

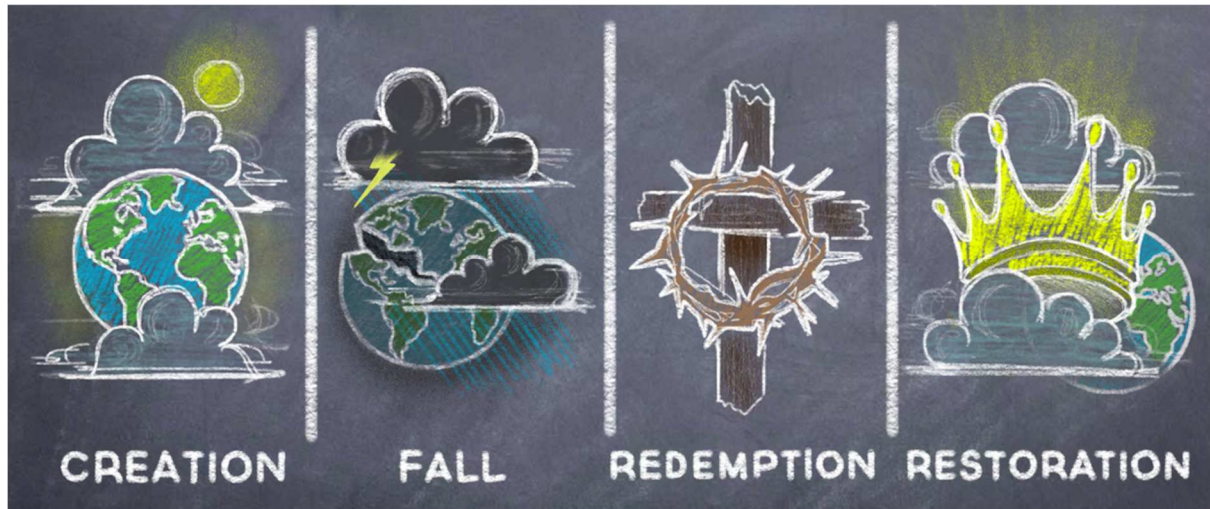
SESSION #2: “WHAT’S THE STORY” EXPLORING THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

Introduction

So many people try to read the Bible without taking a map with them, and quickly become overwhelmed, lost and exhausted. Having a basic framework around the big story of the Bible will help you not get so bogged down in the detail. Too often we get lost in the trees without standing back to see the magnificent forest before us. This session is about the forest. We’ll be looking at a basic framework for the big storyline, and then dive into some of the historical narrative.

The Overarching Story

You can summarize the story of the Bible in 4 phases. CREATION > FALL > REDEMPTION > RECREATION.



Creation: One Hebrew word sums up the picture of Genesis 1 and 2: *shalom*. Peace. Earth was full of God's shalom, the kind of peace in which everything works according to God's intention. The world was made for human flourishing, there we could live in joy in the presence of our Maker, worshiping God by loving Him and one another forever.

Fall: Adam and Eve rejected God's rule over them. We refer to their rebellious choice as "the fall," and because the represented all of humanity, their action affects us too. We have-- through our attitudes and actions-- declared ourselves to be God's enemies. This rebellion results in physical and spiritual death.

Redemption: Thankfully the loving Creator who rightly shows Himself to be wrathful toward our sin is determined to turn evil and suffering we have caused into good that will be to His ultimate glory. So the next movement shows God implementing a master plan for redeeming His world and rescuing fallen sinners. In the Person of Jesus Christ, God Himself comes to renew the world and restore His people. The grand narrative of Scripture climaxes with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Restoration: The story doesn't end with redemption. God has promised to renew the whole world, and the Bible gives us a peak into this glorious future. The restoration of all things will take place in two ways. Christ will return to judge sin and evil, and He will usher in righteousness and peace. God will purge this world of evil once and for all.¹

This is definitely worth remembering. The problem with this is, it is not a good breakdown of the volume of scripture. What I mean is almost every page of the bible but the first of the last tells the story of redemption!

CREATION (Gen. 1-2) > **FALL** (Gen. 3-11) > **REDEMPTION** (Gen. 12 to Rev. 20) > **RESTORATION** (Rev. 21).

¹ Wax, Trevin. 2011. Counterfeit Gods. Moody Publishers.

Biblical Timeline

Today we're going to spend the night breaking down God's story of redemption, focusing on the historical narrative in the Bible. We'll break things down using this timeline, but mildly altered:



1. **Creation:** Everything From Nothing
2. **Patriarchs:** God's Chosen Family
3. **Exodus:** The Birth of Israel
4. **Conquest & Judges:** A Descent into Darkness
5. **United Kingdom:** A King on the Throne
6. **Broken Kingdom:** Rebellion Against God
7. **Exile:** Actions have Consequences
8. **Return:** A Glimmer of Hope
9. **Silence:** Waiting for the Promised One
10. **Gospels:** Away in a manger... Jesus!
11. **Church & Mission:** The Spread of the Jesus Movement
12. **Future & Eternity:** Recreation

You are here

Bible Project Video: The Story of the Bible

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_CGP-12AE0

Bible Project Video: Read Scripture: Tanakh / O.T.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALsluAKBZ-c>

#1 Creation: Everything From Nothing (Gen. 1-2)



Date: Undated – 2100 B.C.

Old Testament Books: Genesis

The creation narrative of Genesis 1 and 2 is where the story begins. Although something in us comes at this highly stylized ancient text with all our scientific presumptions and questions, we quickly find something that perhaps we weren't expecting. Genesis isn't intending to give us a textbook style scientific account of the "how" of the universe, but something much more significant. It gives us the "what", "why" and "who".

Although there might be debate on exactly the "how" due to the poetic nature of the literature, its big idea is unmistakably clear. "In the beginning, GOD created" (Gen 1:1) announces the grand theme. God is unmistakably named as the eternal originator of all things who created mankind for relationship – to love, trust and obey Him.

Genesis 1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ²The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

³And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

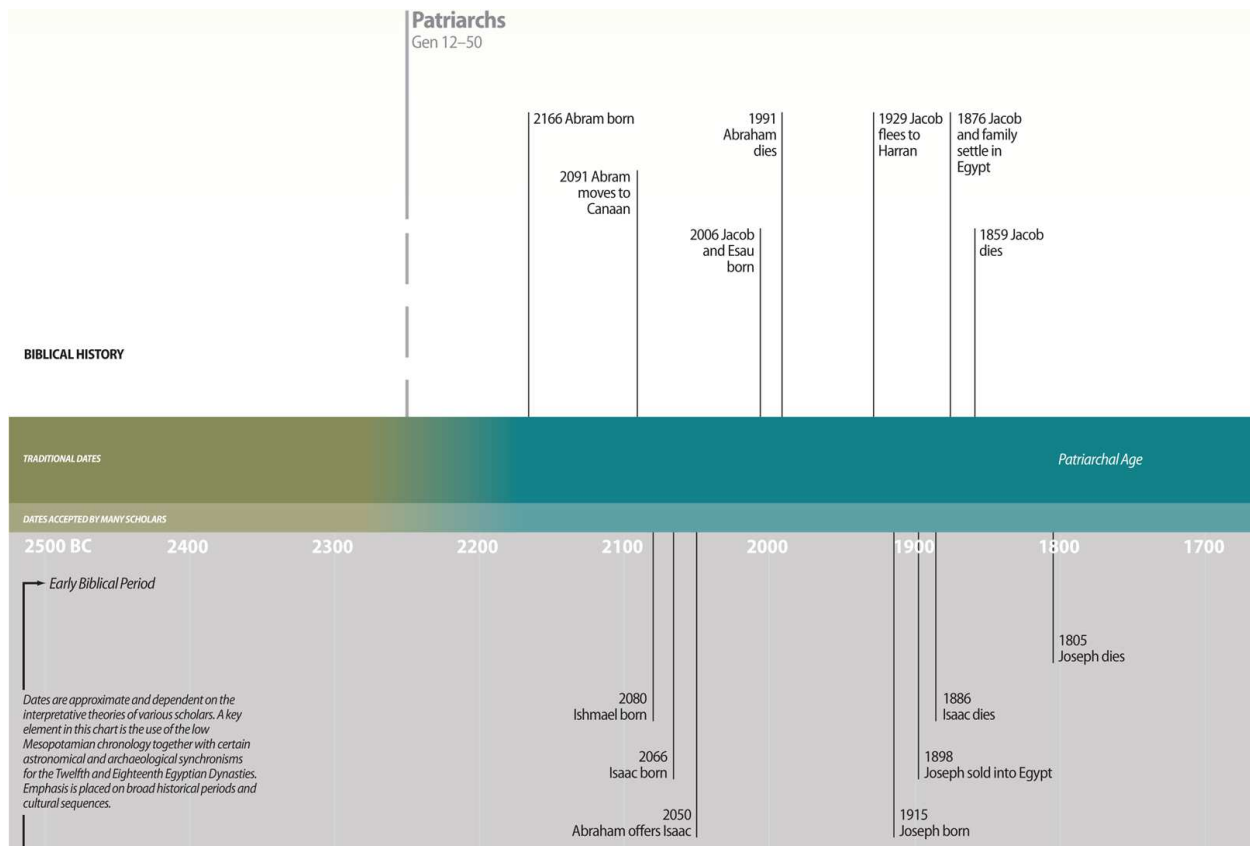
³¹ And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

#2 Patriarchs: God's Chosen Family (Gen. 12-50)



Date: 2100 – 1800 B.C.

Old Testament Books: Genesis, Job



Abraham the Father of Nations:

God gives Abraham a promise in Genesis 12:1-3.

Genesis 12 Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

This is then restated and elaborated upon in Genesis 17:4-8.

Genesis 17 ⁴“Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have



made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”

This sets up the rest of the biblical story: Abraham is given a promise which finds its final fulfillment in Jesus himself. Everything that comes is to be understood in light of this promise.

