

Everything You Always Wanted To Know About the Bible
But Were Afraid To Ask

Tim Attaway

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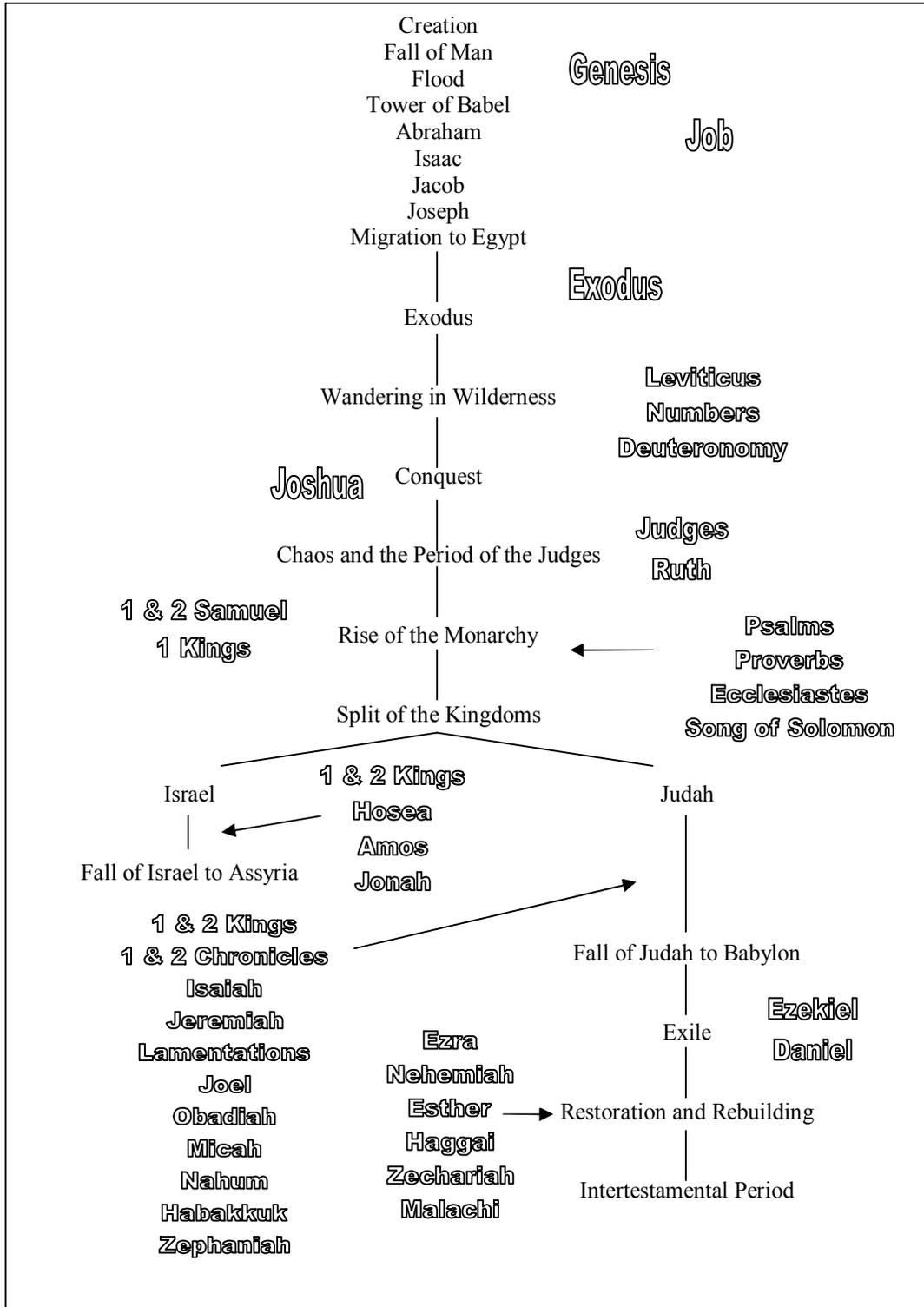
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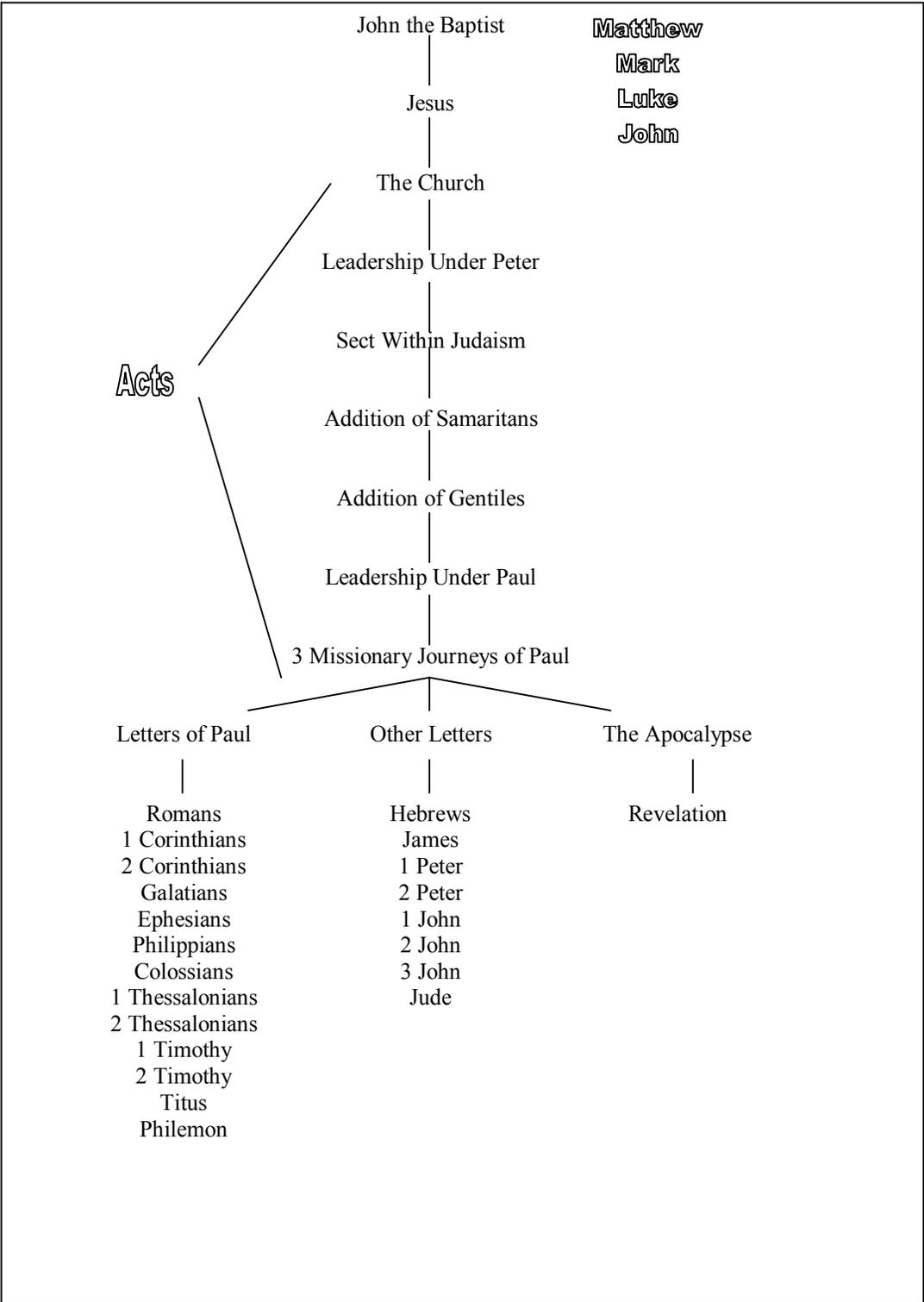
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Diagrammatic Overview





In The Beginning

Genesis, Job

The Book of Genesis lays the groundwork for everything else in the Bible. It shows God's purpose in creation (relationship), the depravity of man, and the beginnings of God's plan for salvation.

The Creation

The story of creation establishes the identity and authority of God. Before anything else began, he existed. He is the author of everything else.

There are two creation narratives. Genesis 1:1-2:3 tells of the creation of the universe over a seven day period of time. Genesis 2:4-2:25 retells the creation of man specifically – introducing the characters of Adam and Eve. Man was the pinnacle of creation and the only creature designed with a soul and a spirit, capable of having a relationship with God.

The Fall of Man

Genesis 3 introduces the concept of evil and rebellion. Genesis takes as a preexisting condition the existence of Satan as a creature opposed to the sovereignty of God. The conflict between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan is already in place. Satan entices Eve to disobey God by eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This is the only thing in the entire Garden of Eden that they had been forbidden to eat. The nature of the tree is significant.

God's desire is that we look to him for moral standards. In eating of this tree, Eve gave into the desire to be able to discern right and wrong herself rather than looking to God. She wanted to become her own moral standard. The serpent promised her that she would be like God if she ate of the tree. His promise was not completely false. She did gain knowledge of good vs. evil – firsthand. She also became responsible for choosing evil. She became mortal and out of harmony with God.

She also discovered that evil loves company. She enticed Adam to join her in the rebellion. They both were driven from God's presence. They broke his heart and disrupted his purpose for creation – relationship. To deal with this problem, God set in motion a plan for salvation and for the defeat of the kingdom of evil. In Genesis 3:15 God said to the serpent,

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers, he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.

This is the first Messianic prophecy in Scripture.

The Flood

After being driven from the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve reproduced. Their first son Cain killed their second son, Abel. They had other sons and daughters who had other sons and daughters and began to fill the earth.

As the generations passed on and the population increased, the depravity of man increased as well. Eventually God said, "Enough is enough." He chose a righteous man named Noah and commanded him to build a large boat to prepare for a massive flood. This might seem strange since it had never rained. Noah was faithful and obeyed. At the time that God told him, he loaded up the animals of the earth, two-by-two,

and then the flood began. The earth was destroyed, but God preserved a faithful remnant. When the flood was over and the waters receded, they came out of the boat and started over.

God gave the rainbow as a sign of a promise that he would never again destroy the world by flood.

The three sons of Noah, Ham, Shem, and Japheth became the fathers of the nations of the world. The descendants of Shem were known as the Semites. The Jews are Semite people.

The Tower of Babel, The Origin of Nations

Time elapsed and the descendants of Noah again populated the earth. When Noah's family came out of the ark, they were a single race and spoke a single language. At some point, they began to forget God and to think of themselves as self-important. So they began to unify themselves into a large city and they began to build a tower that would reach to the heavens. The Tower of Babel represented:

- a) Self-aggrandizement. Man's testimonial to his own greatness.¹
- b) An attempt to reach heaven – the domain of God. This was similar to Eve's sin, which was motivated out of a desire to take over something that belonged to God.
- c) Possibly a place where leaders could protect themselves from another flood, expressing disbelief in the promise of God not to flood the earth again.
- d) An attempt to unify all men under a single governmental structure. It was a foreshadow of the one-world government present in Revelation.

The activity was displeasing to God, so he caused division among them. He confused their tongues, which meant that he supernaturally gave them different languages. They most likely found other people who ended up with the same language as themselves and went off and started new communities somewhere else.

It is conjecture on my part, but it seems plausible to me that when God gave the new languages, he may also have given new racial characteristics to people. He may have confused the genetic pool at the same time as the tongues.

The Call of Abraham

In Genesis 3, God began planning the redemption of the world. In the story of Noah, God demonstrated the principle of salvation amidst judgment. In Genesis 11:26 we are first introduced to a man named Abram, who would later be known as Abraham.

God chose Abraham from among all men and promised to bless the world through his descendants. Abraham was an old and childless man when God called him, yet God promised to make his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. God promised to give to the descendants of Abraham the land of the Canaanites, the area we now call Israel.

The Book of Job

The Book of Job is a great piece of literature that does not really fit in anywhere in the historical flow of the Bible. Job is believed to be one of the earliest-written books of the Bible (author unknown). Job was probably a contemporary of Abraham. The Book of Job deals with two main topics:

¹ Do you believe in prophetic typos? When I first typed this line, I accidentally typed "Man's testimonial to his own great mess."

- 1) Why do bad things happen to good people?
- 2) The sovereignty of God

Isaac, Jacob, and the Twelve Tribes of Israel

Abraham and his wife, Sarah were quite old. Sarah was beyond normal childbearing age. She believed that the only way Abraham could have descendants was through some other woman. She gave her concubine (a female slave) by the name of Hagar to Abraham so that Hagar might conceive. Hagar bore a son named Ishmael. Later God fulfilled his promise through Sarah and she bore a son Isaac. Because of Sarah's jealousy, Abraham's firstborn son, Ishmael, was driven away. Isaac was the heir to the promise of God (God affirmed that promise to Isaac in Genesis 26). Ishmael became the father of a nation as well. Many Arabs are descendants of Ishmael.

Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau was the firstborn. As was true in the case of Isaac, however, Jacob, the younger son, was the heir to the promise (God affirmed that promise to Jacob in Genesis 28). The descendants of Esau became a race known as the Edomites.

Jacob had two wives, Rachel and Leah. Each wife had a concubine. Thus Jacob bore sons through four women. Through these he had twelve sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin. There was also a daughter named Dinah.

Rachel was Jacob's favorite wife. Joseph was Rachel's firstborn son (even though he was the next-to-last son born). Thus Jacob treated Joseph as the favored child, elevating him above his brothers. It caused great discord in the family.

In Genesis 32, God changed his name of "Jacob" which literally means "He Grabs," or "He Deceives," to "Israel," which means, "He struggles with God." That is probably best interpreted as "He struggles with God, i.e. as a partner" as opposed to "He struggles against God." God said that Jacob had struggled with men and with God and had overcome.

Joseph

Joseph's older brothers hated him because of the way his father favored him. When he was a young man, they conspired to kill him, but instead sold him into slavery, telling Jacob that wild animals had killed him.

The slave traders took Joseph to Egypt. He tried to make the best of the situation and began to faithfully discharge his duties as a servant in the household of Potiphar. Potiphar's wife falsely accused Joseph of a crime and he was thrown into prison. Even there, Joseph determined to make the best of the situation. He rose to be a respected trustee in the prison. He made the acquaintance of the Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker, both of whom had fallen out of favor with Pharaoh and had ended up in prison. One night, both had vivid dreams. Joseph interpreted the dreams and said that they indicated that one of them would be released from prison shortly and the other would be executed. Both came true.

Sometime later, Pharaoh himself had a disturbing dream. The cupbearer was out of prison and back in Pharaoh's service at the time. He remembered Joseph (who was still in prison) and his ability to interpret dreams. Joseph was brought to Pharaoh. Joseph listened to Pharaoh's dream and explained the meaning. There were going to be seven years of plenty in Egypt followed by seven years of severe famine. He recommended to Pharaoh that he begin storing the excess during the first seven years so that there would be food the last seven years. Pharaoh was quite impressed and elevated Joseph to second-in-command in Egypt. Joseph was personally responsible for administering the hoarding and later the distribution of the food.

The seven years of plenty happened just as Joseph predicted. The seven years of famine followed. The famine was not isolated to Egypt. It spread all over that area of the world, including the land of the Canaanites, where Jacob and the rest of his family were living.

Note that Genesis 41:38 says that the Holy Spirit was “in” Joseph. Joseph is the first person in the Bible described in this way. The Holy Spirit gave Joseph his extraordinary wisdom and his ability to interpret dreams. Spiritual gifts and other manifestations of the Holy Spirit are not New Testament phenomena; they go at least as far back as Joseph.

Migration to Egypt

The famine was long and severe. Everyone knew that food was available in Egypt, however. Eventually Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy food. He sent his ten oldest sons, keeping Benjamin behind. (Benjamin was Rachel’s other son and had replaced Joseph as the favorite.) Once in Egypt, the ten sons found themselves standing before Joseph. They did not recognize him but he knew who they were. He sent nine of them back but held one of his brothers (Simeon) in prison. He told the other nine that they had to return with their other brother (Benjamin) in order to have Simeon released. Eventually they did return with Benjamin. In a very emotional scene he revealed to them who he was. He told them to go home, gather their families and their belongings – and their father – and to come back and settle in Egypt where there was plenty of food.

