

THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO THE BIBLE

A NON-PREACHY, JARGON-FREE HANDBOOK
TO WHAT THE BIBLE IS, WHERE IT CAME
FROM, AND WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

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INTRODUCTION

Hello, friend.

I feel like I should be welcoming you. Not welcoming you into a book—that’s weird—but welcoming you into what I hope feels like an honest conversation about one of the most important books ever written: the Bible.

I wrote this book for folks who know about the Bible, but have never read the whole thing. It’s for those who think the Bible’s important, but never got a chance to build any foundational knowledge about it. It’s for people who have tried to read the Bible, and only left feeling confused and discouraged. It’s for curious people who want to know what this book is all about, but don’t want to hear a sermon in the process.

Whether you’re a Christian or not, by the time you’re done with this guide, you’ll have a working knowledge of the Bible that most Christians go their whole lives wishing they had. You’ll be able to hold an intelligent conversation about

the Bible with a pastor, an atheist, your bartender, or anyone that's interested in talking about the Bible with you.

Think of the Bible like a jigsaw puzzle

A six hundred thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle.

That's about how many words long the Bible was when it was written.

Can you imagine trying to build such a massive puzzle without looking at the picture on the box first? Without the big picture, you would have no idea how many corners and edges this puzzle had. You might see a few pieces that look like they go together, but you'd have no way of knowing where they fit into the bigger picture. You'd probably give up in frustration.

This book is going to give you that big picture.

What we're going to cover

This guide will give you a baseline understanding of what the Bible is, and what the Bible is about.

You'll know where the Bible came from (hint: it didn't fall out of heaven). You'll know the major sections of the Bible. You'll know where the Bible stories you've heard fit into the book as a whole. You'll know the main characters and the basic plot arcs.

This book won't make you an expert. But by the time you're done, you will have a clear idea of what the Bible is and what it's for. You'll also have an understanding of just how nuanced a subject the Bible is—which will come in very

handy if you're speaking with someone whose views on the Bible differ from yours.

Speaking of views on the Bible ...

This is not a Christian book

The aim of this book isn't to get you to believe the Bible has any spiritual or moral authority. I'm focusing on what *anyone*, Christian or non-Christian, should know about the Bible. I'm keeping this as focused on the facts as I can—specifically, information that you can verify whether or not you believe in the Christian God (or any god at all).

That means no matter what your beliefs are, this book is going to get uncomfortable at times. The Bible is a complex and nuanced book with a complex and nuanced history.

But that's what happens when 2.8 billion people believe a single book contains the most important message in the world. You're bound to have disagreements, both inside and outside the Christian faith. We won't get into all the different points of view (this is a beginner's guide, after all), but you will have a grasp of the basics that almost everyone can agree on.

You might be wondering, "Wait—what are *your* beliefs about the Bible, Jeffrey?"

If so, good on you. I'm a Christian who believes the Bible is the most important and reliable set of documents available for understanding who Jesus is and why he deserves to be followed. I blog at OverviewBible.com, and if you've read anything I've written about the Bible, you've probably seen that I tend to focus on writing at an observational level. This

guide is similar. You're not going to walk away from this knowing what every passage in the Bible means. (Nobody has all the answers, and if anyone says they do, run!) But you will finish this guide with an understanding of what the Bible is, what it's for, and what it's about.

Just so you have an idea of where I'm coming from when I wrote this guide, here's a general rundown of the principles I had in mind:

1. Start at ground zero. All you need to know before you read this book is that the Bible is the central text of the Christian religion. That's it.

You don't need to know who Jesus, Moses, Nebuchadnezzar, or Zerubbabel are. You don't need to know what *pentateuch*, *covenant*, or *epistles* mean. You don't need to have heard a single sermon. You don't need to have attended a single Sunday school class. And you certainly don't need to believe in Jesus (or any divine being) in order to benefit from this book.

So if you're already very familiar with the Bible, keep this in mind. You're in for a lot of review, and a lot of the details are going to get glossed over. If you're not familiar with the Bible, you're right at home.

2. Make no assumptions. I don't know you. I don't know if you've had positive experiences with the Bible, negative experiences with the Bible, or any experience with the Bible at all. You could be a professor of biblical studies or part of an anti-religion book club, for all I know.

All that is to say, this book doesn't assume who you are or

what your journey is. I made this book to help you get a clearer picture of the Bible—that's it.

3. Don't take forever. This book could go on for a long time. But I don't think reading this book should represent a huge time investment. It's a beginner's guide after all!

I've attempted to keep this book down to a length that you should be able to read on a rainy Saturday—which is something we get a lot of where I live in the Pacific Northwest.

So that's what I'm about, friend.

Let's jump in!

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

First things first: what do we even mean when we talk about “the Bible”?

The word “bible” comes from the old Greek word *biblia*, which just means “books.” That might sound weird, because the Bible we use today comes in the form of just one tome. However, the Bible wasn’t always a single work. The Bible, at its core, is **a collection of several dozen ancient, sacred documents.**

The texts of the Bible have been around much longer than the printing press. For most of its history, the “Bible” was a group of scrolls and parchments. You didn’t have just one book: you had a whole library. That’s why “Bible” means “books,” and that’s why people talk about the “books of the Bible.”

The first volume of books is Judaism’s sacred texts—it’s

home to the stories of David and Goliath, Noah and the Ark, and Moses' crossing of the Red Sea. This group of books is called the "Old Testament." The second group of documents focuses on the story of Jesus and his followers. It's called the "New Testament."

But obviously this isn't just any collection of documents—it's the sacred library of the world's largest religion. That means the question, "What is the Bible?" doesn't have a simple answer. There are many schools of thought inside and outside Christianity when it comes to the Bible's origin, nature, value, purpose, and properties.

And these perspectives on the Bible don't divvy themselves across the world in an orderly fashion. Two professors at the same Christian university may hold different views on what the Bible is, where it came from, and what it's for. To make things even more confusing, there are some devout Christians and ardent atheists who *share* some beliefs about the Bible.

This is a beginner's guide, so we can't get into all the very, very different beliefs about the Bible here. But what we can do is establish a baseline of what is generally agreed upon. Once we understand that consensus, we'll explore what the Bible's about.

This section is going to explore the two most important questions we need to consider when it comes to the Bible:

1. Where did the Bible come from?
2. What is the Bible for?

The best place to start is with an overview of where the

Bible came from. If we understand how this book came into the world, we'll have an easier time making sense of its stories, how it was arranged the way it was, and why different people groups love (or hate) it.

WHERE DID THE BIBLE COME FROM?

The Bible didn't fall out of heaven all at once. Instead, the Bible is a product of thousands of years of oral traditions, written documents, and meticulous curation, arranging, and editing. The Bible we have today came together piece by piece, slowly accumulating more material as the Jewish and Christian faiths matured.

When it comes to religious texts, finding an agreed-upon origin story can be tricky and tangled. Many people believe the Bible represents the exact thoughts of God. Others say that's impossible and delusional: the Bible is completely made up by people with their own agendas.

It might seem like the Bible's origin story depends completely on whom you ask. But thankfully, this book has captured the attention of scholars for centuries. Through the ages, academics of both religious and secular backgrounds have poured a great deal of historical, archaeological, literary, and theological (religious) research into documenting where the Bible came from.

And the good news is that both Christians and non-Christians agree on much of the Bible's origin story.

So here's how we're going to explore where the Bible came from. First, we'll go over the story that the religious and secular worlds generally agree on. Next, we'll loop back around from the beginning to add some common additional parts of the story that many Christians believe—parts of the story that either haven't been (or can never be) confirmed from a purely historical standpoint.

The Bible's origin story: what we can all agree on

No matter whom you're talking to when the Bible comes up, this is the important stuff for you to know regarding the Bible's origins. If you speak with an Ancient Near East scholar, you'll hear the same information we're about to go over, but with a lot more context about the ancient world's religions and culture. If you speak to an evangelical pastor, you'll hear plenty more to this story than what's here, too—specifically about how God himself played a hand in the Bible's creation. (We'll get into that a bit more later.)

The Hebrews and the Holy Land

Most of the Bible's material concerns a tiny strip of land in the Middle East, tucked on the Eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It's roughly the same region as modern-day Israel. This place is geographically diverse—similar in some ways to the state of California. It has breezy, mild coasts. It has hot, arid deserts. It has high mountains. It has low seas—in fact, the Dead Sea is the lowest inland point in the world.

This is where the ancestors of the Jewish people settled as

humanity spread across the globe. The Bible refers to these people as the Israelites. They are the main people group that the Bible is concerned with, and the Bible offers an explanation as to how they came to settle there.

The most important location in this area is a city that you can still visit today: Jerusalem.

It's perhaps the most significant religious city in the world—important to Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. Much of the Bible's origin story has to do with Jerusalem: who's living there, who's ruling it, and whether or not it's standing.

King David takes Jerusalem

A long time ago, around 1,000 BCE, there was a man named David. He lived in a rural part of what is now southern Israel. At that time, the people of Israel lived in tribes scattered throughout the area—David's tribe was called "Judah." David was a bit of a folk hero, with a following of loyal soldiers and countrymen. David and his company captured a town called Jerusalem, which became the capital of Judah's territory (or, the "city of David").

David was a legendary king for the people of Judah. In their histories and legends, he's the greatest of their kings, and the standard against which all future kings are measured. We'll look a little more closely at this when we discuss what the Bible's all about. (Spoiler alert: until Jesus came along, David was the centerpiece of the Bible.)

Because King David was such a legendary figure to the people of Judah, they kept traditions regarding his feats and origins. David's supporters wrote the story of how David became king—and why the people needed him to be their king.

David's people build a temple in Jerusalem

After David's death, his people erected a temple to his god. The ancient world worshipped many different deities, but this particular deity got the *primo* temple in Jerusalem, Judah's capital city. The people of that time called this god *YHWH*. (Out of reverence, the Jews didn't pronounce his name aloud, but Christians tend to spell it out as "Yahweh," and pronounce it "YAW-way.") This being is better-known today as simply "God."

To the people of Jerusalem and Judah, this temple was the place where their God chose to cohabit with them. It signified their legitimacy as a nation: they worshipped the true God, who, out of all the nations of the world, had chosen Jerusalem as his home on earth.

Temples

Today, we think of houses of worship as places where people spend time together, learning about their religion, performing liturgies, and the like. But in the ancient world, a temple was something more than this: temples were where deities cohabited with humans. They were special in-between spaces for the seen world and the unseen world, sacred zones where priests offered sacrifices and performed various rituals to please the gods and hear from them.

People groups took great pride in their temples, creating lavish and ornate buildings they believed worthy of the gods. In some ways, temples were

similar to sports stadiums today. Modern cities create enormous, state-of-the-art structures to show off their team's prestige and the fans' devotion. Ancient people groups would go all-out to make the grandest temples possible for their gods—which showed off how powerful the gods were, and how devoted the people were to these gods. (And of course, like modern sports stadiums, ancient temples were enormous sources of income.)

Now, where did the idea of this God come from? The people of Judah had some written documents and oral traditions regarding who their God was, what their relationship with him was, and how they should behave to maintain a good relationship with him. They called these writings “the Law.”

David's descendants rule Jerusalem

David's line continued to rule Jerusalem for about the next four hundred years. Some kings were more powerful than others, but none reached the legendary status of David. He's a bit like the King Arthur of the Jewish people. He had his flaws, but there's just never going to be another bloke like him.

The people of Judah kept records of these kings over the centuries. Some of the kings oversee the collection and production of wise sayings. Some kings are closely aligned with the priests at the temple of God; others diversify their religious interests, following other gods and deviating from the Law. This means some people of Judah also keep notes on the goings-on from a religious standpoint. These folks are

called prophets, and some of their writings are regarded as very, very special. They're not "the Law," but they are considered words from God to the people.

The nation of Judah participates in trade and warfare with other countries in the Ancient Near East ... until they can't anymore.

The Babylonians sack Jerusalem

About four hundred years after David, a world empire led by the warrior king Nebuchadnezzar began snatching up surrounding territories. This empire was based in Babylon, which is in modern-day Iraq. As Nebuchadnezzar grew in political and military might, Judah and Jerusalem fell under his control. Nebuchadnezzar took some of the people of Judah captive to Babylon, and installed a puppet king of his choosing to govern Judah.

But that didn't work out so well. The puppet king led the people of Judah to revolt against the Babylonians in 589 BCE. Nebuchadnezzar didn't put up with that kind of disrespect, so he besieged the city, tore down its walls, destroyed their precious temple of God, and took a host of captives back to Babylon.

That left the city of David completely desolate, and the kingdom of David scattered to the winds.

This is a huge problem for the Jewish people and their religion. For centuries, the line of the legendary king David had been on the throne in Jerusalem. And for even longer than that, they had been worshipping a God that, as far as they believed, had chosen them to be his people. After all, the temple of God had stood in Jerusalem for the longest time. How could another country, who

worshipped other gods, overthrow David's God ... on his own turf?

The Jews review their history in light of the Law and the oracles of the prophets. At some point after the fall of Jerusalem, the Jewish sacred texts declare that this tragedy was the inevitable, inescapable consequence of the kings of Judah turning the people away from the Law. Some of these writings about the good and bad deeds of the kings are considered sacred, even prophetic.

The Jews come home

But the Jews weren't kept out of Jerusalem forever. After a few decades, the Neo-Babylonians were overthrown by yet another emperor: the Persian king Cyrus the Great. The land of Judah changes hands, becoming a region of the Persian empire. Cyrus allows various people that were dominated by the Babylonians to return to their native lands and restore their religious practices. (He's cool like that.) This included a decree that the people of Judah could return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple of God, which they do.

Later on, the Jews reconstruct the rest of Jerusalem, and once again occupy the land of their ancestors. In the following centuries, the city changed hands from foreign power to foreign power—with the Jews enjoying varying degrees of independence and oppression through the years.

The Old Testament comes together

During this time, the Jews continued to organize their sacred texts, or **Scriptures**. This collection of religious scrolls tells the story of where the Jewish people came from,

how and why they belong in their land, and most importantly, why they're not being ruled by a powerful son of David anymore. It includes narratives of their nation's history, the writings of prophets, songs, proverbs, and wise sayings.

By the third century BCE, most of the Bible we know today had been written. The ancient Jews masterfully arranged their texts into one massive collection with three main movements:

It all begins with the **Law**. This is a five-volume set that details the origins of the Jewish people. It specifically deals with how they entered a relationship with God, how they needed to behave in order to preserve that alliance, and the consequences for breaking the rules. These are the first five books of the modern Bible.

The second movement was called the **Prophets**. Part narrative and part poetry, the prophets tell the story of how the relationship between God and the Hebrews played out over time. These books include the story of David's rise to power, the golden age of the Israelite kingdom, and their eventual decline into captivity. The prophetic books explain the ancient Jews' situation by linking their downfall and restoration to God's judgment and mercy on their sins.

The third movement was called the **Writings**. These books include wise sayings, poetry to be used in worship, and more narratives. Several of these books are still used in Jewish feasts and worship rituals today.

As a whole, this body of work called the ancient Jews to keep God's Law, use wisdom, and pursue justice. The Scriptures also anticipate a restoration of a golden age in

Jerusalem, when an heir of David will once again sit on the throne and restore peace, justice, and order to the Jews and the rest of the world.

The Jews call this work the *Tanakh*. Christians refer to this set of sacred Jewish texts as the **Old Testament**. The scrolls that formed this collection are roughly parallel to the first 39 books of the Christian Bible (just in a different order), and they account for almost three-quarters of the text in our modern Bibles.

The Tanakh vs. the Old Testament

Jesus and the Jews of his time used the same books of the Old Testament that we do today, but they were arranged in a different order. Christians arranged the books of the Bible (roughly) by *genre*. While the five books of the Law stayed in the same order, the rest of the Old Testament falls into sections of history, poetry, and prophecy. This makes it easier for modern, non-Jewish readers to get a grip on the overarching narrative of the Bible. The first half of the Old Testament (law and history) reads more or less like a story, and then the commentary on that story comes later. In each of these categories, the books are roughly arranged in chronological order.

But while this arrangement may provide more clarity, it also puts extra distance between us and the original readers of Scripture. We're reading books in chronological order, but we're not reading them in *theological* order. For example, in the

Tanakh, the book of Chronicles is last. This book recaps the bulk of the Old Testament, beginning with the first human and ending with a cliffhanger. However, the Christian Old Testament puts Chronicles in the middle of the history books, which gives us a bit of an awkward mid-Bible recap, and immediately resolves the cliffhanger at the beginning of Ezra. The books are the same, but the arrangement thereof is less artistic.

Jesus is crucified in Jerusalem

In the first century of the Common Era, a man from a little town called Nazareth began gathering a bit of a following in the Holy Land. He was a charismatic teacher who opposed the Jewish religious leaders of his time. Rumors circulate that Jesus is the **Christ**—that is, David’s heir and rightful king of the Jews. We’ll unpack what that means later in this guide.

This kind of talk earned him a quick death: crucifixion at the hands of the Roman government in Jerusalem around 30 CE.

Christianity spreads throughout the world

But soon after his death, followers of Jesus claimed that they saw him alive. They told others that Jesus physically rose from the dead and returned to heaven, and that his resurrection validated his authority as the true heir of David. This small Jewish sect grew exponentially in just months after their leader’s execution.

Jesus’ following began as an offshoot of the Jewish faith in

Jerusalem. But the news of this resurrected person soon traveled outside of Jewish circles. Within a few decades' time, both Jewish and non-Jewish Christ-followers ("Christians") could be found across the Roman empire. These Christians gathered in groups from city to city, groups called "churches."

At the forefront of this growth was a small group of men called **apostles**. The original apostles were the group of eleven people (there were twelve until a traitor named Judas Iscariot pulled his shenanigans) who followed Jesus most closely during his time on earth. These individuals spent the most time with Jesus, and were the *de facto* leaders of the rest of his followers.

Some witnesses of Jesus' life recorded the story of his teachings, his death, and his resurrection. These works are called **gospels**, which means "good news." To Jesus' followers, there's no better news than Jesus rising from the dead and being right all along.

But there was also bad news.

The more Christianity spread, the more opposition it met. For the most part, the Jewish religious leaders rejected the idea that Jesus, whom they executed as a blasphemer, was the Son of David all along. The Roman government wasn't too happy about a new group of people claiming to follow a king other than Caesar, either. Besides this, the leaders of other, older religions didn't like how this upstart movement is cutting into their following, splitting families and diverting worship revenue away from their temples.

These decades of booming growth and opposition posed a few big problems for the early Christians. Churches across

the Roman empire had to grapple with some very serious questions.

• **What should they do about the Jewish Law?** If churches are a mix of Jewish and non-Jewish people, how would Christians handle the culture clashes? The Jews had methods and traditions for food, worship, work, sex, etc. The other cultures had their own approaches to these—how would they sort out cultural differences in a new mixed community?

• **What should they do about opposition?** Christians at that time were underdogs, and often endured hardships because of their faith. (The Roman emperors Nero and Domitian made life particularly difficult for Christians.) Jesus was called “the Lord” by Christians, who believed he was the rightful ruler of the earth. So why was he letting his people take such a beating?

• **What does it even mean to be a Christian?** With so many Christians joining the faith from different backgrounds, there was a lot of confusion as to what it was they were actually supposed to believe and do. How do Jewish theologians, former prostitutes, wealthy merchants, illiterate slaves, and other diverse people live their lives together as followers of Jesus?

Lucky for the early Christians, these questions didn’t go completely unanswered. The leaders of the movement—the apostles—penned letters to the churches elaborating on the teachings of Jesus and the Old Testament. These letters included instructions for how to go about life as part of a Christian church.

There were plenty of letters written, but over the centuries,

a handful of documents attributed to the Christian movement's earliest leaders were preserved and treated with just as much reverence as the Old Testament. Church leaders found these documents to be extremely valuable for teaching other Christians, leading churches, making converts, and even figuring out what the Old Testament meant. These letters, combined with the gospels, became the last quarter of the Bible: the New Testament.

That's the foundation we're working with

Generally speaking, this is the core story of how we got the Bible. The ancient Jews needed to explain their situation, and the early Christians needed to explain theirs. Over the years, some of these explainer documents demonstrated some sacred staying power.

So far, the story of how we got the Bible may sound surprisingly ... naturalistic. No miracles, no angels, nothing supernatural at all. It's just the story of two religious groups trying to understand what was going on.

But there's another side to this story.

To most Christians, the Bible is more than just a patchwork of explanations. It is the word of God—and God himself played a hand in its creation. Now that we have a baseline idea of where the Bible came from, let's dig into the supernatural side of the Bible's origin story. This is where we're going to look at **what most Christians believe about the Bible**, where it came from, and what it's for.

The Bible's supernatural origins

According to multiple human contributors to the Bible, the pages of Scripture contain the words of Israel's God. The authors of the Bible believed that God is the divine, supernatural being who made the world and is ultimately responsible for bringing about order, justice, and goodness in the universe. They also believe that, by mysterious means, God prompted humans to produce much of the material we have in the Bible.

Christians have a term for this idea: *divine inspiration*. The term comes from a line in one of the New Testament letters, in which a major Christian leader named Paul (one of the apostles) tells a younger pastor that "all Scripture is God-breathed," or "inspired by God."¹

So how does that work? Well, the Bible doesn't always give the specifics on how ideas get from God to humans. The general idea is that God gave each human contributor a message, and allowed them to use their own voice, personality, and experience to get that point across. How God gives these messages to humans varies. Sometimes the messages come in dreams and visions. Sometimes they come from angels. Sometimes God himself speaks. But most of the time, we don't hear the particulars of how the message came to the writers—we only have the message itself.

The first five books of the Bible chiefly deal with God's relationship with the Jews' ancestors: the Israelites. According to these books, God speaks directly to Moses, who conveys God's Law to the people. We'll take a closer look at these books soon, but suffice it to say that the phrase,

“The Lord said to Moses” shows up a great deal toward the beginning of the Bible.

Beyond this, the Old Testament is riddled with phrases like, “the word of the Lord came to so-and-so,” and “Thus says the Lord.” Every writing attributed to the prophets claims that their message is from God. Sometimes the prophets derive these messages from dreams and visions, but most of their work is simply verbal messages delivered to the people on behalf of God.

And then later on, Jesus affirms the divine origin of the Scriptures. In one of Jesus’ sermons, he says that, “until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law.”² And as Jesus claimed to be divine himself,³ Christians believe his words in the Bible are considered to be from God.

Jesus’ followers afterward claim that the Old Testament is “the very words of God,” and that “prophecy never had its origin in the human will,” but the prophets were moved by God to write what they did.⁴ Furthermore, early Christians believed that the teachings of Jesus’ apostles had authority on par with that of the Old Testament prophets.⁵

The nuances of divine inspiration are far beyond the scope of this guide. The main thing you need to know is that most of the documents in the Bible fall into one of these categories:

- They claim to have words from God
- They claim to come from apostles of Jesus
- Other parts of the Bible refer to them as Scripture

So to Christians, the Bible is not just a record of what the early Jews and Christians believed—it’s the most important set of documents Christians have for determining what they should believe *today*, too.

Is this circular reasoning?

At about this point you may be thinking, “Wait—so Christians believe the Bible is from God ... because the Bible says so?”

To some degree, yes. Most Christians have a hard time explaining why they believe the Bible without citing the Bible. But that hasn’t always been the case. In fact, Christianity has been around a lot longer than the Bible—at least the Bible that we have today. The underlying reason why Christianity as a whole has gone all-in on the Bible as the word of God is a bit more complex than “because the Bible says so.”

The Christian faith hinges on the belief that Jesus really *did* rise from the dead after his execution. Those who believe this usually follow a trail of if-thens that lead to believing that the Bible is theologically valuable:

- If Jesus rose from the dead, then his claims of being divine are valid.
- If Jesus is divine, then his teachings are theologically valuable.
- If Jesus’ apostles represented his teachings well, then the New Testament is theologically valuable.
- If Jesus’ teachings affirm the Old Testament, then the Old Testament is theologically valuable.

- If both the Old and New Testaments are theologically valuable, then the whole Bible is theologically valuable.

People who believe Jesus rose from the dead also tend to believe that his followers and friends sincerely wanted to do right by him, and wanted to preserve his teachings for the world to hear. Many of the apostles died as martyrs for their faith, never acquiring riches nor leading glamorous lives. This makes it easy for many to assume that the early Christian leaders sincerely believed that they had seen Jesus, and that what they wrote about Jesus is credible. Most of the New Testament documents either claim to have been written by apostles, or have been attributed to reputable members of the early church for almost all of Christian history. And so most Christians accept the New Testament as being trustworthy.

People who believe Jesus rose from the dead are usually inclined to find value in the Old Testament, too. Jesus often appeals to the Old Testament when engaging with his opponents—he even quotes the Old Testament to the devil.⁶ Jesus claims that the writings of the Jewish Scriptures point to him, and tells the apostles how his death and resurrection set a course for fulfilling the prophecies therein.⁷

So, while it's possible that considering the Bible to be God's word can stem from circular reasoning, that's not where the idea originated. In the grand scheme of things, Christians don't (or, rather, shouldn't) value the Bible just because it tells them to. Like everything else in Christianity, **it all hinges on the belief that Jesus rose from the dead.**

Man-made, God-given

So on one hand, the text of the Bible claims to be inspired by God, or at least hold divine authority. On the other hand, the *collection and curation of these texts* into the Bible we have today is an entirely human work. At no point did God say, “Here’s the final product: the Old and New Testaments. You’re welcome!” Humans sincerely, critically tried to piece together which texts belong in the Bible and which don’t for a long, long time. This process of determining which books are sacred Scripture is called **canonization**, and the books that make it into the Bible are considered part of the **canon**.

The Bible’s canonization has a long and very ambiguous history. The ancient Jews and Christians were more keen on preserving and compiling the texts themselves than they were on telling us *how* they brought these texts together.

We don’t know exactly when the books of the Protestant Old Testament were first set forth as the Jewish canon. In the third and second centuries BCE, Jewish scribes set out to translate their sacred texts from their original Hebrew and Aramaic into Greek. Some of the books they translated didn’t make the cut to be included in the *Tanakh*. Some of these books *did* make the cut for the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, however. (You’ll hear Protestants refer to those books as the Apocrypha.)

The New Testament has a little more clarity, as the books were composed more recently than the Old Testament books. But even the books of the New Testament have been disputed by the church for a long time. By the fourth century CE, Christian leaders considered most of the books of the New Testament authoritative and valuable, but they took exception to some (like Revelation and 2 Peter).

Even as recently as 1522 CE, Christians have had some misgivings about some books in the New Testament. For example, Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, deemed the books of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation less authoritative and valuable than the other New Testament documents.

See? I told you it was messy.

This is a tension that anyone who wants to understand the Bible has to deal with. The Bible didn't come prepackaged from heaven: the Jews and Christians spent centuries getting to the canons they have now. But for all the differences of opinion when it comes to canonization, there's a great deal more agreement. It's remarkable that Judaism and Christianity have mutually preserved a huge body of shared sacred texts for more than two millennia. (Remember: the text of Judaism's *Tanakh* represents about three quarters of the Christian Bible!) It's remarkable that the same 27 New Testament books remain accepted by every major branch of Christianity.

So, as we explore the Bible in this guide, it's important for you to remember two things: the Bible is **man-made**, and the text of the Bible is, as far as Christians are concerned, **God-given**.

Quick recap: Where did the Bible come from?

- The Bible is a collection of documents that were sacred to the ancient Jews and early Christians. These documents are called “books.”

- The books revered by both Jews and Christians form the Old Testament.
- The books revered by the Christians (concerning Jesus and the early church) form the New Testament.
- The books of the Bible were written and arranged by humans to explain and inform the relationship between God and his people.
- The text of the Bible claims to be God-given.

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1. 2 Timothy 3:16
 2. Matthew 5:18
 3. John 10:33-36
 4. Romans 3:2; 2 Peter 1:20-21
 5. Ephesians 2:19-20, 2 Peter 3:2
 6. Matthew 4:1-11
 7. Luke 24:44-48

WHAT IS THE BIBLE FOR?

Now that you have a general idea of how we got the Bible, it's time to get an idea of *why* we got the Bible. This is important, because unless we understand what the Bible is for, we're likely to misuse it.

This goes for any text. Your cajun cookbook may have the best gumbo recipe, but if you use that cookbook as a roadmap of New Orleans, you're going to have a bad time. Nothing's wrong with your cookbook, and nothing's wrong with the streets of New Orleans.¹ It's just not what your cookbook is for.

The Bible presents us with a similar situation. It's a massive work, and much of its text deals with things that people should or shouldn't do or believe. This makes it easy for people to use as a go-to resource when they want to form an opinion about something—or just validate the opinion they already have.

The Bible is cited in all kinds of discussions today. Christianity has been the dominant religious influence on

Western culture for a long time, so it's normal for the Bible to come up in conversations about spirituality and ethics.

But it doesn't stop there: people today appeal to the Bible when they're discussing all kinds of things. This is especially true in Christian circles. Growing up in the church, I heard people invoke the Bible in discussions on dating, parenting, personal finance, leadership, charity, race, geology, diplomacy, dieting, immigration, marriage law, warfare, pet care, swimwear, tattoos, dreams, recycling, household chores, taxation, and even UFOs.

If you're not a Christian, this might sound ridiculous. Why should an ancient religious text be brought into nonreligious discussions? But if Christians believe that the Bible's words are supposed to be the ultimate authority in their lives, it's difficult *not* to bring it into significant conversations.

But what is the Bible's intended use, really?

I sometimes wish the Bible came with a divine preface saying, "Here's what the whole Bible is for. Use it that way." It doesn't, because it couldn't: the canon that we have today didn't come together until long after the last book of the Bible was written. The Bible's texts can't refer to the whole Bible, because there was no "whole Bible" for any of the authors to write about. However, if we look a little deeper, the Bible itself *does* provide us with most of the information we need to understand its purpose.

Individual books had individual purposes

First, several of the **individual books of the Bible state their own reasons for being written.** Using

the books themselves and the historical contexts they were written in, you can get an idea of why many of the Bible's books were written, and what the author wanted to accomplish. Let's look at a handful of examples from the Old and New Testaments:

- The book of **Proverbs** is a collection of wise sayings. The book opens with a list of benefits the composer believes the reader will gain from this collection—specifically that the reader will gain wisdom.²
- In the **Gospel of Luke**'s preamble, the author tells the original reader that he has thoroughly investigated the life of Jesus, and sought to write an orderly account of Jesus' ministry.³
- The **Gospel of John** closes by saying the book was written so that the reader would come to believe in Jesus.⁴
- The author of **2 Peter** says in the middle of the letter that he wants to remind them of both the Old Testament prophets' writings and the teachings of Jesus, which the apostles preserved.⁵

Again, none of these books are going to state the purpose of the whole Bible, because there was no "whole Bible" at the time any of these books were written. But these statements do help readers understand the purpose of the book they're reading at the moment. And if you know why a book was written, you have a better shot at using its words in line with the author's intent.

You might have noticed that each of the books I mentioned above state their purpose, and that each purpose is very different from the next. The diverse purposes don't compete

with each other, but they're different enough to show that you shouldn't treat one book's purpose as the purpose of every other book in the Bible. There's a lot of wisdom to be found from Jesus' teachings, but if you read through the Gospel of Luke only looking for decision-making tactics, you'd miss the point Luke was trying to make about Jesus' ministry.

This diversity of purpose comes from the diversity of readers and listeners that the Scriptures had in the early days. Some books of the Bible were written for the Jews long before they were taken to Babylon. Some books were written for the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem. These audiences were living in different realities, facing different challenges and dealing with different problems.

Likewise, most of the New Testament is written to diverse audiences. The Gospel of Luke was composed for one reader in particular: a man named Theophilus. Some short books of the New Testament are written to individual young pastors. Some of the books are letters written to specific churches. Each person had their own situation and setting, and so each book was written with its own aim in mind.

We'll take a closer look at each of the books' purposes later in this guide. For now, it's just important to know that each book of the Bible was written with its own purpose. To properly understand the Bible's purpose, you first need to understand the purposes of the individual books.

Other books (sometimes) give us more information

The individual books of the Bible themselves are the best

sources of information on why they were written, but that's not all we have. Some of the writers of Scripture were aware of other books of the Bible that had already been written. Sometimes these authors mention other parts of the Bible, giving us an idea of how or why that author thought the Scripture was valuable or useful.

