



BIBLE OVERVIEW



THE OLD TESTAMENT

Reading the Old Testament

Reading the Old Testament can be an intimidating activity. However, making the effort to read and understand the Old Testament produces great fruit in our lives. In the many stories, poems, prophecies, songs, prayers, wisdom, and instructions of the Old Testament, we see the way God relates to humanity, both his people in particular and the nations in general.

Here are some things to keep in mind when reading the Old Testament:

1. The Old Testament is as much the Word of God as the New Testament.

Though the Old Testament was compiled over hundreds of years and written by many different authors, it all originated with God. It is his Word to his people. The apostle Peter reminds believers, “We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable.... No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:19–21).

2. The Old Testament helps us understand the New Testament. The Old Testament deals with events and teachings hundreds—and even thousands—of years before Jesus was born. All of those events and teachings give us the background to all that happened when Jesus was born and during his life. For example, understanding the Old Testament sacrifices sheds light on what Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross means. Knowing about the Old Testament prophecies of a coming Messiah helps us see how Jesus is that Messiah (the “Christ”) who fulfills God’s promises given long ago. The Old Testament laws, customs, and religious traditions help us make sense of Jesus’ interactions with the Jewish religious leaders of his day.

3. God’s grace for humanity is seen throughout the Old Testament. As we read the Old Testament, we begin to understand the gracious and powerful God who created all things. We also understand the need for God’s grace as we contemplate human folly and sin. Because of God’s grace, rather than destroying humanity, God planned to save us. We see this plan unfold in the pages of the Old Testament. It is not always a straightforward telling of God’s plan. Often, we must carefully find God’s plan in the stories of people who, just like us today, experience the goodness of creation, the corruption of a good creation, the terrible distorting power of sin, and the sad consequences of our separation from God.

4. **Old Testament people and stories serve as examples for believers today.**

The apostle Paul tells us that the things that happened to people in the Old Testament “happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Cor. 10:11–12). Even the most faithful people in the Old Testament, like Moses and King David, fell into sin and were disciplined by God. Yet we see in the Old Testament how God continued to redeem and restore his people even after terrible sin and tragedy.

5. **The Old Testament helps us recognize God’s actions.** Although we are not of the world, Jesus has sent us to the world to be witnesses of his love, grace, and sacrifice. As long as we are in the world, we must learn to recognize the way God moves and acts in the world, through people, and sometimes in extraordinary ways that do not require people. The more we read the Old Testament, the more we learn to recognize God’s ways in the world.

Geography and Cultural Context

The Old Testament covers the life of a people through a large expanse of space and time. From the fertile Delta of the Nile in Egypt, through the barren wilderness of the Sinai peninsula, the rugged terrain of Edom and Moab, to the lands east and west of the Jordan River, to the wealthy Fertile Crescent of the cities between the two mighty rivers the Tigris and the Euphrates, the Old Testament unfolds the story of God and God’s people in wonderful, dramatic, and often sad ways. Through it all, however, God’s grace shines through, illuminating the plan of the One who would give an answer to the greatest human problem of sin and death.

Knowing the cultures in and around Israel helps us to more fully grasp the meaning of the stories and songs of the Old Testament. Many practices in the Old Testament seem very strange to us. Some of them are beyond our understanding. (For example, the prohibition to eat pork continues to puzzle scholars.) However, many other practices we can understand by looking at the historical and social world of the Old Testament. An important example of this is the concept of royalty and covenants.

The ancient world was very familiar with the concept of royalty. In our day, we have lost the sense of what it was like to have a king. We do not fully understand how difficult it was for people to relate to someone so lofty. “Regular” people did not have contact with royalty. A covenant was often the only way to relate to royalty. There were two main kinds of covenants for that purpose: conditional and unconditional covenants.

- In conditional covenants, the king claimed complete authority over his subject. In return, the king pledged to offer protection and provision on condition of the subject’s loyalty. The subject, on the other hand, pledged loyalty and service to the king, and expected in return the king’s protection and favor.

- Then there are the unconditional covenants. In these, the king pledged a royal favor on behalf of a subject, perhaps to reward a special service to the king. The favor could take different forms; a common form was a royal grant of land.

One of the main metaphors used in the Bible to speak about God is that of the king. God is the Great King, the King of kings. He chose to relate to humans in terms that we could understand. The concept of kingship is an important metaphor to understand our relationship with our Creator.

In the Old Testament we see both kinds of covenants between God the King and his people. For example, the covenant God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai was conditional. In this covenant, God promised to make Israel his people and he expected Israel to obey and keep the covenant (Ex. 19:5–6). God’s covenant with David however was unconditional. God promised to preserve David’s descendants upon the throne of Israel (2 Sam. 7:11)—a promise that found its fulfillment in the Messiah Jesus, a descendant of David.

Books of the Old Testament

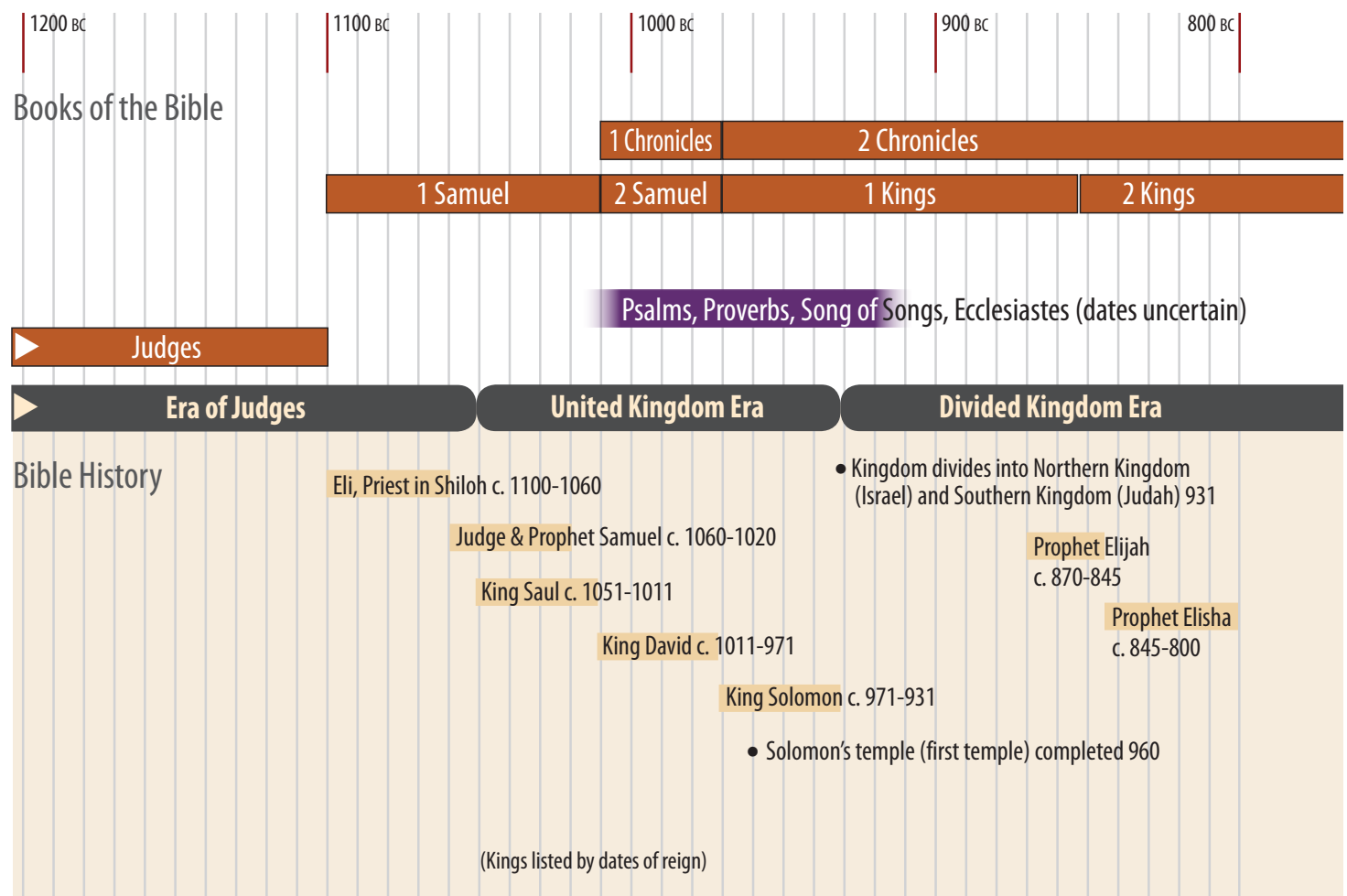
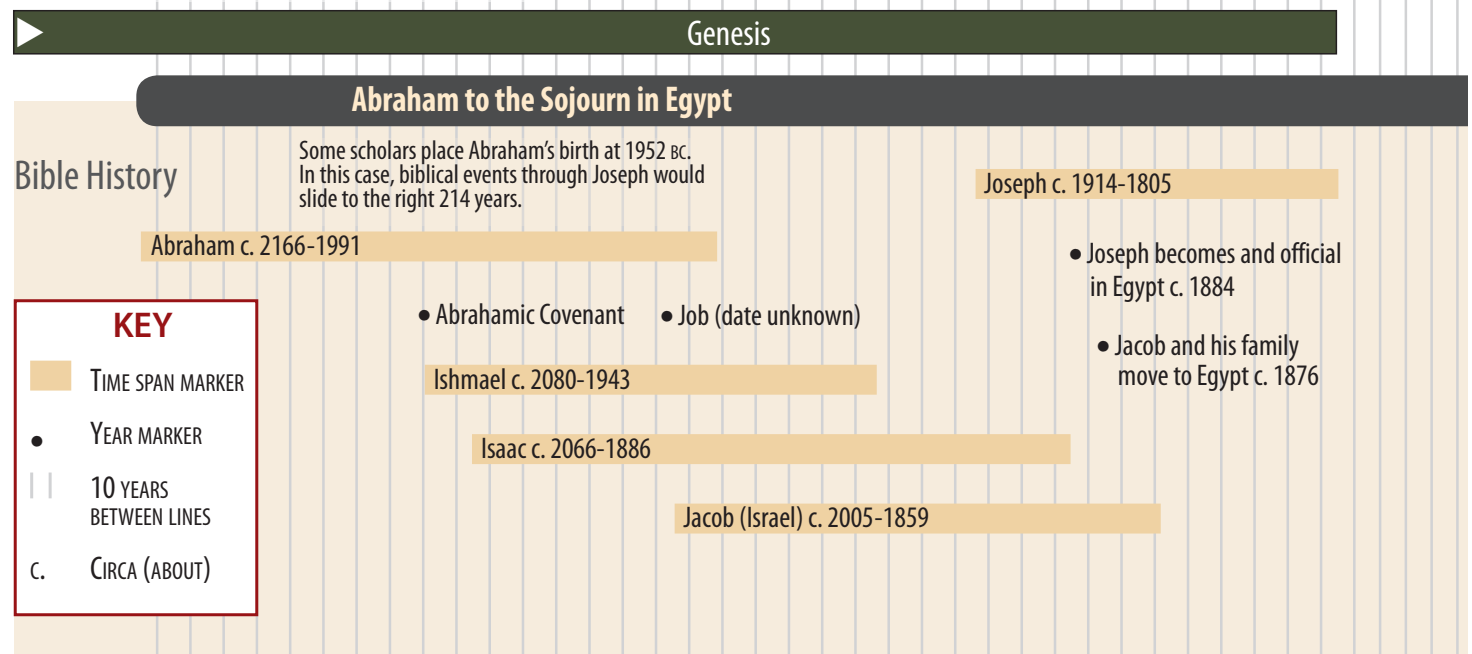
The Old Testament is made up of thirty-nine books, divided into four main sections.

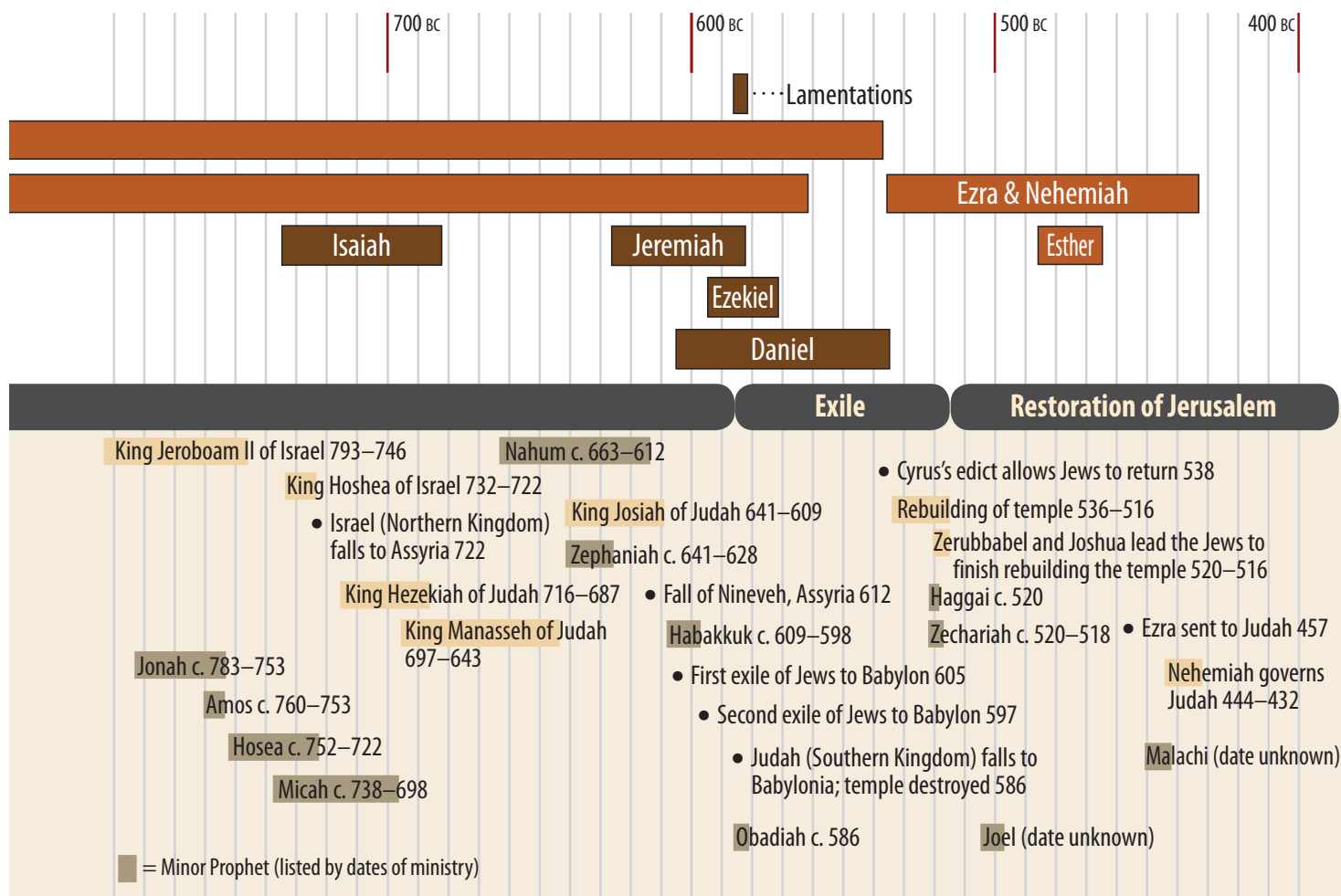
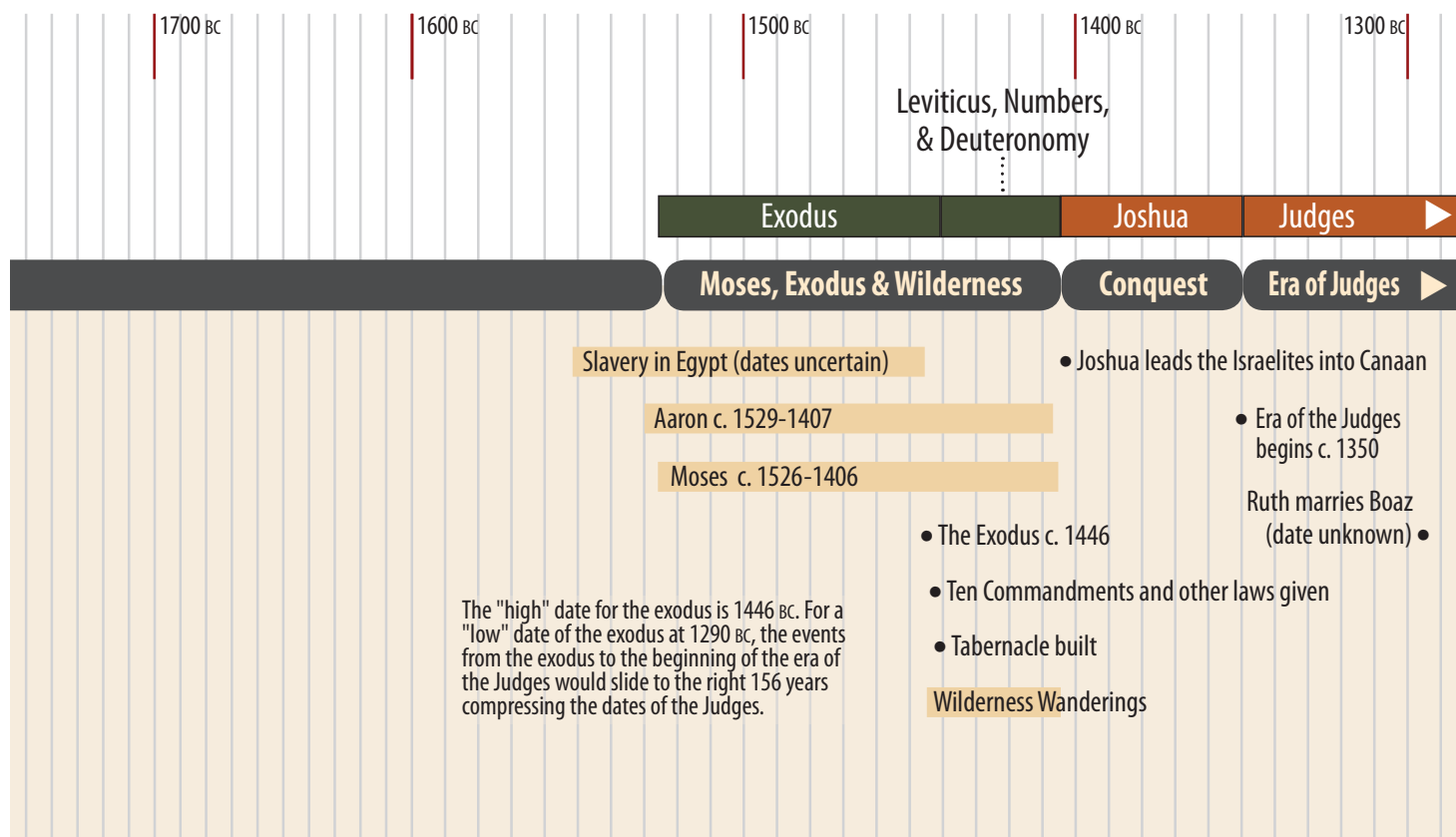
Pentateuch	Historical Books	Poetry & Wisdom Books	Prophetic Books	
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Joshua Judges Ruth 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther	Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Songs	<i>Major Prophets:</i> Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel	<i>Minor Prophets:</i> Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi

Old Testament Time Line

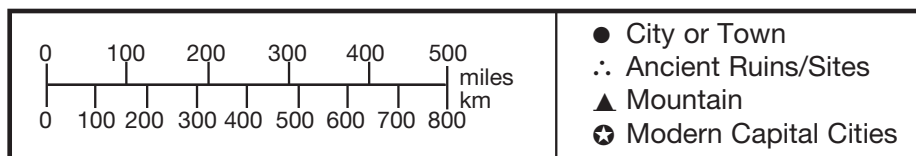
Books of the Bible

The period for each book of the Bible shows its historical setting, not the date the book was written. Many dates listed are approximate and may vary according to different scholars.