They did. The entire family of Jacob migrated to Egypt. This migration was significant. The time in Egypt (four hundred years) was significant. We have no archive on the events of that period of time. We do know that during the time in Egypt, the children of Israel lived as a peculiar people, separate from the Egyptians. They did not intermarry. There were racial barriers that kept them from simply being absorbed into Egyptian society, as we see in Genesis 43:32 (“They served him by himself, the brothers by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is detestable to Egyptians.”) That was by design. God did not want them absorbed into Egyptian society. He used this four hundred years to give birth to a nation. The seventy descendants of Israel that went into Egypt emerged as the nation of Israel, with a cultural and theological identity that stays with them to this day.

Jacob’s reunion with Joseph brought him great joy. Having seen his son again, he felt like he could die in peace.

The family of Jacob was allowed to settle in the Land of Goshen, a very choice area in Egypt. It was fertile and supported their families and their livestock. They were treated well by Pharaoh, all because of the favor that Joseph had with him.

During his time in Egypt, Joseph had married and had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. After Jacob arrived in Egypt, he blessed these two grandsons and adopted them as his own. This meant that they would receive shares of his inheritance (in place of Joseph). In doing this, he was basically giving Joseph a double share of inheritance. Thus from an inheritance standpoint, Jacob now had thirteen sons, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Manasseh, Ephraim, and Benjamin.

When Jacob was near his death, he called his sons to him and pronounced a blessing over each. Perhaps most significant is the one pronounced over Judah. We see in Genesis 49:8-10:

Judah, your brothers will praise you;
your hand will be on the neck of your enemies;
your father's sons will bow down to you.
You are a lion's cub, O Judah;
you return from the prey, my son.
Like a lion he crouches and lies down,

like a lioness – who dares to rouse him?
The scepter will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until he comes to whom it belongs
and the obedience of the nations is his.

Isaac was not the firstborn, and yet was heir to the promise. Jacob was not the firstborn, and yet was heir to the promise. Likewise Judah was not the firstborn, but would rise up as ruler over his brothers. Ultimately one of Judah's descendants would arise and take the scepter and the nations of the world would bow to him.

Jesus was from the tribe of Judah.

In The Wilderness – Training Camp

Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers

The sons of Jacob were treated well by Pharaoh when they arrived in Egypt. Eventually, however, rulers changed and a Pharaoh emerged who did not esteem these foreigners. At some point during their four hundred years in Egypt, the children of Israel were transformed from welcome guests to slaves. Their conditions became grievous and God responded to their cries for help.

The Exodus

The children of Israel thrived, even under Egyptian persecution. Their numbers continued to increase. The Pharaoh saw them as a threat to the wellbeing of Egypt and began a campaign of killing male babies born to the women of Israel.

A woman named Jochebed gave birth to a son. She hid him for as long as she could in order to spare his life. Eventually she knew that she had to do something or else he would be killed. She made a basket and treated it so that it would float. She put the baby in the basket and waited until the daughter of the Pharaoh went into the river to bathe. She floated the basket toward Pharaoh's daughter. Pharaoh's daughter found the baby, adopted him as her own, and brought him into Pharaoh's house to raise him as her own. She named him Moses. Jochebed arranged to offer her services as a nursemaid to Pharaoh's daughter and was allowed to care for her own son in this capacity. Moses grew up in the house of Pharaoh but was raised by his own mother. In this manner, he came to know who he was and what God his people served.

When Moses became a man, he began to realize the suffering of his own people. One day he killed an Egyptian for mistreating one of the Hebrew slaves. As a result, he was forced to flee. He went to the land of the Midianites. There he married, settled down, and became a shepherd. He remained there for a number of years.

Eventually God appeared to Moses and called him into action. Moses was in the desert and saw a bush that was burning but was not consumed. He went over to see what was going on. God spoke to him from the bush. God summoned Moses back to Egypt to ask for the release of his people. Moses objected, saying that he was not up to the task. God promised that his brother Aaron would help him. Moses was faithful and returned.

Pharaoh was not inclined to let the people go. They were his labor force. There would be a huge economic impact to Egypt if they were allowed to leave. God sent a series of plagues on the land of Egypt in order to convince Pharaoh to submit. The harder the conditions got the harder Pharaoh's heart became.

Eventually God informed the children of Israel to go to their homes. They were to slaughter a lamb and put the blood on the doorposts of their houses. Then they were to go inside and to wait. The angel of death passed through the land and took the firstborn of each household that did not have the blood on the doorpost. This finally broke Pharaoh and he agreed to let the people go. This terrible night is known as Passover because God passed over the homes of the faithful in Israel. Jews continue to observe this day as one of their holiest days of the year.

The people left quickly, knowing that Pharaoh was likely to change his mind. Sure enough as they departed, Pharaoh gathered his troops and began to follow. The children of Israel found themselves up against the Red Sea with the army of Pharaoh pressing in behind. God worked a miracle and parted the water of the sea. The children of Israel passed across to the other side on dry ground. The army of Pharaoh followed. When they were mid-sea, God allowed the waters to return and the army was drowned. The children of Israel were free.

Learning to Live Under God's Care

As the people left Egypt, they found themselves in a desert, with no apparent source of food or water. God miraculously provided both. God led them to water or supernaturally brought it forth from rocks or other sources. He began giving them manna to eat. Manna was a bread-like substance. Exodus 16:31 says that it was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey. No one knows exactly what it was. It was manna and it no longer exists.

The people were told to go out every morning and gather just as much manna as they would need for a day. They were told not to gather more than a day's supply, except on Friday. On Friday, they were to gather as much as they would need on Friday and Saturday so that they would not have to do the gathering on the Sabbath. They were to cease from work on that day (note that this prohibition against working on the Sabbath was given prior to the giving of the Ten Commandments).

Sure enough, some people tried to gather more than they needed for a given normal weekday. And sure enough, they woke up the next day to find it rotted and full of maggots. And sure enough, some people tried to go out and gather on the Sabbath and sure enough there was none there to be gathered. Funny how God's word is true no matter how hard we try to circumvent it.

God also supernaturally made sure that their clothing (including shoes) never wore out. All of their needs were met.

Note that in spite of the fact that God provided for their every need, the people still whined. Some began to fantasize about "how good life was back in Egypt." Periodically the people had to be disciplined in order to keep them in line.

The Giving of the Law

God led the children of Israel from Egypt to a place called Mount Sinai. There he instructed Moses to climb the mountain. Moses did, and there God gave to him the Ten Commandments and the Law. The Mosaic Law is documented primarily in Exodus and Leviticus. The code of the Law gives parameters for how we relate to God and for how we should relate to one another. They contain God's standards for how we should live.

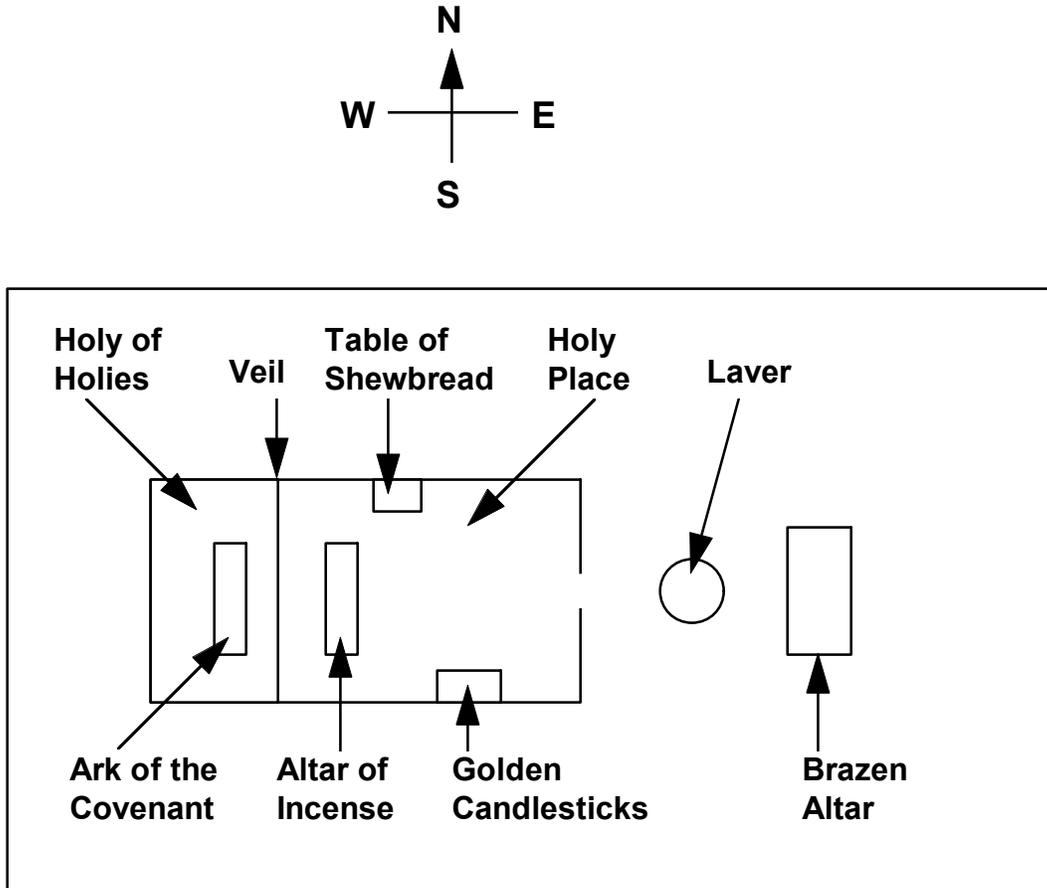
The Construction of the Tabernacle

While God was giving Moses the law, he communicated to him instructions for construction of the Tabernacle and for instituting the priesthood. The men of the tribe of Levi would be set aside as servants, administering in the Tabernacle. The descendants of Aaron (the brother of Moses – Moses and Aaron were of the tribe of Levi) became the priests.

The Tabernacle was a tent. It was the precursor to the Temple in Jerusalem. When the nation of Israel was wandering in the wilderness, this is the place where God dwelt in their midst.

All of the furnishings in the Tabernacle had meaning. They were symbolic of God's presence and of how man should approach God. Among the furnishings was the Ark of the Covenant, which was the very place where God hovered in the midst of the people.

Diagram of the Tabernacle



- As men became aware of their sins, they were to present burnt offerings, sin offerings, etc. One day each year (Day of Atonement) the high priest would corporately make an offering for all sins not individually dealt with.
- The Tabernacle was enclosed. The only way to approach God was through the gate of the court of the Tabernacle. The first thing one would encounter after entering the gate was the burnt offering altar.

The only way to approach God was in sacrifice. The sacrifices were acted-out prayers, begging forgiveness or giving thanks or whatever.

- Furnishings
 - The Burnt Offering Altar was the first furnishing inside the court of the Tabernacle. It has several names – the brazen altar, the altar of brass, etc. It is called this to distinguish it from the golden altar inside the Tabernacle (the incense altar). It was exactly opposite the entrance to the court and between the entrance and the Tabernacle. Whatever is brought to God (entreaty, thanksgiving, etc.) must be brought by the altar. There were horns on the corners of the altar signifying hands. This is where the blood was applied. The first step of the sinner towards God was by way of blood. The horns lifted the blood towards God.
 - The Laver was between the Brazen Altar and the Tabernacle. It was kept filled with water. When a priest would go into the Tabernacle to take coals from the Brazen Altar to the Incense Altar, he would stop at the Laver for ceremonial cleansing. It symbolized cleansing of the heart.
 - The Incense Altar was also called the Altar Before the Lord. It was immediately before the Holy of Holies – the chamber of the Lord. Each morning the high priest would place incense on the Incense Altar. It symbolized communion with God.
 - The Table of Shewbread was on the right-hand side if you stood east facing the Incense Altar. On it were 12 loaves. The constant presence of the 12 loaves signified that the 12 tribes of Israel were constantly before the Lord.
 - The Golden Candlestick had a central shaft with 3 branches on each side. It was on the left side of the Holy Place. The lamps were lighted every evening and illuminated the Table of Shewbread and the Incense Altar. It symbolized light. The 12 tribes could always be seen.
 - The Veil separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. The Veil later became a symbol of the portal of heaven.
 - The Ark of the Covenant had on top of it the mercy seat. At each side were cherubim. The Ark represented the throne of God, the place from which he ruled. This was the place where he received their gifts, their repentance. God met men at the mercy seat. Note that the throne could not be approached without first passing through the place of blood and atonement and of cleansing. Exodus 25 tells us that the Ark was to contain the Tablets of the Ten Commandments. Hebrews 9:4 tells us "This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's rod that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant."

Spies In the Land

God instructed Moses to select twelve spies – one from each tribe – to go into the Promised Land and survey it in preparation for conquest. They went into the land and remained there for forty days. They returned and reported that the land was fruitful and good. Ten of the spies said that the people of the land were too strong and that they could never take it, however. The other two (Caleb and Joshua) said that God was on their side and they could do anything.

The people sided with the ten spies and began to whine again, not trusting God to give them the land. God said that because of their unfaithfulness and disbelief, they would be forced to wander in the wilderness for forty years – one year for each day the spies were in the land. The unbelieving generation would die before the people would be given the land.

God's word was final. The people spent forty years traveling around in circles, waiting for the unfaithful to die. The book of Numbers describes the years of wandering in the desert.

Conquest

Deuteronomy, Joshua

When the time of wandering in the wilderness was over, the people crossed to the land on the east side of the Jordan River, planning to enter the Promised Land from the east. The kings of two nations – Sihon, King of Heshbon and Og, King of Bashan, would not let them pass. The people of Israel went to battle and defeated both of these nations. They took the territory that had belonged to these two kings. This is the first territory that they could really call their own. This land was on the east side of the Jordan River and is known as the Transjordan territories.

Moses knew that it was about time for him to die. Because of his own disobedience to God during the years of wandering, God would not let him enter the Promised Land. Joshua was appointed to be his successor and the one who would lead the conquest of the Promised Land. The book of Deuteronomy is a series of three speeches from Moses to the people of Israel, giving them final instructions. Moses dies at the end of Deuteronomy.

Jericho

The conquest of the land of Canaan began with the city of Jericho. God instructed the people to assemble and walk around the walls of the city quietly one day for six days. Then on the seventh day they were to march around the city quietly seven times. At the end of the seventh circle, the priests sounded trumpets and the people shouted in unison. When they did, the walls of the city fell down and the people of Israel stormed the terrified people inside and took the city.

This really began the conquest of the Promised Land. The land of Canaan was not a unified nation, but a bunch of independent city-states. The conquest really happened one city at a time.

The Southern and Northern Campaigns

The people of Israel set about taking the land of Canaan. Some of the cities realized what was happening and banded together to resist the invasion. A coalition of kings of the south banded together to resist Israel. This resulted in a series of battles in which Israel won most of its southern territories. In a similar fashion, a coalition of kings in the north united against Israel. They were defeated and in the process Israel gained most of its northern territories.

The people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt and then had spent forty years walking around in circles in the desert. They were not trained or skilled militarily. Their power and success in warfare came because the armies of God fought on their behalf. For a brief moment in their history, they were really submitted to God's leadership and he gave them victory.

The Division of the Land

When the majority of the land had been taken, the people of Israel divided their conquered lands among the various tribes. An allotment was given to each of the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Manasseh, Ephraim, and Benjamin. Note that tribe of Levi is missing from the list. The Levites had been set aside as priests. They could not minister to the rest of the nation if they were

all gathered to themselves. The Levites would go live among the other tribes and thus did not have a territory of their own.

The original plan seems to have been for everyone to live west of the Jordan River, in the land of the Canaanites. Remember that before Jericho was taken, however, the people of Israel defeated some of the territories on the east of the Jordan as well. The tribes of Gad and Reuben and some of the people of Manasseh expressed a desire to live in the Transjordan territories. They were allowed to do so. Thus the territory assigned to Gad and Reuben was all in the Transjordan and the territory of Manasseh extended both to the east and the west of the Jordan River.

