empire, and the most important city in the world during the New Testament period. Though Paul wrote an epistle to the Roman believers, he had not visited the city at the time. When he finally did arrive in Rome, it was not as a missionary but as a prisoner. Paul spent the last

years of his life in Rome, writing letters of encouragement to believers in other places before being executed by the emperor Nero.

**Tarsus**—An important commercial and intellectual center located in the province of Cilicia in Asia Minor. Tarsus was the birthplace of the apostle Paul.

## POLITICS AND CULTURE

Though the Bible is largely silent about the events of the 400-year period between the ministries of Malachi and John the Baptist, it must not be supposed that little was happening during this span. Indeed, the political history of the Intertestamental period is quite colorful and complex and provides much insight into many of the attitudes and conditions that are evident in the New Testament.

### **Alexander and the Greeks**

At the end of the Old Testament period (roughly 430 B.C.), the Persian Empire had been the dominant world power for just over a century since overthrowing the Babylonians in the time of Daniel. Persia retained this status for another century, until the Battle of Gaugamela (Arbela) in 331 B.C., when they were defeated by the armies of the Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great.

Alexander, who ascended to the throne of Macedonia in 334 B.C., established a vast empire through his military exploits. At its furthest extent, this empire stretched from Greece through Asia Minor, around the shores of the Mediterranean to Egypt (including Palestine), eastward through Mesopotamia, Media, and Persia, and as far as the borders of India.

The Greek language permeated this entire region, bringing along with it a wealth of knowledge and many trappings of the Hellenistic Greek civilization, including pagan religious beliefs and secular philosophies.

This process of rapid Hellenization (adoption of secular Greek culture) would prove to have important effects in the New Testament period, not the least of which was the fact that the apostles were able to communicate the gospel effectively throughout the ancient world because of the pervasiveness with which Greek was spoken.

## **The Ptolemies and Seleucids**

Alexander died suddenly in 323 B.C. at the age of 32. Because he had no son to serve as his successor, a struggle for power among Alexander's many generals quickly ensued. Five of these generals eventually carved up the empire among themselves, with Cassander ruling in Macedonia, Lysimachus in Thrace, Antigonus in Asia Minor, Syria, and Palestine, Ptolemy in Egypt and Palestine, and Seleucus in Mesopotamia, Persia, and the east. This arrangement did not last long, however, as Antigonus soon began invading the territories of the others, leading Lysimachus and Seleucus to join forces against him. At the Battle of Ipsus in 301 B.C., Antigonus was killed, and his territories were seized by the other generals.

As the generals and their descendants continued to wage war with one another in the succeeding years, pieces of their mini-kingdoms frequently changed hands. Finally, the balance of power in the region stabilized a bit with the emergence of three great empires: the Antigonids in Macedonia (which the descendants of Antigonus had seized from those of Cassander), the Seleucids in Syria and Mesopotamia, and the Ptolemies in Egypt. We must take a more careful look at the latter two in order to understand their impact on the history of the Jews during this period.

Though most of Antigonus' kingdom was divided between Lysimachus and Seleucus following the Battle of Ipsus, Ptolemy took advantage of the turmoil of the moment and seized control of Palestine. Because Palestine lay at the boundary between the Ptolemies and Seleucids and had great strategic significance, it became a source of ongoing contention between the two kingdoms during the hundred years following Ipsus.

The Ptolemies proved to be relatively benevolent overlords. They exacted tribute from the Jewish population of Palestine but generally allowed them to maintain both their self-governance and their religious customs. Still, many Jews of the period found it socially and financially advantageous to adopt the Greek language and much of the accompanying Hellenistic culture. This led to the formation of Greek-influenced Jewish communities like the one at Alexandria that began producing the Septuagint during this period.

After roughly a century of Ptolemaic rule, however, Palestine fell into the hands of the Seleucids following the Battle of Panium in 198 B.C. This marked the beginning of a very dark period for the Jews, as the Seleucids proved to be much harsher masters than the Ptolemies had been.

Antiochus III, the first Seleucid ruler to reign over Palestine, increased the burden of taxation on the Jews and also subjected them to increasing pressure to adopt Greek culture and religion and abandon the faith and customs of their ancestors. By this point, some Jews—indeed, even some among the priesthood—were perfectly willing to embrace the advantages of Hellenization. As a result, the situation soon degenerated, with ambitious Jews going so far as to offer money to their Seleucid masters in exchange for the right to serve as high priest, which was in flagrant disobedience of the Mosaic Law.

This gradual moral and ethical decay under the pressure of foreign influence, however, was only the beginning of the Jews' troubles under Seleucid rule. In 175 B.C., Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) ascended to the Seleucid throne and soon set out to systematically eradicate the Jewish religion and way of life. He forbade Jewish practices such as circumcision, sacrifices, and Sabbath-keeping, outlawed the possession and reading of the Law, and desecrated the Temple by sacrificing a pig (an unclean animal in the sight of the Jews) on the altar. These oppressive acts, along with the concurrent pressure to embrace Greek polytheism and offer sacrifices to Zeus, proved to be the catalysts that would lead the Jews to seek and gain freedom from their foreign oppressors, at least for a time.

## **The Maccabean Revolt**

The struggle for Jewish liberation from the Seleucids began around 167 B.C., when an elderly priest named Mattathias refused to offer sacrifices to the Greek gods and killed a Seleucid official who tried to force him to do so. Along with his five sons, Mattathias initiated a guerilla movement that fought to achieve religious and political independence for the Jews. Upon Mattathias' death, leadership of this movement was taken up by his third son Judas, who was called Maccabeus, "the Hammerer." Judas and his brothers collectively became known to as the Maccabeans or Maccabees.

Antiochus Epiphanes attempted to suppress the fledgling rebellion by force, but Judas Maccabeus proved to be an extremely adept military leader, and the small army of Jewish freedom fighters repeatedly defeated Seleucid forces that far outnumbered them by engaging them on treacherous wilderness terrain. By 165 B.C., the Jews under Judas' leadership were able to wrest control of Jerusalem from the Seleucids. They destroyed the pagan idols that had been erected in the city and rededicated the temple, thus reestablishing their religious freedom. This event is still commemorated by the Jewish people with the celebration of Hanukkah.

## **The Hasmoneans**

Not being content with religious freedom alone, Judas Maccabeus continued to wage war in the hopes of securing political independence. Following his death in battle, leadership of the resistance movement passed first to his brother Jonathan, and later to Simon, the last surviving son of Mattathias. Shortly before 140 B.C., under Simon's leadership, the Jews finally achieved freedom from taxation and thus became fully independent for the first time since the Babylonian invasion roughly four centuries earlier.

Not only did Simon become the civil and political leader of Israel, but the people bestowed on him and his descendants the hereditary office

of high priest. Thus, full religious and secular authority were embodied in a single leader for the first time in Israel's history. This quickly became problematic, as several of Simon's successors, who became known as the Hasmonean dynasty, proved to be more interested in political expediency than religious fidelity. Far from heralding a return to Jewish orthodoxy, the Hasmonean period was marked by continued Hellenization and increasing sectarian conflicts among the Jews.

## **The Romans**

Throughout the period of Jewish independence and Hasmonean rule, the fortunes of the Greek empires of Alexander's successors were rapidly declining, and Rome was fast becoming the dominant world power. Having conquered Macedonia by the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., the Roman armies inexorably moved eastward through Greek-controlled territories, expanding their empire at every step.

In 63 B.C., the Roman general Pompey, having dispatched the last of the Seleucid kings and annexed Syria as a Roman province, proceeded to Palestine. He found the area embroiled in civil strife due to a succession dispute between two Hasmonean brothers, Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II, the latter of which was receiving support from an Idumean named Antipater, who had served as a general under the previous Hasmonean ruler, Alexander.

Taking advantage of this turmoil, Pompey laid siege to Jerusalem, desecrated the temple by entering the Most Holy Place, and established Roman control over all of Palestine. He later installed Antipater as governor of the region, and allowed Hyrcanus to become the new high priest since, unlike some of the Seleucids, the Romans were more interested in political control and taxation than suppressing the native religions of conquered peoples. Thus began the period of Roman rule over Palestine that would continue throughout the New Testament period and endure for more than six centuries.



## The Herods

In spite of the fact that the Hasmonean priesthood was nominally allowed to continue during the early years of Roman rule, Antipater wielded the real power in the region. Following his death, another period of political turmoil ensued. In 40 B.C., the Roman Senate officially recognized Antipater's son Herod as King over the Jewish people.

This move was met with immediate scorn and resistance by much of the Jewish population. Herod, after all, was an Idumean (though his ancestors had been forcibly converted to Judaism). How could God's chosen nation be directly ruled by one who was himself not a Jew? Partially in an attempt to counteract this intense negative reaction, Herod married Mariamne, a descendant of the Hasmoneans, but even this failed to gain him favor with the people.

Herod the Great was the ruler of Palestine at the time of Christ's birth. The wise men visited his palace, and he ordered the execution of male infants in an attempt to kill the new king that the magi had mentioned to him, which persuaded Mary and Joseph to flee with Jesus to Egypt until Herod had died.<sup>7</sup>

Following his death, the territory of Palestine was divided among Herod's three sons: Philip, who governed the northeastern part of Palestine; Archelaus, who inherited control of Judea and Samaria; and Antipas, who ruled in Galilee and Perea. Archelaus was later deposed by the Romans, who installed a series of procurators in his place (of whom Pontius Pilate was one). It was Herod Antipas who ordered the execution of John the Baptist and before whom Jesus appeared during his trial.<sup>8</sup>

## RELIGION

Though it is well-known to most believers that Jesus' teachings represented a revolutionary challenge to the religious views of the Jews

of His day, many Christians lack an understanding of the particularities of Jewish religion during the Intertestamental period, of what the Jews were hoping for, and why Jesus was not what they expected. In order to provide proper context for the events of the New Testament, we must now explore this important topic.

## **An Overview of Jewish Religion in the Intertestamental Period**

Jewish religious life underwent a great deal of upheaval during the Intertestamental period. Following the Babylonian invasion, many Jews found themselves far from Jerusalem and the temple, either because they had been taken into exile in Babylon or because they had fled the ruin of Judah and settled elsewhere. In subsequent centuries, as one foreign empire after another seized control of Palestine, the dispersion of the Jewish population, which is often referred to as the *diaspora*, continued.<sup>9</sup> Thus, many of the Children of Israel left the land that had been promised to their ancestors and were scattered throughout the surrounding nations.

Not only did the dispersion of the Jews from Jerusalem involve departing the land that had comprised such a crucial part of their collective identity for centuries, it also required them to forsake the sacrifices and other rituals of worship that were prescribed by the Law because of their physical separation from the temple (which, in any event, lay in ruins for many years following the Babylonian invasion). One partial solution to this problem came in the form of the emergence of the synagogues—local houses of worship in each community where Jews could gather for prayer and the reading of the Torah. But although the synagogues performed a critical function, the loss of connection with the temple constituted, in a very significant way, a loss of connection with Israel's God and with what it meant to be His chosen people.

Finally, the Jews had to attempt to cope with the unpleasant reality of their subjugation to foreign powers, whether Babylonian, Persian,

Greek, or Roman. Though their fortunes varied greatly under the rule of these different masters, the one common theme was the distress of Israel at the fact that their God had allowed their enemies to triumph over them. The land, the temple, the favor of God—all the key components of the Israelites' collective identity had seemingly been taken from them. Though they had returned from Babylon, in many important ways, they were still in exile, still awaiting their deliverance.

## **Specific Jewish Religious Groups**

This entire state of affairs created a great deal of disquiet and confusion among the Jews as they struggled to come to grips with the complex realities of the new situation in which they found themselves.<sup>10</sup> Soon distinct sub-groups within Judaism began to appear on the scene, each espousing different answers to the key spiritual questions that the Jews were wrestling with as a people during this period, including questions about how and when restoration would finally come. We will now examine a few of the most notable of these Jewish sects.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Pharisees**

The Pharisees are the most notorious of the Jewish groups of this period, due to their frequent (and frequently contentious) encounters with Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. They emphasized the importance of keeping not only the written Law of Moses, but the oral traditions that had been passed down along with the Law itself.

Unlike their contemporaries, the Sadducees, the Pharisees tended to avoid the political intrigue and cultural blending that permeated the temple during this period. They favored the format of the synagogues, which provided them with a forum for instructing Jews in the intricacies of the Torah and the accompanying oral tradition. The common Pharisaic view was that the strict keeping of Torah was an acceptable (if not superior) substitute for the sacrificial system of the temple.

The Pharisees were particularly concerned with issues of personal purity and holiness, which they viewed as being a prerequisite for the

re-establishment of God's divine blessing on Israel. Jesus, though, repeatedly questioned the Pharisees' motives and rebuked them for the judgmental attitudes that they often displayed toward those who failed to meet the stringent requirements of both the oral and written Law.

## **The Sadducees**

The sect of the Sadducees arose some time during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. and was comprised primarily of priests, members of the Jewish high council (the Sanhedrin), and the wealthy. Being generally an upper-class party, they often embraced the high culture of their foreign masters and emphasized the necessity of being loyal to Rome. Because of this tendency to support the ruling elites, the Sadducees gained a great deal of political, economic, and social influence.

The same was not true, however, in the sphere of religion, where the Sadducees held to several distinctives that were not embraced by a majority of the Jews. Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees held strictly to the teachings of the Torah, and had little use for the complex, oral additions and clarifications to the Law that the Pharisees prized so highly. Likewise, the Sadducees valued the ancient rites of temple worship and scorned the synagogue tradition of the Pharisees. The Sadducees were also apparently incredulous about some of the more metaphysical aspects of the Jewish faith, particularly the resurrection of the dead and the existence of angels.<sup>11</sup>

The Sadducees do not play a particularly prominent role in the New Testament narrative (especially when compared with their Pharisaic rivals). Because of their narrow focus on temple worship and its importance to their identity, the Sadducees disappeared almost completely following the temple's destruction in A.D. 70.

## **The Essenes**

The Essenes were a mysterious group of Jews who withdrew from general society and lived communally in remote areas, awaiting God's restoration and focusing much of their attention and anticipation on

the end times, when (they believed) the Sons of Light would be called upon to do battle with the Sons of Darkness. Though they looked forward to this expected end, the Essenes believed that there was nothing that could be done to hasten God's action on behalf of Israel, but that He would act in His own time.

## **The Zealots**

In sharp contrast to the Essenes were the Zealots. Though there is some evidence of the existence of a specific group called Zealots, the term is more generally used to refer to a variety of groups who shared the common belief that the only way to bring about the will of God and the restoration of Israel was through active political revolution. The Zealots saw themselves as God's agents of justice and sought to bring an end to Roman rule over the Jews, though without success.

We can thus conclude that the political and religious situation at the end of the Intertestamental period was complex, ambiguous, and often chaotic and that the great hope of the Jews, regardless of their particular affiliation, was that, somehow, God would act powerfully on behalf of His chosen people to make sense of the madness and to restore all that had been lost. It was within this context that there would soon appear One who promised to do precisely that, though not necessarily in the way that any of them expected.

## CHAPTER FIVE SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have briefly surveyed the geographical, socio-political, and religious landscape of the Intertestamental and New Testament periods. We began by exploring the land of Palestine, including the five regions of Decapolis, Galilee, Judea, Perea, and Samaria, the cities of Bethany, Bethlehem, Capernaum, Caesarea Philippi, and Nazareth, and physical features such as the Jordan River, the Mount of Olives, and the Sea of Galilee. We then broadened our focus to examine some of the major cities of the Mediterranean world, including Antioch, Athens, Corinth, Damascus, Ephesus, Philippi, Rome, and Tarsus.

Next, we surveyed the political history of the Intertestamental period, beginning with the victory of Alexander the Great over the Persian Empire and the ascendance of Hellenistic Greek culture throughout the region. We then explored the reigns of the Ptolemaic and Seleucid Empires, with particular focus on their treatment of the Jews. We studied the brief period of Jewish independence following the Maccabean Revolt, including the reign of the Hasmoneans. Finally, we examined the advancement into Palestine of the Roman Empire and the rise in prominence of the Herods, thus setting the stage for the events of the New Testament.

In the final section of the chapter, we studied the nature of Jewish religious life during this period. We saw how geographic dispersion and foreign oppression, among other factors, began eroding the traditional identity of the Jews, and we discussed the rise of distinct sects within Judaism (including the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots) that proposed various solutions to the problems that the Jews faced as they awaited God's deliverance.

In Chapter Six, we will conclude our introduction to the Bible by examining the literary, historical, and theological content of the 27 books of the New Testament.



## CHAPTER FIVE NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 8:28–34; Mark 5:1–20; Luke 8:26–39. For another instance of Jesus ministering in the region, see Mark 7:31–37. Matthew 4:25 reveals that some of Jesus' followers hailed from the Decapolis.

<sup>2</sup>For hints of this distinct Galilean culture and Judean derision of it, see Matthew 26:73 (referencing Peter's noticeable Galilean accent); John 1:46; 7:52.

<sup>3</sup>See John 10 and 11, where Jesus is in Jerusalem (10:22), flees “beyond Jordan” (10:40), and later returns “into Judea” (11:7). John 10:40 also indicates that some of John the Baptist's ministry may have occurred in the western part of Perea near the Jordan.

<sup>4</sup>See Matthew 8:5–13; Mark 1:16–31; 2:1–14; John 6:24–59.

<sup>5</sup>See Mark 6:1–6; Luke 4:16–30.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 5:1; John 6:1; 21:1.

<sup>7</sup>See Matthew 2.

<sup>8</sup>See Matthew 14:1–12; Mark 6:17–29; Luke 23:7–12.

<sup>9</sup>The word *diaspora* is actually used in several distinct though related senses. It can refer to an ethnic group that disperses out from their traditional homeland, the process by which such a group is dispersed, and/or the area throughout which such a group is dispersed.

<sup>10</sup>For an exhaustive and illuminating examination of the beliefs and hopes of the Jews between the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. and the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).



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<sup>11</sup>For historical background on all of these groups, see Flavius Josephus' *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews*, both of which are contained in *The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1980).

<sup>12</sup>See Matthew 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8.

# Chapter Six

## The Content of the New Testament

In this chapter, we will explore the literary, historical, and theological content of the 27 books of the New Testament, focusing our attention primarily on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and on the life and letters of the apostle Paul.

### THE GOSPELS

The word *gospel* means “good news,” and it is with the unimaginably good news of God’s loving provision for redemption that the first four books of the New Testament are concerned. Taken as a whole, the Gospels paint a rich, multi-faceted picture of the life and character of Jesus Christ. They tell the remarkable story of the Son of God, who came to Earth as a man and sacrificed His mortal life that we might be granted access to everlasting life.

In spite of their common subject, however, the four Gospels are quite distinct from one another. Each author has a unique style, and each targets a particular audience. Nevertheless, Matthew, Mark, and Luke do resemble each other closely in structure and content, and for this reason are often collectively referred to as the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>1</sup> The Gospel of John differs greatly from the others in tone, and many of the events John records are unique to his account. We will briefly consider some of the distinguishing features of each Gospel, and then make a more detailed examination of the life and ministry of Jesus.

### **Matthew**—Jesus, the Fulfillment of Old Testament Prophecy (28 chapters)

Matthew (also called Levi) was a Jewish tax collector who became one of Jesus’ 12 disciples and thus was a firsthand witness to many of the

events of Christ's ministry on Earth. His Gospel was written to appeal to a Jewish audience, and Matthew repeatedly attempts to demonstrate the ways in which Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah, whom the Jews had awaited for centuries. Matthew also appeals to Jewish tradition by beginning his Gospel with a genealogy that traces Jesus' ancestry back to King David and ultimately to Abraham.

While its basic content is quite similar to that of Mark and Luke, Matthew's Gospel does contain some unique elements. The author records several details concerning the events surrounding Jesus' birth that are absent from the other Gospels, including the angel's message to Joseph, the flight into Egypt, and the visit of the wise men. Matthew also contains the most familiar version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' best-known and most systematic discourse on the spiritual life.