ANCIENT MIDDLE EAST



PENTATEUCH

GOD'S INSTRUCTIONS FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

What Is the Pentateuch?

The Pentateuch refers to the first five books of the Bible. The word *Pentateuch* comes from a Greek word that means “five vessels or scrolls.” In Hebrew, this section is known as *Torah*. Commonly translated as “law,” *torah* is better translated as “instruction.” This way, the Torah is not limited to legal sections, but it includes everything in the Pentateuch: genealogies, stories, laws, discourses, and songs.

On one level, the Pentateuch is a collection of books. On a deeper level, the Pentateuch is God's gracious provision for his people. It provides an identity for God's people. It provides the answers to the questions, what does it mean to be God's people, and how can we be God's people? The Pentateuch is God's instructions for a nation learning to be God's people while living in the world.

For this reason, the Pentateuch lays the basis for the rest of the Bible. It explains the origin of the universe, of the nations, and of God's people. It explains the need for God's direct intervention in human history—human sin. The stories show how God acts in the lives of his people.

Pentateuch

Genesis

Exodus

Leviticus

Numbers

Deuteronomy

Who Wrote the Pentateuch?

This is a difficult question. Some scholars argue that Moses wrote the whole of the Pentateuch, and they offer good arguments in favor. Other scholars argue that the collection of books underwent a long writing process, which ended centuries after Moses' life. Still others will grant that Moses wrote a portion of the material. Scholars still debate how much of that material Moses wrote—and how much was written in a long process of editing and rearranging of the material.

The two main arguments for recognizing Moses as the author of the Pentateuch are:

- We know that God ordered Moses to write (Ex. 17:14; 24:3, 4, 7; 32:7–10, 30–34; 34:27; Lev. 26:46; 27:34; Deut. 31:9, 24, 25).
- The Old and New Testaments recognize the Pentateuch as “Moses' Law” (Josh. 8:31, 32; 1 Kings 2:3; Jer. 7:22; Ezra 6:18; Neh. 8:1; Mal. 4:4; Matt. 22:24; Acts 15:21).

However, even supporting Moses as the author, many scholars still recognize that Moses did not write everything in the Pentateuch.

- Moses probably didn't write about his own death (Deut. 34).
- Other passages that use names for cities that don't fit the times (Gen. 11:31; 14:14) or that talk about Moses' humility (Num. 12:3) were probably written by a later author.

- The text itself names ancient sources that were used in the books of the Pentateuch: The Book of the Wars of the Lord (Num. 21:14) and the Book of the Covenant (Ex. 24:7).

Other scholars have taken the idea of ancient sources beyond those two mentioned in the text itself. Although earlier scholars took their critical views too far and with little support, many scholars today continue to see an important history of composition of the books. Despite of how we think the collection was written, the Pentateuch is the Word of God and lays the theological groundwork for the rest of the Scriptures.

Characteristics of the Pentateuch

Literature: Most of the Pentateuch is prose narrative of a high literary quality. That means that besides being divinely inspired books which teach us truths about God and the world he created, the books of the Pentateuch are also beautiful writings. The Pentateuch has two main kinds of literature: stories and laws. The laws—Exodus 20, for example—are framed with stories. The stories help us make sense of the laws, and the laws give boundaries to our lives so we can be God’s separate people. This way, we come to understand that the Pentateuch is not about Moses; it is not a Moses biography. Rather, the Pentateuch is about God and God’s people.

Main Characters:

- *God:* God is the Pentateuch’s main interest. The Pentateuch does not tell us all or most of what there is to know about God. Rather, the importance of everything that happens depends on how it relates to God: God caused or allowed it, it reveals something about God’s character—his goodness, holiness, justice, love, compassion—or it helps us understand how God works in and through history.
- *Abraham:* God’s calling of Abraham shows God’s initiative to rescue humanity from sin and death. The Pentateuch illustrates the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham: Abraham’s descendants were many, through Joseph they were a blessings to all the nations of the world, and God remained with them.
- *Israel:* God decided to work his plan of salvation in and through Israel, a chosen people. Israel becomes central in the great drama of salvation.
- *Moses:* Moses was perhaps the most important person in the Old Testament. His life was bound to the life of God’s people and to God himself. Learning about Moses means learning about God’s people and about God.
- *The Promised Land:* The Promised Land becomes a character in the Pentateuch and the whole of Scripture. The land is the concrete representation of God’s promises to Abraham. The relationship of God’s people with the land becomes a constant theme in the Pentateuch and beyond.

DEUTERONOMY

ALREADY, BUT NOT YET



Fragment of the oldest mosaic floor map of the Jordan River and Dead Sea

Purpose

Deuteronomy is a fascinating book that describes God's people in a time in between. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, they arrived at the Promised Land but hadn't entered yet. Deuteronomy mostly consists of the speeches Moses gave to the second generation on the plains of Moab before they entered the Promised Land. The first generation, those who had left Egypt and witnessed God's mighty acts of salvation, had died—all except Joshua, Caleb, and Moses. The second generation had not witnessed first hand God's powerful acts against Egypt, nor his awesome glory revealed on Mount Sinai. Moses took a long pause to instruct this new generation about what makes them God's people and to challenge them to find their identity and purpose in the covenant with God. As the people waited at the edge of the Promised Land, God's promises were already there to the reaching hand, but they had not yet been fulfilled.

Deuteronomy

The name derives from the Greek name of the book, *deuteronomion*, meaning "second law." However, the book is not really a second law, but rather a repetition of the Torah. Moses repeated God's instructions for the second generation of God's people. The Hebrew name of the book is *'eleh haddebarim*, "these are the words (or discourses)," which are the first two words of the book.

Outline

1. A Look Backward (1–3)
 - a. Summary of the wilderness wanderings
2. The Great Discourse (4–11)
 - a. Fear, Love, and Obey God
 - b. The Ten Commandments
3. Covenant Stipulations (12–26)
 - a. Worship one true God in one place
 - b. Various laws for Israel
4. Covenant Ceremony (27–30)
 - a. Blessings and curses of the covenant
5. A Look Forward (31–34)
 - a. Joshua confirmed as Moses' successor
 - b. The song and blessings of Moses
 - c. Moses' death on Mount Nebo

Ancient Covenants

Many scholars consider that Deuteronomy was written according to the structure of ancient covenant documents. Thus Deuteronomy's outline would be as follows:

1. Preamble (1:1–5)
2. Historical Prologue (1:6–4:43)
3. Stipulations of the Covenant (4:44–26:19)
4. Ratification: Curses and Blessings (27–30)
5. Leadership Succession under the Covenant (31–34)

Background

Author: Although the book of Deuteronomy does not name its author, Jewish and Christian tradition has accepted the author of Deuteronomy (and the other four books of the Pentateuch) to be Moses.

Date: Moses would have written Deuteronomy (and the rest of the Pentateuch) between 1446 BC (a possible date of the exodus) and 1406 BC (the date of Moses' death).

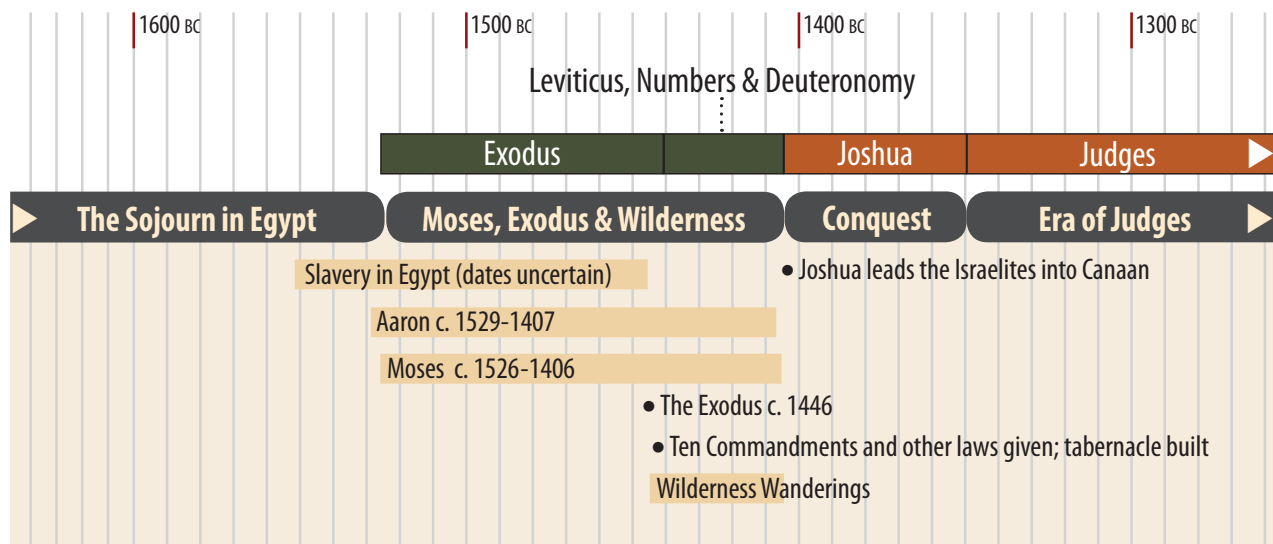
Setting: The entire book of Deuteronomy takes place while Israel is encamped at the border of the Promised Land, east of the Jordan River, in the plains of Moab. Moab became one of Israel's most adamant enemies. As Israel approached the land, Moab formed an alliance with several Medianite kingdoms to stop the advance of the wandering tribes—the Moabite King Barak sent the prophet Balaam to curse Israel, with surprising results (see Num. 22:2–24:25). To the east of the Jordan River, the majestic Mount Nebo was a silent witness of Israel's preparations to enter the land. On Mount Nebo, Moses saw the land for the last time.

Shema

The famous quote from Deuteronomy known as *shema*—from the Hebrew word that means “hear!”—is the basis for Israel's monotheistic (“one God”) faith. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD, our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). Deuteronomy instructs the Israelites to bind God's commandment to their hands and foreheads, as well as write them on the doorposts of their homes. Many Jews today tie small boxes with Scripture quotations (usually the *shema*) to their foreheads and hands, and also attach them to their doorpost.

Old Testament Covenants

Covenant	Reference	Type	Description
Noah	Gen. 9:8–17	Unconditional	God promised not to destroy again his creation.
Abraham	Gen. 15:9–21	Unconditional	God promised to give Abraham's descendants the land. The covenant was sealed with an animal sacrifice.
Abraham	Gen. 17	Conditional	God confirmed his covenant with Abraham and made a commitment to Abraham. He specified Abraham's commitment and reaffirmed his promise of land and Abraham agreed to keep the sign of the covenant: circumcision.
Covenant at Sinai	Ex. 19–24	Conditional	God promised to make Israel his people and also expressed what he expected of Israel.
Phinehas	Num. 25:10–31	Unconditional	God granted Phinehas, a priest, a descendant of Aaron and his descendants a "covenant of lasting priesthood" (25:13).
David	2 Sam. 7:5–16	Unconditional	God promised to preserve David's descendants on the throne of Israel.
The New Covenant	Jer. 31:31–34	Unconditional	God declared that he "will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah" (31:31). It establishes a new relationship with his people by writing his law on their hearts.



Key Verses

But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul.—Deut. 4:29

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.—Deut. 18:15

The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.—Deut. 30:6

Themes

Torah. In the retelling of God’s instructions, Deuteronomy offers anew his law—*Torah* more properly means “instruction”—for each generation of believers.

Covenant. The entire book can be read as a covenant renewal between the second generation and God. The blessings and curses of the covenant play a prominent role in Israel’s history.

The Land. God’s promises to Abraham were concretely represented by the land. The land was a visual reminder of God’s faithfulness to his promises.

Being God’s People

Then: The book of Deuteronomy is a reminder to God’s people that God is faithful to his covenant. He’s the holy God, full of mercy and grace, who led his people to the Promised Land. The next generation is challenged to remember and learn from the mistakes of the previous generation (1 Cor. 10:1–13). In Deuteronomy, the second generation must not forget the source of their blessings, take the land for granted, become indistinguishable from the people living in the land, make idols for themselves, rely on their economic or political power to survive, or abandon the covenant.

Now: God’s people in Deuteronomy are in the already-but-not-yet state that still describes Christians today. In a symbolic sense, all believers are the second generation. We all stand at the borders of the Promised Land—the New Jerusalem—already enjoying some of God’s wonderful promises, but knowing that the fullness of his promise is yet to come. As the Israelites required instruction to live in the land God had promised them, we are learning also to live in God’s presence. In many ways, life today is the training ground for life in a new heavens and new earth in the presence of God.

Jesus in Deuteronomy

The glory to which we look forward will be revealed when Jesus returns. In the meantime, we continue to train and “press toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14).

Quotable Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is the third most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament—only after Psalms and Isaiah. Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy during his confrontation with Satan in the desert (Matt. 4:1–11). Some scholars suggest that Jesus is doing what Israel was incapable of: fulfilling all obedience. In this view, Jesus embodies the new Israel.

HISTORICAL BOOKS

LIVING WITH GOD IN THE LAND

What Are the Historical Books?

The Historical Books are the second section of the Bible. This section continues where the Pentateuch ended. At the end of the Pentateuch, the Israelites are poised at the edge of the Promised Land after hearing instructions, advice, and commands from Moses. Moses, the great leader, has died on Mount Nebo (Deut. 34:1–12). God has chosen Joshua, Moses' longtime assistant, to lead the Israelites into the land.

What Are They About?

The books in this section deal with Israel's historical experience with the land and God. The books range from conquering, settling, and experiencing the many joys, temptations, failures, and challenges of living in the land as the Israelites learned how to live as God's people. The books cover the history of Israel from the time of the conquest (around the 1400s BC) to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (around the 400s BC). In between, we find a dramatic history of a people, their kings, many painful disappointments and some remarkable accomplishments. Israel changed from a loosely organized group of 12 tribes to a united kingdom under David and Solomon, and then to a divided kingdom: Israel in the north with 19 kings who did evil in God's eyes, and Judah in the south with 19 kings also, although eight kings did right in God's eyes.

The dominant figure in the Historical Books is King David. God chose David and his descendants. God would rule and bless his people through the house of David. From this promise, in time, the Messianic hope would arise. This hope refers to God's people longing to be restored and redeemed. God's people were punished for breaking the covenant with God. The historical books give us a theological account of Israel's failure to keep the covenant and God's compassionate and just dealings with them.

Why Are They Important?

The many stories in these books illustrate for us how God relates in history to his people and the whole world. These stories show how God's will works out in history.

- God works in direct ways, as in the stories of Joshua entering the Promised Land.
- God works in indirect ways, through prophets like Samuel and Elijah, or through other nations, like Assyria or Babylon.
- God works behind the scenes, as in the story of Esther.

Historical Books

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

The apostle Paul wrote, “Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.... These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:6, 11).

The Scriptures teach us a new way of thinking and seeing the world. Becoming God’s people means that we progressively grow more sensitive to God’s actions in the world. To understand what God is doing around us and in us, we must understand how God has been acting throughout history. Learning to read the Historical Books equips us to be perceptive to the Spirit’s promptings in our lives. They also remind us in powerful ways that punishment is never God’s final word.