Chaos

Judges, Ruth

At this point, the people of Israel ceased their years of wandering, ceased their warfare, and settled into the land. It was time for them to make the transition from nomads to farmers. Note that manna ceased to fall as soon as they entered into the land of Canaan. They needed to learn how to be the people of God under normal, everyday circumstances.

God wanted the people to live under his leadership with no formal human government. He had spent the last forty-plus years training them and leading them, although there had been a powerful man – Moses or Joshua – at the helm at all times. It was time for the people to follow him directly. Thus there was no government of Israel put in place. They lived as twelve independent tribes. The individual tribes did not even have formal leadership. The people needed to be individually responsible before God.

Everything about their existence was changing. This was not necessarily an easy transition to make. It was complicated by the fact that they had failed to completely drive out the pagan former residents of the land, as God had told them to do. A remnant of these idol-worshipping people remained.

Farming was not necessarily an easy thing for them to learn. They did not farm while wandering in the desert. They did not know how. More than likely many of them turned to their Philistine neighbors for instruction.

Hey, Phil, I'm having some trouble growing wheat and you always have a good crop. How do you do it?

Oh it's easy. You plow the ground like this, plant the seed like that, water it, sacrifice a chicken to the fertility goddess, and voila – wheat!

So the Israelites went home, plowed the ground like this, planted the seed like that, watered it, sacrificed a chicken to the fertility goddess, and had a bumper crop of wheat. They were impressed. They went back to Phil and asked if he had any other gods that they should know about.

Once in the land, the people fell quickly into idolatry and other forms of rebellion. It was never universal but it was widespread. They would learn the pain of their rebellion.

The Period of the Judges

The book of Judges has a repeating theme in it.

1. The people rebel and fall into idolatry.
2. Because of the rebellion, God withdraws his protection. Neighboring nations attack and oppress the people of Israel.

3. Under suffering and oppression, the people cry out to God for help.
4. God raises up a leader – called a judge. He leads the people to find relief from their oppression and he leads them back into a right relationship with God.
5. While the judge is still alive, the people remain faithful and enjoy God’s favor and protection.
6. Eventually the judge dies. There is no human moral compass in the nation. Go back to step 1 and start over.

The people never really grasped that their favor and protection came from God and not from a human leader. They spent most of their time in trouble because they were not submitted purely to God.

The book of Judges tells of the leadership of twelve judges:

- | | | |
|------------|-------------|------------|
| 1. Othniel | 5. Gideon | 9. Ibzan |
| 2. Ehud | 6. Tola | 10. Elon |
| 3. Shamgar | 7. Jair | 11. Abdon |
| 4. Deborah | 8. Jephthah | 12. Samson |

In Judges 17:6, the writer of the book stops to think about the events that he is narrating and says, “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.” In the closing statement of the book he repeats this verbatim. The period of the judges was a period of chaos. Each man did as he saw fit. Each man looked to himself as his own moral compass. The desire that Eve had when she ate the forbidden fruit had come to full fruition among God’s chosen people.

It was not a good time.

The Story of Ruth

If there is a bright spot to be found in the period of the judges, it is in the story of Ruth. Ruth lived during the period of the judges. Ruth is a story of love, sacrifice, and redemption.

Naomi was a woman of Israel. Because of famine, she had moved to Moab with her husband and two sons. She had lived there some time. Her sons had married Moabite woman. One of those women was Ruth.

Eventually the three men – Naomi’s husband and two sons – all died. Naomi decided to return to her own land to be with her own people. Her daughters-in-law were young women still and likely to find new husbands among the Moabite people. Naomi encouraged them to stay.

Ruth loved her mother-in-law and was devoted to her care. She made a pledge to Naomi, found in Ruth 1:16-17:

Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.

Ruth and Naomi returned to Naomi’s home, in Bethlehem in the land of Judah. They were poor. Ruth set about trying to make a living to support the two of them.

A man in the town by the name of Boaz took notice of Ruth and assisted her. It turned out that he was a relative of Naomi’s. Following the traditions and laws of the Jews, he acted in the role of kinsman-redeemer and took Ruth to be his wife, redeeming her from poverty and widowhood.

The story of Ruth teaches us about the need to be self-sacrificing and the need to take care of those who are less fortunate. Ruth and Boaz are also important historical characters. They gave birth to a son named Obed. He gave birth to a son named Jesse. Jesse was the father of King David and an ancestor of Jesus.

The Monarchy

The period of chaos took its toll on the people. They got to the point where they wanted human government. The real solution to their problem was to submit to the leadership of God, but they were failing miserably in that.

Samuel, the Last of the Judges

Samuel was the last of the judges. He grew up in the home of Eli, the priest in the city of Shiloh². Eli was a weak man who let his sons defile the Tabernacle. God promised judgment upon his family because of that and raised up Samuel – who was under his care but was not his son – to succeed him. God made Samuel a prophet and he was widely recognized in the nation for his leadership.

The United Monarchy

First and Second Samuel, First Kings, First and Second Chronicles

The people were weary from the instability of the period of the judges. Eventually they came to Samuel and asked him to give them a king. Samuel was grieved by the request because he knew that the source of the problem was their unwillingness to submit to God. He warned them against it, but they insisted. He took it all very personally.

God told Samuel that they were rejecting him and not Samuel. He instructed Samuel to appoint Saul as king. Samuel was faithful, found Saul, and anointed him as king.

Saul

Saul was of the tribe of Benjamin. He was tall and possessed good leadership qualities. He could have made a good king.

He established his capital in the city of Gibeah, which was his home. It was in the territory of Benjamin.

Saul was a good warrior. Note that the people of Israel were still in a battle to completely claim the territory of the Promised Land. They were frequently at war. Thus it was good to have a strong military leader at the helm of the nation.

When Samuel anointed Saul, the Holy Spirit came upon him and anointed him for leadership. Again, he could have been a good king.

Early in his reign, Saul took it upon himself to offer sacrifices to God without the benefit of a priest (1 Samuel 13). He was assuming priestly authority in doing so and disobeying the commandments of God.

² Note that we learn from this that the Tabernacle resided in the city of Shiloh at this time. It had no permanent home. Jerusalem was neither the capital nor the religious center at this time. In fact, the people of Israel had not yet even captured the territory of Jerusalem in the day of Samuel. That happened under the kingship of David.

For doing this, God promised to take the throne from his descendants and give it to a man “after God’s own heart.”

Later God led Saul in a battle against the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15). He promised to give Saul victory and told him to destroy all Amalekite people, flocks, possessions, etc. once the battle was over. Saul did have victory. He did not completely destroy things as God had commanded. He kept all the best of the livestock and allowed the king to live. Samuel showed up and confronted Saul and told him that God would tear the kingdom from him because of this. Furthermore, Samuel vowed never to see Saul again.

Samuel was truly grieved because he loved Saul.

David

Even though Saul was still acting as king, God sent Samuel to find David, son of Jesse from the tribe of Judah and anoint him as the next king. When David was anointed, the Holy Spirit left Saul and came upon David. David began to enjoy the Lord’s favor from that time.

While David began to enjoy the Lord’s favor, Saul began to feel the results of having the presence of God withdrawn from him. Instead of enjoying the Holy Spirit, evil spirits began to torment him.

During this time, David became a known figure in the royal household. He was a skilled musician. The spirits tormented Saul and David would be brought in to play for him and to calm him down. Saul was having a stalemate with the Philistines because of a Philistine warrior named Goliath. David as a young man defeated Goliath. These encounters with the royal household had several effects:

- David formed a strong friendship with Saul’s son Jonathan. Under different circumstances, Jonathan might have been heir to the throne. He recognized that David would be the next king and loved David like a brother anyway.
- David married Saul’s daughter, Michal.
- David began to enjoy the favor and admiration of the entire nation. Saul grew extremely jealous.

Eventually Saul sought to kill David. Perhaps he believed that he could regain the throne for his descendants if he killed David. Perhaps he simply could not stand to see David enjoy such favor while he experienced such torment. David was forced to flee and spent a period of years as a fugitive in the land.

As David roamed the country, he built up a following. He had an army of men who followed him about. At times he was relentlessly pursued by Saul and more than one time he was in a position to kill Saul but he would not do so. Saul was the king and David would not raise his hand against God’s anointed. He remained righteous and waited upon God to give him anything that he would receive.

Eventually Saul was killed in battle. David emerged as the next king of Israel.

David was a strong leader in war. He expanded the borders of Israel further than they ever were before or after in the history of the nation. His initial capital was in the city of Hebron in Judah, but later he captured the city of Jerusalem and established the capital there.

David was a righteous man for the most part. He was a good leader. National pride and unity peaked under his leadership.

David’s major weakness was in his family life. He married several women. He committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband killed so that she could be his wife. He fathered many children but failed to be a father to them. His son Amnon raped his half-sister, Tamar. David did nothing about it. Her full brother, Absalom killed Amnon in revenge. This caused a rift in the royal household that never healed. Absalom eventually led a rebellion and tried to take the kingdom from his father. Absalom was killed in

the rebellion. David's favorite wife, Bathsheba extracted a promise from David that her son, Solomon would be the next king, even though he was certainly not the oldest son. When David was old, his oldest living son, Adonijah³, held a ceremony and declared himself to be king. Bathsheba found out what he was doing and rushed in to insist that David make Solomon king. David did so and the nation thus recognized Solomon as the successor to David.

David had one unrealized dream in his life. Being a man who was truly devoted to God, he wanted to build a temple for God in Jerusalem. God was pleased with his desire, but did not want David to be the one to build it. David was a man of war – a man who had killed. Because David had “blood on his hands,” God wanted David's son, Solomon to build the temple.

While he was still alive, David made preparations for the building, but he left the task to his son.

Solomon

One of Solomon's first acts as king was to execute his half-brother, Adonijah. He had tried to take the throne once and Solomon viewed him as a threat.

Solomon started out as a man wholly devoted to God. God told Solomon that he would give him anything he wanted. Solomon asked for wisdom in leading the nation. God said that because Solomon had asked wisely and had not requested wealth or long life, he would give him all wisdom, wealth, and honor. Furthermore, as long as he was faithful he would grant Solomon long life.

Solomon's wisdom became famous. People came from all over that region of the world to ask judgments of him. His vast wealth was also widely known.

Solomon undertook the building of the temple. He also undertook other massive building projects. He built mighty palaces for himself. He built up the military and fortified certain strategic cities in the country for defense purposes.

At some point, Solomon got distracted from his devotion to God. He acquired a harem, consisting of over 1000 wives and concubines. Who knows how many children he fathered? He was certainly a worse father to his children than David had been to his. Many of Solomon's wives were foreign, and he allowed them to bring their foreign religious practices with them. He built altars for some of them to be able to make sacrifices to their foreign gods. At times he joined them in the practices.

Solomon's building projects and his excessive lifestyle carried a price and he laid the burden of that on the backs of his people. The people of Israel were forced to pay very heavy taxes to finance the building projects and the other excesses. Furthermore, in order to provide labor for the building projects, Solomon conscripted the able-bodied men of the nation into forced labor several months out of the year, being forced to work on the building projects without wages. Thus if you were a citizen of Israel, you would only have a limited number of months in a given year to make a living, and out of what you were able to make you were forced to pay very heavy taxes.

The people resented this treatment. To make matters worse, extrabiblical evidence seems to indicate that Solomon exempted his own tribesman of Judah from both the labor and the taxes. Thus the other tribes began to hate the tribe of Judah.

By the time Solomon died, there were serious cracks in the foundation of the nation. It was ready to split.

³ David's oldest son was Amnon, but Absalom had killed him. David's second son was Absalom, but he had died in his rebellion against David. Adonijah was the third oldest son, but the oldest living son and thus heir apparent to the throne.

Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon

Out of the house of David and Solomon we have received some of the more beautiful books of the Bible. David wrote many, but not all of the Psalms. They were written as individual songs. At some point the Psalms of David were gathered together with other Psalms of the nation and they became the book of Psalms. This is the hymnbook of the nation.

Solomon is believed to have written most of Proverbs (some sections are specifically attributed to other authors.) Proverbs is a collection of small (one to four lines or so) sayings containing great wisdom. Even three thousand years ago, people needed “sound bites” to help them remember things. That is what Proverbs contains.

Ecclesiastes is also believed to have been written by Solomon. It contains the reflections of a man late in life who is realizing (or perhaps remembering) that wisdom, wealth, power, fleshly indulgences, human relationships, etc. in and of themselves are meaningless and will never bring fulfillment. All is “vanity.” Ultimately the only thing that will ever bring meaning to life is to submit to God and to allow him to bring order and purpose to life. Ecclesiastes is a book that we all need from time to time when we find ourselves feeling that life has no meaning.

Song of Solomon is also attributed to Solomon as author. It is a celebration of love between a man and a woman – sexual intimacy. Sex is God’s idea, and when it is submitted to his order and purpose it is a beautiful and fulfilling thing.

Divided Kingdoms

First and Second Kings, Second Chronicles

When Solomon died, his son Rehoboam was heir apparent to the throne. The elders of Israel came to him and asked whether or not he would be as hard on them as his father Solomon had been. Rehoboam took some bad advice from his friends and told them that he would be even harder on them than his father had been. Thus they refused to make him king.

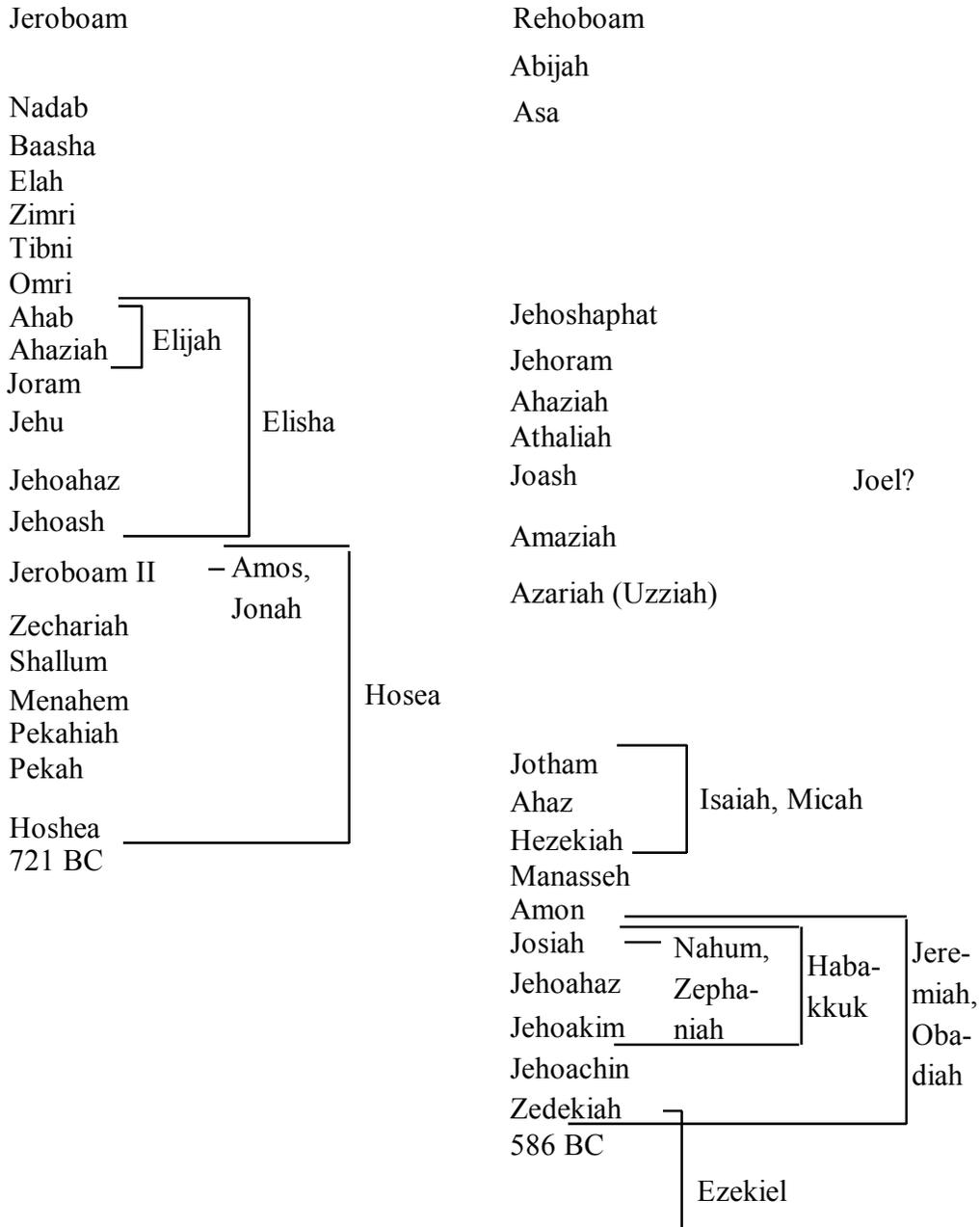
Ten of the tribes split off and formed what was known as the Northern Kingdom, or Israel. The other two tribes formed the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The Northern Kingdom appointed a man by the name of Jeroboam as king. The Southern Kingdom appointed Rehoboam as king.