One contributor to the Bible was especially bullish on the value of the Old Testament writings: the apostle Paul of Tarsus. He was a scholar of the Old Testament, and a member of the group of Jewish religious leaders who opposed Jesus—until he converted to Christianity. Paul's writings make multiple claims about the Old Testament's purpose and value, including that they were written to teach God's people endurance and give them hope,⁶ and that they are useful for training future leaders in the church.

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But what's the purpose of the whole Bible?

The individual books have their individual purposes, and sometimes biblical authors give us some extra insight on other books of the Bible. But what's the purpose of the whole Bible—the Old and New Testaments together?

Again, the Bible doesn't tell us anything about “the whole Bible,” but the history of Christianity and the writings of the apostles give us a general gist of what the Bible is for.

Beyond the purposes of the individual books, **the Christian Bible is for helping people follow Jesus Christ.**

There's nuance to what it means to follow Jesus' teachings—about two millennia of debate's worth of nuance. But Jesus tells his disciples and his opponents that the Law, the

Prophets, and the Writings (the whole *Tanakh*) all point to him.⁸ And the writers of the New Testament consistently direct their readers to adhere to the teachings of Jesus and remain loyal to him, no matter how bad the opposition gets.

However, that's a very, very macro-level purpose of the Bible. Jesus Christ is *not* the singular focus of every single word, verse, or passage of the Bible. The Bible as a whole has helped Christians preserve the teachings of Jesus, but the individual books have their own stories to tell, too.

So just to recap: the Bible's individual books were written with individual purposes in mind, and the whole Bible has been constructed to help people follow Jesus. This is important, because before we get into what the Bible's all about, we also need to discuss what the Bible *isn't* for.

Common misuses of the Bible

Since this is a beginner's guide, we should take a quick moment to examine a few ways the Bible is often misused. Sadly, a lot of people give the Bible a position in their lives that the Bible itself never lays claim to. This is usually a well-intentioned mistake: people misuse the Bible out of respect for the Bible. But to truly respect the Bible, we need to respect its context—and not give it a position it was never meant to have.

We're going to look at three general misuses of the Bible that happen today. These misuses often block people from understanding what the Bible's about, so it's important that we get them out of our way before we get into the meat of this guide.

Misuse #1: Applying the Bible's principles without adjusting for culture shifts

The Bible was not written to modern people. Sure, modern folk benefit from it, but the words of the Bible were, at closest, written for people who lived about 1,900 years before us. That means that, while the Bible contains the most important information to the Christian faith (the good news of Jesus), it's not a handbook for life in general today. People still find timeless truths, inspiring stories, ancient wisdom, and beautiful poetry in the pages of Scripture. However, modern Western cultures are remarkably different from ancient Near Eastern cultures. Many of the concepts that the Bible touches on were understood very differently at the time the Bible was written. The human writers of Scripture had no idea what our world would be like—they were writing to people in their own time.

This doesn't mean the Bible is useless for modern people. But it does mean that we can't assume that the ancient writers are writing directly to us. And it's dangerous to assume that the words of the Bible translate directly to modern issues strictly because the English words are the same.

We, the modern readers, are the ones with the history books. And we're the ones with the modern issues. That means that if we want to understand how the Bible relates (or doesn't relate) to modern issues, it's on us to check if these issues ever would have crossed the biblical authors' minds to begin with.

For example, a common issue that comes up in some modern Christian circles is debt. Credit card debt and student loans are difficulties that many modern families

face. Christians often turn to the Bible for guidance when making financial decisions, and when they do, they're met with sayings like these from the book of Proverbs: "The borrower is slave to the lender."⁹

It's a frightful idea for modern folks. Slavery is an abhorrent practice and a terrible fate to consider. It says plainly in Scripture that debt enslaves borrowers, and so many modern Christians refrain from credit card use and do everything they can to avoid taking out loans. It's easy to read this passage and believe that, because the Bible says something about debt, there's a (morally) right and wrong state of financial being. Those with no debt are in better standing with God than those who aren't—because staying out of debt is "biblical" living.

And while it's generally better to be debt-free, the issue at stake isn't as simple as it may look.

When this proverb was written, the financial world was rough on people in debt. If you were in debt, you were at the mercy of your creditor—and unkind creditors could literally enslave their debtors and their families.¹⁰ The risk of economic oppression was so great that the Law outright forbade the Israelites from charging each other interest.¹¹ The Law furthermore said that no matter what, every seven years the Israelites were supposed to forgive all debts—an economic reset button known as "jubilee."¹² The people couldn't always count on the rich lenders to honor this rule, though. In fact, the problem of the rich oppressing the poor rears its head over and over *and over again* in the Bible. That means that at the time this proverb was written, the borrower truly was at risk of being the lender's slave.

But today we benefit from a far more advanced financial

system than the ancient people had. For most English readers, laws protect us from going into slavery if we miss a credit card payment, and our laws are better enforced than the religious laws of ancient Judah. People borrow money to start new businesses. People borrow money to get a proper education for the career paths they want to pursue. People borrow money just to live in their own home, instead of paying rent while they save up the money they need to cover the cost of a house. These loans are made through public lending entities, not individual loan sharks who could ruin your life if they felt like it.

The circumstances surrounding debt have changed greatly. When the writer of Proverbs wrote that the borrower is the lender's slave, they had no idea that one day, homes would cost so much that regular people would have to take out 30-year mortgages to afford them. If you apply the Bible's principles without taking note of the cultural differences, you could close yourself off to making wise decisions. The *principle* of the proverb is still true: debt limits you. But the specific hardships of debt are not the same.

That's just one example, but you can see how an ancient text, while theologically valuable, can be misused by a modern reader. This is a crucial thing to remember when you're dealing with the Bible (or talking about the Bible): it was written at a different time. The human experience on earth has changed drastically in the industrial and internet ages. It's tempting to either write off parts of the Bible as outdated, or to apply the Bible's words to our time in an unwise way.

This is especially important to keep in mind for the Old Testament. As we'll see, the Old Testament

had a lot to do with how the people of Judah, a semi-theocratic state, should conduct themselves. Much of the Old Testament directives flow from a particular relationship between God and the Jewish nation. We'll examine this relationship in detail soon. This is a unique relationship, so Bible readers should use extreme caution before applying its rules to another relationship. God is not in similar relationships with any of today's world nations—an important thing to keep in mind before applying these messages directly to your own culture.

Bottom line: if you find yourself in a conversation with someone who applies the Bible's text directly to your culture without considering what those words meant in their original, historical context, *you're no longer talking about the Bible.*

Misuse #2: Treating the Bible as a personal message from God to the reader

The Bible is filled with inspiring and encouraging texts. Sometimes, a reader comes across certain snippets of text that feel so pertinent to their specific situation, it seems as though God put it there just for them. Commercialism has cashed in on this: Scripture references show up all the time in greeting cards, jewelry, knick-knacks, and the like.

The Bible may be especially uplifting or convicting at times, but treating it as a personal, one-to-one letter sent from God to the individual reader has some problems. First, there's the huge cultural divide that we just discussed above. But more importantly, there's the problem that these texts don't give any indication that they're supposed to be used that way.

The books of the Bible weren't written to be a catch-all

codex for any single human's experience. If so, they'd make such a claim. They don't. The books were written for specific purposes, sometimes to preserve stories, sometimes to give directions to their readers. Sometimes the Bible names specific readers. (For example, the books of Titus and Philemon are addressed to their namesakes.) Modern readers should be careful not to confuse themselves with the original intended readers of Scripture.

Unfortunately, this is a very easy mistake to make. Many people are told that they should be reading the Bible, that reading the Bible is good for them, that God wants them to read the Bible, and that God will speak to them through the Bible. They're made to feel guilty for *not* reading it. But then they find themselves wading through chapter after chapter of furniture and clothing specifications for a *tent*.¹³

If you've been told that you need to read the Bible to become a better Christian, it's logical that you'll start looking for something—*anything*—that indicates that God is communicating with you, not just a group of people thousands of years and miles away. Finding a deeply personal message in the text from God can be a shortcut to the rewarding feeling that you expected to receive from reading the Bible.

However, this tends to put the Bible in a position in which it never claims to belong. The Old Testament was arranged to help the Jews understand their collective relationship with God. The New Testament was arranged to help Christians and churches follow Jesus. Neither the books nor the canon were made for any single individual living today.

I'm including this misuse in this guide because, as we start looking through what the Bible's about, you're probably

going to want to open a Bible and start digging into these books yourself. If you do so, just keep this in mind. If you protect yourself from creating a shortcut to personal meaning, you will have an easier time exploring the general meaning of a given passage.

There's another reason we need to get this out of the way before jumping into the Bible's content: you probably know at least one person who has treated the Bible this way. These folks are usually well-intentioned and sincere when they talk to you about their faith and what they find in the Bible. But if you want to have a working understanding of the Bible, it's important to recognize this line of thought when you encounter it. Because if someone's talking about the Bible as a personal message directly to them, *they're no longer talking about the Bible.*

Misuse #3: Assuming the Bible has all the answers

A lot of people believe that the Bible is the ultimate source of truth in the world. They come to this belief through a series of other beliefs that's pretty easy to follow:

- If you believe that God knows absolutely everything, past, present, and future, AND
- If you believe that the Bible is the only source of communication humans have from God, AND
- If you believe that God cares about people, THEN
- You might believe that, since God anticipated every single thing that people would have important questions about, he would give us all the answers in his one message.

However, there's a problem with this line of reasoning: **The Bible doesn't make this claim about itself.**

(Partially because it can't—remember, there was no “itself” to make claims about until centuries after its last book was written.) As we've seen before, the individual books of the Bible were written with their own purposes, and the Bible as a whole was put together to help more people follow the teachings of Jesus.

That means the Bible shouldn't be approached as a text with all the answers for all today's questions. Because **that's not what the Bible was written for.** The Bible was written to answer questions about human relationships with God—not questions about natural science, macroeconomics, or the origin of the pyramids.

Sure, you'll find some helpful principles for a non-religious life in the Bible. One of the books, called Ecclesiastes, is filled with such observations. But using the Bible for anything other than its intended purpose puts you in “use at your own risk” territory.

I hope you can see why this is an important thing to address before jumping into the contents of the Bible. When you find yourself in a conversation with someone who treats the Bible as some sort of skeleton key for the knowledge of the universe, *they're no longer talking about the Bible.*

Let's look at what the Bible actually is about.

You've eaten your veggies—time to get into the meat and potatoes. We've covered a few important things to know about what the Bible's intended purpose is, and what it isn't.

We're going to spend the rest of this guide exploring what the Bible is all about.

But first, a quick recap.

Quick recap: What is the Bible for?

- The whole Bible was arranged to help people follow Jesus Christ.
- The individual books of the Bible were written with individual purposes, audiences, and problems in mind.
- The Bible was written thousands of miles and thousands of years away from us. Be wary of applying an ancient text to modern situations without checking to see if any major cultural understandings have shifted over the millennia.
- The Bible is not a personal message to the reader: it's a collection of specific messages preserved for Christians by Christians through the ages.
- The Bible is not a book with all the answers to the universe—it's a book about how humans can have and maintain a good relationship with God.

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1. Or so I've heard. At the time I write this, I've never been to the streets of New Orleans. I'll make you a deal: If I ever end up on a book tour and end up signing books in New Orleans, you can meet me there and I'll cross out this footnote for you. ;-)
 2. "The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:
 for gaining wisdom and instruction;
 for understanding words of insight;
 for receiving instruction in prudent behavior,
 doing what is right and just and fair;
 for giving prudence to those who are simple,
 knowledge and discretion to the young—

let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance—
for understanding proverbs and parables,
the sayings and riddles of the wise.” (Pr 1:1–6)

3. “I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning. I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” (Lk 1:3–4)
4. “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (Jn 20:30–31)
5. “Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.” (2 Pe 3:1–2)
6. Paul says toward the end of his letter to the Christians in Rome that, “everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.” (Romans 15:4)
7. This is the same passage that Christians get the term *divine inspiration* from, where Paul tells a younger pastor that “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16–17)
8. In the Gospel of John, a group of Jewish religious leaders confront Jesus. He tells them, “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39).

After Jesus’ resurrection, he tells his followers that the Scriptures foretold his return from the grave: “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms [the first and most significant book in the Writings].” (Luke 24:44)

9. Proverbs 22:7
10. At one point in the Bible, a woman tells a prophet that her husband is deceased, and that “his creditor is coming to take [her] two boys as his slaves” (2 Kings 4:1). The prophet performs a miracle to help this family out of that bind, but the poor people of ancient Israel couldn’t always count on miracles for getting out of debt.
11. God tells Moses to pass this rule along to the people of Israel: “If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest.” (Exodus 22:25.)
12. In the book of Deuteronomy, the prophet Moses (whom we’ll look at in

detail soon) tells the people, “At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts.” (Deuteronomy 15:1)

13. Seriously: there’s a specific tent that’s a huge point of concern in the first fifth of the Bible. It’s called the “tabernacle,” and we’ll address it later in this guide.

WHAT IS THE BIBLE ABOUT?

You know that the Bible is a collection of sacred texts. You know that these texts were arranged to help humans enter and maintain a good relationship with God.

So it shouldn't be surprising to find that relationships between God and humans are the main focus of the Bible.

In fact, if you understand **four key relationships**, you'll have a framework for how all the books of the Bible fit together—and you'll always have a good sense of what's going on as you read the Bible.

Everything in the Bible is related to at least one of these four relationships—and in this section we're going to examine them all. In the next section, we'll get a high-level view of exactly how all the books of the Bible fit together around them.

RELATIONSHIPS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

For us to understand how the Bible describes God-to-human relationships, we need to dig into how relationships worked in the ancient world. And there's one specific type of relationship that was just part of how the world ran back then, but doesn't come up that much in today's world.

That relationship is called **covenant**.

A covenant was a solemn, binding agreement between two or more parties in the ancient world. It was a pact that, in some ways, was a mix of the modern marriages, business contracts, and alliances. But at its core, when the ancient people entered covenants, a few things took place:

Covenants join two parties together. Similar to royal marriages, covenants bound two distinct entities together in a way that made it very difficult for them to separate. Sometimes covenants took place between two families, sometimes between entire people groups. Usually these covenants were made between two unequal parties. The more powerful party, or the **suzerain**, was often a

mighty nation or monarch, while the lesser party, the **vassal**, was a less powerful nation or ruler. The two parties didn't necessarily merge to become one country, but there were some changes that took place between them, specifically ...

Covenants involve promises. Covenants set expectations between the two parties. In some ways, this is similar to modern business agreements: both parties promise to perform or refrain from certain acts toward each other. These promises set future norms for both parties. For the ancients, this would involve a long list of ways that the suzerain and the vassal would make their relationship mutually beneficial. Suzerains might provide protection against more powerful enemies, aid in battle, and maintain safe trade routes. Vassals might send "tribute" (goods and money) to the suzerain.

Assuming both sides kept their end of the bargain, all would be fine and dandy. But if the vassal didn't hold up their end of the bargain (or worse, betrayed the suzerain to serve another power), there would be a steep price to pay. So steep, in fact, that ...

Covenants invoke divine witnesses. Ancient Near East covenants often looped in the gods of their parties. A covenant wasn't just a handshake between two kings or heads of households—it was made in the presence of divine beings. In fact, copies of treaties between kings were often stored in the temples of the nations' gods. This established the covenant as a sacred text—covenants became part of the moral fabric of a nation. ¹

This was so that the gods could enact two key features of

covenants: **blessings** and **curses**. Blessings were the gods' perks for those who kept the covenant. Curses were the opposite: famine, plague, and utter destruction.

Covenants were to be remembered. This exchange of promises was only as good as the word of those who kept them. This meant that the two parties, especially the lesser one, would need to keep the covenant on their minds—otherwise the people might forget about it.

Ancient people didn't have the same technology nor access to education that we have today, so they couldn't just print out copies of their covenant agreements and distribute them across the nation. Instead, people came up with workarounds for commemorating these agreements.

Ancient folks developed all kinds of ways to ratify and remember their agreements. For example, covenants often involved animal sacrifice; the people of the time saw the slaughter as a way to “seal the deal.” (In one Assyrian covenant, the suzerain beheads a lamb as an example: this is what will happen to the vassal if they break their oath. Gulp.)² Covenant partners would sometimes share an inaugural covenant meal together, and the terms would sometimes specify how often the covenant should be read aloud in public.

Why is covenant such a big deal?

You might be thinking, “Hey now—I was told this was a beginner's guide to the Bible. Why am I reading about disembodied sheep heads and ancient foreign affairs?”

This isn't the stuff that comes up on a typical Sunday morning. But it's absolutely vital to understanding what the

Bible's about. Because everything you read about in the Bible comes down to **four key covenant relationships**—not between petty lords and emperors, but between humans and God himself.

Think back to the jigsaw puzzle analogy for understanding the Bible. In the last section, we got the big picture of what the Bible is and what it's for. In this section, we're finding the four corner pieces of the puzzle. Once you know the basics of these four covenants, the rest of the Bible's content will make a great deal more sense.

We'll look at each of them in detail, but there's no need to hold you in suspense about what specific relationships we're talking about here.

The four covenants you need to know about:

1. God's covenant with Abraham
2. God's covenant with the nation of Israel (the Law)
3. God's covenant with David
4. Jesus' "New Covenant," which welcomes everyone

In this section, we'll look at each of these relationships in specific detail. By the end of it, you'll have a good idea of how each of these covenants influenced the Bible's authors, editors, and readers. Plus, you'll have the essential reference points you'll need to begin reading and studying the Bible for yourself, or even have conversations about the Bible with your friends.

Let's get to it!

1. George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, "Covenant," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1181.
2. A fragment of the tablet the treaty was written on reads:

"This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati'ilu [the vassal], it is the head of his sons, his officials, and the people of his land. If Mati'ilu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off, and its knuckle placed in its mouth, [...], the head of Mati'ilu be torn off, and his sons ..."

James Bennett Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. with Supplement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 532.

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

You may have heard Christianity, Judaism, and Islam referred to as “Abrahamic religions.” The relationship between Abraham and his God is one of the most significant ancient traditions in the modern world—in fact, in 2002, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* estimated that almost fifty-three percent of the world’s population adhered to Abrahamic religions.¹

Abraham’s story is relatively short in the Bible. While other characters like Jesus, Moses, and David have entire books dedicated to their lives and actions, Abraham is only briefly on the scene. We meet him in the eleventh chapter of the Bible’s first book, Genesis, and he dies in the twenty-fifth chapter of the same book.

And yet what happens in those vital pages echoes throughout all of Scripture, both the Old and the New Testaments. During Abraham’s brief time on the biblical stage, God enacts a covenant with him that sets the course for the rest of the Bible. Pastors and academics call this agreement between God and Abraham the “Abrahamic

covenant.” (Fair warning: most of these covenants have academic-sounding names.)

Overview of the Abrahamic Covenant

Parties:

- God
- Abraham (and his descendants)

God's promises:

- God would accompany and protect Abraham.
- Abraham would be the ancestor of many.
- Abraham's descendants would possess a certain land.
- God would bless the world through Abraham's descendants.

God's expectations:

- Faith

Key Bible passages:

- Genesis 12:1–3; 15:1–19; 17:1–16; 22:1–18
- Matthew 3:7–10; Galatians 3:7–9

That's the overview—now let's take a look at some of the specifics.

The backstory

Human civilization has reached a point when a few great nations are already on the scene. Each nation has its own

land and religion, and most of these religions involve worshipping a pantheon of gods. (For example, the Egyptians worship gods of the sun, the sky, and the Nile.) The world's nations look to their gods for protection, justice, blessings on themselves and their allies, and curses on their enemies.

The book of Genesis loosely lists about seventy people groups in the world at this time, each nation stemming from a single patriarch of its own. One family in Mesopotamia gets the idea to move toward the Mediterranean Sea. Their hopes? To settle in the land of Canaan, which is roughly the same area as modern-day Israel. However, the family doesn't make it that far: they settle in an area east of the Euphrates river. As far as their religion goes, they worship an unknown pantheon of gods.²

This family has already endured their share of hardship. Terah, the patriarch of the clan, outlives one of his three sons. And one of his other sons, Abram, is childless. (No, that's not a typo: his name becomes Abraham later in this story.)

The covenant

But then one day, Abram receives a message from God: leave this family and come to a new land. God makes a few promises to the new adventurer:

“I will make you into a great nation, and I will
bless you;

I will make your name great, and you will be a
blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

You might say God gave him an offer he couldn't refuse.

Abram thus sets out on a journey of faith, crossing the Euphrates with his wife and nephew and making his way to the land of Canaan. In a rather *Lion King*-esque scene, God tells Abram to look to the north, south, east and west—saying that the whole land of Canaan will one day belong to his descendants.³

However, there's a problem. Abram doesn't have any kids, which makes the whole “descendants” part of this promise a little difficult for him. When Abram brings this up to God, God swears to give him a flesh-and-blood son, who will become the father of innumerable offspring. The land of Canaan will belong to these descendants.

And Abram takes God at his word. This moment of **Abram's faith** triggers the rest of the Bible's story. God and Abram enter into a covenant relationship: a relationship that is developed over the course of several interactions between God and Abram. God changes Abram's name to Abraham, “the father of many nations,”⁴ and reiterates that through Abram's descendants, all the nations of the world will be blessed. For centuries to come, God is identified as the “God of Abraham,” and Abraham is remembered as the “friend of God.”⁵

God comes through for Abraham, miraculously granting him and his wife Sarah a natural son despite their old age. They name the boy Isaac. God renews this covenant with Isaac after Abraham's death, reiterating the promises he made to Abraham:⁶

1. God would be with Isaac and bless him.
2. Isaac's descendants will be many.
3. Isaac's descendants will possess the land of Canaan.
4. Through Isaac's descendants, the nations of the world will be blessed.

Isaac has sons of his own: twins named Esau and Jacob. The boys have a falling out (but that's another story), and Esau plans to murder Jacob. So Jacob skips town and heads back to the land of Abraham's father. Before Jacob leaves the land of Canaan, God visits Jacob in a dream one night to extend the Abrahamic covenant to him. But this time, God introduces himself as the God of Abraham *and* Isaac.

God makes the same set of promises again: God will be with Jacob and watch over him. Jacob can expect many descendants, who will inherit the land of Canaan, and through whom the whole world will be blessed.⁷ From this point onward, God is often identified in the Bible as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"—the three individual patriarchs through whom God promised to bless all the nations of the world.

Speaking of nations, Jacob's relationship with God has another similarity to Abraham's. When Jacob returns to the land of Canaan from his exile, God changes Jacob's name to Israel. Israel has twelve sons, each of whose families grow

until the whole people group, the Israelites, are a nation to themselves.

Why is the Abrahamic covenant so important?

This covenant undergirds the rest of the Bible—and it's all tied to the promises that God made to Abraham. The book of Genesis contains many conversations between God and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but we're going to focus on just four promises that have long-term effects on how the story of the Bible plays out.

1. God promises to be with Abraham

The Abrahamic covenant is a crucial moment in the Bible's story. Like we saw earlier, the emerging nations of the world had their own pantheons and systems of worship. But out of nowhere, this God singles out Abraham to form an alliance together. Later in the Bible, a prophet named Moses alludes to the idea that each nation was assigned to their own lesser gods and borders, but God (the "Most High") chose Israel to be his own.⁸ This is crucial: in the Bible, **the origin of the Jewish people and the origin of the Jewish faith are one and the same.**

God promises to bless Abraham's friends and curse his enemies. God promises to be a shield to Abraham. And God extends these promises of his presence and protection to Isaac and Jacob as well.

This idea of God's presence will become even more important in the next three covenants that we look at. But for now, it's just important for us to see that with this

covenant, God promised to care for Abraham and his descendants.

Speaking of which ...

2. God promises Abraham descendants

The Old Testament (which is about three-quarters of the Bible) focuses on God's relationship with the Israelite people group. But while the Old Testament as we know it was coming together, the Jewish people were scattered across the nations of the Ancient Near East. What's so special about Israel? Why would the so-called "God Most High" care about a little group of people that couldn't even hold their own on the stage of world empires?

The Abrahamic covenant gives us an answer: the nation of Israel has been on God's mind for a long time. The Jews could point to this arrangement between God and their ancestors and say, "This is where we came from. God *promised* our ancestors that we would exist."

And God didn't just promise that Abraham would be the ancestor of many people. God notes that Abraham will be the father of more than one nation, that kings would come from him, and that at least one of these nations would be "great."

But who is that "great nation"? Well ... there are a few claims to that title in the Bible. We'll look at those later. The main thing to take away is that for generations, the Jews passed along the story of how, long ago, God had promised a childless old man many descendants. The Jewish people themselves were evidence that God keeps his promises.

3. God promises Abraham land

This is a crucial key to understanding the Old Testament. God promises to give the entire land of Canaan to Abraham, a foreigner. The covenant that God makes with Abraham is like a deed to the land: when the time is right, God will hand the land over to Abraham's descendants.

As far as the Jews were concerned, that land belonged to them. It was their God-given inheritance, something that the creator of the cosmos swore would be theirs forever. The Abrahamic covenant assured the Jews that there was a place for them in the world—a place they belonged. This idea of a Promised Land is the driving force for most of the events in the Old Testament. The first five books of the Bible tell the story of the children of Israel making their way from Egypt (more on that later) to the Promised Land. The next five books of the Bible tell the story of how Israel occupied the land.

But from here on out, most of the Old Testament deals with a huge problem: **Israel loses the Promised Land.** In the last section, we briefly touched on the fact that the people of Judah were taken captive to Babylon. The Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and carried their people away from the land that God had promised to them. After about 70 years, the people of Israel were allowed to return to their land, but they were, for the most part, dominated by other world empires from that time onward.

Israel's God-given right to their land is a major plot point in the Bible, and it all comes back to this deal between God and Abraham.

Hebrews, Israelites, or Jews?

You've probably noticed that I've used a few words to refer to the main people group in the Bible.

There's a good reason for this, which we'll dive into in the next section—specifically when we look at the books of Kings in the Bible.

For now, the main thing you need to know is that in the Bible, “Israel” (or “Israelites”) refers to all the descendants of Jacob *as well as* one of the kingdoms that comes from Jacob's descendants. There's a lot more to explore here later.

“Jew” comes from the word “Judah,” which refers to a specific subgroup (a “tribe”) that occupied Jerusalem. The tribe of Judah was later taken captive to Babylon. After the fall of the Babylonian empire, “Jews” became another name for Israelites in general.

“Hebrew” is a slightly broader term that refers to both Abraham's general people group and the language of the Israelites. It's been speculated that the word comes from “Eber,” the name of one of Abraham's ancestors in Genesis, but we don't know for sure. What we do know is that Abraham was called a Hebrew, but not an Israelite—which makes sense, because Israel didn't exist yet.

4. God promises to bless all the nations through Abraham

You might be wondering, “Wait—if the Bible is about the Jewish people, why is it such a big deal to so many non-

Jewish people?” That question has a very, very long answer, but that answer starts with Abraham.

When God makes his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he doesn't simply promise to take care of their Israelite descendants. He pledges to bless all the nations of the earth *through* these descendants.

This idea echoes throughout the rest of the Bible, which we'll see soon. For now, the important thing to remember is that the agreement God made with Abraham gives him descendants, gives his descendants land, and gives the nations a blessing through those descendants.

Quick recap

The covenant God makes with Abraham is the main focus of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. From there on out, the Abrahamic covenant is mostly working in the background. In fact, after Genesis, the Old Testament goes relatively silent on Abraham. It's not until we get to the New Testament that God's covenant with Abraham comes back into the forefront. The New Testament authors Paul, Luke, and whomever wrote the book of Hebrews reference Abraham more than every other book of the Old Testament combined. (You'll see why later on in this guide.)

So if Abraham is in the background for most of the Old Testament, who's front and center?

Well, two characters are going to shape the rest of the Old Testament, and both are associated with other important covenants God made with humans. We'll look at them next.

But first, a quick recap of the Abrahamic covenant:

- Abraham was a foreigner from Mesopotamia who traveled to the land of Canaan.
- God promised to accompany and protect Abraham.
- God promised Abraham would be the ancestor of many descendants.
- God promised that these descendants would occupy Canaan.
- God promised that through Abraham’s descendants, all nations would be blessed.
- God extended this covenant to Abraham’s son Isaac and grandson Jacob/Israel.

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1. You can access their table, which as of August 2018 is archived at (<https://web.archive.org/web/20070312004028/http://www.britannica.com/eb/table?tocId=9394911>). Be forewarned: it’s a Web page from 2002—and it looks like it.
 2. In the book of Joshua, a leader of the Israelites gives them an overview of their nation’s history. He begins by telling them: “Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods.” (Joshua 24:2)
 3. “The Lord said to Abram [...], ‘Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever’” (Genesis 13:14–15).
God actually tells Abram this on more than one occasion—this is just the most dramatic.
 4. “Abraham” probably means “Father of many”—it’s very similar to the Hebrew word for “father,” *ab*, and the Hebrew word for “many,” *hamon*. (Genesis 17:1–5)
 5. In the New Testament, the author of the book of James remembers the scene from Genesis when God makes a covenant with Abraham: “‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,’ and he was called God’s friend” (James 2:23).
 6. God says to Isaac, “I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and

through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed" (Genesis 26:3–5).

7. In Jacob's dream, God speaks from heaven and says to Jacob, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Genesis 28:13–15).
8. The Torah closes with a grand poem from Moses, which includes an encouragement:

"When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance,
 when he divided all mankind,
 he set up boundaries for the peoples
 according to the number of the sons of Israel.
 For the Lord's portion is his people,
 Jacob his allotted inheritance." (Deuteronomy 32:7–9).

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ISRAEL

You've probably heard the story of the Ten Commandments: an old man named Moses climbs a mountain, and returns with two stone tablets from God with ten important rules for mankind.

Well, these Ten Commandments are more than just a tiny list of rules. They're the basis of yet another relationship between God and humans. Whereas with Abraham, God himself made a covenant between him and a handful of humans, this time God makes a pact with an entire nation: Israel.

While the arrangement with Abraham was mostly just a matter of faith that God would keep his promises, this relationship is a lot more complicated. This is where the Hebrew people receive their entire code of conduct. Kosher food rules? Those start here. Taking Saturdays off from work? That starts here. Festivals like Passover? Those start here, too.

That great big problem of Israel losing their promised land?

Well, this relationship has the answer to why that happened.

We're going to look at the Law of Moses. If you have an understanding of what happened between God, Moses, and the nation of Israel, you'll have a pretty good grip on the rest of the Old Testament.

A quick caveat: If our chapter on the Abrahamic Covenant was at the 10,000-foot view, this chapter on the Law will be at the 50,000-foot view. That's because the Bible has a whole lot to say about this agreement. In fact, as early as the first century, Christians referred to the Law of Moses as the Old Covenant ... which is where we get the term "Old Testament" from. About a fifth of the *whole* Bible is considered "the Law." And this relationship is so complex that a good chunk of the *New* Testament is dedicated to figuring out how (and if!) the Law is applicable to Christians.

Bottom line: this is a massive, complicated relationship that *technically* spans multiple smaller agreements between God, Moses, and Israel. But since this is a beginner's guide to the whole Bible, we won't get stuck here.

Overview of the Law of Moses

Parties:

- God
- The nation of Israel

God's promises:

- Prosperity and protection if Israel obeys the Law

- Punishment and exile if Israel breaks the Law

God's expectations:

- Holiness: complete dedication and obedience to God
- Sacrifices when commands were not met

Key Bible passages:

- Exodus 19–34

That's the overview—now let's take a look at some of the specifics.

The backstory

The ancient Jews believed that Jacob and his family moved from Canaan to Egypt to survive a food shortage. Jacob was a wealthy man with family in high places in Egypt, so his people were welcomed as honored guests. Jacob's twelve sons had children of their own, and over the next several centuries they multiplied, becoming a large people group living in Egypt. After Jacob and his sons died, the Egyptian monarchy changed hands—and the new Pharaoh saw the foreign residents as a threat. His solution? Put the Israelites to work as slaves.