## **Mark**—The Action-Packed Gospel (16 chapters)

Mark is the briefest of the four Gospels and is also thought by many scholars to be the first to be written. Well over 90 percent of its content is also found in one or both of the other Synoptic Gospels, leading some to speculate that Matthew and Luke drew from Mark's text in writing their accounts. The author, John Mark, was probably not a firsthand witness to Christ's ministry but, apparently, drew his information from the preaching of Peter and the other disciples. Mark was also an associate of Paul and accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary voyage as a young man.

Mark's intended audience seems to have been Gentile believers, as evidenced by the fact that he takes care to explain Jewish customs and translate certain Aramaic words.<sup>2</sup> Throughout his Gospel, Mark employs a terse, dramatic writing style, moving quickly from one event in Jesus' ministry to the next and focusing more on Jesus' actions than His teachings.

## **Luke**—The Babe in the Manger and the Great Storyteller (24 chapters)

Luke, like Mark, was not one of Jesus' disciples but a close associate of the apostle Paul. Scripture tells us that Luke was a physician, and his writing style confirms that he was a well-educated man with a great command of the Greek language.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the Gospel that bears his name, Luke also authored the Book of Acts. Both Books are specifically addressed to an individual named Theophilus, but Luke's writings are clearly intended to enrich the faith of all believers, and to appeal to both Jewish and Gentile audiences.

Luke presents the most comprehensive picture of Christ's life on Earth, from the annunciation to the ascension. His Gospel includes the familiar story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, as well as the account of Jesus teaching in the temple at the age of 12, the only event from His boyhood that is recorded in Scripture.

Another distinguishing feature of Luke's Gospel is its rich collection of Jesus' parables—colorful stories that He used to illustrate spiritual principles. Luke contains 28 parables, the most of any Gospel, and several of them (including the famous parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son) are found nowhere else.

## **John**—The Word Becomes Flesh (21 chapters)

The fourth Gospel is attributed to the apostle John, the brother of James and a member of Jesus' inner circle, who is also referred to as "the disciple whom Jesus loved."<sup>4</sup> The Gospel of John is profoundly different in several respects from its Synoptic counterparts. John ignores many of the most memorable episodes from the other Gospels, including Jesus' birth, His baptism and temptation, the Sermon on the Mount, the Transfiguration, the Great Commandment, the Great Commission, and the Ascension. He also recounts many events that are absent from the Synoptic Gospels, such as the changing of water into wine, the healing of the lame man at the pool of Bethesda, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, and the washing of the disciples' feet.

In addition to these differences in content, John's Gospel is also unique in terms of style and intent. While the Synoptic Gospels offer detailed, linear, historical narratives of Jesus' life and ministry on Earth, John seems to be more interested in presenting a broad view of who Jesus *was*, rather than focusing primarily on what He *did*. John goes to greater lengths than the other Gospel writers to emphasize the mystery of Christ's divine nature. Mark begins his Gospel with Jesus' baptism, Luke starts with His birth, and Matthew goes so far as to trace His ancestry back to Abraham, but only John begins at the Beginning. He emphasizes that Jesus was with God and *was* God before the creation of the world. John further establishes Jesus' identity as the Son of God by recording His seven "I am" statements and other lengthy theological discourses, which stand in sharp contrast to the terse action of Mark or the colorful parables of Luke.

But while John certainly emphasizes Christ's divinity, he also clearly portrays Jesus' humanity and compassion through his detailed descriptions of the Lord's interactions with people such as Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery, and Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. And though John's Gospel begins with the profound mystery of Jesus' eternal existence, it closes with a unique, touching account of Christ's humanness, in which Jesus cooks breakfast for His weary disciples and lovingly restores Peter, commissioning him to care for others. It is this multi-faceted picture of Jesus as both transcendent and tender that makes the Gospel of John so widely treasured.

## **The Life of Christ—A Harmony of the Gospels**

Having explored some of the distinguishing features of the four Gospels, we will now construct a composite picture of the life of Jesus that draws from each of them.

### **The Annunciation and the Birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:5–80)**

More than four centuries after the voice of the Lord had fallen silent

following the ministry of the prophet Malachi, God sent the angel Gabriel to Palestine, a remote corner of the Roman Empire whose borders roughly corresponded to those of the fallen kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Gabriel spoke only to one man in the temple at Jerusalem and one woman in the small Galilean village of Nazareth, but these two brief encounters set in motion God's master plan for redeeming all of humanity.

The man in question was Zechariah, an elderly priest who had no children because his wife, Elizabeth, was barren. Gabriel appeared to Zechariah as he was serving in the temple and told him that Elizabeth would give birth to a son who would turn the hearts of the people of Israel back to God, a son whom they were to name John. Much like his distant ancestors Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah questioned whether such a thing was possible at his age. Because of his doubts, Gabriel declared that, as evidence of God's power, Zechariah would not be able to speak until the child was born. Zechariah immediately became mute, and Elizabeth soon found herself pregnant.

The woman to whom Gabriel appeared was Elizabeth's cousin Mary, a young virgin who was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. The angel told Mary that she had found favor with God, that the Holy Spirit would cause her to become pregnant in spite of her virginity, and that she would give birth to a son, the Son of God, whom she was to name Jesus. Mary became pregnant as Gabriel had promised, and shortly thereafter, Elizabeth gave birth to John.

### **The Birth and Early Life of Jesus (Luke 2:1–20, 41–52; Matthew 1:18–2:23)**

When Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant, he planned to break their betrothal quietly, in order to spare them both any unnecessary shame. But an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and explained that the child in Mary's womb had been conceived by the Spirit. Thus reassured, Joseph took Mary as his wife. Mary, however, remained a virgin until after her child was born.

The Roman emperor at the time, Caesar Augustus, issued a decree that required everyone in the empire to travel to their ancestral homes for the purpose of taxation. Thus, with Mary expecting her baby soon, she and Joseph had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. When they arrived, they found that all the inns were full of travelers who had come to be taxed, so they were forced to stay in a stable.

While they were in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to a Son, whom they named Jesus. The unusual circumstances of His birth fulfilled several Old Testament prophecies, including Isaiah's prophecy that the Messiah would be born to a virgin and Micah's prophecy that He would be born in Bethlehem.<sup>5</sup> Jesus' arrival on Earth was announced by the appearance of an unusually bright star in the night sky, and Mary and Joseph were visited by a group of local shepherds who had been told by an angelic choir of this special Child's birth.

Not long afterward, three scholars from the East arrived in Palestine, having followed the star that heralded Jesus' birth. They found Mary and Joseph, and presented Jesus with precious gifts, but they also unwittingly alerted Herod the Great, the king of Galilee and Judea, to the existence of the child, whom they referred to as "the King of the Jews." Herod, feeling threatened by the existence of this so-called king, ordered the execution of all infant boys in Bethlehem and the surrounding areas. But Joseph had been warned by an angel in a dream, and he, Mary, and Jesus fled to Egypt, where they remained until the death of Herod.

Luke contains the only biblical account of Jesus' childhood, in which Jesus became separated from His parents during a Passover trip to Jerusalem and was later discovered in the temple, discussing the Scriptures with a group of religious teachers whom He impressed with His eloquence and understanding of the Word. Next to nothing is known of Jesus' adolescence or young adulthood. The Gospel writers resume their accounts with the beginning of His public ministry, approximately 30 years after His birth.

## **Jesus' Baptism and Temptation (Matthew 3:1–4:11; Mark 1:1–13; Luke 3:1–22; 4:1–13; John 1:19–34)**

Jesus' cousin John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, lived alone in the wilderness of Perea. Shortly before Jesus' ministry began in earnest, John began preaching that the Messiah was soon to come. He urged people to repent of their sins and baptized them in the Jordan River as a symbol of moral renewal, thus earning the moniker John the Baptist. John continually brushed aside speculation that he might be the Messiah, claiming that he was only a messenger preparing the way for the Lord.

One day, as John was baptizing people in the Jordan, Jesus approached him and asked to be baptized. Though John initially protested that he was unworthy to do such a thing, Jesus reassured him that it was God's will that the baptism take place. John relented; and as Jesus emerged from the water, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove, and the Father's voice came from heaven, expressing pleasure in His Son.

This glorious baptism comprised one-half of the final preparations Jesus underwent before beginning His ministry. The other half was far more difficult and painful. After being baptized, Jesus went into the wilderness to endure a 40-day period of fasting and being tempted by the devil. Satan attempted to disrupt Jesus' mission by enticing Him to use His power in selfish ways and by offering Him dominion over all the kingdoms of the world if He would worship him. Jesus resisted each of these temptations, relying on Scripture to rebuff Satan's arguments. The devil then left Jesus, and angels came to strengthen and attend to Him.

## **The Public Ministry of Jesus (Matthew 4–20; Mark 1–10; Luke 4–19; John 2–11)**

The public ministry of Jesus lasted approximately three years. We are dependent upon the Gospel of John for information about the first year, which the Synoptic Gospels largely ignore. During this time, Jesus



began gathering a group of disciples, encouraging people to be baptized and performing miracles, but all of this was done in relative obscurity. Apparently, Jesus' ministry became more widespread and well-known after John the Baptist's ministry ended with his imprisonment (and eventual execution) at the hands of Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great.<sup>6</sup>

The second year of Jesus' ministry was a time of increased notoriety and popular favor. Great numbers of people heard of His persuasive teachings and the many miracles He had performed, and they flocked to see and hear Him for themselves. But even as He was being embraced by the general populace, Jesus was being rejected by the people of Nazareth, His hometown. Consequently, Jesus moved to the city of Capernaum, which served as a temporary headquarters for Him and His disciples as they ministered throughout Galilee.

During the final year of His life on Earth, Jesus expanded His ministry into Judea and Perea. During this period, He faced ever-increasing opposition from the Jewish religious authorities. Jesus' Messianic claims, along with His policy of compassionately ministering to hurting people rather than strictly upholding the letter of the Jewish law, stirred up bitter resentment among some of the Pharisees. These men eventually dedicated themselves to seeing Jesus killed, leading ultimately to the events of the Passion.

Rather than undertaking a lengthy, chronological account of the events of Jesus' ministry prior to His last week on Earth, we will highlight a few important topics and themes, drawing appropriate examples from the Gospels.

## **The 12 Disciples**

Jesus' closest companions during His three years of ministry were 12 seemingly unremarkable men of differing backgrounds, most of whom would go on to become founding fathers of the Christian church: Simon Peter, his brother Andrew, James and John (who were also

brothers), Philip, Bartholomew (or Nathanael), Thomas, Matthew (or Levi), another James (the son of Alphaeus), Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot. These men became Jesus' disciples, His students and followers. Later, they were commissioned as apostles, sent out to do His work and spread His message to others.

It appears that the first of the disciples to encounter Jesus was Andrew, who had originally been a follower of John the Baptist. Andrew introduced his brother Peter to Jesus as well, but it was not until later that the two of them, along with James and John, gave up their occupations as fishermen to follow Jesus permanently. Philip and Bartholomew met Jesus the day after Andrew and Peter did and decided to become His disciples. Matthew left his job as a tax collector in order to follow Jesus. The Bible does not record Jesus' initial encounters with the remaining five disciples, but at some point during the second year of His ministry, Jesus chose these 12 men from among His followers so that they might be with Him and learn from Him. It was only after having spent considerable time walking at Jesus' side and learning at His feet that the disciples were sent out to share the gospel and to minister to the needs of others.<sup>7</sup>

At various times, the disciples proved themselves to be both loyal friends and spineless traitors. They performed miracles in Jesus' name, and they bickered amongst themselves like children. They often seemed confused by Jesus' teachings and uncertain about who He really was. In short, they were fully human, generally well-meaning but often misguided, much like all the followers of Jesus who have come after them.

## **The Teachings of Jesus**

Jesus' teachings are remarkable both for their form and their content. While He challenged the conventional religious wisdom of the Jews in a way that was truly revolutionary, He often used language that was remarkably simple and practical.

### **Parables**

One of Jesus' favorite teaching strategies was using parables—colorful

stories illustrating moral lessons—as a means of making complex spiritual truths easier to grasp for His audience. Among the most famous and compelling are the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Prodigal Son, and the Good Samaritan.

The following chart lists Jesus’ parables and their locations in the Gospels.

<b>The Parables of Jesus</b>	
<b>The Cost of Discipleship</b>	Luke 14:28–33
<b>The Faithful Servant</b>	Matthew 24:45–51; Luke 12:42–48
<b>The Fig Tree</b>	Matthew 24:32–35; Mark 13:28, 29; Luke 21:29–31
<b>The Friend in Need</b>	Luke 11:5–8
<b>The Good Samaritan</b>	Luke 10:30–37
<b>The Great Banquet</b>	Luke 14:16–24
<b>The Growing Seed</b>	Mark 4:26–29
<b>The Lamp Under a Bowl</b>	Matthew 5:14, 15; Mark 4:21, 22; Luke 8:16; 11:33
<b>The Lost Coin</b>	Luke 15:8–10
<b>The Lost Sheep</b>	Matthew 18:12–14; Luke 15:4–7
<b>The Lowest Seat at the Feast</b>	Luke 14:7–14
<b>The Master and His Servant</b>	Luke 17:7–10
<b>The Moneylender</b>	Luke 7:41–43
<b>The Mustard Seed</b>	Matthew 13:31, 32; Mark 4:30–32; Luke 13:18, 19
<b>The Net</b>	Matthew 13:47–50
<b>The New Cloth on an Old Coat</b>	Matthew 9:16; Mark 2:21; Luke 5:36
<b>The New Wine in Old Wineskins</b>	Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37, 38
<b>The Owner of a House</b>	Matthew 13:52
<b>The Pearl of Great Price</b>	Matthew 13:45, 46
<b>The Persistent Widow</b>	Luke 18:2–8

<b>The Pharisee and the Tax Collector</b>	Luke 18:10–14
<b>The Prodigal Son</b>	Luke 15:11–32
<b>The Rich Fool</b>	Luke 12:16–21
<b>The Rich Man and Lazarus</b>	Luke 16:19–31
<b>The Sheep and the Goats</b>	Matthew 25:31–46
<b>The Shrewd Manager</b>	Luke 16:1–8
<b>The Sower and the Soils</b>	Matthew 13:3–23; Mark 4:3–20; Luke 8:5–15
<b>The Talents</b>	Matthew 25:14–30; Luke 19:12–27
<b>The Ten Virgins</b>	Matthew 25:1–13
<b>The Tenants</b>	Matthew 21:33–44; Mark 12:1–11; Luke 20:9–18
<b>The Treasure Hidden in a Field</b>	Matthew 13:44
<b>The Two Sons</b>	Matthew 21:28–32
<b>The Unfruitful Fig Tree</b>	Luke 13:6–9
<b>The Unmerciful Servant</b>	Luke 18:23–34
<b>The Watchful Servants</b>	Mark 13:35–37; Luke 12:35–40
<b>The Wedding Banquet</b>	Matthew 22:2–14
<b>The Weeds</b>	Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43
<b>The Wise and Foolish Builders</b>	Matthew 7:24–27; Luke 6:47–49
<b>The Workers in the Vineyard</b>	Matthew 20:1–16
<b>The Yeast</b>	Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20, 21

**The Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes (Matthew 5–7; Luke 6:17–49)**

While much of Jesus’ teaching took the form of parables, perhaps His greatest legacy as a teacher is the Sermon on the Mount, a lengthy discourse on moral and ethical matters that He delivered to a large crowd shortly after the choosing of the 12 disciples.

In this sermon, Jesus challenged His listeners to pursue righteousness and spiritual maturity that went beyond the strict legalism of Jewish religion. The Law condemned murder and adultery, but Jesus warned

against the hatred and lust that lay behind these actions. The Law urged people to love their neighbors but allowed for retribution against those who had wronged them. Jesus told His followers to love their enemies and not to seek revenge. The Law said, “Do not get a divorce without a certificate.” Jesus said, “Do not get a divorce without evidence of unfaithfulness.” The Law said, “Don’t break your oaths.” Jesus said, “Don’t make oaths.” In every instance, Christ’s words serve not to undermine or contradict the teachings of the Law, but to strengthen and extend them; not to add new rules to an already voluminous legal code, but to illustrate the spirit that was to accompany (and occasionally supersede) adherence to the Law.

In addition to this radical commentary on Jewish law and tradition, the Sermon on the Mount contains many other important spiritual teachings. Jesus explains that His followers are to act as salt and light, providing illumination, preservation, and a unique flavor to the society around them. He exhorts them to regularly pray, fast, and give to the needy, and to do so with proper motives. He urges them not to worry needlessly about the future, but to trust in God’s provision. He sternly warns them not to judge others, lest they, too, be judged. Jesus concludes the Sermon by instructing the crowds to put into practice all that they have heard from Him, that their faith might have a firm foundation.

But perhaps the most celebrated portion of the Sermon on the Mount is its first few lines, a collection of blessings known as the Beatitudes. In them, Jesus turns traditional notions of power and success on their heads, maintaining that it is those who are often overlooked or held in contempt—the poor in spirit, the meek, the sorrowful, the persecuted—who are truly blessed.

## The Beatitudes

### Matthew 5:3–12

<sup>3</sup>Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

<sup>5</sup>Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup>Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

<sup>7</sup>Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

<sup>8</sup>Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

<sup>9</sup>Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

<sup>10</sup>Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup>Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

<sup>12</sup>Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

### The “I Am” Sayings

While the Gospel of John does not record the Sermon on the Mount, and is the only Gospel that contains no parables, it does feature important teachings of Jesus that are unique to its pages, most notably the seven “I Am” sayings of Christ. In contrast to the teachings contained in the Synoptics, which largely consist of instructions for the spiritual life, these seven statements focus on the identity of Jesus Himself.

The “I Am” sayings provide us with analogies that help us understand Jesus’ true nature and our relationship to Him. He is presented as the bread that feeds us, the shepherd that leads us, the vine that provides us with nutrients, and the light that guides us. And while these four analogies depict Jesus as our present help, the others present Him as our eternal hope. He is the Door by which we enter into salvation, the

Truth to which we cling, the Resurrection that assures us that death will not be the end of us, the Way by which we are granted access to eternal life, and the Life itself, within which all of our lives find their ultimate expression and fulfillment.

### **The “I Am” Sayings of Christ**

1. “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35).
2. “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12).
3. “I am the door [gate]” (John 10:7).
4. “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11).
5. “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).
6. “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).
7. “I am the true vine” (John 15:1).

### **The Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4)**

The model prayer that we have come to know as the Lord’s Prayer is recorded by both Matthew and Luke. According to Luke’s account, Jesus taught this prayer to His disciples in response to their request that He teach them how to pray. The prayer offers a concise framework around which believers may structure their conversations with God, and it has proved to be a source of strength and inspiration for Christians around the world throughout history.

## The Lord's Prayer

### Matthew 6:9–13

<sup>9</sup>After this manner therefore pray ye:

Our Father which art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.

<sup>10</sup>Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done  
in earth, as it is in heaven.

<sup>11</sup>Give us this day our daily bread.

<sup>12</sup>And forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors.

<sup>13</sup>And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil:  
For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power,  
and the glory, for ever.  
Amen.

### The Great Commandment and the New Commandment (Matthew 22:37–40; John 13:34, 35)

Jesus' teaching often attracted learned religious men who sought His opinions, either for genuine personal enrichment or with the intention of trapping Him in a doctrinal controversy. On one such occasion, Jesus was asked, "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus' response was to take two Old Testament verses (Leviticus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 6:5) and combine them into what has become known as the Great Commandment: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37–40). With these words, Jesus revealed that the Jewish Scriptures, which the Pharisees treated



as a labyrinthine legal code intended to produce personal righteousness, could actually be distilled down to an insistence on loving relationships with God and one another.

On the night before His death, Jesus reemphasized the importance of relationships by issuing what He labeled “a new commandment”: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34, 35 NIV). While the passage from Leviticus that Jesus incorporated into the Great Commandment urged that they should love their neighbors as themselves, this new commandment set a higher standard for the disciples: that they should love one another *as Christ had loved them*—deeply, sacrificially, and unconditionally. Jesus revealed that such love will be the only compelling evidence that they are truly His disciples, a truth that the church has, sadly, too often forgotten.