The two nations immediately went to war against one another. They fought off and on throughout their history, battling over border territories, etc. More than anything, their fighting was provoked by the resentment that built up under the leadership of Solomon.

Jeroboam, in the North, did have a problem. The temple was in Jerusalem, in the South. He did not know how he would rule the people politically in the North if the center of their religious life was in the South. Thus he went to the cities of Bethel and Dan – at his southern and northern borders – and constructed alternate places of worship. He built idols – golden calves – and encouraged the nation to make sacrifice to them. He appointed non-Levite men as priests in his new order. In an effort to protect himself politically, he completely rebelled against the commandments of God. He started the Northern Kingdom down a path of disfavor with God that never ended.

The following diagram shows the kings of the North and the South, how they overlapped with one another, and the prophets that ministered during their various terms.

Saul, 1095-1055
 David, 1055-1015
 Solomon, 1015-975



Israel

The books of 1 and 2 Kings tell the stories of the kings of Israel and Judah, intermixed with one another. The books of Hosea, Amos, and Jonah were written by prophets to the Northern Kingdom. Elijah and Elisha were two of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament. They ministered to the Northern Kingdom,

although they did not leave specific books as part of their legacy. Their stories are also found in the books of 1 and 2 Kings.

The Kings

Name	Length of Reign	When He Took the Throne	Spiritual Quality
Jeroboam	22 yr	Death of Solomon	bad
Nadab	2 yr	2nd year of Asa	bad
Baasha	24 yr	3rd year of Asa	bad
Elah	2 yr	26th year of Asa	bad
Zimri	7 days	27th year of Asa	bad
Tibni	(Overlap with Omri)	27th year of Asa	bad
Omri	12 yr	27th year of Asa, sole reign 31st year of Asa	bad
Ahab	22 yr	38th year of Asa	bad
Ahaziah	2 yr	17th year of Jehoshaphat	bad
Joram	12 yr	2nd year of Jehoram	bad
Jehu	28 yr		good, turned bad
Jehoahaz	17 yr	23rd year of Joash	bad
Jehoash	16 yr	37th year of Joash	bad
Jeroboam II	41 yr	15th year of Amaziah	bad
Zechariah	6 mo	38th year of Azariah	bad
Shallum	1 mo	39th year of Azariah	bad
Menahem	10 yr	39th year of Azariah	bad
Pekahiah	2 yr	50th year of Azariah	bad
Pekah	20 yr	52nd year of Azariah	bad
Hoshea	9 yr	12th year of Ahaz	bad

The kings of the North were characteristically evil in the eyes of God. There was great instability in leadership. It was common for one man to become king by assassinating another king. The kings often led the nation into idol worship. The evil may have peaked under King Ahab. He certainly has the reputation for evil, but it may have been more a function of his wife Jezebel than Ahab directly (he basically let her run wild and let her drive the nation into Baal⁴ worship.) Ahab's father Omri was also an evil king. Omri is the one that established the capital of the Northern Kingdom in the city of Samaria.

Israel experienced a great deal of warfare during its history. The not only fought against Judah, but they fought other nations as well. Eventually Israel was conquered by the nation of Assyria in 721 BC. When the Assyrians conquered a nation, they sought to eliminate the culture of the people that they conquered. They came into Israel and rounded up the middle and upper classes of society. They took them to other lands, and settled one family in one city, another family in another city, etc. Thus if you were one of the captives, you would find yourself in a new place surrounded by a completely new culture with none of the other people from back home. Over a period of time (probably not a long period of time) you would simply be absorbed into the new culture. Your children would marry the children of your new neighbors. Your traditions, your religious practices, and your culture would die.

This is how the ten lost tribes of Israel became lost. The Assyrians disbursed them and they were never heard from again.

⁴ Baal was a pagan fertility god.

Note that the Assyrians left behind in Israel the underlings of society. People from neighboring pagan nations moved into the land to take up residence where the captives once lived. Thus the remnant that was left behind in Israel found themselves surrounded by new people with different cultures and different religious practices. Over time the Israelites began to intermarry with these pagan newcomers. Their descendants became the people known as Samaritans in the New Testament (named after the capital city of Samaria).

The Prophets

In spite of the fact that the leadership of the North was consistently evil, God sent prophets among them to try to woo them back into his favor. They steadfastly refused to be swayed.

Hosea

Hosea had a long ministry, which spanned the time of Jeroboam II through the end of the Northern Kingdom. The book of Hosea tells of his experiences with his wife Gomer. She left her place as his wife and sought other lovers. Eventually she was used up and sold herself into prostitution. Hosea purchased her back out of slavery and restored her to the place of his wife. His life is a metaphor of the way that God loves us and seeks to restore us to our place with him, even when we leave his favor and seek other "lovers."

Amos

Amos prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel. Jeroboam II did not attempt to lead the nation out of idolatry. During his reign, however, the nation experienced great military success. They reclaimed land that has been previously lost in other battles. Furthermore, God dealt with the nation mercifully during his reign. Economic suffering that they experienced in previous years was relieved. The nation reclaimed a degree of wealth. Jeroboam II reigned for forty-one years and died a natural death.

By the time that Jeroboam II died, the nation had experienced over a hundred years of political stability (which was unusual for the Northern Kingdom). During those years, they had transitioned from a nation of want to a nation of plenty. As is typical in a nation of plenty, a class system had arisen – the "have's" and the "have not's". The rich were oppressing the poor. This did not please God. God's standard, repeated over and over again in his law, is to take care of the widow and the orphan and the alien and the poor. The reason that he sent plentifulness on the land is that he wanted everyone to have plenty. He was not trying to create an economic climate wherein a few people could get very rich while many others did without.

This is the background for Amos. He came to a nation of God's chosen people who were engaged in idolatry and where the rich were oppressing the poor. He came to a nation that was basically "at ease." They needed to snap to attention or else they would lose the favor of God that they were so busy enjoying.

Note that Amos was from the nation of Judah, but was sent to prophesy in Israel.

Jonah

Jonah also prophesied under Jeroboam II. Jonah was from Israel and seems to have had an active prophetic ministry. The record that we have in the book of Jonah, however, describes his ministry to the city of Ninevah in the nation of Assyria.

God called Jonah to go to Ninevah and tell the people to repent. Jonah did not want to go. Along with most of the people in Israel, he hated the Assyrians. They were brutal enemies. Most Israelites would have liked to see the judgment of God fall on Assyria. Thus Jonah did not want to go tell them to repent so that they might be spared punishment.

He tried to flee from God and set sail on a boat – the opposite direction from Ninevah. God saw to it that he was thrown from the boat and swallowed by a large fish. He spent three days in the belly of the fish, thinking things over. Then the fish regurgitated him up onto the shore.

Jonah went to Ninevah and told everyone that God was going to kill them in forty days (note that this was not exactly God's message – God said that if they did not repent he would bring judgment in forty days). The people repented. Jonah got really mad when that happened. The last thing that he wanted was to see them spared. Furthermore, how would it make him look since he told them they were going to be killed in forty days? His credibility was shot. He went and sat in the shade to brood about it. God killed the plant that was providing him shade. He got even madder and told God to just go ahead and kill him. God showed Jonah how Jonah could get so emotional over a plant that he had not cultivated. How then could he expect God not to care for a people that he created?

Lessons from Jonah:

- God is the God of all the earth. You cannot hide from him.
- God has a heart for the whole earth. He wants the whole world reconciled to him. The people he calls his own are to be a nation of priests, reconciling the world to God.
- God is indeed a God of judgment, but he gives opportunities for repentance first.
- If you pervert the message of God to suit your own agendas, then it is not his problem if you end up looking foolish.
- God uses his physical world to illustrate his spiritual lessons. Look for it.

Elijah and Elisha

Out of all of the people in the Old Testament, the two that may have had the greatest “signs and wonders” ministries were Elijah and Elisha.

Elijah arose as prophet during the reign of Ahab. By being a faithful messenger of God, he was a constant thorn in the side of Ahab and his wife, Jezebel. Elijah is perhaps best known for the contest he staged with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. This was a sound defeat for the Baal worshippers in the nation.

Elisha succeeded Elijah in his prophetic ministry. Elisha carried on the ministry that had been given to Elijah and was a voice for righteousness in the nation. In some ways, their ministries echoed that of Moses and foreshadowed that of Jesus.

Like Moses,

- God led Elijah to Mount Sinai (Mount Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai) for a divine appointment.
- At Mount Sinai, God revealed his presence to Elijah.
- Both Elijah and Elisha saw God part the Jordan River so they could walk across on dry land.

Like Jesus,

- Both Elijah and Elisha raised the dead.
- Elisha fed a mass of people with a few loaves of bread.
- In a miracle similar to the multiplying of the loaves and fishes, both Elijah and Elisha were able to multiply oil or flour and oil.

- Elisha healed a leper.
- Elijah spent forty days in the wilderness. 1 Kings 19 tells us that Elijah's journey to Mount Horeb took forty days. The text implies that he may have fasted during that time like Jesus did during his forty days in the wilderness.
- Elisha called upon the miraculous power of God to help with what we might consider to be ordinary problems of life. In Matthew 17:24-27, Jesus told his disciples to find money to pay the temple tax in the mouth of a fish. In 2 Kings 6, Elisha asks God to make an axe head float to the surface of the water so that they will not lose it.

Malachi prophesied that someone would come in the spirit of Elijah as a precursor to the Messiah. This person would prepare the hearts of the people for the message of the Messiah. In Matthew 11, Jesus identified John the Baptist as this one who had come in the spirit of Elijah.

None of the prophets of the North were able to turn the nation back to God, but that was not their job. Their job was to be faithful and obedient. They were. Thus they were successful and they have left a legacy that benefits us all.

Judah

Judah experienced much more political stability than Israel. A descendant of David remained on the throne throughout the history of the nation. The nation also had some kings that were good in the eyes of God, although as a general rule they were bad.

The books of First and Second Kings give the history of the kings of Israel and Judah interspersed with one another. The books of First and Second Chronicles tell only the history of the kings of Judah.

The Kings

Name	Length of Reign	When He Took the Throne	Starting Age	Spiritual Quality
Rehoboam	17 yr	Death of Solomon	41	bad
Abijah	3 yr	18th year of Jeroboam		bad
Asa	41 yr	20th year of Jeroboam		good
Jehoshaphat	25 yr	4th year of Ahab	35	good
Jehoram	8 yr	5th year of Joram	32	bad
Ahaziah	1 yr	11th or 12th year of Jehoram	22	bad
Athaliah	7 yr	1st year of Jehu		bad
Joash	40 yr	7th year of Jehu	7	good then turned bad
Amaziah	29 yr	2nd year of Jehoash	25	good
Azariah (also called Uzziah)	52 yr	27th year of Jeroboam II	16	good
Jotham	16 yr	2nd year of Pekah	25	good
Ahaz	16 yr	17th year of Pekah	20	bad
Hezekiah	29 yr	3rd year of Hoshea	25	good
Manasseh	55 yr		12	bad
Amon	2 yr		22	bad
Josiah	31 yr		8	good
Jehoahaz	3 mo		23	bad
Jehoiakim	11 yr		25	bad
Jehoiachin	3 mo		18	bad

Zedekiah	11 yr		21	bad
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The Prophets

The prophets played the same role in Judah that they did in Israel. God sent them to address problems in the nation and to call the people back into righteousness. They encouraged the people at times and corrected them at others.

Isaiah

The opening of the book of Isaiah tells us that he was a prophet who served during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. This makes Isaiah a contemporary of Micah in Judah and Hosea in Israel. These were turbulent times. Hezekiah was king of Judah when Israel finally fell to the Assyrians. Their brothers to the north served as a stunning portrait to the citizens of Judah of what could happen if they persisted in unfaithfulness.

Uzziah, Isaiah's first king, was a righteous man for the most part. Judah experienced military success during his reign. His son Jotham succeeded him and again was a righteous man for the most part. Judah experienced military success under Jotham. Ahaz was another sort of king. Ahaz was a zealous Baal worshipper. He participated in child sacrifice. Because of his unfaithfulness, Judah experienced military problems during his reign. Ahaz turned to Assyria for help. This alliance later caused problems for Judah. Hezekiah was the fourth king that Isaiah served. Hezekiah was one of the best kings that Judah ever had. He experienced great favor with God. He inherited the Assyrian problem that Ahaz had created. Ahaz had left Judah subject to Assyria. Hezekiah fought to end that subjection. The fighting took a great toll on Judah. God finally gave Hezekiah victory, however.

This is the historical backdrop for the book of Isaiah, but who was Isaiah, the man? We know very little about him. The book of Isaiah identifies him as "son of Amoz" (not Amos the prophet). Tradition says that Amoz was the brother of King Amaziah of Judah, which would mean that Isaiah and Uzziah were cousins. Although we do not know whether or not this is true, it seems likely. Isaiah was a well-educated individual with free access to the "upper crust" of society. He was close to the kings of Judah and they respected him. He may well have been related to them. If he and Uzziah were cousins, then we may assume that he was quite a bit younger than Uzziah because he received his call from God the year that Uzziah died. His most active ministry occurred during the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah. It is obvious from the text of Isaiah and of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles that Hezekiah and Isaiah were quite close. Isaiah's influence may have been one of the primary reasons that Hezekiah was such a righteous king.

Tradition also accounts for Isaiah's death. It is said that Manasseh, Hezekiah's evil son, executed him. In fact, tradition says that Manasseh had his men saw Isaiah in two. Again, we do not know for sure whether or not this is true. Many people believe that Hebrews 11:37 is a reference to Isaiah's death.

The book of Isaiah is a problem for some biblical scholars, primarily because of the predictions it contains. Perhaps the greatest problem occurs in Isaiah 44:28-45:1, in which Isaiah names Cyrus, the king who will release the Jews from Babylonian captivity. This was written well over a hundred years before Babylonian captivity began. At the time of its writing, Babylon was not a world power. Since the text accurately discusses Babylonian captivity and even gives the name of the king who released the nation from captivity, the only conclusion that some people can draw is that this portion of the text must have been written after the captivity was over. Thus they conclude that there was more than one "Isaiah". The "real" Isaiah must have written the first part of the book and later parts of the book were written by other men and then added to Isaiah's writings. They refer to a "Deutero-Isaiah" and even a "Trito-Isaiah". Such a conclusion, however, overlooks the fact that God inspires Scripture. Some of prophecy is predictive in nature. God inspires these predictions and then brings them to fulfillment in order to demonstrate that he is God and that his word is true.

There have been different outlines proposed for the book of Isaiah, and they all agree in one area. The book is divided into two main sections. The first is chapters 1-39, which focuses on the judgment of God. The second is chapters 40-66, which focuses on the mercy and comfort of God. Oddly enough, the Bible itself consists of two groupings. The Old Testament consists of the first 39 books of the Bible, and it has more of a focus on the judgment of God. The New Testament consists of 27 books (books 40-66) and it has more of a focus on the mercy and comfort of God. Do not be too quick to try to draw theological significance from this parallel. The books of the Bible were written without chapters. They were added hundreds of years after the fact. Still it is an interesting observation.