Pharaoh attempted to dissolve the Israelite people group by killing their newborn sons, but one mother successfully hid her son from the genocide. She hides her baby in a basket-boat and sets him in the reeds of the Nile, where Pharaoh's daughter discovers him. The Egyptian princess adopts the child and names him Moses.

Moses grows up, and kills an abusive Egyptian when he sees

him beating a fellow Hebrew. It's a crime that Pharaoh won't forgive, so Moses runs away to the East, where he works as a shepherd for 40 years. During this time, things get worse and worse for the people of Israel back in Egypt. A new Pharaoh takes the throne, and conditions become more and more oppressive, until the people of Israel cry out for help—a cry that God hears. God is ready to make good on his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by bringing Israel to the land of Canaan at last.

God visits Moses on a mountain in the wilderness: a mountain called Sinai. Famously appearing as a burning bush, God gives Moses a message to pass on to Pharaoh: “Let my people go.”

Pharaoh eventually relents (more on that later), and the newly independent people of Israel make their way out of Egypt and back to the foot of Mount Sinai, where something miraculous happens. God himself speaks to the entire nation at once.

The covenant

God thunders from the mountaintop in voice loud enough for everyone in the camp to hear: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”¹

Remember the suzerain-vassal treaties we discussed at the beginning of this section? These human agreements would often begin with the more powerful king (the suzerain) stating the ways that he had been kind or generous to the lesser people group (the vassal). God begins this new relationship with Israel the way an ancient human emperor

would begin a relationship with a smaller nation under his protection. He declares that he is the deity looking out for Israel. Of all the divine beings that all the nations of the ancient world recognized, only one had shown Israel any compassion, and it was God.

God then makes it clear that he is the divine being to whom Israel owes their worship and allegiance. Israel was to have “no other gods” before him, and they’re forbidden from worshiping anyone or anything else. While the nations around them worshiped their own pantheons, Israel was to worship their God, and serve their God only. God then gives Israel a list of simple rules to abide by (the Ten Commandments).

After this, the people of Israel ask Moses to serve as a mediator between God and the people, out of fear that their direct exposure to the divine being would put them in peril. Moses then approaches God himself, gathering a list of more specific rules for the children of Israel to follow. The nation of Israel agrees to these laws.²

That brings things to Phase Two: now that God and Israel have this special relationship, God is going to make his home among the people. The people of Israel have a long journey ahead of them to the land God promised to give to Abraham, and so God gives Moses plans for a portable temple, called the “tabernacle.” It’s a sacred tent where the people can make sacrifices and worship God as they make their way through the wilderness.

The Ten Commandments were the core of this covenant, but there are additional, more specific laws sprawled across the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—the books of the Bible immediately

following Genesis. These covenant laws are so pervasive that, collectively, these five books have been referred to as “the Law” by Jews and Christians for millennia.

But there’s a catch. Whereas most of the promises God made to Abraham were unconditional, *this* relationship was contingent on Israel keeping their end of the bargain. Moses later made a pact with the nation of Israel, calling on God to bless the Israelites if they obeyed all the laws of the covenant, and curse them if they broke them.³ (That’s the gist of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Bible. We’ll look more closely at that later.)

Spoiler alert: the rest of the Old Testament is more or less the story of Israel dropping the ball on this.

Why is “LORD” in all caps?

The Old Testament was written in ancient Hebrew (for the most part), and Hebrew uses several different words to refer to God. Some of these Hebrew words mean “lord,” “master,” and the like. But one word in particular, *YHWH* or *Yahweh*, is the specific name of the Israelite God, which might have meant “I am,” or “the one who exists.” When you see the word “LORD” printed in all capital letters, it means that the Hebrew manuscripts originally used this name of God here.

Why is the Law so important?

This relationship between God and Israel sets the “rules” for the rest of the Old Testament, and it lays a status quo that the New Testament subverts later on. If you understand the general nature of the Law, you’ll have a much easier time navigating the Bible’s story arc. Let’s get a quick overview of some of the important themes the Law puts into play.

1. The Law demands Israel’s loyalty to God

Back when God was making promises to Abraham, he pledged to be the God of Abraham’s descendants.⁴ This is important because the other nations of the world *had their own gods*. God intended to raise up a human nation that worshiped him, not the other gods in play. The Israelites carried on the stories of how God spoke to their ancestors for centuries, presumably in the form of oral traditions. By the time Moses is an adult, the leaders of the Israelites have an understanding that they worship a God that their ancestors worshiped—specifically, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When their situation in Egypt became particularly oppressive, the Israelites cried out for help—and God hears them.

When God calls Moses to serve as a prophet, he tells Moses that Pharaoh won’t just let his workforce walk away. Pharaoh, who believes himself to be a god, must be shown that someone more powerful than him has a claim to the Israelite people. Only then will he allow the slaves to leave. Therefore, God plans to “strike the Egyptians” with a host of miraculous, divine interventions. Today, we know these

wonders as the Ten Plagues—a set of powerful miracles that compelled Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave.

The story of the exodus is often told from a human perspective: Moses vs. Pharaoh. But there's a bigger story at work here. Just before God deals the final plague on Pharaoh, he tells Moses that he will judge "all the gods of Egypt." This isn't Moses vs. Pharaoh, or even God vs. Pharaoh. It's a showdown in which one God takes on the entire Egyptian pantheon, and wins.

God is the rescuing deity, sweeping away the oppressive rulership of Egypt and offering to make Israel his own people. Instead of serving the oppressive Pharaoh, they have the option to serve a kinder, more benevolent ruler-deity and benefit from his care.

However, in return, the Israelites owe God their total allegiance. Rather than worship the gods of the nations, they are required to worship *only* the God who brought them out of Egypt. God describes himself as "jealous," similarly to how we might talk about a jealous lover today. From God's perspective, he answered Israel's cry for help by rescuing them, and making them his own people. If God's people worship other deities, it feels like they're cheating on him.

So right at the beginning of the Ten Commandments, God identifies himself as the benevolent deity who rescued them from Egypt, and forbids them from worshipping anyone before him. This is vital, because for centuries to come, the Israelite people will struggle to keep this rule.

2. The Law brings God to earth

After God and Israel enter this covenant relationship, God

gives Moses instructions for building a special tent called the tabernacle. It's a portable temple that the Israelites can use in their newly established religion—a place where priests can make sacrifices and perform other rituals. You'll remember from the first section of this book that after King David's reign, the Israelites build a temple to God in Jerusalem. The tabernacle is the precursor to this temple.

When the tabernacle is complete, a cloud comes down to cover the tent—and God's majesty fills the tabernacle. It's a sign that God has indeed made Israel his people, and was living among them. This is very important to keep in mind when you're reading the Bible: according to their traditions, God had maintained a very special presence with the people of Israel. They weren't serving some faraway deity—their God was both ruling the heavens and being present with them on earth.

3. The law introduces holiness and purity

But the tabernacle introduced an issue to the people of Israel: how do you deal with such a powerful being living in the middle of your camp? God had expectations of his people, and in order for them to live in such close proximity to Him, they had to make some changes to their lifestyle.

This is because God is **holy**. It's a word the Bible uses to describe God over and over again. Holy means "sacred," or "set apart"—the opposite of profane or common. God himself is holy, and by nature of making Israel his people, Israel became holy as well. ⁵Because the holy God had come down to be with Israel, he expected the people around him to reflect this sacredness. In fact, God repeatedly tells the people in the Law to be holy *because* he is holy.⁶

This wasn't just a matter of pomp and circumstance. The Israelites believed that God was so holy that his holiness destroyed or consumed anything profane that came near to his presence. (God is sometimes referred to as “a consuming fire.”) So the closer to God you wanted to get, the holier you would have to be. Otherwise, you'd be toast.

This is where we get the idea of ritual **purity** and **impurity**. The people of Israel had to refrain from eating certain things, refrain from wearing certain things, refrain from certain behaviors, and the like. (The Israelites even needed to leave camp to poop, so that God wouldn't happen upon it decide not to stick around.)⁷ It was a way of maintaining a sacredness that was supposed to reflect the presence of God among the Israelites.

4. The Law establishes sacrifices

But everybody poops, and people mess up. So the Law also made a way for people to keep themselves ritually pure when they broke it: animal sacrifices. By killing animals, the Israelites were able to maintain a ritually pure status before God—the blood of the animal was a stand-in for the people's own impurity.

Throughout the Old Testament, people make sacrificial offerings to God when they find themselves in the wrong, or when they want to display their faith in him. The Law is where they got all the rules for which animals were acceptable to sacrifice, and how to sacrifice them.

5. The Law introduces blessings and curses

The Law provides part of the answer to that huge question

the Jews faced when they arranged the Old Testament:
What happened?

They had a special relationship with God. They had the temple of God. They were aligned with the God who went toe-to-toe with the Egyptian pantheon and won. So why did Jerusalem fall to the Babylonians?

Part of the answer to this question is in the Law. Toward the end of the books of Law in the Bible, Moses pronounces blessings and curses for the people of Israel. He tells Israel that God will generously bless them if they obey the Law. But if they break the Law and show no regard for God (ignoring his holiness), then they will be cursed and carried away to a foreign country.

The rest of the Old Testament tells the story of Israel (mostly) failing at keeping the Law, and edging closer and closer to those curses kicking in, until finally, they do.

6. The Law anticipates another great prophet

In the last book of the Torah, Moses knows that his own death is imminent. He won't be the last prophet to share God's messages with Israel. Many will follow (and they'll be the ones writing most of the Old Testament).

Moses specifically promises that God will raise up a prophet "like him" to speak the words of God to the people. However, by the time the Old Testament was finished, that prophecy hadn't yet been fulfilled. The Torah ends with a scribal note saying that since the Law was given, no prophet like Moses had yet arisen in Israel.

Quick recap

This Old Covenant, the Law of Moses, is crucial to understanding the rest of the Bible. But you may have noticed something about this one that makes it very different from the Abrahamic covenant: it's all about Israel. The Abrahamic covenant promised to bless all nations—this one's all about *one*. In fact, while the Law did allow converts to Judaism, the general rule was that Israel was in, and the other nations were out. Keep that in mind, because while the next two covenants are still related to the people of Israel, they're a little bit more inclusive for those of us who aren't Jewish.

For now, here's a quick recap of the Law:

- God made Israel his special people by rescuing them from Egypt's gods.
- God began living among the people in a portable temple.
- By following God's laws, Israel had God's protection and blessing.
- By disregarding God's laws, Israel incurred curses.

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1. Exodus 20:2
 2. Moses comes back down the mountain and reads the people everything that God told him. The people are pretty gung-ho about it, and tell Moses, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey." (Exodus 24:7)
 3. Toward the end of Moses' life, he gives the people of Israel a choice: "If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth [...]. However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and

overtake you [...]. The LORD will drive you and the king you set over you to a nation unknown to you or your ancestors.” (Deuteronomy 28:1, 15, 36)

4. God tells Abraham, “The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.” (Genesis 17:8)
5. God tells the Israelites via Moses that he is the one who makes Israel holy (Exodus 31:12–13).
6. God says this many times in the book of Leviticus, which we’ll look at in more detail later. For now, this quote from God sums up the general idea: “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.” (Leviticus 20:26)
7. You can’t make this stuff up. Moses tells the people, “Designate a place outside the camp where you can go to relieve yourself. [...] Dig a hole and cover up your excrement. For the LORD your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you. Your camp must be holy, so that he will not see among you anything indecent and turn away from you.” (Deuteronomy 23:12–14)

GOD'S COVENANT WITH DAVID

Even if you don't know anything about the Bible, you've probably heard the tale of David and Goliath. A young shepherd named David, hardly more than a boy, has the stones to square off against a giant in single combat, and he's victorious. This boy then goes on to become king of all Israel.

Abraham and Moses are big deals in the Bible. But with the exception of Jesus, no human gets as much biblical attention as King David. When the Old Testament was being put together, King David was the hero on every scholar's mind. He was the good, powerful, hero of a king from ages past—a shining example of everything Israel could be, and a sobering reminder that they weren't.

The biblical account of David paints a picture of political genius, military prowess, poetic aptitude, sage wisdom, and unmatched religious zeal. There's some not-so-good stuff too—but we'll take a closer look at David later. Right now we need to discuss something even more important. We need to understand the covenant God made with David.

Because David wasn't just a king, God promised to put a descendant of David on the throne in Jerusalem *forever*. The problem: David's dynasty ruled Jerusalem for several hundred years—until the Babylonians took over. Ever since this time, the Jews have been awaiting a coming Messiah: a new king who will bring in a new golden age like David's kingdom.

If you understand this covenant, you'll have a sharp understanding of why the Bible tells the story of Israel's history the way it does. And even more importantly, you'll see why Jesus is such a big deal.

Overview of the Davidic Covenant

Parties:

- God
- David

God's promises:

- David would be a great king
- God would establish his temple in Jerusalem
- A descendant of David will rule God's kingdom forever
- God's people would be safe and established

Key Bible passages:

- 1 Chronicles 17:1–15

That's the overview—now let's take a look at some of the specifics.

The backstory

After making their covenant with God in the wilderness, the people of Israel eventually reach the promised land of Canaan. But before they get there, Moses dies, and appoints his assistant Joshua to lead the people. Joshua takes charge, and leads the military conquest of the promised land. The Israelites depose the kings of the city-states in Canaan and enjoy a period of peace as they settle into life in their new land.

But they don't all settle in one place. The nation of Israel is made up of twelve subgroups, called tribes, each of which is said to have descended from one of Jacob's 12 sons. The twelve tribes settle in their own territories, with the tabernacle of God parked roughly in the middle of the land. When Joshua dies, the nation of Israel becomes something akin to a confederacy: the twelve tribes share their religion and some degree of cultural heritage, but for the most part operate independently of each other. There's no official central government, except the mild theocracy of the Law of Moses and the priests of their religion.

However, without the influence of leaders like Moses and Joshua, the Israelite society decays rapidly. The people follow the gods of the surrounding nations and engage in heinous acts, including, but not limited to: mass rape, fratricide, and child sacrifice. After a few centuries, the tribes of Israel devolve from Moses' united, God-worshipping confederacy into all-out civil war—with one of the tribes nearly going extinct.

Things aren't much better at the tabernacle, either. While the tribes are crumbling around them, the priests of God

become corrupt as well. It comes to a point at which the chief priest's sons are robbing the people and taking advantage of women. You have chaos in the nation, and corruption in the clergy.

The people push for a king to be given to them, someone to rule them like the nations around them. They're given Saul, who turns out to be a huge disappointment. (More on him later.) All of this amounts to a sad result: although the nation of Israel is supposed to reflect God's holiness, they look a lot more like the surrounding nations in their area.

But one young man, David, starts turning all this around.

David, the youngest son from a rural family, visits a battlefield one day on an errand from his father. When he sees the giant Goliath taunting the Israelites (by mocking their God), he accepts the challenge to fight him in single combat. David doesn't do this because of his fighting skills (he's a shepherd boy, after all); rather, he's confident that the God of Israel won't let this giant make a fool of him. David's faith has nothing to do with his own abilities: it has everything to do with his confidence that God wants to show up the gods of the Philistines.

David quickly becomes a national hero: defeating the enemies of Israel at every turn. When King Saul dies, it only takes a few years for all the tribes of Israel to make David the new king, instead of Saul's heirs. David establishes Jerusalem as the religious and social capital of the nation, and he worships the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob exclusively. One prophet describes David as a man after God's own heart.¹

It's about this time that David notices a bit of disparity:

while he lives in a grand palace, God's house of worship is just a tent. So one day, David begins making plans to build God a splendid house.

That night, however, God turns the tables on David.

The covenant

Rather than allow David to build God a house, God makes a counter-promise. Instead, God will build *David* a "house": a mighty dynasty. God promises to make the name of David "like the names of the greatest men on earth."² (Which, whether you put any stock in the Bible or not, turned out to be true—the tale of David and Goliath is cemented in the Western mind.)

This goes beyond a simple agreement between God and David. God ties David's reign to the rest of the nation. He promises that the nation of Israel will be established: they will have a home of their own and a place where they can live in peace, no longer in fear of oppressive forces from the outside (like the giant Goliath) nor the inside (like David's predecessor).

But the promises keep coming. God says that although David's not the one to construct God's temple, David's descendants will. God himself will be a father to David's sons, and although he will discipline his descendants when they stray, he will never revoke his love from them.

And finally, God makes the greatest promise of all: he will establish a descendant of David on the throne *forever*.

Spoiler alert: Christians believe Jesus is that special descendant of David.

This promise to David is known as the **Davidic covenant**. And although it's far, far less involved than the Law of Moses, it's vital for understanding the Bible. Let's look at why.

Why is the Davidic covenant so important?

The Law sets the rules for Israel, giving the nation a religious foundation to look back to. The Davidic covenant is different: it's *future* oriented. About a thousand years passed between David and the arrival of Jesus, and a host of Old Testament literature anticipates these promises being fulfilled. There's a lot that we could explore here, but here are the key takeaways that you should know.

1. The promise of a Messianic King

This covenant promised the Jews a king who would rule the people of Israel in peace and justice. God was giving David and all of Israel a guarantee: God's chosen leader would rule and protect Israel forever. God makes a few impressive moves in his promises to David. He says that David's son will be like a son to God himself, and that God would be a father to him. Furthermore, God speaks of the Messiah's kingdom as not *only* the kingdom of David. In fact, God refers to the Messiah's kingdom as *God's* kingdom.³

There was, of course, a glaring problem: **David's dynasty ended when Jerusalem fell to Babylon.**

David's line continued to rule Jerusalem for several hundred years, but when the Babylonians took the people captive, David's kingly line went with them. When the people were allowed to return to Jerusalem, a member of

the previously royal family named Zerubbabel led the way home. Zerubbabel served as governor of the area, but was far from a king. The Jews had various levels of peace and political independence over the next few centuries, but never maintained a kingdom of their own—certainly nothing that reflected God's promises to David.

Even so, the prophets of Israel (both before and after the exile) anticipated a time when a divinely-empowered descendant of the royal line would rule in Jerusalem. They looked forward to a king who would defeat the enemy nations and give Israel freedom from war. But they also expected a king who would judge the oppressive elites within the people of Israel. This king would look out for the poor and the oppressed, and judge the corrupt leaders of the people who took advantage of the lower social classes.

Over time, this future king became known as the “**Messiah**,” which means “anointed one.” When David was chosen by God to be king of Israel, a prophet poured oil on the boy's head, anointing him as the future ruler. The term “the Lord's anointed” is used frequently in the stories of David to refer to kings of Israel. The prophets and scribes of the Old Testament expected that a future king would have a similar anointing about him. He would be a new David: a mighty and good king who would deliver Israel and lead them forever. Many of the Psalms and books of prophecy in the Bible mention this coming Messianic King—and the Gospels of the New Testament each make a case that Jesus *is* that Messiah.

2. Jerusalem, a holy city

One of the results of the Law of Moses was that God's

presence dwelt among his people. Since the Law was forged way out in the wilderness, the people couldn't just build a temple to meet him in right then and there—they'd have to leave it behind on their journey to the promised land! So instead, Moses has the people build the tabernacle: a tent that worked as a portable temple where the Hebrews could meet with their God, make sacrifices, observe religious rituals, and the like.

The Israelites carried this tent around in the wilderness for the next several decades, and continued to carry it around during their conquest of Canaan. When it's time to divvy out the land to the various tribes of Israel, the people set up camp at a place called Shiloh, roughly in the center of the land. This is where the tabernacle stays for several centuries—and they aren't good centuries. (You'll learn all about it later when we look at the book of Judges.)

But David moves the tent to Jerusalem—and then David's son Solomon builds a grand temple for God in the city several decades later. The idea is that God and David have joined houses: just like David chooses to establish his throne in Jerusalem, God also chooses to make Jerusalem where *God's* throne is established.

The Ark of the Covenant

For all you Indiana Jones fans reading this, guess what was kept in the innermost chamber of both the tabernacle and the temple? You guessed it: the ark of the covenant. The ark of the covenant was a wooden chest with a golden lid (including two cherubim), and held the Ten Commandments that

Moses passed on to the people, along with a few other miraculous items.

However, to the ancient Israelites, this wasn't a mystical weapon. The Israelites thought of this box as the visible footstool that accompanied God's invisible celestial throne. The ark was literally where heaven met earth. King David calls the ark of the covenant "the footstool of our God."⁴ Centuries later, a Jewish song mentions the ark as God's footstool, and how God had chosen to be enthroned at Jerusalem, his "resting place for ever and ever."⁵

This is huge for the Israelites. God's covenant with David (and the events that unfold because of it) set up Jerusalem as a sacred point in the ancient world. God had chosen a king to rule Israel, and had chosen this capital city for his earthly dwelling place.

For the rest of the Bible, Jerusalem is center stage. Jerusalem is where David and his descendants rule. Jerusalem is where the Jews return from captivity. Jerusalem is where Jesus dies. Jerusalem is where the Christian church begins. All of this is important because Jerusalem is the city where God promises the Messiah will one day take up his kingship.

3. Hope of restoration

David's descendents don't keep the throne in Jerusalem forever. And God's holy presence doesn't reside in Jerusalem forever, either. The Babylonian empire took both of these off the table for a while.

But because of the promises that God made to David, the Jewish people held out hope that God would restore David's people to David's city. And according to the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which we'll look at soon, God does so.

God's covenant with David wasn't exclusively about David—it involves a promise for all God's people. God promises to give Israel peace from all her enemies, and give them a secure place in the world. Although Israel would still be disciplined for breaking the Law of Moses, the people could count on God to restore them when the time was right.

This led to the idea of a "Messianic age." The Jews looked forward to a time when the divinely empowered descendant of David (the Messiah) would assume leadership in Jerusalem. He would rule the nation (and lead the world) in peace and justice. He would usher in a time of prosperity for all. It's a golden age to come—and it's an idea that resonates throughout the writings of the prophets in the Old Testament and the apostles in the New Testament.

Quick recap

God told Abraham that he would be the ancestor of kings, and that through his descendants all the nations of the world would be blessed. God's covenant with David adds some specificity to these promises: David will have a descendant who rules God's kingdom from Jerusalem. Jerusalem becomes the spiritual (and political) capital of the Israelite people from here on out, and the descendants of David rule in Jerusalem for about 400 years. Although Jerusalem falls captive to world empires afterward, the Jews hold out hope that one day the Messiah, a divinely

appointed descendant of David, will liberate Israel from her oppressors and bring about an era of peace, justice, and prosperity.

We're about to jump about a thousand years into the future—so before we do this, let's get a brief recap of God's promises to David:

- David would be a great king
- God would establish his temple in Jerusalem
- A descendant of David will rule God's kingdom forever
- God's people would be safe and established

-
1. That prophet actually describes David that way to Saul, the failed king of Israel at the time. It's part of the message telling Saul that he and his family will not remain the rulers of Israel, because "the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people." (1 Samuel 13:14)
 2. God makes this promise in 2 Samuel 7:9 and 1 Chronicles 17:8
 3. Note the use of "my" when God tells David what he will do for this Messianic descendant: "I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever." (1 Chronicles 17:14)
 4. David assembles the people and tells them, "I had it in my heart to build a house as a place of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD, for the footstool of our God, and I made plans to build it." (1 Chronicles 28:2)
 5. The Jews used the 132nd Psalm to ask God to remember the promises he made to David, and to remind each other that God himself had chosen Mount Zion (a hilltop in Jerusalem) as the place to be enthroned "forever and ever." (Psalm 132:7, 13-14)

THE NEW COVENANT IN JESUS CHRIST

After God made a covenant with David, the descendants of David ruled Jerusalem for about the next five centuries. This was followed by 70 years in captivity to Babylon, and later a return from exile. The Jews rebuilt the city and the temple, and for a short while, more prophets spoke to the leaders of the people, calling them to remember the Law of Moses and prepare for the Messianic age.

But then there was silence for about 400 years. No new prophets—at least none that matched the likes of the ones that spoke during the times of Moses, David, and the exile. As these centuries wore on, Jewish religious scholars began piecing together the Bible—specifically our Old Testament. They studied the prophecies regarding the three covenants we’ve looked at thus far. They devised elaborate ways of keeping the Law of Moses, they pulled together texts that they believed were inspired by God, and eventually, they created the Old Testament. They developed various religious schools of thought, each with sophisticated interpretations of the Scriptures.

During this time, the city of Jerusalem changed hands several times. The Persian empire eventually fell before Alexander the Great, and the world was divided into four kingdoms—each kingdom going to one of Alexander's generals. Two of these kingdoms, Syria and Egypt, controlled Jerusalem at different points in history, before the Jews enjoyed about a century of independence in their own kingdom.

This came to an end when the Roman empire took control of Jerusalem—with the Jews eventually coming to be ruled by a man named Herod. Herod built a marvelous temple for the Jews in Jerusalem, but he wasn't exactly a hero to the Jewish people. Herod was a self-indulgent tyrant from a neighboring (sometimes rival) nation who was installed as the king of the Jews by the Romans.

The Jews wanted that Messiah they'd been promised almost a millennium ago.

The previous three covenants are the foundations of the Old Testament. This next covenant is the one that Christians believe pulls them all together.

With the three covenants we've looked at thus far, each covenant narrows the focus just a bit. God chooses Abraham out of all the nations. Then God chooses to make the Israelites his special people. Then God selects David as the one who will rule Jerusalem—the one from whom the Messianic king will come.

This covenant does the reverse: it culminates all these covenants in one person, Jesus, and then makes God's blessings available to anyone, of any nationality, anywhere. The covenant we're about to discuss is the focus on the

New Testament—in fact, the latter section of the Bible gets its name because it “testifies” about the New Covenant.

Let’s take a look.

Overview of the New Covenant

Parties:

- Jesus
- Humanity

God’s promises:

- Salvation from sin and evil
- A coming kingdom of peace and justice
- A place in this kingdom for those who believe in Jesus

Key Bible passages:

- Jeremiah 31:31–34
- Isaiah 42:1–7
- Luke 22:14–20
- Hebrews 9:15

That’s the overview—now let’s take a look at some of the specifics.

The backstory

In the Law of Moses, God rescues the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The Egyptians oppressed the Israelites in their own quest for power, wealth, and security. God then

goes head-to-head with the gods of Egypt and wins Israel as his own nation, freeing them from their cruel oppressors and making it possible for them to live at peace in a bountiful land. All the people had to do was remain loyal to God and keep his commandments.

But over the course of history, the people of Israel didn't do that.

Instead, the people worshipped other gods, which included acts of human sacrifice. Kings oppressed their own people by allowing the sick, poor, and underprivileged in their cities to be abused. Judges accepted bribes. Priests took advantage of worshippers, both financially and sexually. Instead of becoming a holy nation that reflected God's character, they were just like the oppressive nation that God had saved them from.

God's responsibilities in the Law were to protect and bless Israel when they were loyal, and discipline Israel when they were disloyal. God's prophets warned the people about this time and time again—but they continued to break the Law. Finally it came to a breaking point: the Babylonians carried the people of Jerusalem off into captivity for 70 years.

The covenant was broken.

But right after that happened, a prophet named Jeremiah shared a new message: God was planning to make a new covenant. Instead of a covenant based on God's act of rescuing Israel from Egypt, there would be some brand new act of salvation. And instead of laws written on tablets of stone, God's expectations would be written on the hearts of his people. And under this covenant, God would grant forgiveness for wrongdoings, and remember them no more.¹

God was planning a new deal.

Over time, other prophets shared similar messages with the Jews. A prophet named Ezekiel told his fellow captive Israelites that days would come when God would change their hearts, and put his own spirit within his people. He anticipated a time when the people would be motivated to follow God's ways instinctively—from the inside out.² The author of Malachi wrote that a divine messenger of the covenant would appear suddenly to test and purify the temple and the priests—removing corruption and bringing about a better relationship between the people and their God.³

And then, hundreds of years later, a man named Jesus appeared on the scene in the regions of Galilee and Judea (the same geographical area as ancient Israel—but now under the Roman empire). He worked miracles and amassed a following of decidedly non-elites: fishermen, Roman sympathizers, former political extremists, prostitutes, etc. He healed the sick, cared for the poor, and confronted the political and religious leaders who oppressed the people.

And the political and religious leaders had him killed.

But on the night before Jesus died, he celebrated the Jewish feast of Passover with some of his closest followers. And during that meal, he passed a cup around, telling them that his blood was being poured out to begin a “new covenant.”⁴

The covenant

Long beforehand, God opposed the gods of Egypt to set the Israelites free from their oppressors. Now, Jesus was going

to set humanity free by going head-to-head with oppression itself. Jesus performed a new redemptive act: **he was killed by oppressive forces, and emerged victorious.** Jesus was betrayed by one of his closest followers (the infamous Judas Iscariot) for money. He was accused of blasphemy and treason by the Jewish religious leaders, and publicly executed by the Roman government. Three days later, his followers reported seeing him alive and well.

And this act of dying and rising again puts an entirely new covenant in play, which we should unpack piece by piece.

Why is the New Covenant so important?

According to the first-century Christians, the New Covenant introduces an entirely new kind of relationship between God and humans—one that the Law of Moses (which Christians call the “Old Covenant”) never could provide.

1. Forgiveness (and salvation) from sin

The idea of “sin” runs throughout the Bible, and it’s a commonly used word in conversations about Christianity today. Sin is anything that runs contrary to God, or that falls short of his expectations. It includes theft, murder, corruption, neglect, withholding compassion, etc. It’s the human tendency to exploit one another for power, comfort, and pleasure at the expense of the innocent and vulnerable.

Under the Law, sin had to be paid for—a bit like a debt. Humans had the option of offering sacrifices to God to cover their debts, or to use the biblical word, *atone* for them.

These sacrifices usually involved killing animals and burning their carcasses on an altar. Priests would oversee these rituals, culminating with a yearly sacrifice to atone for the sins of all the Israelites.

These sacrifices were necessary because God is holy. The people of Israel had to maintain their ritual and moral purity in order to be in close quarters with him. The problem, of course, was that these sacrifices had to be made over and over again, because sin wasn't going away.

According to Jesus' followers, the New Covenant changes this. Jesus' death was him sacrificing *himself* on humanity's behalf, and for those who believe in him, it's the last sacrifice they'll ever need.⁵ According to Jesus' followers, his death and resurrection made forgiveness available to everyone—the need for sacrifices was put to an end, and anyone could have their sins forgiven.

Furthermore, Jesus' death defeated the embodiment of evil and sin in the Jewish and Christian traditions: the devil himself.⁶ Jesus and his followers taught that Jesus not only offered forgiveness of sin, but he also offered freedom from sin. It wasn't just that the sin debt was forgiven—Jesus made a way for humans to *sin less*. Jesus empowers his followers to reverse the tendency to sin, and instead act in wisdom and love.

Under the Law, people had to cleanse themselves in order to approach God in the temple. But under Jesus' covenant, the people are cleansed by God from the inside out. Because the sacrifice structure wasn't the only thing that Jesus shifted.

His covenant also radically changed the idea of temples.

Which brings us to the next big reason why this covenant is so vital to understanding the Bible.

2. A new temple of many temples

Under the Law, the people interacted with God through one established sacred place: the temple. God's indwelling of the temple was signified by pillars of cloud and flame hovering over the temple in the time of Moses. Jerusalem was the place where heaven met earth: the footstool of God's heavenly throne.

But Jesus' covenant changed all of this.

When Jesus was on earth, he referred to *himself* as a temple.⁷ From his followers' perspective, he technically was one. They believed that he was the Son of God, a divine being inhabiting a human body—a place where heaven and earth overlapped.

It goes even further than this, though. After Jesus rises from the dead, a group of his followers sees him ascending into heaven to assume his rightful position at God's right hand. Later, his followers have a powerful spiritual experience: a rushing wind comes from heaven, and they see small flames resting on one another—just like their ancestors claimed to see a pillar of fire resting on Moses' tabernacle.

According to the author of Acts, it's a sign that the spirit of God (better known as the Holy Ghost or "Holy Spirit") has filled Jesus' followers—and in some cases, it empowers them to perform miracles similar to the ones Jesus performed. And just like that, the locus of God's presence on earth shifts from one place (the temple) to many. This idea of a decentralized temple continues into the rest of the New Testament. The apostle Paul tells a group of non-Jewish

Christians that their bodies have all become temples of the Holy Spirit⁸, and when the author of Revelation anticipates the victorious return of Jesus and the kingdom of God, he sees no need for a physical temple at all.⁹

This is important, because the covenant of Jesus makes the divine presence, God's protection and power and love and holiness, available to anyone who believes in him. Rather than God's holy presence being specifically located in one place, the spirit of God indwells all of Jesus' followers, no matter where they are.