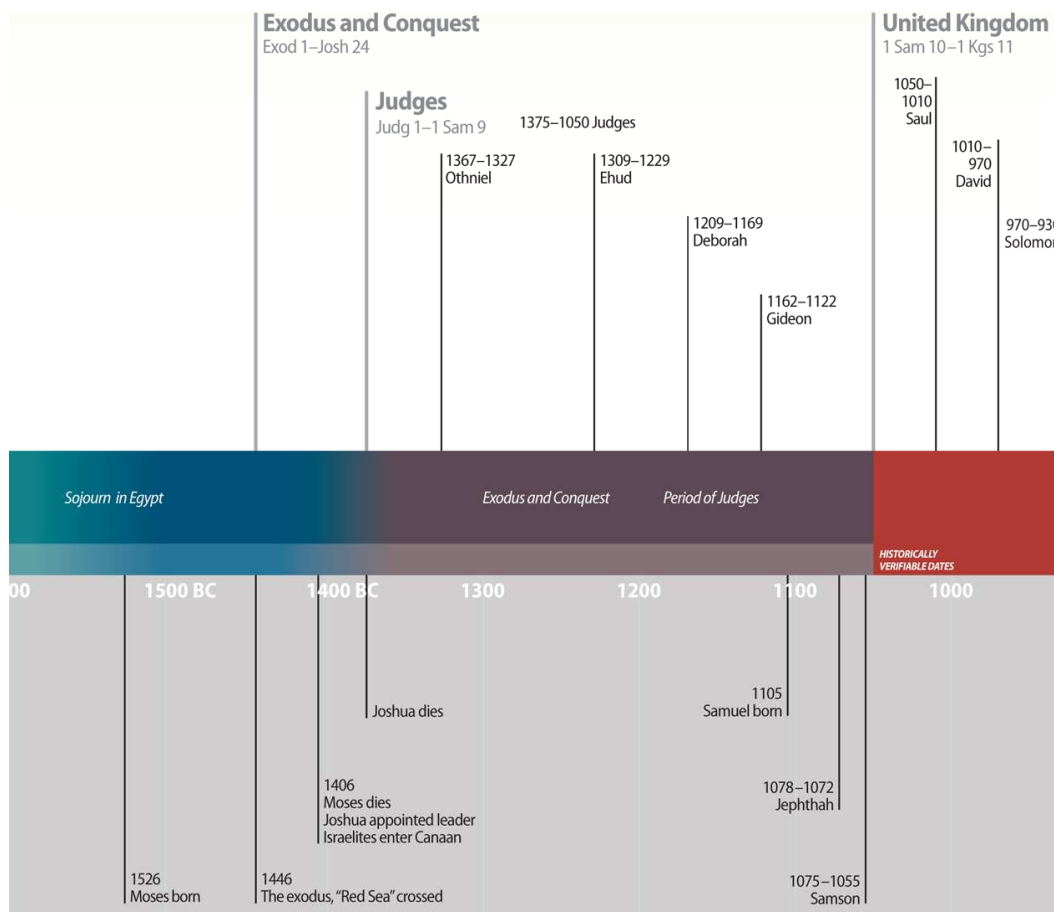
The Family line continues:

The promise for Abraham is closely tied in to that of his family line. The narrative then carries on to show that line continue, to Isaac, then Jacob (also called Israel), and then his 12 sons who become the 12 tribes of Israel.

#3 Exodus: The Birth of Israel

Date: 1800 – 1406 B.C.

Old Testament Books: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Psalms



The Family Enslaved:

The Family of Abraham explodes in Egypt until they are a great people, and Pharaoh fearing a rebellion, brutally enslaves them.

Exodus 1:7-11 ⁷ But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. ⁸ Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹ And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. ¹⁰ Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war



breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.”¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens.

Enter Moses: God’s Chosen Deliverer

Stephen retells the narrative of the book of Exodus in Acts 7.

Acts 7:20-36 ²⁰At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house,²¹ and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. ²²And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.

²³“When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. ²⁴And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. ²⁵He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. ²⁶And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?’ ²⁷But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?’ ²⁸Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ ²⁹At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

³⁰“Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. ³¹When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: ³²‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. ³³Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.’

³⁵“This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. ³⁶This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.”

Israel Constituted at Mt Sinai

The people of Israel are led out from Egypt and come to Mt Sinai where Moses receives the Ten Commandments and other laws to give to the people. These laws become their defining traits that set them apart as God’s special people. Along with the Law, also given are the instructions regarding the tabernacle (a mobile tent that functioned as a temple) and the stipulations regarding the priesthood.

Wilderness Wanderings

After the people receive the Law, they make their way to the Promised Land in Israel. However, when they arrive, they are too fearful to take possession of it and spend the next 40 years wandering the desert until the entire generation dies out. This season in Israel’s history becomes the quintessential picture of rebellion and faithlessness.

#4 Conquest & Judges: A Descent into Darkness

Date: 1406 – 1050 B.C.

Old Testament Books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel



The Conquest of Canaan:

After the death of Moses, God appoints Joshua to lead the people into the land of Canaan (modern day Israel), otherwise known as “the Promised Land”. This is the land promised to Abraham back in Genesis 17:8 and would be the home of the nation of Israel for centuries to come.

The mandate given to the Israelites was to drive out the idolatrous pagan nations inhabiting the land; a directive which they hopelessly failed to do. Instead, they intermarried with the nations, resulting in a mixture of paganism with the worship of Yahweh the true God. This failure would lead to endless strife for centuries to come.

Judges Rule:

After Joshua died, God would raise up leaders called Judges to lead and enact rule of law on the peoples. This was a season of dreadful spiritual decline and evil. Reading this period of Israel’s history reads more like Game of Thrones than anything one would expect to find in the Bible. It is a stark depiction of the evil humanity is capable of when they turn their back on God.

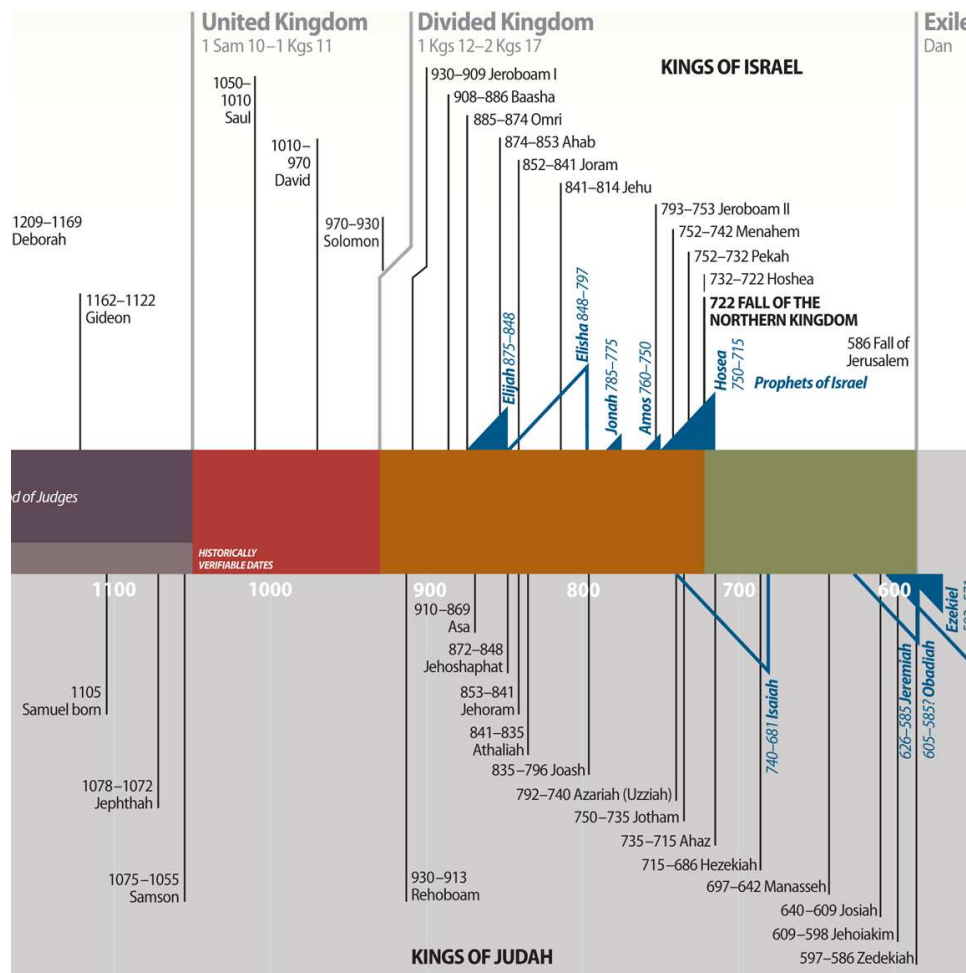
The line that sums up this period is repeated in **Judges 17:6 and 21:25**: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

Key Judges: Deborah, Gideon, Samuel & Samson

#5 United Kingdom: A King on the Throne

Date: 1050 – 930 B.C.

Old Testament Books: 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs



The Israelites then turned to Samuel, the last of the judges, asking for a king to rule over them like the neighboring nations. This was ultimately a betrayal towards the God who had rescued them out of Egypt who was their true king. He did however fulfill their request by instructing Samuel to anoint Saul as their first king. In some ways, Saul was a good king but his vanity and lack of spiritual integrity was his downfall. Because of his great sin, God rejected Saul as king. Samuel was then instructed to anoint David as the next king.



God makes a covenant with David – which we will address more fully next week

2 Samuel 7:12-16 ¹² When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, ¹⁵ but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶ And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.”

After David, his son Solomon becomes king. Solomon’s reign is fraught with contradictions; in many ways his reign was the pinnacle of Israel’s history – in material wealth, wisdom as well as the construction of the temple, but his spiritual life and character was compromised by his hundreds of pagan wives.

Kings: Saul, David and Solomon.

#6 Broken Kingdom: Rebellion against God

Date: 930 – 586 B.C.