Interspersed throughout the sixty-six chapters is a great deal of messianic prophecy. Isaiah eagerly anticipated the coming of the Lord.

The name "Isaiah" means "The Salvation of Jehovah." It is a fitting name. The salvation of God is a two-edged sword, having his judgment on one side and his mercy and comfort on the other. It was delivered to the world through his Messiah. The book of Isaiah is a warning and a promise of this salvation.

Isaiah is without a doubt one of the most important books in the Bible. Everyone knows verses from Isaiah, even if he does not know that he knows verses from Isaiah. It is quoted heavily in the New Testament, but also in other places (e.g. much of the text of Handel's Messiah is from Isaiah). Some of the better-known passages from Isaiah include:

Isaiah 7:14:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Isaiah 9:6:

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.

Isaiah 11:1-6:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD – and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. 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.

Isaiah 53:5-6:

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Luke 4:18-19 is actually a quote of Isaiah 61:1-2:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach 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,

This is a very light sampling of the treasures that are found in the Book of Isaiah.

Jeremiah (Including the Book of Lamentations)

There was a popular song around 1970 called "Joy to the World." It began with the line, "Jeremiah was a bullfrog. Was a good friend of mine." There is no biblical evidence to support the conclusion that Jeremiah was indeed a bullfrog and there is nothing to indicate that the author of the song ever knew the prophet. Furthermore, his message was primarily one of judgment rather than joy to the world.

Jeremiah is the author of the book that bears his name plus the book of Lamentations. More is known about the man Jeremiah than most of the other prophets because his writings reveal a great deal about him. He is somewhat more introspective than most of the other prophets and displays a great deal of emotion. Jeremiah is often called the "weeping prophet," because he displays so much pain in his writings. But Jeremiah had a great deal to cause him pain.

His ministry probably began soon after that of Zephaniah closed. Habakkuk and Obadiah prophesied early in his ministry. Ezekiel probably began his ministry before Jeremiah's death. This places him at a very strategic time in the history of Judah and of the world. He began his ministry during the reign of Josiah. Josiah was the last good king that Judah had. Josiah was killed in a battle when he was trying to prevent Egypt from defending Assyria against Babylon. Four years later, Babylon returned to take on Egypt. In 605 BC at the battle of Carchemish, Babylon defeated Egypt. In that part of the world, there were no more powers to confront the Babylonians. Assyria had been wiped out. Israel was gone. Egypt was subdued. Babylon reigned. Judah was very much subject to Babylonian authority.

The period from 609 BC (when Josiah died) to 586 BC saw four different kings cycle through Judah. The last king was Zedekiah. The majority of Jeremiah's prophecies took place under Zedekiah. Jeremiah did not get along with this king and as a result Jeremiah spent much of his life in prison. In 589 BC, Zedekiah attempted to rebel against Babylon. The result was Babylonian invasion, which ended with the destruction of all of Jerusalem, including the temple. Many people fled for safety. A group of Jews headed for Egypt and forced Jeremiah to go with them. He died there after having seen his homeland conquered and destroyed.

Jeremiah did not have an easy life. His message is indeed full of gloom and doom, because that really was what was facing the nation. His writings will teach us much about the man, much about the history of the world at that time, and much about the nature of God.

Jeremiah wrote the book of prophecy that bears his name. He also wrote the book of Lamentations. It was written shortly after the fall of Judah to Babylon. The entire book laments the fall of Jerusalem. It is an expression of pain and dismay – crying out to God for comfort. Jews today still feel this pain. The book is read annually to commemorate the destruction of the temple. It is common to see people reading it at the Wailing Wall. In some Christian traditions, the book is read as part of Holy Week observances as a way of remembering the terrible consequences of sin.

Joel

Although parts of the book of Joel are well known and widely quoted, very little is known about the book or its author. We can rely neither on tradition nor on content to place the book historically. Thus we do not know the conditions and historical setting in which the prophet ministered. The text seems to favor a preexilic setting – perhaps even a late preexilic setting – but such a conclusion is only conjecture. Nobody really knows when Joel lived.

The message of Joel is similar in nature to the message of the other prophets that we have considered. There is a threat of judgment for sin with a suggestion that the people should repent. There is a lengthy discussion of the misery that would be inflicted by the judgment. There is hope of restoration at the end.

Probably the best-known passage in Joel is Joel 2:28-31:

And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.

Obadiah

Obadiah is the shortest book of the Old Testament. It is short enough that it is only broken into verses and not chapters. Obadiah was a contemporary of Jeremiah and of Habakkuk. He lived at a time when both Egypt and Babylon threatened Judah. Assyria was no longer a real power.

This short book contains a message of judgment against the Edomites. The reasons that are given for the judgment include arrogance, violence against Judah, and failure to come to Judah's aid at her time of need.

Micah

Very little is known about the prophet Micah. The first verse of his book gives us the only real biographical information that we have, and it is very limited. It tells us that he is from the town of Moresheth, which was a small Judean village. It tells us that he ministered during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, which would make him a contemporary of Isaiah in Judah and Hosea in Israel. The introduction to Isaiah describes the political and military events that transpired during this period. It was a turbulent time, which saw the fall of the Northern Kingdom and great reduction of the Southern Kingdom.

Micah ministered to the same people as Isaiah and his message was very similar. He may best be remembered for his prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Micah was known and respected by the people of his time. We have evidence of this, because a generation after his death, we see the elders of Israel quote Micah in Jeremiah 26:18

Nahum

Almost nothing is known about the prophet Nahum. Scholars generally date his ministry to be during the reign of Josiah. This would make him a contemporary of Zephaniah. The young Jeremiah may have begun his ministry during Nahum's time. Habakkuk may also have been a contemporary.

The book of Nahum is three chapters in length. The bulk of the book is devoted to prophecy against Assyria, pronouncing God's judgment upon them because of:

- Idolatry and witchcraft – other gods. (Nahum 1:14, Nahum 3:4)
- Cruelty towards fellow man (the bulk of the book)

History records that Assyria did indeed meet its downfall during the time of Josiah. It was defeated soundly by Babylon. In fact, Egypt and Assyria formed an alliance against Babylon. Josiah tried to stop them and was killed in the process. Nahum probably saw his prophecy come true during his lifetime.

Habakkuk

Habakkuk's ministry is typically dated as occurring during the reigns of Josiah, Jehoahaz, and Jehoiakim. This might have made him a contemporary of Nahum, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and Obadiah. It was a time when Assyrian power had begun to subside and Babylon had become the major world threat. It was also a time when Judah was experiencing harassment by Egypt.

The book deals with the problem of evil in Judah and predicts that God will use the nation of Babylon to punish Judah for its evil.

Habakkuk contains a few very well known verses.

Habakkuk 2:4:

See, he is puffed up;
his desires are not upright –
but the righteous will live by his faith

Paul quotes this in Romans 1:17 and in Galatians 3:11. Tradition says that it was this verse ringing through the mind of Martin Luther that triggered the Protestant Reformation.

Habakkuk 2:20:

... But the Lord is in his holy temple;
let all the earth be silent before him.

The last two lines of this passage have been turned into many an anthem and many choirs have sung them as a call to worship or a benediction. This book is their source.

Zephaniah

The opening of the book of Zephaniah gives biographical information about him. He ministered during the reign of Josiah. He was the great-great grandson of Hezekiah. Because of that, like Isaiah he probably had free access to royalty and to the leaders of the nation. Thus his words probably had an important impact on the direction of the nation. As is common in prophecy, Zephaniah's words consist of a series of warnings to specific nations about how God intends to deal with them. Zephaniah's prophecies are addressed to Judah, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Cush, Assyria, and then specifically to Jerusalem.

The Fall of Judah

Against the advice of Isaiah, Ahaz formed a military alliance with the nation of Assyria, shortly before Assyria conquered Israel. Assyria was an extremely powerful nation. By forming this alliance with Assyria, Judah became subject to Assyria.

Hezekiah succeeded Ahaz. When Sargon II of Assyria died in 705 BC, Hezekiah rebelled against the Assyrian influence. Sennacherib came to the Assyrian throne. Hezekiah anticipated an attack and fortified Jerusalem and some other cities. He built the water tunnel into Jerusalem. In 701 the attack came. Forty-six Judean fortified cities were taken. While encamped outside Jerusalem one night an angel killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. Jerusalem was saved but Judah was greatly reduced and Hezekiah did end up paying tribute to Sennacherib.

Following Hezekiah are Manasseh, Amon, and Josiah. Josiah was righteous and made religious reforms. Judah enjoyed peace with Assyria during the reign of these kings.

Around 614 BC, the Babylonians and the Medes formed an alliance and attacked and subdued Assyria. The king of Babylon was Nabopolassar and his son was Nebuchadnezzar. Pharaoh Neco II of Egypt tried to assist the king of Assyria. In 609 BC, Josiah was killed in Megiddo trying to stop Neco. Jehoahaz succeeded him. On the way back from battle, Neco deposed Jehoahaz and put Jehoiakim in his place as king. Judah became a puppet state of Egypt.

In 605 BC at the battle of Carchemish, Babylon defeated Egypt under General Nebuchadnezzar. Then Nabopolassar died back home. Nebuchadnezzar returned home. This spared Egypt from becoming completely a Babylonian vassal that year (and also Judah since Judah was a puppet of Egypt). In 604 and 603 Nebuchadnezzar returned to the area with renewed military campaigns. Jehoiakim broke away from Egypt and became a Babylonian vassal.

Jehoiakim rebelled around 601 and was captured. Jehoiachin succeeded him. He ruled until March 16, 597, and gave up when the city was sacked. In 597 BC was the first deportation of people from Judah to Babylon. (Daniel would have been one of the earlier exiles to Babylon.) Babylon treated its conquered people differently than Assyria. They were taken away, but allowed to live in communities and to retain their identities. They had fairly prosperous lives in Babylon. Ezekiel would have been taken in the first deportation and prophesied from Babylon.

Jehoiachin was taken to Babylon and his uncle, Zedekiah, was put in his place. The bulk of Jeremiah's prophecies were under Zedekiah. Jeremiah did not like him.

Zedekiah rebelled around 589. Babylon sieged Judah and ravaged it. In 587-586 BC they totally destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple. Zedekiah fled towards Jericho. He was captured and taken to Babylon. He was forced to watch his sons being slain and then he had his eyes put out. The second deportation was in 586 BC.

Nebuchadnezzar set up Gedaliah as king over what was left of Judah. His capital was at Mizpeh (Jerusalem was gone). Jeremiah had the option to go to Babylon or to stay and he chose to stay (even though it was probably much nicer in Babylon). Gedaliah was assassinated. Nebuchadnezzar sent his army. Many people fled to Egypt and they made Jeremiah go with them. They set up a Jewish colony in Egypt called Elephantine. The third deportation to Babylon occurred in 592 BC.

The Exile

The exile lasted from 597 - 539 BC. The Jews in Babylon were not really slaves. They led lives of relative freedom and financial success. Many rose to high positions. In spite of that, they were captives in a foreign land and never lost the desire to return home.

Daniel and Ezekiel were written during this period.

The Babylonian Empire was short-lived. Nebuchadnezzar died. The Persians and Medes gathered to fight them. (The Persian king was Cyrus.) Babylon fell in 540 BC.

Ezekiel

Ezekiel was born in Judah. In 597 BC Jehoiachin surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar and the first deportation occurred. Ezekiel was taken to Babylon at this time. It was 11 years before Zedekiah's rebellion brought final destruction to Jerusalem. Ezekiel 1:3 tells us that Ezekiel was a priest and thus a descendant of Levi. More than anything, Ezekiel was a man who heard the voice of God and did what he said to do. He was

faithful to carry God's message to those who needed to hear it. He was a man who loved and feared God and responded in obedience. That is what made him special.

The book of Ezekiel contains some of the weirdest images to be found anywhere in the Bible. It opens with a vision of winged creatures with four faces that ride about on a wheel-in-a-wheel. Chapter 37 has the well-known vision of the valley of dry bones that come back to life. These are not the sort of dreams that a person has at night and then still wakes up the next day feeling rested. Ezekiel was a man of dramatic and significant visions from God.

Ezekiel ministered to people in exile. He was a voice reminding them who they were in spite of the fact that they were dwelling as captives in a foreign land. He helped them to understand why their homeland was being destroyed and he helped them to keep alive the hope that they would one day be restored to their land.

Daniel

In the English Bible, Daniel is included in the section that contains the writings of the prophets. This is not true in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible has three major groupings. The first are the books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The second grouping is the prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel (1 and 2 Samuel are one book in Hebrew), Kings (1 and 2 Kings are one book in Hebrew), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The last grouping is the writings: Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles (1 and 2 Chronicles are one book in Hebrew). Its positioning indicates that the people who organized the Hebrew canon of Scripture considered Daniel to be more of a book of history than a book of prophecy. Notice that it is grouped with the historical exilic and post-exilic books of Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

In fact, Daniel is a book of history and of prophecy. The book contains twelve chapters. The first six contain a historical narrative. The last six are apocalyptic. Apocalyptic literature is prophetic in nature. Apocalyptic literature is normally a recording of a dream or a vision. Such was the case with Daniel. Other sections of Scripture that are apocalyptic in nature include the book of Revelation, the latter part of the book of Ezekiel (roughly chapters 37 - 48), and most of the first seven chapters of Zechariah.

The apocalyptic sections of Daniel have challenged commentators and students of the Bible for years. Pick up any two commentaries and you will find at least two different interpretations between them. Be wary of anyone who will offer a sure-fire infallible explanation of the images in the vision. The fact that so many people confidently disagree on their meaning indicate that this is not a place for dogmatic interpretations. Still, the images have been given to us for a reason and they are worthy of our attention and study.

Daniel had many similarities with Joseph, son of Jacob. Although captive, he rose to a position of importance in the government of Babylon. He was in a position of influence and he was a voice of righteousness in that land. He suffered persecution because of his faithfulness (i.e. being thrown into the lion's den) as did his faithful friends (i.e. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the furnace), but God preserved them all. His ability to interpret dreams won him favor and guided the course of nations.

Restoration and Rebuilding

With Babylon defeated, the Jews began a process of returning to their homeland to rebuild. Judah had been destroyed. In particular, the city of Jerusalem – including Solomon's temple – had been destroyed. When the people returned to their land, land was all that was really there for them. It was time to rebuild the nation.

The Cyrus Decree

Cyrus was the Persian king who overthrew the Babylonians. In 539 BC he issued the edict to let the Jews return to Judah. This fulfilled the prophecies of Isaiah. In fact, there are four edicts mentioned in Scripture for the Jews to return to Judah.

Cyrus issued the first decree. It is mentioned in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and in Ezra 1:1-4. This was a decree to rebuild the temple. The second decree was given by Darius I and is found in Ezra 6:1-12. It is a confirmation and strengthening of Cyrus' decree. Again, it references the temple only. Artaxerxes gives a decree in Ezra 7:11-26. The focus of this is the reinstatement of the ordinances of the temple. The last decree that we find is that of Artaxerxes in Nehemiah 2:1-9. This decree commissioned Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the city itself, particularly the walls.

A man named Zerubbabel led the building of the temple. In 515 BC it was finished.

Cyrus (559-530 BC) was followed by several Persian kings, including Cambyses (530-522 BC), Smerdis (522 BC), Darius I (521-486 BC), Xerxes (also known as Ahasuerus) (485-465 BC), and Artaxerxes I (also known as Artashasta) (464-424 BC). Darius I was king when Haggai and Zechariah prophesied. He was king when the temple was completed. Ezra ministered during his reign, and continued to minister on into the reign of Artaxerxes. Xerxes was the king who made Esther queen. Artaxerxes I was the king during the ministry of Nehemiah and during the ministry of Malachi.

Note that the rebuilding process was a bit “uneven.” The people got distracted from rebuilding the temple – which should have been the first priority – and focused on rebuilding their own homes and livelihoods. The primary focus of the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah as well as the ministry of Ezra was to spur the people on with the temple rebuilding.