And they don't even have to be Jewish.

3. A new nation of all nations

The temple isn't the only thing that gets decentralized by Jesus. Under the Law, the Israelites were God's people, but the New Covenant introduces a new people of God: a group of Jewish and non-Jewish people united by their belief in Jesus and allegiance to him as their king. Christians believe that through Jesus, people from all nations can enjoy the blessings of God's wisdom, love, and justice.

A king of God's kingdom? All the nations enjoying God's blessings? These should sound familiar. Jesus' followers believed that Jesus' covenant fulfilled God's promise to Abraham way back at the beginning of the Bible. To Christians, Jesus is the descendant of Abraham through whom God blesses the all the nations of the world.

Jesus' followers also recognized him as the Messiah, the long-awaited heir of David that God promised. Of the four records of Jesus' life, two of them trace Jesus' genealogy back to David, and all of them claim that Jesus is that Messianic king destined to rule the nations in peace and

justice forever. In fact, this is where we get the term “Christ.” It’s from the Greek word for “anointed one”—which is what “Messiah” means. (That’s right: “Christ” is Jesus’ title, not his last name!)

4. The hope of a new world and everlasting life

Jesus’ followers hoped (and still hope) to see his return to earth to establish a new, better way of life. Christians believe that the kingdom of Jesus will bring the world into an era of peace and justice—putting an end to suffering and evil.

The “whens” and “hows” of this have been debated for millennia, and you can plot them on a wide, wide scope. Some Christians believe that Jesus will destroy this universe and bring his followers into an entirely new one. Others believe that Jesus will restore the current world into the paradise it was meant to be. There’s an entire arm of Christian studies related to how this age ends and the next begins—or whether a new age will begin at all. Christian scholars call it “eschatology.”

Christians have not been completely united on how and when Jesus will return for a long, long time. But regardless of how many different takes Christians have on the issue, the fact remains that, for the most part, **Jesus’ followers anticipate a time in the future when Jesus will make the world right again.**

And in that world, death itself is supposed to be done away with. The writers of the New Testament believed that Jesus offered his followers life beyond the grave in his kingdom. The apostle Paul wrote to one church that the followers of Jesus would indeed be raised back to life—and

that in the end, death itself would be “swallowed in victory.”

This was a key reason Christianity spread so rapidly through the world. Jesus’ followers were sure that Jesus had risen from the dead. And they believed that, if death had no power over Jesus, then Jesus’ followers had no reason to fear death.

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1. You can read the poetic message in Jeremiah 31:31–37.
 2. Ezekiel has a whole book named after him, and we’ll look at him more closely later on. But for now, you can read this message of his in Ezekiel 36:24–31.
 3. Malachi isn’t the most diplomatic book of the Bible—which we’ll look at later in this guide. You can check out this particular note in Malachi 3:1–5.
 4. This is the famous Last Supper, which all four accounts of Jesus’ life in the New Testament give some retelling of. You can read this part of the story in Luke 22:14–20.
 5. As the mysterious author of the book of Hebrews puts it, Jesus “appeared once for all [...] to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.” (Hebrews 9:26)
 6. One early church leader sums up Jesus’ mission in one line: “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.” (1 John 3:8)
 7. For example, the author of the Gospel of John writes about one exchange between Jesus and the Jewish leaders: “Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’ [...] But the temple he had spoken of was his body.” (John 2:19, 21)
 8. You can find that in 1 Corinthians 6:19.
 9. Even though this city is called the “New Jerusalem,” the author “did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” (Revelation 21:22)

QUICK RECAP OF COVENANTS

You can probably see why these covenants are so important when it comes to understanding the Bible. The collection of documents that Christians call the Bible is built around these four agreements that people believe God made with humans at various points in history. There are, of course, many, many details to each of these covenants that we haven't covered here—but that's the nature of beginner's guides.

Just knowing these facts will give you the context you need to explore the books of the Bible, and how they fit together—which is what this next section is all about.

So by way of review, here's a snapshot of these four covenants, and why they're important:

The Major Covenants of the Bible

Covenant	Abrahamic	The Law	Davidic	New
Key character	Abraham	Moses	David	Jesus
Promises	God's protection Many descendants Israel's land Blessings for all nations	Prosperity and protection for obedience Punishment and exile for rebellion	David would be a great king God's temple in Jerusalem David's heir rules God's kingdom forever Safety for God's people	Salvation from sin and evil A coming kingdom of peace and justice A place in this kingdom for those who believe in Jesus
Significance	Starts God's plan to reconcile all nations back to himself	Establishes God's holiness, and designates Israel as God's special nation	Gave Israel hope for a Messiah and future restoration	Gives everyone an opportunity to join God's kingdom

WHAT'S IN THE BIBLE?

You know that the Bible is a collection of sacred texts. You know that these texts were arranged to help people follow God, specifically through the person of Jesus Christ. And you know that all these documents came together to tell the story of how four covenant relationships between God and humans played out.

Now it's time to look at the documents themselves.

Buckle up, friend. We're going on a high-level tour of the books of the Bible. By the end of this section, you'll have a general understanding of each book and how they all fit together.

We'll start with the beginning of the Old Testament, and conclude with Revelation—the end of the New Testament. Before we jump in, there are a few important things to keep in mind:

1. We're going through these books in the order that they

appear in the Protestant Bible. That's not the same as the order in which they were written, nor the order in which the events took place. For example, the events in Jeremiah take place after the events in Ezra—but in our modern Bibles, Ezra comes before the book of Jeremiah. More on that next.

2. Some of these books are crazy long—others don't even take up a page. This section will summarize each book, but naturally, there's a lot more to dig into with each individual book than we cover here.

All right. Let's begin!

THE MAJOR SECTIONS OF THE BIBLE

The books of the Bible are traditionally broken down into smaller groups—and this practice is, well, *older than the Bible itself*. For example, the first five books of the Bible were called the Torah (Hebrew for “law”) long before Jesus walked the earth. In fact, this fivefold work is referred to throughout the rest of the Scriptures. Another good example is a group of short Old Testament books known as the Minor Prophets. These twelve documents have been so closely associated that the ancient Jewish rabbis simply treated the lot as a single book, calling it “The Twelve.”

The tradition of grouping books together into smaller groups continued with Jesus’ followers. Within a few centuries, Christians began calling the group of four books about the life of Christ “the Gospels.” Later, Christian leaders began categorizing the many letters preserved by the church based on who wrote them, and to whom they were written.

And that makes a lot of sense, because when you’re dealing with more than 60 books, things can get a little difficult to

keep track of. It's far easier to wrap your mind around the many books of the Bible if you first break that big list down into smaller groups.

So that's what we're going to do here. First we'll get a high-level view of the various **groups** of books in the Bible, and then we'll examine the **individual books** of the Bible, group by group.

The Bible

The Old Testament	The New Testament
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The most important groups to hold in mind are the big two we've already addressed: the Old and New Testaments.

The **Old Testament** is the group of writings that the Jews of Jesus' time held sacred. It's the larger and (surprise, surprise) older of the two. There's a bit of disagreement among Christian groups as to how many books fall into this category. Orthodox Christians recognize 51 books. Catholics recognize 46. For Protestants, it's 39. (This guide focuses on the 39 books that everyone recognizes.)

The **New Testament** is the group of writings about the life and teachings of Jesus, and the teachings of his followers after him. Both Testaments have additional groups of books within them, which we'll look at now—starting with the Old Testament.

The Law

The Bible

The Old Testament				The New Testament	
The Law (5 books)					

The first five books of the Bible tell Israel's origin story. They present a take on how the nation of ancient Israel and the people group that formed it came to be—but it's from a spiritual perspective. To the ancient Jews, their nationality was just as much a religious matter as it was a biological one.

Being a Jew came with codes and rituals for how to dress, when to work, and what to eat. And all that was tied to that covenant Law God made with the Hebrews via Moses. The first five books of the Bible tell the story of how that agreement came about: specifically how God brings the nation on a journey from captivity in a foreign land to a land of their own.

These books go by many names. The “Torah” (Hebrew for “law”) is what the Jews called it. Christians today still call it the Law, the Law of Moses, and the Pentateuch (which just means “five books”).

History

The Bible

The Old Testament			The New Testament		
The Law (5 books)	History (12 books)				

Next come the books that tell the story of how Israel's

relationship with God played out through the centuries. This section of the Old Testament is mostly narrative, with an emphasis on telling us how faithful (and unfaithful) Israel was to God's Law, and how God chose to bless (and discipline) the nation.

This section begins by stating that Moses was dead. And right after this happens, the Israelites enter the land that God had promised to Abraham long beforehand. They live in this land for centuries, until finally they become a strong kingdom under a ruler named David. King David commissions a glorious temple for God, and for a moment, everything looks pretty great for Israel.

But David's descendants (and the people of Israel in general) are not loyal to God, and the mighty nation of Israel begins a long, four-century decline. The kingdom splits into two smaller rival nations, both of which are eventually taken captive by other world empires. The temple in Jerusalem is destroyed, and things look about as bad as they were back before God saved Israel from Egypt.

However, it doesn't end there. The history books culminate with a remnant of the people returning to their own land, rebuilding the temple, and once again enjoying God's protection and blessing—albeit in less cosmic, miraculous ways.

This is where the main narrative portion of the Old Testament ends. From here on out, it's mostly grand works of poetry.

Worship and wisdom poetry

The Bible

The Old Testament				The New Testament	
The Law (5 books)	History (12 books)	Poetry (6 books)			

The people of Israel followed the religion of Moses for a long, long time—and over that time, they wrote many pieces of literature that were used for worshiping God, meditation, and teaching one another how to live wise, loving lives.

These writings were collected into a few works, some of them huge (like the book of 150 Psalms), others brief (like the Song of Songs). Reading these works became part of worship at the temple, festival celebrations, and parent-to-child mentoring. Christians group most of these together at the middle of the Old Testament.

Prophecy

The Bible

The Old Testament				The New Testament	
The Law (5 books)	History (12 books)	Poetry (6 books)	Prophecy (16 books)		

We touched on the idea of prophets earlier in this guide. Prophets were individuals who challenged and encouraged the people of Israel to remain loyal to God and obedient to the Law. These men claimed to speak on God's behalf, often beginning their messages with “thus says the Lord.”

These books are called prophetic, but they're not all about

telling the future. Prophecy is delivering messages on God’s behalf, which means sometimes the message is about the future, sometimes it’s about the past, and other times it’s about what’s already happened—and why.

And don’t be fooled: poetry plays a big part in these books. These works of prophecy feature spectacular, epic poems about the past, present, and future of God’s relationship with Israel and the world. You’ll find the prophets making references to each of the four covenants we’ve looked at—even anticipating the New Covenant that hadn’t happened yet.

Christians have grouped these books at the back of the Old Testament.

The Gospels and Acts

The Bible

The Old Testament				The New Testament	
The Law (5 books)	History (12 books)	Worship/wisdom (6 books)	Prophecy (16 books)	Gospels & Acts (5 books)	

Christianity spread as the followers of Jesus shared the news about his teachings, his life, his death, and his resurrection. At first, these teachings were passed on verbally, in the form of sermons. But eventually the apostles agreed that it was important to have Jesus’ story written down. This story was good news—the best of tidings to pass on to Jews and non-Jews throughout the world. That’s why the books about Jesus’s life were called gospels, which, you’ll remember, means “good news.”

There were several attempts to record the story of Jesus, but only four documents emerged as the authoritative, valuable, sacred accounts of Jesus' teachings. These four gospels are named after the men traditionally assigned as their authors: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They're the first books of the New Testament.

One of the gospel writers was ambitious enough to write a sequel: an account of how the Christian faith spread from a small group of people in Jerusalem to a religious movement that spanned the Roman empire. This book records the acts of some of Jesus' prominent followers, which is how it gets its name: the Acts of the Apostles, or "Acts," for short.

While there are 27 books in the New Testament, the first five are much longer than the remaining 22. In fact, the first five books account for about 60% of the New Testament.

Letters

The Bible

The Old Testament				The New Testament	
The Law (5 books)	History (12 books)	Worship/wisdom (6 books)	Prophecy (16 books)	Gospels & Acts (5 books)	Letters (22 books)

The rest of the New Testament is correspondence between church leaders and other Christians. As Christians went from town to town telling the story of Jesus, communities of Christians (churches) sprang up across the Roman empire. These churches were mixed groups of Jews and non-Jews, men and women, slaves and merchants, Romans and barbarians. But they all claimed to serve one new leader, whom they referred to as the Lord Jesus Christ.

As you can imagine, there was no lack of tension nor questions. How does such a multicultural group act on their loyalty to Jesus? For example, if Jesus was the promised one from the Jewish Scriptures, but was also betrayed and killed by the Jews' religious leaders, then how "Jewish" should Jesus' followers consider themselves? For that matter, how *anything* should Jesus' followers be?

Plus, there was the issue of persecution. Christians often found themselves at odds with the world around them. For example, Christians were taught to pray to an invisible God—which didn't sit well with the businessmen who sold shrines for other religions.¹ Christians provoked outrage when they converted from other religions—which could result in public punishment, imprisonment, or even death. Plus, the Roman government wasn't always too happy with the idea of Christians following a king other than Caesar.

The churches had the story of Jesus, but they had a lot of questions and issues to work out, too.

And that's why it was important for some of Jesus' closest followers, the apostles, to write letters. The apostles tackled the big issues of their time, sought to bring clarity and harmony, and encouraged Christians to stay loyal to Jesus and love one another. These letters fall into several categories, which we'll get into as we explore them in more detail later.

Much later, actually, because this is the last group of books in the Bible.

A quick note on genres

The arrangement of books in the Bible has shifted over time. The ancient Jews had their books in a certain order, and Christians have moved them around a bit (and added 27 of their own to the mix).

The modern Bible is arranged by *overall* genre, and rather loosely at that. For example, the books of Samuel and Kings contain a good deal of prophecy—so much that the ancient Jews classified them as prophetic books. More recent theologians saw fit to group them differently—putting them with the rest of the books that have a primarily narrative feel.

This looseness applies to the rest of the Old Testament. Almost all the books of prophecy have significant poetic sections. The book of Psalms includes many prophecies anticipating the Messiah. The prophetic book of Jonah is mostly narrative.

So keep that in mind as we go through these books. Christians painted with a very broad brush when they arranged the Bible.

Quick recap:

- The Bible falls into two large divisions: the Old and New Testaments.
- The books within these divisions have been (loosely) arranged by their overall genre.

1. You can read about that episode in Acts 19:23–41

THE BOOKS OF THE TORAH (OR “LAW”)

The first five books of the Bible do a lot of the heavy lifting when it comes to biblical content. Not only do they provide the backstory for all of Israel’s (and Christian) religious history, but they provide a key to understanding just about everything that happens in the rest of the Old Testament.

When you hear Christians talk about this part of the Bible today, you usually hear them referring to them as individual books. The book of Genesis gets a lot of air time in discussions about human and cosmic origins. The book of Exodus has been the subject of some well-loved cinematic masterpieces. Leviticus is a punchline in jokes by Christians and non-Christians alike (more on that soon). Numbers mentions a talking donkey, and Deuteronomy holds what Jesus Christ called the greatest commandment of all.

People usually only mention these books by name when they’re referencing certain stories or passages within them. And it’s hard to blame them—because these books are pretty long. However, the writers of the Old and New

Testaments don't mention the individual book names at all: instead, they talk about the work as a whole. In Hebrew, they called it the Torah. Our English Bibles simply refer to it as “the Law.”

That's because these are not standalone books. The first five books of the Bible were developed as a set, a work that flows steadily from beginning to end, each book building upon the last. The work as a whole sets the foundation for everything that follows—all the way to the end of the Bible.

The Torah

Genesis	Exodus	Leviticus	Numbers	Deuteronomy
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Plus, they're all (loosely) attributed to the same general authority figure—in fact, the greatest prophet in Israel's history: Moses. Although Moses wasn't the originator of all the words we find in these books, he is the main messenger *in* the books themselves. Four of these five books tell the story of how God led the people of Israel through Moses. A good amount of their content is either presented as the speeches, prayers, and directions of Moses, or words that God told Moses to pass on to the people.

This part of the Bible goes by many names, some of which you've already encountered in this guide. But just for a refresher, here are the most common ones.

- The **Torah**, which is Hebrew for “**law**,” “instructions,” or “regulations.” That's because more than half of this section is made up of rules, ordinances, and rituals that the people of Israel believed God placed on them. (And the

parts that *aren't* laws are setting up reasons for *why* God's laws should be followed.)

- The **Pentateuch**, which means “five scrolls” in Greek. Since the Christians who lived shortly after Jesus' time on earth spoke and wrote in Greek, it's common for English-speaking Christians to still borrow Greek words to describe our religion. By the time of Jesus, the Old Testament had been translated into Greek, and these first five scrolls were still the foundational religious texts of the Jewish faith. So they got a sweet nickname: the Pentateuch.

- The **Books of Moses**. Moses is (apart from God himself) the central character in these books' events, since he's the go-between for God, Pharaoh, and the ancient Israelites. By the first century C.E., it was common for Jews and Christians to reference this part of the Old Testament as simply “Moses”—even Jesus does so in one of his parables.¹

Expect to see these terms used interchangeably throughout this guide. (Well, and everywhere else).

But what these five books are called isn't as important as what they're for. These books of the Law represent what the Jews of Jesus' time (and before) believed about their national and spiritual origins. They believed that God made promises to a human friend named Abraham. They believed that God, via a prophet named Moses, led Abraham's descendants out of slavery in Egypt to a promised land. They believed that they were special to God; and that their status as God's chosen people came with certain responsibilities, rituals, rules, and regulations: the Law.

Another thing to keep in mind before we look at these specific books: we're taking **a giant leap backward in time**. The Torah as we know it today came together over long centuries of oral traditions and scribal efforts. We don't know when the five books reached the form they're in today, but they were pretty close to it by the third century BCE (and many believe they came together much earlier). That means that when you read the first pages of the Bible, you're reading what a group of people 2,300 years ago believed happened *many centuries and millennia earlier*. The events in the books of the Law span all the way back to the creation of the cosmos, and the book of Genesis alone claims to cover a period of about two millennia. That's a perspective you're going to need to keep in mind as we look at these books: the books are old, and the stories they tell are much, much older.

There's one more thing that we'll need to call attention to before we jump into the individual books—you've probably already picked up on it. These books are called "the Law," but "the Law" is also what we call that second, very important covenant that God made with Israel. The covenant Law is introduced within the books of Law. So as we explore the books of the Bible, keep in mind that "the Law" is both the relationship *and* the documents describing the relationship. It seems complicated at first, but you'll get the hang of it.

All right. Let's dig into the books of the Bible, beginning with ... well, the beginning.

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1. That's a story you can read in Luke 16:19–31. Jesus is making a point about how humans struggle to value the things that matter in life—and

that in the afterlife, things will operate along a different system. Jesus tells a hypothetical story about a comfortable rich man and a miserable poor man who die and find their situations reversed in the afterlife. Abraham (who is also deceased) tells the rich man that his brothers may avoid a hellish fate by listening to “Moses and the Prophets.”

GENESIS

It's the first book of the Bible, and its name comes from the Greek word for "origins." When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, a line toward the beginning of this book read, "This is the book of the origins [*biblos geneseos*] of heaven and earth."¹ So in some sense, the book of Genesis named itself.

Genesis is famous among Christians and non-Christians for its **A-list Bible stories**. It's more densely-packed with famous Bible stories than any other book.² Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah's ark, Abraham and Isaac, Joseph's famous jacket—they're all here. These stories are larger-than-life—so it's easy to understand why they've become almost ubiquitous to the Western world. However, these stories are often told as standalone morality tales. The stories themselves are not what the book of Genesis is primarily about.

The book of Genesis has two major purposes:

1. It sets the stage for relationships between the divine world and the human world.
2. It introduces God's relationship with the Israelites' ancestors.

The book is broken down this way rather simply. The first eleven chapters focus on the unraveling of divine–human relationships, the following 39 are about God's covenant with Abraham—the first of the major covenants in the Bible.

Summary of Genesis

1. God and humanity (1–11)

Genesis opens with God creating the cosmos and giving humans a special position in the world. They were made “in the image of God,” sharing some attributes of divinity that animals, rocks, and plants just don't have. God gives humans the responsibility to care for the earth he created, and places them in a garden where they can commune with him. The whole world is good, so there's no need for a temple: humans and divine beings can naturally intermingle.

But things go awry. A crafty creature known only as “the serpent” lures the humans into breaking one of the rules God gave them: they eat a piece of forbidden fruit. This results in humans being expelled from the temple garden with both a new understanding of good and evil, and a far more complex relationship with the divine world.

Things unravel quickly. One generation later, a man named Cain murders his brother Abel. A few generations afterward, people in power are bragging about how they'll

murder anyone who insults them. Humans get more and more violent, until (so the story goes) there is only one decent human being left: Noah. God sends a flood to destroy life on earth and start over again with Noah—but Noah and his children don't get it right, either.

Time goes on, and some of Noah's descendants build a city. They accumulate power and wealth (often via violence), eventually attempting to build a tower that reaches into heaven itself—the epitome of humans' arrogant quest for power. This tower is called Babel (later, Babylon). God and the divine company come down to earth, confusing humanity's languages and scattering them into the various nations of the ancient world. (At the end of the Pentateuch we learn that the ancient Jews believed that this is when the various nations came under their own gods.³)

In just a few short chapters, humanity falls from living in God's garden temple as the trusted caretakers of earth to being a violent, oppressive, discordant mess devoid of any healthy relationship with God.

2. God and Israel's ancestors (12–50)

But then something changes in the twelfth chapter: God makes some promises to a man named Abraham (we've already looked at these promises in detail). The book then follows Abraham's family as they work through their relationships with God and with each other.

The book culminates with the story of Joseph, Jacob's favorite son. Joseph is disowned by his jealous brothers, sold into slavery, and ends up in an Egyptian prison for a crime he didn't commit. But when Pharaoh has two disturbing dreams, Joseph's wisdom (which he attributes to God) gains

him an audience with the king of Egypt. Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams as signs that a terrible famine is coming, and advises Pharaoh on how to prepare. Joseph's plans work, and Egypt becomes a source of food for everyone—including the brothers who betrayed Joseph in the first place.

In his old age, Jacob moves his whole family down to Egypt to be with Joseph (who is a big deal in Egypt now). Joseph forgives his brothers, pointing out that while they intended evil and harm, God used their schemes for the good of many. Genesis concludes with the fledgling Hebrew nation sojourning in Egypt, with the hope of one day returning to the land God promised to Abraham.

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1. You can find this wording in Genesis 2:4 in the Lexham English Septuagint.
 2. Well, with the possible exception of Jonah, which is basically a very famous short story all the way through.
 3. Right before the children of Israel make it to the promised land, Moses sings a song reminding them (and the rest of the cosmos) that when God divided the nations, he kept Israel for himself (Deuteronomy 33:7–9).

EXODUS

Next up is the book of Exodus, which gets its name from an Old Latin word for “departure.” It’s in reference to the main event of the book: the Israelites’ departure from Egypt. Because while Genesis tells the story of how the Israelites ended up in Egypt, Exodus tells the story of how they left.

The book of Exodus is key to understanding the rest of the Old Testament, because it’s where we learn about God’s relationship to the nation of Israel. Exodus gives us Israel’s religious origin story and introduces us to the covenant of the Law.

Like Genesis, Exodus contains two major sections:

1. How God rescued Israel from Egypt
2. How the Israelites began their relationship with God

But while Genesis is very heavy on narrative, Exodus is different. The first half of the book is mostly the story of, well, the Exodus from Egypt. But halfway through, the book shifts into the actual specifications of the Law. The first 19

chapters follow Moses and Israel out of Egypt, and the last 21 chapters take place at the foot of a mountain, where Israel and God come together.

Summary of Exodus

1. God rescues Israel from Egypt (1–19)

Exodus opens with the Israelites still down in Egypt—but hundreds of years have passed since the events that brought them there. Jacob’s family has grown exponentially over time, and it seems like God’s beginning to make good on his promise to Abraham about having many descendants.

But then a new Pharaoh takes the throne. This new guy doesn’t know or care about how Joseph saved the nation—he just sees a great multitude of foreigners living his kingdom. So in order to keep his power, he carries out a plan of genocide: kill off all the baby Hebrew boys, and the Hebrews will just go extinct.

But at least one child escapes this mass murder: a baby named Moses. His mother hides him in a little basket, which she sets in the Nile. As destiny would have it, the child is discovered by none other than Pharaoh’s daughter—who takes compassion on the boy and brings her into her house. Moses grows up, but eventually comes to identify more with his Israelite origins than his Egyptian upbringing. When Moses kills an Egyptian to save an abused Israelite slave, the Israelites reject him, asking, “Who put you in charge?”

His people won’t accept him, and Pharaoh definitely isn’t going to be OK with the killing, so Moses flees to the desert where he lives in exile for 40 years. It’s here that he has his

famous encounter with a burning bush: a plant that appears to be on fire, yet doesn't burn up. Moses hears the voice of God, who tells him to return to Egypt, confront Pharaoh, and then lead the people out of slavery and into the land God promised to Abraham long ago. Moses reluctantly agrees to do so.

However, Pharaoh doesn't give in easily. God sends a series of ten plagues on the Egyptians (and their gods), culminating in the death of Pharaoh's son. The king of Egypt eventually relents, and the people of Israel leave. But they don't get far before Pharaoh changes his mind and pursues them with his army. When Pharaoh pins the Israelite camp against the banks of the Red Sea, God parts the waters, allowing Israel to escape on dry ground. But when the Egyptians pursue them, God washes their army away.

Sidenote: This is one of the most important moments in the Old Testament. It's a legendary event for both Israel and her enemies for centuries to come. Old Testament writers claim that the surrounding nations heard of this event, and it gave Israel (and her God) a reputation as the kind of folks you don't want to mess with. Plus, for the rest of the Old Testament, God and his prophets will continue to tell the Israelites, "Hey, remember that time I single-handedly overpowered Egypt's gods, rulers, army, *and the very sea* to save you? Maybe don't turn your back on me."

But ... back to Exodus.

2. God makes Israel his people (20–40)

After this, Moses brings Israel back to the mountain where

God first visited him. And it's here that God forms that second important covenant with Israel: the Law. God begins with the famous Ten Commandments, which he thunders to all the people from the mountaintop. These commandments cover the basic, high-level expectations God has for his people. Rules like "Have no other gods but me," and "don't murder each other." The people of Israel agree to these laws.

Now that God and Israel are "official," God plans to come down from the mountaintop and dwell in Israel's midst. It's a huge sign of God's commitment: just like he swore to be with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he will now be with the entire nation. God gives Moses the details of what he has in mind: a portable temple where the people can worship him in person (the tabernacle).

Meanwhile, at the foot of the mountain, the people completely abandon the Law they just agreed to. They make a golden calf and begin worshiping it—claiming that *this* was who actually brought them out of Egypt. God is not happy and for a moment considers destroying (or at least withdrawing from) the Israelites and making a great nation out of Moses' descendants alone. Moses, however, intercedes on Israel's behalf, and God gives the people a second chance.

The book of Exodus ends with the people of Israel completing the tabernacle according to God's specifications. God does come down the mountain, and his presence fills the tent. However, there's a problem: nobody can enter the tent—not even Moses.

LEVITICUS

God just moved in. Now what?

That's what Leviticus is all about. It's a lawbook, a set of regulations for the people of Israel living with a powerful God in their midst.

The name "Leviticus" is a Latin word, pulled from an old Greek name for the book, *Levitikon*. These names refer to the Levites, a subgroup of the tribe of Israel. Back in Exodus, when the golden calf incident went down, Moses called everyone who still claimed to worship God to stand with him. The only folks who responded to the call were from the tribe of Levi (which, perhaps not-so-coincidentally, was Moses' tribe). In return for their zeal and loyalty, God chose a few families in the tribe of Levi to be his priests. These priests were responsible for maintaining the tabernacle, conducting religious ceremonies, and ministering to the people. Since the first half of this book is all about the duties and requirements that God had for his priests, it makes sense that it earned a priestly, or "Levitical" title.

Whereas Genesis and Exodus enjoy a little bit of the spotlight in modern conversations about the Bible, Leviticus doesn't get as much attention. There are a few good reasons for this. Firstly, it's very, very light on narrative. Not a lot of story takes place in this book at all. Secondly, most of the book is a list of regulations. Do this, don't do that; eat this, don't eat that; sacrifice bulls for this, sacrifice goats for that—not as exciting as, say, the sea swallowing up a tyrant's armies. If you hear someone use Leviticus as the punchline of a joke, they're likely referencing its lack of exciting content.

And thirdly, Leviticus isn't mentioned much because it's *really difficult to relate to*. Modern readers typically don't have the same concepts of ritual purity. We don't make animal sacrifices. Thanks to the New Covenant, even modern Christians have a different idea of what temples are and how they work—which means much of the specific regulations that Leviticus prescribes haven't carried over into Christian tradition.

However, the concepts that this book explores are vital when it comes to understanding the rest of the Bible. When we explored the covenant Law of Moses, we took a look at purity and temple rituals. Leviticus focuses on those two aspects of ancient Israelite beliefs. God was giving Israel a second chance, and had come to live among the people. But these folks had just betrayed him for a golden calf a short while ago—and it almost cost them everything. So how can a group of people, who have already demonstrated that keeping the Law is easier said than done, hope to *survive* living so close to their God?

In Leviticus, we find out.

Summary of Leviticus

Exodus closes with the presence of God filling the tabernacle, but nobody, not even Moses, can enter it. But it won't always be that way. So Leviticus opens with God speaking to Moses from within the tent, laying down some ground rules for how he and the Israelites can commune in the wilderness.

Like Genesis and Exodus, Leviticus can be roughly split into two parts. The first is generally about what should take place within the tabernacle (and mostly concerns the priests). The second is about what should and shouldn't take place within the entire nation.

1. Laws for the priests (1–16)

In the first section, God (via Moses) begins with a list of the types of sacrifices that the Israelites should offer to him. This process often includes killing animals and burning them on a special altar outside the tabernacle. There are plenty of specifications for both the people making the sacrifices and the priests conducting the sacrifices.

After this, Moses ordains the priests who will serve in the tabernacle. Moses' brother Aaron is the chief priest, and his sons are made priests as well. But things turn sour quickly: two of Aaron's sons defy the priestly code that was *just* established, and are consumed in flames. It's not a good day to be Aaron.

From here, God gives Moses and Aaron a long list of rituals and regulations for maintaining purity among the people. We get lists of acceptable and unacceptable foods, rules for dealing with body fluids, disease, mold—all kinds of things

that aren't necessarily *bad*, but would render someone unpresentable in the tabernacle.

And how do you keep the tabernacle *itself* pure? Well, the first part of Leviticus concludes with a grand annual ceremony: the Day of Atonement. On this day, the high priest would offer some special sacrifices that cleanse the tabernacle and render the nation as a whole pure before God. It's a like a yearly rinse and refresh that maintains a level of purity that allows God to cohabitate with his people.

2. Laws for the people (17–27)

The second part of Leviticus is what some scholars call the “holiness code.” It's a list of ways the entire nation is expected to live with God. This section covers more rules about food, sex, and purity, as well as festivals for celebrating God's provision, protection, and love for his people.

In covenant fashion, God lays out the blessings of obedience. If the people of Israel keep the holiness code, then God promises to dwell with them, walking among them in their promised land.¹ But God also warns Israel of the penalties that will result from disobedience: disaster and exile.

1. Leviticus 26:11–12

NUMBERS

In Genesis, God promises Israel land. In Exodus, God frees Israel from slavery and makes them his people—the people that he will lead to their land. In Leviticus, God sets up expectations for how the Israelites should conduct themselves while he’s living in their midst. At the end of Leviticus, the people are still at the foot of Mount Sinai—no closer to the promised land than they were when God gave them the Ten Commandments back in the middle of Exodus.