**Teachings on the End Times (Matthew 24:1–51;  
Mark 13:1–37; Luke 12:35–48; 17:22–37; 21:5–36)**

Finally, though they are not as well-known or quotable as the teachings we have already examined, we must consider Jesus’ words concerning the end of the age and the second coming, which He delivered to His followers during the last week of His life. When the disciples asked Jesus to describe the circumstances leading up to the end of the age, He told them that the initial signs would include the rise to prominence of false Messiahs, wars, famine, and natural disasters. Many Christians would then be persecuted and killed for their beliefs, and others would renounce their faith. Finally, the Son of Man would appear in the skies, accompanied by angels who would gather His children to Him.

However, Jesus went on to caution the disciples that having an understanding of the sequence of events that would lead up to the end of the world was really of secondary significance. The most important thing was maintaining a constant state of vigilance and spiritual preparedness for the Lord’s return. Jesus told the disciples that no man had any idea when He would appear, and neither did the angels,

nor even the Son, but only the Father. He did warn the disciples, however, that it would occur when they least expected it. In light of all this, He encouraged them to be like humble servants who faithfully perform the work their master has given them, knowing full well that He might return at any moment.

## **The Miracles of Jesus**

The Gospel of John records that Jesus' first miraculous act was performed at a wedding in the town of Cana, during which He transformed a large amount of water into an exceptionally fine wine, thus sparing the wedding host a great deal of embarrassment. Jesus went on to perform dozens of miracles over the course of His ministry, often using humble materials and unorthodox methods to spectacular effect. He used saliva and mud to cure blindness, cast out demons with the aid of a herd of pigs, and turned sack lunches into meals for thousands of people.

Often Jesus healed with a touch. Other times, His word was enough. Once, a miracle of healing occurred when a woman simply reached out and grasped His garment. On two other occasions, He healed the sick from long distances, without ever laying eyes on them. He ministered to the needs of beloved friends, social outcasts, foreigners, and even a man who had been sent to arrest Him. He exhibited His control over plants, animals, the weather, and even the law of gravity. Nothing was outside the scope of His powers, and no one was disqualified from receiving His mercy.

There is no question that the miracles Jesus performed during His public ministry were an important factor in His rapid rise to notoriety, and they remain a major reason for people's interest in Him today. Yet Jesus Himself sometimes told others to keep His miracles quiet, occasionally seemed exasperated at having to perform them, and refused to use them as a means of getting people to believe in Him.<sup>8</sup> Thus, a close reading of the Gospels reveals that Jesus' miracles were not primarily intended as either attention-grabbing spectacles or irrefutable apologetics for His divinity. Rather, they were performed in

the context of ministering to needy people—the sick, the maimed, the oppressed, the hungry, the grieving, the hopeless. The relational impact of each miracle was always of primary importance; the supernatural elements were merely means to an end. To illustrate this important principle, let us consider three of Jesus' most well-known miracles: the calming of the storm, the feeding of the five thousand, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

**The Calming of the Storm (Matthew 8:23–27; Mark 4:37–41; Luke 8:22–25)**

Demonstrating control over the weather is just the kind of large-scale, irrefutable miracle that many clamored for, the kind that might have caused great numbers of people to acknowledge Jesus' divinity. Yet Jesus did not calm a storm at midday in the midst of a large crowd in a major city. He did it at night, from a small boat in the middle of a lake, with only the disciples for an audience. Clearly, He was not motivated by a desire for attention. Nor was He concerned with His own comfort, convenience, or safety—indeed, He was sound asleep in the back of the boat as the storm raged. Rather, He quieted the wind and waves because of His loving care for His friends, who were wet, tired, and terrified. The disciples' response—"What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?"—reveals that the incident forced them to reappraise their understanding of Jesus' power. But it also undoubtedly left them with a deepened sense of His love and compassion.

**The Feeding of the Five Thousand (Matthew 14:15–21; Mark 6:35–44; Luke 9:12–17; John 6:6–13)**

Jesus did not reserve His tender care for the disciples alone, however. On another occasion, He was surrounded by a crowd of thousands who had come to be healed of sicknesses and to hear His teaching. As the hour grew late, Jesus became concerned for the multitude because they had been with Him for hours and had not eaten anything. He told the disciples to see if they could come up with any food, and they found a young boy in the crowd who had five loaves of bread and two

small fish. From this meager supply, Jesus made enough food to satisfy more than five thousand people.

Clearly, this was a remarkable act, even by Jesus' standards. In fact, the feeding of the five thousand is the only one of Jesus' miracles to be recorded by all four Gospel writers. But just as with the calming of the storm, it is clear from the Gospels' accounts that Jesus did not perform this miracle to impress the crowd or convince them of His power. There is no clear evidence that anyone but the disciples even knew exactly how little food He had to begin with, and when those who realized that something miraculous had happened began to murmur about Jesus' great power, He quickly fled the scene. Instead, it seems that Christ's only motivation was to ensure that every single hungry person went away satisfied, including His disciples, who, after completing the wearying task of distributing food to the vast throng, found that there was a full basket of leftovers for each of them.

### **The Raising of Lazarus (John 11:1–44)**

The raising of Lazarus from the dead was one of Jesus' final public miracles, and John records that it was this miracle that set in motion the events leading to Christ's arrest and crucifixion. When Jesus first received the news of His friend Lazarus' illness, He chose not to travel to the town of Bethany right away. Instead, He waited a few days, eventually arriving after Lazarus had already died and been buried. This hesitation on Jesus' part is perplexing at first glance, and it was certainly disappointing and hurtful to Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, who, undoubtedly, expected Jesus to come at once and heal their brother, just as He had healed so many others.

Once Jesus arrived in Bethany, He comforted the grieving sisters, demonstrating empathy for their suffering and reassuring them of both His power and His love. He then raised Lazarus from the dead, thus quelling His friends' momentary sorrow, but the question remains: Why did Jesus choose to handle the situation as He did? He could have come and healed Lazarus before he succumbed to his illness, sparing

Mary, Martha, and the townspeople of Bethany much sorrow. On the other hand, He could have allowed Lazarus to remain dead, understanding not only that Lazarus was better off having left Earth behind, but also that he would inevitably die again, that his resurrection was a temporary solution to the inexorable problem of human mortality.

Once again, the explanation is to be found in terms of relationships—not only Jesus’ relationship with the sisters, who probably would have favored a quick healing, or His relationship with Lazarus, who might have preferred to leave his earthly life behind (although these relationships were clearly very important to Jesus), but also His relationship with the disciples. The Gospel of John reveals that the disciples were very hesitant to travel to Bethany at all because they feared death at the hands of the religious leaders who sought to silence Jesus. The resurrection of Lazarus was, in part, Jesus’ way of preparing the disciples for His own impending death, and the persecutions and martyrdoms that many of them would ultimately endure. It showed them that death was not the final word, that it was not to be feared. They gained reassurance that Jesus’ power was sufficient to overcome bodily death, and that, if they believed in Him, even the eventual death of their bodies would not be enough to take life from them.

The following chart lists Jesus’ miracles and their locations in the Gospels.

<b>The Miracles of Jesus</b>	
<b>Changing Water Into Wine</b>	John 2:1–11
<b>Healing of the Official’s Son at Capernaum</b>	John 4:46–54
<b>A Large Catch of Fish</b>	Luke 5:4–11
<b>Healing of a Possessed Man in the Synagogue</b>	Mark 1:23–26; Luke 4:33–35
<b>Healing of Peter’s Mother-in-Law</b>	Matthew 8:14, 15; Mark 1:30, 31; Luke 4:38, 39
<b>Healing of a Leper</b>	Matthew 8:2–4; Mark 1:40–42; Luke 5:12, 13

<b>Healing of a Paralytic</b>	Matthew 9:2–7; Mark 2:3–12; Luke 5:18–25
<b>Healing of a Man at the Pool of Bethesda</b>	John 5:1–9
<b>Healing of a Man with a Withered Hand</b>	Matthew 12:10–13; Mark 3:1–5; Luke 6:6–10
<b>Healing of a Centurion’s Servant</b>	Matthew 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10
<b>Raising From the Dead of the Widow’s Son</b>	Luke 7:11–15
<b>Healing of a Blind, Mute Demoniac</b>	Matthew 12:22; Luke 11:14
<b>Calming the Storm</b>	Matthew 8:23–27; Mark 4:37–41; Luke 8:22–25
<b>Healing of the Gerasene Demoniac(s)</b>	Matthew 8:28–34; Mark 5:1–15; Luke 8:27–35
<b>Healing of a Woman With an Issue of Blood</b>	Matthew 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–29; Luke 8:43–48
<b>Raising From the Dead of Jairus’ Daughter</b>	Matthew 9:18, 19, 23–25; Mark 5:22–24, 38–42; Luke 8:41, 42, 49–56
<b>Healing of Two Blind Men</b>	Matthew 9:27–31
<b>Healing of a Mute Demoniac</b>	Matthew 9:32, 33
<b>Feeding of the Five Thousand</b>	Matthew 14:15–21; Mark 6:35–44; Luke 9:12–17; John 6:6–13
<b>Walking on Water/Calming the Wind</b>	Matthew 14:24–33; Mark 6:47–52; John 6:16–21
<b>Healing of the Syro-Phoenician Girl</b>	Matthew 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–30
<b>Healing of a Deaf-Mute Man</b>	Mark 7:31–37
<b>Feeding of the Four Thousand</b>	Matthew 15:32–38; Mark 8:1–9
<b>Healing of a Blind Man at Bethsaida</b>	Mark 8:22–26
<b>Healing of a Demon-Possessed Boy</b>	Matthew 17:14–18; Mark 9:17–29; Luke 9:38–43

<b>A Coin From the Mouth of a Fish</b>	Matthew 17:24–27
<b>Healing of a Man Born Blind in the Pool of Siloam</b>	John 9:1–7
<b>Healing of a Crippled Woman</b>	Luke 13:11–13
<b>Healing of a Man with Dropsy</b>	Luke 14:1–4
<b>Raising From the Dead of Lazarus</b>	John 11:1–44
<b>Healing of Ten Lepers</b>	Luke 17:11–19
<b>Healing of Bartimaeus and His Friend</b>	Matthew 20:29–34; Mark 10:46–52; Luke 18:35–43
<b>Withering of the Fig Tree</b>	Matthew 21:18–22; Mark 11:12–14, 20–25
<b>Healing of the High Priest’s Servant’s Ear</b>	Luke 22:50, 51
<b>A Large Catch of Fish After the Resurrection</b>	John 21:1–11

## **Jesus’ Other Encounters**

In addition to the many miracles that Jesus performed, the Gospels also record several other significant meetings that He had with various people during His ministry, many of which are unique to the Gospel of John. While more mundane on the surface, these encounters often proved to be just as miraculous and transformational as any of Jesus’ physical healings.

### **Nicodemus (John 3:1–21)**

Nicodemus was a Jewish religious leader who sought an audience with Jesus at night, presumably because he feared the censure of his comrades. He was apparently a sincere and inquisitive man who truly sought to understand the teachings of Jesus, but he, like many others, found it difficult to grasp Jesus’ radical reinterpretation of traditional Jewish religion.

It was during this conversation with Nicodemus that Jesus introduced the spiritual metaphor of “being born again,” emphasizing that rebirth through the Spirit is a prerequisite for life in the kingdom of God. This discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus also provided the context for

what is arguably the most well-known verse in the entire Bible, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” While Nicodemus apparently left without being fully convinced, later evidence suggests that he became a believer.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Woman at the Well (John 4:1–42)**

Shortly after talking with Nicodemus, Jesus was traveling with the disciples from Judea to Galilee and chose to pass through Samaria, whose inhabitants had a longstanding enmity with the Jews. While the disciples ventured into the city of Sychar, Jesus rested by a well on the outskirts of town. There He encountered a Samaritan woman who had come to fetch water. Though it was taboo for a Jewish man to speak to a woman in public (much less a *Samaritan* woman), Jesus began to converse with her. He used the water in the well as the inspiration for a metaphor in which He described Himself as the source of living water, which He said could fully satisfy the woman’s soul and grant her access to eternal life. While the woman did not fully understand Jesus’ words, He was able to intrigue her further by revealing that He knew about the events of her past (including her series of failed marriages), which had apparently made her an outcast among the people of Sychar.

Having concluded that Jesus must be a prophet, the woman questioned Him about whether she should worship in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim, a controversy that divided Jews and Samaritans. Jesus told her that it did not really matter *where* people worshiped; it was more important that their worship was genuine. As they talked, the woman gradually became convinced that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, and, in spite of her differences with the townspeople, she proceeded to excitedly share the news with them, with the result that many of them came to believe in Jesus also. Thus, through Jesus’ influence and investment in her, this most unlikely of figures—a woman, a foreigner, and a social outcast—became, in a sense, the first Christian missionary.

### **The Woman Caught in Adultery (John 8:1–11)**

The third and final major encounter recorded in the Gospel of John is,



in many ways, the most striking. It occurred early one morning as Jesus was teaching in the courts of the temple at Jerusalem. A group of Pharisees interrupted the proceedings by dragging in a woman whom they had caught in the act of adultery and asking Jesus what should be done to her. They were trying to trap Jesus—if He said she should be pardoned, He would be contradicting the Jewish Law (which demanded that adulterers be stoned to death), but if He assented to her execution, He would be undermining His own teaching and would undoubtedly lose the esteem of many of His followers.

Jesus' solution to this dilemma was both ingenious and deeply affecting. He simply said, "If anyone of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (v. 7 NIV). With these words, He protected the woman's life without defying the Law, and the Pharisees were forced to drop their stones and slink away. Jesus lovingly told the woman that He would cast no stones at her either (though He was the only one present who could legitimately claim to be without sin), but He also instructed her to leave behind her life of sin. It was this combination of unswerving righteousness and unfathomable mercy that separated Jesus from the Jewish authorities, and that fueled their increasing hatred of Him.

### **Peter's Confession of Christ and the Transfiguration (Matthew 16:13–17:13; Mark 8:27–9:13; Luke 9:18–36)**

Of all the encounters that Jesus had during His ministry, one stands apart as utterly unique. It was a meeting not with a diseased man or a distraught woman, an inquisitive follower or an accusatory Pharisee, but with God the Father and two long-dead Old Testament figures, Moses and Elijah.

This remarkable event was prefaced by an important conversation between Jesus and the disciples at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus asked His followers, "Who do people say that I am?" They replied that there were several popular theories: some thought Jesus was a reincarnated John the Baptist, while others believed He was Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other Old Testament prophets. Jesus then posed the question to the disciples—"Who do *you* say that I am?" Peter replied, "You are the

Christ, the Son of the living God.” This marked the first time that any of Jesus’ disciples had explicitly acknowledged Jesus’ divinity and His identity as the Son of God.

Jesus affirmed Peter’s answer, saying that it was God the Father who had revealed this to him and promising that Peter would play a key role in the foundation of Christ’s church. From this point on, Jesus began to emphasize to the disciples the nearness, inevitability, and eternal importance of His death though He also assured them that after three days in the grave, He would rise again. While Peter initially protested that Jesus would never die, Jesus rebuked him and said that those who wished to truly follow Him must be willing to lay down their lives, just as He was preparing to do.

These discussions set the stage for the Transfiguration, which took place a few days later. Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him and ascended a nearby mountain to pray. When they reached the top of the mountain, Jesus’ appearance was transformed. His face shone brightly, and His garments turned a dazzling white. Moses and Elijah then appeared and began talking with Jesus about His mission. When Peter somewhat foolishly suggested that they should build three shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah in order to commemorate the occasion, God the Father spoke from heaven, reaffirming that Christ was His beloved Son and instructing the disciples to listen to Him (as opposed, presumably, to building shelters for Him). The Transfiguration thus provided a fuller revelation of Jesus’ glory, confirmation of Peter’s words at Caesarea Philippi, and encouragement for the disciples, who would quickly have to come to grips with the terrible reality of their Master’s impending sacrifice.

## **The Events of Passion Week**

Shortly after the resurrection of Lazarus, Jesus and His disciples journeyed to Jerusalem in preparation for the Passover. Although Jesus’ arrival in the city occasioned a great celebration among the populace, within the week He would be betrayed, arrested, abandoned, mocked,

beaten, and executed. The events of this single week in a relatively insignificant corner of the Roman Empire would powerfully and irrevocably alter the course of human history.

**The Triumphal Entry (Matthew 21:1–11; Mark 11:1–11; Luke 19:28–44)**

After spending some time at Bethany, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a Sunday, riding into the city on the back of a donkey that the disciples had borrowed from a man in a nearby village. Jesus was greeted by a throng of people who honored Him by strewing garments and palm branches in His path and shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” (Mark 11:9)! Undoubtedly, many of those who had assembled to welcome Jesus viewed His arrival as that of a conquering king, the long-awaited Messiah who would deliver His chosen people from the tyranny of Roman rule. But these hopes would quickly be proved false, and the jubilation of the Jews would turn to bitterness and hatred.

**Cleansing the Temple (Matthew 21:12, 13; Mark 11:15–18; Luke 19:45–48)**

The day after arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus visited the temple and, to His dismay, found the courtyard filled with merchants who were exchanging currencies and selling sacrificial animals. Angered by this desecration of the Lord’s house, Jesus overturned the tables of the merchants and drove them from the temple, chastising them for transforming a house of prayer into a den of thieves.<sup>10</sup>

**The Plot to Kill Jesus (Matthew 26:1–5, 14–16; Mark 11:18; 14:10, 11; Luke 19:47, 48; 22:1–6; John 11:45–57)**

Following the incident at the temple, the Pharisees and chief priests assembled and began plotting to arrest and kill Jesus. Because of the tremendous amount of popular support that Jesus had, the Jewish leaders knew that they would have to act very cautiously in order to avoid widespread unrest. They resolved not to act until the Passover feast had ended, hoping that this would reduce the chance of rioting. But there was still no consensus regarding the best way to get at Jesus.

The Pharisees' problem was solved for them when one of Jesus' 12 disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was under the influence of Satan, approached them and offered to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. The priests and Pharisees gladly accepted the offer, and together with Judas they outlined a plan whereby Jesus would be delivered to them.

**The Last Supper (Matthew 26:17–35; Mark 14:12–31; Luke 22:7–38; John 13:1–17:26)**

On the night of the Passover, Jesus and His 12 disciples gathered in a house to share one final meal together. The traditional Passover meal of lamb, bitter herbs, and unleavened bread was served, and as they ate, Jesus began preparing the disciples for His departure by leading them in two rituals that retain deep significance even today. First, He took a towel and a basin of water and, in an act of remarkable humility, washed the disciples' feet, a duty normally reserved for the lowliest servant. Jesus urged them to serve one another with the same spirit of selflessness, rejecting earthly notions of status and power. Then He took bread and wine and shared it with the disciples, explaining that the bread was symbolic of His body, which would soon be broken for them. The wine signified His blood, which would be spilt for them. He instructed them to repeat this ritual (which has come to be known variously as the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion) in remembrance of Him.

According to John's account, the Last Supper was the occasion of several other important teachings, including the New Commandment and the "I am the way, the truth, and the life" and "I am the true vine" discourses. Jesus also reassured the disciples that He would prepare a place for them in heaven and that after He had returned to the Father, He would send the Holy Spirit to comfort and guide them.

Not all of Jesus' words were so reassuring, however. He also revealed to the disciples that one of them—one of His dearest friends, who had spent the better part of three years by His side—would betray Him to His enemies. Upon hearing this, Judas left the room and prepared to execute the plan He had hatched with the Pharisees. Jesus went on to

predict that the disciples would all abandon Him before the night was over and that Peter would go so far as to deny knowing Him three times before the rooster crowed. These words caused a great deal of sorrow, uncertainty, and denial among the disciples, and it was with heavy hearts that the group left the house and set out for the Mount of Olives.

## **The Arrest and Trial of Jesus**

True to Jesus' predictions, the hours immediately following the Last Supper were very dark indeed. The disciples were soon overcome by fear, guilt, and despair while Jesus was tormented by the much more tangible implements of whips, thorns, and fists. But before His abuse at the hands of the Romans, Jesus faced a much more difficult confrontation with His Father and His own humanity.