After the prophecies of Malachi, there were approximately 400 “years of silence” until the coming of John the Baptist, who is the last prophet of the old covenant.

Ezra and Nehemiah

Ezra and Nehemiah were most likely a single book in their original form. In some earlier versions of the Bible (e.g., the Septuagint) they appeared as a single book. Whether or not they were written as a single book, they do appear to have been written by the same author, who was probably the same person that wrote Chronicles. Chronicles is a history of the united monarchy and of the Southern Kingdom, beginning at the time of Saul became king and going through the fall of the Southern Kingdom. It ends with the decree of Cyrus (which paved the way for the exiles to return), which is exactly how Ezra opens (with almost the identical words as Chronicles). Ezra/Nehemiah tells the history of the post-exilic period, when the people returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the city. It carries the history of the nation through the time of Malachi, which begins the 400 years of silence before the coming of Jesus.

Ezra and Nehemiah were historical figures who participated in and provided leadership for the return and the rebuilding. Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries. The focus of the book of Ezra is on the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of the observances of the offerings, sacrifices, and festivals of Judaism. The focus of Nehemiah is on the rebuilding of the walls of the city.

Esther

The book of Esther takes place during the time of Xerxes (also known as Ahasuerus), which is why it is placed in the post-exilic section. In fact, it describes an event in the life of Jews who were still living outside of the Promised Land.

When Cyrus issued his decree, anyone who wanted could have returned to Judah. Few people actually returned at that time (compared to the number of Jews who were living under Persian rule). More returned at later times, but communities of Jewish people were well established outside the confines of the borders of Israel by this time. Esther was a member of such a community.

The book is a piece of history. It shows how the faithful and brave act of one woman was able to spare a whole race of people from pain and destruction. God was able to work through the life of Esther to bring about deliverance to his people.

Haggai

Haggai is a minor prophet who prophesied during the post-exilic period, particularly coincident with Ezra Chapter 5. His recorded prophetic activity only covered several months – from "the second year of King Darius on the first day of the sixth month" (Haggai 1:1) through "the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month of the second year of Darius" (Haggai 2:10). Still he made a big impact on the people and God used him to spur the people on to get the temple rebuilt.

Zechariah

Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai. The opening verse of the book dates his first prophecy as "In the eighth month of the second year of Darius", which was the same year as all of Haggai's prophecy. Like Haggai, God used him to encourage the people to get on with the task of rebuilding the temple. Zechariah's role of prophet lasted longer than that of Haggai and his body of prophecy is bigger, containing much messianic prophecy.

Malachi

Malachi was a contemporary of Nehemiah. Between the time that Nehemiah returned to King Artaxerxes and the time he came back to Jerusalem, the people had deviated badly from being faithful to the requirements of the law. Malachi was present during this time and prophesied against their unfaithfulness. Why were the people so quick to fall into unfaithfulness? They impatiently waited for the glorious future promised by the prophets and for the time when God would come to his temple in power, exalting Israel before other nations. They got tired of waiting and began to doubt God's love and his willingness to fulfill his covenant. Malachi was a voice of rebuke in their midst, although we know that they did not really turn around until Nehemiah returned.

The Intertestamental Period

The writing of the Old Testament ceased around 400 years before the birth of Christ. Although we have no recorded Scripture from that period, God did not cease working with his people and accomplishing his purpose through the events of history. Understanding the events of this period provides an important background for understanding the events of the New Testament.

Political Developments

When the Old Testament closed, the Persian/Mede coalition dominated. Under Persian rule, the Jews were allowed a great deal of religious freedom, including religious freedom.

The Greeks

In 332 BC Alexander the Great, a Greek, was in the process of dominating of the known world. He conquered the Persians and took control of the land of Israel. This Greek military conquest had the side effect of spreading Greek culture and the Greek language. The world adopted Greek as the common language of business. Educated people could converse in Greek. God gave the world a very rich and a universal language that would be used to write the New Testament. During this time, the Jews who had settled in Egypt (Elephantine) translated the Scriptures of the Old Testament into Greek, producing the Septuagint. This became a universally available Bible to the people of the time (i.e. a copy of the Scriptures in the language of the people). When the Old Testament is quoted in the New Testament, it is typically the Septuagint that is being quoted.

Alexander's rule only lasted around 10 years.

The Seleucids

Alexander died in 323 BC. At his death, his empire was split up among four of his generals, including Ptolemy and Seleucus. Palestine became part of a larger province that included Syria and Phoenicia. It came under control of the Ptolemies, who also ruled Egypt. Judea, which was the name given to the area predominantly inhabited by the Jews, was set up as a separate administrative unit. The Ptolemies allowed the high priest in Jerusalem to rule politically over Judea.

In time, war broke out between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids for control of Palestine. In 198 BC, the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III took control of Judea. His son, Antiochus IV Epiphanes succeeded him as ruler of the area. Antiochus Epiphanes was very intolerant of Judaism. He tried to force Hellenistic religion upon the people and he tried to forbid the practice of Judaism. His activities included such things as slaughtering a pig on the altar of the temple in Jerusalem.

The Maccabean Revolt and the Hasmoneans

The intolerance of Antiochus touched off a revolt among the Jews. Led by a man named Judas Maccabee, this revolt broke off Seleucid rule. By 140 BC, the Seleucids had been driven away. For the first time since Judah fell to Babylon, the Jews had independence in their own land. Judas Maccabee was a member of the Hashmon family. This period in Jewish history is called the Hasmonean period.

Note that Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights, is a celebration of the reconsecration of the temple by Judas Maccabee.

Things were not perfect under the Hasmoneans. The Hasmonean leaders were heavily influenced by Hellenism, which caused problems for the more conservative Jewish leaders, particularly the Pharisees. The Hasmoneans set out on a policy of territorial expansion. They pushed their boundaries to the Mediterranean and into the Negev. When they conquered a new area, they forced the residents to convert to Judaism. Among those forced into Judaism were the Idumeans.

The Hasmonean kingdom reached its greatest size under the ruler Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 BC). He was a cruel leader who came into a great deal of conflict with the Pharisees. When he died, his widow, Salome Alexandra took over. She was received more favorably than had been her husband.

Salome Alexandra died in 67 BC. At her death, her two sons, Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, fought over the throne. Different parties formed around the two sons. Hyrcanus had a strong supporter in an Idumean

named Antipater. The struggle between the Hyrcanus and Aristobulus resulted in civil war, which lasted until the Romans came in 63 BC.

Rome

In 63 BC, under the leadership of Pompey, the Romans took control of Palestine from the Hasmoneans.

Rome did not get heavily involved in the administration of Roman provinces. They divided their conquered areas into various administrative districts and appointed people to rule over these districts. There are different sorts of titles that go along with these positions. Some were called kings. Others were called tetrarchs, ethnarchs, procurators, proconsuls or praefectus. There was a certain status implied in which title one bore, but each of them was a governor, subject to the emperor in Rome. When a man was given control of a district, that control was fairly absolute. He could rule it as he saw fit. He oversaw the military there. He administered justice. As long as he maintained order and sent his due taxes to Rome, they left him alone. About the only exception to this applied to Roman citizens. A Roman citizen had the right to appeal to Caesar rather than accept a sentence from his governor.

When Pompey took Palestine, he divided it up into various administrative districts. Only those areas with significant Jewish populations were left as part of Judea. He set up Judea as a state, subject to Rome. Leadership was divided between Hyrcanus, who was made ethnarch and high priest, and the Idumean Antipater, who became proconsul. Antipater appointed his son, Phasael, as governor of Jerusalem and his other son, Herod, as the governor of Galilee.

In 40 BC, the Parthians invaded Judea. Hyrcanus was removed as high priest. His nephew, Antigonus (son of Aristobulus) was put in his place. He remained in office only three years.

When the Parthian invasion occurred, Herod fled to Rome. He convinced the emperor to make him king of Judea. He returned with the Roman army in 37 BC and defeated the Parthians. He also took Idumea, Samaria, and Galilee. Herod was in control and the remnant of the Hasmonean dynasty was gone.

Herod lived a very colorful life. He managed to stay in power even though there was intrigue in high places in the empire. He lived and retained his power through the assassination of Julius Caesar. He managed to switch loyalties at just the right time when Octavius defeated Mark Antony. He was at constant political odds with Cleopatra of Egypt. His own life was a tangled web of intrigue, as evidenced by the fact that he executed his favorite wife, his brother-in-law, his mother-in-law, and several of his sons because he suspected them of wanting to take his position.

By and large, the Jews hated Herod. He did make attempts to appease them. One of the most significant things that he did was to undertake a massive remodeling of the temple. When Herod took office, the temple in Jerusalem was Zerubbabel's temple, built under the Cyrus decree. Herod greatly expanded and enhanced the temple complex and produced what became known as Herod's temple. This is the temple that stood in Jesus' day.

When Herod died, his kingdom was divided among his three surviving sons. Archelaus was given Judea. Herod Antipas received Galilee. Philip received the territory in the northeastern part of the kingdom.

Archelaus ruled only ten years. In AD 6, he was exiled and Rome began to rule Judea directly. Governors were sent directly from Rome to oversee affairs. The best known of these was Pontius Pilate.

The Jews really had a great deal of autonomy under this arrangement. The Sanhedrin existed as a ruling body for the Jews. The Sanhedrin was the Jewish supreme court. They were subject to Roman authority but Rome took a very hands-off approach to their affairs. As long as peace prevailed, the Romans were satisfied. Technically the Sanhedrin did not have the authority to administer capital punishment, but Rome

often seemed to turn its eyes on that as well. We see in the case of Jesus that the Sanhedrin brought Jesus to Rome for execution, but in the case of Stephen they took matters into their own hands.

This arrangement lasted until AD 37. At that time, the emperor Caligula appointed Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, to be king over Judea, as well as over the territories previously served by his uncles Philip and Herod Antipas. He ruled until AD 44. He was very tolerant of his subjects and did a great deal to prevent Roman interference with their religious practices. When he died, however, a series of very corrupt Roman governors followed. This resulted in Jewish resentment, which culminated in the Jewish revolt of AD 66 to 70. The Jews tried to break off Roman rule. In the spring of AD 70, the Roman general Titus led his troops into Jerusalem and destroyed the city, including Herod's temple.

Roman domination had an important benefit to the church. The Romans were brutal to their enemies, but the result of that was that peace prevailed among their subjects, who were afraid to do anything but submit. Because of that, international travel was easy and common. This made it easy for the gospel to spread.

The Herodian Dynasty

The family of Herod the Great made an indelible mark upon the events of the New Testament. The following chart gives information about the descendants of Herod.

- Herod the Great, King of Palestine 37 - 4 BC. Mentioned in Matthew 2, Luke 1:5.
 - Antipater
 - Alexander
 - Herod Aristobulus
 - Herod of Chalcis
 - Herod Agrippa I, King of Palestine AD 37 - 44. In Acts 12 he killed James and put Peter in prison. Mentioned in Acts 12:1-23.
 - Herod Agrippa II, served as tetrarch in the north AD 50 - 70. Paul was on trial before him in Acts 25. Mentioned in Acts 25:13 - 26:32.
 - Drusilla, wife of Felix, procurator of Judea, AD 52 - 59. Paul was tried before Felix in Acts 23-24.
 - Bernice, married her uncle, Herod of Chalcis. She was present with her brother, Herod Agrippa II at Paul's trial in Acts 25. Mentioned in Acts 25:13 - 26:32.
 - Herodias, first married her uncle, Philip, and then later married her other uncle Herod Antipas. This set the stage for conflict between Herod Antipas and John the Baptist (see Matthew 14). Mentioned in Matthew 14:3-12, Mark 6:17-29, Luke 3:19.
 - Herod Philip I, married his niece Herodias, but she later left him and married Herod Antipas. Mentioned in Matthew 14:3, Mark 6:17.
 - Herod Antipas, served as tetrarch of Galilee and Perea 4 BC - AD 39. He had John the Baptist beheaded in Matthew 14 and he was one of the judges who dealt with Jesus in Luke 23. Mentioned in Matthew 14:1-12, Mark 6, Mark 8:15, Luke 3:1, Luke 3:19-20, Luke 9:7-9, Luke 13:31-32, Luke 23:7-15, Acts 4:27, Acts 13:1.
 - Herod Archelaus, served as ethnarch of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea, 4 BC - AD 6. He is mentioned in Matthew 2. When Joseph returned from Egypt, he was afraid of Archelaus and thus settled in Nazareth (the domain of Herod Antipas) rather than in Judea. He is mentioned in Matthew 2:22.
 - Herod Philip II, served as tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis from 4 BC - AD 34. Married Salome, daughter of Herodias. Mentioned in Luke 3:1.

The Caesars

- Julius Caesar

The first triumvirate consisted of Pompey, Crassius, and Julius Caesar. It began in around 60 BC as a political alliance, designed to secure control of the country but at the same time distribute the power among three men. Crassius died. Pompey and Julius Caesar began a struggle for power that resulted in civil war. From this body of three, Julius Caesar emerged as dictator. Technically he was not an emperor, because the Roman Empire began with Augustus. Still he established Rome as a nation with a government under a single individual. Julius Caesar died on March 15, 44 BC.

- Augustus

After the death of Julius Caesar, the second triumvirate arose. This consisted of Mark Antony, Lepidus, and Octavian, an adopted son of Julius Caesar. Antony never really accepted Octavian. Eventually they battled for control. On September 2, 31 BC, a civil war was ended between Octavian and Mark Antony, with Octavian emerging as the undisputed leader. After he was the official leader of the nation, he took the name Augustus. Caesar Augustus reigned at the time of the birth of Jesus. He remained in office until his death in AD 14. Augustus is recognized as the first "official" emperor of Rome.

- Tiberius

Tiberius was emperor from AD 14 - 37. The city of Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee was built in his honor. He was not a well-liked leader and there was much rejoicing when he died. Tiberius is mentioned by name in Luke 3:1 and is referred to as Caesar in other places. He was emperor during the public ministry of Jesus. In the story where the people asked Jesus if it was lawful to pay taxes and he asked them whose picture was on the coin, it would have been Tiberius' picture that they saw. In AD 19, Tiberius expelled the Jews from Rome, although they later were allowed to return.

- Gaius, also known as Caligula

Gaius was emperor from AD 37 - 41. Gaius started out as a popular leader, but it soon became apparent that he had an illness that made him insane. He became an unpredictable tyrant and was assassinated. One of the things that he did to offend his subjects was to order that a statue of himself be placed in the temple in Jerusalem.

- Claudius

Claudius was emperor from AD 41 - 54. Claudius had great accomplishments in public life, bringing about many improvements in public buildings, building harbors, etc. He had a very chaotic private life, however, and put to death many people whom he considered to be enemies. Claudius was tolerant of Jews in the empire, although he did not allow them to assemble in the city of Rome because their numbers were too great. He is the emperor that put his friend, Herod Agrippa I in power. Claudius is assumed to be the emperor that eventually expelled the Jews from Rome because they were having internal problems over "Chrestus." Among those expelled were Aquila and Priscilla.

- Nero

Nero was emperor from AD 54 - 68. Nero was a stepson of Claudius. He was a self-indulgent spoiled brat. His time and the empire's money were spent on satisfying Nero's fancies. During his reign, the capital city burned. Many believe that Nero set the fire himself so that he would have a reason to build himself a lavish new capital. He needed to blame someone for the fire, however, so he chose a new religious sect called the Christians. He began official persecution of Christians and burned many of them alive for public sport. Many believe that this persecution is the backdrop for the book of

Hebrews. His cruel treatment of Christians won them public sympathy and cost his public support. Nero eventually committed suicide. In Acts 25 when Paul appealed to Caesar, Nero would have been the Caesar to whom he appealed.

- Galba

Galba was emperor from AD 68-69. He succeeded Nero, but there was a great political struggle in Rome over who should be the next emperor. Early in AD 69 Galba was executed.

- Otho

Otho was emperor for part of AD 69. Otho was put in power after the death of Galba, but he was not well accepted either. He committed suicide in April of AD 69.