Numbers chronicles the journey that Israel takes from Sinai to the very edge of Canaan. And it’s not a good journey. You might have heard that Moses and the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Numbers tells us how (and more importantly, why) that long road trip takes place.

Numbers is the first English-sounding book of the Bible, and it gets its name from its beginning and end. Numbers begins with God speaking to Moses in the tent. God tells

Moses to count the men of Israel, everyone over the age of twenty.

Moses and the Tabernacle

At the end of Exodus, God fills the tabernacle, and nobody, not even Moses can enter the tent. At the beginning of Leviticus, it seems this problem is still in place. God speaks to Moses *from* the tent of meeting, giving instructions to him regarding sacrifices, priests, and purity codes. During the book of Leviticus, Moses finally gets to enter the tent with his brother Aaron, the high priest (Leviticus 9:23). The people stay at Sinai for about a year, until the book of Numbers begins—this time with God speaking to Moses *inside* the tabernacle.

And all those people die. (Well, with a few exceptions. But we'll get to those later.)

At a critical point in their journey, the whole nation of Israel loses faith in God's promises. They believe *God* won't hold up *his* end of the bargain. Their solution: forfeit the promised land and go back to Egypt. God meets them halfway: they won't enter the promised land, but he's not going to let them put their children back in the bonds of slavery. So the people wander in the wilderness for forty years ... until everyone that was counted dies off. Then God has Moses count all the people *again*. That's how the book gets its name: there are a lot of numbers.

While this book may not have all the blockbuster narratives

that you'd find in Genesis and Exodus, it is a source of very, very significant stories in the Bible. Genesis sets the stage for relationships between the divine realm and the human realm. Exodus tells us how one divine being, God, chose to establish a special relationship with a human nation. Leviticus shows us how important it was for humans to be holy in the presence of God.

But Numbers? Numbers shows us how that relationship tends to play out. It's a story of humans struggling to maintain faith in God—and it's also a story of how God has to balance keeping his promises *and* disciplining those who betray him. That's why the writers of the rest of the Bible will reference the book of Numbers time and time again. They'll continue to warn God's people not to test God, and instead trust and obey him.

Numbers becomes even more significant when you consider that the Jews put the finishing touches on Old Testament after the Babylonian exile. The Jewish people found themselves in a wilderness situation of their own: many of them were scattered across the world, and even the ones who lived in the land of Israel were dominated by foreign powers. This was a far cry from the God-fearing kingdom of David. The ancient Jews needed to ask themselves: would they remain faithful to God, or lose faith in him and potentially forfeit his blessings again?

And the book of Numbers holds significance for non-Jewish Christians, too. The first Christians were in a similar boat as the post-exile Jews. They were eagerly awaiting the return of Jesus, anticipating a "promised land" of their own: the kingdom of God. Christians considered themselves exiles and sojourners in the world, and needed to ask themselves

whether they would keep the faith or turn back to their old way of life. The New Testament writers had the book of Numbers in mind when they encouraged Christians to remain loyal to Jesus' New Covenant—lest they suffer a similar fate as the rebellious people in Numbers.

We've looked at Numbers' significance—now let's look at the actual contents of the book.

Summary of Numbers

This book charts Israel's journey from the foot of Mount Sinai to the eastern banks of the Jordan River, the border of the promised land. It's a long journey that takes place in five movements.

1. Camping at Sinai (1–10)

Moses takes a census of the people of Israel. The nation is a great multitude, and is about to undertake a huge journey—so Moses organizes the camp into groups. The tabernacle, where God communes with Israel, is at the center. The tribe of Levi (who took care of the tabernacle) was camped around the tabernacle, and the rest of the tribes camped around them—mirroring the states of ritual purity that were established in Leviticus.

2. Traveling to Canaan (10–12)

Moses and the people begin their journey from Sinai to the promised land. It's not a good trip. The people complain so much about the food that Moses *asks God to kill him*. Moses' own siblings criticize the prophet. The people eventually come to the edge of the promised land.

3. Camping on Canaan's border (13–19)

Moses sends twelve spies into the promised land, but most of them return with some bad news. While the land looks like a wonderful place to live, it's populated by fierce warriors. Ten of the spies tell Israel there's no hope. Two spies, Joshua and Caleb, say that it doesn't matter who or what Israel is up against: God will keep his promises and give Israel the land.

Unfortunately, the majority rules. The people rebel against Moses, almost killing him. God intervenes, and tells them that nobody from that generation will enter the promised land. Instead, the people will wander in the wilderness for forty years, until the rebellious generation dies out. The people don't like the sound of that, so they try to take the land by force themselves. But without God's aid, they're easy prey for the Canaanites. The people rebel against Moses *again*, this time led by one of the other Levites—but once again, God intervenes.

4. Wandering for 40 years (20–21)

The people of Israel begin their wanderings. They complain again, this time about water. God gives Moses instructions for miraculously providing water in the desert, but Moses is so frustrated that he disobeys God's commands—which disqualifies *Moses* from entering the promised land, too. Aaron, Moses' brother and the high priest, dies.

5. Camping on Canaan's border, again (22–36)

In the fifth and final movement, Israel finishes their wanderings and camps on the East side of the Jordan river, just across the water from the promised land. The

surrounding nations are uneasy about this large assembly of people migrating about, and so they hire a man named Balaam to curse the people of Israel. God, however, prevents Balaam from doing this—in fact, the prophet-for-hire can only *bless* God's people. The Israelites engage the surrounding nations in battle, and emerge victorious with spoils and a good deal of land.

And then, of course, Moses recounts the people after the last of the rebellious generation dies off—except for himself and Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who trusted God.

DEUTERONOMY

The Torah is the story of how Israel and God came to be in a covenant relationship, and one of the most important parts of this relationship is the land that God promised to Abraham. The book of Numbers follows Israel on their journey to the very edge of the promised land. At this point in the Bible's narrative, a new generation of God's people are on the brink of entering the land that their parents and grandparents couldn't. So in the days before Moses dies, he gives these Israelites a set of laws to follow in order to keep the land.

You might be thinking, "But wait—the people of Israel already *had* laws from God."

They sure did. Not only did they have the 10 commandments in Exodus, but they also had the holiness code in Leviticus, and a host of other laws they'd received from God via Moses along the journey from Egypt. But Moses gives the second generation of freed Israelites a second set of laws.

And that's how this book gets its name. "Deuteronomy" comes from the Greek name for the book, *deuteronomion*, which means "second law," or "repeated law."

This is important, because from the perspective of the people who arranged the Old Testament, Israel *didn't* keep the land. They knew that the Babylonians had taken them captive, and they knew that they weren't living with all the blessings that they had once enjoyed during their golden age. Deuteronomy anticipates the rest of the story that unfolds in the Old Testament—from Israel's independent statehood under David, to her exile in Babylon, to her redemptive return to the land afterward. You might even say that Deuteronomy foreshadows the rest of the Old Testament.

In this book, Moses lays out a choice for the people of Israel. Will they love and obey God, keep his commandments, and enjoy his blessing (unlike the previous generation)? Or will they, like their forefathers, turn away from God, invite his discipline, and forfeit the blessings available to them? The book continued to present the same choice to Jews for centuries: each generation needed to make the call.

And like the rest of the Torah, Deuteronomy is significant to non-Jewish Christians, too. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment in the Old Testament was, he responded with a line from Deuteronomy: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength."¹ The Torah takes up a great deal of the Bible—almost a fifth of it—but the single greatest commandment is simply to love God fully.

Summary of Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy falls into three main sections: an overview of Israel's journeys, a second giving of the covenant law, and wrapping up the Torah.

1. Recap (1–4)

Deuteronomy opens with a brief recap of Israel's journey from Mount Sinai to the plains of Moab, just across the river from the promised land. Here, Moses calls the people together to address them before his death.

2. Israel's choice: blessings or curses? (4–30)

The bulk of Deuteronomy is a redelivery of the covenant laws God made with Israel in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, with more understanding of Israel as a kingdom with a temple in a land of their own—rather than a collection of tribes sojourning in the wilderness. Moses' speeches anticipate not only Israel's occupation of Canaan, but also a future monarchy, a permanent temple location, an exile to a foreign nation, and a return from afar.

All of this comes in the context of blessings and curses—the terms of the covenant. Moses tells the people how they need to conduct themselves if they're going to enjoy God's blessings in the land he's about to give them. But he also warns that if the Israelites break the Torah (by not loving and obeying God), they will incur God's disciplinary action, or "curses." These curses include poverty, famine, war, and eventually being carried away into exile and scattered across the nations. However, Moses indicates that even if the people of God break his covenant, he will eventually bring them back, and re-establish them. Moses then tells the

people of Israel that they will face the choice: obedience or disobedience, blessing or curse, life or death.

He hopes they and generations after them will choose wisely.

3. The Torah closes (31–34)

The book of Deuteronomy then ties up a few loose ends. Moses confirms Joshua as the one who will lead Israel in his stead. Moses writes down the words of the law, which are placed in the ark of the covenant. Moses then writes a song to remind the people of the curses they will face if they break their covenant with God, and then blesses the tribes of Israel.

Then Moses dies.

And with that, the Torah closes. The collection of books that charts Israel's journey from Egypt to the promised land ends *before* they ever finish their journey. That part is addressed in the next section of the Bible.

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1. Moses gives this command in Deuteronomy 6:5. He specifically tells the people to love God and teach their children to love God so that they can live long in the land he promised to them.

THE BOOKS OF HISTORY

In a Christian Bible, the book of Deuteronomy ends and Joshua begins—there’s not a lot of fanfare between the books. However, a simple turn of the page represents a giant leap in terms of the Bible’s literature.

Up until now, we’ve been in the Torah, the five-volume book of Moses. These books laid out the relationship that God established with Israel in the wilderness, and his expectations for his people. The rest of the Old Testament is going to tell us how this relationship played out. We’re moving from the “law,” which the writers of the Old and New Testaments will reference again and again, into a new group of the Bible’s many books.

Christians have placed the books of historical narrative next. These books chart the story of ancient Israel’s kingdom in three movements:

1. From Moses to David: six of these books chart the nation’s growth from a group of migrant tribes into a unified, independent nation with a king, a temple, and a capital city.

2. From David to exile: things fall apart in three of these books, as the nation splits in two and both sides eventually fall captive to other empires.

3. From exile to restoration: the final three historical books tell how a remnant of Jews return to Jerusalem, rebuild the temple and city, and face the choice of following God or repeating past mistakes.

That’s twelve books total. Although that might feel like a lot more ground to cover than the five books of the Torah, this is probably the most straightforward leg of this guide!

OT Historical Narrative

Moses to David	David to exile	Exile to restoration
Joshua Judges Ruth 1 & 2 Samuel 1 Chronicles	1 & 2 Kings 2 Chronicles	Ezra Nehemiah Esther

We spent a good deal of time looking at the significance of each book of Moses before diving into a summary. But we’ll be able to move through the history books at a brisker pace. These books are mostly narrative-driven, so we’ll spend a bit of time looking at the book’s significance in the Bible, then explore exactly what happens in each of these books.

Before we jump in, let’s cover a few ground rules to keep in mind about this leg of the Bible.

The “good guys” do bad things. Because the Bible is often seen as a moral handbook, it’s tempting to read these stories and assume that the characters fall into two groups: good and bad. But that’s not always the case. These stories feature various people of varying loyalty to God—whose

actions have varying moral quality. We often see Bible characters attempt to do what they think is right (and God works with that), but that *doesn't mean they did the right thing*.

A rather famous example of this principle is Samson, whom we'll meet in the book of Judges pretty soon. Samson's a tough guy, and he's someone God designates to save the Israelites from oppressors. However, his methods get pretty dubious at times. The Bible presents Samson as an Israelite hero, but it doesn't endorse everything he does.

With that said, it is pretty obvious when an "evil" character is doing evil things. We'll meet a pair of monarchs named Ahab and Jezebel in the books of Kings—and there's no real question as to whether or not their murder plans are wrong.

It's all about zeal. While you can't necessarily count on the actions of a given character to be good or bad, zeal is a quality that admirable(ish) characters have in common. In the historical books, we're going to see a lot of characters making bold moves. A warrior will tell the sun and moon to stand still. A shepherd boy will challenge a giant in single combat. A king will put musicians on the front lines of battle.

These actions and more are done out of radical faith in Israel's God: an unshakable belief that God will keep his promises and bless those who follow him. Zeal for God is key to understanding the characters in the historical books. Zealous characters are devoted to God, consumed with reverence and loyalty for the one they worship.

This zeal flows out of the Law. Zealous characters are aware of God's covenant relationships with Israel, Moses, and

later David. They know what blessings the Torah promises, and they sincerely believe that God makes those blessings available to those who are loyal to him.

Watch for integration and disintegration. This is the story of how a loose association of tribes becomes a strong kingdom. We're going to see Israel rise from a decentralized collection of settlements in the promised land into a nation with one king, one temple, and one army centralized in one place: Jerusalem.

We're also going to see that grand kingdom fragment, crumble, and shatter—and a remnant of Israelites, led by the descendants of David and Aaron, try to put it all back together.

It's a long story—so let's get started.

JOSHUA

At the end of the Torah, Moses dies. And that's exactly where the book of Joshua picks up.

This book is named after its central character, whom you might remember from our look at Numbers. When the generation of Israelites who left Egypt first approached the edge of Canaan, Moses sent twelve spies into the land on a brief mission. Of the dozen spies, only two return with a good report. Joshua is one of them.

Because of his faith, Joshua is one of the only members of the first generation who gets to enter the promised land. Furthermore, God (via Moses) designates him to be Moses' successor. It falls to Joshua to lead the new generation of Israelites into the land that God promised Abraham. It falls to Joshua to divvy up the land between the tribes. And it falls to Joshua to hold the people to Moses' warnings about blessings and curses in Deuteronomy.

This book is significant to the Old Testament story because we immediately see some of the promises that God made in

the Torah, both to Abraham and through Moses, come to pass. God keeps his promise to bring Israel into the land of Canaan once again. God keeps his promise to protect Israel and drive out her enemies before her. In fact, the book of Joshua says that Israel enjoys every single one of God's "good promises"—the blessings for obedience that Moses laid out in Deuteronomy.¹ The people who wandered in the wilderness for four decades finally enjoy a time of rest and peace.

That's vital, because the entire Bible is about these covenants that God made with humans. The book of Joshua shows that God has no problem holding up his end of the bargain.

Summary of Joshua

Joshua has one of the most straightforward structures in the whole Bible. It very neatly falls into two parts: conquering Canaan and distributing the land to Israel's twelve tribes.

1. Conquering the land (1–12)

Joshua and the Israelites cross the Jordan River. But this isn't a regular river fording. God revisits that iconic miracle in Exodus—just like he parted the Red Sea for Moses, God stops up the river, allowing the people of Israel once again to walk across a body of water on dry ground. It's a way of affirming to the people of Israel that while they may have a new leader, they're still following the same God that brought them out of Egypt.

After crossing the Jordan, the young nation begins sweeping through the land of Canaan. The war for Canaan begins with the famous battle of Jericho, wherein God

miraculously topples the enemy's fortifications on Israel's behalf. Throughout the first half of the book, God fights on Israel's behalf—at one point, even the sun and moon stand still in the sky at Joshua's command. It culminates with Israel's victory: they enjoy all God's blessings, including peace on every side.

2. Distributing the land (13–24)

In the second half of the book, Joshua assigns the tribes their portions of the land. (This part is ... less exciting than Act One.) Each tribe is given an inheritance in the land, namely a list of cities with surrounding pastures and farmland to occupy. The tribes settle the land, and all is well.

The book ends with Joshua delivering a mini-Deuteronomy of his own. In his old age, he calls the people together to remind the younger generations of God's covenants with Abraham and Moses. He tells the people how God has kept all his good promises, and that if the next generation chooses to love and obey God, they can expect to continue enjoying these blessings. But if the people turn away from the Law of Moses and serve other deities, they can expect the dark consequences of breaking covenant with God.

And just like the two generations before them, the people swear to keep the Law. But will they go the way of their parents, and continue loving and obeying God ... or will they be like Moses' generation, and forsake the Law?

That's what the next book is all about.

1. Joshua 21:45

JUDGES

The book of Joshua ends with Israel's leader telling the people that God has kept all his good promises. In terms of the covenant between God and Israel, the Lord has proven that he's kept his end of the bargain. Judges shows the flip side.

The next book, Judges, begins with the death of Joshua, who had just commissioned Israel to continue keeping the law of Moses to enjoy God's blessings in the land. While Moses had commissioned Joshua to lead the people, Joshua has no designated successor. Instead, the people of the tribes go their separate ways, settling into their new homes. This goes well for a while—until the generation that had witnessed God's miracles and Joshua's leadership dies out.

The following generations must again choose whether they will remain loyal to God, or explore worshiping the gods of the surrounding people groups. In the absence of a pro-Torah leader, Israel tends to stray from God. When this happens, God disciplines his people, bringing in foreign powers to dominate them.

Over time, the people of Israel remember their God, and call to him for help. When that happens, God raises up leaders to deliver the people. These folks are a bit like small-scale Moseses and Joshuas. The Bible calls these leaders “judges,” which is where the book gets its name.

The cycle of Israel’s disobedience and deliverance points to a deep need for God-fearing leaders among the people. The authors of Judges conclude by attributing Israel’s moral chaos to their lack of a king. It’s a vacuum that Joshua left behind, and one that the heroic David (and later, the Messiah) will eventually fill. The book isn’t shy about this message, either. It concludes by simply saying that “in those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.”¹

Summary of Judges

Judges breaks down into three main movements: an introduction, the stories of twelve judges, and finally a series of vignettes showing the moral state of Israel. Well ... more like the *immoral* state of Israel.

1. Introduction (1–3)

The first two and a half chapters of Judges tell the reader why all the chaos of the main movement is going to take place. While the children of Israel had peace following Joshua’s conquest, some of Canaan’s original inhabitants were still in the land, too. This led to a few issues for the Israelites.

Specifically, as long as these Canaanites lived in the land and worshipped their gods, the Israelites faced the temptation to worship the Canaanite gods, too. This was a big no-no for Israel—rule number one in the Ten

Commandments was to have no other gods. Worshiping another culture's deities happened for a variety of reasons. Some generations dropped the ball on teaching their children about the Law. Some individuals intermarried with other people groups, making families of mixed religious loyalties. Some people just wanted to set up their own systems of worship. As far as the Old Testament writers and editors were concerned, it didn't matter—if you wanted to maintain a healthy relationship with Israel's God, other gods were just off-limits.

In the introduction, the author of Judges explains how the gods of the surrounding people groups became “snares” to Israel. The Israelites slipped into worshipping other gods, triggering the cycle of disobedience, oppression, and then deliverance that we see throughout the rest of the book.

2. The Judges (3–15)

In the second (and main) portion of the book, we meet the judges. The book introduces twelve leaders who assist various tribes in overcoming their oppressors. With God's help, some of these judges emerge victorious despite all odds. Others accomplish miraculous feats themselves—most notably the strong Samson. All of them are raised up by God to help his people, but after the judge dies, the cycle tends to repeat itself.

If you're into obscure, morally ambiguous, and violent Bible stories, this is the place to find them. This section culminates with the story of the outwardly strong, inwardly unstable Samson, who can kill a thousand men with a donkey's jawbone but can't seem to find a lady friend who won't sell him out to the Philistines. But along the way we

meet the left-handed assassin Ehud, the prophetess Deborah, the reluctant battle hero Gideon (and his absolute monster of a son), and Jephthah, who ... well, let's just say he didn't win any father-of-year awards.²

3. The People (16–21)

The book concludes with an appendix of four stories about the people of Israel—all of which are low points brought about by the lack of a king. First, Samson falls in love with Delilah, who betrays him to his enemies. Second, a rich family makes *their own god*: a silver idol to worship, and hires a Levite priest to leave the Torah-approved priesthood to serve *them*. Third, an entire tribe abandons the land Joshua assigned to them, captures new territory, and then re-hires the same Levite priest to serve their tribe. And finally, a woman's murder sparks a nation-wide civil war.

You can see the progression here. First we see the fall of a man, then the fall of a family, then the fall of a tribe, and finally, the whole nation's descent into chaos and bloodshed. The four stories consistently raise the stakes, and at four points in this section the author notes that this is what happens when there's no king.

Now, in the *Tanakh*, the book of Judges is followed by Samuel, which tells us all about how Israel finally finds a king to put an end to these shenanigans. But the Christian Bible takes a break from the grand national saga to tell a different, more personal story.

1. Judges 21:25

2. Because he killed his own daughter. Before going into battle, he made a vow to God: if Jephthah won and returned home victorious, he would sacrifice the first person or thing that came out of his house to greet

him. (God doesn't agree to this deal.) Jephthah wins anyway, his daughter comes out to greet him, and the rest is sad, sad history. Yet another example of the antiheroes you'll find throughout the Old Testament narrative.

RUTH

After the book of Judges, we find a small, four-chapter story named Ruth. Like Joshua, this book is named after one of its main characters. Unlike the books before it however, this book isn't looking at the happenings of Israel at a national-leadership level. Instead, it zooms in on the life of one family in particular.

The story of Ruth takes place during the time of the Judges—so imagine there's a big “meanwhile” at the beginning of the book. Ruth is known as a romantic story, but its significance to both Jews and Christians goes beyond a few touching moments. Ruth plays an important role in the Bible overall.

Aside from being a well-crafted story, the book of Ruth lifts up various **Jewish and Christian virtues**, such as kindness, generosity, loyalty, steadfast faith, family, friendship, and love. Whereas Judges warns about the corrupting nature of foreign gods, Ruth promotes the idea of openness and compassion to foreigners. In fact, the virtuous

heroine is a non-Israelite—who is grafted into Scripture’s most important lineage.

Specifically, the book shines a spotlight on the coming **King David**. At the end of the book (spoiler alert!) Ruth has a son, who has his own children and becomes the grandfather of the national hero. Again, this contrasts the story that we’re reading in Judges. While Israel is falling apart and wandering from the Torah on a national level, there are still a few God-fearing Israelites (and even non-Israelites!) who are leading their families, employees, and communities according to the Law of Moses. So while Judges shows how Israel came to need a good king, Ruth shows how a good king came to Israel.

Summary of Ruth

The story of Ruth unfolds in four parts, which conveniently fit the four chapters of the book.

1. Naomi’s loss and Ruth’s loyalty (1)

An Israelite woman named Naomi travels to another land with her husband and two sons. Her sons marry women of the land, one of whom is named Ruth. However, Naomi’s husband and sons die, leaving Naomi destitute and without a provider. Naomi intends to return to Israel, telling her two widowed daughters-in-law to stay in their land and build a new life. One leaves, but Ruth remains loyal to Naomi—declaring her allegiance to Naomi’s people and Naomi’s God.

Naomi brings Ruth back to her hometown. A little town called Bethlehem.

2. Ruth meets Boaz (2)

Ruth gathers grain on behalf of Naomi, working in the fields of a wealthy man named Boaz. Boaz learns of Ruth's loyalty to Naomi and how she has taken refuge "under the wings" of Israel's God.¹ He blesses Ruth, and prays that God will reward her. Boaz then gives her protection from the other workers (an unmarried foreign woman would have been a target for harassment—or worse) and extra grain.

Ruth returns home, telling Naomi about her day at work. It just so happens that Boaz is related to Naomi's deceased husband, which, according to the custom of the time, makes Boaz an eligible person to carry on Naomi's family line.

3. Ruth propositions Boaz (3)

Naomi sends Ruth to meet with Boaz in secret. Ruth asks Boaz to answer his own prayer: that he will "spread his wing" over Ruth and redeem their family in marriage.² Boaz would be happy to oblige, but there's an even *more* eligible bachelor in the picture. And that guy gets the right of first refusal to both Ruth and the land that Naomi's husband owned.

But Boaz *really* likes Ruth, so he promises to sort the whole thing out.

4. Naomi's family restored (4)

And so ... Boaz sorts the whole thing out. He calls the town elders together and presents the situation to the other guy. This more-eligible bachelor isn't into marrying a foreigner, so he defers to Boaz. Ruth and Boaz are married, and the people of the town bless Ruth, comparing her to Jacob's wives, who "built up the family of Israel."³

Ruth bears a son, who continues not only Boaz's family line but also the family line of Naomi's husband. The women of Bethlehem praise Ruth, telling Naomi that a daughter-in-law like her is better than "seven sons." That little boy grows up and has a son.

And then that son has a son named David.

And as far as biblical narrative goes, we're off to the races.

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1. Ruth 2:12
 2. Ruth 3:9
 3. Ruth 4:11

1 & 2 SAMUEL

Next up in the Christian Bible is the book of 1 Samuel, followed by 2 Samuel. Don't let that fool you, though. This may sound like an original–sequel situation, but both books were originally written as one unified work: the book of Samuel.

Why was Samuel split up? Well, the short answer is that it was just too long to fit on one scroll. We're used to Bibles printed on ultra-thin pages—which allows you to fit more than 780,000 English words on just a few pounds' worth of paper and binding. But in the old days, these texts were written on thicker, heavier materials wrapped around a few rods. A book the length of Samuel was just too heavy to manage. Splitting the content across two scrolls made a lot of sense.

(It's the same story for the books of Kings and Chronicles, which come next in the Christian Old Testament. Lucky for our memories, all the “First and Seconds” of the Old Testament are right next to each other.)

Samuel is named after the first main character that we encounter in the book: the wise prophet and the last judge who anointed King David to rule over Israel. Although the book bears Samuel's name, he's not the focus of the story. In fact, Samuel is dead long before we even reach the second book! Instead, the story shines a spotlight on the kingship of Israel, both the iconic David and his not-so-awesome predecessor, Saul.

The books of Samuel are important for a few reasons. First, they finally introduce us to the Old Testament's central human figure: **David**. Even though this story shows David as a very flawed person, his zeal for God makes him the standard every king that follows will be measured against. He's a warrior, a musician, a diplomat, and a man after God's own heart.

Second, the rise of David is important because David's reign **unifies all the tribes of Israel**, both politically and spiritually. The book of Judges ends with a civil war in Israel: one that almost leaves one tribe extinct. But the story of Samuel shows how, under David's leadership, Israel transforms from the fragmented confederacy of tribes into a mighty kingdom. David puts Israel on the map, as it were.

Third, Samuel introduces us to the spiritual and political capital of Israel: **Jerusalem**. Although Jerusalem has been mentioned several times by this point, it's in Samuel that Jerusalem becomes the central location. Deuteronomy anticipates a time when God's name will be established at a specific place in the land of Israel. And that begins to happen in the book of Samuel.

Fourth, and most importantly, Samuel introduces us to the

idea of a **Messianic King**. Like we've discussed earlier in this guide, Messiah means "anointed one," and in this story we meet not one, but two men anointed to rule Israel as king. Later in the story, God makes his covenant promises to David—promises we've already familiarized ourselves with.

Summary of Samuel

The story of Samuel is pretty straightforward. We follow three main characters: a wise prophet named Samuel, a power-hungry king named Saul, and David, who must choose between consolidating his own power or submitting to God's authority. But at the beginning and end of the book, we find a handful of poems and stories that frame the main narrative with a few themes. The first poem is by Samuel's mother Hannah, the last is by King David himself.

1. Hannah's prayer (1 Samuel 1–2)

A childless woman named Hannah is in great distress. While her husband loves her very much, she desperately wants a child. She humbles herself before God, who grants her request: a son. Hannah names the boy Samuel, and dedicates him to service in the tabernacle with the priests.

Hannah then says a prayer (in the form of a poem or song) about how God is sovereign over the affairs of the world. He raises up those who humble themselves, and brings prideful people down. According to Hannah, and the author of Samuel, the whole earth belongs to Israel's God, and so the Lord is the one who decides who is right, who is wrong, and who succeeds. She then anticipates a coming king anointed by God, someone whom God will strengthen and exalt.

2. From Samuel to Saul (3–15)

The boy Samuel grows up, becoming a religious leader among the people of Israel—the last of the judges, in fact. Just like Samson before him, Samuel helps the Israelites fend off the Philistines, a people group that also had an interest in the land of Canaan.

As Samuel ages, the people insist that he give them a “real” king. The Philistines have their rulers—and the Israelites want one, too. Samuel warns them that kings tend to oppress and abuse their people, building wealth and power for themselves at the expense of the people they’re supposed to lead. But the people don’t care.

So Samuel anoints a man named Saul. Saul shows some promise at the start, but not for long. He disobeys directives from God, breaks sacred promises, and helps himself to plunder (even if it’s been forbidden by God) ... you get it. Saul doesn’t humble himself before God, and so God revokes Saul’s kingship.

3. From Saul to David (1 Samuel 16–2 Samuel 10)

Samuel anoints another future king: a shepherd boy named David. The boy comes from humble beginnings (he’s not even a firstborn son, which was a big deal in those days), but his zeal for God soon puts him in the public eye. When nobody else in Israel will fight the giant Goliath (the Philistines’ champion) in one-on-one combat, David volunteers, claiming to fight as a representative of God himself. Spoiler alert: David wins.

David immediately becomes the nation’s darling. He’s

zealous. He's handsome. He's a skilled musician. He's a cunning and competent warrior. He even gains influence over Saul's administration by marrying Saul's daughter and befriending Saul's son. King Saul sees what's happening, and begins a jealous manhunt against the younger man. Saul eventually drives David into exile, separating the hero from his people.

But with David out of the picture, the Philistines overpower Saul's army. Saul sees his sons die in battle, and takes his own life. After a few years of power struggles between David and Saul's heir, David is made king over all the tribes of Israel. His first move as king is to capture the city of Jerusalem (which is being held by another people group). After this, David moves the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem.

And it's at this point that God makes his covenant with David. The kingdom of Israel grows mightier and mightier, overcoming her enemies in battle on every side. Everything's going well until...

4. David's sin, exile, and restoration (11–21)

David sees a beautiful woman (Bathsheba) who happens to be married to one of his most loyal warriors. The king beds the woman, who becomes pregnant with his child. After a few cover-up attempts fail, David arranges for the poor soldier to be killed in battle. With the husband out of the way, David marries Bathsheba and the two have a son.

That's a major breach of the Ten Commandments—and it's an abusive move for a king who represents God in Israel to make. God judges David, and David is exiled from Jerusalem when his son leads a rebellion against him.

However, David humbles himself before God and repents. He admits wrongdoing and corruption, and continues to have faith that God will care for him and the people of Israel. Eventually David defeats the rebels and returns to Jerusalem to rule the nation once again.

5. God's authority (22–24)

The book of Samuel closes with an appendix of songs, records, and stories about David's relationship with God. While the rest of the book has shown leadership in Israel pass from Samuel to Saul to David, this part brings us back to the themes that Hannah laid down at the beginning of the book. Who is the true ruler of Israel?

The author of Samuel says it's God. Kings like David need to choose whether they will humble themselves before God and submit to him, or if they will act in their own interest and oppose him. David sings that God is the one who rescues him, the one who gives him victory, and the one who deserves praise. When David errs, he prefers to fall into the hand of God—because God is merciful. As David dies, he claims that God himself told him that rulers ought to rule in both justice and reverence for God.

David's not a perfect king, but his reverence and zeal for God is the standard that all other kings will be held to for the rest of the Old Testament.

KINGS

This work is about—you guessed it—kings. We’ve already met two kings of Israel: David and Saul. In this two-part work, we meet 40 more rulers of God’s people. Like the books of Samuel, Kings was written as one unified work, but split into two volumes. These books tell the story of how Israel falls from a rich, powerful, unified kingdom under David to a people group ripped out of their land and scattered across the nations.

Sound familiar? It should. In the book of Kings, we see **the promises of the Torah fulfilled**. In the book of Kings, God keeps his “good” promises to bless Israel—which he does in magnificent ways when they remain loyal to him. But the kings stray from keeping the Torah, and instead mix their loyalties with other nations and gods—succumbing to gruesome acts of abuse, oppression, murder, and even human sacrifice. Eventually the people and their leaders reach a point of no return: and then God keeps the darker promises he made to discipline Israel.

These books are vital. Most of the books of prophecy in the

Old Testament were written during or in reference to the time of the events in Kings. If you want to know what's getting under Jeremiah's skin, this book has the answers. Kings answers the question that was on the ancient Jews' minds during and after their exile: "How did things end up like this?"