Old Testament Books: 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Amos, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah



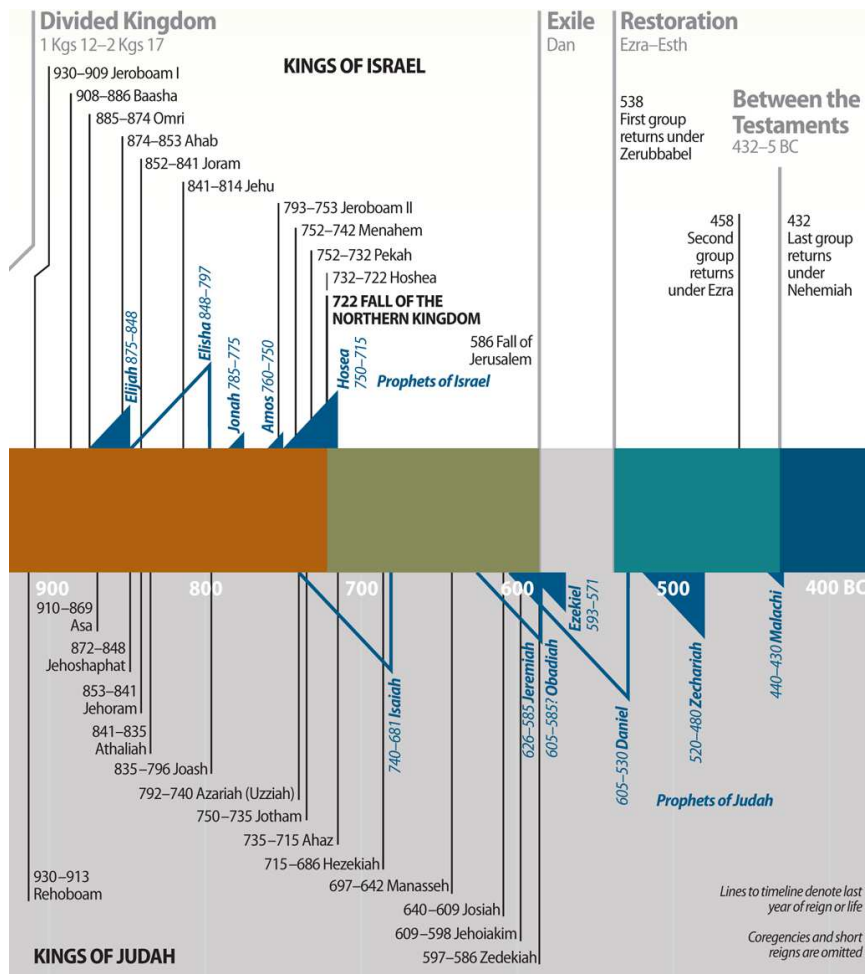
North vs South

The cracks that were widening during the life of Solomon were brought to breaking point when his son Rehoboam became king and caused outright rebellion, fracturing the entire kingdom. From this point on, the 10 northern tribes of Israel splintered off and refused to submit to the new king, with only the tribes of Benjamin and Judah remaining loyal to the line of David. The northern kingdom – which retained the name Israel, failed to worship and honour God and spiraled down until they were destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., while the southern kingdom – referred to as Judah, lasted significantly longer with periods of spiritual revival, until they were overcome by the Babylonian empire in 586 B.C.

#7 Exile: Actions have Consequences

Date: 586 – 538 B.C.

Old Testament Books: 2 Kings, Psalms, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Obediah



By the Rivers of Babylon:

Unlike the Assyrians who decimated the northern kingdom by assimilating them into their population and therefore stripping the people of their national identity, the Babylonians were content to let the nation of Judah retain its cultural and religious identity. Instead of assimilation, the Babylonians exiled the best and brightest of the people and brought them to Babylon.

Hence the famous versions of Psalm 137:

Psalm 137 Lament of the Exiles

¹ By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and wept
when we remembered Zion.
² There we hung up our lyres
on the poplar trees,
³ for our captors there asked us for songs,
and our tormentors, for rejoicing:
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”

⁴ How can we sing the Lord’s song
on foreign soil?
⁵ If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
⁶ May my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not exalt Jerusalem as my greatest joy!

During this time, the temple was destroyed, the ritual sacrificial system had basically ceased, and only the poorest of the poor remained in Judah. We recently we preach through the book of Daniel which was set in Babylon during this time period.

I know the plans I have for you:

It is in this context that Jeremiah writes this word from the Lord:

¹⁰ “For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

There are two recurring messages Israel receives during this period. Firstly, that their current experience is a direct consequence of generations of rebellion and sin by them and their forefathers. Secondly, that God has not abandoned them and would come restore them in time.

#8 Return: A Glimmer of Hope

Date: 538 – 430 B.C.

Old Testament Books: 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Psalms, Daniel, Joel, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi



King Cyrus of Persia captured Babylon in 539BC and then absorbed the Babylonian empire into his Persian Empire. In order to gain favour with his constituents, he proclaimed all captives in Babylon were free to return home, and as a result, a small group of Jews returned to Israel to reestablish some of their nationhood (albeit, under Persian rule).

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah detail this period of history, where the people repair the alter and reinstitute sacrifices and the priesthood.

Ezra 1:1-3 In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:

² “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.

Not all Jews return however. Over decades of exile, many people found themselves integrated into the culture in which they had lived so much of their lives, while still maintaining some Jewish identity. This group had something of a unique identity, as even their language shifted from Hebrew to the language of their new homeland – Aramaic. This group – known as the *diaspora* (“the scattered”) ended up all over the Roman empire by the time of Jesus. Over time, many made their way back to Israel.

#9 Silence: Awaiting the Promised One

Date: 430 – 6 B.C.



Political Turmoil

We call this time the “intertestamental” period. Although we’ve called the period “Silence”, referring to the lack of God’s prophetic movement between the ministry of Malachi and the arrival of John the Baptist, it was anything but peaceful. This time was characterized by much political upheaval as the world power shifted from empire to empire.

The Babylonians who exiled Judah were overthrown by the Persian empire, who were then in turn overthrown by the Greek Empire. It was out of the turmoil of the fractured Greek Empire that the seeds of the Roman empire began to grow and take hold. All this time, Jewish discontent was simmering. In around 166 B.C., there was a Jewish revolt (the Maccabean Revolt), which lasted a generation or two before the Roman Empire crushed the resistance in 63 B.C. See Appendix B for a more in depth look at this period.

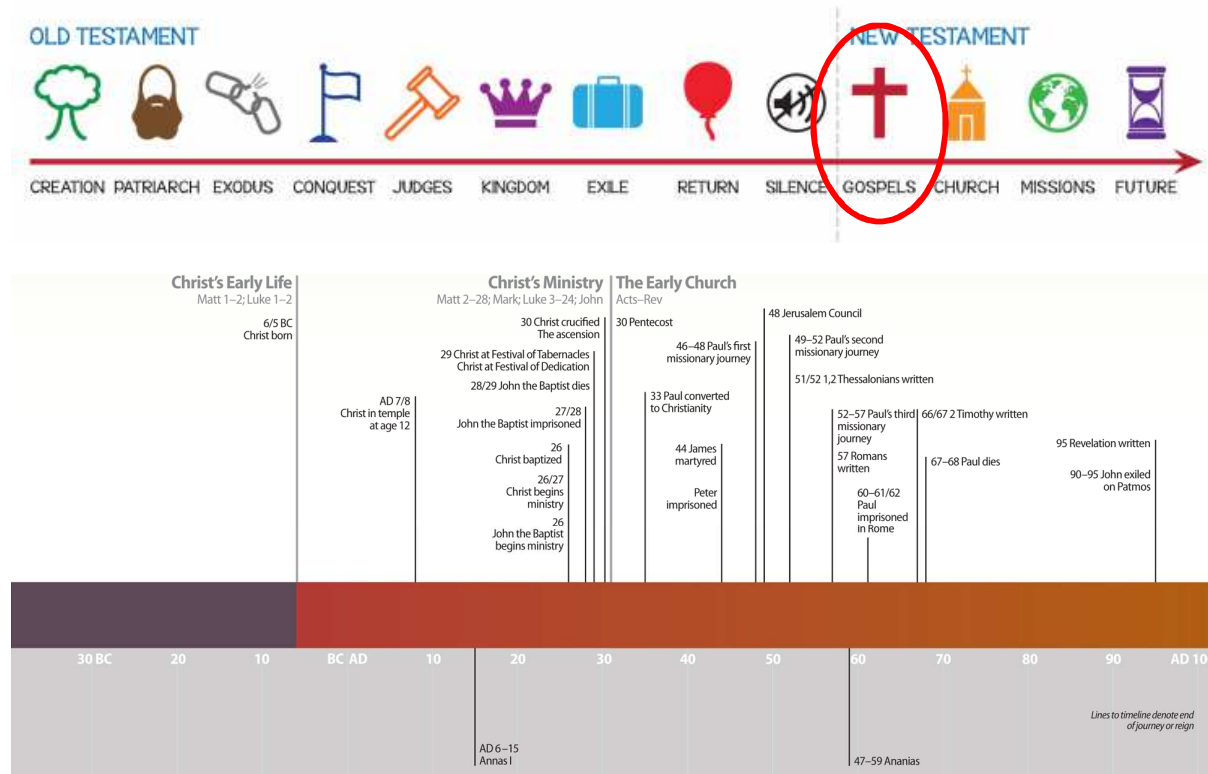
God is “Silent”

The promises have been made in the prophets, and now we await the Messiah.

#10 Gospels: Away in a manger... Jesus!

Date: 6 B.C. – A.D. 30

New Testament Books: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John



The Culmination of the Story

All of the story up until now has something of a forward tilt to it. It is all future orientated. The story finds its full and final climax in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Son of God. This will be the focus of next week's session.