The Exile

There are important, decisive moments in the Old Testament: The calling of Abraham, the exodus, entering the Promised Land, God’s covenant with David, the building of the temple in Jerusalem. Two other decisive moments were the Assyrian exile of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC and the Babylonian exile of the southern kingdom of Judah (including Jerusalem) in 586 BC.

Assyria and Babylon deported people from newly conquered territories. The idea was to remove the possibility of rebellion, making it easier to control the territory. They did not relocate the entire population. Rather, they took into exile the nobles—kings, princes and princesses, priests and royal officers. They would also move other people from city to city. And, finally, they would destroy the capital cities of the kingdoms they conquered.

Samaria in the northern kingdom and Jerusalem in the south were destroyed and made almost inhabitable places. It is not possible to exaggerate the spiritual, emotional, and social trauma of these type of events. The historical books, along with the prophetic books, show that these two events were punishments for Israel and Judah’s disloyalty to God. However, punishment is never God’s final word. God restored a remnant of his people from Babylon. Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor returned with them. They reorganized the religious and political life of the people in Jerusalem. God’s grace was paving the way for the coming of the promised Messiah, the only one who could rescue humans from sin and death.

1 & 2 SAMUEL

GOD IS KING, BUT WE WANT A KING



David and Saul by Ernst Josephson

One or Two Books?

The Hebrew Bible has only one book of Samuel. When the book was translated into Greek—the Septuagint—the translated text was significantly longer. To make it fit better in the scrolls, the translators of the Septuagint decided to break the book of Samuel into two parts. Originally, Samuel was called 1 and 2 books of Kings, and Kings was divided into 3 and 4 books of Kings.

Purpose

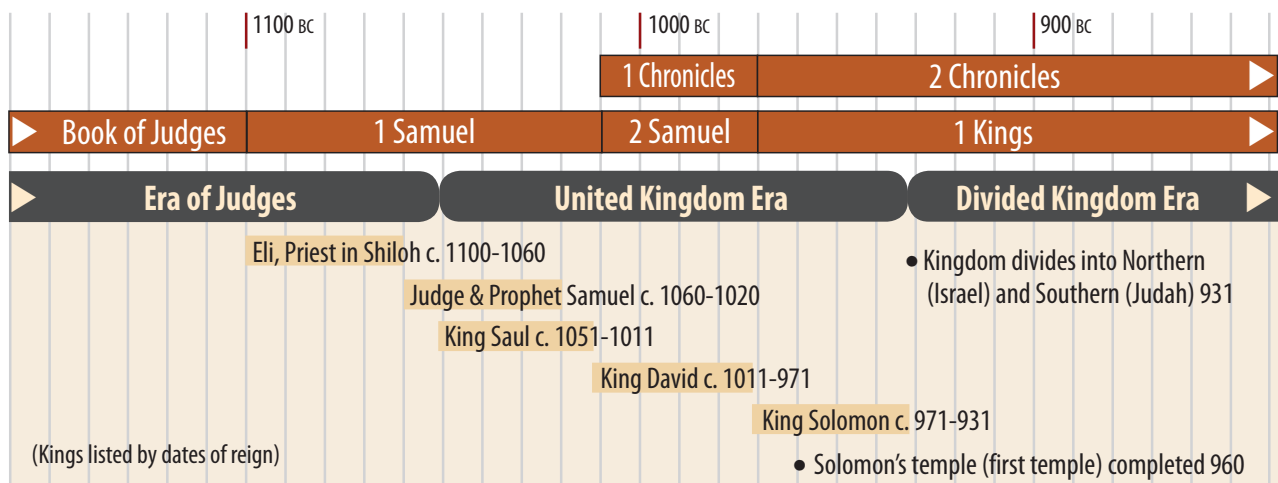
- When the Israelites entered the Promised Land, they were a collection of tribes, the tribes of the children of Israel. They hardly were the nation God had promised Abraham (Gen. 12:2). The time of the judges was a time of lawlessness and disorder, where “everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 21:25). Israel’s moral and spiritual decline is well represented by the high priest Eli and his children. The book of Samuel how and why the monarchy started after the era of the Judges.
- The book of Samuel is a prophetic book. It gives a prophetic assessment to a crucial time of Israel’s history: the early era of the kings. It is meant to expose sin, warn people against rebellion, and instruct people about how God works in history.
- The book also shows the beginning of the monarchy with Saul, the rise, importance, and limits of David’s reign, and the spiritual state of the nation during David’s reign.

Outline

1. Samuel: A Prophet in Times of Transition (1 Sam. 1–7)
 - a. Birth of Samuel and early ministry (1 Sam. 1–3)
 - b. Samuel's ministry as judge and prophet (1 Sam. 4–7)
2. Samuel and Saul: Establishment of the Monarchy in Israel (1 Sam. 8–15)
 - a. Transition to Saul's reign (1 Sam. 8)
 - b. Saul's leadership in Israel (1 Sam. 9–15)
3. Saul and David: Transition from Saul's Failed Kingdom to David (1 Sam. 16:1–2 Sam. 5:5)
 - a. Anointing of David (1 Sam. 16:1–13)
 - b. David and Goliath (1 Sam. 16:14–17:58)
 - c. Saul, Jonathan, and David (1 Sam. 18–23:6)
 - d. David flees Saul (1 Sam. 23:7–26:25)
 - e. David in Philistia (1 Sam. 27–30)
 - f. Death of Saul and Jonathan (1 Sam. 31–2 Sam. 1)
 - g. David becomes king (2 Sam. 2:1–5:5)
4. David's Victorious Reign over Judah and Israel (2 Sam. 5:6–8:18)
 - a. David conquers Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5:6–5:16)
 - b. David defeats the Philistines (2 Sam. 5:17–25)
 - c. David brings the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:1–8:18)
5. David's Weakness and Failures as King (2 Sam. 9–20)
 - a. David and Saul's descendants
 - b. The Ammonite-Syrian threat
 - c. David and Bathsheba
 - d. Absalom's rebellion
6. Afterword on David's Reign (2 Sam. 21–24)
 - a. God's wrath: Famine and Saul's descendants
 - b. David's mighty men
 - c. Song of David
 - d. David's last song
 - e. David's mighty men
 - f. God's wrath: The census of Israel

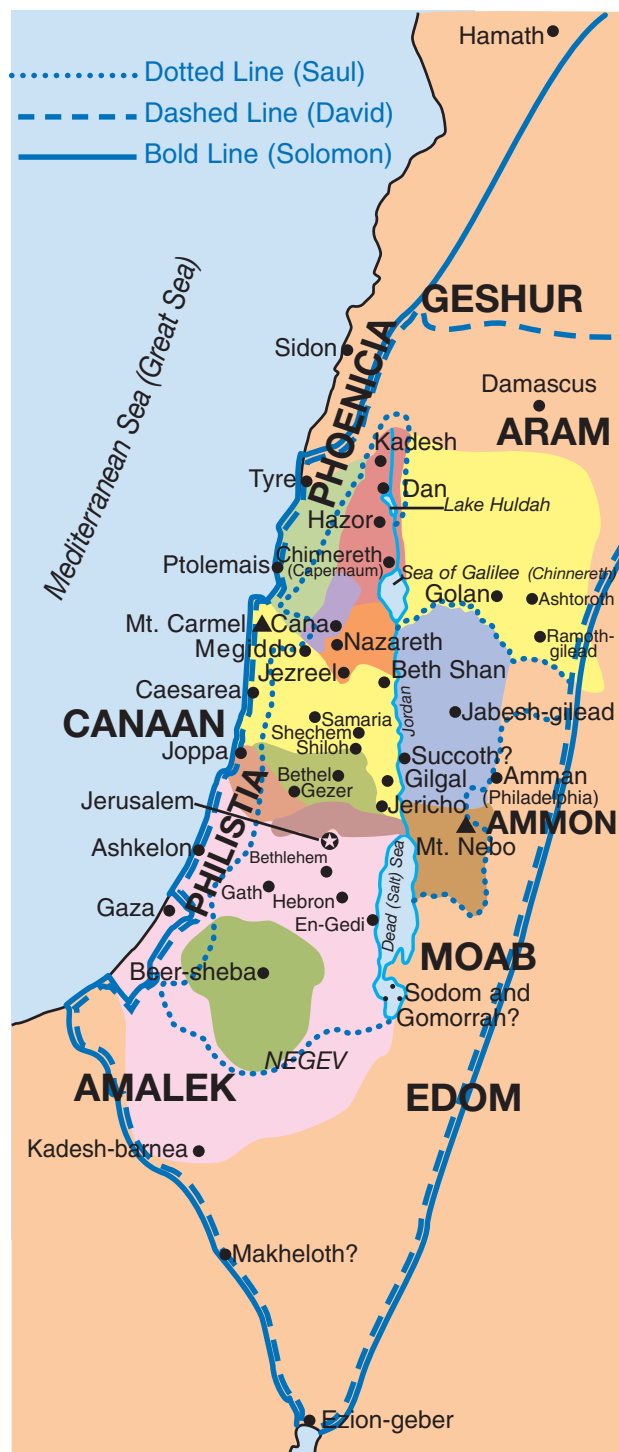


The Child Samuel Dedicated by Hannah by Frank W. W. Topham



THE UNITED KINGDOM

Canaan Divided by the Twelve Tribes			
	Reuben		Naphtali
	Simeon		Gad
	Zebulun		Asher
	Judah		Issachar
	Dan		Manasseh
			Ephraim
			Benjamin



Background

Author: The author of the book of Samuel is unknown. We know that Samuel, Nathan, and Gad wrote some of the story the book narrates (1 Chron. 29:29–30), but the extent of those writing remains unknown. Many scholars agree that some later editor collected written and oral traditions and, guided by the Holy Spirit, put together the book of Samuel as we know it.

Date: The events the book presents occurred at the end of the period of the judges (around 1350–1100 BC). The prophet Samuel was the last judge. His ministry transitioned the time of the judges to the monarchy. As for the time of writing, it appears that different people, in different times, contributed to the writing of the book. It is possible that the book was completed, or nearly so, around the time of Solomon, though it is far from certain.

Themes

God's Kingship. One of the central teachings of the Old Testament is that God is King. This is, perhaps, the main metaphor used for God. Israel's relationship with God through the covenant uses this important metaphor. It is the central proclamation of God's people: "The LORD reigns for ever and ever" (Ex. 15:18).

Human Kingship. The book of Samuel does not reject human kingship entirely. Rather, it expects that a human king would "When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his

life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees” (Deut. 17:18–19). In Saul and David, we get to see both sides of the coin. They began their reign well but ended up in disaster and failure. Yet, despite its limitations, God chose to use human kingship, David’s royal line, to bring the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

Covenant. God chose to relate to humans using covenants, as ancient kings would with their subjects. A covenant implies a relationship with commitments, promises, and conditions. The book of Samuel assumes the validity and importance of the Mosaic covenant. To it, the book adds God’s covenant with David. It is a covenant that shows God’s commitment to solve the problem of human sin.

Key People

Eli – High Priest of God at the town of Shiloh. Under his watch, Samuel was born and trained. His own decline as a priest exemplifies Israel’s moral and spiritual decline.

Hannah – Samuel’s mother. Despite her inability to bear children, she showed an amazing, humble faith in God. God rewarded her with a child, Samuel. Hannah dedicated the child to God. Her song of gratitude is echoed by Jesus’ mother, Mary, in the Gospel of Luke (1:46–55).

Samuel – God’s servant who acted as prophet, priest, and judge for Israel. He led the transitional period from the time of the judges to the time of the monarchy. He anointed Saul, Israel’s first king, and David, the great king who united the tribes of Israel into a nation.

Saul – First king of Israel, he is described as one “without equal among the Israelites...” (1 Sam. 9:2). Saul rebelled against God’s instructions and made serious mistakes. In time, God removed his Spirit from upon him. He grew jealous of David and tried to kill him.

Jonathan – As Saul’s first son, he was in charge of Saul’s armies. He became David’s closest friend and interceded on David’s behalf before Saul. He died with Saul in the field of battle (1 Sam. 31).

David — God chose him to become Saul’s successor as king of Israel. He unified the tribes of Israel into a kingdom, brought peace to Israel, and found favor with God. God made a covenant with him to have David’s descendants on the throne of Israel forever.

Bathsheba – David lusted after her when he saw her. Although she was married to Uriah, one of David’s loyal army officers, David had an affair with her. After David had her husband killed in the field of battle, David married her. Bathsheba became pregnant. However, the baby died because of David’s sin. She later gave birth to another son Solomon.

Nathan – God’s prophet, he came to David with a clever parable that denounced David’s sin. David recognized his sin, repented, and accepted God’s punishment.

Absalom – Son of David, he led a rebellion against his father. Although at first he succeeded, eventually David’s faithful generals chased him out of Jerusalem and killed him.

Solomon – He was the son of David and Bathsheba. “The LORD loved him; and because the LORD loved him, he sent word through Nathan the prophet to name him Jedidiah” (2 Sam. 12:24–25). This lesser known name means, “loved by the Lord.”

Names in the book of Samuel

Name	Meaning	Significance
Samuel	“God has heard”	Not only did God hear Hannah’s prayer, he also heard Israel’s requests for a king. Samuel, the prophet, represented God’s willingness to hear his people’s requests.
Saul	“the one who has been requested”	Saul was the answer to what Israel had requested: “appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have” (1 Sam. 8:5).
Absalom	“father of peace”	He produced strife against his father.

Key Verses

It is not by strength that one prevails; those who oppose the LORD will be broken. The Most High will thunder from heaven; the LORD will judge the ends of the earth.—1 Sam. 2:9–10

The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.—1 Sam. 16:7

The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.—2 Sam. 7:11–16

Being God’s People

Then: Despite Samuel’s warnings, the Israelites wanted to have a king like the nations around them. God granted their request. However, the monarchy turned out to be a great failure, beginning with the first king, Saul. Even though David accomplished great things, and God chose him to be the father of the future Messiah, his failures illustrate that the way of redemption and restoration is God’s own plan. Nevertheless, God turned David’s weakness into a future blessing for Israel and all peoples (see

Rom. 8:28). Through David's royal descendants, God sent the Messiah who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

Now: God is King. Although he appoints humans to lead his people—Moses, Samuel, Paul, Peter, and others—he doesn't surrender his authority. Only he is King, to him alone belongs all glory and honor. For that reason, we must not allow other humans, or things, to take the place of God. In the book of Samuel, the kings forgot their place and acted as having ultimate authority. God does not share his glory.

Jesus in Samuel

Jesus is present in the book of Samuel in many different ways:

- **Samuel.** His roles as prophet, judge, and priest anticipated Jesus' work during his earthly ministry. Jesus is the best example that God hears the pleas of his people and knows the needs of all human beings.
- **Saul.** Saul was God's answer to the people's request for a king. Saul's failure contrasts sharply with Jesus' victory: Jesus is God's answer to humanity's greatest need for a redeemer.
- **David.** He was God's chosen king. David unified Israel into a nation, brought political peace to the land, and expanded its boundaries. God's covenant with David anticipated the coming of a Messiah. This Messiah would unify God's people, not just in Israel but in the whole world, bring true peace to the world, and bring about God's kingdom to the whole earth.



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"House of David"

Inscription. Discovered in Tel Dan in 1993, the inscribed stone contains the expression "the house of David," referring to David's descendants. The stone was quite possibly part of a victory pillar of a neighboring king of Damascus. The stone has been dated to two or three centuries after David's time. This is a very important archaeological finding since it is the first reference to King David found outside of the Bible and establishes the existence of David's dynasty.

POETRY & WISDOM BOOKS

WISDOM AND SONGS FOR LIFE

What Are the Poetry and Wisdom Books?

This section is composed of five books, four of them are written in poetry: Job (most of it), Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Songs. Ecclesiastes is written mostly in prose, with a long poem at the end of the book. These books are different from the rest of the Old Testament because they do not deal directly with Israel's life at a specific time in history. Rather, they reflect on the life of God's people and their relationship with God in a more general way.

Hebrew poetry is not always easy to distinguish from prose. Prose is writing that reproduces the way we normally speak. Besides being the Word of God, the Old Testament is also beautiful, carefully written literature. So prose can be as beautiful as poetry. Poetry exists in other books of the Old Testament: the song of Moses in Exodus, the song of Deborah in Judges, and many passages in the prophets.

Wisdom books deal with questions that affect humans everywhere and at any time: Questions about human suffering, death, what makes for a good life, knowledge for living. Poetry has a unique ability to express deep feelings and thoughts in effective and beautiful ways. For that reason, poetry is the perfect instrument for wisdom.

Poetry and Wisdom Books Today

These books continue to be important for Christians today. Their main themes—praise and prayer, guidance for holy lives, our inner relationship with God and others around us—and their powerful, evocative language continue to shape the hearts and minds of God's people. As we read Psalms, meditate on Proverbs, are moved by the beauty of Songs of Songs, and wrestle with the difficult topics of Job and Ecclesiastes, the Holy Spirit transforms and renews our hearts and minds.

How to Read Poetry and Wisdom

In English, poetry is characterized primarily by meter and rhyme. Old Testament poetry is characterized primarily by terseness, parallelism, and imagery. Hebrew poetry is composed with short lines that say much with a few words. It is, perhaps, because of this characteristic that poetry is able to express concepts that are almost impossible to express otherwise.

Parallel lines are an important feature of biblical poetry. For example, English-language proverbs normally have one line—"a penny saved is a penny earned."

Poetry & Wisdom

Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Songs

Hebrew poetry normally has two or three lines—“A fool finds pleasure in evil conduct, but a man of understanding delights in wisdom” (Prov. 10:23). The sense of the poem is found in the interplay of these lines. Parallelism means that the second line of the verse advances the thought of the first line in some way. Determining how this movement occurs allows us to understand the sense and meaning of the poem.