Before we jump into a summary of Kings, now's a good time to mention that it's at this point in the Bible's story when we see **the rise of the prophets**. At this point in the Bible, we've seen the leaders of Israel seek counsel from a handful of prophets, priests, and seers (Samuel being the most prominent). But in Kings we see more tensions rise between the political leaders of Israel and the people who speak out on behalf of God and the Torah. Some of them simply confront people with divine messages. Others, like Elijah and Elisha, work great miracles on behalf of God.

However, the books of Kings aren't exclusively about the covenant God made via Moses. This work also follows God's faithfulness to the promises he made to David back in Samuel. For example, even though the kingdom of Israel splits early in the story, God preserves David's dynasty in Jerusalem for centuries. And even when the city of Jerusalem is sacked and the temple destroyed, David's line survives and is partially restored in the royal courts of Babylon.

Summary of Kings

The story of Kings is a long one. In fact, you could say it's the longest "book" of the Bible. It's longer than the combined Samuels and the combined Chronicles (which we'll look at next).

But the overall narrative is quite straightforward—especially if we understand the points of the Torah and Samuel. It can be summed up in four movements.

1. Solomon and the golden age (1 Kings 1–11)

David's son Solomon inherits the throne, and is visited by God himself in a dream. The Lord offers Solomon anything that he desires, and Solomon (wisely) asks for the wisdom to lead the people of Israel. God is pleased with Solomon's request, and not only grants the young man wisdom, but also power, money, peace, safety, and fame.

Solomon builds a grand temple for Israel's God, which God fills with his glory (just like he manifested in Moses' tabernacle). This establishes the temple in Jerusalem as *the* place where God dwells on earth, publicly aligning the people of Israel with God. The Lord renews his promises to Solomon: if he and his descendants are faithful to God, rule in justice, and uphold the Torah, then they will be established forever. But if they disobey, they'll be cut off from the land.

God's glory

The idea of God's glory is very important in the Bible. The word for "glory" that the Hebrews used means "weightiness." It's the gravity of God's presence, the utter significance of such a powerful spiritual being taking up residence in a physical location. This manifestation of God's glory was present in the Torah, when God dwelt in the tabernacle. The Bible's authors use

heavenly, divine imagery to describe the glory of God, often describing it as fire, cloud, lightning, and smoke.

2. The kingdom splits (12)

Solomon, however, isn't as loyal to God as David was. Solomon marries many, many foreign women, building an enormous harem and a network of marriage alliances that criss-crosses the world. These diversified interests pull Solomon's loyalties away from God, however. In fact, late in his life the king erects sites of worship to *other* gods from other nations.

Because of this, God takes away the kingdom that Solomon built. When Solomon dies, the nation splits in two, with the southern tribes following the Davidic dynasty in Jerusalem and the northern tribes following a new king from a different tribe, a king named Jeroboam. The northern kingdom keeps the name "Israel," while the southern kingdom takes the name "Judah."

3. Both kingdoms stray from God (1 Kings 12–2 Kings 24)

King Jeroboam is given a golden opportunity: a prophet tells him that if he and the people are loyal to God, then Jeroboam's dynasty will be established in the north just as surely as David's is established in the South. But, afraid that allowing his people to worship the God in Solomon's temple will weaken his rulership, Jeroboam strategically turns the people against God *on purpose*. He sets up not one, but *two* golden calves (doubling the rebellion of Israel at Mount

Sinai), and is remembered throughout the book as the one who caused Israel to sin.

For hundreds of years, the kingdom of Israel changes hands—they put the “nasties” in “dynasties” to say the least. Each time a new king takes the throne they are given the choice to follow the ways of David or the ways of Jeroboam. And they all choose Jeroboam’s path. Not a single good king rules Israel.

Things go a little better in the South, but not by much. Judah’s downfall is a slower burn than Israel’s partially because every once in a while a descendant of David demonstrates loyalty to God. These reformer kings reestablish worship in the temple and try to curb idol worship among the people. As the king acts, so the people follow.

However, Judah eventually reaches a point at which their fate is sealed. One particularly evil king, Manasseh, worships all the foreign gods he can—inside Solomon’s temple. He oppresses his people by shedding innocent blood, even sacrificing his own child to a foreign god.

The prophets of God consistently speak up through this story. When new kings take office, prophets present them with the choice to follow God, keep the Torah’s commands, and experience blessing, or turn away from God and risk his punishment.

3. Both kingdoms are exiled (17, 25)

However, the prophets go largely ignored. So God hands both kingdoms, first Israel and then Judah, over to world empires of their day. Israel falls captive to the Assyrians. Several generations later, Judah and Jerusalem are defeated

by the Babylonians. The temple is destroyed, the walls of Jerusalem are burned, and the would-be heir of David is a prisoner in a faraway land.

The author of Kings is very clear about why all this happens to Israel and Judah: they ignored the prophets, followed other gods, and committed heinous acts. Because of this, they were unable to continue living in the same land that God had established his temple in.

There's no happy ending to Kings, but there is a glimmer of hope. The author ends the book saying that many years after being exiled, a new emperor in Babylon remembers the heir of David. He releases the would-be king of Judah and makes him an honored guest in the king's palace, treating him with kindness. Maybe there's hope for David's line, yet...

CHRONICLES

The books of Chronicles appear in the middle of the Christian Old Testament—but in the Jewish Tanakh, Chronicles is the last book of Scripture. That makes a lot of sense, because Chronicles is a **recap of the Old Testament**. These books (originally one work, but split into two parts) begin with Adam and Eve and end with the Jews’ return to Jerusalem. That means that by the time you get to Chronicles, whether in the Christian or Jewish Scriptures, most of it feels like review.

However, there are a few important differences. Chronicles presents the drama of Israel’s relationship with God, with David as the star and the Jerusalem temple as center stage. No other work in the Bible mentions the words “temple” or “Jerusalem” as much as Chronicles. This is the story of the city of David, seen through the lens of God’s covenants.

At this point in the Bible, we’ve read all about how God made humans in his image, but humans are at odds with God. The Lord made promises through Abraham, Moses, and David. With each of these covenants, God and

humanity came a little bit closer together again. The story we've read thus far is one of God **reconciling** humanity, and the world, back to himself.

Reconciliation

This is one of those words that you might hear in church sermons or Bible studies. When “reconciliation” comes up in conversations about the Bible, it’s usually in reference to God’s ways of bringing humans back to himself—specifically through the New Covenant work of Jesus Christ.

This story culminated back in the book of Kings, when God’s holy presence filled the temple that Solomon built. God established his earthly headquarters in Jerusalem, the city of David. But hundreds of years later, the temple was destroyed and the people were scattered. The Jews were allowed to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple, but things were never the same again.

At the time that Chronicles was written (perhaps around 400 B.C.), the Jews were still awaiting that Messianic King. They had received many prophecies of Jerusalem’s coming destruction, restoration, and finally, a coming day when a king even greater than David would rule Jerusalem and the nations in peace and justice. Chronicles reminded the Jews that God was faithful to his covenant promises: just as surely as God had disciplined his people, they could count on God making good on his promises to David.

Someday.

Summary of Chronicles

Chronicles falls into four main parts—each contributing to the narrative of God's covenant history with Israel.

1. From Adam to David (1 Chronicles 1–10)

Chronicles starts over from the beginning of the Bible—seriously, the first word of Chronicles is “Adam,” the name the Hebrews used to refer to the first human. The first nine chapters of Chronicles are mostly lists of names. These genealogies trace important family lines through Israel's history, with special attention paid to two key groups of people: the tribe of Judah (especially the line of David) and the tribe of Levi (especially the priests and temple staff).

2. David builds up Jerusalem (11–29)

Once again, we meet the valiant King David. But this time, the story highlights him at his best. He becomes king, overcomes Israel's enemies, and establishes Jerusalem as the central place of worship in Israel. Once again, we read an account of God establishing his covenant with David, and afterward much of the story focuses on David's preparations for the temple.

In Chronicles, we find some key new material: David is the master architect who lays the plans for the temple. He arranges for supplies, he appoints musicians, he even charges Solomon with the construction project in a grand ceremony before the nation. This section (and the book of 1 Chronicles) ends with the death of David.

3. Solomon builds the temple (2 Chronicles 1–9)

Next, David's son builds the magnificent temple of the Lord

in Jerusalem. God fills it with his glory, and the nation of Israel enjoys a time of prosperity unlike any other in the Chronicler's history.

4. From Jerusalem to exile (10–36)

The rest of Chronicles charts the descent of Jerusalem from David and Solomon's golden age to their exile. Unlike Kings, which follows both the stories of both the northern and southern kingdoms, Chronicles focuses on the kings of Judah alone. (Which makes sense—that's where Jerusalem and the temple are, after all.) The Chronicler compares the kings of Judah to David: some of them pass the test by following the Lord. When a God-fearing king is on the throne, Jerusalem enjoys God's protection and blessings. When kings oppress their people and follow other gods, the nation suffers.

Ultimately, the kings choose rebellion, and so the nation, the city, and the temple come to ruin. But after seventy years in exile, the people of Israel are once again permitted to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.

EZRA

We've read about how Israel devolved from a strong, united kingdom to a scattered people group in exile. But in the next three books, we're going to look at what happened after the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem. The books of the Bible whose events take place after Cyrus' decree are referred to as *post-exilic* books.

The book of Ezra is named after one of its main characters, a bit of a hero in the post-exile story of Israel. Ezra is a scholarly descendant of Levi who returns to Jerusalem to teach the people about the Torah, reminding them to be loyal to God in order to remain in the promised land.

In the Tanakh, Ezra is the first part of a double-feature book. Ezra and Nehemiah are treated as a single work in the Hebrew tradition, while Christians separate them into two different books. This division makes a good deal of sense from a modern readership standpoint: the book of Ezra focuses on **rebuilding the temple** in Jerusalem and rededication to the Torah. The book of Nehemiah turns its

focus to the city of Jerusalem as a whole—but we'll look at that next.

Ezra introduces two more very important characters in the Bible's story: **Zerubbabel and (another) Joshua**. Zerubbabel is a descendant of the kingly line of David, and the first political leader of the Israelites after the exile, heir to a throne that no longer exists. Joshua is a descendant of Aaron, heir to a priesthood in a temple that no longer exists. Both of these men are tasked with re-establishing Israel in Jerusalem and reinstating worship of God in a new temple.

Summary of Ezra

The book of Ezra falls into two main sections: the first focuses on rebuilding the temple of God, and the second on Ezra's mission to reinstate Torah practice among the people of Israel.

1. Rebuilding the temple (1–6)

The first portion of Ezra is concerned with the physical construction of the second temple in Jerusalem. The book opens with Cyrus' decree allowing the Israelites return to Jerusalem and once again erect a temple to worship their God. Zerubbabel and Joshua the priest lead a group of former exiles back to the land and begin working on the new temple.

However, construction doesn't go very smoothly. Zerubbabel and Joshua are opposed by some of the surrounding people groups (along with internal factors, as we'll learn later in the Minor Prophets). This brings temple construction to a standstill, until two new prophets speak

up. These prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, motivate the leaders and the people to complete the temple.

The temple is rededicated, and the Levite priests once again facilitate worship in Jerusalem. The Jews (and Gentile converts) celebrate the Passover together.

2. Rededication to the Law (6–10)

Some time after this, a scholar and priest named Ezra (who is also a descendant of Aaron) moves to Jerusalem from Babylon to realign the people to the Law of Moses. He begins teaching the people the Torah, but soon discovers that many of the Israelites have intermarried with people groups who worship other gods. Ezra sees this as a big problem, and has the Jews begin a process of cutting those ties.

NEHEMIAH

Nehemiah is “part two” of the story that began in Ezra. Like the book of Ezra, the book of Nehemiah is named after one of its main characters. And like the character Ezra, Nehemiah is a Jew who journeys from east of the Euphrates to Jerusalem in order to restore his people and his homeland.

While the book of Ezra focuses on rebuilding the temple, Nehemiah tells the story of how the Jews rebuild the city itself. The book gives us a look at how God is still at work among his people, working to bless and restore them. But it also shines a light on the Israelites’ continued difficulty when it comes to keeping the law of Moses.

Summary of Nehemiah

Again, like the book of Ezra, this book falls into two main sections: the physical rebuilding of Jerusalem and the religious reform brought about under Nehemiah and Ezra’s leadership.

1. Nehemiah rebuilds the walls (1–7)

A man named Nehemiah works as cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes, far away from Jerusalem. One day a group of men from Judah visit Nehemiah, and tell him that Jerusalem is still in the shambles that Nebuchadnezzar left it in. This distresses Nehemiah. He understands that the Israelites were unfaithful to the law of Moses, and so they earned the punishment of exile.

But he believes that there are still some Jews (like himself) who revere God. On behalf of those who remain loyal to the law, Nehemiah asks God to grant him favor as he seeks to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

God grants Nehemiah this request. The king gives Nehemiah the resources and authority to head to Jerusalem and restore the walls and gates. Nehemiah does so, but not without some opposition from the surrounding people groups. He also introduces some social reform in Jerusalem, lightening the financial hardships of his people.

2. Nehemiah and Ezra recommit to the Torah (8–14)

Afterward, Ezra reads the Law of Moses to the people, who respond by rededicating themselves to the Torah. The people, lead by Nehemiah, write and sign an agreement binding them to Moses' teachings, particularly promising to do three things:

1. Keep separate from non-Israelite influences, especially not intermarrying with foreigners
2. Keep the Sabbath, refraining from work and forgiving debts at certain times

3. Financially support the new temple and treat it with reverence

After this, the town of Jerusalem is repopulated. Families from outside the city send representatives to Jerusalem to occupy it. Nehemiah celebrates the completed walls with a grand dedication ceremony. The city of David isn't a ghost town anymore.

If the book ended there, then we'd have a happy ending to the narrative of Jerusalem in the Old Testament. But that's not the case. In the last chapter of the book, we fast-forward several years. Nehemiah is called back to work directly for the king again, but returns to Jerusalem some time later to find that the people have been less than diligent in abiding by their agreement. Specifically, the people of Israel are:

1. Adopting non-Israelite influences and intermarrying with foreigners
2. Doing business on the Sabbath
3. Financially neglecting the temple and defiling it

It's more than a little frustrating for Nehemiah.

The book begins with Nehemiah begging God to give him and the other God-fearing Jews a chance. But despite all Nehemiah's work to bring about revival, the people still struggle to remain loyal to God and keep the law of Moses. The book ends with Nehemiah begging God to remember that at least he tried.

ESTHER

The last book in this section of the Old Testament is Esther. Like Ruth, it's a brief, dramatic, artistically crafted story. Named after one of its main characters, the book of Esther tells the tale of how a small family of Jews in exile bravely risk their lives for the good of people everywhere.

The book of Esther has a few special characteristics. Although the book provides an origin story for a significant Jewish feast (Purim), nowhere in the book of Esther is God mentioned. The book also isn't very concerned with the land of Israel—Jerusalem is only mentioned once, and only in passing. There are no prayers, no mention of Moses, and only a tiny reference to David's line.

Despite this, the story of Esther eventually attained status as Scripture for both Jews and Christians. It's a well-crafted political drama showing how two people seize opportunities in their lives to preserve life and oppose oppressors.

Summary of Esther

The book of Esther features four main characters: Esther the Jewish queen, her wise relative Mordecai, the drunken, impulsive king Artaxerxes, and the nasty, conceited Haman. The drama unfolds in four major movements, which fall together in a rather symmetrical way.

1. The feast and the new queen (1–2)

King Artaxerxes holds a lavish feast, and demands that his queen, Vashti, put her beauty on display for his party pals. Vashti refuses, and so Artaxerxes deposes her to teach her (and all women¹) a lesson. The king searches for a new queen, finally selecting the beautiful, popular, and secretly-Jewish girl Esther.

Soon after this, Esther's relative Mordecai learns of a plot to assassinate Artaxerxes. He tells Esther about it, Esther tells the king, and Artaxerxes lives to drink another day. The scribes note that Mordecai saved the king's life, but receives no recognition or reward.

2. Haman plots to wipe out the Jews (3–5)

Artaxerxes promotes a man named Haman to the highest position in the kingdom (well, below the king). Haman enjoys honor from everyone but Mordecai, who refuses to bow to Haman. Haman is enraged—so enraged that killing Mordecai alone isn't enough for him. He hatches a plot to kill Mordecai in the most publicly humiliating way possible and, just for good measure, *wipe out all the Jews entirely*.

Mordecai learns of this plan, and once again tells Esther. The only way for Esther can hope to protect the Jews is by

directly approaching the king and making her request. However, the king reserves the right to kill anyone who approaches him without permission. Esther chooses to risk her life in order to save her people.

3. Haman's plot backfires (6–7)

But Haman's plan doesn't work out so well. The king is reminded of that time Mordecai saved his life, and decides to publicly honor him. And he assigns Haman the task of making sure Mordecai gets the royal treatment.

Then things get worse (well, for the bad guy). Haman attends a banquet with Esther and Artaxerxes, and Esther reveals that Haman's plot to wipe out the Jews would include killing her. In a rage, the king executes Haman in the same manner Haman tried to kill Mordecai.

4. A new feast (8–10)

Esther and Mordecai then get the king's support in counteracting the plans that Haman put in place. The Jews are saved, and celebrate with a new feast: Purim. The book ends with Esther as queen and Mordecai in Haman's old position: two Jews working for the good of the king and the good of Jews everywhere.

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1. Seriously. The king's counselors tell him that civilization itself hangs in the balance. After all, if Vashti can get away with refusing his orders, then there's no way *their* wives will kowtow to them! (Esther 1:18)

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

We've looked at all the books that Protestants have grouped into the "historical narrative" section of the Old Testament. The Old Testament's story, for the most part, is over. In fact, although we're only 17 books into the 66 individual books, we've covered almost half the Bible's content.

These books paint a relatively straightforward, general picture. When Israel commits to following God, they enjoy the blessings that God promised them in the Torah. When Israel strays from God, they reap the curses promised in the Torah. On an individual level, though, things are more complex. People get away with evil deeds, and innocent people suffer. And by the time the Old Testament was coming together, the Jews were living under the dominion of (successful) world empires who didn't worship their God at all. How did that work?

The rest of the Old Testament books give the Jews (and Christians) ways to think about how God uses wisdom, justice, mercy, and love to order the world—and how he invites humans to use the same tools in service to him.

BOOKS OF POETRY

We looked at a lot of books in the historical narrative section. The next section is much smaller: the books of poetry. These books are primarily collections of songs, wise sayings, and discourses on how humans can be loyal to God, even if they don't have the benefit of worshiping him at a grand temple in Jerusalem.

Why are these books called “poetry”? Well, up until now, we've read a good deal of law, which goes a little something like this:

Do not defraud or rob your neighbor.

Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight.

Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:13–14)

And we've seen a lot of narrative content in both the Torah and the historical books. It reads like a story:

As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground. (1 Samuel 17:48–49)

But now, we're going to see a lot more content like this:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
 The skies proclaim the work of his hands.
 Day after day they pour forth speech;
 Night after night they reveal knowledge. (Psalm 19:1–2)

The poems of the Bible come in many forms. Sometimes the poetry is obvious to English readers: we can see how the lines parallel or contrast each other. The example from Psalm 19 above is a good example. Other times the poetry is more sophisticated than we might notice. For example, the book of Proverbs ends with an ode to a “wife of noble character.” In our English Bibles, it reads like a list of qualities:

A wife of noble character who can find? She is
worth far more than rubies.

Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks
nothing of value.

She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her
life ... (Proverbs 31:10–12)

It's a nice enough poem in English, but there's a lot more artistry going on in Hebrew, the language it was originally written in. The first line begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and the following lines each begin with the successive letters of the alphabet. It's an acrostic—a bit like an “ABC's of character.”

These books aren't the only works of poetry in the Bible—in fact, most of the writings of the prophets (the next section) are compilations of long poems about God's relationship with Israel and the world. However, all the books in this small section have been grouped in the “Writings” section of the Hebrew *Tanakh*, rather than “Prophets.”

While all of these books are standalone works unto themselves, they were many years in the making. Some of these books seem to have been carefully curated over hundreds of years. For example, some of the later Psalms were written after the exile to Babylon, while one of them is attributed to Moses!¹ Likewise, the book of Proverbs claims that its sayings were gathered and transcribed over at least a few hundred years.²

Old Testament Poetry

Job	Psalms	Proverbs	Ecclesiastes	Song of Songs
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There are a few themes to keep in mind as we explore these books. First and foremost is the theme of **wisdom**. The books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes have been used for generations to help God's people understand God's world. They've been passed down through the generations as helpful tools for dealing with the complexities of life, from work to marriage to worship. The Jews believed that God created and ordered the cosmos in great wisdom, and that

by using wisdom, humans brought more of that godly order to the world around them. They believed wisdom enabled people to live better lives and to make life better for the communities they lived in.

Another important theme in the books of poetry is **justice**. Justice was a matter of treating people fairly, whether they were rich or poor, seemly or unwinsome, Jew or non-Jew. In the Bible, justice isn't simply punishing wrongdoers, although that is part of it. Justice looks like caring for the poor and standing up for the oppressed even if it doesn't seem like it's in your best interest. The Jews believed God expected them to exercise justice—from the greatest to the least.

God expects justice from humans, but in these books we also see humans demanding justice from God. People who are being oppressed will often **lament** their situation to God in the form of prayer and song. When they see that the world isn't as it should be, they call on God for relief, protection, or explanation.

We'll find other major themes in the books of poetry when we look at them individually—beginning with the book of Job.

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1. Psalm 90 claims to be a prayer of Moses.
 2. Proverbs opens claiming Solomon as its main contributor (Proverbs 1:1), but says later that some of Solomon's sayings were compiled by the scribes of one of Solomon's kingly descendants (Proverbs 25:1).

JOB

This book is named after its main character, Job (rhymes with “robe”). It’s a grand piece of poetry exploring the nature of divine justice, human suffering, and the complexity of the world. We don’t know exactly when the book of Job was written, but the story seems to be set sometime before the days of Moses.

Job tells a type of story that wasn’t uncommon in the ancient Near East. It’s the tale of a suffering saint—a good person who experiences extreme misfortune, and has to deal with the question of why it happened. Other cultures of the time figured that if their gods were truly good, they would reward good people with fortune and punish evil people with misfortune. But every culture has rich, powerful jerks and poor, unfortunate sweethearts. How is that OK?

The Jews had to deal with this question, too: if God is just, then how is it that terrible things happen to innocent people? The book of Job explores several takes on this problem, and in the end, the characters never learn exactly

why good people suffer. Rather, they learn that the cosmos is a lot more complex than any of them thought it was—and the character Job chooses to trust that God, in his wisdom, will work things out for good in the long run.

Summary of Job

Job is a long series of poetic movements, bookended by two brief narratives introducing and concluding the story. The poetry is primarily Job discussing God's justice with his friends, with a surprise interjection from God himself.

1. Introduction (1–2)

The book opens with a dual storyline: one that's happening on earth, and another taking place “behind the scenes” (or should it be “above the scenes”?) in the throne room of God. On earth, Job's a swell guy who worships God and does what's right. He's very wealthy and has plenty of kids. Life's good for Job.

Until one day in God's throne room, when a divine character called “the satan” tells God that Job is only loyal to him because God has blessed him with so much prosperity. This accuser says that if Job lost everything that make him happy, Job would turn on God and curse him. God gives the being permission to afflict Job with all kinds of problems to see if Job will remain faithful to God.

The accuser then strips Job of his family, wealth, and good health, leaving him desolate and covered in sores. Job has no idea what's happening behind the scenes, and believes that *God* has afflicted him—but even so, he doesn't curse God.

Satan

In the book of Job, your English Bibles call the accusative character in God's divine throne room "Satan." Modern English readers immediately associate that word with the devil, the enemy of God and the personification of all evil. But the Bible paints a more complex picture than this.

The book of Job was written in ancient Hebrew, and in Hebrew, the character is called "the *satan*"—the word *satan* is more like a role or a title than a name. *Satan* means "adversary," and the Old Testament uses the Hebrew word *satan* to describe several non-evil characters, including King David and even the angel of the Lord himself.¹

In the Old Testament, the enemies of God are the gods of other nations. There's not a central "evil one" in the story—although there are evil spiritual forces at play. However, by the time of Jesus, the Jewish religious leaders recognized a single "ruler" behind the evil spirits, and they called this being by many names, including:

- Satan, which still meant "adversary"
- The devil ("accuser")
- The "evil one"
- Beelzebul ("lord of the flies")

In the New Testament, Jesus, the Jews, and the Christians seem to have a single, evil entity in mind when they're talking about "Satan." But the Old Testament writers don't necessarily have the

personification of evil in mind when they mention the role of the *satan* in their stories.

2. Job and his friends discuss (3–37)

Three of Job's friends come to visit the man in his distress, and the four begin discussing exactly why all these terrible things are happening to Job. The friends assume that God is just: he blesses the righteous with welfare and he punishes the wicked with hardship. Because God is just and Job is experiencing hardship, Job must have done something wrong to deserve it. To them, **Job is experiencing divine justice.**

Job, on the other hand, says that's not true. He agrees that the guilty *should* suffer and the righteous *should* be blessed, but there's a problem: Job believes he is innocent. He says there must be some mistake. He doesn't deserve punishment, so why is God punishing him? To Job, he is a **victim of divine injustice.**

Each friend takes three turns accusing Job of getting himself into this mess. And Job responds to each in turn, telling them that it's not fair. They go around and around, until Job crescendos with an appeal to God himself. Job states his innocence, and demands that God give him an answer. If Job is guilty of something, he wants to hear the verdict directly from God.

At this point, a younger man named Elihu speaks up, telling the four men that *both* arguments are wrong. If Job's friends can't think of anything Job has done wrong, then they shouldn't accuse him of wrongdoing. And if Job can't think

of any reason for bad things to happen, well, it's not Job's place to decide what God *should* be doing. Ehilu argues that **it's not a human's place to assess divine justice.**

3. God speaks for himself (38–41)

And then God himself speaks to Job. But Job doesn't get the answer that he demanded. Instead, God essentially says, "Do you have any idea how big and complex the world is? Are you really going to tell me how to do my job?"

God takes Job on a verbal tour of the cosmos, asking Job if he really understands how the world works—or how it should work. He asks Job if he knows how to keep the sea off the land, how to keep the stars in the sky, and how various animals know how to do what they do. He culminates by describing a sea monster, Leviathan, which the ancient associated with the forces of chaos that resisted divine order. No human can harness with the forces of evil and chaos—how could a human hope to judge, God, the one who keeps Leviathan in line?

Job concedes that he overreached, and humbles himself before God. Job answers to God, not the other way around. God wraps up his argument by telling Job's friends that they've misrepresented God to Job, and God's not OK with that.

4. Conclusion (42)

In the end, Job's fortunes are restored. Everyone who knows him brings him a small gift and comforts him—and he ends up with twice the wealth he had before. He has more children, lives to a ripe old age, and dies happy.

Job never learns why things went so wrong.

1. When David is on the run from King Saul, he stays with the Philistines. When they prepare to fight Saul in battle, the Philistine commanders caution their leader against letting David join in combat, saying “he will turn against” them during the fighting (1 Samuel 29:4). The Hebrew phrase that is translated “turn against” is literally saying David would “be *satan*” to the Philistines.

There’s a moment back in the book of Numbers when a messenger of the Lord opposes the prophet-for-hire Balaam. Balaam has instructions to curse Israel, and God wants to stop him. The Torah says that “the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose” Balaam (Numbers 22:22). The Hebrew phrase translated “to oppose” literally says that the angel was being *satan* to Balaam.

PSALMS

The book of Psalms is a collection of about 150 pieces of sacred poetry. Most of this poetry seems to have been written as worship to God, or as a call to other people to worship God. While every other book of the Bible is divided into numbered chapters, Psalms falls into, well, psalms. Many of these psalms begin with **titles**, a bit of description about who wrote the song and how it should be played before the actual poem begins.

These psalms are arranged into five volumes called “books,” which come together to form the whole book of Psalms. That’s right, each psalm is part of a book, which is part of a book (Psalms), which is part of a book (the Bible). This five-fold nature of the Psalms echoes the five books of the Torah.

Since the psalms were (and are) used for worshipping God, they feature most of the Bible’s major themes in their lyrics. Some of them we’ve already looked at in detail, like the blessings in store for those who keep the Torah, Jerusalem as God’s chosen earthly abode, the coming Messianic king,

the lament of the oppressed innocent, the importance of wisdom, etc.

But Psalms also brings two major themes we haven't discussed to the forefront: **praise** and thanksgiving. The book actually gets its name from the Greek word *psalmoi*, which means "songs of praise." God is the object of praise in Psalms: it's common for the author of a given psalm (called the "psalmist") to tell the readers or singers to praise the Lord. You know that fancy word "Hallelujah"? It occurs all the time in Psalms, and it's a command to praise the God of Israel.

Songs of **thanksgiving** are also common in this book. When God's people consider the work God has done, either recently or in generations long past, they respond with gratitude. Many of the psalms encourage the reader to "give thanks to the Lord." The Bible paints God as a powerful, loving, and wise being—yet someone concerned about the welfare of humans and the earth. Jews and Christians think that's a good reason to thank him.

Summary of Psalms

Because Psalms is a collection of a hundred and fifty individual, non-narrative works, summarizing this book (as well as the other poetic books) will feel a little different from how we've summed up books before.

1. Introduction: the first two psalms

The first two psalms set the tone for the rest of the book, introducing the major themes and takeaways that the reader will find therein. The first psalm opens with a blessing

available to any **individual** who keeps the Torah—the person who delights in the law of Moses will be established like a tree by a stream, bearing good fruit. Those who follow God will prosper, but those who rebel against God’s order can’t count on any divine security.

The second psalm is about God’s king in Zion (a common name for the hill in Jerusalem that the temple is built on). It’s a king to whom **Israel and all nations** should subject themselves—with blessings for those who take refuge in him and disaster for those who oppose him.

2. The five books

Each of these smaller books is a collection of associated psalms, all ending with a call to praise Israel’s God.

- Book I (Psalms 1–41): After the opening two psalms, the Book I launches into cries of lament: songs written as pleas to God for deliverance and protection from harm. Most of the psalms in Book I are attributed to King David.
- Book II (Psalms 42–72): Here we find several songs written by a group of Levite musicians (the sons of Korah), culminating in a few more songs and prayers associated with David.
- Book III (Psalms 73–89): Several of these psalms are associated with a man named Asaph. Asaph was a prophet-musician appointed by David, whose family traditionally served in the temple to God. Many of these songs are written on behalf of the community of God-worshippers.
- Book IV (Psalms 90–106): Opening with a psalm of Moses, this small set of psalms proclaims God’s greatness:

presenting him as king over all the earth (and all the other gods).

- Book V (Psalms 107–150): While this book does include some psalms of lament, it's far heavier on praise for God. This book includes the longest of the psalms (119), which extols the Torah as the way to enjoy life in harmony with and obedience to God. The other psalms in this book anticipate a restored kingdom of Israel, a return to the temple, and a Messianic kingdom in which Israel, and the whole world lives in peace, justice, and reverence for God.

3. Conclusion: the last five psalms

The five-fold book ends with a set of five short songs (146–150), all of which begin and end with “Hallelujah” (“praise the Lord!”). The book of Psalms include hymns for all kinds of occasions, but in the end, the overall call is to praise the God of Israel.

PROVERBS

When David's son Solomon became king of Israel, God appeared to him in a dream. God invites Solomon to ask him for whatever he wants. Rather than ask for wealth, or a long life, or for the death of his enemies, Solomon asks for a "discerning heart," so that he can govern the people with justice. God is pleased with this request, and grants Solomon an abundance of wisdom, along with peace and prosperity. The king becomes an international icon of wisdom—a legend in his time and ours. According to *Kings*, Solomon was credited with three thousand wise sayings and a thousand and five songs—spanning all sorts of subjects.

And the book of Proverbs claims to be (mostly) a collection of sayings associated with him. The book practically names itself with its opening line: "The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel." (Proverbs 1:1)

However, not all of these proverbs are Solomon's. This book is a wisdom anthology, and is arranged into seven sections of sayings. Solomon is credited with three(ish) of the sections. Two other contributors are named in their sections, and a

two more sections of the book are simply attributed to “the wise”—possibly sages from foreign lands.