Jesus is Born

In the midst of the political struggle in the Ancient Near East, a baby is born. We are well familiar with the biblical story of that night in Bethlehem, but I think it would be more accurate to say we are overfamiliar with it now to the point of absolute confusion. How does Santa and Rudolf fit into the nativity scene? What even is frankincense. What's a "hark"? What's "Gloria in excelsis Deo" mean? Why does *Gloria* have so many syllables when you sing it?

But the Bible is less confused about the meaning of Jesus birth. He is the promised messiah, the king of the Jews, the promised son of Abraham, the promised king of David, the promised deliverer of oppression and injustice.

Jesus teaches



In his public life, Jesus was first and foremost understood to be a teacher. Even those who disagreed with him would call him Rabbi and acknowledge his great wisdom. His teaching centered around the kingdom of God – what it is, what it is like, how to recognize it, and how to be included in it.

Jesus crucified

The death of Jesus was no sorry accident of history. Jesus would speak frequently and candidly about his death, and even referred to it as the reason that he came. It is these themes that make him so hard to embrace for the secular mind – you can't read the words of Jesus and conclude that he was simply a peace preaching teacher espoused love and compassion. He certainly did those things, but at the forefront was sayings like Matthew 20:18-19:

“See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.”

Jesus is alive *again*?

The way Jesus spoke about his death was one thing. But to combine it with the claims of his resurrection is absolute dynamite. Indeed – it was! News of his appearances spread around the region like wildfire, with crowds of up to 500 people witnessing the resurrected Jesus. News of, not just his teaching, but his resurrection began to spread until the Roman Empire was entirely subverted by the teaching of a homeless Jewish rabbi who claimed to be God.

Jesus ascends to heaven

Jesus met with his disciples one final time before leaving them. Here he told them to wait in Jerusalem for the coming Holy Spirit who would clothe them with power. Then he was taken up into heaven.

#11 Church: The Spread of the Jesus Movement

Date: A.D. 30 – Present

New Testament Books: Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews James, Jude, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Revelation



The spread of the early church is documented in the book of Acts, while the letters of the apostles give us insight into the issues facing the early Christians. Key events include:

- Pentecost
- First Christian Martyr
- Paul meets Jesus
- “The Way” spreads over the Empire
- Jerusalem Council
- Paul in Prison in Rome

The book of Acts finishes awkwardly in chapter 28 with Paul in prison in Rome awaiting a hearing with Caesar. Finally, key leaders in the church, Peter and Paul are executed, although this is not recorded in the book of Acts.

#12 Future / Eternity: Restoration

Date: Future



All Things Made New

The story doesn't end with redemption. God has promised to renew the whole world, and the Bible gives us a peak into this glorious future. The restoration of all things will take place in two ways. Christ will return to judge sin and evil, and He will usher in righteousness and peace. God will purge this world of evil once and for all.



Big Takeaway: How does this change how I read the Bible?

Each week, we will conclude with this question: how does this change the way I read the Bible for myself? Take some time to consider this question.

Homework

There will be two levels of homework each week, depending on how much time you'd like to dedicate. Level 1 is for everyone to do, but if you want to dive a bit deeper, I'd definitely encourage you to do level 2 as well.

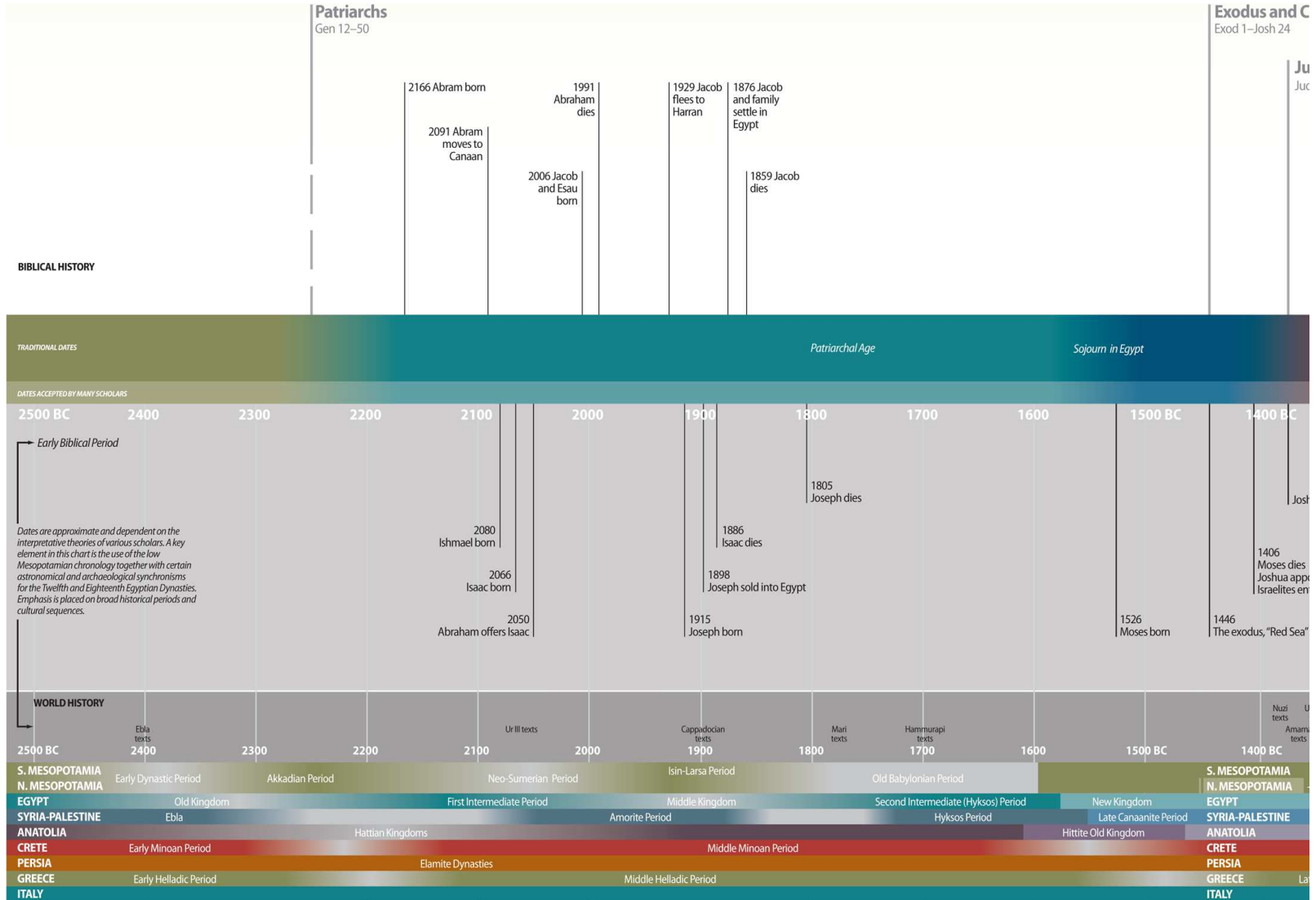
Level #1

- Over the next 4 weeks, we will be working our way through the book of Ephesians, doing one chapter per week. Our reading before next week is: **Ephesians 2**
- In preparation for next week where we will be looking at the meta-themes of the Bible, please read the following chapters - **Luke 24**

Level #2

- Appendix A – Biblical Chronology
- Appendix B – Intertestamental Period
- Appendix C – Introduction to the OT by T.D. Alexander
- Appendix D – Introduction to the NT by D. Moo