### **The Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36–46; Mark 14:32–42; Luke 22:39–46)**

After leaving the scene of the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples made their way to the Mount of Olives and entered a garden called Gethsemane, where Jesus often went to pray. After instructing the other disciples to wait, Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him and went further into the garden. Telling these three to watch and pray with Him, Jesus moved a short distance away and prayed passionately and sorrowfully, to the point that He began to sweat drops of blood. He asked God to spare Him the suffering that was to come, but He emphasized that, ultimately, He wanted the will of His Father to be done. Having made peace with the inevitable necessity of His sacrifice, Jesus returned to the disciples, only to find them asleep. He quickly roused them, warning them that His betrayer's arrival was imminent.

### **Judas' Betrayal (Matthew 26:47–56; 27:1–10; Mark 14:43–52; Luke 22:47–53; John 18:1–11)**

Having contacted his co-conspirators following his hasty departure from the Last Supper, Judas arrived in the garden accompanied by a contingent of soldiers sent by the chief priests and Pharisees. Judas identified Jesus to these accomplices by the pre-arranged signal of

greeting Him with a kiss. The armed men then seized Jesus, and Peter drew a sword and cut off the ear of one of the high priest's servants, a man named Malchus. Jesus instructed the disciples not to resist, saying that His arrest was necessary in order to fulfill prophecy and accomplish the Father's purposes. Then, in an incredible display of compassion toward one who had come to wrongfully arrest Him, Jesus healed the man's ear. As the mob led Jesus away, His disciples, overcome by their fear and confusion, fled the garden, abandoning their Lord to His captors.

Having fulfilled his bargain with the Pharisees, Judas was free to enjoy the silver for which he had sold his friend and master. But Judas found himself seized by great remorse and tried to return the money to the chief priests, claiming that he had sinned by betraying an innocent man. When the Jewish leaders offered no sympathy and claimed that Judas' guilt was his own responsibility, Judas threw the silver pieces into the temple, fled to a nearby field, and hanged himself. Though Jesus' love was great enough to offer even Judas forgiveness, it appears that Judas could not forgive himself.

**Jesus Before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin (Matthew 26:57–68; Mark 14:53–65; Luke 22:63–71; John 18:12–14, 19–24)**

The men who arrested Jesus in the garden led Him to the house of Caiaphas, the ruling high priest. After first being briefly interviewed by Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas and a former high priest, Jesus was brought before Caiaphas and the assembled Sanhedrin. These men were seeking evidence against Jesus that would allow them to justify putting Him to death. But although many false witnesses against Jesus came forward, their stories contradicted each other, and the Sanhedrin could find no just cause for having Him put to death. Finally, Caiaphas confronted Jesus directly, charging Him to tell the Sanhedrin whether He was indeed the Son of God. When Jesus replied that He was, the high priest tore his garments and accused Jesus of blasphemy. On this basis, the Sanhedrin agreed that He must be put to death.

**Peter's Denial (Matthew 26:69–75; Mark 14:66–72; Luke 22:54–62; John 18:15–18, 25–27)**

As this confrontation between Jesus and the Sanhedrin was taking

place, Peter was facing his own sort of trial. Having followed the crowd to the house of Caiaphas, Peter remained in the courtyard as Jesus was being interrogated. As he was warming himself by a fire, Peter was approached by a servant girl who insisted that Peter was one of Jesus' followers. Peter adamantly denied her claims and moved away. When someone else approached Peter with a similar accusation, he denied it again. When he was accosted a third time, Peter lashed out vehemently, swearing that he did not even know Jesus. At that moment, a rooster crowed, and according to Luke, Jesus turned and caught Peter's eye. When he heard the rooster, Peter was suddenly and forcefully reminded of Jesus' words to him at the Last Supper, and as he was struck by the awful reality of what he had done, Peter fled from the courtyard and wept.

**Jesus Before Pilate and Herod (Matthew 27:11–31;  
Mark 15:1–20; Luke 23:1–25; John 18:28–19:16)**

The Sanhedrin led Jesus to the palace of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. Pilate initially told the Jews to handle the matter themselves, but they protested that they had no right to carry out the death penalty.<sup>11</sup> Pilate then agreed to hear the case against Jesus.

The Jewish leaders accused Jesus of inciting rebellion and of claiming to be the King of the Jews. Jesus refused to answer these charges and remained silent as the Jews made their accusations. However, when Pilate asked Him directly if He was the king of the Jews, He admitted that He was though He emphasized that His was not an earthly kingdom to compete with that of the Roman Caesar, but rather a spiritual kingdom.

Based on this initial interview, Pilate determined that there was no basis for the charges against Jesus. But when he announced this to the Jews, they insisted that Pilate execute Him. During the course of their protests, Pilate learned that Jesus was a Galilean. Therefore, he sent Jesus to appear before Herod Antipas, the Roman governor of Galilee, who happened to be in Jerusalem because it was the week of the Passover feast. This Herod was the man who had executed John the

Baptist and was the son of Herod the Great, who had ruled at the time of Jesus' birth. Like Pilate, Herod saw no reason to execute Jesus, and rather than making a ruling on the matter, he simply sent the prisoner back to Pilate.

Pilate resolved to simply have Jesus beaten and then released, but the Jewish leaders persisted in their demands that Jesus be crucified. It was apparently a tradition for the Roman governor to release one Jewish prisoner during the Passover feast. So, in an effort to placate the mob, Pilate told them that they could choose whom he should release—Jesus or a murderer and insurrectionist named Barabbas. Undoubtedly, Pilate thought that, once confronted with this choice, the Jewish leaders would relent and allow Jesus to go free. But he underestimated the Jews' hatred and fear of Jesus, and a cry quickly went up for Barabbas' release. Faced with the realization that nothing less than Jesus' execution would appease the mob, Pilate brought out a basin of water and washed his hands, symbolically absolving himself of the shedding of innocent blood. He then turned Jesus over to the Roman soldiers for crucifixion.

### **The Crucifixion (Matthew 27:27–66; Mark 15:16–47; Luke 23:26–56; John 19:1–42)**

The soldiers scourged Jesus mercilessly with whips, stripped Him of His clothes, and mocked Him by outfitting Him as a king with a purple robe, a scepter, and a painful crown made of thorns. They spit on Him, bowed their knees in mock worship, and struck Him on the head with the scepter. The soldiers compelled a man named Simon, from Cyrene, to carry Jesus' cross, presumably, because Jesus was too weak from the beatings He had endured to carry it Himself, as was customary. Then they led Him away to be crucified, along with two other criminals, at the traditional site of such executions, which was known in Hebrew as *Golgotha* (which means "Place of the Skull"), and in Latin as *Calvary*.

Jesus and the two criminals were nailed to crosses, with Jesus' being in the middle. At the top of Jesus' cross, where the charges against the



condemned normally appeared, Pilate affixed a sign that read simply, “The King of the Jews.” After completing the task of raising the crosses, the soldiers divided Jesus’ clothes among them and gambled for His coat. As this was taking place, Jesus prayed to God on behalf of His persecutors, saying, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

Despite this remarkable display of forgiveness and compassion, Jesus continued to take abuse from all sides. The crowds taunted Him, telling Him to come down from the cross if He truly was the Son of God. The priests and elders said, “He saved others; let him save himself” (Luke 23:35). Even one of the criminals joined in, mockingly asking Jesus to save Himself and them as well. But the second criminal rebuked the first, telling him that, while they deserved their punishments for the crimes they had committed, Jesus had done nothing wrong. The man then asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom, and Jesus promised the man that he would be with Him in paradise.

The criminal was not the only recipient of Jesus’ individual attention and compassion. Christ also took time to provide for the needs of His mother, Mary, who stood near the foot of His cross along with some other women and the apostle John. Jesus commended Mary into John’s care, saying that from that day forward she was to be a mother to him, and he was to be a son to her.

After Jesus had hung on the cross for three hours, a supernatural darkness descended upon the whole land. After three more hours of darkness, the events of which the Gospels do not record, Jesus cried out, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani,*” meaning “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34)? Shortly thereafter, Jesus said, “I thirst,” and He was allowed to drink a bit of wine vinegar from a sponge that was lifted to His lips on a stalk of hyssop (John 19:28). He then cried out, “It is finished,” and said, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (John 19:30; Luke 23:46). With these words, Jesus died.

Immediately, the supernatural significance of Christ's death was made strikingly clear. An earthquake shook the ground, opening graves from which dead saints began to rise to life. The veil in the temple that separated the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place was torn from top to bottom, signifying the end of the efficacy of the Old Testament system of atonement in light of Jesus' sacrifice. Upon witnessing these miraculous happenings, one of the Roman centurions concluded, "Truly this was the Son of God" (Matthew 27:54).

After thrusting a spear in His side to ensure that He was dead, the soldiers removed Jesus' body from the cross. A disciple named Joseph, from Arimathea, was granted permission by Pilate to bury the body properly. Joseph and Nicodemus took Jesus' body, wrapped it with spices in strips of linen, and placed it in a new tomb that Joseph owned. Because Jesus' predictions of His own resurrection were well-known, the Pharisees had guards placed at the tomb to prevent Jesus' followers from removing the body and claiming that He had risen from the dead.

### **The Resurrection (Matthew 28:1–15; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1–18)**

The day after Jesus' death was the Sabbath, and it passed without incident as Jesus' friends and followers observed the holy day and mourned the loss of their friend and master. The following day, however, proved to be the most momentous in the history of the world. Early on Sunday morning, Jesus rose from His tomb, fulfilling His promise to the disciples and offering the hope of salvation and eternal life to all those who would follow Him over the centuries to come.

It is safe to say that in no other instance do the Gospel writers' accounts vary more widely than in their descriptions of what exactly happened on that Resurrection morning. Indeed, it is difficult to synthesize the four versions of the Resurrection story into one coherent narrative without glossing over several apparent discrepancies. A close examination of the four Gospels reveals differences concerning which

women visited the tomb, when they encountered the angels (and how many angels there were), what the angels said, whether the women informed the disciples, how the disciples reacted to the women's news, and when and to whom Jesus Himself appeared. Given the confusion and excitement of the occasion, and the fact that none of the Gospel writers were eyewitnesses to the immediate aftermath of the Resurrection (indeed, only John even visited the empty tomb at all), these variations are perhaps to be expected. It is safe to say that the most important fact about the events of that Sunday morning is the one about which all four Gospels unequivocally agree: that Jesus, having lain dead in the tomb since two nights before, rose from the grave.

Nonetheless, it is important to have a general understanding of all of the events of the first Easter Sunday, so we will attempt to summarize them as clearly as possible given the information presented in the four Gospels, with the understanding that some conjecture is necessary to reconcile the accounts.

As dawn approached, the ground near Jesus' tomb was shaken by an earthquake, and an angel descended from heaven and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the tomb. This combination of a natural disaster and a supernatural visitor struck fear in the hearts of the tomb's guards, who were apparently completely incapacitated.

Soon thereafter, a group of women, including Mary Magdalene (a woman whom Jesus had delivered from demonic possession and who had subsequently become a loyal follower), Mary the mother of Jesus, and others, arrived at the burial site with the intention of anointing Jesus' body with spices, only to find the stone rolled away and the body gone. The women were greeted by angels, who told them that Jesus was risen, just as He had promised.

The women hurried to tell the disciples the news, but it seems that most of them were skeptical, despite the women's testimony and Jesus' own assurances that He would indeed rise from the dead on the third day. Only Peter and John made their way to the tomb, and even they

seem to have been more mystified than encouraged by the fact that it was empty. After the two disciples departed, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, who had accompanied Peter and John. Though Mary did not recognize Him at first, Jesus made Himself known to her and told her to inform the disciples that she had spoken with Him and that He was ascending to the Father.

Once the guards at the tomb revived, they reported to the chief priests and told them of the angel and of the disappearance of Jesus' body. The priests, fearing that news of these events would spread and lend credence to Jesus' claim that He was indeed the Messiah, instructed the guards to lie about what had happened and paid them to ensure their compliance. The story was circulated that Jesus' disciples had come at night and stolen His body while the guards slept, and this hastily constructed falsehood was accepted by a majority of the Jews, both immediately and throughout history. Only a small band of believers knew the truth: that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah, that He had tasted death on the cross, and that He had risen from the grave.

### **The Post-Resurrection Appearances of Christ**

Forty days passed between the resurrection of Christ and His ascension into heaven. During this period, Jesus made several appearances to His followers, including some that are not recorded in the Gospels but were later referenced by the apostle Paul.<sup>12</sup> Jesus used these post-Resurrection visits to encourage His disciples and to commission them for the work they were to carry on once He departed Earth.

#### **On the Road to Emmaus (Mark 16:12, 13; Luke 24:13–35)**

On the day of His resurrection, Jesus appeared to two disciples who were walking along the road from Jerusalem to the nearby village of Emmaus. The two men did not recognize Jesus, and He asked them what they were discussing as they traveled. One of the men, Cleopas, asked Him if He had not heard about the recent events in Jerusalem. Cleopas and His companion then proceeded to tell Jesus about the

crucifixion and about the women who had discovered the empty tomb that very morning. Jesus then instructed the men concerning all that was written in the Law and the Prophets about the Messiah, explained why the crucifixion was necessary, and assured them that the resurrection of Christ had indeed come to pass just as the Scriptures had foretold.

When they reached Emmaus, the two men urged Jesus to stay with them. As they gathered for the evening meal, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples to eat. As He did so, the disciples were finally enabled to recognize Him for who He was, and, having thus revealed Himself to them, Jesus disappeared.

**Appearances to the Disciples and Thomas (Mark 16:14; Luke 24:36–49; John 20:19–31)**

Cleopas and his friend rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the 11 disciples that they had seen the risen Christ and were informed by the group that He had appeared to Peter as well. As they were conversing, Jesus appeared in their midst and said, “Peace be with you” (John 20:19)! In spite of this word of blessing, and the testimonies of their friends, some of the disciples were frightened by His sudden appearance, thinking that they were seeing a ghost. Jesus told them not to fear, showed them the wounds in His hands, feet, and side, and ate a piece of fish in their presence to demonstrate that He was truly risen from the dead, body and spirit. Then the disciples were filled with joy and amazement. Jesus told them that they were to remain in Jerusalem until they had been visited by the Holy Spirit, and then departed from their midst.

Apparently, Thomas was not present with the other disciples when Jesus appeared. When Thomas returned to the place where the disciples were staying, they told him of their encounter with the risen Christ. Thomas, however, was skeptical. He insisted that unless he saw the nail marks in Jesus’ hands and touched the scars for himself, he would not believe that Jesus was alive. A week later, Jesus appeared again to the disciples; this time with Thomas present. Jesus invited Thomas to touch His wounds but scolded him gently for requiring such proof, saying that those who believed without seeing were truly blessed.

## **The Miraculous Catch of Fish and the Restoration of Peter (John 21)**

A few nights later, Peter, James, John, Thomas, Nathanael, and two other disciples decided to go fishing on the Sea of Galilee. Though they fished through the night, they caught nothing. As dawn approached and the disciples prepared to admit defeat, a figure appeared on the shore. He called out to them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, and when they heeded His advice, the nets filled with fish. Only then did they realize that the man on the beach was Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

The disciples came ashore to find that Jesus was cooking bread and fish for them over a small fire. When they had eaten, Jesus took Peter aside and asked him whether he loved Him. Peter assured Jesus that he did love Him, and Jesus responded by instructing Peter to feed His sheep. Jesus repeated the question, with Peter's answer and Jesus' resulting admonition remaining the same. Jesus then posed the same question a third time, and Peter was grieved as it became clear that Jesus would not take "yes" for an answer. Finally, Peter said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Once more, Jesus replied, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:17 NIV). Jesus then predicted that Peter would die a martyr's death but urged him to follow Him faithfully, nevertheless.

It seems that this encounter was Jesus' way of restoring the relationship that was damaged by Peter's denial. Surely the parallel between his three attempts to convince people that he did not know Jesus and his three attempts to assure Jesus that he loved Him was not lost on Peter.

## **The Great Commission and the Ascension (Matthew 28:16–20; Mark 16:15–20; Luke 24:50–53; Acts 1:1–11)**

Some time later, Jesus summoned the disciples to a mountain in Galilee. Here, He instructed them to go into all the world, preach the gospel, baptize converts, make disciples, and teach people to obey all that He had commanded them. Jesus assured them that He would always be with them and that signs of His presence and power would

accompany their ministry. This speech has come to be known as the Great Commission, and its principles remain foundational to the mission of the Christian church in the world.

The final chapter in Christ's earthly ministry occurred not long after the Great Commission and exactly 40 days after the Resurrection. Jesus led the disciples into the countryside between Jerusalem and Bethany, pronounced blessings over them, and reiterated that the Holy Spirit would soon arrive to bestow power on them and to equip them for the work that lay ahead. After saying these things, Jesus was taken up into heaven. Two angels then appeared to the disciples, telling them that Jesus would one day return to Earth in the same way that they had seen Him depart. The disciples, having thus parted from God the Son, who had walked alongside them, returned to Jerusalem, there to await the promised coming of God the Spirit, who would dwell within them.

## HISTORY

The historical books of the Old Testament present a grim history indeed—an account of the Israelites' long, slow descent into rebellion and spiritual decay, resulting in death, devastation, and enslavement. In contrast, the New Testament's chief historical book, the Acts of the Apostles, tells a much more attractive, hopeful story—the story of the infant Christian church's resolve to share the gospel and the love of Christ with a world that often hated and feared them, and more particularly, the story of the early church's most dynamic figure, the apostle Paul.

### **Acts—The History of the Early Church and the Ministry of Paul (28 chapters)**

The Acts of the Apostles was written by Luke, and it picks up the narrative of Jesus and the disciples where Luke's Gospel left off—with an account of the ascension of Jesus. Acts 1:8 records that Jesus' final words to the disciples were, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in

Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth,” and the remainder of the Book of Acts describes how, over the course of a 30-year period, this promise was fulfilled.

The first 12 chapters of Acts focus on the ministry of Peter and the other disciples and the growth of the early church in and around Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. The remainder of the Book chronicles the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul, who helped spread the gospel throughout Asia Minor, into Greece, and as far as Rome. Thus, Acts functions within the New Testament as an important bridge between the Gospels and the epistles, serving both to illustrate how Peter and the disciples undertook the work for which Jesus had prepared and commissioned them, and to provide a contextual framework for Paul’s correspondence.

### **The Selection of Matthias and the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:12–2:41)**

After the ascension, the 11 remaining disciples returned to Jerusalem, where they were staying together in the upstairs room of a large house. Soon thereafter, they gathered a large group of believers for the purpose of selecting a replacement for Judas Iscariot. Two longtime followers of Jesus were nominated: Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. The believers then prayed for God to guide their decision. When the lots were cast, it was Matthias who was chosen to fill the role of the 12<sup>th</sup> disciple.

Shortly thereafter, the believers were gathered together on the day of the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, a Jewish holy day. The Holy Spirit came among them, accompanied by the sound of wind blowing and by the appearance of tongues of fire, which rested on each person present. As the Spirit indwelt them, they began to speak in several different languages.

Because it was a holy day, Jerusalem was filled with Jews from throughout the Roman Empire. When these crowds heard the group of believers speaking in their native tongues, they were amazed and



perplexed. Some even accused the disciples of being drunk. Peter, emboldened by the Spirit, stood and addressed the throng, telling them that the believers' strange behavior was a result of the work of the Holy Spirit, and was, in fact, the fulfillment of a prophecy given by the Hebrew prophet Joel, with whose writings the Jews were intimately acquainted.

Peter went on to assert the divinity of Jesus, explaining that the arrival of the Holy Spirit was made possible only by the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. He urged the crowds to repent of their sins and be baptized, and about three thousand people accepted his words and became believers.

### **The Apostles' Early Ministry (Acts 2:42–4:31)**

Following the coming of the Holy Spirit, the believers continued to meet regularly, both in the courts of the temple and in their homes. They prayed together and received the teaching of the apostles, as well as simply fellowshiping and sharing meals. They lived communally, sold many of their personal possessions, and divided their resources so that the needs of all were met. This example of mutual care and selflessness undoubtedly made a profound impression on those around them, and unbelievers continued to be saved and baptized on a daily basis.

On one occasion, Peter and John encountered a crippled man as they were preparing to enter the temple for prayer. Peter healed the man, creating a stir among the Jews who were present. Peter once again seized the opportunity to present the gospel, telling the onlookers that it was by the name of Jesus that the man had received healing.