There are different kinds of parallelism; the following examples from the book of Proverbs are the most common types of parallelism in the Wisdom and Poetry Books.

<p>Kings take pleasure in honest lips; they value a man who speaks the truth (16:13).</p>	<p>In this example, we find these parallels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Kings</i> is the main subject of the whole verse. ■ <i>Taking pleasure</i> is parallel to <i>value</i>. However, valuing something is a step beyond merely taking pleasure. ■ <i>Honest lips</i> is parallel to <i>a man who speaks the truth</i>. Although both expressions mean the same, the second one further specifies what honest lips are. ■ Some call this type of parallelism <i>synonymous parallelism</i>.
<p>A fool finds pleasure in evil conduct, but a man of understanding delights in wisdom (10:23).</p>	<p>This verse presents a contrast which provides the parallelism.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>A fool</i> is contrasted with <i>a man of understanding</i>. ■ Another parallel is the action of each person: one <i>finds pleasure</i> whereas the other <i>delights</i>. The two concepts are closely related, though the first one seems more impulsive. ■ The true contrast is on what each one finds delight in: the fool finds pleasure in <i>evil conduct</i>, while the man of understanding delights in <i>wisdom</i>. ■ The final contrast is the key to the verse. Like the rest of Proverbs, the book invites its readers to delight in wisdom. ■ Some call this contrasting parallel <i>antithetical parallelism</i>.

In addition to terseness and parallel lines, Hebrew poetry also contains heightened imagery. Powerful images—metaphors—have a way of dwelling in and sparking our imaginations so we understand God’s revelation to us in exceptional ways. These are images such as God is king—of course he is more than a king; in fact, he is the King of kings, the image can only go so far—shepherd, rock, and so on. In Proverbs, wisdom is personalized as a woman. And, of course, the wonderful, though often difficult to understand, images in the book of Song of Songs: eyes are compared to doves, hair to a flock of goats, teeth to newly shorn ewes, neck to the tower of David, and so on. Today, one could hardly use those images to describe a beloved. This shows we must be careful when understanding the images of poetical texts, which draw from the cultural world of ancient Israel.

PSALMS

IN GOD'S PRESENCE THROUGH SONGS AND PRAYERS



Purpose

The book of Psalms is a compilation of many songs, by many authors, over a long span of time. The book of Psalms is a book of songs and prayers for God's people. The psalms provide us with the vocabulary of God's people for worship. How do we approach this holy, awesome, and terrifying God? What words can we use to express our love, joy, praise, sadness, anger, frustration, doubts, need for forgiveness, and loneliness to God?

Because the psalms are poems, they have a wonderful way to express the deepest emotions of our hearts. Whether in times of suffering and sadness or joy and celebration, the psalms have been close to God's people at all times and places. Poetry relies on heightened language and powerful images. The psalms are terse and beautiful. They say much with a few words and can express deep feelings that are not easily spoken.

Psalms

The ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, calls this book *psalmos*, which refers to stringed instruments that accompany songs. The word *psalmos* is also used to translate the Hebrew word *mizmor* meaning "songs." The Hebrew name for the book of Psalms is *tehillim* which means "praises."

Psalms is also a book of instruction. It might not be coincidence that the psalms are divided into five books, just like the Pentateuch, a book that instructs us what it means to be God's people. However, unlike the Pentateuch, the psalms do not give instructions about how to pray and praise God. Rather, like Jesus did when his disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, the psalms show us how to do it. As the fourth-century theologian Athanasius famously wrote, "Most of Scripture speaks *to* us; the Psalms speak *for* us."

Finally, the psalms express God's people's longing for the coming of the Messiah. God had promised through his prophets that a descendant of King David would always sit on the throne of Israel. The promise of this anointed King, the Messiah, became one with God's other promises to restore and redeem his people and the world. Although the psalms are not prophecies in the same sense as the prophetic books, they do anticipate, so they speak prophetically about the coming of the Messiah. The New Testament quotes or alludes to many psalms in connection to Jesus.

Outline

1. Book 1 (Psalms 1–41)
2. Book 2 (Psalms 42–72)
3. Book 3 (Psalms 73–89)
4. Book 4 (Psalms 90–106)
5. Book 5 (Psalms 107–150)



David Playing the Harp by Jan de Bray

Background

Author: The book of Psalms is a collection of collections. These collections were put together at different times and for purposes we might never know. However, when the songs and prayers were put together, along with an introduction (Ps. 1) and a conclusion (146–150), the book of Psalms became a learning tool for God's people.

One hundred and sixteen psalms have a title. It is not certain if the titles were part of the original writing or were added at later dates. However, they do provide important and helpful information. In general, the titles give information about the psalm's author, historical background, melody, use during worship, and a few other items. According to the titles, some of the named authors of psalms were: David (73 times), Asaph (12 times), the sons of Korah (11 times), Solomon (2 times), Jeduthun (4 times), and Heman, Etan, and Moses (1 time each).

Date: Dating of individual psalms is difficult. The poems were collected over a long period. Most were composed between the time of David (around 1000 BC) and the time of Ezra (450 BC).

Psalms 1–150

Five Books	I	II	III	IV	V
	(1–41) Prayers of lament and expressions of confidence in God dominate this book.	(42–72) Communal laments dominate the prayers in this book. The book ends with a royal psalm.	(73–89) In this book, the prayers of lament and distress are more intense and bleak.	(90–106) This book presents the answers to the bleakness of book III. The theme of “The Lord Reigns” dominates this book.	(107–150) This book declares that God is in control, will redeem his people, and praises God’s faithfulness and goodness.
Two Main Collections	First Collection (2–89)			Second Collection (90–145)	
	Collections within the Collections: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction: Torah Psalms (Ps. 1) 2. Two Davidic Collections (3–41 and 51–72) 3. Two Collections of Temple Musicians Korah (42–49; 84–85; 87–88) Asaphat (50; 73–83) 			Collections within the Collections: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “The Lord Reigns” (93–100) 2. Hallelujah Psalms (111–118) 3. Songs of Ascent (120–134) 4. Davidic Collection (138–145) 5. Conclusion: Hallelujah Psalms (146–150) 	

Genres in the Psalms

Genres are different kinds of writings—or paintings, for example—that share specific elements of content and form. Most of the time we read the psalms in a devotional way. This kind of reading is refreshing for our spirits and leads us closer to God and other fellow believers. However, other times we may want to explore a psalm deeper. In those times, knowing about their genres will help us in our spiritual exploration. Each genre lists a sample of representative psalms for each of the following main genres in the book of Psalms.

The Hymn. The beautiful and glorious songs of praise to God characterize the psalms. These hymns highlight God’s character and deeds like his goodness, majesty, and virtue (Ps. 8, 19, 29, 33, 65, 100, 145), or his righteous Kingship over all of creation (47, 93–99).

The Lament. Curiously, the psalms of lament outnumber any other type of psalm. This fact might reflect the messiness of life, the many reasons for suffering and

sadness. However, the psalms do not typically end in lament. They move from lament to praise, from grief to joy. The conclusion of the psalms, the magnificent hallelujah songs 146–150, reflect that with God, all tears will be dried, all sufferings will turn to joy, and all injustices will receive the proper and righteous response. There are individual prayers of lament (13, 22, 31, 42–43, 57, 139, etc.) and community laments (12, 44, 80, 85, 90, 94). These prayers provide us with the language to ask God to intervene in our favor. They might include a plea to God for help, the specific cause of the suffering, a confession of faith or innocence, a curse of the enemies, confidence in God’s response, and a song of thanksgiving for God’s intervention. Prayers of lament may include one or more of these elements.

Songs of Thanksgiving. These songs focus on thanking God for his answer to a specific request. The request is not always explicit in the song, though it seems that they are connected to laments. Songs of thanksgiving can also be individual (32, 34, 92, 116, 118, 138) or communal (107, 124).

Songs Related to the Temple. Some songs were to remind the community of their covenant with God (50, 81). Other songs, royal psalms, make mention of King David or his descendants (2, 18, 110). Songs of Zion celebrate God’s presence with his people (46, 84, 122). It appears that the singing of these psalms took place during the worship at the temple in Jerusalem.

Teaching Psalms. Songs have a unique way of teaching the people who hear and sing them. The wisdom psalms use traditional wisdom themes to guide and shape the view of those singing them (37, 49, 73). Closely related to them, other psalms praise the wonders of God’s law and encourage God’s people to obey it and delight in it (1, 19, 119).

Themes

The Lord Reigns. This is the main claim of the book of Psalms—and the whole Bible. No matter who or what claims control over creation, God is the rightful and just ruler of all. Psalms 47, 93, and 95–99 offer a splendid and beautiful account of the claim that the Lord reigns.

Creation. One of the best examples of God’s rule over all is creation. God created everything and sustains it with his power, wisdom, and justice (93, 104, 29).

Salvation. The Lord reigns because he has already defeated evil and has redeemed his people (47, 68, 98, 114).

Judgment. The Lord reigns because his judgment is worthy, righteous, wise, and universal (50, 82, 94, 96, 97, 105).

God’s People. God’s people are “the people of his pasture, the flock under his care” (95:7; 100:3). God redeemed them (74) and has intervened in their history with power and grace (44, 74, 77, 80).

The King. Unlike other cultures surrounding ancient Israel, the kings were not

worshiped or held in higher esteem than other Israelites (see, for example, the story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21). The importance of the kings, however, was that God chose them to work through them to carry on his divine purposes. Toward the end of Psalms, the focus is more on the future king who is to come, who will restore and redeem Israel. This promised King, the Messiah, became the emphasis of Israel's hope and longing.

Key Verses

O LORD, our LORD, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.—Ps. 8:1

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.—Ps. 23:1

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.—Ps. 51:1–2

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.—Ps. 100:1–2

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.—Ps. 121:1–2

Being God's People

Then: God promised to be with his people. In times of suffering and troubles, it always seems that God has turned his face away from his people. However, the songs of petition, lament, and praise show that God has always been faithful to his word. He answered the requests of his people because he is a good, powerful, and compassionate God. Humanity's ultimate plight, sin and death, will be finally answered through the Messiah, the son of David, that the psalms anticipate with much longing and faith.

Now: The Messiah has come and has defeated sin and death! But we still live in a world filled with trials, temptations, and suffering. However, the songs of petition, lament, and praise in Psalms invite us to trust that God is always present, that he reigns over all, and he will intervene in the perfect time and with the perfect answers to our needs.

Jesus in Psalms

When Jesus said that all of the Scriptures spoke of him he specifically mentioned the psalms (Luke 24:44). The New Testament writers quote many of the psalm texts in connection to Jesus being the promised Messiah. In Acts 4:11, the apostle Peter cites Psalm 118:22, "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone," as he explained the identity of Jesus. Psalms 2, 16, 22, 69, and 110 are the most quoted psalms in the New Testament. All of them anticipate and explain the identity of the promised King.



PROPHETIC BOOKS

REPENT, BELIEVE, AND BE RESTORED

What Are the Prophetic Books?

The Prophetic Books are records of the prophetic ministry of individuals whom God chose and sent to encourage, warn, exhort, and guide his people. They are divided into two sections: the Major and the Minor Prophets. The distinction is very old. Since biblical books were written in scrolls, they had a size limit. It appears that all twelve Minor Prophets fit well into one scroll, so they became one unit. Apart from being shorter, the Minor Prophets are the same type of prophetic literature as the Major Prophets.

What Is Prophecy?

Biblical prophets were God's servants especially called to be his witnesses. In the Old Testament, prophecy was a tool that God used to communicate his will to his people. Prophets were not simply teachers of the law, which was the main job of the priests (Deut. 33:10). God sent prophets to his people during times of crisis, such as: (1) during times of military threats against God's people (Isa. 36–37); (2) when the people rebelled against God's will (Gen. 3:11–19; Ezek. 2:3–5); (3) when hope seemed all but lost (Jer. 29:11); and (4) when the people needed comfort in difficult times (Isa. 40:1–5).

Old Testament prophets were intermediaries between God and his people. They stood in the gap that separates God from humans. They brought the word of God to the people, and they interceded on behalf of the people before God. As the Scriptures say, "Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7).

Most often prophecy dealt with issues current to the prophet's time. However, in the Old Testament, God also revealed the future to his prophets. An important characteristic of Old Testament prophecy is called prophetic telescoping or prophetic perspective. It means that one prophecy could be fulfilled more than one time even though the prophet saw it and spoke about it as single event. An excellent example of this characteristic is the "day of the Lord." Whereas Joel (Joel 2:28–32) and Amos (Amos 5:18–19) present the day of the Lord as a onetime event, we know that in fact the day of the Lord refers to two separate events: when God brought punishment on Judah in the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem (586 BC), and the second coming of Christ (2 Peter 3:10–13; 1 Thess. 5:2).

Major Prophets

Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel

Minor Prophets

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

Main Themes of the Prophetic Books

1. *One true God.* Only the Lord, the God of Abraham, is the true God, creator of the universe. All other claims to divinity are false.
2. *God is Holy.* Holiness is in God's very being. God's holiness means that he is not part of nature but is its Creator. God is beyond his creation. For this reason, any attempt to represent God—make an image of him—becomes idolatry. God cannot be manipulated with offerings or sacrifices. Because of his holiness, God does not tolerate sin. Sin offends God because it is the opposite of what he desires for his creation.
3. *God is Sovereign.* As the creator of all, God rules and owns it all. The best image to express this truth is that God is King. Yet, because he is beyond the created world and our own experience, God is much more than just a king. He is the King of kings. Nature is under God's rule, as are the nations and his people.
4. *God is Merciful and Full of Grace.* Although God is holy and sovereign, he is interested in humanity and his creation. God is deeply involved in what humans do and do not do. His willingness to send prophets to correct, warn, comfort, and guide his people shows this interest. Mercy and grace are also part of God's nature.
5. *God is Just and Good.* Because of his great mercy, God has shown amazing patience with his people and faithfulness to his covenant. The prophets make it clear that God wishes his people to be obedient and repentant, he wishes to forgive and transform them. Yet, he will punish and discipline in love when necessary.
6. *The Torah.* The prophets alluded, quoted, enforced, and applied the law of Moses to specific events, persons, or circumstances.
7. *The Covenant.* God's activities, both his promises of restoration and his acts of judgment, spring from his faithfulness to his covenant.
8. *The Exile and Restoration.* The exiles to Assyria in 722 BC and to Babylon around 586 BC became a central theme. The prophets warned, called to repent, announced God's judgment upon Israel, and explained the reasons for exile. However, they also comforted the people with assurances that God would save and restore them.
9. *The Messiah.* The central component of the prophets' announcement of salvation was the coming of a special person who would represent, save, and restore Israel.

The Minor Prophets

Name & Meaning	Approx. Date BC	Location from	Audience	Subject
Hosea "salvation"	752–722	Northern Kingdom of Israel	Northern Kingdom of Israel (Ephraim)	Israel's unfaithfulness to their covenant with God
Joel "Yahweh is God"	Unknown	Unknown	Possibly Judah and surrounding nations	The great and dreadful day of the Lord
Amos "burden bearer"	760–753	Town of Tekoa in Judah	Northern Kingdom of Israel	God's judgment upon Israel for their injustice and lack of mercy
Obadiah "servant or worshiper of Yahweh"	586	Unknown	Edom (neighbor to Judah) and the people of Judah	God's judgment upon Edom
Jonah "dove"	783–753	Town of Gath Hepher in Zebulun	Nineveh (capital of Assyrian empire)	God's judgment upon Nineveh; yet God's mercy extends to all
Micah "who is like Yahweh"	738–698	Town of Moresheth southwest of Jerusalem	Samaria (capital of Israel) and Jerusalem (capital of Judah)	God's judgment upon Israel and Judah for their wickedness
Nahum "the Lord comforts"	663–612	Town of Elkosh (possibly Capernaum)	Nineveh (capital of Assyrian empire)	God's judgment upon Nineveh for their cruelty against God's people
Habakkuk "embrace"	609–598	Unknown	All God's people	God's judgment, justice, love, and mercy
Zephaniah "the Lord hides"	641–628	Jerusalem	Southern Kingdom of Judah and surrounding nations	A call to repentance before the coming judgment on the day of the Lord
Haggai "festival"	520	Unknown	Judah and Jerusalem	A call to rebuild the temple and a message of hope
Zechariah "Yahweh remembers"	520–518	Unknown	Judah and Jerusalem	A call to rebuild the temple and a message of future glory
Malachi "my messenger"	Mid to late 400s	Unknown	Jerusalem	A call to spiritual renewal

The Genres in the Prophetic Books

The Prophetic Books contain many different kinds of writings, some of it in poetry and others in prose. These are some of the most important genres—types of literature that share similar characteristics—in the Prophetic Books:

1. **The Judgment Speech:** This is one of the basic forms of the prophetic messages. These speeches usually start with an introduction of the prophet (Amos 7:15), a detail list of the accusations or the reasons for the judgment, and the prediction of the punishment (Amos 7:17).
2. **Prophecy of Blessing or Deliverance:** Similar to the judgment speech, these speeches of blessing or deliverance elaborate the life situation that produces a difficulty that requires deliverance. The blessing follows it (Isa. 41:8–20; Jer. 33:1–9).
3. **The Woe Oracle:** The word “woe” is an expression of sorrow. The prophets used this interjection “woe” to express the imminence of God’s judgment against rebellion and sin (Amos 5:18–20; Isa. 5:8–24; Hab. 2:6–8).
4. **The Lawsuit:** It uses the language of legal courts to present God as the plaintiff, prosecuting attorney, and judge. In a sense, the prophets sue God’s people for breaking the covenant. The indictment or accusations are either directly stated or implied, and the judgment sentence is announced (Isa. 2:13–26; Hos. 3:3–17; 4:1–19).