Appendix A – Old Testament Timeline





Exodus and Conquest

Exod 1–Josh 24

Judges

Judg 1–1 Sam 9

1375–1050 Judges

1367–1327
Othniel

1309–1229
Ehud

1209–1169
Deborah

1162–1122
Gideon

United Kingdom

1 Sam 10–1 Kgs 11

1050–1010
Saul

1010–970
David

970–930
Solomon

Divided Kingdom

1 Kgs 12–2 Kgs 17

930–909 Jeroboam I

908–886 Baasha

885–874 Omri

874–853 Ahab

852–841 Joram

841–814 Jehu

793–753 Jeroboam II

752–742 Menahem

752–732 Pekah

732–722 Hoshea

722 FALL OF THE NORTHERN KINGDOM

586 Fall of Jerusalem

Prophets of Israel

Elijah 875–848

Elisha 848–797

Jonah 785–775

Amos 760–750

Hosea 750–715

KINGS OF ISRAEL

Exile

Dan

Restoration

Ezra–Esth

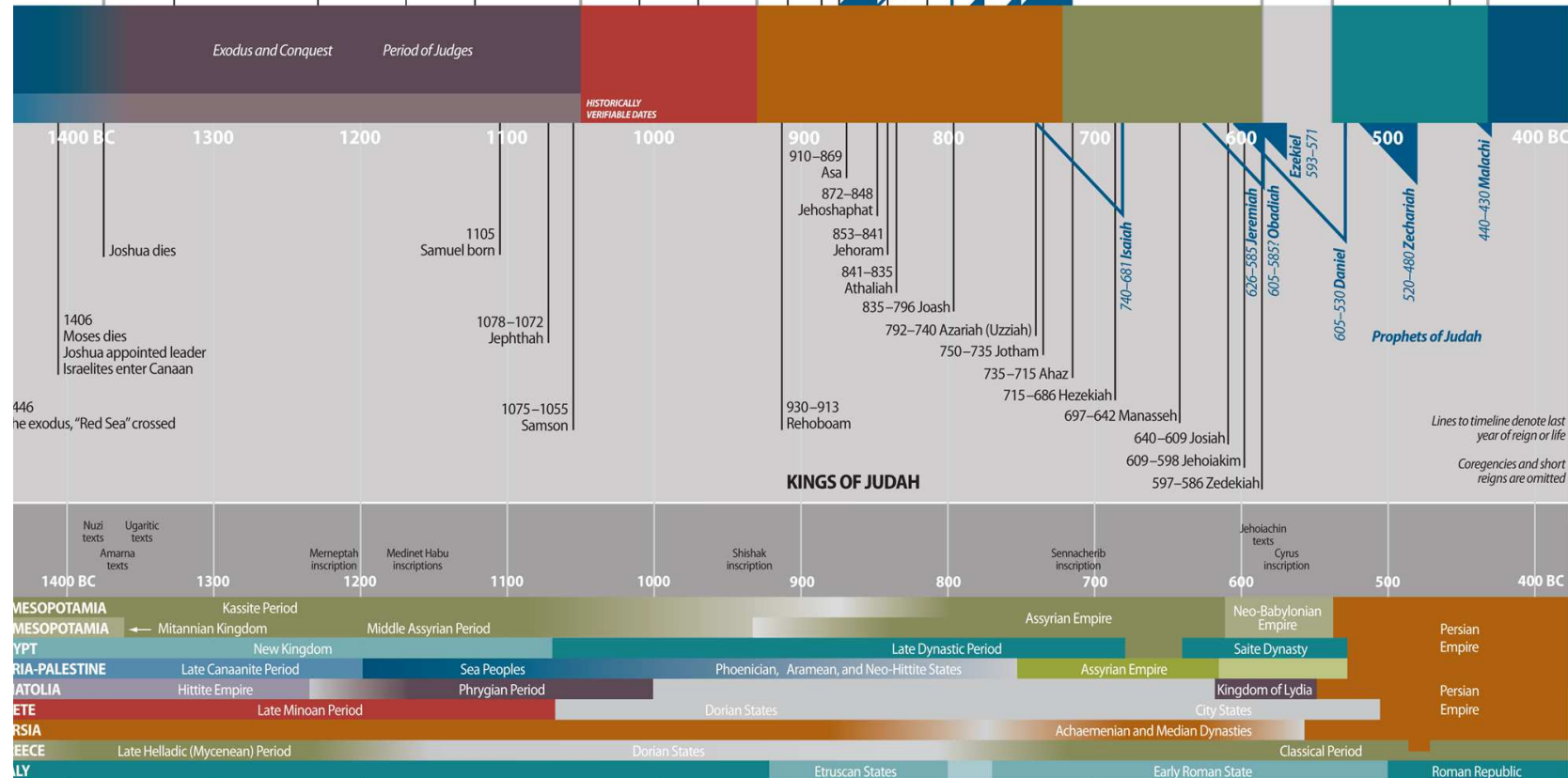
538
First group returns under Zerubbabel

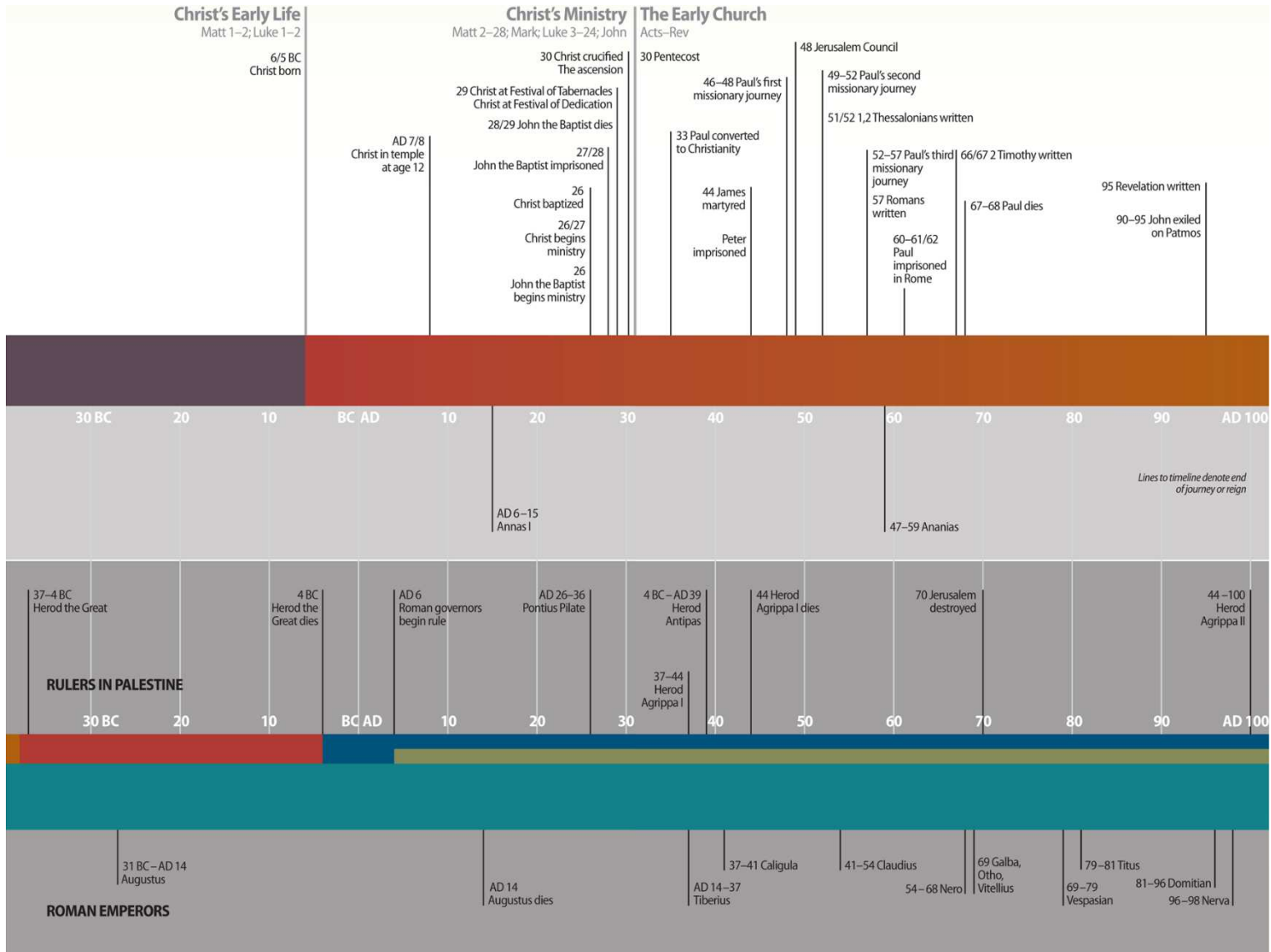
458
Second group returns under Ezra

Between the Testaments

432–5 BC

432
Last group returns under Nehemiah





Appendix C - Introduction to the Old Testament

T. D. Alexander

The 39 books of the OT are an integral and vital part of the Christian Bible. As a unique collection of religious documents, mostly written in the first millennium BC, they comprise about 75 percent of the Bible. The OT stands on a par with the NT, being equally inspired by God and essential for Christian teaching and practice (see 2 Tim 3:14–17).

Canon of the Old Testament

Although the evidence is sparse and open to debate, on balance it seems likely that the canon (i.e., the authoritative list of books) of the OT was closed well before the time of Jesus. While some scholars contend that the library of OT books remained fluid until the latter part of the first century AD, the earliest surviving evidence suggests that the books of the OT, or the Hebrew Bible as it is sometimes called, were viewed as an authoritative collection of writings by about 150 BC at the latest. In the prologue of Ecclesiasticus (in the Apocrypha), a Greek translation of a Hebrew book known as Sirach, the translator, writing about 132 BC, refers to the OT using the following expressions: “the Law and the Prophets and the others that followed them”; “the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors”; “the Law itself, the Prophecies, and the rest of the books.” This threefold division reflects the later Jewish custom of referring to the Hebrew Bible as the Law, Prophets, and Writings. Unfortunately, no ancient texts survive to explain how the process of canonization happened and what criteria were used to determine which books should be included. The process itself may well have occurred in stages over several centuries, and individual books were probably viewed as special long before the different sections of the canon were finally closed. Although some Christian traditions hold that various other Jewish writings should be viewed as canonical, the earliest evidence, including the authoritative testimony of the NT, suggests that only those books that comprise the Hebrew Bible are divinely inspired.

Contents of the Old Testament

As a highly select library of religious writings, the OT has a rich variety of contents. Although we have become accustomed to viewing the books as ordered in a fixed way, the order differs in Jewish and Christian Bibles. Whereas Jewish tradition divides the OT into three sections, Christian tradition has favored four:

1. the Law, or Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy;
2. the Historical Books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther;
3. the Wisdom and Lyrical Books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs and;
4. the Prophetic Books: the Major Prophets include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel, and the Minor Prophets include Hosea through Malachi

Old Testament Story

The Bible is built around a grand story that starts in Genesis with the divine creation of the earth and ends in Revelation by anticipating the coming of a new earth. The OT contributes to this story by explaining the origin and nature of the human predicament, which, in essence, is our alienation from God. From the early chapters of Genesis onward, the OT describes how God sets about redeeming and restoring creation after the tragic rebellion of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Not only is God’s redemptive activity evident throughout the OT, but by pointing forward to Jesus Christ, the OT introduces the ultimate means by which the tragic consequences of human sin will be reversed.



To understand the grand story that underlies the OT, it is important to appreciate the flow of events that shape the main plot of the story. We must recognize, however, that although various OT books, especially the Wisdom and Lyrical Books, say little directly about the OT story, they complement it by addressing important theological issues. The same is partly true for most of the Prophetic Books, but their contents are usually tied more closely to the OT story.

Primeval Era

Gen 1–11 record a small number of highly significant episodes that belong to the early history of the world from creation up to about 2000 BC. These chapters describe how humanity becomes estranged from God, leading to a world dominated by violence due to the corruption of human nature. While Adam and Eve's betrayal of God has horrific consequences for all of earth's creatures, God promises that one of Eve's offspring will eventually crush the head of the mysterious, but clearly evil, serpent (Gen 3:15). Gen 4–11 trace this offspring from Adam (through Seth) to Noah and then onward (through Shem) to Abraham.