- Vitellius

Vitellius was emperor for part of AD 69. Vitellius succeeded Otho. Vespasian was already mounting opposition. Vitellius was killed by Vespasian's troops in December of AD 69.

- Vespasian

Vespasian was emperor from AD 69 - 79. Vespasian was emperor at the time that the rebellion in Palestine came to a head. His son, Titus, was the general that led the armies to destroy Jerusalem.

- Titus

Titus was emperor from AD 79 - 81. He was a popular leader who succeeded his father, but he died soon after becoming Caesar.

- Domitian

Domitian was emperor from AD 81 - 96. When Titus died, his brother Domitian became emperor. Domitian was an intolerant tyrant who engaged in bloody persecution of any who opposed him, especially on religious grounds.

Developments Within Judaism

Between the close of Malachi's prophesy and the beginning of the first century, several developments occurred in Judaism.

Herod's Temple

As already mentioned, Herod's temple was constructed during this intertestamental period. It was a massive remodeling project undertaken on Zerubbabel's temple by Herod in order to placate the Jews.

The Hebrew Scriptures

During the intertestamental period, the canon of Hebrew Scripture was closed and was organized into the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Jews living in Egypt (at Elephantine) translated the Old Testament in the common language (Greek). This version of the Hebrew Scriptures was known as the

Septuagint. When the Old Testament is quoted in the New Testament, it is normally the Septuagint that is being quoted.

Synagogues and Rabbinism

While the Jews were living in Babylon, separated from the Temple, the synagogue became a permanent fixture in Jewish life, focusing on a teaching-based, nonsacrificial form of worship. Rabbinism came into being, with the rabbis, or teachers emerging as an important part of the culture.

Factions Within Judaism

The Jews themselves began organizing into factions. The primary parties of Jews were the Sadducees, with an emphasis on a very legalistic study of the law, and the Pharisees, with an emphasis on the priesthood. Two other factions existed as well. The Essenes were a separatist group, seeing the Sadducees and Pharisees as being somewhat apostate. They tended to live in communities off to themselves. The community at Qumran, which preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls, was one such community. John the Baptist is thought to have been heavily influenced by the Essenes. The other faction is the Zealots, which was more of a political movement, seeking political freedom for the nation.

New Testament History

The New Testament is not a stand-alone history. It is a continuation of the story that began in Genesis. It is the climax of God's attempt to bring man back into reconciliation with himself.

John the Baptist, The Last of the Old Testament Prophets

The story of the New Testament really begins with the ministry of John the Baptist. John was the last prophet of the Old Covenant. Through the prophet Malachi (Malachi 4:5) God said that he would send another prophet in the spirit of Elijah who would prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. John the Baptist was that person. He came to call people to repentance, preparing them for the coming Savior.

John and Jesus were cousins of some sort, although it is unlikely that they knew each other very well.

John baptized Jesus, and this event was essentially Jesus' coronation. It inaugurated him into his ministry.

John fell out of favor with Herod Antipas and was beheaded.

The ministry of John is described in all four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Jesus

The four Gospels are primarily biographies of the life of Jesus. Followers of Jesus who wanted to tell the world his story wrote them. Matthew and John were among the twelve disciples. Mark was a young man during the ministry of Jesus, too young to be a disciple. The early church met in his home in Jerusalem. He accompanied Paul and Barnabus on their first missionary journey (at first, but then left them). He was a close companion of Peter during most of his ministry. Luke may not have known Jesus first-hand; we have no indication that he was present during the ministry of Jesus. He was a traveling companion of Paul,

present on the second missionary journey (joining him at Acts 16:10 to be precise). Luke researched the events of the life of Jesus in order to produce his biography.

Birth

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell of the birth of Jesus. He was born of a virgin, conceived by the Holy Spirit. This set him apart from every other man. He was born in Bethlehem, the birthplace of his ancestor David, in fulfillment of a prophecy of Micah (Micah 5:2). He grew up in the city of Nazareth in Galilee, in the home of Joseph the carpenter and his wife Mary. He had brothers and sisters. He remained there until he was about thirty years of age.

At thirty, Jesus left Nazareth and went to be baptized of John. He went into the wilderness for forty days, to be tested and to spend time with the Holy Spirit. It seems to have been during this period that Jesus got a clear picture of who he was and what his mission was to be.

Teaching

Jesus came for two purposes:

1. To model for us how to live a life in perfect harmony with God. He came to teach us about the Father and how to live lives empowered by the Holy Spirit.
2. To be the sacrifice for our sins.

Much of the Gospel accounts are devoted to his teachings. He used parables as a powerful way to teach us various ideas. He did not merely speak in abstracts; he demonstrated the power of the Kingdom of God whenever he could. The signs and wonders that he performed during his time on earth were a powerful teaching tool. He equipped his followers to do the same.

The Appointment of Disciples

Early in his ministry, Jesus appointed twelve disciples. These are men who would minister side-by-side with him during his time on earth. The majority of Jesus' ministry was focused on these twelve men. Although Jesus frequently reached out to the massive, forefront in his concern was the equipping of these select men to carry on his work after he was gone.

John does not name the twelve disciples. The lists in Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not agree exactly.

Table 1 - List of Apostles

Matthew's List	Mark's List	Luke's List
Simon (who is called Peter)	Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter)	Simon (whom he named Peter)
His (Peter's) brother Andrew	James son of Zebedee	His (Peter's) brother Andrew
James son of Zebedee	His (James') brother John	James
His (James') brother John	Andrew	John
Philip	Philip	Philip
Bartholomew	Bartholomew	Bartholomew
Thomas	Matthew	Matthew
Matthew the tax collector	Thomas	Thomas
James son of Alphaeus	James son of Alphaeus	James son of Alphaeus

Matthew's List	Mark's List	Luke's List
Thaddaeus	Thaddaeus	Simon who was called the Zealot
Simon the Zealot	Simon the Zealot	Judas son of James
Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him	Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him	Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor

Note that each list begins with Peter, who was considered the "head" apostle, and ends with Judas, the traitor. This is probably an indication that each author listed the disciples in an order equal to the "pecking order" that he perceived to exist in the group.

Each list includes Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot. Matthew and Mark list the twelfth disciple as Thaddaeus, whereas Luke names him as Judas the son of James. More than likely these were two names for the same individual (just as Matthew was also known as Levi or Simon was also known as Peter).

John never mentions James, John, Bartholomew, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot, or Matthew by name. The book of John often referred to "the disciple that Jesus loved," and this is assumed to be a modest way that John referred to himself. John does mention a disciple named Nathanael. Again, we assume this to be a second name for one of the twelve, although we do not know which one.

Interestingly enough, the Bible has very little to say about the majority of these men. Outside of the verses quoted above plus Acts 1:13 (which mentions all of the disciples except Judas Iscariot, gathered for prayer after the resurrection), the following references are made to these men:

Table 2 - References to Apostles

Simon Peter	Matthew (23 verses), Mark (21 verses), Luke (20 verses), John (31 verses), Acts (68 verses), 1 Corinthians (4 verses), Galatians (6 verses), 1 Peter (1 verse), 2 Peter (1 verse)
Andrew	Mark (2 verses), John (2 verses)
James	Matthew (1 verse), Mark (7 verses), Luke (3 verses), Acts (1 verse)
John	Matthew (1 verse), Mark (8 verses), Luke (5 verses), Acts (14 verses), Galatians (1 verse), Revelation (4 verses)
Philip	John (6 verses), Acts (14 verses, but they may refer to a different Philip)
Bartholomew	none
Thomas	John (7 verses)
Matthew	Luke (1 verse)
James son of Alphaeus	none
Thaddaeus/Judas the son of James	John (1 verse)
Simon the Zealot	none
Judas Iscariot	Matthew (7 verses), Mark (3 verses), Luke (4 verses), John (11 verses), Acts (3 verses)

John 21:2 does make one additional reference to Nathanael.

These twelve men were instrumental in changing the course of history. Unfortunately we have very little information about who they were, what they were like, why Jesus chose them for the role, etc.

Conflict with Authorities

Jesus upset the status quo. The Jewish hierarchy had put themselves between people and God. They had imposed themselves as "filters" of God rather than leading people to God directly. Jesus came to undo

what they had done. Because of this, they hated him and sought to get rid of him. Each time he challenged their teaching or their authority, they further intensified their intent to have him killed.

Death, Resurrection, Ascension

Eventually the Jewish leaders prevailed. They had Jesus arrested. He was falsely accused of sedition against the Roman government. The Romans executed him by crucifixion.

Not too coincidentally, the crucifixion took place at Passover. Jesus became the fulfillment of the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, being the ultimate atoning sacrifice for the sins of mankind.

He was buried. Three days later he arose from the dead. He appeared to his disciples and then to many others. There were many witnesses to the resurrection. He walked among his followers for forty days and then ascended into heaven.

The Early Church

The Book of Acts documents the early history of the church. It was written by Luke and is a continuation to his Gospel account.

During the early days after the execution of Jesus, his followers lived in fear and uncertainty. They spent a great deal of time gathered together in semi-secrecy, meeting and praying with one another and hoping to avoid the attention of the same people who had just executed Jesus. All of that changed on the day of Pentecost.

Pentecost was an important feast of Judaism. Jerusalem was full of Jews from all over the world, who had come to celebrate the feast. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fell upon the followers of Jesus and they began to preach boldly in public, winning many converts to the church. The day of Pentecost is often pointed to as the day when the church was born.

In the early days, Christianity remained as a sect within Judaism. Christians were Jews who maintained that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. There was no attempt to actively evangelize people outside the walls of Judaism.

The leaders of this Christian movement encountered opposition from the Jewish leadership. They were not anxious for these followers of Jesus to pick up where he had left off.

The Stoning of Stephen (Acts 6-8)

The anger of the Jewish leadership erupted in the stoning of Stephen. Stephen was a leader in the church. In Acts 6, he was elected as one of the first deacons of the church. He boldly preached the message of Jesus. Because of this, the Jewish leadership arrested him and brought false charges against him. He was publicly stoned. With this act, persecution broke out against the church in earnest. It was no longer safe to be a Christian in Jerusalem. Because of the persecution, many Christians fled Jerusalem. Note that when they went, they took their newfound faith with them. The persecution against the church caused it to spread.

Philip in Samaria (Acts 8)

In Acts 8, Philip, who was a follower of Jesus had left Jerusalem because of the persecution. He went into Samaria and preached the Gospel there. As a result, many Samaritans became believers. This was the first effort to evangelize people who were not Jews. Samaritans were distant cousins to the Jews, but they were not Jews.

Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10)

In Acts 10, Peter meets with a Gentile named Cornelius and brings him into the faith. This opened a new phase in the life of the church. No longer was Christianity a fraternity within Judaism. It was a life-changing force available to all men.

The presence of Samaritans and Gentiles in the church posed problems for the young church. They did not really understand how to transition these new people into the faith. Many of them attempted to force all new converts abide by all of the rules and traditions of Judaism, including circumcision. This was a terrible obstacle to the Gentile converts and would have kept many out of the faith. There was also no reason for it. The church met in Jerusalem and decided that Gentile Christians would not be forced to submit to Jewish regulations. This meeting was called the Jerusalem Council. The people who tried to force the Christians into Jewish practices were known as the “Judaizers.”

The Emergence of Paul

Paul started out as an avid persecutor of the church. In fact, he was on a journey to the city of Damascus when the Lord met him and changed his heart. Jesus appeared to him in a blinding light and asked Paul why he was persecuting him. Paul believed that he was working to stamp out an unhealthy influence in the Jewish community. He sincerely wanted to serve God. He was doing so out of ignorance.

Paul was converted to Christianity and became the main character in the Book of Acts.

Call to the Gentiles

Paul’s special call was to the Gentiles. God called him as the apostle to the Gentiles. He did not begin the work among the Gentiles, but he championed the cause and avidly sought to travel among the nations and bring anyone and everyone into a right relationship with God through salvation in Jesus.

Missionary Activity

Much of the Book of Acts describes Paul’s three missionary journeys. He traveled about the Middle East and Europe, starting church, making converts, and nurturing people in the faith. He encountered a great deal of resistance from the Jewish communities wherever he went.

The Writings of Paul

Thirteen of the books of the New Testament are actually letters that Paul wrote to individuals or churches. These letters were written to instruct or to correct. For that reason, they are able to instruct or correct us as well. They contain doctrinal truth that is eternal. Paul was a master at showing people how to understand the things that Jesus taught and how to apply them to our everyday lives.

The list below shows the letters in an approximate chronological order based on when they were written. Note that this is not the order in which they appear in the New Testament. In the New Testament, the writings of Paul are order basically by length, with Romans (the longest) being the first and Philemon (the shortest) being last.

Written from Corinth, During the Second Missionary Journey

1 Thessalonians

This letter answers several questions that the young church had posed to Paul, including some questions pertaining to end-time events. Believers have never lost their fascination with this topic.

2 Thessalonians

This letter clarifies some of the issues discussed in 1 Thessalonians.

An Early Letter, Following 1 & 2 Thessalonians

Galatians

Galatians was written primarily to address a problem that Judaizers were causing in the churches in Galatia. Emphasis is on the inability of the law to bring us into a right relationship with God and righteousness by faith.

Unknown Date

Romans

Paul had not visited the Roman church at the time he wrote this letter. He wrote them to instruct them in matters that he would like to have taught them in person. As a result, he wrote one of the best books of Christian doctrine that has ever been written. Themes include the depravity of man, the resulting judgment of God, our need for salvation, the inability of the law to save, and salvation by faith in Jesus.

1 Corinthians

This letter was written to the church in Corinth more to correct than anything else. There were a number of problems in the Corinthian church being caused by people who would not submit to Paul's leadership. In the course of addressing these problems, Paul gives us wonderful teaching about such topics as spiritual gifts, Christian love, order in worship, end-time events, the observance of the Lord's Supper, and other topics.

2 Corinthians

This continues and clarifies some of the topics raised in 1 Corinthians. It also contains the best text in the New Testament on obedience in giving.

Written from Prison in Rome

Philemon

This was written to a believer named Philemon about a run-away slave named Onesimus. Onesimus had also become a believer. Paul instructed Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a brother.

Colossians

Paul seems to have written this letter to address certain heresies that had started in the Colossian church. We are not certain about the exact nature of the philosophy that infected the church, but the letter reveals a great deal about it. It seems to have been a mixture of Gnosticism⁵, Asceticism⁶, and a degree of Judaizer philosophy.

Ephesians

Paul wrote this letter to encourage and instruct the Ephesian church. Topics include salvation by grace, Gentiles in the Kingdom of God, living a Christian life, spiritual gifts, maintaining Christ-like family relationships, and putting on the “spiritual armor.”

Philippians

Paul wrote this letter to encourage the church and to deal with a Judaizer influence there.

Unknown Date, Probably Written After Roman Imprisonment As Recorded In Acts

1 Timothy

This letter was written from Paul to Timothy, his son in the faith. Timothy was Paul’s close companion and was also serving as pastor of some of the churches that Paul had founded. He was pastoring the Ephesian church when 1 Timothy was written. 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus are referred to as the “Pastoral

⁵ Gnosticism is a philosophy that teaches that spirit is good and matter is evil. It is a dualistic philosophy that says the spirit man is good and the flesh-and-bones body is not good. It teaches that salvation is achieved through knowledge – which feeds the spirit man. By achieving the appropriate special knowledge we can rise above the evil of our physical existence and ascend to spiritual salvation.

⁶ Asceticism adds a twist to Gnosticism. Some Gnostics believed that since the body was evil anyway, it did not matter what you did with your body. Asceticism says that the body is to be rebuffed by denying it of wants and needs. This will help the spirit to conquer the flesh.

Epistles,” because Paul gave instructions to them on how to pastor their flocks. The letter contains instructions regarding women in the church, qualifications for overseers and deacons, instructions on dealing with false doctrines in the church, instructions on care of the elderly and the widow, slavery, and personal instructions to Timothy.