ISAIAH

JUDGMENT AND SALVATION



Purpose

Called to prophesy to the kingdom of Judah, the prophet Isaiah preached a message of judgment and salvation. With powerful enemies on all sides and war looming, Judah formed many political and military alliances in hopes of protecting itself. Isaiah opposed these alliances because they showed Judah's reliance upon human power over divine power. Isaiah knew that any alliance with a world power would place Judah in submission as a vassal to the powerful nation. This would lead Judah to serve the gods of those states. Vassal states during Isaiah's time usually adopted the religions of their overlords.

The prophet Isaiah exhorted Judah and her kings to seek God and maintain their faith in God's providence and faithfulness rather than trusting the military and political strength of other nations. God would save and deliver Judah if they trusted God to do so. If Judah continued to doubt God, then Judah would meet the same end as the northern kingdom of Israel, which Assyria conquered and sent into exile. Just as God used Assyria to judge the nations, he would use Babylonia to destroy Assyria and, eventually, Judah.

Isaiah is outraged by the idolatry, injustice, unrighteousness, rebellion, disdain, arrogance, and scandalous behavior of God's people. The main purpose of the book of Isaiah is to communicate God's anger, disappointment, and sorrow with his people's behavior and to warn them of impending judgment. Judah could continue to turn to political treaties, other gods, and military strength to save them, but their efforts to do so would prove worthless. Unless the people of Judah repented and fully relied on God as their Savior, they would never be safe from destruction.

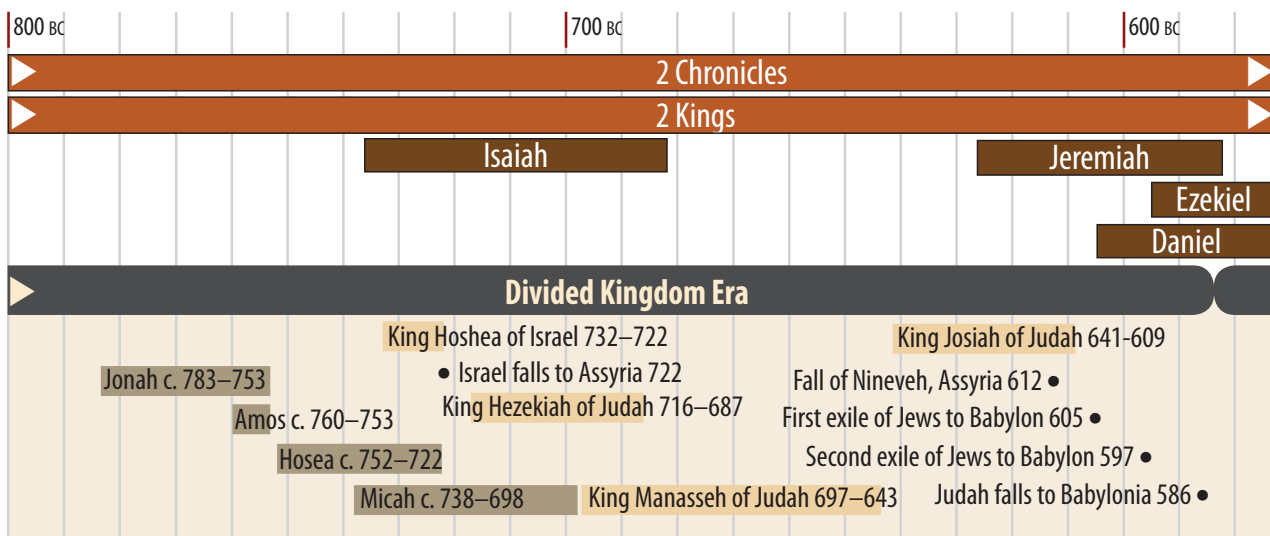
However, Isaiah is more than a prophecy of doom. Isaiah, whose name means “Yahweh saves,” wrote beautiful and memorable prophecies of hope and salvation. Isaiah’s prophecy anticipates the coming of a king, a Messiah, who will fulfill all of God’s promises to Israel. A remnant of God’s people will find their full redemption in the coming of this Messiah—a suffering servant—who will die to save them.

Outline

1. Oracles of Judgment and Promise for Judah (1–5)
2. Isaiah’s Commission (6)
3. Judgment against Aram, Israel, and Assyria (7–10)
4. The Branch from Jesse (11–12)
5. Prophecies against the Nations—Babylon, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Cush, Egypt, Arabia, Jerusalem, and Tyre (13–23)
6. The Lord’s Destruction of the Earth (24–27)
7. Woe to Ephraim, Judah, and Jerusalem (28–32)
8. Judgment against Israel’s Enemies and Joy to Israel (33–35)
9. Judah Escapes the Assyrian Threat and Isaiah Predicts the Babylonian Exile (36–39)
10. The Fall of Babylon and the Restoration of Israel (40–48)
11. The Suffering Servant and the Salvation He Brings (49–57)
12. Judgment, Worship and the Everlasting Kingdom of God (58–66)



The Prophet Isaiah



EXPANSION OF THE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE 745–681 BC



Kings: Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 BC); Shalmaneser V (727–722 BC); Sargon II (722–705 BC); Sennacherib (705–681 BC)

Background

Author: The author is the prophet Isaiah, the son of Amoz (Isa. 1:1). Isaiah was married and had at least two children—Shear-Jashub (7:3) and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (8:3). Isaiah lived at the time of Amos, Hosea and Micah. According to Jewish tradition, Isaiah died by being sawed in half during the reign of King Manasseh (Heb. 11:37).

Some scholars argue that there were at least three different authors of the book of Isaiah. Many agree that Isaiah wrote chapters 1–39 in the eighth century BC. However, some believe that a second author (or group of authors) wrote chapters 40–55 in the mid-sixth century BC and a third author (or group of authors) wrote chapters 56–66 in the late sixth century BC. However, based on literary analysis, many scholars today argue for a single author for the book.

Date: Isaiah wrote during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah (1:1). Some sections of the book are dated: The events in chapter 7 occurred around 735 BC (7:1) and chapters 36–38 around 701 BC (36:1). However, the remaining sections are not dated. It is very possible that Isaiah wrote the book in sections throughout his life, starting around 701 BC and ending as late as 681 BC, the date that Assyrian King Sennacherib died (37:38).

Setting: In 745 BC, Tiglath-Pileser III, king of Assyria, began to expand the Assyrian empire westward. As he threatened the borders of many small kingdoms, they frequently formed coalitions to fight the advancing armies. In 733 BC, Syrian King

Rezin and King Pekah of Israel formed a coalition. When King Ahaz of Judah refused to join them, Syria and Israel attacked Judah. Instead of trusting in God's providence, Ahaz formed an alliance with Assyria. Judah became a vassal kingdom of Assyria. Ahaz had to appear before Tiglath-Pileser to pay homage to the Assyrian god.

After the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, the southern kingdom of Judah continued to struggle with the consequences of their alliance with Assyria and later alliances with Babylonia and Egypt.

During his long ministry, Isaiah warned the kings of Judah about their political and military deals as well as their unrighteousness, complacency, injustices, and arrogance.

Themes

God the Holy One of Israel. God is a holy God, and he will not tolerate sin. Sin will be punished.

God as Savior and Redeemer. God is a merciful, loving, and forgiving God. Israel and Judah deserved to be completely destroyed, but God promised salvation and restoration to a remnant.

God's Suffering Servant—The Promised Messiah. Only through the suffering of the promised Messiah, God's Servant, will God's people be healed and forgiven of their iniquities. The promised Messiah, through his suffering, will inaugurate the kingdom of God—the new heaven and the new earth.

Key Verses

Come now, let us settle the matter,' says the LORD. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.—Isa. 1:18

Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.—Isa. 7:14

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.—Isa. 9:6–7

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.—Isa. 11:6



Taylor Prism. Made around 689 BC and found in 1830 in Nineveh (modern Iraq), this copy of the Prism is known as the Taylor Prism and is housed in the British Museum. The Assyrian inscription details Sennacherib's military campaign in the Middle East. In it, Sennacherib boasts that he had Hezekiah "like a bird in a cage." Two copies of the prism were found later and are housed in Chicago and Jerusalem. These copies are nearly identical, with minor text differences.

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.—Isa. 53:4–6

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn.—Isa. 61:1–2

Being God's People

Then: Under Assyrian pressure, Judah could either form alliances with other nations or trust in God and believe the prophet Isaiah that God would protect them from their enemies. God was angry, disappointed, and saddened with the disobedience of his people. God's people put more trust in human power than in him. Such trust is a form of idolatry. God's anger and righteous judgment came to an unfaithful people. However, God is also merciful and compassionate and he will save his people and redeem them.

Now: So often today, we place our trust in money, possessions, weapons, governments, or our leaders. We form alliances or sacrifice our integrity instead of trusting God to provide for us and protect us. God is our rock, our fortress, our deliverer, our shield, and our salvation (Ps. 18:2). When we are in trouble, God assures us that “those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (Isa. 40:31).

Jesus in Isaiah

Jesus is the promised Messiah, a descendant of King David (Isa. 11:1–2). Jesus Christ fulfilled more than 50 prophecies in the book of Isaiah. Some of these prophecies are:

- The descendant of Jesse upon whom the Spirit of the Lord would rest (Isa. 11:1–2; Matt. 1).
- Born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:22–23).
- Jesus is the suffering servant who was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, and by his wounds we are healed (Isa. 53; 1 Peter 2:21–25).
- Jesus came to proclaim good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim freedom for the captives, and release prisoners from the darkness (Isa. 61:1–2; Luke 4:14–20).

Death would not contain Jesus. In his death and resurrection, Jesus inaugurated a new kingdom—God's kingdom. When Jesus returns, there will be a new heaven and a new earth where crying and weeping will be heard no more (Isa. 65:17–19).

HABAKKUK

WHY DOES EVIL GO UNPUNISHED?

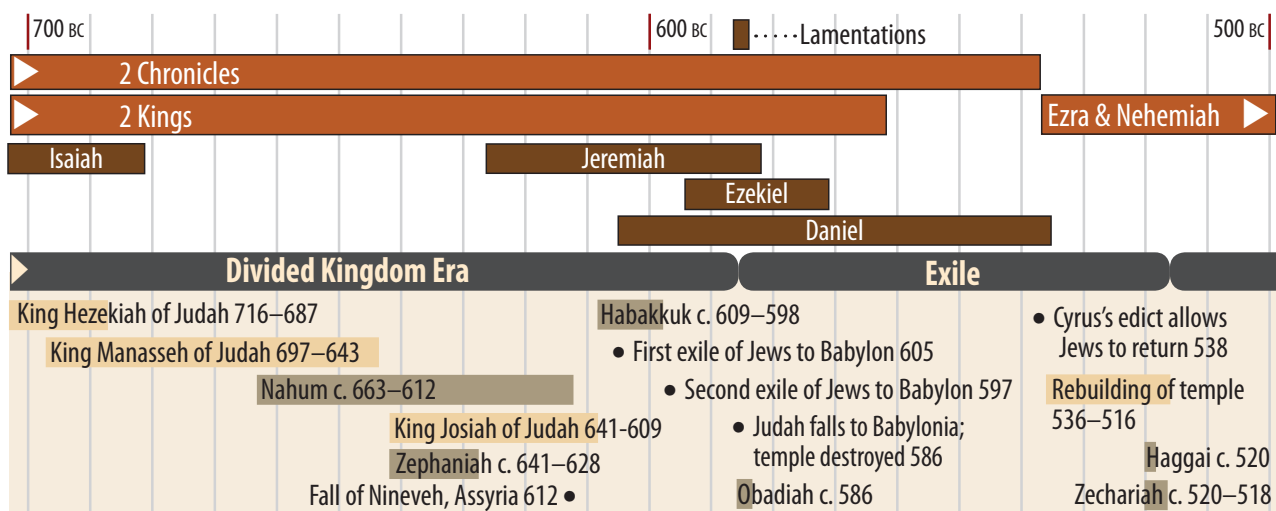


Warriors on the Babylonian Ishtar Gate, c. 575 BC

Purpose

In the book of Habakkuk, the prophet asks, “Why does God let people get away with evil?” Habakkuk wonders why God tolerates wickedness among his people. After God answers him, the prophet is perplexed by how God allows a wicked nation like the Babylonians to impart justice upon God’s own people.

The prophet Habakkuk grapples with how God’s anger and justice relate to his love and mercy. Habakkuk recognizes that God is powerful and God’s actions are mysterious and incomprehensible. The Lord will always render a righteous judgment. At the end of the book, the prophet rejoices and is comforted knowing that God will punish the wicked and will redeem his people.



Outline

1. Habakkuk's First Complaint: Why does evil go unpunished? (1:2–4)
2. God's Answer to the First Complaint: I will raise the Babylonians to punish the wicked. (1:5–11)
3. Habakkuk's Second Complaint: How can a loving God allow the wicked Babylonians to punish a less wicked people? (1:12–2:1)
4. God's Answer to the Second Complaint: I will eventually punish all the wicked—including Babylonia. (2:2–20)
5. Habakkuk's Prayer of Praise. (3:1–19)

Background

Author: Habakkuk lived at the time of the prophet Jeremiah. Some scholars believe that Habakkuk was a temple prophet in Judah. His name might be derived from a Hebrew word meaning “embrace.”

Date: Many scholars suggest a date for the book of Habakkuk during the early reign of Johoiakim (609–598 BC) while Babylonia was advancing westward conquering nations under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar. The reasons this period is preferable are: (1) King Johoiakim was a king who led the people of Judah to embrace the wickedness and evil described in Habakkuk 1:2–4; (2) The Babylonians were coming onto the scene as a world power and threat to Judah—as described in Habakkuk 1:5–11—shortly before the death of King Josiah in 609 BC.

Audience: Habakkuk is an unusual type of prophetic book because the prophecy itself is the prophet's own complaint to God. The dialogue between God and the prophet occurs for the benefit of God's people.

Setting: After the death of King Josiah of Judah in 609 BC, Josiah's son Jehoahaz was made king. After three months, Pharaoh Neco III deported Jehoahaz to Egypt and placed his brother Jehoiakim on the throne as a vassal to Egypt. Jehoiakim was a wicked king and evil flourished in Judah under his leadership.

The two decades after the death of King Josiah, the Babylonians rose as a world power conquering one nation after another as they swept westward from Mesopotamia. In 586 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Judah and the temple, and exiled most of Judah's inhabitants.

Themes

- God's justice is mysterious.
- Why does it seem that God tolerates evil?
- God is powerful and in control.

Figures on the
Babylonian Ishtar
Gate, c. 575 BC



BABYLONIAN EMPIRE 612 BC – 539 BC



Key Verses

How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save?—Hab. 1:2

Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.—Hab. 1:5

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.—Hab. 1:18–19

Being God’s People

God will bring justice, but his timing is not the same as ours. God’s answers to Habakkuk can provide insight into our difficult questions. Sometimes it appears that God tolerates evil. How can a loving God allow the wicked to prosper and the good to suffer? Habakkuk addresses these issues and challenges us to trust in God and live in faithful obedience to him.

Jesus in Habakkuk

Habakkuk recognized that God would eventually bring justice and redeem his people (Hab. 3:13). God’s ultimate redemption comes to completion in Jesus Christ. By the grace of God, Jesus crushed wickedness. On the cross, Jesus overcame sin, death, and Satan offering the world God’s love, mercy, and justice (Eph. 2:1–10).

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Between the Old and the New Testaments

An approximate 400-year gap divides the events in the Old Testament and the birth of Jesus in the New Testament. The Old Testament ends around 400 BC when many Jews returned to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon. They returned to rebuild the city and the temple.

This 400-year gap is known as the Intertestamental Period (meaning “between the testaments”) or the Second Temple Period (referring to the time after the temple was rebuilt). We learn about this era through a few important sources: the Apocryphal and the Pseudepigrapha books, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the writings of Josephus.

- **The Apocrypha** – The Apocrypha, which in Greek means “the hidden books,” are not considered inspired by God, and were written during the Intertestamental Period, often in Greek, though some might have been written in Hebrew. These books—like Tobit, 1–2 Maccabees, and 1–2 Esdras—reveal a great deal about this period even if they are not part of the divine revelation.
- **The Pseudepigrapha** – The word means “false name,” and it is used for books written in the Intertestamental Period whose authors falsely attribute the books to famous names, like Moses, Enoch, and Isaiah.
- **The Dead Sea Scrolls** – Discovered in the mid-twentieth century near the Dead Sea, these writings contain the oldest copies of portions of the Old Testament, and also include other writings that give us insight into the religious and cultural life of the Intertestamental Period and the time of Jesus.
- **Josephus** – He was a first-century Jewish historian who wrote extensively on the history of the Jewish people and the struggles between the Romans and the Jews. His writings provide us with a portrait of first-century Judaism during the time of Jesus.

Historical Background to the New Testament

When dealing with the background to the New Testament, it is impossible to avoid important changes in the culture, politics, religion, and language in what had once been the kingdom of Israel. In the 500s BC when the Jews left Babylon to return to Jerusalem, the Persian Empire ruled from the borders of India to the eastern Greek islands. However, the Persian dominance did not last very long.

Alexander the Great, from Macedonia, a small kingdom to the North of Greece, began a campaign of expansion that overtook Greece and moved to the east to the very borders of India. In a few years, Alexander established an enormous kingdom.

However, he died at the peak of his power and abilities in 323 BC. The kingdom was divided among four of his generals. However, the cultural Greek influence was long-lasting. That was the beginning of the Hellenistic Period (331–146 BC).