Peter and John were then taken into custody by the priests and the temple guard, who feared that the disciples' words would sway the populace. The priests and elders threatened Peter and John, commanding them not to speak publicly in the name of Jesus. The disciples, however, boldly and unflinchingly replied that they could not help but speak about Jesus and what He had done, thus demonstrating that their encounters with the resurrected Christ and their experience of the Holy

Spirit's power had given them much more courage and resolve than they possessed at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. Faced with the disciples' defiance, and fearful of the disapproval of the crowds (who knew that they had witnessed a miracle), the priests were forced to release Peter and John. Many who heard of the man's healing became believers, thus further strengthening the infant church.

### **Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 4:32–5:11)**

In accordance with the believers' lifestyle of service and mutual aid, some men and women (including Barnabas, who would later journey with the apostle Paul) sold their houses or lands and brought the proceeds to the apostles, who used the money to help those in the community who had urgent needs.

Hearing of this, a couple named Ananias and Sapphira decided to sell some land and present the disciples with part of the proceeds, while secretly keeping a portion of the profit for themselves. When Peter confronted each of them in turn and accused them of lying before God, Ananias and Sapphira fell dead. This caused great unease among the believers and illustrated clearly to unbelievers that a commitment to Christ was not to be taken lightly. Nevertheless, the church continued to grow and flourish in Jerusalem, and the disciples performed many miracles of healing and deliverance.

### **The Martyrdom of Stephen and the Persecution of the Believers (Acts 5:17–42; 6:8–8:3)**

Unsurprisingly, the swelling ranks and growing acclaim of the believers were sources of frustration and fear for the priests and Sadducees. They seized some of the apostles and had them imprisoned, only to find the next morning that an angel had released them from their cells. When the Jewish leaders confronted the disciples again, insisting that they cease teaching in the name of Jesus, they were again rebuffed. Infuriated, the members of the Sanhedrin planned to put the apostles to death but were dissuaded by a Pharisee named Gamaliel, who argued that if the believers were not allied with God, they would soon

be scattered and rendered powerless, but that if they were, they should not be opposed. So, after having the disciples beaten, the Sanhedrin released them. Nevertheless, this incident ushered in a period during which the fledgling church faced increased persecution.

The first man to die for the cause of Christ was a disciple named Stephen, who helped oversee the distribution of food and charitable gifts to the needy. Stephen spoke powerfully and performed a number of miracles, which drew the wrath of many of the Jews. Some of these men brought Stephen to trial before the Sanhedrin, falsely accusing him of blaspheming against God and Moses.

Stephen gave an impassioned defense, during which he emphasized the continuity between the words and deeds of the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets and the ministry of Christ. He then accused the Jewish leaders of betraying and murdering Jesus, just as their forefathers had persecuted many of God's prophets—including those who had foretold the Messiah's coming. Infuriated by this scathing criticism, the crowd seized Stephen, took him outside the walls of the city, and stoned him to death. As he was being stoned, Stephen prayed that God might receive his spirit and forgive the actions of his executioners, thus echoing the words of Christ on the cross.

One of the men present at the stoning of Stephen was a young Jew from the city of Tarsus named Saul. Following Stephen's death, Saul became the leader of a concentrated program of anti-Christian persecution in and around Jerusalem. Saul and others went from house to house, imprisoning any Christians they found. As a result, many of the believers scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, thus beginning (albeit unintentionally) the spread of the gospel that Christ had foretold at His ascension.

### **The Ministry of Philip (Acts 8:4–8, 26–40)**

The apostle Philip went into Samaria and preached the gospel to the inhabitants of a large city there. He healed the sick and cast out

demons, and many people were converted and baptized. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaritans were accepting Christ, Peter and John traveled to Samaria, prayed for the new believers that they might receive the Holy Spirit, and preached the gospel in other towns and villages throughout Samaria.

Philip was then instructed by an angel of the Lord to journey from Jerusalem toward Gaza. On his way, he met a eunuch who was an important official in the service of the queen of Ethiopia. The Ethiopian was riding in a chariot and reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Philip offered to explain the prophet's writings to the eunuch and showed him how Jesus Christ had fulfilled Isaiah's messianic prophecies. When they passed a small body of water, the Ethiopian asked to be baptized, and Philip agreed. As the two men came up out of the water, Philip was transported away by an angel, and the eunuch went on his way rejoicing, becoming perhaps the earliest Christian missionary to Africa.

### **The Conversion of Saul (Acts 9:1–31)**

Saul, meanwhile, continued his campaign of persecution against the believers. He set out from Jerusalem for Damascus, in the Roman province of Syria, intending to arrest any followers of Christ he found there and bring them back to Jerusalem for imprisonment. As he was traveling, a bright light suddenly shone from heaven, blinding Saul and causing him to fall to the ground. He heard the voice of Jesus, who asked Saul why he was persecuting Him, and told him to go into Damascus and await further instructions.

Saul, still blind and dependent on his companions for aid, made his way to the house of a man named Judas, where he waited and fasted for three days. At that time, the Lord sent a disciple named Ananias to Saul. Though Ananias was fearful of visiting Saul because of his reputation as a merciless persecutor of Christians, the Lord assured him that He had chosen Saul to be the bearer of the gospel to the Gentiles. So Ananias went to Saul, removed his blindness, and baptized him.

Saul immediately began preaching the gospel in Damascus, astonishing those who knew of his past. Eventually, some of the Jews of the city conspired to have Saul put to death, but he escaped and returned to Jerusalem. Many of the disciples there were reluctant to allow Saul to join their ranks, fearing that he was attempting to set a trap for them. But Barnabas assured the apostles that Saul had encountered Jesus on the Damascus road and that his conversion was genuine. So Saul joined the apostles and began preaching in Jerusalem. When he again was threatened with death by some of the Jews, he returned to his birthplace of Tarsus, where he remained for several years. During this time, the young church, which by now had spread through Galilee, Judea, and Samaria, enjoyed a period of relative peace and continued to be enlarged and strengthened.

### **Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1–11:18)**

Up to this point, the infant Christian church consisted almost exclusively of converted Jews. But one day, an angel appeared to a man named Cornelius, a God-fearing Roman centurion who was stationed at Caesarea. The angel told Cornelius that he had found favor with God and that he was to send messengers to Joppa to bring back the apostle Peter.

The next day, Peter had a vision in which the Lord instructed him to eat unclean animals. Peter protested, saying that he had never eaten anything impure. The Lord replied that Peter should not label anything “impure” that He had made clean. As Peter was pondering the meaning of this vision, the messengers from Cornelius arrived. The Lord instructed Peter to go with them in spite of the fact that the Jewish Law forbade him from associating with Gentiles. Correctly assuming that this was the situation for which his vision had been intended to prepare him, Peter accompanied the men back to Caesarea.

When Peter arrived at Cornelius’ home, Cornelius described to him what the angel had told him. Peter then told Cornelius that he had come to realize that God did not show favoritism but accepted all those who feared Him and did what was right, regardless of whether they

were Jews or Gentiles. The apostle then gave a brief presentation of the gospel, at which point Cornelius and all the members of his household were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, much to the astonishment of the Jews who were present. Peter then baptized them in water in the name of Jesus, making Cornelius and his family the first recorded Gentile converts to Christianity.

When Peter returned to Jerusalem, many of the Jewish believers criticized him for having had fellowship with uncircumcised Gentiles. But when Peter told them about the angel's visit to Cornelius, the vision of unclean animals that the Lord had given him, and the way in which the Spirit had filled Cornelius and his family, they ceased their objections and rejoiced that God had extended forgiveness and salvation to the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

### **Saul and Barnabas in Antioch (Acts 11:19–30)**

By this time, the gospel had spread as far as Cyprus, Phoenicia, and Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria. Following the conversion of Cornelius, Jewish believers from Cyprus and Cyrene returned to Antioch to evangelize the Gentile populations there, and a great number of people became believers. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard of this, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to help this new faith community. Barnabas soon journeyed to Tarsus to persuade Saul to join him at Antioch, and together the two of them met regularly with the believers and taught great numbers of people. Antioch became an important hub for the further dissemination of the gospel, and it was there that the believers were first given the name “Christians.”

#### **From “Saul” to “Paul”**

As he ministered among the Gentiles, Saul began to be known as “Paul,” which was his Roman name (“Saul” being his Jewish name). Unlike Jacob in the Old Testament (whom God renamed

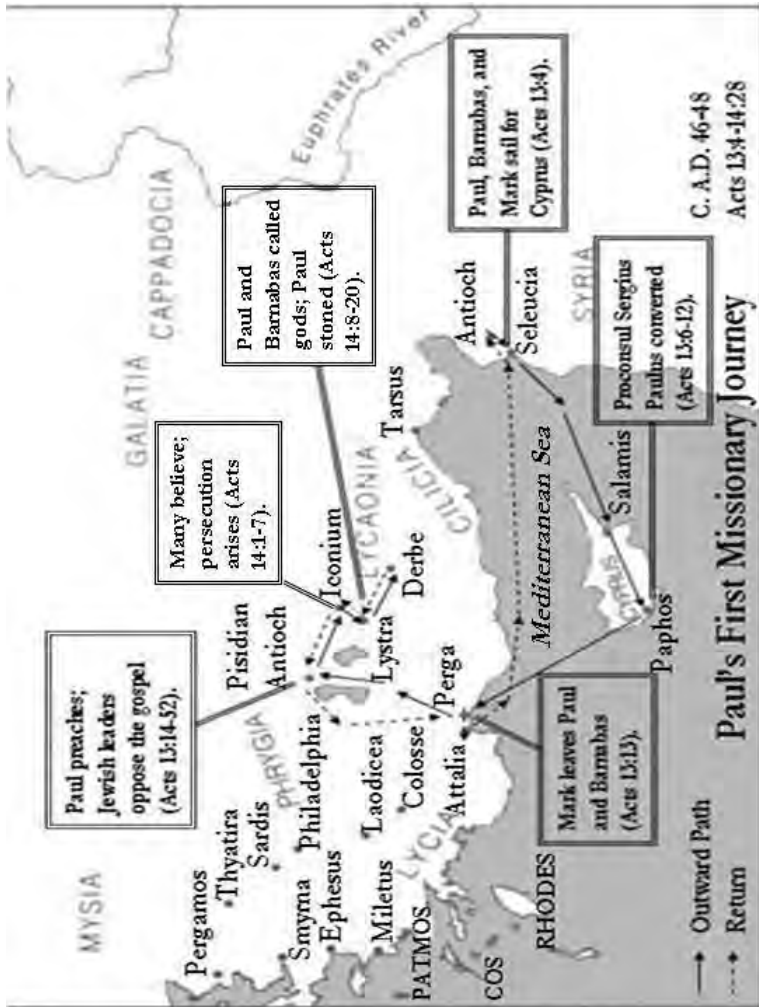
“Israel”), or Simon in the New Testament (to whom Jesus gave the name “Peter”), Saul’s name change does not seem to have been ordained by God, or to have had any specific spiritual significance, and was apparently simply due to the fact that he spent the latter part of his life ministering among non-Jewish peoples. At any rate, the shift from “Saul” to “Paul” appears to be unconnected to the apostle’s conversion, since Luke marks the change much later in his narrative and does so rather abruptly, without any lengthy explanation (Acts 13:9).

### **Paul’s First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:4–14:28)**

After ministering in Antioch for a year, Paul and Barnabas were commissioned by the Holy Spirit to spread the gospel to the surrounding Gentile nations. They took with them John Mark, a young man who was a cousin of Barnabas, and who would later author one of the four Gospels. The three sailed from Seleucia in Syria to Cyprus, where, in the city of Paphos, they shared the gospel with the Roman governor of the island, Sergius Paulus. They then sailed north to Perga, a port in the region of Pamphylia in southern Asia Minor. Here John Mark left Paul and Barnabas, returning home to Jerusalem for reasons that are not entirely clear.

Paul and Barnabas traveled throughout the regions of Pamphylia, Pisidia, and Lycaonia, preaching the gospel in the local synagogues to large numbers of Jews and Gentiles alike. Though they gained many converts, they also faced increasingly hostile opposition from devout Jews, who expelled them from Pisidian Antioch, plotted to kill them in Iconium, and stoned Paul in Lystra, leaving him for dead. Because of the Jews’ rejection of the gospel, Paul and Barnabas decided to focus their missionary efforts on the Gentiles, who presented their own unique set of challenges. In Lystra, for example, the apostles were mistaken for gods after healing a lame man and were forced to persuade a group of over-zealous Gentiles not to offer sacrifices to them.

Yet despite the difficulties they faced on all sides, Paul and Barnabas managed to establish churches in each city they visited. After reaching Derbe in Lycaonia, the apostles retraced their steps, encouraging each group of new believers as they went. Upon reaching the coast, they sailed back to Syria, where they gathered together the church at Antioch to report on the events of their journey and to share how God had opened doors for the evangelization of the Gentiles.





## **The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–29)**

Shortly after Paul and Barnabas' return to Antioch, some Jewish Christians began teaching the Gentile believers that they could not truly receive salvation unless they were first circumcised in accordance with the Law of Moses. Paul and Barnabas strongly opposed this teaching, claiming that salvation was a free gift of grace for both Jews and Gentiles. When the matter could not be resolved among the church at Antioch, a group of believers, including Paul and Barnabas, was sent to Jerusalem to bring the question before the apostles and elders.

After a lengthy discussion among the assembled council, Peter addressed the rest of the apostles, emphasizing the truths that the Lord had revealed to him through his encounter with Cornelius—that God loved and accepted the Gentiles, and that they had been saved by grace, just as the Jewish believers had. Paul and Barnabas also spoke before the council, giving an account of their ministry to the Gentiles and emphasizing the miraculous signs that God had worked among them.

Finally, James, the brother of Jesus and an important leader in the Jerusalem church, spoke to the council, stating that he believed they should not create unnecessary obstacles (such as requiring circumcision) for Gentiles who wished to be saved. Under James' direction, the council composed a letter to the Gentile believers in Syria and Cilicia informing them of the apostles' decision and entrusted it to two disciples named Judas and Silas. These men accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their return journey to Antioch, where their letter brought great encouragement to the Gentiles.

## **Paul's Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:39–18:22)**

Paul soon proposed to Barnabas that they take another missionary journey for the purpose of revisiting and encouraging the churches that they had founded on their previous trip. But when Barnabas insisted that Mark join them, Paul objected. Mark had returned to Jerusalem early on in their first journey, and this incident had apparently caused Paul to lose faith in the young man. This disagreement between Paul

and Barnabas led them to part ways. Barnabas and Mark sailed for Cyprus, while Paul took Silas and proceeded over land through Syria and Cilicia.

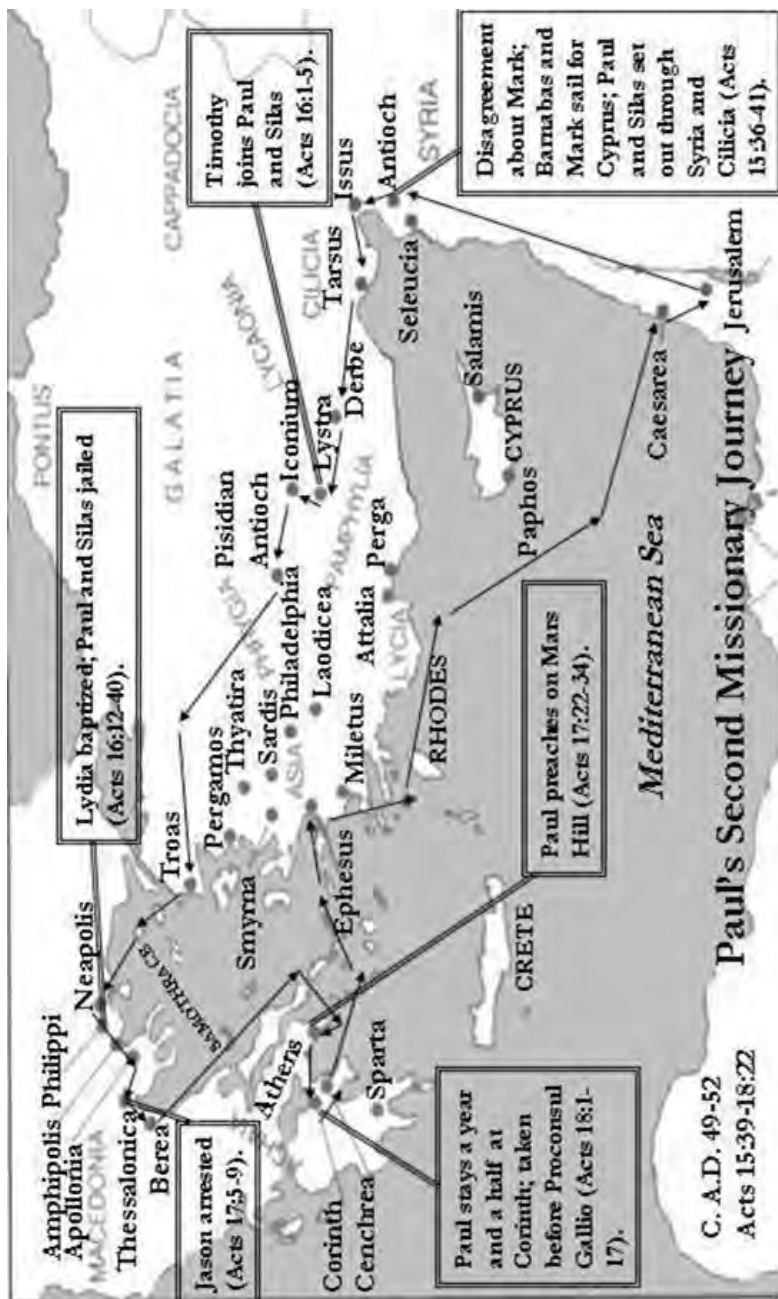
In Lystra, Paul and Silas met a young believer named Timothy, who joined them on their journey. They proceeded through Lycaonia, Galatia, and Phrygia until they reached the port city of Troas. Here Paul received a vision from the Lord instructing him to cross the sea and preach the gospel in Macedonia.<sup>14</sup> In the Macedonian city of Philippi, Paul cast a spirit of divination out of a slave girl whose owners made a great deal of money by having her tell people's fortunes. Angered by this blow to their livelihood, the slave owners brought Paul and Silas before the authorities, who had the apostles beaten and thrown into prison. Late that night, as Paul and Silas were praying and singing in their cell, the prison was shaken by a powerful earthquake, the doors to the jail cells swung open, and the chains fell off the prisoners. The jailer, convinced that something supernatural had taken place, asked Paul and Silas to tell him how he could be saved, and he and his entire household became believers as a result. The next morning, the authorities, having learned that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, ordered their release.

After passing through Macedonia, Paul journeyed to Athens, the cultural and philosophical center of the Greek world. There he dialogued with members of the Areopagus, a council of Greek intellectuals and philosophers. These men worshipped many different gods and were intrigued by any new ideas concerning philosophy or metaphysics. Paul proclaimed the gospel to them, exhorting them to worship the living God rather than devoting themselves to idols and telling them of God's plan of redemption through Christ. Many of the secular Greeks scoffed at the idea that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, but a few accepted Paul's teachings and became believers.

From Athens, Paul traveled to Corinth, where he taught in the synagogue and in the homes of Gentiles and lived and worked with a couple

named Aquila and Priscilla, who like Paul were tentmakers by trade. After ministering in Corinth for a year and a half, Paul set sail for Syria, accompanied by Aquila and Priscilla. He stopped briefly in Ephesus, the largest city in the Roman province of Asia, but left quickly, promising to return if it was God's will. Aquila and Priscilla remained in Ephesus, while Paul and his companions sailed on to Caesarea, visited the church in Jerusalem, and returned to Antioch.

Soon thereafter, the people of Ephesus, who had been disappointed that Paul could not stay longer and instruct them in the faith, were visited by a man named Apollos, a learned Jew from Alexandria who taught them about Jesus and about water baptism though he did not yet know about the Baptism of the Spirit. Aquila and Priscilla invited Apollos to their home, instructed him more fully in the Christian faith, and eventually encouraged him to go to Corinth. There, Apollos proved to be both a great help to the young church and a worthy adversary for the Corinthian Jews, whom he often debated publicly, using their own Scriptures to demonstrate that Jesus was the Messiah.