Patriarchal Period

Divided by genealogies, Gen 11:27–50:26 falls into three main sections that focus chiefly on (1) Abraham (chs. 12–24), (2) Isaac and his son Jacob (chs. 25–36), and (3) Joseph (chs. 37–50). God promises Abraham, who initially is both childless and landless, that his descendants will become a great nation in the land of Canaan and that a future descendant will mediate God's blessing to the nations of the earth. These promises link the divine redemption of humanity to a royal line descended from Abraham (cf. Matt 1:1–17). Gen 37–48 trace this potential royal line through Joseph and his son Ephraim. Anticipating later developments, Joseph's unexpected rise to prominence in Egypt results in blessing for many nations; this foreshadows the much greater blessing that will eventually come through Jesus Christ.

Deliverance From Oppression

Moses' birth and death frame the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy. Events move geographically from Egypt, via Mount Sinai, to the eastern bank of the Jordan River in the land of Moab.

The early chapters of Exodus recount the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt. After God commissions him, Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt. This involves a series of signs and wonders that emphasize God's authority over nature. When these extraordinary events climax in the death of the Egyptian firstborn males, God spares the Israelite firstborn when the Israelites observe a special "Passover" ritual. The Passover encapsulates the process of divine salvation whereby God redeems his people from slavery and ransoms them from death in order to create a holy nation. The subsequent destruction of the Egyptian army in the "Red Sea" confirms the Lord as savior of his people.

After rescuing the Israelites, God graciously invites them to submit to him as their sole sovereign by entering into a unique covenant relationship. God places distinctive obligations upon the Israelites, the most important being the Ten Commandments (Exod 20). The covenant ratified at Mount Sinai prepares the way for God to come and dwell among the Israelites. To facilitate this, the people construct a special tabernacle in which God will reside (Exod 25–31, 35–40).

Leviticus addresses how the Israelites should maintain their newly acquired status as a holy nation. In particular, it describes the measures necessary to atone for sin, cleanse defilement, and promote holy living.

The Israelites' journey from Mount Sinai to the land of Canaan, recorded in the book of Numbers, is marked by a series of damaging events that demonstrate their lack of trust in God. Consequently, God punishes them: they must remain in the wilderness for 40 years. Only after the adults who left Egypt die does God permit their children to enter the promised land.

According to Deuteronomy, after arriving at the eastern border of Canaan, Moses delivers a valedictory address to the Israelites, reminding them of their covenant relationship with God and summoning them to greater loyalty. Moses pronounces that God will reward them with blessing for obedience but punish them for disobedience, resulting ultimately in exile from the land of Canaan.

Taking the Land

Joshua replaces Moses as the leader of the people and brings them safely into the land of Canaan. While only the tribes of Judah, Ephraim, and Manasseh actually take possession of territory in Canaan during Joshua's lifetime, this initial phase of occupation progresses well with God's support.

After Joshua's death, the Israelites enter into a period of moral and spiritual decline that results in their enemies gaining the upper hand. The book of Judges underscores how the Israelites spiral downward as they disregard their obligations to God under the Sinai covenant. Only the divine provision of Spirit-empowered leaders, traditionally known as judges, provides periods of relief. Significantly, the tribe of Ephraim, which had been privileged with leadership of the nation, rightly receives the harshest criticism for its apostasy. Ephraim's failure to lead the people prepares the way for the establishment of a monarchy drawn from the tribe of Judah.

The Early Monarchy

The books of Samuel record how Israel moves from a tribal system of government to a monarchy. The account of the transition is complex, but it ultimately results in David from the tribe of Judah being appointed by God as the head of a dynasty that reigns from the city of Jerusalem. According to Ps 78:59–72, God chose David and Jerusalem (Zion) after rejecting Ephraim as the royal tribe and the city of Shiloh as the location of the central sanctuary.

The enthronement of David and the choice of Jerusalem as his capital city begin a process that leads to David's son Solomon building a temple (or divine palace) that transforms Jerusalem into the earthly residence of the divine King. Unfortunately, Solomon fails to adhere to the instructions for kings that Deut 17 lays out, resulting in his kingdom being partitioned in two.

The Two Kingdoms

The unity of the Israelites shatters after the death of Solomon when only two tribes remain faithful to his son Rehoboam. The other ten tribes appoint Jeroboam, an Ephraimite, as their king. This creates two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Under a succession of shortlived dynasties, the northern kingdom becomes more and more apostate. Eventually, God punishes its population when the Assyrian king Sargon II decimates the kingdom in 722 BC.

While God's commitment to the Davidic dynasty offers some stability to the southern kingdom of Judah, it too comes under divine judgment due to the sinfulness of its monarchy and people. After a series of invasions, the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem in 586 BC, demolish the temple, and deport the Davidic monarchy into exile. These events mark the start of the Babylonian exile, a period of deep soul-searching as the people of Judah reflect on the catastrophic events that have led to their humiliation and punishment by God.

The Babylonian Exile

Although the Babylonians raze Jerusalem in 586 BC, they previously deported Judahites to Babylon in 605 BC (see Dan 1:1) and 597 BC (see note on Dan 1:2). The displacement and subjugation of Judahites creates a period of uncertainty for the exiles as they contemplate the theological significance of these events. Little survived of all that God did for them in the past. In spite of this, prophets spoke words of comfort and promised restoration to those in exile.

The Restoration

When the Babylonian Empire falls to the Persians in 539 BC, the conquering king, Cyrus the Great (559–530 BC), permits Judahite exiles to return to Jerusalem in order to reconstruct the temple. The work is eventually completed in 516 or 515 BC (Ezra 1–6; see note on Ezra 4:4). Although the returning exiles lack the resources to replicate the earlier temple, the process of restoration reassures the people that God has not abandoned them completely. Subsequently, the walls of Jerusalem are repaired under the guidance of Ezra (from 458 BC) and Nehemiah (from 445 BC). With the temple and city restored, the people are encouraged to anticipate the reinstatement of the Davidic monarchy. This, however, remains unfulfilled during the OT period. What the OT anticipates, the NT brings to fulfillment with the coming of Jesus Christ.

While the grand story of the OT moves through a series of distinctive stages, these stages are closely linked to one another as God's plan of redemption unfolds. From the Garden of Eden to the return of the exiles from Babylon, God is at work, seeking to restore to himself an alienated humanity and to reclaim the earth from the powers of evil. In all of this, the OT prepares for events that come to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. With good reason the NT cannot be fully understood without an intimate knowledge of the OT.

Text of the Old Testament

With the modern proliferation of English Bibles, it is easy to forget that in the time of Jesus a copy of the Hebrew Bible consisted of numerous scrolls, each handwritten by a copyist. Although between the second and sixth centuries AD codices (i.e., book forms) gradually replaced scrolls, all biblical texts continued to be copied by hand. Only with the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century AD did it become possible to mass-produce identical copies of the Bible.

Not surprisingly, over a period of at least 1,500 years, copyists occasionally made minor errors as they produced new copies of biblical books one at a time. Even the best of scribes could make mistakes. Since no original manuscripts existed by which later manuscripts could be corrected, scribes replicated errors each time they made new copies. Consequently, few surviving manuscripts are completely identical. By identifying and rectifying scribal errors, modern scholars attempt to reconstruct the earliest text of the OT. This is a highly specialized field of study that relies heavily on gleaning information from the somewhat disparate manuscripts that have survived.

Before 1947, the oldest known manuscripts of the Hebrew OT were the Codex Cairensis (AD 895/96), the Aleppo Codex (ca. AD 925) and the Codex Leningradensis (AD 1008/09). With the unexpected discovery in 1947 of ancient scrolls in caves near Khirbet Qumran on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea, scholars gained access to the remains of over 200 biblical scrolls copied between ca. 250 BC and AD 70. Among the first scrolls discovered at Qumran were a complete manuscript and a partial manuscript of the text of Isaiah in Hebrew.

Regrettably, due to the fragmentary nature of the surviving scrolls, the evidence from Qumran is not complete. Nevertheless, the scrolls confirm that the medieval codices preserve accurately the text of the Hebrew Bible. When the book of Isaiah in the medieval codices was compared with the manuscripts from Qumran, scholars concluded that only a dozen or so copyist errors need to be removed from the medieval text of Isaiah. Almost all of these changes involve correcting only one or two letters in Hebrew.

In addition to relying on the Dead Sea Scrolls, experts on OT manuscripts compare early translations of the Hebrew OT into other languages (e.g., Aramaic, Greek, Syriac). Some of these date to at least the third century BC, although only later copies have survived. The earliest and almost complete Greek translation of the OT is the fourth-century AD Codex Vaticanus. Unfortunately, the quality of translation varies among the different OT books.

Early Aramaic translations of the OT became necessary because more and more Jews spoke Aramaic as their first language. In the OT itself, half of the book of Daniel is written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. Unfortunately, the surviving Aramaic

translations tend to be paraphrases enhanced with interpretative comments. For this reason they offer only limited help in reconstructing the earliest text of the Hebrew Bible.

Although textual critics continue to explore the process by which the books of the OT were preserved and translated, we may, with a high degree of confidence, be certain that our English Bibles, allowing for translation, accurately reflect the original text of the biblical books.

Reading the Old Testament

For most people the OT is distant geographically, historically, linguistically, and culturally. Some or all of these factors may present major barriers to how modern readers understand the OT.

1. *Geographic distance.* The OT books are located in the world of the Middle East; they deal with events that took place in the countries that we now refer to as Israel-Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Turkey, and Iraq. The geography of the region impacts what we read. For example, harvest time for cereal crops occurs in the spring or early summer. The semi-arid nature of parts of this region means that references to rain are often positive.

2. *Historical distance.* The writing of all of the OT originates before the time of Christ. The world was a very different place then.

3. *Linguistic distance.* Almost all of the OT was composed in Hebrew, with a few passages in Aramaic. While modern English translations enable us to comprehend what the writers were saying, we should never forget that no translation can convey fully and accurately all the nuances of the original language. Resources like this study Bible are often helpful in addressing this issue.

4. *Cultural distance.* The OT frequently addresses situations far removed from the lifestyle of modern societies. When we read OT texts, we need to interpret them in the light of the customs and practices that existed in the past. We must be careful not to read the text against the background of our own culture.