Greek became the language of education and trade. As Greek expanded its influence, Greek culture also influenced and changed many other cultures; this became known as Hellenism. Alexander founded many cities, such as Alexandria in Egypt and Bactria in Central Asia—modern day Afghanistan—that became centers of Hellenic culture and influence.

Jerusalem and its surroundings were also under the influence of Hellenism. Both Ptolemies from Egypt and Seleucid from Syria dynasties (323–166 BC)—descendants of Alexander’s generals—ruled the area. The Second Temple Period, especially the history that the Maccabean books narrate, occurred under the Seleucid kings, most notably Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The title Epiphanes means “god manifest,” which shows his increasing megalomania during his rule (175–164 BC).

The Jews revolted and sought independence, which they achieved under the Maccabees and the Hasmonean dynasty, which ruled from 164–63 BC. As it was in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Jews and their faith were once again under siege from the powerful and pervasive Hellenic influence. Under these difficult cultural conditions, the people of the land developed a tough and often legalistic understanding of religion. It became a fight for their cultural and religious survival.

Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes

From this time, three distinct groups emerged (there might have been more groups, but these three have survived the passing of time):

- **Pharisees:** The name probably means “set apart, be separated.” The group appears to have emerged during the religious and social reforms under the Maccabees. Without a king, the temple was even more important for the religious practices of the Jews. However, besides the temple, Judaism was practiced and studied in smaller houses of worship, the synagogues. Whereas the priests controlled life at the temple, the synagogues became the province of scribes and teachers of the Law, the Pharisees.
- **Sadducees:** The name means “the righteous ones,” and probably was a way to connect the group with Zadok the priest (2 Sam. 8:17). This group was in charge of the temple. The temple became the most important political symbol, and the group in charge of the temple dominated the political life of the region.

- Essenes: The name might be connected to a self-description in the Dead Sea Scrolls as “observers of the law.” Not much is known about this group. It appears that they followed a communal life, with a severe self-discipline and abstinence, daily cleansing rituals, and dedication to study the Law.

The Roman Empire

This period, the Hasmonean period, ended when the Romans conquered the region and imposed a regional government (63 BC–AD 324). The Romans governed the region first through King Herod and his successors, then through prefects (such as Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem). In time, the Jews revolted against the Roman yoke in AD 66, but this resulted in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70.

Looking for a Messiah

The events in the New Testament take place in a time of political difficulties. The Roman Empire had tightened its fist around regions like Judea, with people unwilling to bow down to the Roman emperors. Many Jews hoped and prayed for a liberating Messiah to come and drive the Romans away from Jerusalem and rebuild the kingdom of David. God did send the Messiah, but he was not the Messiah they were expecting. He is much more than a political leader: he is the Savior who conquered death, defeated evil and sin, allows us a direct relationship with God, and offers eternal life. The New Testament tells us the story of this Messiah, Jesus Christ, his life, teachings, death, and resurrection.

In the Old Testament, we find God’s revelation through his works of creation and redemption of Israel, as well as through the law and the prophets. In the New Testament, God “has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe” (Heb. 1:2).

In Jesus, God reveals the fullness of his plans for humanity. God also establishes a new way of relating to people. This new relationship does not occur through the Sinai covenant but through the new covenant in Jesus’ blood. This new covenant, as God promised through the prophets, is now written in our hearts and sealed by God himself, the Holy Spirit. Through the ministry of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, God has created for himself a people, the body of Christ, the church.

The Beginning of the Church

The New Testament also tells the story of this new people, the church. It gives guidance, instruction, exhortations, and encouragement for the long journey home, for the mission that Jesus gave to his disciples, and for the times of persecution and trials.

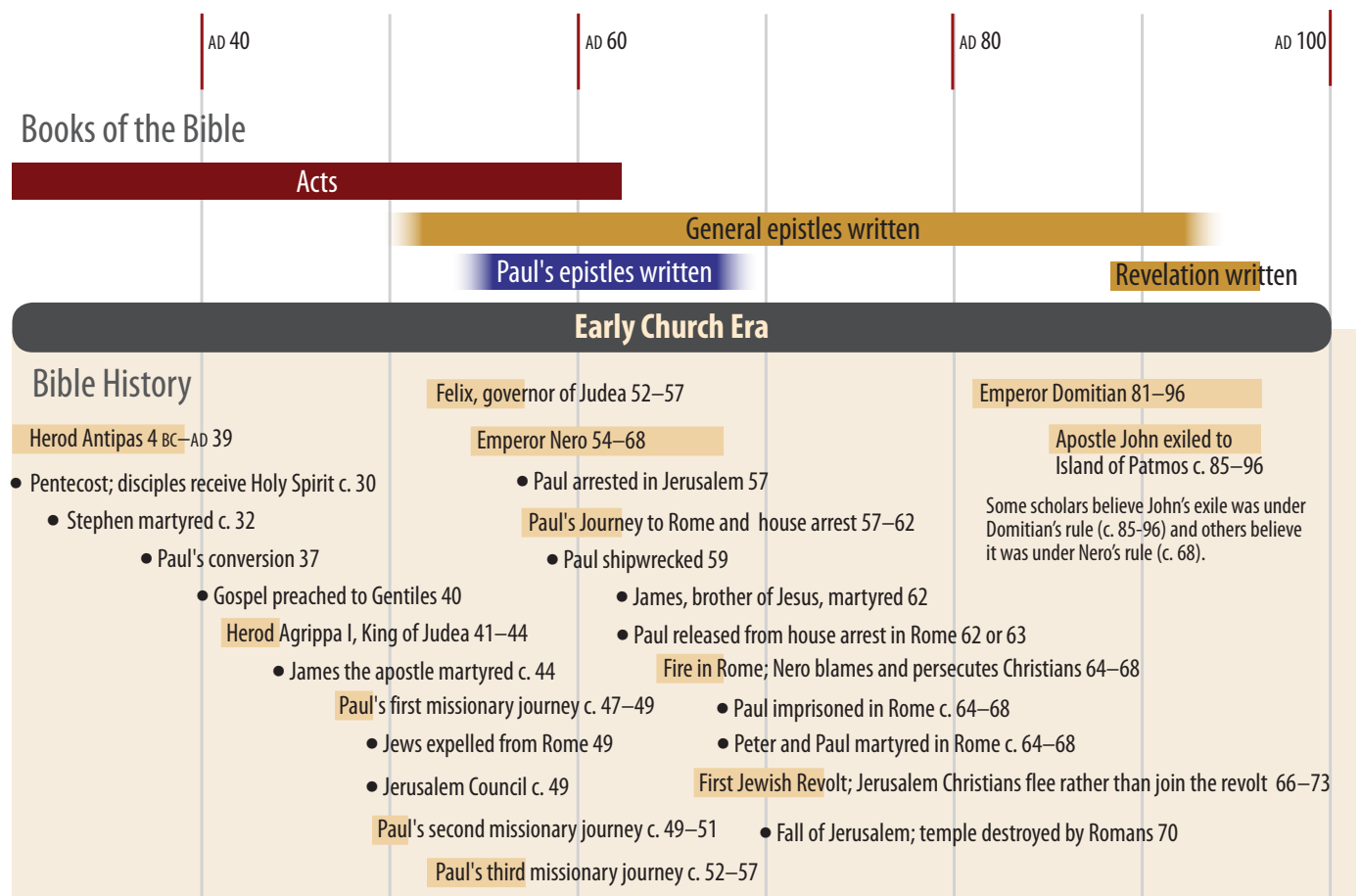
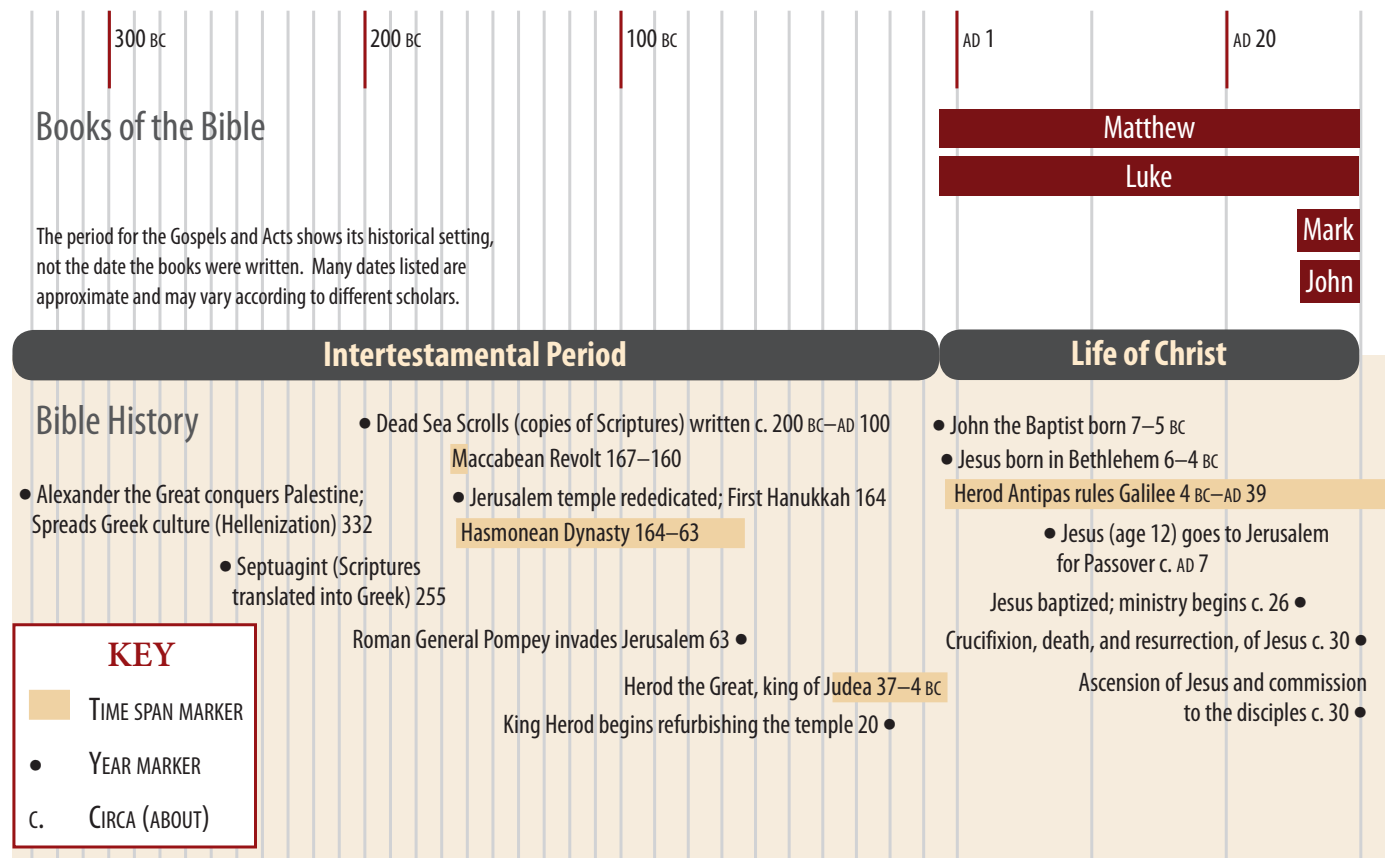
In the New Testament, we find what it means to be God's people—the body of Christ, the purpose of our existence as Christ's body, and the ultimate goal of each believer and the whole creation. In the New Testament we learn about God's final solution to rescue humanity from sin and death.

Books of the New Testament

The New Testament consists of twenty-seven books. The four Gospels narrate the life of Jesus Christ and Acts tells the story of the first Christians. The twenty-one epistles are letters from early church leaders to churches and believers. Letters from the apostle Paul make up most of the epistles in the New Testament. The book of Revelation is unique in the New Testament because it is the only book that is written in an apocalyptic style; in other words, the book relates its message through signs, symbols, dreams, and visions.

Gospels & Acts	The Epistles & Revelation	
<i>Gospels:</i> Matthew Mark Luke John Acts	<i>Paul's Epistles:</i> Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians 1 Timothy 2 Timothy Titus Philemon	<i>General Epistles:</i> Hebrews James 1 Peter 2 Peter 1 John 2 John 3 John Jude Revelation

New Testament Time Line



NEW TESTAMENT HOLY LAND



GOSPELS & ACTS

THE LIFE THAT BRINGS NEW LIFE

What Are the Gospels?

The term *gospel* was used in the Roman world as an imperial proclamation, the good news of the deeds of the Caesar. However, in the New Testament, the good news these books present is about “Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). The Gospels tell a story about the actions and teachings of Jesus. In his life and words, Jesus proclaimed the coming of God’s kingdom. God’s promises to his people in the Old Testament are now fulfilled in Jesus.

However, we do not find just one story about Jesus. Rather we find four similar yet distinctive stories. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us about Jesus’ life and work from four related perspectives. Why are there four Gospels instead of just one? One answer is that it takes four points of view to get the whole story about Jesus. Some might argue that one authoritative story should be enough. However, God chose to reveal himself using four Gospels. The Gospel of John begins with these words: “In the beginning was the Word (1:1) ... and the Word became flesh (1:14). God chooses as his preferred method of communication to speak to humans by means of the human. This is true of the Bible and it is supremely true of Christ whom we are told is God in the flesh (John 1:14–18). So then, the Gospels are, like Jesus, both a Divine work as well as a human work. They have real human authors and one divine Author. They give details that might be difficult to understand, but they are never truly contradictory. They have four different points of view on the history of Jesus, but only one Divine conclusion as to his identity as the Son of God.

Gospels & Acts

Matthew
Mark
Luke
John
Acts

Gospel	Viewpoint	Audience	Jesus the Son of God
Matthew	Palestinian Jewish	A Jewish cultural world	Is he the Messiah the King of Israel?
Mark	Hellenistic Jewish	A Greek cultural world	Is he the power of God active in the World?
Luke	Greek-Roman	A Gentile world	Is he the ideal man of God?
John	Heavenly	The whole world	Is he the Word of God?

The Synoptic Gospels and John

The word *synoptic* means “seen together.” It refers to the first three Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. When seen together, these Gospels often reveal related accounts in very similar language. Scholars agree there is some relationship between these three books. The exact nature of this relationship has been the subject of much debate. It seems that these three authors either read one another or some common source, which explains why so much of their content and language are so similar.

The Gospel of John, however, is different than the first three Gospels. John includes material that the other writers do not have. For example, in the feeding of the 5,000, the Synoptic Gospels show that Jesus talks to the disciples as a group, whereas the Gospel of John names specific individuals who talk with Jesus. Also the wording of some of the stories is different. John often adds details that the others do not include. For example, the name of the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her hair (John 12:3), and that John beat Peter in a foot race to the empty tomb on Easter Sunday (John 20:4). Many of these details have a personal tone. On a more theological level, whereas the Synoptic Gospels emphasize the theme of the kingdom of God, the Gospel of John focuses on the concept of eternal life. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus’ miracles are illustrations of how the kingdom of God has already arrived through Jesus’ ministry. In the Gospel of John, miracles (there are no exorcisms in this Gospel) show that Jesus’ ministry is superior to Jewish institutions.

The Book of Acts

The book of Acts is a natural continuation of the Gospels. The good news of Jesus continues in the work of Jesus’ disciples in Jerusalem and throughout the world. In the book of Acts we find God’s plan for humanity being played out in the life of the early Christians, who embodied Jesus’ ministry and announced the good news of salvation to all peoples. Similar to the Historical Books in the Old Testament, the book of Acts gives identity to God’s people today by showing us how God’s mission spread to all people and nations of the world.

Although the apostles Peter and Paul play a significant role in the book, the main characters of the book are God and the church. The apostles Paul and Peter lay the foundations for the spread of the gospel and illustrate the ministry of the Holy Spirit through the apostles. Acts tells about the spread of the gospel. For that reason, some knowledge of the places Christians visited and of the cultures in those places helps us to better understand the importance of the book.

In a very real sense, the book of Acts is about us because we are members of Christ’s body. Understanding the book of Acts helps us understand our missions as followers of Christ.

LUKE

THE GOSPEL FOR THE WORLD



Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem (Luke 19:28–43)

Luke, Mark, and Paul

Luke as the author of both the Gospel and Acts is the most prolific writer of the New Testament. Paul wrote more books, but Luke wrote more pages. Luke knew John Mark as well (Col. 4:10, 14; Philem. 24). It is a common view among scholars that Mark's Gospel was one of the source materials used by Luke (1:1–2). Many scholars point to Luke's use of Mark's basic outline of events. To this Luke adds much more material and his own insight in the development of his Gospel.

Purpose

Luke's main purpose is to show that the good news of Jesus is meant for the whole world. First, Luke addresses the book to Theophilus who was probably a Gentile, an indication that Luke saw the gospel message as not only for the Jewish people. Second, the sending of the seventy—or seventy-two—disciples occurs only in Luke (10:1–24). For many rabbis, seventy was the number of languages of the world. Sending seventy disciples meant that the gospel was being preached to the whole world.

In addition, Luke, who is also thought to be the author of the book of Acts, wants to show how Jesus' ministry is extended to the disciples at the end of the Gospel and into Acts.

Theophilus

Both of Luke and Acts are addressed to a certain Theophilus whom the author calls “most excellent” (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1) The same Greek word is applied to Felix (Acts 24:3) and Festus (Acts 26:25) both Roman governors. Theophilus may have been a Roman official. Another possibility is that he was a Christian convert who became Luke’s patron. Books were expensive, and only a few people and groups were able to afford them. It was common to have a wealthy patron who would keep the books and grant access to others to read. Theophilus might have financed Luke’s writing, paid for copies of the books, and granted churches access to the books.