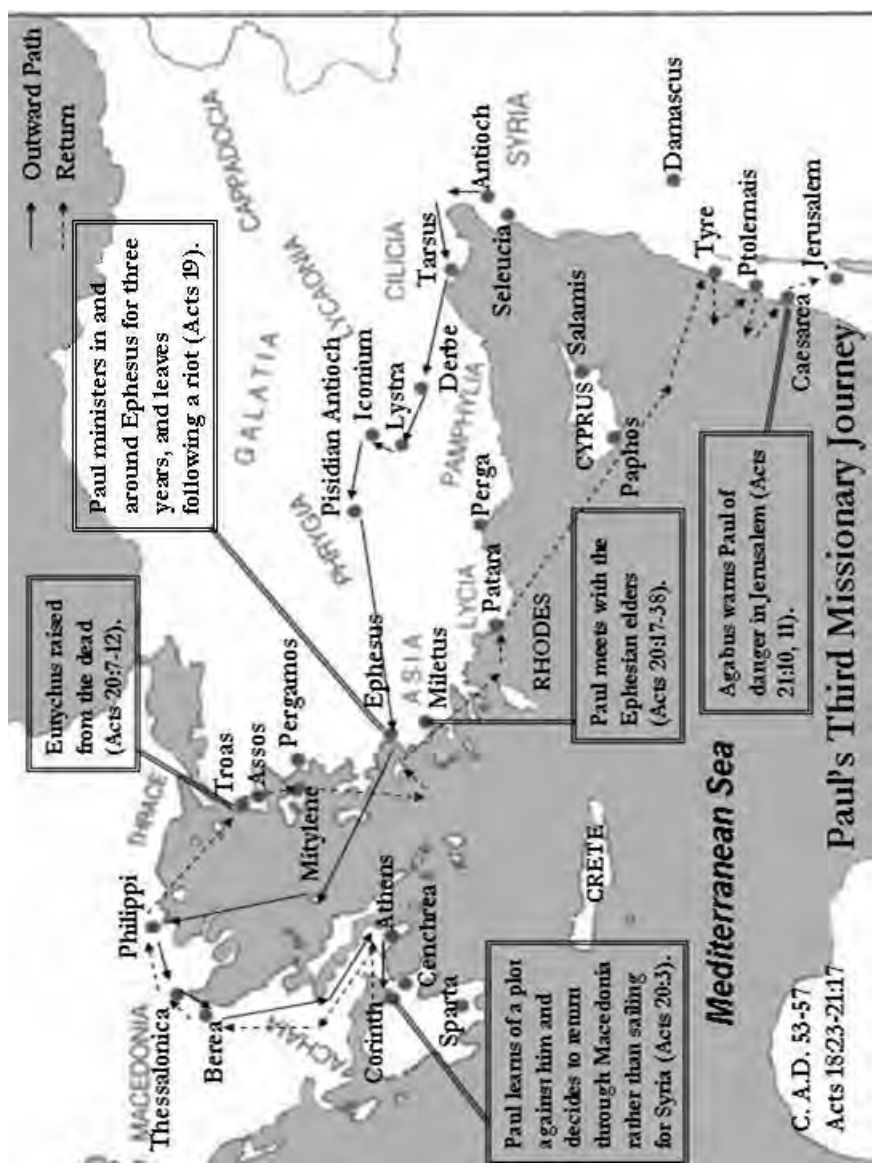


## **Paul's Third Missionary Journey (Acts 18:23–21:17)**

After spending a short amount of time in Antioch, Paul set out on his third missionary journey, once again passing through Lycaonia, Galatia, and Phrygia to visit the churches that he had established on his first trip with Barnabas. He then proceeded to Ephesus, where he remained for about three years. During this time, Paul taught daily in a public lecture hall and performed many miracles with the result that Jews and Gentiles throughout the province of Asia received the gospel.

Paul left Ephesus following a riot that was stirred up by local silversmiths, who were angered because the disciples' ministry had greatly decreased the demand for the idols that formed the basis of the smiths' business. Paul then traveled through Macedonia and Greece, probably proceeding as far as Corinth, where he is thought to have composed his epistle to the Romans. The 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans reveals Paul's intentions at the time: He planned to travel to Jerusalem to present the poor believers there with money that he had collected from the Gentile churches in Macedonia and Achaia, after which he intended to visit Rome on his way to Spain. He would soon discover, however, that God had set out for him a very different path from that which he imagined.

After learning of a plot against him, Paul decided to return through Macedonia and Asia rather than sailing directly from Greece to Syria. Because of his desire to reach Jerusalem before the Passover feast, he bypassed Ephesus but summoned the elders of the Ephesian church to meet him at Miletus where he exhorted them to be good shepherds of the believers in their care. He then bid them farewell, fearing that he would never see them again. Paul then sailed on to Caesarea where he was warned by the prophet Agabus that he would be arrested if he continued on to Jerusalem. But despite the pleadings of his companions and the growing sense in his own spirit that hardships lay ahead, Paul insisted on completing his mission to deliver the offerings of the Gentile churches and proceeded to Jerusalem, thus ending his final missionary journey.



## **Paul's Arrest, Trials, and Journey to Rome**

### **(Acts 21:27–28:31)**

About a week after his arrival in Jerusalem, Paul was seized by a group of Jews who accused him of teaching against the Law of Moses and profaning the temple by bringing Gentiles there. The Jews intended to kill Paul, but the Roman commander in charge of the city was alerted to the uproar and took Paul into custody to protect him from the mob. When the commander learned that some of the Jews were plotting to ambush and murder the prisoner on his way to appear before the Sanhedrin, he had Paul transferred to Caesarea, where he was delivered into the care of Felix, the Roman governor of Judea.

Paul was tried before Felix, with the Jewish high priest Ananias coming from Jerusalem to present charges against him. Felix elected not to take any immediate action on the matter, but in order to appease the Jews, he kept Paul imprisoned for two years, after which Felix was succeeded as governor by Porcius Festus.

Hoping that Festus would be easier to manipulate than Felix, the Jewish leaders and high priests urged the new governor to have Paul transferred back to Jerusalem, planning to ambush and kill him along the way. When Paul learned of the Jews' request, he appealed to his status as a Roman citizen, demanding to stand trial before Caesar rather than being taken back to Jerusalem. Festus agreed to this, and Paul was soon placed on a ship bound for Rome.

Several days into the journey, the ship encountered a fierce storm off the coast of Crete. Though it looked as if the ship would be lost, Paul encouraged the crew, telling them that an angel had assured him that no one aboard the ship would perish. After fighting the winds and waves for several days, they were shipwrecked on the island of Malta, where God demonstrated that His hand was upon Paul by protecting him from a poisonous snakebite and empowering him to heal the sick among the islanders.

After spending three months on Malta, Paul was delivered to Rome. There he was placed under arrest, but he was permitted to live in his

own house, with a soldier to guard him. From this house he welcomed guests, preached the gospel, and authored several letters, including the epistles to the Ephesians, the Philippians, the Colossians, and Philemon.

Though Luke's account of Paul's life ends at this point, the apostle's own later writings suggest that his life did not end for several more years. Indeed, it would appear that Paul enjoyed a period of freedom following this first Roman imprisonment, during which he probably ministered on Crete (as suggested in the epistle to Titus), and may even have realized his intention of visiting Spain. At some point, however, Paul was again imprisoned at Rome, and it was at this point that he penned his final epistle, 2 Timothy. It is believed that Paul was executed during the reign of the emperor Nero and that his life came to an end on a road just outside of Rome, bringing to an end the long journey that had begun years before as he lay blinded on another road, outside of Damascus.

## THE PAULINE EPISTLES

The next 13 books of the New Testament are all letters that were written by the apostle Paul. The first of these was written to present a summary of the gospel to the people of Rome, which Paul had not yet visited. The next eight epistles are addressed to individual churches that (with the exception of the church at Colosse) Paul had either established or visited during the course of his missionary journeys as recorded in the Book of Acts. These are followed by the three Pastoral Epistles, so-called because they are addressed to individual pastors rather than entire churches. The final Pauline epistle, Philemon, is a brief personal letter that is included in the canon of Scripture because it suggests principles that are significant for all believers.

The Pauline Epistles were written over the span of several years and were addressed to churches in various cultural contexts and in different stages of their maturity in the faith. Therefore, although much of their contents can be applied to the church today, it is important for us to consider the unique circumstances in which each was written, and to



remember that these writings were, after all, conceived primarily as personal letters, not theological treatises.

## **Romans**—The Classic Statement of the Christian Faith (16 chapters)

Rome was arguably the most important city in the world in New Testament times. It was the capital of the vast Roman Empire, and the seat of the ultimate secular authority in the world. Thus, the penetration of the gospel into Rome was essential if the fledgling Christian church was to survive and succeed in its mission to bear witness to Christ throughout the world. Accordingly, the apostle Paul planned for several years to visit the city but was delayed by other concerns. Feeling burdened to communicate his heart to the believers in Rome, Paul composed what would prove to be the longest and most systematic of his letters, and in many ways the most important. It would go on to profoundly affect the lives of believers throughout the centuries, from St. Augustine to Martin Luther, and the ideas presented in it would provide much of the impetus for the Protestant Reformation, thus forever changing the course of Christian history.

The Epistle to the Romans was probably written from Corinth during Paul's third missionary journey, thus falling between the apostle's earliest letters (1 and 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians) and the later Prison Epistles and Pastoral Epistles. Romans, unlike most of Paul's Epistles, was addressed to a church that the apostle had neither founded nor visited. For this reason, it reads more like a theological essay than a personal letter, serving to prepare the Roman believers for Paul's expected visit by giving them a solid foundation of doctrine, rather than addressing specific issues or problems within the church, as was more typical of Paul's epistles.

The first eight chapters of Romans constitute a concise yet relatively comprehensive overview of the essentials of Christian doctrine: humankind's sinfulness, God's righteousness, faith, grace, justification,

sanctification, and life in the Spirit. Paul begins by emphasizing that both Jews and Gentiles are guilty before God—Jews as a result of transgressing against the Law, and Gentiles as a result of betraying their own consciences and indulging wicked desires. Thus, all people are subject to God’s wrath and judgment and in need of His righteousness. But, contrary to Jewish belief, this righteousness is not gained through strict observance of the Law, but only through faith in Christ. The Law serves merely to make us conscious of sin; faith is required in order to receive the grace that frees us from sin’s control and its consequences.

In order to illustrate this point, Paul uses the example of Abraham, who believed God and followed Him by faith, having lived and died before the Law was given to Moses. According to Paul, Abraham’s faith was “credited to him as righteousness” (4:3 NIV), and as a result, he became the father of the Jewish nation. Paul’s message to the Romans was that God would likewise credit righteousness to those who believed in the resurrected Christ.

In the fifth chapter, Paul further explores this theme of justification, explaining that God demonstrated His great love for humanity by sending Christ to die for us while we were still in sin. Having thus been reconciled to God through Jesus’ death, we are now offered peace with God, deliverance from His wrath, and eternal life in His presence. Just as Adam’s disobedience in the Garden brought condemnation on the entire human race, so Jesus’ death and resurrection offered grace and the opportunity for salvation to all. Adam’s sin unleashed death upon us, but Christ’s loving sacrifice brought us life.

In the final three chapters of Romans’ theological first half, Paul moves on to the topics of sanctification and life in the Spirit. He argues that just as Jesus died and rose again, so we have become dead to sin in order that we might rise to new life in Christ. Thus, we are no longer slaves to our sinful nature, nor to the Law. Rather, we are servants of righteousness, led by the Spirit of God.

Paul freely admits, however, that this process of being sanctified—becoming separated from sin and pursuing holiness—is neither easy

nor painless. The apostle confesses that he continually struggles to do the things he knows are right and often finds himself yielding to temptation. For even within those who have received God's gifts of salvation and sanctification, the sinful nature wars against the nature of Christ. Our hope lies not in the prospect of completely vanquishing our sinful nature in this life, but rather in allowing our lives to be guided by the Spirit, so that, while sin may continue to plague us, we do not allow it to control us.

Paul concludes his theological instruction on a hopeful note, assuring the Romans that those who allow themselves to be led by the Spirit are God's children and heirs and that the sufferings we endure in this world are not worth comparing with the glories that await us. He offers the comforting promises that the Spirit is continually interceding with God on our behalf and that the Father Himself works for our good. Finally, Paul reassures his readers that absolutely nothing in this life, nor death itself, is able to separate God's children from His love.

## The Riches of Romans

The first eight chapters of Romans, which outline the foundations of Christian theology, contain several of the most well-known and best-loved verses in the New Testament. You may wish to explore some of these passages, thus placing familiar Scriptures in their proper context within the larger framework of Paul's letter:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Romans 1:16).

“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23, 24).

“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

“There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God” (Romans 8:28).

“If God be for us, who can be against us” (Romans 8:31)?

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35)?

“In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (Romans 8:37).

Chapters 9–11 of Romans deal specifically with the unique relationship between God and the children of Israel. It would appear that Jews constituted a significant minority within the Roman church, and Paul must have felt it necessary to offer to the Gentiles his insights regarding their Jewish acquaintances. The apostle confesses that he feels sorrow and anguish because many Jews have rejected Christ, and laments the fact that they sought righteousness through adherence to the Law, rather than pursuing it through faith, as the Gentiles did. Yet he does not condemn the Jews, but expresses an earnest desire that they might be saved in spite of their doubts and failures. He also insists that God has not rejected His people, but that He will mercifully preserve a remnant of the Jews and that many of them will eventually be saved. Further, Paul explicitly warns Gentile believers not to be prideful or to think that they have superseded the Jews in God’s eyes, lest they fall into the same trap of self-righteousness that ensnared many of the Jews.

The final few chapters of Romans deal with the practical application of the Christian faith. Paul urges the Roman believers to exercise their unique gifts as members of the body of Christ (12:1–8), entreats them to love one another sincerely (12:9–21; 13:8–14), and instructs them to submit to those who have authority over them (13:1–7). Finally, he pleads with them to be tolerant of the differences among them and to respect those who might express their faith in ways that seem unusual (a particularly important point for a church comprised of both Jews and Gentiles). He urges them to pursue unity, compassion, and mutual acceptance so that the diverse body of believers in this great city might glorify their Lord and Savior with one heart—a goal that should surely inspire us as well.

## **1 Corinthians**—Passionate Instruction for a Troubled Church (16 chapters)

Corinth was the most important commercial city in Greece during Paul’s lifetime. It was also a religious center and contained many temples to Greek deities, including the temple of Aphrodite, which was

notorious for its 1,000 priestess-prostitutes. This combination of secular commerce and pagan religion made Corinth a remarkably immoral city.

Paul visited Corinth during his second missionary journey and wrote a series of letters to the church there, some of which have been lost to history. The Epistle that we know as 1 Corinthians actually appears to have been the second of these letters and was probably written during Paul's lengthy stay at Ephesus on his third missionary journey.

As might be expected given the moral climate of the city, the Corinthian church was plagued by a variety of problems and controversies. Many of these issues came to Paul's attention, and 1 Corinthians is his attempt to address them. He begins by confronting the Corinthians about the divisions that were threatening the church. Various factions had pledged their allegiance to Paul, Peter, Apollos, or one of the other apostles, but Paul sternly reminds them that the apostles are co-workers, not competitors and that all Christians must ultimately follow Christ alone, for only He has the power to save them. Paul then goes on to denounce other spiritual problems within the Corinthian church, including sexual immorality and lawsuits that Christians were bringing against one another in secular courts.

Following these admonishments, the apostle addresses other issues about which members of the Corinthian church had apparently questioned him. He presents a balanced Christian viewpoint on marriage and offers his thoughts on the practice of eating food that has been sacrificed to idols. On both of these topics, Paul urges discernment, mutual respect and consideration, and the responsible use of Christian freedom.

In the final third of the letter, Paul offers further instructions concerning spiritual matters. He urges propriety and order in corporate worship, chastens the Corinthians for not properly honoring the Lord's Supper, discusses the diversity and relative value of spiritual gifts, and emphasizes the importance of the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. In the

midst of all this, the apostle pens one of the most sublime passages in the entire Bible, chapter 13, in which he expounds on the central importance of love in the Christian life.

## **2 Corinthians**—Paul’s Account and Defense of His Ministry (13 chapters)

Apparently, at some point after the writing of 1 Corinthians, word reached Paul at Ephesus that false teachers had come to Corinth and were challenging Paul’s integrity and authority as an apostle. Paul’s response was to write a rather severe letter to the Corinthians, which has been lost.<sup>15</sup> Soon thereafter, Paul moved on to Macedonia, where he received word that the situation at Corinth had improved. It was in response to this news that he penned the Epistle of 2 Corinthians.

The first nine chapters of 2 Corinthians are full of gentle encouragement. Paul expresses his joy at hearing that the Corinthians have responded favorably to his harsh earlier letter, and shares with the church news of his travels. He then offers a compelling discourse on the nature, trials, rewards, and responsibilities of Christian ministry. He goes on to plead for reconciliation within the church and calls believers to separate themselves from those who embrace wickedness. Paul closes this section of the letter by appealing to the Corinthians’ generosity, asking them to be faithful in contributing to an offering for poor Christians in Jerusalem.

Beginning in chapter 10, there is a radical shift in the tone of the letter.<sup>16</sup> Over the course of the final four chapters of 2 Corinthians, Paul stridently defends his authority as an apostle and answers the charges of those who had accused him of weakness and immorality. This section of the letter contains more autobiographical information than any of Paul’s other Epistles, as he details his sufferings for the sake of the gospel and the visions and revelations that he had received from God, all of which he offers as evidence of his spiritual authority.

Lest he seem overly boastful, however, Paul reveals that the Lord has allowed him to be subjected to a “thorn in the flesh” (12:7), some sort

of spiritual hindrance that forced him to admit his own weakness and trust in God's strength. He concludes this paradoxical letter by urging the Corinthians to carefully examine their own spiritual lives, that they, too, might find their strength in the Lord.

## **Galatians**—Freedom Through Grace (six chapters)

Unlike the majority of Paul's Epistles, Galatians is not addressed specifically to a single church or an individual in a particular city, but rather "to the churches in Galatia," a large region in Central Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Paul and Barnabas established churches in the southern Galatian cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe during their first missionary journey (Acts 13, 14), and it is most probably these churches that Paul addresses in Galatians.

Galatians is certainly one of the most important of Paul's Epistles as the ideas it contains constitute the foundation of the Christian faith and provided much of the impetus for the Protestant Reformation. It was written to contend against false teachings that had been introduced into the Galatian churches. Certain religious activists had tried to convince the believers in Galatia that the gospel as Paul had presented it to them was insufficient for salvation. These men argued that faith in Christ had to be accompanied by strict observance of the Law of Moses (including, notably, the practice of circumcision).

In response to these teachers, Paul first launches a vigorous defense of his own authority and integrity as a minister of the gospel, and then he proceeds to carefully present the theology of salvation by grace through faith, rather than by adherence to the Law. Paul emphasizes that Abraham's unique relationship with God was not based on the Law (which would not be given to the Jews until hundreds of years after Abraham's death), but on faith. The Law was never intended to replace salvation by faith, but was to be a temporary measure that lasted until God's promise to Abraham found its ultimate fulfillment in Christ.

Paul closes his letter to the Galatians by proclaiming that they have been released from the strict confines of the Law and granted true



spiritual freedom. He urges them not to use this freedom as a license to live sinfully, but to rely on the leading of the Spirit. Paul then goes on to list the “fruit,” or evidences of the Spirit’s active presence, that should mark the life of every believer—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It is these characteristics, not circumcision or adherence to the Law, that truly indicate that we have become new creations in Christ.

## **Ephesians**—A Message of Unity and Hope (six chapters)

Ephesus was a populous seaport in the Roman province of Asia, one of the most important and impressive cities in the empire. Paul visited the city briefly during his second missionary journey then returned during his third journey and stayed for more than two years, preaching the gospel and discipling the Ephesian Christians. The epistle to the Ephesian church was written years later, during Paul’s imprisonment at Rome. Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon were also written during this period, and these four books are often collectively referred to as the Prison Epistles.