These sayings are delivered as simple statements, often with little context and no defense. They’re generally agreed-upon principles that the wise people of the time accepted. Fair, honest, hard-working, good people receive their rewards of love and help from God and others. But nobody—God or human—wants to see a dishonest, lazy, unscrupulous person succeed. At least, that’s how it *should* work.

However, the world doesn’t always work as it should. We all know this from personal experience, and the book of Job backs up the notion that sometimes the world works in ways that don’t seem fair. That’s why it’s best to understand the writings of Proverbs as insightful principles—more like guidelines than guarantees. Proverbs doesn’t tell us how the world works. But it does invite us to participate in how the world *should* work.

Summary of Proverbs

Proverbs, like Psalms, is a collection of collections. The first section teaches that God used wisdom to create the order of the world¹—a process that took seven days, according to Genesis. Just like the creation story took place in seven movements, the book of Proverbs is arranged into seven sections.

1. Introduction: the value of wisdom (1–9)

The first movement begins by telling the reader what the whole book is for: it’s for gaining wisdom and discerning how to do the right thing. These sayings are for anyone who

wants to gain wisdom and understanding, the simple and the sage alike. This preamble finishes by stating that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge”—or, the wisdom that follows presumes that the reader worships Israel’s God.

The next nine chapters of Proverbs are delivered as instructions from a father to a son, making an argument for why wisdom is so important. Wisdom is personified as a generous woman standing in the public square, calling out for all to hear. She offers insight and understanding (and the blessings that accompany them) to anyone willing to humble themselves and learn. But she can’t help those who don’t take her up on her offer. That’s because wisdom isn’t something you can just summon in an hour of need—it comes from discipline and dedication. God used wisdom to create the world—bringing order out of cosmic chaos in ages long past. The same wisdom is available to anyone who wants it.

2. The proverbs of Solomon (10:1–22:16)

Next come the “proverbs of Solomon.” These proverbs may have been written by Solomon, curated by Solomon’s court sages, or compiled in memory of Solomon’s wisdom long after his reign had ended—or potentially a combination. However they came to be, the Jews preserved these writings by associating them with the wisest individual in their history.

These wise sayings often take the form of couplets: two-line statements that compare or contrast two ideas. For example:

A wise son brings joy to his father,

but a foolish son brings grief to his mother.²

Sometimes the authors pair concrete images to abstract concepts as a means of illustration:

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout
is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion³

And sometimes a thought will be stated in one line and further developed in the next—a “doubling down” on a principle:

A generous person will prosper;
whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.⁴

This kind of language to juxtapose two kinds of people: the wise versus the foolish, the diligent versus the lazy, the righteous versus the wicked.

3. Thirty sayings of “the wise” (22:17–24:22)

We don't know who “the wise” are, but at this point the book of Proverbs moves from the works associated with Solomon to the works of other wise people of the ancient times. They may have been wise men from Israel. It's also possible that they were well-known sages in foreign lands, whose works were edited to reflect Israel's religious beliefs.

Whoever the wise were, at some point an Israelite collected thirty sayings from them, which made it into our book of Proverbs.

4. More from the wise (24:23–34)

A later (and shorter) collection of wise sayings. This snippet speaks against partial judges, false testimonies, and especially the dangers of laziness.

5. More from Solomon (25–29)

The book returns to sayings associated with the son of David—this time mentioning one of Solomon’s descendants. King Hezekiah was a religious reformer, remembered as the greatest king of Judah after the kingdom divided.⁵ According to Proverbs, some men who served Hezekiah compiled more of Solomon’s wise sayings.

Many of these sayings are similes, figures of speech commonly beginning with “like” or “as” that illustrate abstract concepts with concrete ones. The themes of honor, justice, and rulers crop up several times in this section, reminding leaders how fairness brings about well-being for everyone, but corruption hurts everyone—including corrupt people.

6. Agur’s utterance (30)

This brings us to a rather mysterious corner of the Bible. This chapter is introduced simply as the words of someone named Agur spoken to someone named Ithiel. We don’t know who either of these people are.

But this section does not have the same tone as the rest of Proverbs thus far—in fact, it seems to make a few direct

references to the book (and point) of Job. While the previous authors are notably wise, this Agur character says he's *not* wise—quite the opposite. And instead of wishing for the riches and prestige that wisdom can bring, Agur simply prays that he will stay honest, and that he gain neither a position of power (lest he abuse it) nor a position of poverty (lest he be tempted to steal). The rest of the chapter lists observances of God's world, especially things that are difficult to understand.

It's possible that this is the best response to Proverbs as a whole: if you gained wisdom from Proverbs, you will be humbled by how much more there is to learn about God and the world.

7. The virtuous woman (31)

The last section of Proverbs is written by another mystery man: Lemuel. He records the wisdom that his mother shared with him, culminating in a beautiful acrostic poem about a virtuous woman who exemplifies the wisdom of Proverbs in daily life.

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1. Proverbs 3:19–20
 2. Proverbs 10:1
 3. Proverbs 11:22
 4. Proverbs 11:25
 5. Hezekiah doesn't get a lot of attention in this beginner's guide because, well, this is a beginner's guide. However, he's a significant figure at a few points in the Old Testament story, both as a political leader of Judah and as someone who turned the people of Judah back to God. The author of Kings says compares him to David, saying that "there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him." (2 Kings 18:5)

ECCLESIASTES

In the book of Proverbs, we're invited to participate in how the world *should* work. In Job, we face a harsh reality: the world is far more complex than anyone can fathom. Even if divine order and justice exists, it's beyond human comprehension anyway.

So ... what's the point of it all?

That's the question that the book of Ecclesiastes has been challenging people with for millennia. The book is named after the main voice behind its words. English Bibles introduce a "Preacher" at the beginning of the book. The word translated "preacher" is *Qoheleth* in the original Hebrew—a rather mysterious word that seems to mean "one who assembles" or "one who gathers." It could refer to someone who assembles people, someone who assembles ideas, or both. The word "Ecclesiastes" comes from the Greek word for *Quoheleth*.

This Preacher claims to have examined the whole world—every aspect of human life under the sun. But he doesn't

come away with the meaning of life: instead, he finds life to be tricky, unstable, and unpredictable.

Ecclesiastes is a beautiful work of wisdom literature, but as you can imagine, its acknowledgement of life's inconsistencies doesn't make it a popular read in churches. Still, this book gives us a look at how the ancients grappled with a complex and often disappointing world. And it's a work that validates the struggle of human existence even today.

Summary of Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes opens by introducing the Preacher, who gets right to the point:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!”

says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless.”¹

The Preacher then takes the reader on a tour of everything he has observed about the world. The universe is on its own repetitive timetable, and there's nothing that humans can do about it. And even if humans *could* do something about it, their mortality prevents them from accomplishing all that much. Besides all this, the unpredictability of life means that you can't really count on things to work out your way, even if you do everything right. According to the Preacher,

toiling for a secure, good life is like chasing the wind. You'll never get there.

People can seek wisdom, but still fall victim to misfortune. A king can build a mighty empire, but a foolish successor can undo all that hard work. Workers can be diligent and industrious, but oppressive leaders can still abuse and cheat them. A crooked rich person can game the justice system. A righteous rich person will be stolen from. The fastest runner doesn't always win the race, the strongest warrior doesn't always win the battle, and the smartest people don't always get rich. As the Preacher says, time and chance overtake them all.²

So what should a person do? The Preacher recommends enjoying a moderate life. Nobody knows what's going to happen tomorrow, so it's best to enjoy the joys of work, friendship, family, and health while you still can. And the Preacher concludes that ultimately, it's best to fear God and keep his commandments—because it's ultimately up to God to make sense of all this, even if it's after we're long dead.

1. Ecclesiastes 1:2

2. Ecclesiastes 9:11

SONG OF SONGS

Like the book of Psalms, this book is entirely a work of poetry. The book goes by a few names in English, some call it Song of Songs, some call it Song of Solomon, and some call it Canticles (from the Latin word for “songs”). All these names come from the opening line of the piece, which calls itself “Solomon’s Song of Songs.”¹

That’s no humble claim. In Hebrew, the “thing of things” was a way of designating the greatest in a certain category. The greatest king was the “king of kings.” Likewise, this work claims to be the greatest of all songs. Whether it’s the greatest song ever, or just the greatest one associated with Solomon, it sets some high expectations.

The Song of Songs is a love poem with three main voices: a male, a female, and their friends. It’s possible that the Song is an anthology of pre-existing love poems later woven together, or that it was conceived of as a single piece with multiple movements.

The book is an interesting one. We’re not sure when it

became part of the *Tanakh*, and we're not entirely sure why, either. It's not an overtly religious work. In fact, like Esther, the book never directly mentions God as a character—though it comes rather close.² Even so, the book has been celebrated for millennia for its joyful depiction of human sexual love, and many have used it to illustrate the intense kind of (nonsexual) love that can exist between God and humans.

Summary of Song of Songs

Many have tried to structure Song of Songs, and many different ideas for how to best understand the book have been written over the millennia. For the purposes of a beginner's guide, we'll look at the three main roles in the book, and the major themes that the book explores.

The characters:

- **The woman**, sometimes called the bride. She loves, admires, enjoys, and longs to be with the man.
- **The man**, sometimes called the bridegroom. He reciprocates the woman's affections.
- **Their friends**, who rejoice on behalf of the loving couple.

Some interpretations of the Song have put forward the idea that there are more characters at play across the voices. If the whole work is an anthology, the man's part of the Song doesn't necessarily represent a singular character, nor does the woman's. But whether the voices represent two characters or many, the themes of love, longing, and delight pervade every corner of the book.

When the couple is separated, they long for one another. When they are together, they passionately enjoy one another. Toward the beginning of the book, the two characters seem to be further apart—with some mentions of preparing for a wedding. As the book goes on, the two voices grow closer together, culminating with the two united, content with each other. The book ends with a wink: the woman takes the man away to be alone.

1. Song of Songs 1:1
2. There's one passage of Song of Solomon in which the bride compares the intensity of true love to a flame. But English Bible translations tend to differ on what *kind* of flame Song of Solomon 8:6 references:
 - NASB and ESV: "the very flame of the LORD"
 - NIV: "like a mighty flame"
 - KJV and NKJV: "a most vehement flame"
 - NLT: "the brightest kind of flame"

Wait—why do some Bibles mention the Lord and some don't?

It's because that phrase is really coming from just one Hebrew word (*sälhebet yäh*). You see those last letters, *yäh*? That's the short form of Yahweh, the Lord. The first part of the word is Hebrew for "flame." While this "god-flame" does seem to reference Israel's God, he's not exactly named as a character in the book.

THE BOOKS OF PROPHECY

You've seen the Old Testament story of Israel, from Abraham to the exile. God made three important covenants with the Hebrews: one with Abraham, one through Moses, and one with David. Two of those covenants are unconditional, one-sided relationships: God makes promises to Abraham and David, and those promises stay in effect through the whole Bible.

But the Law of Moses is conditional. Israel's loyalty to God directly affects whether or not Israel would get to occupy their land in peace. And throughout the story, Israel's leaders have been inconsistent when it comes to staying loyal to the Lord.

Israel served a different kind of deity than the surrounding nations did, and they represented that deity to the rest of the world. God wanted Israel to be different from the other nations. However, throughout the Old Testament the leaders of Israel behave like the leaders of other nations. Rather than trust in their God, they diversify their religious interests and worship other beings. Rather than use their

power to help people, the powerful Israelites oppress those beneath them. Judges accept bribes. Priests take advantage of pious women. Kings and rulers build lavish lifestyles on the backs of their subjects. None of this sits well with God. And according to the Law, he's well within his rights to punish Israel with all kinds of bad things: famine, war, plague, poverty, and even exile.

But God would rather Israel repent and follow him. So he sends prophets to his people: individuals who call attention to the ways the people are out of alignment with God. These prophets warn the Israelites of the consequences of disobeying the Law, and urge them to return to God in order to enjoy his blessings. And they present this message in various ways. Most of them pen epic poems about God's justice and the people's need to repent. Some perform physical signs to illustrate greater points. (For example, one prophet married a woman who left him to be a prostitute, and then brings her back—a picture of God's unending love for the unfaithful Israel.)

When we hear the word “prophet” today, we often think of a fortune teller: someone who sees specific events in the future. But while the prophets often anticipate God's future actions of judgment and mercy, prophecy is just as much about the past and present as it is about the future. The prophets often remind the Israelites of how God rescued them from Egypt and gave them the land of Canaan. They use poetic imagery to explain current events to the people they're addressing, often using metaphors to describe how God views what's happening in the prophet's time. When prophets *do* speak of the future, it isn't usually a precise form of communication. Prophets use symbolic imagery and figures of speech to give a general idea of what's going

to take place—these might be recorded as dreams and visions.

We've read about the theme of justice already in the books of poetry. The prophetic books are going to hit that theme even harder. Another common theme in these books is the concept of **faithfulness**: being true to promises made. The prophets will sometimes describe the relationship between God and Israel like a marriage, in that both parties made vows to each other in the wilderness outside Egypt. While the Israelites prove to be unfaithful to their vows, God must find a way to be faithful not only to the promises he made via Moses, but also the promises he gave to Abraham and David.

God's faithfulness involves **judgment**, something that the prophets warn the people about. In the Torah, God promised to discipline the children of Israel if they refused to be loyal to him. Israel's punishment would grow worse until the land ultimately rejected the Israelites just like it rejected the people who occupied it before them. We saw that take place in Kings and Chronicles, when the nations of Assyria and Babylon carried the Northern and Southern kingdoms into captivity. The pre-exilic prophetic books often warn Israel of this coming fate. Sometimes the prophets call the people to repent (turn back to God) in order to avoid judgment, and other times they say that the coming calamity is a result of their lack of repentance.

God's judgment doesn't stop with Israel, though. The prophets often foresee God's judgment on the other nations, too—particularly the nations who have mistreated the Israelites. In these books we read about judgment in store for neighboring nations like Moab, Ammon, and

Edom, who also fall captive to world empires. We see judgment in store for the oppressive empires of Assyria and Babylon, too. The prophets say that all nations must eventually be held accountable to God, the fair judge over the whole world.

But it's not all doom and gloom. The prophets also anticipate times of **restoration** for both the Jews and the nations. They look forward to the return to Jerusalem from exile, for starters. But in many of these books, the prophets also write about how God will bring not just Israel but all nations into an era of peace and justice under the Messianic heir—keeping his promises to Abraham and David.

These moments of God's divine justice being carried out are often referred to as **the day of the Lord** in these books. This doesn't refer to a singular day, but rather, any time when God puts a stop to evil and sin in the world. This might mean overthrowing Israel's enemies—or overthrowing Israel itself. But it also refers to God's coming kingdom of peace and safety, a day when evil is overthrown altogether.

Earlier in this guide, we saw that the Tanakh (the version of the Old Testament that was around in Jesus' time) was arranged in three parts, the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. Most of the books we're going to cover here fell into the Prophets section, with a few exceptions that we'll address soon. There are seventeen books in this section of the Bible, and Christians usually divide the prophets into two subgroups: the Major Prophets and the Minor Prophets, with two outliers thrown into the mix. With one exception, each book is named after the prophet delivering the messages in the text.

Old Testament Prophets

Major Prophets				Minor Prophets	
Isaiah	Jeremiah	Ezekiel	Daniel Lamentations	Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah	Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi

The **Major Prophets** group includes some of the longest books in the Bible: Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. These prophets generated a lot of material in the form of sermons, poems, and narratives. The Jews saw these prophets' works as significant, God-approved messages, and compiled their teachings (and perhaps the teachings of their disciples) into large volumes. All three of these prophets were active before or during the Babylonian captivity, and much of their material has to do with God's plans for judgment and restoration on Israel and the world.

The dozen **Minor Prophets** are all named after their traditional authors, too. Although "minor" makes them sound unimportant, it's really just a reference to the relative brevity of these books. In fact, the Jews of Jesus' time treated the Minor Prophets as one book with twelve short sections, creatively named "The Twelve." (Just as Psalms is a book of five books, the Minor Prophets were once considered a book of *twelve* books.) But even after combining all twelve of the Minor Prophets, "The Twelve" is *still* shorter than Isaiah, which is the briefest of the Major Prophets!

ISAIAH

Isaiah is the earliest of the Major Prophets, who served several generations of kings before the fall of Jerusalem. Isaiah's message is one of both judgment and comfort for the kings of Jerusalem, the people of Israel, and all the nations of the world. The book of Isaiah includes a good deal of prophecies that remain popular with Christians—because the church interprets them as being about Jesus, the heir of David.

Isaiah is a compilation of prayers, songs, visions, and stories which were assembled over some degree of time. The perspective of Isaiah's writings seems to shift partway through the book: in the first portion, the prophet Isaiah anticipates a future exile (which didn't happen for another hundred years). But later in the book, the perspective seems to assume the exile already happened in the past, and the judgment that Isaiah promised has passed. It's possible that a single person, Isaiah, foresees a future *beyond* the judgment that he describes, and writes as though it has already happened. But it's also possible that prophets who

learned from Isaiah and studied his teachings later added poems and oracles in the same vein as the original prophet's work—but from a much later perspective.

While the main message of Isaiah is about Jerusalem,¹ which had become corrupt by worshipping the gods of other nations (breaking rule number one in the Torah) and by perverting justice by oppressing the most vulnerable people among them. Again and again, Isaiah warns the people of Jerusalem that God's judgment is coming on those who rebel against him, whether those rebels are Jewish or not. But Isaiah also tells his audience that God has bigger plans in mind than simply punishing the wrongdoers: he intends to cleanse his people, and bring Jerusalem (and all nations) into an era of peace and justice.

Summary of Isaiah

The book of Isaiah is commonly divided into two major sections, the first of which mostly concerns the coming judgment of God on Jerusalem, Judah, and the surrounding nations. The second section is predominantly a message of hope for those who trust in God, promising a future in which Jerusalem and the world is ruled by a just servant-king.

1. God's coming judgment (1–39)

Isaiah is commissioned by God to call out Jerusalem's leaders for their corruption: their idolatry and oppression of their own people has provoked God to anger. Even though the people of Israel are sacrificing to God and worshipping him in Solomon's temple, the nation doesn't reflect the God they're supposed to serve. In fact, Isaiah compares

Jerusalem to an unfaithful wife who has become a prostitute, turning away from God by worshiping foreign deities and turning on her own children by taking advantage of the poor and downtrodden.

Because of this, God is going to judge Jerusalem—but not leave it utterly destroyed. Instead, he will purify them with fire. It will be a painful process, but in the end, God intends to bring about a new, better, holy Jerusalem. Isaiah anticipates a future in which Jerusalem is ruled by a just and God-fearing descendant of David. But the city has a lot of punishment to endure first.

However, Jerusalem isn't the only party that God takes issue with. The surrounding nations will be judged, too—their violent, oppressive societies will be destroyed by the mighty Assyrian Empire. And when the Assyrians have swallowed up the world around Judah and grow proud of themselves, God will put an end to *their* violence too, using the next world empire: Babylon.

This section of Isaiah ends with a few stories about how Isaiah ministered to King Hezekiah. Hezekiah was a good king—one of the best since David, in fact. In one of these narratives, Hezekiah is surrounded by the Assyrians, who mock Israel's God and demand that the people abandon their God and king to serve the gods and king of Assyria. Isaiah encourages Hezekiah, and Jerusalem is miraculously saved. Later, Hezekiah gets friendly with Babylon, presumably to gain a military and economic alliance. But Isaiah reminds the king that his help doesn't come from world empires. In fact, the Babylonians are the ones who will destroy everything that belongs to Hezekiah.

2. Comfort and hope (40–66)

The tone shifts dramatically in the second part of Isaiah. Instead of a message of judgment and coming doom on Israel, the Lord has words of comfort. They are free to return home from Babylon, and as far as God's concerned, they've done their time and then some.²

The prophet speaks of a servant: a being who not only brings about peace and justice in Jerusalem, but also teaches all the nations of the earth the ways of God. This servant-king ushers in a new covenant between God and the people—and serves as a light to the non-Jewish nations of the world.

However, it's not good news for everyone. Babylon, the proud and violent empire, will be brought low. The prophet speaks of Babylon as a place teeming with worship for other gods, but claims none of these gods have demonstrated the power and the covenant faithfulness of Israel's God. Babylon may have enjoyed its moment of power, but all its gods and armies can't thwart God's plan to unite the nations under *his* rule: a kingdom of peace, fairness, and prosperity for all.

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1. The book of Isaiah opens by saying it's a vision for Judah and Jerusalem, specifically referencing four generations of kings from the line of David (Isaiah 1:1).
 2. In fact, the section kicks off by saying that whatever sins God held against them, they've paid double the penalties. (Isaiah 40:1–2)

JEREMIAH

Jeremiah tells the story of how and why Jerusalem falls to the Babylonians. The man Jeremiah is a priest, someone familiar with the law of Moses and the state of worship in the days of Israel. He sees Israel's sharp decline from a time of religious reform into idol worship, oppression, and ultimately exile and desolation.

Jeremiah begins his ministry under the reign of Josiah, the last good king of Jerusalem. Josiah reigns a few generations after good King Hezekiah and wicked King Manasseh (the one who drove the last nail in the coffin for Jerusalem back in the book of Kings). Similar to Hezekiah, Josiah brings about religious reform. He invests in restoring Solomon's temple, tearing down idols, and turning the people back to following God. However, Josiah recognizes that Jerusalem's reform comes late in the game: according to the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy, Jerusalem is facing a steep price to pay for her lack of loyalty to God. Josiah's faithfulness only postpones the inevitable.

Jeremiah himself is known as the "weeping prophet"

because his message is not a welcome one. He's charged from a young age to alert Jerusalem's leaders of God's coming judgment, but they take offense at his message. Jeremiah is beaten and imprisoned by the government and faith that he is trying to help—the man doesn't catch a break. Still, he can't stop proclaiming the message that God has given him: yes, there's hope for Jerusalem, but God's people need to take 70 years of punishment, first.

Summary of Jeremiah

The book of Jeremiah is an anthology of sermons, poems, and other writings, mostly attributed to the prophet Jeremiah. The prophet received messages from God regarding the fate of his people over the years, and at one point, God directs him to work with a scribe named Baruch to put them all into a scroll.

Eventually that scroll grew into the book that we have today, which includes not only Jeremiah's teachings, but also the people's responses to those teachings and the fallout from those responses.

The book of Jeremiah is structured around three main sections of Jeremiah's teachings. These sections are interspersed with stories about Jeremiah's ministry, as well as stories that tell how Jeremiah's prophecies came true.

1. God's charge against Jerusalem (1–28)

In the first section of Jeremiah's teachings, God calls Jeremiah to be his messenger to the people. He gives Jeremiah a message of coming destruction for the nations of the world, but also a promise to rebuild afterward.

Jeremiah brings up two main problems God has with Jerusalem. First, there's the problem of idol-worship. The people of Jerusalem have been worshiping the gods of other nations. Like Isaiah, Jeremiah likens the people of Israel to a woman who, instead of remaining faithful to the husband who provides for her, takes up a lifestyle of prostitution. Jeremiah says that in a similar way, Israel has deserted him and gone looking for love from foreign gods—gods who have done nothing for Israel, and never will. God charges Jerusalem with unfaithfulness: they have broken and abandoned the covenant he made with them in the Torah.

The second problem is corruption of justice in the land. The Torah made many, many provisions for the poor and downtrodden. God's people were supposed to look out for the most vulnerable among them. But the leaders of Jerusalem have instead become corrupt and abusive, oppressing people for the sake of consolidating their own power.

Of course, these problems aren't limited to Jerusalem. The people of the surrounding nations have become arrogant and oppressive, too, and they'll face God's justice as well. (More on that in the third set of writings.)

Jeremiah finishes this collection of writings by saying that after twenty-three years of delivering God's messages, the people still didn't listen. And since nobody heeded his warnings, the Lord has made his plans for the future: for seventy years Judah and the surrounding nations will be made desolate by the Babylonians.

But the people don't repent. When Jeremiah speaks up with God's messages, he's beaten, imprisoned, put in stocks,

thrown in a well, and banned from the temple ... it's not a good time to be Jeremiah.

2. Hope and restoration for Jerusalem (29–45)

However, Jeremiah still sees hope ahead. Although Israel's national pride is broken, the Israelites can still seek the welfare of the communities they're displaced into. When the seventy years have passed, God will bring his people back to their land, replanting them and nurturing them as his own. And even though the Law of Moses has been broken time and time again, Jeremiah anticipates the *New Covenant*, one that's etched on the hearts of his people.

However, that doesn't take place in Jeremiah's generation. The people are resistant to the bitter end. Israel's leaders instead choose to make alliances with other nations, resist the invading Babylonian armies, and subject their people to horrific siege conditions. When Jerusalem falls (just like Jeremiah said it would), the surviving Jews drag him to Egypt to seek safety there, despite his warnings not to go. And once they get there, the Jewish refugees start worshipping Egyptian deities—doubling down on the same crimes that God charged them with in the first place.

3. Judgment for the nations (46–51)

Jerusalem isn't the only place where people are oppressing each other and thumbing their noses at God. The surrounding nations have also been accumulating wealth and power, becoming more and more arrogant. (In case you're wondering, God *really* doesn't like it when humans think of themselves as his peers.)

The rest of the nations in the area will also fall prey to the

violent Babylonians. This whole section of the world will become desolate; everyone loses to Babylon. But it won't stop there. Although God is using the Babylonians to judge the arrogant nations of the world, that doesn't excuse Babylon for *their* violence and arrogance. Eventually, Babylon will have to face the consequences of how they've oppressed the people of the world, too.

4. Historical prologue (52)

The book of Jeremiah ends the same way as 2 Kings: with a historical summary of the fall of Jerusalem.¹ It's pretty bleak, but there's a glimmer of hope. While David's line may have been carried away to Babylon, the Babylonian king eventually shows David's heir kindness.² There's still a possibility of God someday fulfilling his promises to David and Abraham, and fulfilling the prophecies made through Isaiah about the coming Messianic king.

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1. Seriously, the last chapters of 2 Kings and Jeremiah are almost identical.
 2. The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar takes Jewish King Jehoiachin to Babylon as a prisoner, where he's held captive for thirty-seven years. But after that time, the new emperor gives Jehoiachin a seat in his court, treating him with honor. It's a far cry from the prestige and power that Solomon enjoyed, but it's a hint that the royal line of David isn't done for.

LAMENTATIONS

Jerusalem has fallen. Solomon's temple is destroyed. The people of Israel thought they were the ones God was supposed to protect, and yet they were the ones getting slaughtered. The land of Canaan was supposed to be their God-given place in the world, and yet they were being driven out of it. Back in Genesis, God scattered the nations of the world when they built their tower at Babylon, and yet now God is using *Babylon* to scatter the Israelites? How long will this tragedy continue? That's the question the book of Lamentations asks.

Lamentations is exactly what it sounds like: a collection of poems lamenting the fall of Jerusalem. Content-wise, it's more like a tiny book of Psalms than the books of prophecy. The ancient Jews grouped this book with the Writings (not the Prophets); however, Christians put Lamentations with the prophets' books, perhaps because of an old tradition that this book was written by the prophet Jeremiah.¹

Summary of Lamentations

The book is very brief, just five chapters—each of which is an acrostic poem. (Oh, look: another five-fold work in the Old Testament!) The first four poems follow the progression of the Hebrew alphabet, the fifth simply has 22 lines, the same number of letters in that alphabet.

Each of these poems speaks of the dire situation Jerusalem and the Jews are in. The siege is a horrific experience for the people, and the fact that this destruction is coming from God makes it even worse. Because they were unfaithful, the people have found themselves on the wrong side of their God.

However, in the center of the book, the author proclaims that while the people may have been unfaithful, God is always true to his word. The poem calls the people to turn back to God, who is their only hope for relief now. The poet says that God is loving, and doesn't take any pleasure in punishing his rebellious people—so the best course of action is to repent and call upon God for help.

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1. The Bible never really says that's the case. It's possible that Jeremiah put this collection of poems together, but the work is anonymous.

EZEKIEL

The final Major Prophet, Ezekiel covers a lot of similar territory that Isaiah and Jeremiah do. However, Ezekiel's focus is on a specific location that should be familiar to us by now: the temple.

Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel is both a prophet and from a priestly family. But unlike Jeremiah, Ezekiel begins his ministry far from the temple in Jerusalem. Ezekiel is taken captive by the Babylonians, then recruited into prophetic service by God. He explores exactly why the temple of God wasn't protected from the Babylonians—and how God might one day restore his **glory** in Israel.

The prophet Ezekiel is referred to as a “watchman,” someone responsible for sounding the alarm about the coming judgments on Israel. Ezekiel gave the people a chance to change their ways and avoid destruction, going to great lengths to get their attention. This might be why he uses vivid imagery—the book is known for its intense visual metaphors. But despite all his efforts, Ezekiel's message falls on deaf ears. The people are so callous to God that they

can't receive his last-chance warnings, even for their own good.

Summary of Ezekiel

You can think of Ezekiel as a two-part work. While the first half is bad news for Israel, the second half is good. However, there's some overlap: in the middle, Ezekiel sees God's judgment extending to the nations surrounding Israel. So the good news for Israel begins with bad news for her enemies—but the bad news feels much like an extension of Ezekiel's oracles of judgment on Israel.

1. Judgment on Israel (1–24)

God calls Ezekiel to be a watchman on his behalf: Ezekiel will be responsible for telling the exiles about the coming siege and destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon's temple. The oracles begin with a vision of the glory of God sitting on a mobile throne. Traditionally, God's glory was thought to rest above the ark of the covenant in Solomon's temple. (Remember, the ark was considered the earthly footstool of God's heavenly throne.) But Ezekiel sees God's glorious presence departing the temple, leaving Jerusalem and the whole land to be overthrown by the Babylonians.

Ezekiel partakes in various symbolic actions (such as lying on his side for more than a year) to get Israel's attention, and uses several metaphors to describe why Israel deserves the judgment that's coming upon them. But the people don't heed his warnings.

2.a Judgment on the nations (25–32)

This is where the message starts turning around—but it's

not exactly good news yet. Ezekiel pronounces oracles against the other nations in that part of the world. Several of these people groups took pleasure in Israel's demise, so in a sense, God promising to serve his justice on Israel's enemies was good news for Israel.

2.b Israel restored (33–39)

This section opens with God reiterating Ezekiel's calling to be a watchman for Israel—just as the terrible news of Jerusalem's final defeat reaches the exiles. But God has bigger plans for his people long-term. Ezekiel says there's still the opportunity for anyone to turn from their rebellion against God and serve him, and if they do, their sins will be forgiven.

Ezekiel anticipates a new king, a "good shepherd" from David's line who rules a reunited Israel. Instead of the corrupt, oppressive leaders that have pushed people away from God (think Jeroboam and Manasseh from Kings), the people will be led to follow God. In one of his most famous visions, Ezekiel sees a valley of dry bones reanimated into living people: a picture of how God will breathe life back into his people.

Ezekiel then sees a final battle, with Israel's enemies assembled and ready to invade. God fights on Israel's behalf against this great army, scoring a definitive, cosmic victory. It demonstrates for the final time that he is holy, both to Israel and all the nations of the world.

2.c God's glory restored to Israel (40–48)

The book finishes with Ezekiel's vision of a new, glorious temple paradise. The tribes of Israel once again occupy

their land, and the glory of God returns to Israel. The priests are able to once again serve before God in the new temple. From this new temple flows a river of life, turning the Dead Sea into a place teeming with life. And while the book began with the glory of God leaving Jerusalem, it ends with his glory returning and filling the city like never before. In fact, the name of this city isn't even "Jerusalem" anymore: its name is simply "The Lord Is There."

DANIEL

In Jeremiah, the prophet tells the people in captivity to seek the welfare of their new (captor) communities. It wasn't an easy thing to ask: other cultures worshiped other gods, kept other customs, and recognized other holy places. Jews who were used to worshiping their own God at their own temple according to the Torah had a lot of adjusting to do. The book of Daniel tells the story of one Hebrew who still followed God despite being subject to systems that *didn't* recognize God.