Outline

1. Prologue (1:1–4)
2. Birth of Jesus (1:5–2:52)
3. Preparation for Jesus’ Ministry (3:1–4:13)
4. The Work in Galilee (4:14–9:50)
 - a. Beginning of his ministry in Galilee (4:14–5:16)
 - b. Beginning of conflicts (5:17–6:11)
 - c. Jesus and his disciples (6:12–49)
 - d. Identity of Jesus (7:1–50)
 - e. Teachings of Jesus (8:1–21)
 - f. The power of Jesus (8:22–56)
 - g. Jesus and the twelve disciples (9:1–50)
5. The Ministry on the Way to Jerusalem (9:51–19:27)
 - a. Ministry in Judea (9:51–13:21)
 - b. Ministry in and around Perea (13:22–19:27)
6. The Work in Jerusalem (19:28–24:53)
 - a. Triumphal entry and cleansing of the temple (19:28–48)
 - b. Authority of Jesus questioned (20:1–47)
 - c. The Olivet Discourse (21:1–37)
 - d. Last Supper (22:1–38)
 - e. Gethsemane (22:39–46)
 - f. Jesus arrested (22:47–65)
 - g. Jesus, Pilate, and Herod (22:66–23:25)
 - h. The crucifixion (23:26–56)
 - i. The resurrection and appearances (24:1–49)
 - j. The ascension (24:50–53)

Background

Author: Luke is thought to be the author, based on a second century (100s) tradition that names him as the author of this Gospel as well as Acts. Also, evidence from the two books and Paul’s letters make that conclusion more likely. The introductions to Luke and Acts seem to connect the books; both are addressed to Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1).

It is likely that Luke was a Gentile, well educated, companion and friend of Paul, and possibly the same Luke the physician mentioned in Colossians 4:14. Luke followed Paul from his second missionary journey through the time of Paul’s house arrest in Rome (2 Tim. 4:11).



St. Luke by James J. Tissot

Date: Tradition says that Paul was martyred sometime late in the persecution of Christians by Roman Emperor Nero (AD 64–68). Thus, Luke probably wrote both his books around AD 60–62 before the fires in Rome for which Nero falsely blamed and persecuted Christians.

Audience: The Gospel of Luke was most likely intended for a Gentile audience. It is presented as a biography similar to other works of its day. The book is historical, although not in the same way we think of a historical book. It is historical in the sense of being a character portrait of Jesus the man, his work and, if Acts is included, his continuing work in and through others.

The Gospels as Biography

Modern Biographies	Ancient Biographies
<p>Biographies place a premium on historical sequencing. This means that the events of the subject's life are typically narrated in the order in which they happened. Beginning with the birth of the individual, relevant events and information are viewed in sequential order up to the death of the subject. While chapters may present different phases in the subject's life, these phases are arranged in the order in which they are supposed to have happened.</p>	<p>Ancient biographers had a general commitment to an historical sequence. They did not feel the need to place every detail in their writings in the exact order in which it happened. Much more emphasis is given to developing an accurate picture of the character of the subject. Deeds and happenings are seen as illustrative of that character no matter when they occurred.</p>
<p>Example:</p> <p>Luke 7:36–50 is an example of the non-sequential nature of ancient biographies. This passage is Luke's account of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet. Matthew, Mark and John tell this event as part of Jesus' arrival at Bethany just before the events of Easter week. Despite Luke's care as an accurate historian (Luke 1:1–4), he places this event much earlier in Jesus' ministry.</p> <p>Some have tried to resolve the difficulty by suggesting that there were two such events, two times when various women anointed Jesus' feet. But scholars think that the details of Luke's account too closely resemble the other Gospel accounts to make it a separate incident.</p> <p>It is possible that Luke (and so the Holy Spirit) placed this event out of historical sequence to illustrate the coming of the kingdom of God through the Messiah Jesus. This story, like the stories before it, illustrate the kind of Messiah Jesus is: one who heals—like the story of the centurion and the widow's son show—and one who forgives, as the story of the woman who anoints Jesus' feet shows. For Luke, this story helps demonstrate who the Messiah is, which was more important than placing the story in historical sequence as the other Gospels do.</p>	

Themes

- The presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit (1:15; 1:35; 3:22; 4:1, 14, 18; 10:21; 24:49).
- Luke, like Matthew, lays emphasis on the kingdom and Jesus as king (4:43; 6:20; 7:28; 9:2; 10:9–11; 12:32; 13:18–29; 14:15–24; 17:20–21; 18:15–17; 19:11–27).
- Luke focuses on the spiritual realm with frequent references to angels (more than twenty times) and the hidden reality of God (1:11, 26; 2:9, 13; 9:28–36; 22:43; 24:15–31).
- God's care for the poor and the disadvantaged in society (5:12–14; 6:17–26; 8:36–50; 13:10–17; 18:9–17; 19:1–10; 21:1–4).
- Jesus as the perfect spiritual man (3:23, 38).

Gospel

The word *gospel* translates the Greek word *euangelion*, which means “good news.” Around the time Jesus was born, the term *euangelion* was used to announce the birth of the emperor’s (Caesar’s) son and future Caesar. The Roman empire promised a *pax romana*, a Roman peace, that would benefit all peoples. Caesar was regarded as the son of the gods, divinely chosen to rule the world. The gospel in the New Testament refers to the birth of the true King, one who came first to be a humble servant and a savior, and then he will rule as the rightful King of all forever. The gospel is the good news about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and the new life that he offers to all who repent and believe in him as their King and Savior.

Key Verses

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”—Luke 4:18–19 (Isa. 61:1–2)

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”—Luke 6:20

The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.”—Luke 23:47

Being God’s People

The Gospel of Luke presents the ongoing importance, relevance, and necessity of the good news for all humans. The presence of the kingdom of God now is seen the work of the Holy Spirit who equips, guides, and empowers believers to continue the work that Jesus began. Besides the wondrous salvation Jesus accomplished on the cross, Jesus was also an example of what it means to live and serve God in his kingdom. Empowered and led by the Holy Spirit, all Christians are entrusted to continue Jesus’ ministry until he returns, as he promised.

THE EPISTLES & REVELATION

GUIDANCE FOR THE JOURNEY

The Epistles

The epistles (or letters) make up twenty-one of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament. They contain vital information for Christians and their journey through life. Whereas the Gospels present the good news of Jesus—his life and ministry—the epistles explain the effects of Jesus’ ministry, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the spread of the gospel through Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the Gentile world.

The epistles are traditionally grouped into two sections: Paul’s Epistles which are the thirteen letters written by the apostle Paul, and the eight General Epistles which are letters written by other apostles or early church leaders.

There are different kinds of epistles in New Testament:

1. Personal letters, such as Philemon which is written to a specific individual.
2. Circular letters, such as Ephesians which was a letter meant to be circulated among several churches in a region.
3. Letters to a specific congregation, such as 1 and 2 Corinthians which were written to the church congregation in the city of Corinth.
4. Other letters do not name the author or the recipients, such as Hebrews which does not name its author and 1 John which does not indicate to whom it is written. Others look only in a very general way like a letter at all (James).

However, all the letters share some important features. The first, and most important, is that they are divine communications for God’s people in the early church and throughout history. Another important consideration about these New Testament letters is that they are *occasional documents*. This means that each letter was written to address a specific set of issues, at a specific time, and in a specific place. This point is important to keep in mind because it highlights the value in knowing as much about the context of the letter as possible. It also reminds us that none of the letters, or even all of them put together, represents the full theology of Paul, Peter, or John. Rather, they were addressing specific issues. Those issues determined the content of each letter. However, understanding the issues that each letter addresses is not easy. Often, reading the letters can feel like listening in on a person’s phone conversation; we know only half of it.

Paul’s Epistles

Romans
1 Corinthians
2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 Thessalonians
2 Thessalonians
1 Timothy
2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon

General Epistles & Revelation

Hebrews
James
1 Peter
2 Peter
1 John
2 John
3 John
Jude
Revelation

Epistle	Author	Date	Audience	Major Themes
James	James	49	Christian Jews in and around Jerusalem	A faith in action
Galatians	Paul	48–49 or 54–55	Churches in the Roman province of Galatia	Justification by faith through Christ alone
1 Thessalonians	Paul	50–52	Church in the city of Thessalonica	Encouragement during persecution
2 Thessalonians	Paul	50–52	Church in the city of Thessalonica	The second coming of Christ and the end times
1 Corinthians	Paul	55–56	Church in the port city of Corinth	Unity of the body of Christ, freedom and mature behavior of a godly lifestyle, the nature of love, and the centrality of Christ's resurrection
2 Corinthians	Paul	56	Church in the port city of Corinth	Humility and power, tough love, and the new creation
Romans	Paul	57	Church in Rome	God's power, justification, sin, and holy living
Philippians	Paul	60–62	Church in the important Roman colonial city of Philippi	Servant leadership, unity of believers, joy in the Lord
Colossians	Paul	60–62	Church in Colossae (in modern day Turkey)	The supremacy of Christ, community life in Christ
Philemon	Paul	60–62	Philemon, a leader at the church in Colossae	Forgiveness and Christian love
Ephesians	Paul	60–62	Church in the Hellenistic cultural center of Ephesus	God's gracious salvation in Christ, unity and diversity of the church, and the Christian life
1 Timothy	Paul	62–66	Timothy, one of Paul's disciples, who was ministering in Ephesus	Encouragement in the face of false teaching, instruction on worship, organization, and care within the church
Titus	Paul	64–66	Titus, one of Paul's disciples, who was ministering on the island of Crete	Encouragement for Titus, warning against false teachings, doing good
1 Peter	Peter	64–65	Churches in Roman provinces of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey)	Suffering and Christian witness
2 Peter	Peter	64–65	Churches in Roman provinces of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey)	God's revelation and warning against false teachings
2 Timothy	Paul	66–67	Timothy, one of Paul's disciples, who was ministering in Ephesus	Personal appeals to Timothy, encouragement to proclaim the gospel at all times, and encouragements for the church
Jude	Jude	60s–80s	Unknown. Perhaps addressed to Jewish Christians.	Christ's faithfulness and God's judgment
Hebrews	Unknown	60–69	Jewish Christians	The superiority of Christ
1 John	John	85–95	Churches in Asia Minor	The love of God
2 John	John	85–95	Probably to a house church in Asia Minor	Warning against false teachings
3 John	John	85–95	Gaius, a Christian in a church in Asia Minor	The Christian life

THE WORLD OF THE FIRST CHRISTIANS



Who Was Paul?

Paul was an enemy of Christianity, who became the greatest Christian missionary of all time. He authored more books of the Bible than anyone else. He is better known as the “apostle to the Gentiles.”

Paul came from a well-respected family in Asia Minor (Turkey today) where his father was an official. He excelled in his studies and became a devout Pharisee. As a young man Paul—whose Jewish name was Saul—was sent to Jerusalem to study under the great teacher Gamaliel. He hated Christians and participated in the first execution of a Christian leader, a man named Stephen. Paul was determined to murder all those who followed Jesus, not just in Jerusalem, but elsewhere (Acts 7:54–8:3).

Paul asked the chief priest in Jerusalem to give him authorization to arrest any follower of Jesus in Damascus (about 100 miles away). On his way from Judea to Damascus, a light from heaven blinded him. He fell to the ground and a voice said, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He answered, “Who are you?” The voice said, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Get up! Go into the city, and you will be told what to do.” Paul was told to go to a house and wait for a Christian man named Ananias to come restore his sight (Acts 9:1–12).

The Lord spoke to Ananias and said that Paul was chosen to take the Lord's name to Gentiles, their kings, and to the Jews. Ananias placed his hands on Paul and his sight was restored. Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit and was baptized. He started speaking in synagogues and convincing people that Jesus was the Messiah.

During the early years of Christianity, most of the converts were Jewish. Jesus' disciples preached only to Jews. Yet as Jewish people scattered throughout the Roman empire, they told their neighbors about Jesus. Many of these Gentiles (non-Jews) became followers of Jesus too (Acts 11:19–21). Traveling all over the Roman empire, the apostle Paul preached and ministered to Gentile Christians. Paul became one of God's powerful tools to spread the good news of Jesus. Eventually it would cost him his life. According to tradition, Paul was martyred during Emperor Nero's fierce persecution of Christians in Rome. Yet Paul's God-inspired writings have provided guidance, comfort, exhortation, and assurance to millions of Christians throughout history.

The Book of Revelation

The book of Revelation is not an epistle. Rather it belongs to a special category or *genre* of writing, known as apocalyptic literature. *Apocalyptic* is a type of literature that reveals God's plans that had been hidden to humanity. The message is conveyed through signs, symbols, dreams, and visions.

Interpreting the book has always been a great challenge for Christians. However, its message is much too important to simply ignore it. We must approach the book with a sense of respect and wonder, but also with the confidence that God's message in the book is still relevant to all believers today.

Despite the many disagreements about the meaning of the book, there are important agreements among Christians:

- The message of the book is relevant for Christians today, as it was for Christians in the times of the apostles.
- The main purpose of the book is to provide *hope* and *encouragement* for believers at all times, especially in times of persecution or suffering.
- The message of the book is clear on at least three points: (1) Christ is coming back and will judge humanity; (2) the powers of evil are doomed before Christ; and (3) God promises a wonderful future for all who believe in Christ.

ROMANS

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL



Purpose

The epistle to the Romans is Paul's most theological and complex letter. The letter has at least three important purposes:

- **Missionary.** Paul's ministry was at its core missionary—spreading the gospel throughout the world. His travels present us with an apostle profoundly involved with Jesus' commission to spread the gospel. The epistle to the Romans reveals Paul's heart for missions. The apostle had not visited the church in Rome, yet he wanted to make it his church base for launching a missionary effort that would reach the end of the known world: Spain. Paul might have wanted to explain to the Roman believers what the content of his missionary preaching was—in other words, the message of the gospel.
- **Teaching.** Paul explained in detail many crucial topics of the Christian faith. The letter to the Romans is not a complete handbook of Christian beliefs. Rather, the book reveals an interest in themes like the human need for salvation, the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians, the death and resurrection of Jesus as the way of salvation, justification by faith alone, and the role of faith in people's lives.
- **Pastoral.** This is not just a doctrinal letter; it is a personal letter. The apostle Paul sends personal greetings to many people and shows that he is aware of the different house churches in Rome. He is also aware of potential divisions and troubles. As a pastor, he writes to encourage and exhort Roman believers to unity and wisdom.

Outline

1. Introduction, Greeting, and Preface (1:1–17)
2. The Righteous Anger of God (1:18–3:20)
 - a. Against the Gentile world
 - b. Against the Jewish world
 - c. Against the whole world
3. Justification by Faith in Christ (3:21–5:21)
4. Sanctification through Union with Christ (6:1–8:17)
5. Glorification in Conquering with Christ (8:18–39)
6. Election (9:1–11:36)
7. A Living Sacrifice (12:1–15:13)
8. Conclusion, Personal Greetings, and Doxology (15:14–16:27)

Election

Election (Rom. 9–11) is best thought of as a compelling love story in which God's love seeks a specific beloved (the church in Christ) and we are individually and as a group drawn compulsively into that love revealed in Christ.

Paul's Roman Citizenship

The apostle Paul was a Roman citizen by birth (Acts 22:25–29). Access to Roman citizenship was limited and difficult to obtain. Although many people achieved, earned, or were granted Roman citizenship, their citizenship had less rights and privileges than those who were citizens by birth. In the Roman Empire, when slaves were freed, they became citizens. When people performed special duties for Rome, the emperor granted them full Roman citizenship. Many scholars believe this is how Paul's ancestors might have acquired their Roman citizenship.

Background

Author: The apostle Paul is the author of this important letter (1:1).

Date: This letter was probably written in AD 57 a little after the Corinthian letters at the time Paul was visiting the Corinthian church and just before he was headed to Jerusalem with the relief fund gathered for the believers there (Rom. 15:25–27).

Audience: Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome. Rome was at the center of nearly all that happened in the Mediterranean world. Though there is no mention of who first brought the gospel to Rome, Christianity had spread quickly to the capital city of the Empire, probably through the natural concourse of business, political, and religious activity. By the time of the great persecution under Emperor Nero (AD 64), the historian Tacitus could say a “great multitude” of Christians lived in Rome. (Those were Nero's early days as emperor, and he had not yet turned into the cruel ruler he would become after the fires in Rome.)

The church at Rome was a mix of both Jewish and Gentile believers. There was a large Jewish presence in Rome as we learn from the expulsion order given under Emperor Claudius (Acts 18:2–3). Many believers were

already there before Paul made his first journey to Rome around AD 57 (Acts 21:17–28:31).

Paul greatly desired to visit the Christians in Rome. Little did he know when he wrote this letter that he would later come in chains to the city and testify before the emperor. Nor could he know of his eventual death by beheading in Rome. What Paul did know was the power of the gospel. In Romans, we have an unmatched presentation of it.

Examples of Faith in Romans

Believers	Example	Reference in Romans
Abraham	Father of all the faithful and example of justification by faith	4:1–25
David	Knew God's justification by faith	4:6–8
Adam	Through his faithless disobedience, the punishment of death came to all humanity.	5:12–21
Sarah and her son Isaac	Examples of God's choice in Christ	9:6–9
Rebecca and her sons Jacob and Esau	Examples of God's choice in Christ	9:10–13
Moses and Pharaoh	Examples of God's choice. Moses is quoted to show the distinction between salvation by perfect obedience to the law and salvation by faith.	9:14–18 10:5–10
Phoebe	She lived in Cenchrea, the port city of Corinth and was a deaconess. She probably carried the letter of Romans (10:8).	16:1–2
Aquila and Priscilla	A husband and wife team expelled from Rome with other Jews. They met Paul at Corinth and worked the same trade with him. They risked their lives for Paul, possibly at Ephesus (Acts 19:30).	16:3–5

Themes

God's Power. The apostle Paul was writing to citizens of the most powerful city at the time. The Roman believers knew about power. God's power to save and condemn, as the righteous owner of the whole universe, was manifested in the law of Moses and in the gospel. His power, along with his justice, grace, mercy, and holiness, has reached out to save humanity from the hold of sin and evil.