The first half of the letter to the Ephesians contains some of Paul’s most profound and beautiful theological language. The apostle explores the works and purposes of God and emphasizes that believers receive salvation by grace through faith. He also explores the important truth that God has not only reconciled believers to Himself through Christ, but that He has also broken down the barriers that separate His children from one another and has united them in one body, His church.

The second half of the epistle shifts the focus from the theological to the practical as Paul urges the Ephesians to pursue unity and spiritual maturity. He stresses the importance of being imitators of God and illustrates how believers are to mirror Christ’s love for His children in their marriages, parent-child relationships, and master-servant relationships. Paul closes the letter by encouraging the Ephesians to remain strong and bold in the faith, culminating in the famous analogy of the armor of God.

## **Philippians**—Joy From a Jail Cell (four chapters)

The city of Philippi was a Roman colony in the province of Macedonia (present-day Greece). Paul and Silas visited the city and established a church there during Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 16), and the Philippian church seems to have held a special place in Paul's heart. Philippians, like Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon was written while Paul was imprisoned at Rome, and Paul's initial impetus for writing the letter was to express thanks for gifts that the Philippian church had sent to him in prison.

The chief theme of Philippians is joy. Paul assures the church that he still has joy and hope in the midst of his hardships, and he rejoices because God has used his imprisonment to instill hope and determination in others and to advance the gospel. Despite the uncertainty of his future, Paul is at peace because he knows that if he lives, he lives for Christ, and if he dies, he will be with Christ. In turn, he exhorts the believers at Philippi to be faithful in the face of suffering and persecution, following his example.

Paul goes on to urge the Philippians to embody the same love and humility that characterized Jesus during His earthly ministry. He warns them against two opposing yet equally dangerous spiritual errors—trusting in the good works of the flesh (a common mistake among the Jews), and living only to please the flesh (a pervasive lifestyle among secular Gentiles). Instead, as believers they are to rejoice in the Lord, trust Him to provide for their needs, and think on good things. Paul promises that, if they do these things, the God of peace and joy and hope will be with them, just as He had been with Paul.

## **Colossians**—The Glory and Supremacy of Christ (four chapters)

Colosse was a city in the Roman province of Asia, about 100 miles east of Ephesus. Paul never visited the city himself, but a man named

Epaphras, who had apparently been converted during Paul's ministry in Ephesus, established a church at Colosse. During Paul's first Roman imprisonment, he sent this Epistle to the Colossian believers to address a diverse mixture of heresies—including legalism, extreme asceticism, pagan ceremonies, secular philosophies, and angel worship—which were threatening the church.

As a means of combating these heresies, Paul delivers an impassioned argument for the supremacy of Christ, emphasizing His roles as Creator, Redeemer, and Head of the church. He leaves no doubt that Christ is above and beyond even the angels and that He is all-powerful and all-sufficient, able to meet every need. Paul emphasizes that Christ has freed believers from the kinds of strict human regulations that others had tried to impose on them, but he also emphasizes the importance of holy living, entreating the Colossians to set their minds and hearts on Christ and to put to death sinful thoughts and behaviors.

## **1 Thessalonians**—Exhortations to a Model Church (five chapters)

The city of Thessalonica was the capital of and largest city in the Roman province of Macedonia. Paul founded a church there during his second missionary journey, but he was forced to leave abruptly when some of the Jews in the city incited a riot against him (Acts 17:1–10). Paul later sent two letters back to the Thessalonian church from Corinth in order to continue the instruction that he had not been able to finish in person. These letters to the Thessalonians are thought by many to have been the earliest of Paul's canonical Epistles.

Although the church at Thessalonica was young and surrounded by pagan culture, it was apparently a spiritually strong congregation. Paul opens his first Epistle to the Thessalonians by commending their faith and affirming them as positive models to neighboring believers. Indeed, unlike his letters to the Corinthians and Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians were not written to address any particular heresies or

controversies within the church. Instead, they deal chiefly with teachings concerning the second coming of Christ.

In the first letter, Paul emphasizes that the dead in Christ will be resurrected upon the Lord's return and assures the Thessalonians that there is no need to grieve hopelessly over death as pagans do. He goes on to caution them that the day and time of Christ's coming is unknown and that it will arrive quickly and unexpectedly. Therefore, he admonishes them to remain spiritually alert and ready at all times.

## **2 Thessalonians**—The Second Coming of Christ (three chapters)

Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians was written shortly after the first, and in some ways served as a corrective to it. It appears that Paul's exhortations to be ready for Christ's return caused some of the Thessalonian believers to become idle. Because they now believed that Jesus might come back at any moment, some chose simply to await His imminent return rather than working to advance His kingdom. Paul urges them to work diligently so that each one can earn his or her keep without being a burden to the community and reassures them that Christ will not return until certain things have occurred, most notably the coming of the Antichrist.

## **1 Timothy**—Instructions to a Young Pastor (six chapters)

Timothy was a young man who accompanied Paul on his later missionary journeys and served as a leader in the early church. The two apparently enjoyed a close friendship as Timothy is listed as a co-sender of six of Paul's canonical Epistles, and he was specially commended by Paul for his faithful service.

Paul entrusted Timothy with the care of the church at Ephesus, and the main purpose of this first letter to Timothy was to offer pastoral advice to the young man. Specifically, Paul warns Timothy against certain false

teachings that were present in Ephesus at the time, offers instructions concerning orderly corporate worship, and lists the necessary qualifications for serving as a deacon or overseer within the church.

## **2 Timothy**—Paul’s Final Farewell (four chapters)

Paul’s second letter to Timothy was the last of his 13 New Testament Epistles to be written. It was composed while Paul languished in a Roman jail cell, awaiting his execution at the hands of the emperor Nero. During Nero’s reign, the young Christian church endured a period of harsh persecution, and part of Paul’s motivation for writing to Timothy may have been a desire to admonish him to preserve and protect the faith in the midst of this very challenging time.

While 2 Timothy touches on some of the same church-related issues as 1 Timothy and Titus, it is by far the most personal of the three Pastoral Epistles. Paul begins the letter by telling Timothy that he is praying for him and longs to see him and commends the young man for embracing the faith that was modeled for him by his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois. Throughout the letter, Paul offers encouragement to Timothy and exhorts him to remain faithful and strong through the difficult days ahead.

Paul closes his final epistle by admitting that his life is nearing its end, but he emphasizes that he is at peace because, in his words, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith” (4:7). Thus, as he faced his impending execution, Paul looked back with satisfaction, not regret, and looked ahead with hopeful anticipation, not fear. In death, just as in life, the apostle provided a model of genuine faith for his apprentice (and generations of Christians to come) to emulate.

## **Titus**—Planting a Church in Hard Soil (three chapters)

Titus was a Gentile convert who became a friend and helper of Paul. He was entrusted with overseeing the development of the young church

on the island of Crete, which in New Testament times was notorious for the immorality of its inhabitants. In this epistle, Paul offers instruction and encouragement to Titus, outlines the unique things which Titus should teach to various groups within the Cretian church (older men, older women, young men, young women, slaves), and warns against the influence of false teachers.

The Epistle of Titus, perhaps more than any of Paul's other writings, emphasizes the importance of sound doctrine and righteous behavior, which apparently were in short supply among the people of Crete. However, Paul is also careful to emphasize that these things are not sufficient in themselves, but that we are ultimately dependent on the grace and mercy of God.

### **Philemon**—Paul's Plea for a Runaway Slave (one chapter)

The Epistle to Philemon is both the briefest of Paul's letters and the most specific in purpose. It was composed during Paul's Roman imprisonment, and it was apparently delivered to Colosse along with the epistle to the Colossians. The letter is directed to a man named Philemon, who was a leader of the Colossian church and a slave owner.

One of Philemon's slaves, Onesimus, had run away (and possibly stolen from Philemon). Somehow, Onesimus made his way to Rome where he met Paul and became a believer. Paul then wrote this letter to Philemon, urging him to forgive Onesimus and to receive him back, not as a slave, but as a brother in the faith. This short letter thus serves both as a treatise on the importance of forgiveness and a reminder of the wondrous truth that brotherhood in Christ transcends all the man-made social barriers that divide us—even that between master and slave.

## THE GENERAL EPISTLES

The eight New Testament letters that were not authored by the apostle Paul are referred to as the General Epistles because (with the notable

exceptions of 2 and 3 John), they are intended for more general audiences than Paul's Epistles. Since the main reasons for grouping these books together are simply the facts that they are all letters and that Paul did not write them, they are predictably quite diverse in terms of length, content, style, audience, and intent.

## **Hebrews**—The Superiority of Christ and the New Covenant (13 chapters)

The Epistle to the Hebrews is the only New Testament Epistle whose author is unknown.<sup>17</sup> Some scholars believe that it was written by Barnabas, who accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey, or Apollos, a Jewish apostle from Alexandria who was renowned for his eloquence, but the letter itself offers no concrete evidence. Hebrews is also unique in its style and construction as it reads more like an essay or sermon than a personal letter. It was written to persuade Jewish believers and seekers (many of whom were wavering between Judaism and Christianity) of the divinity and Lordship of Christ and his superiority to all that had come before.

The letter continually appeals to Jewish history and tradition, emphasizing that Christianity actually fulfills Judaism, as well as superseding it. The author begins by arguing that Jesus is superior to the Old Testament prophets, to the angels, to Moses, and to the Levitical priests. Under the Old Covenant, Moses and the priests acted as mediators between God and the children of Israel, and the people's relationship to God depended on strict adherence to the Law and a complex system of animal sacrifices. Under the New Covenant, Jesus acts as a more powerful mediator than Moses, as a perfect and holy high priest, and as the ultimate, eternally effective sacrifice. Throughout the Epistle, the author exegetes several Old Testament scriptures, including passages from the Psalms, Proverbs, the prophets, and Exodus, in an attempt to demonstrate to his audience the Judaic foundations of his claims about Christ.

The culmination of the author's argument comes in chapter 11, which is commonly referred to as "the faith chapter." In it, the author

recounts the lives of famous Jewish figures, from Abel to Abraham and Moses to Rahab, and argues that the common thread running through the Hebrew scriptures is faith. All of these heroes of Judaism accomplished great things through their faith in God's promises, not through legalistic righteousness. Yet none of them lived to see God's promises completely fulfilled—fulfillment came only through Christ. Thus, according to the author of Hebrews, Christ's sacrifice served as both the capstone of Judaism and the cornerstone of Christianity, providing meaning to all that had come before and promising hope for all who would come after.

## **James**—Practical Faith (five chapters)

James was the son of Mary and Joseph and thus was raised as a brother of Jesus. According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus' brothers were not initially convinced of His divinity, but at some point James and Judas, at least, became believers. James was one of the leaders of the infant church at Jerusalem, played a prominent role in the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15, and was greatly respected by both Peter and Paul.

The Epistle of James is thought to be one of the earliest New Testament books. It is addressed to Jewish believers, which would seem to indicate that it was written when the church was still primarily Jewish in its makeup. Its content is highly practical, placing special emphasis on the idea that faith, which exists only on a verbal or intellectual level, is not really faith. True faith must be accompanied by action. This notion that, in James' words, "faith without deeds is dead" (2:26 NIV) serves as a necessary complement and counterbalance to the idea that believers are saved by faith alone, an important truth which is emphasized throughout Paul's writings.

## **1 Peter**—Blessings, Duties, and Trials (five chapters)

The first of two Epistles which are attributed to the apostle Peter, this letter consists of a series of exhortations regarding various aspects of



the Christian life. Peter instills hope in his audience by emphasizing the wonder of salvation and reinforcing the idea that Christians are a chosen people. He goes on to address the importance of our obligations to one another—submitting to authorities, serving our spouse, and living in harmony with each other. Finally, the apostle offers instruction and encouragement regarding the nature and necessity of Christian suffering and insists that suffering for the cause of Christ should inspire joy, not despair.

## **2 Peter**—Growing in the Faith (three chapters)

Peter's second Epistle was apparently written to the same group of believers as his first. It consists of three chapters, each of which briefly addresses a distinct subject. The first chapter addresses the Christian life and offers a pattern for meaningful spiritual growth. Chapter 2 issues strong warnings against false teachers and heretical doctrines, and largely mirrors the content of the Book of Jude. The final chapter emphasizes the certainty of Christ's return and urges believers to remain strong in the faith.

## **1 John**—Light, Love, and Life (five chapters)

In addition to the Gospel that bears his name, the apostle John also wrote three short Epistles which became part of the canon of Scripture. The first of these was written in response to the heresy of Gnosticism, which claimed that all physical matter was inherently evil, and all spirit was inherently good. These beliefs led the Gnostics to argue that Christ could not have been fully human. Gnostics also lived sinful lives because they thought that evil was unavoidable in the physical realm and that keeping or breaking God's commands had no real moral consequences. John strongly denounces these false teachings, reiterates the true nature of the Incarnation, and emphasizes that those who are children of God will not continue to live willfully sinful lives, but will walk in the light of God's truth.

In addition to these repudiations of Gnostic teaching, John fills his first Epistle with beautiful descriptions of the fellowship that Christians are to enjoy with God and with one another. He reflects on the wondrous love of God for His children and encourages believers to respond to God's love by truly, sacrificially loving one another.

## **2 John**—Caution Against Deceivers (one chapter)

The second of John's three Epistles is the shortest book in the entire Bible. In this brief letter, John issues a warning against deceitful men who promote false doctrines. He urges believers to practice discernment when inviting traveling teachers into their homes, lest they unwittingly provide aid to those whose teachings contradict those of Christ.

## **3 John**—Christian Hospitality (one chapter)

Whereas 2 John cautions the early church not to welcome those who spread false teachings, 3 John urges them to extend hospitality to fellow believers. The letter is addressed to John's friend Gaius, whom the apostle praises for his kindness to traveling evangelists.

## **Jude**—A Call to Contend for the Faith (one chapter)

The Epistle of Jude is thought to have been written by Jude (or Judas), a brother of Jesus and James. Its central purposes are to warn believers against those who spread false teachings and to exhort them to defend the integrity of the faith. The Book of Jude bears a very close resemblance in content to the second chapter of 2 Peter, and it is speculated by some that Peter may have drawn some of his comments regarding false teachers from Jude's epistle.

## PROPHECY/APOCALYPSE

While almost half the books of the Old Testament and over a quarter of its pages consist of the writings of the prophets, the only prophetic

book in the New Testament is its final one. The Book of Revelation concludes the Bible by looking ahead to the culmination of the wondrous story that began in Genesis, and that we are still living out.

## **Revelation**—The Final Conflict and the Second Coming of Christ (22 chapters)

Revelation is, without question, the most bizarre book in the Bible. It is filled with apocalyptic imagery, strange symbols, and fantastic creatures, and much of its content is open to multiple interpretations. Thus, it is in some ways a very frustrating book. Yet it is also immensely important since it is the primary source of Christian belief regarding the end of the present age, the second coming of Christ, the final conflict between God and Satan, and the eternal judgment of mankind.

Some believe that the visions contained in Revelation portray a number of happenings that have already come to pass in the centuries since the book was written, as well as many that have yet to occur. Others contend that the prophecies found in Revelation refer exclusively to the events of the end times. Because of the obscure nature of much of the symbolism found in these visions, it is difficult to be certain. It would seem that the most beneficial approach for the believer is to focus on the larger thematic messages of Revelation—the omnipotence of God, the certainty of Christ’s return, the inevitability of Satan’s defeat, and the promise of eternal life for believers—rather than obsessively seeking definitive interpretations of every prophetic symbol.

Revelation is attributed to the apostle John, who received the visions contained therein while he was imprisoned on the isle of Patmos, most likely during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (89–96 A.D.). The actual writing of the book probably occurred at Ephesus, where John lived following his return from exile. Persecution of Christians by the Roman state was widespread during this period, and one of the major themes of Revelation is the necessity for believers to remain faithful in the face of trials—both those that were imminent in John’s day, and those that await all mankind at the end of the present age.

John received the contents of Revelation as a series of seven visions, to which he appended a brief personal greeting to the seven churches of Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos (or Pergamum), Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. John's first vision was preceded by the voice of God instructing him to record all he saw and to send his account to each of these seven churches, and it was with these churches themselves that the first vision was concerned.

In this vision, Christ appeared to John in an imposing, superhuman form, and dictated separate messages to each of the seven churches. These messages consist of a mixture of commendations, corrections, and exhortations to remain strong in the face of persecution. Perhaps the most memorable of these letters are the one to the believers at Ephesus, whom Jesus accuses of having forsaken their first love, and the one to the church at Laodicea, which Christ warns against remaining lukewarm and complacent in the faith.

The remaining six visions that John received dealt with things that were yet to come. In the second vision, John saw God seated on His heavenly throne, surrounded by four creatures and 24 elders, all of whom sang His praises. Christ also appeared in this vision, this time in the humble form of a lamb. The lamb took from the hand of God a scroll, sealed with seven seals, and began to open it. As the seven seals were broken, a series of seven disasters befell the earth.

The third vision depicted another series of seven catastrophes, this time triggered by seven angels sounding their trumpets. The fourth vision contained several mysterious prophetic symbols, including a pregnant woman, a multi-headed red dragon (representing Satan), and two great beasts, which apparently represent the Antichrist and his false prophet, servants of Satan who will deceive much of humanity and lead them away from Christ. The fifth vision returned to the theme of judgment upon the earth, as seven angels released plagues from seven bowls, representing God's wrath against those who had sided with the Antichrist. The sixth vision predicted the fall of the great city of

Babylon, which many believe actually served as a metaphor for Rome, the center of secular power and pagan religion in John's day.

The seventh and final vision concerned the events of the end times. In it, John saw Christ returning to Earth as a victorious king on a white horse. Christ defeated the armies of Satan at Armageddon, and the antichrist and false prophet were cast into a fiery lake. Satan himself was bound for a thousand years, during which Christ reigned on Earth with His people. When the millennium ended, Satan was released from captivity, but he was defeated once more and cast into the lake of fire. Following these things, John saw God seated on a white throne, from which He judged the dead, casting into the lake of fire any whose names were not recorded in the Book of Life.

Finally, John witnessed the advent of a new heaven and a new earth. A new Jerusalem descended from heaven, and John heard the voice of God issuing from His throne in this holy city: "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. . . . I am making everything new" (21:3–5 NIV). With these words, God lovingly restored the relationship between Himself and man to the idyllic state in which it existed before the Fall, thus providing a fitting ending to this long act in the eternal drama of God and man, the act which began with, "Let there be light."

As the visions concluded, Christ assured John that He would return to earth soon, bringing to fulfillment the prophecies that John had witnessed. John closes the Book of Revelation (and the entire New Testament) by entreating the Lord to come as He had promised, and by admonishing those who read his account of the visions to remain faithful in their pursuit of Christ, lest they be unprepared for His glorious return.

## CHAPTER SIX SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have surveyed the content of the 27 books of the New Testament. We began with the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These books all tell, in different ways and with different emphases, the story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We continued our exploration of New Testament historical writing by examining the Book of Acts, which details the infancy and growth of the early Christian church, with particular emphasis on the ministries of Peter and Paul.

We then proceeded to look at the many letters that comprise most of the remainder of the New Testament. We began with the 13 Epistles of Paul: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. Romans is a detailed statement of Christian belief addressed to the inhabitants of a city that Paul had not yet visited, while the eight letters from 1 Corinthians through 2 Thessalonians address issues that had arisen in some of the churches that Paul had planted during his missionary journeys. The final four letters are addressed to individuals rather than churches and are more personal in nature.

From Paul's correspondence, we moved on to the eight general Epistles: Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude. Significant themes from these letters include the superiority of the new covenant to the old (Hebrews), the importance of true faith (Hebrews), the interdependence of faith and good works (James), and the primacy of love (1 John).

Finally, as the conclusion to our study of the New Testament and to this course as a whole, we explored the Book of Revelation. This apocalyptic vision closes the Bible with both strange, frightening images and glorious, reassuring promises concerning the end of the present age and the return of our Lord.

## CHAPTER SIX NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>*Synoptic* comes from a Greek word meaning “common view.”

<sup>2</sup>E.g. 3:17; 5:41; 7:3, 4, 11, 34; 15:22, 34, 42.

<sup>3</sup>See Colossians 4:14.