Reading the OT is more alien than most people suppose. If we are to make sense of it, we need to overcome the distance that exists between it and us.

Importance of the Old Testament

History itself confirms the importance of the OT. In spite of fierce criticism from opponents, few documents can rival its prominence and popularity throughout the centuries. Three factors may begin to account for this.

1. The OT recounts a remarkable story that uniquely explains life as we experience it. Offering a very realistic view of human nature and society, warts and all, it provides an unexpected explanation for humanity's predicament. Most of all, it offers hope by reimagining a very different kind of world and by pointing readers to the God-given solution.

2. The OT has the potential to transform lives. It contains a wealth of moral teaching. It shapes our lives by its moral instructions and stories.

3. Most important, the OT provides unique insights into the nature of God. The books of the OT variously focus on the divine-human experience through stories, reports of divine messages given to earlier generations, songs of worship, and prayers. This God-orientated dimension causes the OT, alongside the NT, to transcend all other literature.

Chronology/Dating



Sometimes we can identify the events of the Bible with other events outside of the Bible and correlate those with known dates. For example, the Assyrian records of kings mention an eclipse in 763 BC, and the OT also mentions those kings. This process of correlating events yields exact dates, BC and AD. On this basis, scholars generally agree on the dating scheme for events from the time of David and Solomon onward, and we provide a single timeline for them. However, there exist two sets of dates for earlier events. These dates depend largely on how one interprets the dating scheme in the book of Judges and when one dates Israel's exodus from Egypt.²

² Alexander, T. D. (2015). [Introduction to the Old Testament](#). In D. A. Carson (Ed.), *NIV Zondervan Study Bible: Built on the Truth of Scripture and Centered on the Gospel Message* (pp. 3–7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Appendix D – Introduction to the New Testament

Douglas J. Moo

“New Testament” is the name given to the collection of 27 books that comprise the second part of the Christian Bible. “Testament” is the English equivalent of the Latin *testamentum*, which translates the Greek *diathēkē* (Hebrew *berit*). The Bible uses this Greek word in a rather technical sense to designate the “covenants” that God enters into with his people. In a covenant, God pledges to act on behalf of his people in certain ways, and his people, in turn, commit themselves to respond to God as he requires. Although the Bible refers to several covenants, it also suggests the idea of two basic covenants. God, through the prophet Jeremiah, contrasts the “covenant” he entered into with Israel when he brought them out of Egypt with a “new covenant” (Jer 31:31–32; see Heb 8:8–9). The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross enacts this new covenant: in Jesus’ words over the cup at the Last Supper, he calls the cup “the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). The extension of covenant language to a collection of books that describes the covenant has roots in the NT itself: the apostle Paul refers to reading “the old covenant” (2 Cor 3:14; cf. “new covenant” in 2 Cor 3:6). Building on these biblical texts, Christians were referring to the work of God in history in terms of two covenants by the end of the second century AD. Applying this language to the two collections of books that Christians recognized as inspired and authoritative Scripture was a natural step.

The Two-Testament Shape of the Bible

The two-testament form of our Bibles reflects the two basic stages in the unfolding of God’s grand program of redemption. The OT tells the story of creation, the fall into sin, and God’s inauguration of his single plan to conquer the evil that invaded his good creation and to reassert his sovereignty over the entire cosmos. God hints at his plan immediately after the fall (Gen 3:15) and sets it into motion by entering into a covenant with Abraham. God promises that he will establish Abraham’s many descendants in a land of their own and that he will use Abraham and his descendants to bless the world. Those descendants are the people of Israel. God renews his covenant with Israel, promising them that they will live securely and prosperously in the land he will give them as long as they turn their hearts to the Lord and obey his law. But despite the many blessings God bestows on Israel, the people prove again and again to be faithless, lapsing into idolatry and refusing to obey God’s law. God therefore visits his people with the judgment that he had threatened when he first gave the law: he uses pagan nations to force the people from their land, sending them into exile. Yet in the midst of his peoples’ unfaithfulness, God proves himself to be both faithful and gracious, promising to bring the people back to their land and to change the hearts of his people so that they will be fully able to obey him and bring glory to his name. This deliverance is often associated with a redeemer figure, often portrayed as a warrior-king like David. God promises to use this redeemer figure to punish Israel’s enemies, save the people of Israel, and extend God’s blessing to the nations.

The NT is the story of how God fulfills this promise of salvation. Jesus is the redeemer whom God had promised. Jesus is the “Christ,” the “anointed one,” or “Messiah.” Yet the program of redemption does not initially take the shape that most Jews in Jesus’ day were expecting. While Jesus manifested his power in miraculous works, he did not gather the armies of Israel to battle the pagan nations oppressing the people. Instead, he allowed himself to be condemned and put to death by those pagans. Yet this startling turn in the history of redemption was, in fact, anticipated in many OT passages. God’s raising Jesus from the dead announced to the world that Jesus was, in fact, God’s “anointed one,” the one through whom God was bringing salvation to his people. Moreover, the Christ who went humbly to his death is also the Christ who will return again in glory to judge the world and fully establish God’s sovereignty over all creation. These two “comings” of Jesus provide the two fundamental linchpins of the NT story. Jesus’ first coming inaugurates the “last days,” the time when God fulfills his promises of judgment and salvation. Jesus’ second coming will culminate the end-time work of redemption. Much of the NT is devoted to helping believers understand the nature of this time in which they live: “already” brought into God’s kingdom by the work of Christ, but “not yet” enjoying the full benefits of God’s redemptive program.

One of the most significant storylines in the NT is a redefinition of the people of God. In the OT, God's people are by and large identified by their descent from Abraham: the people of Israel. To be sure, the OT itself plainly indicates that God's people cannot ultimately be confined to Israel. Yet the NT announces a new and revolutionary step in this direction: God's people are now defined by their relationship to Christ, *the* descendant of Abraham. Only Jews who place their faith in Christ are the true people of God; and Gentiles, through that same faith, can now join believing Jews as full and equal members of God's people. A "new covenant" has been inaugurated through the redemption won by Christ and sealed by the pouring out of God's Spirit with new power on all his people.

The two-testament format of our Bibles therefore reflects the contrast between "promise" and "fulfillment" that is the central storyline of the story of the Bible. This story is one continuous story that falls into two basic parts; there is both continuity and discontinuity. We err if we do not recognize the fundamental shift in salvation history that Christ's coming created; as Jesus himself put it, he has brought "new wine" that cannot be confined in the "old wineskins" (Mark 2:22). But we also err if we fail to recognize that the two stages of salvation history are part of one continuous story, a single plan of God to reclaim his creation: two "testaments" but one Bible.

The Books of the New Testament

Gospels

The first four books of the NT are named "Gospels." The word "gospel" comes from the Old English *god spell*, a phrase that means "good news." In the NT this word never refers to a book; it denotes the coming of Christ and the message about him (e.g., Mark 1:1 ["good news"]; Rom 1:16; 1 Thess 1:5). By the early second century, however, Christians were calling the books that recorded the life of Jesus "Gospels." But the original application of the word was not left behind. The titles of our Gospels take the form "[the Gospel] according to Matthew," etc.—that is, the story of the good news as related by Matthew, etc. (The titles are abbreviated in the NIV.) While our Gospels are not biographies in the modern sense, their obvious focus on the life and significance of one person, Jesus Christ, suggests that they fit comfortably in the ancient genre of *bios*, or "biography." The fourfold Gospel was explicitly recognized by the end of the second century.

The four Gospels tell the same basic story: Jesus ministers in several regions of Israel, teaching and performing miracles; he gathers followers and makes enemies (especially in the Jewish religious establishment); this opposition leads to his death by crucifixion at the hands of the Romans in Jerusalem; he is resurrected from the grave. All four accounts relate that Jesus' followers recognized him to be God's Messiah, the one through whom God's plan of salvation was reaching its climax. For all their basic agreement, the four Gospels also differ, sometimes significantly, in their presentations of the life of Jesus. These differences are especially marked between the first three Gospels, on the one hand, and John, on the other. The many parallels between Matthew, Mark, and Luke—extending even to specific wording at many places—suggest that they are closely related. Accordingly, they are labeled the "Synoptic" Gospels (*synoptic* is Greek for "seen together"). Mark's Gospel may have been the first to be written, with both Matthew and Luke using Mark's account to compose their own Gospels. John's Gospel differs significantly from the first three, and it is not clear if it depends on any of the first three. The diversity in our Gospels can prove challenging at times, but a careful and charitable reading reveals that they do not contradict one another. Rather, they complement one another: God has used four different early Christian leaders to help his people understand the many facets of Jesus' life and teaching.

Acts

The "Acts of the Apostles" serves as a bridge between the stories of Jesus' life and the letters that instruct churches about Jesus' significance. This book tells the story of the expansion of the early church, from the 120 disciples gathered together on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem to significant numbers of believers scattered all over the Mediterranean world—

including the great center of that world, Rome. The title “Acts of the Apostles” (abbreviated to “Acts” in the NIV) was given to the book not by its author but by later Christians who recognized the prominence of Peter (chs. 1–12) and Paul (chs. 13–28) in the book. Yet a better title might be “Acts of the Holy Spirit” because the author is especially keen to show how God’s Spirit, poured out on the church at Pentecost, is the power behind the apostolic preaching of the word of God. As the similarity between Acts 1:1 and Luke 1:1–4 reveals, the author of the third Gospel, Luke, the companion of Paul, wrote Acts also. Some key plotlines and theological themes bind these two volumes together.

Letters

The next major section of the NT comprises 21 letters. These may be divided into two basic parts: 13 letters written by the apostle Paul and 8 written by five other early Christian leaders. Most of them were written to churches but four of them were written to church leaders (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and 3 John; Philemon is addressed not only to a man named Philemon but to other Christians and the church in Colossae). The “letter” form was a popular means of communication in the ancient world that Christians adapted to maintain relationships among the widely scattered Christian communities (see *The Letters of the New Testament*, p. 2282). Written over the course of about 50 years to churches and individuals scattered all over the Mediterranean world, these letters deal with an incredible number of issues. Yet they are united in their concern to help believers understand how Jesus Christ must be the center and touchstone of all that believers think and do. Believers today read them with profit, not only to understand the many facets of Christian truth and to know how to live out the gospel in specific circumstances but also to appreciate how the gospel must be integrated into every aspect of the believer’s life.