Justification. In Christ, God has justified us and opened the way to serve him and love him. Justification is a word that comes from the courts of law. Paul uses this word to explain to the Romans—well acquainted with the court system—the effects of Jesus' death for believers. In Christ, God has declared us just, or acceptable, before God.

Sin. Humanity is a slave to sin, death, and evil. Through Christ's sacrifice, however, God has redeemed us—made us free—from the tyranny of sin and death. God has empowered us to live in a new way for God.

Emperors

Rome was under Nero at the time Paul wrote Romans. Roman government had descended into an empire where the Caesars were quickly becoming powerful tyrants. Caligula had already made his evil and insane mark on the office—his cruelty and sexual perversity were well known. Fortunately, the more competent and moderate Claudius had replaced him. Nero came next after his stepfather Claudius died. The sixth Caesar, Nero, was restrained at first. In time, however, Nero became so cruel and evil that his contemporaries called him the “beast.” Tradition says that both Peter and Paul were martyred under the persecution of Nero.



Nero, Roman Emperor AD 54–68

Key Verses

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.—Rom. 3:23

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
—Rom. 6:23

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.
—Rom. 12:1

Propitiation

Propitiation is a key word used in Rom. 3:25. Often translated as “sacrifice of atonement” or “expiation,” the word carries the idea of “turning aside anger.” It points back to Paul’s opening statement in 1:18, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people.”

Being God’s People

Believers in Rome faced many challenges to their faith. A powerful, rich, and influential city like Rome harbored many different religions, ideas, and practices that contradicted the Christian faith. Paul’s desire to present the Christian faith in some detail and his exhortations to keep the unity hint at the problems that confronted believers then. In the face of persecution, Paul reminded them that God has promised that nothing shall separate us from his love in Christ (8:28–39). The apostle Paul also reminded the Romans that the Christian faith is always a missionary faith.

The Christian faith continues to be assailed by different religions, ideas, and practices. Paul’s exhortations to faithful belief and the practice of Christian unity are still important for us today. God challenges us in view of his great mercy to present ourselves as living sacrifices (12:1). The reminder that our faith is at its core missionary must shape our Christian life and practice.

Jesus in Romans

A large part of the letter includes Paul’s presentation of the gospel. Jesus is the central figure and the climax of the gospel story. In his letter, Paul presents the power of God through Jesus, his full grace displayed in his sacrifice, and his justice fulfilled in his death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit, fulfilling Jesus’ promise of sending the Counselor, empowers all believers to follow Jesus, do as he commanded, and work “so that all nations might believe and obey him” (16:26).



The Forum Romanum in Rome, Italy

COLOSSIANS

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST



Gnosticism

Gnosticism was a philosophy that began during the first and second centuries AD. Gnostics believed one could “escape” the evil, physical world through a special knowledge (*gnosis*) typically obtained through a connection with a transcendent Being. Early Gnostics held the heretical belief that a special knowledge revealed to only a select group of souls could help them achieve salvation, escaping from the physical world into a spiritual reality.

Purpose

The church in the city of Colossae was dealing with some false beliefs. It appears the heresy in Colossae was a mixture of Jewish legalism and an early form of Gnosticism. Jewish legalism made the observation of Jewish practices like circumcision (Col. 2:11), festivals, and dietary laws (2:16) mandatory for Gentile believers.

Paul’s emphasis on Christ providing all the “understanding, mystery, and hidden treasures of wisdom” (2:2–3) seems aimed at early Gnostic beliefs. Some elements of extreme self-denying (2:21–23) and Greek philosophy (2:8) were also part of the misled beliefs of the Colossians.

Paul combats the Colossian heresy by emphasizing the supremacy and complete sufficiency of Christ while at the same time denouncing human philosophies and proving that they are inadequate.

Outline

1. Introduction, Thanksgiving, and Prayer (1:1–14)
2. The Supremacy of Christ (1:15–23)
3. Paul's Labor for the Church (1:24–2:5)
4. Freedom in Christ (2:6–23)
5. The Christian Life (3:1–4:6)
6. Final Greetings (4:7–18)



Paul Ends His Letter to the Colossians
by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

Background

Author: The author of Colossians is the apostle Paul (1:1).

Date: The letter to the Colossians is one of the Prison Epistles, meaning that Paul wrote it during his house arrest in Rome, sometime between AD 60 and 62.

Audience: Paul wrote this letter to the church in Colossae (in modern-day Turkey). Prior to the first century AD, Colossae was an influential trading town in Asia Minor. However, by the time Paul wrote Colossians, the city had been on the decline for several centuries.

Themes

The Supremacy of Christ. Jesus is all that is necessary in life—over and above Jewish legalism, Gnostic beliefs, and any other human philosophy, which are empty, inadequate, and unfulfilling.

Family and Community Life in Christ. When Jesus is central, he will influence all we do and say within our families and within our societies.

The Prison Epistles

Paul had been sent to Rome where he spent two years under house arrest (AD 60–62). Paul was allowed to have visitors and share the gospel. Acts 28:30–31 reads, “For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!” Epaphras, a minister to the church in Colossae and possibly the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col. 4:13), eventually joined Paul as a prisoner (Phil. 1:23).

While under house arrest in Rome, Paul wrote the Prison Epistles: Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon. According to his letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote another letter from prison to the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16). This letter was never discovered.

Key Verses

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.

—Col. 1:15–16

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.—Col. 2:13–14

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.—Col. 3:12–14

Being God’s People

Jesus Christ is sufficient in all things. No power, philosophy, or practice is effective in forgiving us and redeeming us other than Jesus. Jesus is the absolute truth and we can be assured of the effectiveness of Christ’s influence in our lives, the lives of our family, and the life of our community. It is important to be on guard and aware of false teachings, heresies, and idle promises from other religions and philosophies that claim salvation can be found in something or someone else besides Jesus. Unlike Gnosticism that claims to have “hidden knowledge,” God has revealed in the Scriptures everything we need to know and come to him.

Fascinating Facts

- Colossae was only 10 miles (16 km) from Laodicea and 13 miles (21 km) from Hierapolis. The three cities combined were known as the tri-city area.
- Philemon lived in Colossae and the church met in his house.
- Paul never visited Colossae. Many scholars believe that Epaphras planted the church in Colossae while Paul lived in Ephesus.

Jesus in Colossians

The epistle to the Colossians emphasizes Jesus’ divinity in a wonderful way: “The Son is the image of the invisible God” (1:15). Since Jesus is God, he is at the center of the whole universe, and through him, God is reconciling “all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (1:20).

HEBREWS

A SUPERIOR COVENANT



The Last Supper by Philippe de Champaigne

Purpose

The main purpose of the letter to the Hebrews was to establish the superiority of Jesus. Jesus is better than angels, the prophets of the Old Testament, Moses, the law, the old covenant, the priesthood, the tabernacle (or sanctuary), and the Jewish sacrificial system. Jesus' death on the cross fulfilled the Old Testament. Jesus reveals God in a new and more complete way.

The letter aims to guide God's people into God's rest—his promised land. This is a journey of faith. Faith is the stance God's people take as they persevere in confidence toward the goal. The letter urges all Christians to strive to be holy and be like Jesus. Suffering was a catalyst for Christ's life of obedience and perfection. As imitators of Christ, suffering can help believers on their journey toward obedience in faith and love.

Outline

1. The Superiority of Christ over Angels, Moses, and Priests (1:1–7:28)
 - a. Supremacy of Christ's revelation (1:1–4)
 - b. Supremacy over angels (1:5–2:18)
 - c. Supremacy over Moses (3:1–4:13)
 - d. Supremacy over priests (4:14–7:28)
2. The Superiority of Christ as the High Priest of the New Covenant (8:1–13)
3. The Superiority of the New Tabernacle (9:1–12)
4. The Superiority of Christ's Sacrifice (9:13–10:18)
5. A Call to Perseverance, Faithfulness, and Discipline (10:19–12:29)
6. Rules for Christian Living (13:1–17)
7. Request for Prayer, Final Greetings, and Benediction (13:18–25)

Background

Author: The author of Hebrews is unknown. Some scholars suggest that the apostle Paul wrote Hebrews. However, Paul identified himself as the writer in his letters, and the author of Hebrews does not identify himself. Also, the difference in themes and style between Paul's letters and Hebrews argues against Paul as the author.

Date: Many scholars suggest a date from AD 60 to 69 for two main reasons: (1) The author of Hebrews mentions Timothy (13:23), and (2) the temple in Jerusalem, which was destroyed in AD 70, still appears to be standing. The author speaks of the temple in the present tense and doesn't reference the end of the Old Testament sacrificial system.

Audience: The author of Hebrews is writing to Jewish Christians. These converts appear to be tempted to resort back to Judaism or at least a hybrid version of Christianity mixed with Judaism. Some scholars suggest that the recipients of Hebrews were the large number of priests who converted to Christianity after the selection of the seven deacons in Acts 6:1–9. Because most people assumed that the audience of the book was Jewish, the book came to be called the letter to the Hebrews (or Jews).

Setting: The letter seems to address a group of Christians facing fierce persecution (10:32; 12:4). The persecution from the Roman government probably was not the only one. They might have experienced persecution from other Jews. During the first century, Judaism was a protected religion under Roman law; Christianity was not. The pressure of the persecution must have made it tempting for Christians to return to their Jewish roots in order to avoid persecution and possible death. Some scholars believe that in certain areas in the first century when Jews converted to Christianity, they were banned from the synagogue and their children couldn't attend the synagogue's schools.



Themes

The Superiority of Christ. Because of Jesus' superiority, what Christians have is superior to the old revelation. Jesus and the new covenant are superior to the old covenant, the old promises, the old sacrifices, the old "promised land," the old sanctuary, and the old priesthood.

Christ's Humanity. Christ became flesh to defeat the power of death, sin, and evil, and to give true freedom (2:14–15). Because Jesus became flesh, we know that Jesus understands our weakness and provides us with the grace to be faithful to him (4:15).

Faith, Perseverance, and Discipleship. Christ has given us a superior revelation and salvation.

As a response in gratitude to him, we are called to endure persecution and suffering. We press on to our goal with faith in Christ: to rest in God's presence for all eternity.

Key Verses

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.—Heb. 4:12–13

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.—Heb. 10:23–25

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.—Heb. 12:1–2

Heroes of the Faith in Hebrews 11

Abel (Gen. 4:2–10)

Enoch (Gen. 5:21–24)

Noah (Gen. 5:30–9:28)

Abraham (Gen. 11:26–25:11)

Isaac (Gen. 24:4–66; 25:9–11, 19; 26:1–40)

Jacob (Gen. 25:19–35:29; 49:1–28)

Sarah (Gen. 11:29–31; 12:5–17; 16:1–8; 17:15–18:15)

Joseph (Gen. 37:2–36; 39:1–23; 40:3–50:26; Ex. 1:5–8; 13:19)

Moses (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy)

Rahab (Josh. 2:1–24; 6:16–17, 22–25; James 2:25; Matt. 1:5)

Gideon (Judg. 6:11–8:35)

Barak (Judg. 4:1–5:15)

Samson (Judg. 13:1–16:31)

Jephthah (Judg. 11:1–12:7)

David (Ruth 4:17, 22; 1 Sam. 16:1–2 Sam. 24:25)

Samuel (1 Sam. 1:9–28:20; Ps. 99:6; Acts 3:24; 13:20)

Being God's People

God's promises of saving and transforming the world are made complete in Jesus Christ. Throughout the history of the Bible, heroes of faith have persevered through great trials and difficulties. These heroes provide us with insight into God's providence and faithfulness.

Throughout the book of Hebrews, the author gives five warnings to all believers:

1. Pay attention to everything you hear.
2. Fight against unfaithfulness and the hardening of your hearts.
3. Grow in spiritual maturity.
4. Persevere through trials and suffering.
5. Never refuse the Holy Spirit.

"Better Than"

The phrase "better than" occurs 13 times in the book of Hebrews—it is repeated in a couple of places:

- The prophets (1:1–3)
- Angels (1:4–2:18)
- Moses (3:1–18)
- Joshua (4:1–13)
- High priest (4:14–6:12)
- Abraham (6:13–7:10)
- Melchizedek (7:1–10)
- Aaron and priests (7:11–8:6)
- Sacrifices (8:7–10:39)

Jesus in Hebrews

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of every promise that preceded him. Jesus Christ is superior to anything that came before him. In Jesus, we have a better hope, a better covenant, a better sanctuary, and a better inheritance. Jesus is the supreme and superior mediator, the sinless High Priest. There is no longer a need for repeated sacrifices because Jesus is the one and only sacrifice. Jesus' sacrifice provides all who believe in him access to the holy God.



Jesus Appearing to His Apostles by Duccio di Buoninsegna

1 & 2 PETER

HOLY LIVING IN TIMES OF TRIALS



Purpose

The main focus of the first letter of Peter is the problem of suffering. As persecution against believers in the time of the apostles increased, this letter encourages faithfulness and Christ-like behavior in difficult circumstances. All other themes—the ministry of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the people of God as God’s flock, a life of holiness—come back to the issue of suffering. The letter teaches what it means to be God’s people in times of suffering, persecution, and trials.

The second letter of Peter warns believers against false teachers, encourages them to grow in their faith, and instructs them regarding the return of Jesus.

Outline

1 Peter

1. Greeting (1:1–2)
2. The Nature of the Gospel (1:3–2:10)
 - a. The blessings of the gospel (1:3–9)
 - b. Anticipation of these blessings (1:10–12)
 - c. Those who receive these blessings (1:13–2:10)

The Scribe

1 Peter, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and the letter quoted in Acts 15:22–29 have a similar writing style. Some scholars have suggested that one writer/secretary was behind them all. The name Silas appears among all four works, making him the likely scribe behind these letters.

3. Holy Relationships (2:11–3:12)
 - a. In a pagan world (2:11–12)
 - b. With the government (2:13–17)
 - c. With the family (2:18–3:7)
 - d. In the church (3:8–12)
4. Christian Suffering and Service (3:13–4:19)
 - a. Blessings in suffering (3:13–17)
 - b. The example of Christ (3:18–4:6)
 - c. Call to a holy life (4:7–11)
 - d. Holiness in the midst of suffering (4:12–19)
5. Christian Discipline (5:1–11)
 - a. Discipline of the body of Christ (5:1–6)
 - b. Personal discipline (5:7–11)
6. Conclusion and Final Greeting (5:12–14)

2 Peter

1. Greeting (1:1–2)
2. God's Providence and Election Made Certain by a Godly Lifestyle (1:3–11)
3. Jesus is the Central Truth of the Testimony of the Apostles and Fulfillment of the Prophets (1:12–21)
4. A Warning Against False Prophets and Teachers (2:1–3:17)
5. Doxology (3:18)

Background

Author: The author identifies himself as Simon Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1).

However, authorship of the letters has been much debated. First Peter gained entrance into the New Testament canon quicker than 2 Peter. First and Second Peter are written in a different style, and the first letter uses an advanced level of Greek writing, while the second letter is written in simpler Greek. Some scholars argue that the level of Greek in the first letter is too high for a non-native speaker like Peter.

First Peter 5:12 suggests that Silas might have been involved in the first letter's composition. Silas was a partner and possibly a secretary to Paul (Acts 15:40; 1 Thess. 1:1). The Greek of 1 Peter could be explained as Silas' influence on the letter of 1 Peter. The lower Greek and stylistic differences in 2 Peter might be explained by the use of a different secretary, or even Peter actually writing the letter himself.

Date: The first letter was written late in Peter's life (AD 64–65). Peter seems to have written just before Nero's extreme persecution (AD 64–68). Although persecution is a main focus of the letter, it does not appear to be referring to the horrifying persecution under Nero. The second letter may well have been written soon after the first epistle.



Peter the Apostle by Giuseppe Nogari

Audience: Peter addresses his first letter to believers in parts of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) (1:1). If 2 Peter was the follow up letter (3:1), then the audience for both letters was the same group of believers. The many references to the Old Testament suggest an audience familiar with the Jewish Scriptures. On the other hand, Peter also seems to be writing to an audience with a pagan past (1 Peter 1:14; 2:10; 4:3; 2 Peter 3:15) suggesting a largely Gentile group of believers. Peter was probably writing to both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Themes

1 Peter

- **Suffering.** Christians are called to suffer for the sake of Christ (2:19–25, 4:12–19).
- **Christian Testimony.** Holy living in the face of persecution and suffering is a testimony to the lost world (3:13–17).

2 Peter

- **Revelation.** The prophetic word and apostolic testimony are not human creations. They are reliable testimonies (1:16–21).
- **False Teaching.** False teaching is dangerous and destructive (2:1–3).

Key Verses

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.—1 Peter 1:8–9

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.—1 Peter 2:9

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.—2 Peter 1:16

Being God's People

God's people throughout the world continue to face persecution. God strengthens and is present with his people through times of suffering and the confusion of false teaching. The letters of Peter encourage all believers to hold on to Jesus, to be faithful and holy in the face of persecution, and to be on guard against false teachers.

Jesus in 1 & 2 Peter

Jesus gave his life for us; he knows suffering. God is with us, even in times when we feel alone and defeated. Knowing that Jesus will return gives us hope to continue being faithful and obedient to God. When Jesus returns, all our pain and suffering will be redeemed and we will be with him forever.