Titus

Titus was another traveling companion of Paul. When this was written, Titus was pastoring the church in Crete. This letter was written about the same time as 1 Timothy, and includes much of the same information. Topics include qualifications for elders, sound teaching vs. false doctrine, slavery, submission to government, and avoiding strife in the church.

2 Timothy

This is Paul’s last letter in the New Testament. Paul is at the end of his life and knows it. He is tired, somewhat discouraged, but ready to be with Jesus. He wants to encourage and instruct Timothy, his son in the faith, one last time. This letter is intense, focused, and personal.

Other New Testament Letters

Paul was not the only author to have letters included in the New Testament. Other letters include:

- Hebrews – author unknown
- James – written by James, the half-brother of Jesus, a leader in the church after the ascension
- 1 & 2 Peter – written by the apostle Peter
- 1, 2, & 3 John – probably written by the apostle John, the author of the Gospel of John
- Jude – written by another half-brother of Jesus, the full brother of James

Hebrews

We are not sure who wrote Hebrews or to whom it was written. It is often attributed to Paul, but most modern Biblical scholars would doubt the Pauline authorship. Note that the book itself makes no claims of authorship.

Hebrews is an intensely Jewish book. It draws heavily upon the Old Testament to show that Jesus is the Messiah, the Great High Priest. Topics include:

- Angels – Jesus is greater than the angels
- Jesus – greater than Moses
- Jesus, the Great High Priest
- Jesus – a priest in the order of Melchizedek
- Jesus – priest of the New Covenant
- Jesus – sacrifice of the New Covenant

All of these are very Jewish ideas. The author of Hebrews shows that Jesus is the fulfillment of the writings of the Old Testament. In addition, chapter 11 of Hebrews is the classic section of the entire Bible on the topic of faith.

James

James was the half-brother of Jesus. He does not seem to have been a believer while Jesus was on earth, but according to 1 Corinthians 15:7, Jesus appeared to James after his resurrection. James became a believer and a leader in the church in Jerusalem.

The Book of James is an extremely practical book. It is similar in style to the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament (e.g. Proverbs.) It has an underlying assumption that the Christian life should produce fruit. The people of Christ ought to be about the business of Christ. Because of this emphasis on “doing,” Martin Luther actually challenged its place in Scripture. Luther’s reformation started as a reaction to the fact that the Catholic Church was adding works as a requirement for salvation. His desire was to bring back a pure theology of salvation by grace alone. Because of that, he found the emphasis on works in James to be distasteful and tried to have the book removed from the canon of Scripture. Other church leaders of his time did not share his feelings and fortunately preserved the place of James in the Bible.

1 Peter

Peter wrote this from Rome to Christians everywhere. It was intended to be circulated and was not addressed to a specific individual or church. It was written to encourage people in the faith. Topics include hope, living a Christian life, Godly households and relationships, and rejoicing in sufferings.

2 Peter

The nature of this letter is similar to that of 1 Peter. Peter is giving further instruction and encouragement to Christians. Topics include false teachers and the day of judgment.

1 John

The apostle John most likely wrote this letter. It is not addressed to any particular individual or church. It is a treatise on Christian living. Topics include imitating Jesus, loving fellow believers, the antichrist, demons, living as children of God, and eternal life.

2 John

John wrote this short letter (one chapter) to a particular church, although it is unnamed. He gives instructions on dealing with false teachings (probably Gnosticism) and the importance of loving one another. Note that 2 John has the fewest verses of any book in the Bible – 13 (3 John has 14, Obadiah 21, Jude 25, Philemon 25).

3 John

John wrote this to an individual named Gaius. It gives instructions on caring for traveling missionaries in the area.

Jude

Jude was probably another half-brother of Jesus, as was James. The letter was written primarily to deal with the problem of false teachers in the church.

The Revelation

Revelation contains a description of a dream or vision that John had while on the isle of Patmos. This was probably the apostle John. It is a vivid portrayal of the final battle – the conclusion of this age. The book contains a great deal of symbolism that has intrigued the church for two millennia. Can one read Revelation and know for certain and in detail everything that will happen at the end of time? No. But he can know for certain that time as we know it will end and that good will triumph over evil. We win.

From The Close of Acts to the Canon of the New Testament

As the New Testament closed, the church had shifted from an entirely Jewish composition to a primarily Gentile composition. God continued (and continues) to move among his people. The events that occurred after the close of Acts were instrumental in shaping the church into what we know it to be today.

The Revolt Against Rome

One of the reasons that many of the Jews did not accept Jesus as Messiah was because they were looking for a political savior who would lead them out from under Roman domination. Tension between the Jews and the Romans was always present. In the late 60s, the Jews revolted against Roman domination. Rome came down hard on them. In 70 AD, Rome destroyed the city of Jerusalem, including the temple. About all that was left was the western retaining wall of the temple compound, now known as the Wailing Wall. A few hundred Jews were able to hold out for three years in Herod's mountain fortress, called Massada, but they were eventually defeated as well. After that, the Jews were a disbursed and homeless people for almost 2000 years.

The conflict between the Jews and Rome caused Christians to distance themselves from Jews. Even though the church had a significant Gentile component by this time, the people of the church still considered themselves to have close ties to Judaism. This is the point where the church broke with its Jewish heritage and became an institution on its own.

Growth Amidst Persecution

Nero was emperor from AD 54 - 68. Nero was very impressed with himself and had dreams of grandeur. The people hated him because of his ego and his excessive lifestyle. Many considered him mad. While he was emperor, a large fire broke out in Rome. Many people believe that he set the fire himself because he wanted an excuse to build a new capital. Still, he needed to blame the fire on someone. He chose as his scapegoat the Christians in Rome. To punish them for this crime, he began a policy of official persecution against them. Christianity was outlawed. He was known for doing such things as rounding up groups of Christians, tying them to poles, and setting them on fire (alive) to serve as torches at his parties. Many Christians died in the arena, being torn to pieces by wild animals. Many people believe that this persecution was the backdrop of the book of Hebrews, in which the writer encourages people not to fall away from the faith.

Nero died in 68. Official persecution ended, but laws that had been passed against Christians remained.

Persecution resumed under Domitian, who was emperor from AD 81 – 96. Official persecution of Christianity by the Roman government occurred in an off-and-on fashion until the first part of the fourth century. Many, many people were martyred for their faith. Still the church continued to grow under this persecution. Those who were executed included some church leaders – fathers of the faith – such as Polycarp and Ignatius.

Christians were killed for various reasons. As was true under Nero, at times they were blamed for calamities that befell the state. At times the emperor would try to force all the people to worship a certain god and the Christians would not cooperate. At times they were simply seen as stubborn and rebellious and thus a bad influence. Most historians of the time – even those who really did not care for Christians – viewed their treatment as unjust.

In spite of the harsh treatment, many people remained faithful. They continued to tell others about their faith. The church grew constantly, in numbers and in strength.

Early in the 4th century the emperor Diocletian divided the empire up among four emperors – two main and two subordinate. At first there was no persecution. Problems seemed to start in the military since Christians were undecided on the question of military service. Galerius saw this lack of commitment as a threat and convinced Diocletian to begin a policy of persecution, beginning with driving the Christians out of the military and other government positions. Churches were burned and scripture destroyed.

Fires in the imperial palace (possibly set by Galerius) were blamed on the Christians and Diocletian's fury was quick in coming. Christians were forced to sacrifice to the gods, including Diocletian's Christian wife and daughter. Those who did not go along were persecuted fiercely. Other problems in the empire were blamed on Christian conspiracy and the worst persecution in the history of the church began. Many recanted the faith.

Diocletian became ill and Galerius took over. Political instability followed. One of the rival emperors was Constantius Chlorus. He died and his son Constantine led a revolt. He was very tolerant of the Christians while Galerius tightened his policies.

Galerius became very ill and thought that his treatment of Christians might be the cause. He issued an edict to stop the persecution of Christians if they would pray to their god to leave him alone. A few days later he died. Maximinus Daia, who continued his policy of persecution succeeded him.

By this time Constantine was ready to strike. The night before the big battle he had a vision (or whatever) to put the cross of Christ on the shields. He did so and won the battle. He issued the "Edict of Milan" to stop the persecution of Christians. Although it was important, Galerius's edict might have been more important in stopping the persecution.

Constantine made Christianity the state religion. He would march his troops through rivers and declare them baptized. Obviously the conversions were often less than genuine.

It took a while for Constantine himself to actually become a Christian. He continued in sun worship for a time. But this ended official persecution of the Christians.

Early Church Life

By and large Christianity was a religion composed of the ignorant masses. Christianity spread not in the church but in the marketplace and in the mines, etc.

Worship consisted of meeting on the first day of the week for communion. They met on Sunday to celebrate the resurrection. Early services involved a meal but that was later dropped, possibly to avoid the charges that the services were a form of fleshly indulgence.

Communion was the high act of worship. Preaching as the high point in a religious service is a fairly recent phenomenon in church history.

Only those who were baptized were allowed to attend the service.

Services were often held near the tombs of deceased martyrs to honor them – not necessarily to hide from the authorities. At some point they began to observe “saints days” – honoring the day of the martyrdom of a beloved saint.

Churches normally met in homes – not tombs.

After a time, one special day was set aside each year as a special celebration of the resurrection. This gave way to our Easter. This was often preceded by a time of fasting, which gave way to Lent. Pentecost was also celebrated.

Epiphany – January 6 – was celebrated to commemorate Christ's manifestation but was supplanted by Christmas, which was originally a pagan festival.

Baptism was the other main event of early Christianity. At first converts were baptized right after conversion then later only after a period of examination. Baptisms often took place on Easter. They were by immersion.

Christianity spread by word-of-mouth. After the apostolic age there was no main missionary emphasis. Many people were brought into the faith because they saw the power of the Holy Spirit active in the lives of other converts. Such things as miraculous healings attracted them. Power evangelism was in full swing from the beginning of the church.

The Emergence of a Church Hierarchy

As for church organization, as the possibility of heresy increased, extra emphasis was placed on episcopal authority. Church leaders included men and women. The church took care of widows because if they had to rely on their families, who might not be Christians, their involvement with the church might be jeopardized. “Widow” became a general term for unmarried women who served the church. This progressed into the role of nun.

Constantine and the Globalization of Christianity

Constantine made Christianity the state religion of Rome. His actions had both good and bad results for the church. The persecution stopped. That was good. Globalizing Christianity had the effect of watering it down a great deal, however. Marching through a river is not a conversion experience. The church now had within its ranks many people who were not Christians, i.e. who had no relationship with Christ. They were now in a position to influence the policies and the direction of the church.

Monasticism and the Papacy

When the persecution ceased, many felt that something was missing. Many people felt that they should suffer for the cause of Christ. With no governmental persecution, there was no suffering to be had. The monastic movement was a result of peace within the church.

Some people began to separate from society and live lives of poverty, often moving out into the wilderness. They devoted themselves to study or writing or other things. They took on a kind of suffering or deprivation because they felt they should be sacrificing something for the cause of Christ. This mindset gave rise to monasticism. Orders of monks arose. Nuns joined their ranks. Monastics became recognized as official church orders and those who belonged to the orders became leaders of the church.

The association of the church with the Roman government had another effect. With the emperor as part of the church, somehow it no longer seemed appropriate to meet in homes. Churches began to be built – large and ornate. Constantine funded the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, along with other large churches all over the Roman Empire. Furthermore, the regalia that typified royalty made its way into the church. The hierarchy of the church began to resemble the hierarchy of the Roman Empire. The papacy arose out of this structure.

The Canon of the New Testament

How did the various writings that make up the New Testament come together into a single book? Did Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, etc. get together one day, put together an outline, assign pieces to the various writers, and send their respective chapters to a publisher? No. The twenty-seven books of the New Testament were written as individual works, many of them being letters. Furthermore, they were not the only writings of the early church. Many other documents were written and some still exist.

We do know that the early church circulated their documents. When Paul wrote a letter to a church, they would typically make copies of it and circulate it to other churches. 2 Peter 3:15-16 says:

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

This statement indicates that the letters of Paul were well known among the churches and that Peter considered them to be Scripture. Colossians 4:16 says:

After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.

Paul gives instructions on the circulation of his letters. There are other places in the New Testament where we have indications that the writings of the New Testament were already being circulated among the churches and regarded as Scripture by the churches – all of this in the first century.

Church fathers in the late first century and on into subsequent centuries began quoting the books of the New Testament in the same fashion that they did Old Testament Scriptures. They treated these books as Scripture, even though they still had not been bound together and labeled as “The New Testament.”

Eventually church leaders began to put together collections of church writings that they considered to be Scripture. There was no universal agreement on which books should be included. After Constantine put an end to Roman persecution of the church, the leadership was free to hold councils to discuss or debate various topics. One of the topics that was discussed freely at early church councils was which books should be included in the New Testament canon. At the Third Council of Carthage, held in AD 397, the

church leadership resolved that the twenty-seven books we now call the New Testament would constitute the canon of New Testament Scripture.

There were many other documents written. There were many other gospel accounts than the four we have in the New Testament. There were many other letters or books of teaching. The primary criteria for becoming part of the New Testament were:

- a) Apostolic origin was preferred, but not required.
- b) The book had to be regarded by the early church as Scripture. This indicated that the early church found the book to be accurate and helpful.
- c) The doctrine in the book had to be consistent with the rest of Old Testament and New Testament teachings.

Some of the other gospel accounts that were written had a great deal of truth, but were embellished a bit here and there. The early church viewed these as inaccurate and thus they were not included. Some of the other writings were considered to be useful and accurate by the church, but were not regarded as Scripture. They were not included. Many of these documents remain as valuable sources of teaching for the church today, but they are not on the same par as Scripture.

The Apocrypha

The Septuagint was a translation of the Old Testament into the common language of the people – Greek. When it was prepared, some books that were not part of the official Hebrew Canon of Scripture (i.e. the “official” Jewish Old Testament) were included. Thus the Septuagint had more books in it than the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament. Later, when the Bible was translated into Latin (producing the Latin Vulgate), more books were added.

These books were treated as part of the Bible for most of the history of the church, although their authenticity or authority has always been somewhat disputed. When the Protestant Reformation occurred, one of the things that happened was that the Protestants discarded these books as Scriptural while the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches continued to treat them as Scripture. Protestants normally refer to this group of writings as “The Apocrypha.” Books in the Apocrypha include:

- The First Book of Esdras
- The Second Book of Esdras (Not in the Septuagint)
- Tobit
- Judith
- The Additions to the Book of Esther
- The Wisdom of Solomon
- Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach
- Baruch
- The Letter of Jeremiah (This is often treated as Chapter 6 of the book of Baruch)
- The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men (Often treated as an addition to the Book of Daniel)
- Susanna (Often treated as an addition to the Book of Daniel)
- Bel and the Dragon (Often treated as an addition to the Book of Daniel)
- The Prayer of Manasseh
- The First Book of the Maccabees
- The Second Book of the Maccabees
- The Third Book of the Maccabees
- The Fourth Book of the Maccabees
- Psalm 151

Note that the inclusion of these books as Scripture is handled differently by different denominations. Roman Catholic Bibles handle them differently than Greek Orthodox Bibles, which handle them differently than Russian Orthodox Bibles.

None of these books are quoted directly by New Testament writings, although several are alluded to in the New Testament. The New Testament writers were familiar with their principles but did not quote them as authorities, as they did the canonical Old Testament writings.

Some of the doctrinal differences that exist between Roman Catholic and Protestant churches stem from books of The Apocrypha. It is these books that inspired such concepts as purgatory or praying to deceased saints.

Some of the literature in The Apocrypha seems to be accurate but is simply not part of the Hebrew canon. Some of it is not entirely accurate. For example, Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah were written during the intertestamental period, and thus certainly were not written by Baruch and Jeremiah. Some of the events in Third and Fourth Maccabees do not seem to be entirely accurate historically.

Note that there is a mass of other literature called “apocryphal” literature. There are many other books that claim to be written by Biblical figures. There are many other books and writings that are “second witnesses” to things that transpired in the Bible. Some of these are very accurate or inspired and others are not so accurate or inspired. These books are referred to as “apocryphal,” but are not part of The Apocrypha.