Revelation

As the last book of the NT, Revelation appropriately focuses on the end of history. The climax of the book is the coming of Jesus Christ in glory to reward believers, punish unbelievers, and usher in the new heaven and the new earth (chs. 19–22). Yet Revelation is about much more than just the end of history. The book utilizes a popular Jewish genre called the “apocalypse” to take John (and us) into the unseen spiritual realm where the ultimate realities that dictate the course of our history are revealed. The visions that God gave to John provide believers with a vital perspective on all of history. These visions remind the church that, however difficult our circumstances might be, God is indeed on his throne (ch. 4); God has a definite plan for his people; God is infallibly carrying out this plan through Jesus, “the Lamb, who was slain” (5:12; see ch. 5); and believers must remain faithful to God in order to receive their ultimate reward from him.

How the New Testament Came Into Being

All of the NT books were written in koine, or “common,” Greek. This Greek was the lingua franca in most of the countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. It was the language that people with many different native languages would use to communicate with one another (much like English in our day). Jews who grew up in Palestine, for instance, would often learn Greek in addition to the Aramaic that was their native language at the time. Jesus and the apostles would have learned Greek so that they could interact with the many Gentiles who lived in their own country and surrounding regions. Greek was so widely used that when Paul, a Roman citizen, wrote a letter to the believers in the capital of the Roman Empire, he wrote not in the Latin of the empire but in Greek. This widespread, common language smoothed the way for the early evangelists, who could travel almost anywhere in the Roman Empire and effectively communicate the gospel in the Greek they already knew.

We do not know how soon the early Christians began to write about their faith. It is quite possible that Christians committed to writing some of the details about Jesus’ life and ministry shortly after the resurrection. But the earliest NT letter was written probably in the middle 40s, and the earliest NT Gospel was probably written in the late 50s or early 60s. These

Christian authors would have used sharpened reeds or quills to transfer ink to papyrus, a paper made from the reeds of the papyrus plant. In the NT period, papyrus was rolled up to form scrolls; later in Christian history the codex, or book form as we know it, began to be used. We do not possess the original written text of any NT book. As the books of the NT were written and sent to their destinations, Christians undoubtedly came to realize how valuable these books would be if distributed more widely. Indeed, we see the beginnings of the wider distribution of the NT books in the NT itself; Paul encourages the Colossians to read the letter he sent to the Laodiceans and the Laodiceans, conversely, to read the letter he sent to the Colossians (Col 4:16). As this process continued, we can imagine early Christians wanting collections of several similar NT books, such as the letters of Paul or the Gospels. In order to preserve and to disseminate these books or collections of books, copies of the originals would have been made.

Today we possess over 5,000 manuscripts containing a part of (in most cases) or the whole NT. Some of these manuscripts contain only a few verses. Many of them contain several NT books, usually organized by type of book: Gospels, Acts, the letters of Paul, the “catholic” (i.e., general) letters, and Revelation. The earliest manuscript containing part of the NT dates from the early second century, but the most significant come from the fourth and fifth centuries. Scholars have devoted many centuries to studying these manuscripts in an effort to identify the “original text” of the NT. The fruit of this labor (called “textual criticism”) is a Greek text of the NT, called the modern critical text, that is without doubt very close to what the NT authors originally wrote. The sheer mass of evidence, the text’s origins from many parts of the ancient world, and its comparatively early date enable us to have great confidence that when we read this text, we are reading the words that God himself inspired their authors to record. Most modern translations of the Bible, such as the NIV, work from this reconstructed text, using text notes to signal places where the text may be somewhat uncertain.

The Canon of the New Testament

The NT itself refers to books written by early Christians that are not part of the NT (e.g., Paul’s letter to the Laodiceans [Col 4:16]). And there are many books written in the late first century and second century by apostolic fathers that were popular among early Christians but are not now found in our NT (e.g., The First Letter of Clement, The Shepherd of Hermas, The Letter of Barnabas). How did it come to be that the NT contains only the 27 books that we are familiar with?

This question involves what we call the canon. The Greek word *kanon* referred originally to a reed, and then to a rod, or bar, and eventually a rod used for measuring something. Hence *kanon* came to have the sense of a “standard.” The “canon” of the NT is the collection of those books that have been deemed to meet the standard for inclusion in Scripture. These books, and only these books, are the ones that the church has recognized as inspired by God and therefore providing authoritative divine guidance about Christian belief and practice.

The recognition that some early Christian books had the same status as the existing books of Scripture (the OT) can be traced back to the NT itself. In 1 Tim 5:18 Paul cites a saying of Jesus—“The worker deserves his wages” (Luke 10:7)—as “Scripture” along with a quotation from the OT. In 2 Pet 3:16 Peter criticizes people for twisting the meaning of some of the letters of Paul, “as they do the other Scriptures”—“the other” implying that Peter thinks of these Pauline letters as Scripture. But aside from these few references, the NT provides little guidance for deciding what books should belong to the canon of NT Scripture. Partly as a result of this silence, it took early Christians some time to settle on the limits of the NT canon.

Christians everywhere clearly recognized many NT books, such as the Gospels, Acts, and most of Paul’s letters, as Scripture at an early date. Other books took them longer to widely embrace as part of the NT canon, especially James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, and Revelation. But these doubts are not surprising. Doubts about Revelation were due mainly to the animus against the apocalyptic style of the book shared by many early believers. The brevity of some letters meant that the church did not widely use them, which made them difficult to distinguish from the many forgeries circulating in the names of the apostles. Considering these historical circumstances and the diversity of the early church, what is remarkable is that virtually



the entire early Christian movement came to agree on the identity of NT canonical books. The first list containing all (and only) the 27 canonical NT books is found in the Easter letter written by the famous early church theologian Athanasius in 367. The Third Council of Carthage (397) provided official church recognition of the 27 books of the NT canon.

Finally, it is especially important to emphasize that the early church did not *create* the canon; it *recognized* the canon. Early Christians used several criteria in their judgments. Apostolic authorship or connection with an apostle was important (Mark, for instance, was viewed as a disciple of Peter). More important, however, was conformity to the apostolic teaching, the “rule of faith” (Latin *regula fidei*). But most important of all was inspiration. God, in a sense, created the canon by inspiring what human authors wrote as they wrote certain books. He entered into this special work of inspiration, for instance, as Paul wrote Colossians, but not as he wrote to the Laodiceans. Early Christians recognized the unique significance and authority of certain books, and this recognition led to the decision to include them in the canon.

Reading the New Testament

God inspired the books of the NT so that people would have an authoritative record of his climactic revelation in his Son, the Lord Jesus. The NT has been translated into hundreds of languages so that people around the world can access this revelation in their own tongue. Whether you are a seasoned believer or someone who has picked up the Bible for the very first time, the message God has for you is (in the words Augustine heard long ago): “Take up, read!”

Some simple principles will help you as you read:

1. *Ask God to help you understand.* The NT itself warns that sin has affected the ability of humans to understand God’s truth (Rom 1:28; 1 Cor 2:14; Eph 4:18). Pray for illumination from the Spirit of God.
2. *Look for connections with the OT.* The NT is part of one large “book” (the Bible), and we should always seek to understand how a particular passage fits into this single story of God’s redemptive work. The NT authors themselves, soaked in this story, constantly point us to these connections. They make use of the basic categories of the OT (sacrifice, covenant, law, etc.), they quote the OT, they pick up language from the OT. NIV text notes, cross references, and study notes in this Bible will help readers identify many of these points of contact.
3. *Recognize the different ways the NT communicates.* The NT books use different genres—biography, history, letter, apocalypse—to communicate with us, and a good reader will take these into account. Some passages, such as Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels or the apostles’ teachings in the letters, address us quite directly, telling us what to believe or what to do (or not to do). Other passages, such as stories about Jesus in the Gospels or about the early church in Acts, give us insight into the nature of reality as God sees it, challenging us to adjust our worldview to align it with the worldview seen in these stories.
4. *Remember that the NT books are occasional.* While God designed the NT to speak to every generation of believers in every part of the world, a particular first-century person wrote each NT book to a particular first-century audience with first-century concerns in view. Fortunately, most of those first-century concerns involve basic spiritual realities that transcend time and place. But some of those first-century issues are different than ours, and we will understand and apply the NT message more effectively if we know something about that world. The notes on biblical passages in this study Bible are designed precisely to help the reader navigate these issues.

A CHRONOLOGY OF KEY NEW TESTAMENT EVENTS

Birth of Jesus	6–5 BC
Beginning of Jesus’ public ministry	AD 27 or 28



Jesus' death and resurrection	30 (or 31 or 33)
Conversion of Paul	33
Paul's first missionary journey	46–47
Apostolic Council	48
Paul's second missionary journey	49–52
Paul's third missionary journey	52–57
Paul's voyage to Rome	Fall 59–Spring 60
Imprisonment of Paul in Rome	60–62
Death of Paul and Peter	64–65 (or 67)

5. *Compare Scripture with Scripture.* Because NT books address specific issues in the first century, they will sometimes give advice that is directly relevant only for that time and place. Readers should follow the cross references provided in this Bible to see what the Bible says elsewhere about a particular topic. If, for instance, what the Bible says elsewhere contradicts a particular teaching, that teaching may have been limited to a special circumstance or period of time. If, on the other hand, parallel passages say much the same thing, we may conclude that the teaching applies generally.³

³ Moo, D. J. (2015). [Introduction to the New Testament](#). In D. A. Carson (Ed.), *NIV Zondervan Study Bible: Built on the Truth of Scripture and Centered on the Gospel Message* (pp. 1909–1915). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.