<sup>4</sup>John 13:23; 21:7, 20.

<sup>5</sup>Isaiah 7:14; Micah 5:2.

<sup>6</sup>See Matthew 14:3–12; Mark 6:17–29; Luke 3:19, 20.

<sup>7</sup>On Andrew and Peter’s initial encounter with Jesus, see John 1:35–42; On Jesus’ later encounter with the four fishermen, see Matthew 4:18–22, Mark 1:16–20; Luke 5:1–11. On Philip and Bartholomew, see John 1:43–51. On Matthew, see Matthew 9:9–13; Mark 2:14–17; Luke 5:27–32. On the choosing of the 12, see Mark 3:13–19; Luke 6:12–16. On the sending out of the disciples, see Matthew 10:1–16; Mark 6:7–13; Luke 9:1–6.

<sup>8</sup>See Matthew 4:6, 7; 12:38–45; 16:1–4; 17:14–17; Mark 1:40–45; 7:31–37; 8:22–26; John 2:1–4, 18–22.

<sup>9</sup>See John 7:45–52; 19:38–42.

<sup>10</sup>While John 2:12–16 recounts a similar incident, it would appear that this cleansing of the temple took place much earlier in Jesus’ ministry than the one recorded in the Synoptics.

<sup>11</sup>It is interesting to note that on other occasions, such as the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7, Jewish religious leaders seemed perfectly willing to assume such power.

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<sup>12</sup>See 1 Corinthians 15:3–7.

<sup>13</sup>No doubt this event forcefully reminded the disciples of the previous miraculous catch of fish that Jesus had provided. See Luke 5:4–11.

<sup>14</sup>It would appear that Luke joined Paul's party in Troas and traveled with them as far as Philippi, for during this portion of his narrative, he refers to "we" rather than referring to the exploits of Paul and his companions from an objective vantage point, as he did previously and subsequently. See Acts 16:11–18, and cf. 16:6; 17:1.

<sup>15</sup>This letter is referenced in 2 Corinthians 2:3, 4.

<sup>16</sup>The contrast is so startling that some scholars even believe that these chapters originally constituted a separate letter though there is little other evidence to suggest this.

<sup>17</sup>Hebrews was originally thought to have been written by Paul, and it circulated in some compilations of his epistles (though not the earliest ones). Most scholars have now abandoned this assumption, as the Epistle is quite different in style and language from Paul's other letters.



## Afterword

The first words spoken in Genesis are God's command for light to appear. The last words spoken in Revelation are John's prayer that the Light should come again. Twenty centuries later, we continue to await the Light's triumphant return. Yet if we watch carefully, we are sure to catch many small glimpses of Him. We see Him in creation—in a sunset or rainbow or snowflake, in the towering majesty of a redwood and the delicate beauty of a butterfly. We see Him in humankind's own inspired creations—in stories and poems, in hymns and songs, in art and architecture. We see Him, hopefully, in the words and actions of those who claim His name—in a smile, in a prayer, in a sermon, in a humble act of service.

And, of course, we see Him in His Word in that beautiful, terrible, comforting, confusing, life-changing book that we call the Bible. Throughout its pages, we see Him at work—often in subtle ways, and mostly through unlikely people. We see Him best of all in the Gospels, in the flesh. The life of Christ provides us with a template for our own lives, helping us to understand how to live in a way that brings light and hope to a world that is so often shrouded in darkness and despair. That is the sacred task that has been entrusted to us until the day comes when the Light that the world has so long awaited appears, sweeping away the shadows and making even the light that God spoke into existence seem dim by comparison.

But although the Bible remains our best means of seeing the Light, our most trustworthy guide, our most reliable resource, we must remember that it is, in a very important sense, an unfinished piece, a painting not quite completed, a masterwork with missing chapters. For although the Bible ends with John's prayer, the story of God's relationship with humanity, a story of unfathomable, inexhaustible, wondrous love, did not end with it. That story has endured through the centuries following John's death, and it continues today, in the lives of every man, woman, and child on this beautiful, tragic planet. And though Christ's

return will provide, at last, some semblance of a fitting conclusion to the story that began in Genesis, those who know and love Him will find that the last page is not stamped “Revelation 22:21,” nor even “The End,” but rather “To Be Continued.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

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**Instructions:** The following exam consists of 100 questions based on the material covered in this book. There are three types of questions: true/false, multiple choice, and matching. For true/false questions, place a checkmark or X in the blank that corresponds to your answer. For matching and multiple choice questions, write the letter corresponding to your answer in the blank provided.

In order to pass this exam, you must answer at least 90 of the 100 questions correctly. You may refer to the contents of this book as you complete the exam unless instructed otherwise in the context of a group study. Any student taking the exam individually should send his or her completed exam, along with the accompanying registration form, to the state/regional/national office for grading. Students taking the exam in a group study setting should give their completed examinations, along with the accompanying registration form, to the instructor for grading.



## Chapter 1: The Nature of the Bible

1. \_\_\_\_ The Bible is best understood as which of the following?
  - a. A compendium of rules and regulations
  - b. A manual of systematic theology
  - c. A book of proverbs and advice for good living
  - d. A collection of colorful stories
  - e. Part of a single, ongoing story about God and humanity
  
2. \_\_\_\_ Which of the following statements best describes the process of the inspiration of Scripture?
  - a. God Himself supernaturally inscribed all the words of Scripture without help from humans.
  - b. God delivered His words to human servants, who served only as emotionless transcribers.
  - c. God initiated and guarded the transmission of His Word while still allowing humans to be active, creative participants in the process.
  - d. The human authors of the Bible were given extraordinary spiritual insight by God, then wrote the Scriptures without further guidance from Him.
  - e. The human authors of Scripture were unusually perceptive and intelligent, but were not aided by God in any supernatural way.
  
3. \_\_\_\_ Which of the following words refers to the means by which God communicates with humanity concerning His nature, character, and purpose?
  - a. Revelation
  - b. Inspiration
  - c. Illumination
  - d. Dictation
  - e. Proclamation

4. \_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_ F Is the following statement true or false?

The New Testament serves as our guide for faith and practice, while the Old Testament is essentially obsolete and irrelevant in the life of the believer.

Match the following books of the Bible with the types of literature they represent.

- |                      |                     |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| 5. ____ Ecclesiastes | a. Historical Books |
| 6. ____ Philemon     | b. Poetic Books     |
| 7. ____ James        | c. Major Prophets   |
| 8. ____ Nehemiah     | d. Minor Prophets   |
| 9. ____ Jeremiah     | e. Pauline Epistles |
| 10. ____ Zephaniah   | f. General Epistles |

## Chapter 2: The History of the Bible

11. \_\_\_\_ Which of the following Old Testament books has an unknown author?
- a. Leviticus
  - b. Isaiah
  - c. Ruth
  - d. Psalms
  - e. Lamentations

12. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following New Testament books was not written by Paul?

- a. Colossians
- b. Galatians
- c. Romans
- d. Acts
- e. Titus

13. \_\_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_\_ F Is the following statement true or false?

The composition of the Protestant canon is identical to that of the Orthodox canon, but different from the Hebrew and Catholic canons.

14. \_\_\_\_\_ The word that refers to the whole of the Hebrew scriptures is:

- a. Torah
- b. Tanakh
- c. Talmud
- d. Mishnah
- e. Midrash

15. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following terms refers to books that are considered “of questionable authenticity” by Protestants?

- a. Canonical
- b. Deuterocanonical
- c. Apocryphal
- d. Pseudepigraphal
- e. Gnostic

16. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following was not one of the original languages in which parts of the Bible were written?
- a. Hebrew
  - b. Aramaic
  - c. Persian
  - d. Greek
  - e. Chaldean

Match the following descriptions with the corresponding Bible translation or translator.

- |   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| 17. _____ The standard Latin Bible produced by Jerome                     | a. Geneva Bible    |
| 18. _____ The original Greek translation of the Old Testament             | b. John Wycliffe   |
| 19. _____ First English Bible translated entirely from original languages | c. Miles Coverdale |
| 20. _____ Translated the entire Bible from Latin to English               | d. Septuagint      |
| 21. _____ Translated the New Testament from Greek to English              | e. Vulgate         |
| 22. _____ Produced the first complete, printed Bible in English           | f. William Tyndale |

### Chapter 3: The Context of the Old Testament

Match the following descriptions with the corresponding locations.

- |           |  |              |
|-----------|--|--------------|
| 23. _____ | A kingdom in northern Mesopotamia with its capital at Nineveh              | a. Assyria   |
| 24. _____ | A powerful empire located southeast of Mesopotamia                         | b. Babylonia |
| 25. _____ | The land that God promised to Abraham and his descendants                  | c. Canaan    |
| 26. _____ | An empire located between the Tigris and Euphrates in southern Mesopotamia | d. Egypt     |
| 27. _____ | An empire located in the northeast corner of Africa                        | e. Persia    |

Match the following descriptions with the corresponding people groups.

- |           |  |                |
|-----------|--|----------------|
| 28. _____ | Descendants of Ham who were ruled by a series of dynasties | a. Assyrians   |
| 29. _____ | They permitted the return of the exiles to Judah.          | b. Babylonians |
| 30. _____ | They overthrew the northern kingdom of Israel              | c. Canaanites  |
| 31. _____ | They overthrew the southern kingdom of Judah               | d. Egyptians   |
| 32. _____ | Their mastery of iron work made them formidable soldiers.  | e. Persians    |
| 33. _____ | They settled between the Jordan and the Mediterranean.     | f. Philistines |

34. \_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_ F Is the following statement true or false?

The basic course of development of religion during the Old Testament period is from simplicity and informality to complexity and routinization.

35. \_\_\_\_ Which of the following was one of the major deities of the Canaanites?

- a. Ahura Mazda
- b. Dagon
- c. Baal
- d. Ashur
- e. Ra

#### Chapter 4: The Content of the Old Testament

Match the following descriptions with the corresponding Old Testament figures.

- |  |            |
|--|------------|
| 36. ____ The first king of Israel, who was not obedient to God         | a. Abraham |
| 37. ____ He wrestled with God and was given a new name.                | b. Daniel  |
| 38. ____ The leader of Israel during the conquest of the Promised Land | c. David   |
| 39. ____ He was the last judge and the first prominent prophet.        | d. Esther  |
| 40. ____ A queen who saved the Jewish people from execution            | e. Ezra    |
| 41. ____ The leader of the Exodus and author of the Pentateuch         | f. Isaiah  |

42. \_\_\_\_ A prophet who recorded many Messianic prophecies g. Jacob
43. \_\_\_\_ The king who built the temple as a house for the Lord h. Joshua
44. \_\_\_\_ He served in the courts of the kings of Babylonia and Persia. i. Moses
45. \_\_\_\_ A shepherd, poet, musician, warrior, and king j. Samuel
46. \_\_\_\_ He left his homeland in response to God's command. k. Saul
47. \_\_\_\_ A priest and scribe who returned with the exiles to Jerusalem l. Solomon

48. \_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_ F Is the following statement true or false?

Joseph was the favorite of Jacob's 12 sons, and became an ancestor of Christ.

49. \_\_\_\_ Which book of the *Pentateuch* records the rebellion of the Israelites and the sin of Moses that prevented him from seeing the Promised Land?
- a. Genesis
  - b. Exodus
  - c. Leviticus
  - d. Numbers
  - e. Deuteronomy

50. \_\_\_\_ The lone defeat for the Israelites during their conquest of Canaan occurred where?

- a. Jericho
- b. Ai
- c. Gibeon
- d. Hazor
- e. Hebron

51. \_\_\_\_ Which of the following figures was not one of the judges?

- a. Samson
- b. Jephthah
- c. Deborah
- d. Gideon
- e. Caleb

52. \_\_\_\_ Who led a rebellion against King David?

- a. Amnon
- b. Joab
- c. Absalom
- d. Jeroboam
- e. Rehoboam

53. \_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_ F Is the following statement true or false?

Elisha was a prophet of God who confronted the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel.

54. \_\_\_\_ Which godly king of Judah was told he would die, but had his life extended by God?

- a. Joash
- b. Josiah
- c. Uzziah
- d. Hezekiah
- e. Jehoshaphat



55. \_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_ F Is the following statement true or false?

King David was responsible for authoring all of the Psalms.

56. \_\_\_\_ Which of the poetic books represents the classic treatment of the problem of the suffering of the innocent?

- a. Job
- b. Psalms
- c. Proverbs
- d. Ecclesiastes
- e. Song of Solomon

57. \_\_\_\_ Which of the following figures is known as “the weeping prophet”?

- a. Jeremiah
- b. Isaiah
- c. Nehemiah
- d. Zechariah
- e. Ezekiel

58. \_\_\_\_ The visions of the wheels, four living creatures, and dry bones are found in which of the following prophetic books?

- a. Isaiah
- b. Jeremiah
- c. Ezekiel
- d. Daniel
- e. Hosea

59. \_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_ F Is the following statement true or false?

Jeremiah prophesied to the Jews in exile around the same time that Ezekiel prophesied to the Jews in Jerusalem.

60. \_\_\_\_ Which prophet prophesied concerning the coming of the Holy Spirit?

- a. Hosea
- b. Joel
- c. Amos
- d. Jonah
- e. Malachi

61. \_\_\_\_ Which prophet foretold the destruction of Nineveh?

- a. Obadiah
- b. Micah
- c. Nahum
- d. Habakkuk
- e. Haggai

62. \_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_ F Is the following statement true or false?

Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, foretold the coming of John the Baptist.

### **Chapter 5: The Context of the New Testament**

63. \_\_\_\_ Jesus was born and crucified in which of the following areas?

- a. Perea
- b. Decapolis
- c. Galilee
- d. Judea
- e. Samaria

64. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following cities served as Jesus' base of operations during much of His ministry?
- a. Bethlehem
  - b. Bethany
  - c. Capernaum
  - d. Nazareth
  - e. Jerusalem
65. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following events took place on the Mount of Olives?
- a. The Sermon on the Mount
  - b. The Feeding of the 5000
  - c. The Ascension
  - d. The Crucifixion
  - e. The Transfiguration
66. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following events did not take place in the Sea of Galilee?
- a. The calming of the storm
  - b. The baptism of Jesus
  - c. Jesus walking on the water
  - d. The 1<sup>st</sup> miraculous catch of fish in Luke 5
  - e. The 2<sup>nd</sup> miraculous catch of fish in John 21

Match the following descriptions with the corresponding figures of the Intertestamental period.

67. \_\_\_\_\_ The rulers of Egypt during much of the Intertestamental period      a. Alexander the Great
68. \_\_\_\_\_ The Jewish military leader who recaptured Jerusalem and rededicated the temple      b. Antiochus Epiphanes

69. \_\_\_\_ The Roman general who captured Jerusalem in 63 B.C. c. Herod the Great
70. \_\_\_\_ The king of Judea at the time of Jesus' birth d. Judas Maccabeus
71. \_\_\_\_ The Greek military genius who overthrew the Persian Empire e. Pompey
72. \_\_\_\_ The rulers of Syria during much of the Intertestamental period f. Ptolemies
73. \_\_\_\_ The Syrian ruler who desecrated the temple and threatened to exterminate the Jews g. Seleucids
74. \_\_\_\_ Which of the following groups favored active revolution against Roman rule?
- a. The Pharisees
  - b. The Sadducees
  - c. The Essenes
  - d. The Zealots
  - e. The Herodians
75. \_\_\_\_ Which of the following groups was made up largely of priests and aristocrats?
- a. The Pharisees
  - b. The Sadducees
  - c. The Essenes
  - d. The Zealots
  - e. The Herodians

76. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following groups emphasized the importance of strict observance of both the written Law and oral tradition?
- a. The Pharisees
  - b. The Sadducees
  - c. The Essenes
  - d. The Zealots
  - e. The Herodians
77. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following groups withdrew from secular life and lived in isolated communities?
- a. The Pharisees
  - b. The Sadducees
  - c. The Essenes
  - d. The Zealots
  - e. The Herodians

## **Chapter 6: The Content of the New Testament**

78. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the four Gospels is generally thought to have been written first?
- a. Matthew
  - b. Mark
  - c. Luke
  - d. John
79. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the four Gospels contains the most of Jesus' parables?
- a. Matthew
  - b. Mark
  - c. Luke
  - d. John

80. \_\_\_\_ Which of the four Gospels was written to appeal primarily to a Jewish audience?
- a. Matthew
  - b. Mark
  - c. Luke
  - d. John
81. \_\_\_\_ Which of the four Gospels contains the seven “I am” sayings of Christ?
- a. Matthew
  - b. Mark
  - c. Luke
  - d. John
82. \_\_\_\_ Which of the 12 disciples is thought to have been the first to encounter Jesus?
- a. Peter
  - b. John
  - c. Philip
  - d. Matthew
  - e. Andrew
83. \_\_\_\_ Jesus’ words, “As I have loved you, so must you love one another” are part of which of the following?
- a. The Sermon on the Mount
  - b. The Great Commission
  - c. The Great Commandment
  - d. The New Commandment
  - e. The Good Shepherd discourse

**84.** \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following is the only one of Jesus' miracles to be recorded in all four Gospels?

- a. Walking on the water
- b. The calming of the storm
- c. The changing of water into wine
- d. The feeding of the 5,000
- e. The resurrection of Lazarus

**85.** \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following statements about the events of the Passion Week is incorrect?

- a. Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem preceded his cleansing of the temple.
- b. The disciple who cut off the soldier's ear was the same one who later denied Jesus.
- c. Jesus was tried before Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate, and King Herod.
- d. In accordance with Old Testament prophecy, Jesus remained silent on the cross.
- e. Jesus' cross was carried by Simon of Cyrene, and His body was buried by Joseph of Arimathea.

**86.** \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following men was the first recorded Christian martyr?

- a. James the brother of John
- b. Stephen
- c. James the brother of Jesus
- d. Apollos
- e. James the son of Alphaeus

**87.** \_\_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_\_ F Is the following statement true or false?

Following Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus, the Lord renamed him Paul.

88. \_\_\_\_ Which of the following men was the first recorded Gentile convert to Christianity?
- a. Barnabas
  - b. Ananias
  - c. Nicodemus
  - d. Matthias
  - e. Cornelius
89. \_\_\_\_ Paul and Silas were imprisoned at Philippi during which of Paul's journeys?
- a. 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey
  - b. 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey
  - c. 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey
  - d. Journey to Rome
90. \_\_\_\_ Paul was shipwrecked on Malta during which of his journeys?
- a. 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey
  - b. 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey
  - c. 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey
  - d. Journey to Rome
91. \_\_\_\_ Paul established the church on the island of Cyprus during which of his journeys?
- a. 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey
  - b. 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey
  - c. 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey
  - d. Journey to Rome



Match the following descriptions of the Pauline epistles with the corresponding books.

- |           |  |                          |
|-----------|--|--------------------------|
| 92. _____ | Addresses a variety of heresies, including angel worship, and asserts the supremacy of Christ                  | a. Romans                |
| 93. _____ | An overview of Christian doctrine addressed to a church that Paul had never visited                            | b. 1 and 2 Corinthians   |
| 94. _____ | Emphasizes that God has both reconciled believers to Himself, and united them in one body, the church          | c. Galatians             |
| 95. _____ | Written to address several problems and controversies, and to defend Paul's authority as an apostle            | d. Ephesians             |
| 96. _____ | Letter in which Paul expresses his great joy and urges others to remain faithful even in the face of suffering | e. Philippians           |
| 97. _____ | Written to give instruction to believers regarding the second coming of Christ                                 | f. Colossians            |
| 98. _____ | Emphasizes that salvation is by grace through faith, and lists the Fruit of the Spirit                         | g. 1 and 2 Thessalonians |

99. \_\_\_\_ Which of the general epistles emphasizes that faith without deeds is dead?
- a. Hebrews
  - b. James
  - c. 1 Peter
  - d. 1 John
  - e. Jude
100. \_\_\_\_ In the Book of Revelation, which of the seven churches was warned against remaining lukewarm and complacent in the faith?
- a. Thyatira
  - b. Philadelphia
  - c. Laodicea
  - d. Pergamum
  - e. Smyrna

*For other foundation can  
no man lay than that is laid,  
which is Jesus Christ.*

*1 Corinthians 3:11*

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