Daniel is a special character in the Bible. He's a handsome member of the royal family (like David). He's wise (like Solomon). He counsels kings (like Samuel and Isaiah). He intercedes with God on behalf of the people (like Moses). He receives visions about the future (like Ezekiel). But unlike these biblical headliners, the Bible never tells us about Daniel doing anything wrong. He's a rare character who follows the Torah and embodies the ideals of the Jews who lived under the rule of world empires. Perhaps that's

why the Jews put this book in the Writings category of the *Tanakh*.

However, Christians place the book of Daniel with the prophets for two good reasons. First, Daniel includes a good deal of prophecy about Israel and the empires of the world. Second, Jesus called Daniel a prophet.¹ These prophecies anticipate a day when the kingdoms of the world are finally brought under the rule of God's kingdom, which will bring about an era of peace and justice for everyone. Daniel's prophecies are referenced not only by Jesus, but also heavily drawn upon by the author of the last book of the Bible, Revelation.

Summary of Daniel

The book of Daniel is a strange one. It contains several vivid, bizarre dreams and visions. But beyond this, the book is **written in two languages**. While half of the book is written in Hebrew like the rest of the Old Testament, the other half is written in Aramaic. And that Aramaic portion is in the middle-ish of the book, beginning in the second chapter and ending with the seventh. This makes structuring Daniel an involved task, but in terms of what we need to cover in this beginner's guide, the book breaks down into two halves: the first six chapters and the last six chapters.

1. Stories about Daniel (1–6)

This section follows Daniel in third-person. Daniel and his (fireproof) friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are taken to Babylon, where they are trained to serve in

Nebuchadnezar's court. They abstain from violating the Torah's purity laws, and as a result, are blessed with favor in the sight of the Babylonians. Daniel becomes a beacon of wisdom in Babylon, interpreting troubling signs and dreams that the kings receive from the divine realm.

The Babylonian kings are very arrogant, considering themselves God's peers. This gets them into divine trouble, and the Babylonian empire eventually falls to the Persians. Daniel remains in exile after the Persian king, Cyrus, allows the Jews to return home, using his wisdom to serve the Persians, too.

His wisdom and favor make the other (non-Jewish) leaders jealous, so they plot to have Daniel disgraced and killed. But Daniel's so flawless that the only way they can get him in trouble is to make his piety to Israel's God illegal. Still, Daniel remains loyal to God, and gets thrown to the lions—which he famously survives. Throughout these stories, Daniel's wisdom and loyalty to God foil the arrogant and power-hungry humans of Babylon and Persia, pointing to Israel's God as the one with true power.

2. Daniel's visions and dreams (7–12)

Here the book shifts from third-person narratives into a first-person account of Daniel's dreams and visions. Daniel sees future empires (depicted as beasts) dominating the world and oppressing Israel. He sees that the 70 years predicted by Jeremiah are just the start of Israel's problems. In fact, Israel will still struggle with loyalty to God—and subjugation to the nations—until the Messiah sets up a new kingdom of peace and wisdom and justice.

1. In the New Testament, the author of Matthew references the writings in this book as those of “the prophet Daniel.” (Matthew 24:15)

THE TWELVE MINOR PROPHETS

The next twelve books of the Bible are named after their traditional authors: the prophets whose messages are preserved in the text. Most of these prophets continue the dual message of coming judgment and hope with some or all of these elements:

- **The coming Day of the Lord.** The prophets believed that God would avenge the oppressed and bring the oppressors low. Fire, flood, plague—all kinds of disasters are associated with being on the wrong side on the day when God rights wrongs.

- **Warning the Israelites** that they have fallen out of good standing with God. The prophets call on the people to repent and return to God, abandoning their foreign gods and abusive ways.

- **Anticipating God's judgment on the nations.** The surrounding nations that have taken advantage of Israel and disregarded Israel's God will need to answer for their arrogance. This would have been good news for Israel: the

idea that God would punish Israel for their wrongdoing, but also protect and avenge them when other nations oppress them.

- **A new Jerusalem.** The prophets look forward to a time when God will restore Jerusalem and rule the nations in peace and justice through his chosen Messianic king.

These books are very brief for the most part—brief enough for the ancients to treat the whole collection as one book! So the summaries of these books will be brief as well.

Hosea

A prophet to the Northern Kingdom, Hosea's life becomes a picture of God's relationship with Israel. You remember how Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel compare the people to a cheating wife? Hosea takes the metaphor a step further: he marries a harlot, who bears three children and leaves him.

Hosea tells the people of Israel that they have broken their covenant with God (the Law of Moses) just like Hosea's wife broke their marriage arrangement. Hard times are going to come on Israel as they face the consequences of rejecting God. However, when Israel realizes that the foreign gods they've been worshipping aren't helping them, they will return to God. Then God will receive them, and they will be led by a king from the line of David.

Hosea demonstrates this by restoring his wife to himself, just as God intends to forgive Israel and take her back someday, too.

Joel

This short book compares a modern problem in the land of Judah (a plague of locusts) to the coming day of the Lord. When the insects eat up all the food, it brings a famine on the land. Joel warns that the day of judgment is coming for Judah—if the people can't withstand a bunch of locusts, how can they hope to stand when God comes to set things right? Joel urges the people to repent and seek God's forgiveness with a humble heart. The locusts subside.

Joel tells the people that before the “great and terrible” day of the Lord, he will pour out his spirit on all the people, enabling everyone to share his word (not just prophets like Joel). When the day comes, people will be given every chance to heed the warning and turn to God before it's too late.

That warning goes for the nations, too. Joel says that God will put the nations on trial for how they have dealt with his people. When all is done, Jerusalem will be restored, and the famine of Joel's time will be replaced with a time of abundance of food, peace, and justice.

Amos

A shepherd from the Southern Kingdom of Judah named Amos travels to preach to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. His message? The day of the Lord is coming. God will come and overthrow his enemies: the nations whose leaders oppress their people and (surprise, surprise) think they're above divine judgment.

But this time, instead of God defeating Israel's enemies like

he did in the old days, Israel *is* one of the enemies! They've oppressed their poor and served other gods—and God plans to remove them from the land just as he removed the Canaanite inhabitants before them.

Israel's leaders oppose Amos, but the prophet keeps preaching his message. He takes up a dirge against the unrepentant Israel, and records a series of visions regarding Israel's sins and coming judgment. The book isn't very heavy on the good news, but Amos does conclude with a promise that after all the judgment has passed, God will once again restore his people.

Obadiah

Obadiah is the shortest book of the Old Testament—a single chapter long. While most of the prophets are focused on calling Israel to repentance, Obadiah is an oracle written about the nearby nation of Edom. According to the Torah, Israel and Edom were both descendants of Abraham: Edom descended from Jacob's twin brother Esau. The two nations had a tense relationship through the ages.

When Judah fell captive, the Edomites looted Jerusalem and captured refugees to sell into slavery. That doesn't sit well with God. Edom's people believed that their territory (high in the hills) made them invulnerable. However, Obadiah says that Edom too will be cut down to size in due time.

But this judgment isn't just for Edom. Obadiah says that the day of the Lord is coming to all nations—every people group will need to give an account for how they have treated others. In that day, Obadiah says God will return to

Jerusalem and deliver the land of Israel from oppressive kingdoms altogether.

Jonah

This is the odd one out. Even if you're unfamiliar with the Bible, you've likely heard the story of Jonah before. God tells Jonah to warn the Assyrians (Israel's enemies) that their evil deeds will soon bring about a day of the Lord on their capital, Nineveh. Jonah doesn't want to give the Assyrians a chance to repent and save themselves, so he instead tries to sail away in the opposite direction. However, Jonah is thrown overboard and is swallowed by a great fish, which spits him on land. He preaches to the Assyrians. They repent. God spares them. And Jonah is really, really bent out of shape about it.

The book is strange for a few reasons. For one, the titular prophet is an antihero. Secondly, the story has more than a few over-the-top moments (a fish swallows a man, a plant grows at rapid speeds, animals repent of their sins, etc.) Thirdly, while most books of prophecy are heavy on poetic oracles and visions from the prophet, this book is mostly a story *about* the prophet. And perhaps most interestingly, the book has very little to do with Israel. The story is about the lone prophet who accepts God's protection and mercy, but wants to decide who should and shouldn't receive this kind of treatment from God.

For this guide, keep in mind that Jonah's narrative touches on many of the elements that the other prophets directly preach about:

- Like Israel, Jonah has a privileged relationship with God,

but rebels.

- Like Israel, Jonah is removed from the face of the earth and “exiled” to the belly of a fish.
- Like Israel, Jonah is restored—but is still resistant to God’s character.
- Like the nations, Nineveh is warned about God’s coming judgment and given a chance to repent.

There are many, many interpretations of Jonah in the Christian and Jewish communities. That’s partially because the book never resolves—it ends with a question about whether or not God *should* be compassionate on the repentant non-Jewish people.

Micah

This book reads much like a condensed Isaiah. Micah calls out the people of Israel and Judah for their rampant corruption. The most powerful people in the land extort the most vulnerable. The judges accept bribes, allowing the rich to get away with crimes and the poor to suffer. The priests only teach the people in exchange for money. The so-called prophets have reduced themselves to fortune-tellers, giving good news to those who pay them and threatening those who can’t with curses. Because of this, the people face judgment from God.

However, Micah believes there will be a time of justice again in Israel. He anticipates someone leading the people of Israel in peace and fairness, similarly to how a good shepherd leads a flock of sheep. This Messianic king will teach all the nations to live in harmony with one another.

Micah believes that there are very, very dark days ahead for Israel. But he holds out hope that one day, God will pardon all the sins of his people, and make good on his promises to Abraham.

Nahum

Like Obadiah, Nahum's message is mostly about a foreign oppressor, rather than the corruption in Israel and Judah. Nahum sees a vision regarding the Assyrian capital of Nineveh—and it's not pretty.

The prophet describes God's character: he's good and slow to anger. He cares for the people who place their trust in him. But he's also responsible for bringing the guilty to justice. Because of Assyria's violence and bloodshed (not only against Israel and Judah but also against their own people), Nahum says that God is going to overthrow the Assyrians.

Habakkuk

Habakkuk is a prophet and psalmist who sees the innocent suffering from violence and injustice in his area. The Torah is "paralyzed," incapable of giving the people a peaceful life because the leaders keep perverting the rules to their own advantage. He calls to God, asking how long this situation can last before God brings judgment on his oppressors. God responds to Habakkuk, saying that the Babylonians will be his tool for breaking Judah and all the corrupt, arrogant nations in that part of the world.

Habakkuk is *not* pleased with this—as far as he's concerned, the Babylonians are also a violent people who have no

regard for God or his laws! God tells Habakkuk that in the end, prideful human kingdoms will meet their downfall, but those who act justly will live by being faithful to the law.

Habakkuk then composes a hymn for the temple in Jerusalem. This song anticipates a time when God will once again deliver the Jews from their enemies, pulling imagery from Exodus and Joshua to describe God's ability to save his people in mighty ways. Habakkuk hopes that this redemption and restoration happens in his lifetime. But the prophet concludes the song (and the book) saying that even though all he sees before him is destruction, he can find joy in his faith that one day, God will make things right.

Zephaniah

A brief and stark book: the prophet Zephaniah says that Judah and the surrounding nations will be thoroughly destroyed. The poet uses strong, chaotic imagery to describe how bleak the coming day of the Lord will be for Jerusalem: just like God created an ordered world in the book of Genesis, God will "destroy" the world as the Jews of Zephaniah's time know it. Zephaniah calls the people to repent now, and humble themselves before God in hopes of finding shelter and safety on that day.

However, just as the beginning of this book is extremely bleak, the end is extremely hopeful. Zephaniah looks forward to a time when God will restore Jerusalem and take up residence as Israel's king: a mighty warrior-god who saves his people. This new Jerusalem is a place of joy and celebration and peace—a huge contrast to the opening doom-and-gloom prophecies.

Haggai

After the exile, the Jews returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. The first group of returners, “the remnant,” were led by Zerubbabel, an heir of David, and Joshua, the high priest and heir of Moses’ brother Aaron. The two began work on the new temple, but eventually abandoned construction. However, the people still continued to build houses for themselves in the land while the temple was neglected.

After a while, the produce of the land tapers off. Haggai draws a connection between the hard times in the land and the way the leaders have neglected the temple. Fortunately for Haggai (and the people), Zerubbabel and Joshua take Haggai’s direction. They complete the temple, and Haggai tells the people that God will bless them in return for their obedience.

Zechariah

The book of Zechariah is the longest of the minor prophets. Like Haggai, Zechariah gave his messages to the Jews after their return from exile. Much of Zechariah’s messages address a problem facing Jews of his time: what will they do without a king from David’s line on the throne?

First, Zechariah records seven graphic, symbolic visions, which affirm that God has chosen to work through the appointed governor (Zerubbabel) and priest (Joshua) to lead the people. Jerusalem may not have a Davidic monarchy, but God is still at work fulfilling his promises to David and Abraham. As far as Zechariah is concerned, the Messianic

king could arrive soon, if the people diligently return to God.

After Zechariah's set of visions, the book gives a series of oracles: sermons that anticipate a time when God will judge the nations and fully restore Jerusalem. The prophet predicts times of intense hardship for the people of God. But in the end, God himself will appear to defend his people and defeat his enemies once and for all. After this the prophet says that God will rule over the whole earth, and all the nations will worship him in Jerusalem.

Malachi

It's the final book of the prophets and the Old Testament. "Malachi" simply means "my messenger," and the author of the book takes up a few final issues with the Israelites. The book calls the people (even the priests) back to the covenants that God had established, reminding them to be faithful. Malachi forms his book around small debates, framing God's messages by showing how God and the people have come to see their situation differently.

The book closes with a final appendix: the people who still trust in God write their names in a book, committing once again to be faithful to God. The author reminds them how God opposes the arrogant, but spares those who humble themselves before him. Malachi urges the reader to remember the Torah and keep an eye out for a new prophet who resembles Elijah.

And that's it.

(Seriously. The Old Testament ends with a cliffhanger.)

QUICK RECAP OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

We've covered a lot of ground—about three-quarters of the Bible is behind us now. Before we move into the New Testament, there are a few important things to stop and consider.

First, just about everything that we've overviewed so far is from the perspective of ancient Hebrews—people who were writing and editing Scripture long before Jesus of Nazareth ever showed up. The majority of what we call “the Bible” was compiled by Jews who believed that their national identity was bound up in the God they worshiped, and how loyal they were to him. Thus far, the Bible isn't a personal message to any *individual* reader. It's a collection of stories, poems, prophecies, and proverbs for the ancient Jewish *community*.

Second, you probably noticed that the entire Old Testament story revolves around the land of Israel. Most of these books tell the story of how Israel migrated to and captured the land, how they lost it, and how they resituated themselves there after the exile. Nearly all the prophets promised the

people a time when Israel would once again be elevated to independent status as a nation—one that was ruled by a king from the line of David. This Messiah would be responsible for overthrowing the corrupt and oppressive leaders, both inside and outside the nation of Israel. He was supposed to rule the nations in justice and peace, allowing all nations to worship God in Jerusalem. Some of the prophets seem hopeful that this might happen in their lifetimes—but it sure doesn't.

Keep this in mind before we jump into the New Testament. Everything we've looked at thus far is sacred to the Jewish religion as well as Christians. But we're about to get into the Christian-only zone of the Bible. And it's the part of the Bible that exists because around two millennia ago, one man seemed to make all the missing pieces fall into place.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Old Testament introduced three major covenants that the ancient Jews believed God made with humans. They believed that God promised land to Abraham's descendants, and that through those descendants (the Jews) all nations would be blessed. They believed that God made a pact with the Jews after he rescued them from Egypt, and that the welfare of the Jews was contingent upon their ability to follow God's laws: the Torah. And they believed that God promised to send a king from David's line to rule the nations from Jerusalem in peace and justice forever.

In the New Testament, we meet the character that Christians believe consummates these old arrangements and introduces something new: the New Covenant. We looked at that in detail earlier in this guide, but we'll be referencing it again and again as we work through these final 27 books—because that's what all they're all about.

The New Testament only accounts for about a quarter of the Bible's content, but it represents 27 of the 66 books. The first five deal with the story of Jesus and his close

followers, and the rest are letters about what those followers think other followers need to know and remember:

New Testament Books

Narrative (5 books)	Letters (22 books)
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But even past this, there are a few ways Christians like to subsegment the New Testament. The first four books of narrative are all about the life and teachings of Jesus, stories that Christians quickly spread throughout the Roman Empire during the first century. The Christians called the message of Jesus “the gospel,” which means “good news” (more on that later). And so the four books that tell the gospel came to be called “the Four Gospels.” The fifth book, called “Acts,” is a work of early Christian history and a bit of a loner in the New Testament: not a gospel, but not a letter.

New Testament Books

Narrative		Letters (22 books)
The story of Jesus, or “Gospels” (4 books)	Early church history (1 book)	

The letters, more formally called “epistles,” are subdivided, too. The first thirteen of these letters are associated with an early church leader named Paul, whom we’ll look at more closely soon. They’re collectively called the “Pauline Epistles.” Most of these letters are for specific first-century communities and individuals.

The next eight books are attributed to other leaders of the early Christian movement and, for the most part, were written for Christians throughout the first-century Roman world.

And then there’s the final book, Revelation. While framed as a letter, it has a lot more in common with the Old Testament books of Daniel, Zechariah, and Ezekiel than the other New Testament letters. It’s a series of visions that the author claims reveal or uncover the things that were to come in the readers’ future. This kind of writing is called “apocalyptic,” which just means “uncovering.” (We’ll talk about the gloom-and-doom connotations of the work “apocalypse” later.) Since it’s a vastly different style from the other letters, the last book of the Bible is treated a bit distinctly from the rest of the New Testament epistles.

You’ll find a few further subdivisions within the epistles, but we’ll address those in more detail when we come to them.

New Testament Books

Narrative		Letters (22 books)		
Gospels (4)	Acts	Pauline Epistles (13)	Catholic Epistles (8)	Revelation

When we looked at the Old Testament, we saw that most of these books (and therefore, most of the Bible itself) focus on Israel, her people, and her land. Those first 39 books were written, edited, and preserved by a single people group—so

there's a lot of rich cultural tradition flowing through (and from) the text.

But things change with the New Testament. While perhaps all of these books were written by Jews (more on that "perhaps" later), these books shift from the kingdom of Israel to a new group of people: Jesus' followers. These folks are called the "church," and they come from many different nations and consider themselves citizens of a different kingdom: the kingdom of God. This creates a significant shift in the cultural backdrop. The New Testament wasn't written by and for one established cultural people group. Instead, it was written to members of a new culture that was still finding its legs in the midst of many other different cultures. The New Testament includes books written for people in various metropolises across the Roman empire. So although the New Testament is more recent, we're still dealing with a great deal of cultural divides between modern readers and the original people who read these works.

With that being said, let's dive into the first group of New Testament books: the Gospels.

THE GOSPELS

The New Testament (and the Christian faith) is based on the story of Jesus of Nazareth, a person who lived in the same part of the world where most of the Bible took place: the region of Palestine, in modern-day Israel. In Jesus' time, this area (along with a good deal of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East) was under the control of the Roman Empire, which had set up non-Jewish leadership of the area. The land that had belonged to Israel under David was now divided into three Roman provinces: Judea to the South (from "Judah," where Jerusalem was), Galilee to the north, and Samaria between them. The little Galilean town of Nazareth was where Jesus grew up.

Three days after Jesus' execution, his followers began claiming that he rose from the dead. According to these people, this validated Jesus' teachings about how to love and obey Israel's God. Furthermore, it proved that he was the Messiah, the long-awaited heir of David who would one day rule the world in peace and justice. Jesus' followers believed that his life, death, and resurrection ushered in a new deal, a

New Covenant, that allowed anyone to become a holy member of God's family.

The Christians believed that those who were loyal to Jesus were divinely empowered to do as Jesus did, spreading love and justice throughout their communities. Through Jesus, it was possible to dismantle the old, oppressive ways of doing things and instead participate in bringing light and goodness and truth to the world.

Jesus had launched a new kind of invasion. Every other kingdom rose to power by forcing themselves on the people. But Jesus and his followers served their communities, and invited everyone to participate in the kingdom of God. Jesus' death triggered this shift: the king had come not to slay his enemies and abuse his people (like the kings of Babylon, Assyria, and Israel in the Old Testament), but to die on the people's behalf.

That was good news for the Jewish Christians: the king from David's line had come, and there was finally a cure for the ways of violence and corruption that diseased humanity. Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's prophecies about the people of God returning to him with a new heart were coming true. There was hope that the God they'd worshipped for so long was keeping his promises to David and Abraham.

It was good news to the Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians, too. Through Jesus, they believed that people of all nations had access to God—not just Jews. While the Law of Moses allowed for Gentile converts, they had to dump their old cultures and essentially become Jewish in order to enjoy the blessings God provided in the Torah. Jesus' followers, however, believed that the teachings of Jesus transcended Jewishness—as far as God was concerned,

there was no discrimination between men and women, Jews and Romans, slaves and nobility. A new, better king had come, and with him a new, better order. All people had to do was put their faith and allegiance in Jesus to take part in it.

And there was even more good news. According to Jesus' disciples, Jesus was just the first person to come back from the dead, never to die again. In time, Jesus would return to earth to set up the final stage of his kingdom, and when he did, those who were loyal to him would *also come back to life* to enjoy a better world with Jesus forever.

Jesus and his followers called this message “good news,” or “the gospel.” The four books of the New Testament that tell this story are also called gospels, and named after their traditional authors (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). All of these gospels tell the same story, but from different perspectives, for different audiences, and with different goals. That's why we're going to look at a summary of the gospel story, and then look at some of the distinctives of each book.

Summary of the four gospels

The Gospels vary in length and tone, but all four of them hit some of the same beats:

1. Prologue: Before Jesus' ministry

Each gospel includes a small lead-up to Jesus coming on the scene as a prophet, teacher, and miracle worker. This portion of the text might be very brief, like in Mark, or longer, like the Bible stories we hear during Christmastime in Luke. But all four gospels use this lead-in time to address

how Jesus was a promised one that God had designated for this task long beforehand.

This part of the story introduces a character named John the Baptist, a prophet who told the people that the Messiah was coming soon. John encounters Jesus, and it is revealed to him that Jesus is, in fact, more than just the long-awaited human son of David. A voice speaks from heaven, declaring him to be the son of God.

2. Jesus teaches and performs miracles

The largest portion of each gospel is devoted to Jesus' ministry to the people around him. This is where Jesus performs miracles: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and even restoring the dead to life. Jesus teaches people how things work in the kingdom of God; both his teachings and his actions consistently show mercy to the hurting and agitate the people in power. Jesus also predicts a coming time when he, the Messiah, will give each person what they deserve: great rewards await those who keep his teachings.

Jesus teaches people in various ways. Sometimes he uses miracles as a springboard into sharing a spiritual truth. Sometimes he delivers sermons: straightforward messages for people to put into practice. And sometimes he gives parables: cryptic, allegorical riddles that use fictional scenarios to make a point.

We meet a few groups of people in this part of the story. The **disciples** are the people who follow Jesus closely and seek to understand his teachings. A group of twelve disciples becomes representative of this group—just like Jacob's twelve sons became the nation of Israel, Jesus' twelve apostles will multiply into a worldwide community

of Christians. The **crowds** are the masses who don't necessarily have much allegiance to Jesus, but certainly enjoy his miracles. And the **Pharisees** are the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' time. They know a great deal about the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings—but instead of using the Scriptures to help the weak and oppose the proud, they use it to consolidate *their own power* over the people. These folks take issue with Jesus, and eventually plot to kill him.

This section of the story is, in many ways, a long introduction to the third part: the passion narrative.

3. The passion narrative

This is the core of the gospel story: Jesus becomes the suffering servant that Isaiah foretold. On the night of Passover, the Jewish feast commemorating God's rescue of Israel from Egypt, Jesus shares a meal with his closest followers and then goes for a walk in a garden outside the city. One of the twelve, Judas Iscariot, betrays Jesus and hands him over to a mix of Jewish religious leaders and Roman authorities. Jesus does not resist them, and tells his followers not to use violence against his enemies, either.

Jesus is then put through a sham trial, wherein people taunt and accuse him. Jesus doesn't lash back, and he is found innocent by the Romans. However, the Jewish leaders demand Jesus be executed for claiming to be the Messiah. The Romans oblige, and execute Jesus via crucifixion: a humiliating, excruciating public death.

It's a dark day: not only is a good and innocent man killed, but he's put to death by the people he came to save. The Jewish leaders were awaiting a Messiah to throw off the

oppressive yoke of Roman rule—but in a chilling twist, they use the Romans' oppressive system to kill the very man who claims to be the Messiah.

4. Resurrection appearances and commission

Three days after Jesus' death, people start seeing him alive and well again. Not a ghost nor an apparition, but a living, breathing, physical Jesus who still bears the scars of his execution. At first his followers are doubtful, but eventually Jesus appears to them and explains how this was how it had to happen all along. Afterward, he commissions his followers to spread his message far and wide, and care for those who join the movement.

Why four gospels?

This is the pattern all four gospels follow. But each gospel takes a different approach to these beats. The events are often arranged in different order. Some gospels provide details that you don't find in the others.

That's because each gospel was written for slightly different reasons. The main reason was the same: teach people who Jesus was, what he said, and what he did. But beyond that, the gospels addressed other issues that would have been important to first-century Christians. While one gospel heavily plays on Jesus' teachings, a different one focuses more on Jesus' miracles. One gospel makes far more heavy use of the Old Testament than the rest. One gospel sticks with narrative and generally avoids long chunks of Jesus speaking, and others spend entire chapters on Jesus' discourses.

One quick note before we look at each gospel up close:

Christians sort the gospels into two categories. The first three are called the **synoptic gospels**, and the fourth, John, is on its own. The synoptic gospels are grouped together because they cover a lot of similar ground. But while there's a great deal of overlap between Matthew, Mark, and Luke, about 90% of the gospel of John is unique. You'll see just how different the two types of gospels are as we examine their structures individually.

The Gospels

Synoptic Gospels			John
Matthew	Mark	Luke	

MATTHEW

The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the Messiah, the fulfillment of everything God promised through Abraham, Moses, and David. This book focuses on Jesus' teaching, arranging the stories of Jesus around long collections of Jesus' speeches, called discourses.

Although the gospel is an anonymous work, Christians have traditionally attributed it to one of Jesus' apostles named Matthew. He was a former tax collector, a profession that most religious Jews of his time despised. Matthew's job was to take money from the Jews and forward it to the Romans (so they could further dominate the world and spread their religious influence). However, Matthew finds his place serving Jesus: growing a kingdom bigger than Israel and Rome could ever be.

The book of Matthew deals with questions that the early Christians were asking: what is the nature of Jesus' kingdom? What did it mean to be a citizen and follower of King Jesus? And how did the old Jewish law factor into a somewhat-post-Jewish religion? To Matthew, there's value

to be found in the Law as a means of understanding and appreciating the way of Jesus. In this book, Jesus' followers are called to go above and beyond the Law of Moses—not merely adhering to rules and regulations, but instead wholly following Jesus from the heart.

Summary of Matthew

Matthew's gospel has a brief prologue and epilogue that frames Jesus' ministry with the three covenants we've studied in this guide. Like all the gospels, this work culminates with the passion narrative: Jesus' betrayal and crucifixion. But the long lead-up is what structurally sets Matthew apart from the other gospels. Just like Moses imparts the Old Covenant in the five-fold Torah, Matthew shares Jesus' teaching in five long installments, called "discourses."

1. Jesus is born (1–2)

Matthew opens with a genealogy tracing Jesus' lineage back to David and Abraham. He introduces several prophecies that Jesus fulfills at birth, and compares Jesus' origin to the baby Moses (both escaped attempted murder by a power-hungry king). This all sets up Jesus as the promised divine Messiah: "God with us."

2. Jesus' five teachings (3–25)

The bulk of this gospel is centered on Jesus' teachings, which come in five major sessions.¹ All of these discourses are focused on what it means to follow Jesus and participate as part of his kingdom—but with different areas of focus. Between these speeches, Matthew includes miracles and

interactions that Jesus has with the crowds, the Jewish leaders, and his disciples.

3. Jesus dies (26–27)

Matthew's passion narrative tells the story of Jesus inaugurating the New Covenant during the Jewish feast of Passover. This feast commemorates God's rescue of Israel from Egypt by sacrificing a lamb—but for this New Covenant, Jesus himself becomes the sacrifice. Judas Iscariot betrays him, and Jesus is killed by the Jews and the Romans.

4. Jesus commissions his disciples (28)

However, Jesus doesn't stay dead. He returns to life and tells his followers that he has been given authority as the new Messianic king of heaven and earth. He tells them that he will return, and in the meantime, the disciples are to go and make *more disciples*, teaching the people of all nations to follow Jesus' teachings. The book closes with a promise from Jesus: he will be with his followers forever.

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1. Specifically, you can find those sessions in the following places:
 - The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7)
 - Jesus commissions his disciples (Matthew 10)
 - Parables about Jesus' kingdom (Matthew 13)
 - What it means to be "great" in Jesus' kingdom (Matthew 18)
 - How Jesus will administer justice in his kingdom (Matthew 24–25)

MARK

The shortest of the gospels, and perhaps the earliest written, Mark presents Jesus as a servant who suffers on behalf of the people. Christians have a longstanding tradition that a man named Mark wrote this gospel based on the notes of Peter—one of the very closest of Jesus’ followers and the *de facto* leader of the church in its first few decades. It’s likely that both Matthew and Luke used the gospel of Mark as source material for their own gospel works.

Summary of Mark

While Matthew focuses on Jesus’ teaching, Mark’s gospel is centered on Jesus’ self-sacrifice on behalf of the people he came to lead. Right in the middle of the gospel, Jesus predicts his own death and resurrection three times—but his disciples are blinded to his teaching. The portions of Mark’s gospel before and after these predictions highlight the authority that Jesus had as God’s son, and the rejection that he met from the people he was sent to serve.

1. Jesus is introduced as the Son of God (1)

The book opens by simply introducing Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus is baptised in the Jordan River (the same river God stopped up for Joshua) by the prophet John the Baptist, and a voice from heaven affirms that Jesus is God's Son.

2. People reject Jesus 3 times (1–8)

Jesus performs miracles, heals the sick, teaches the people, and even confronts evil spirits. He tells the people that the kingdom he's building has humble beginnings. Just like a tiny mustard seed grows into an enormous bush, Jesus' kingdom will start small and unseemly. But that's not how the human empires of the world grow (using force and fanfare), and it's definitely not how the Jews expected their Messiah to do things. So Jesus is rejected by the religious leaders and his own hometown—and even his disciples can't see what he's trying to teach them.

3. Jesus predicts his death 3 times (8–10)

Jesus tells his followers that in order for his kingdom to come, he must die and rise again. The disciples don't understand this, but Jesus insists that his kingdom works differently. He teaches that anyone who invests in his way of doing things will receive a great reward—but that investment is a self-sacrificial one. Jesus teaches that in order to become great in his kingdom, you must become a servant to those around you in the world. And Jesus plans to set the ultimate example: dying on behalf of the people he came to rule.

4. Jesus is rejected and killed (11–15)

Jesus goes to Jerusalem, where he is welcomed as the

Messianic King. He demonstrates superior knowledge of the Torah when he speaks with the Jewish religious leaders. He prophesies about the coming destruction of Jerusalem. And finally, he introduces his New Covenant.

But then he runs a gauntlet of rejection. One of his apostles betrays him. The disciples abandon him. One of his closest followers (Peter) denies knowing him. The Jews condemn him. And Rome executes him.

And paradoxically, as Jesus hangs dead on a cross, a Roman soldier who doesn't know Jesus observes what Mark has been saying all along: "Surely this man was the son of God!"¹

5. Jesus rises again (16)

But then the book ends with the report of Jesus rising from the dead. Everyone rejected Jesus before, but he still came through and did exactly as he said he would. It leaves the readers of Mark's story with an implied question: "How will *you* respond to Jesus' actions and teaching?"

1. Mark 15:39

LUKE

The longest and most detail-oriented of the gospels, the book of Luke was written to educate first-century Christians on who Jesus was, what he did, and what he taught. The work has been traditionally attributed to a man named Luke, a physician and Christian missionary in the first century. Luke takes a more journalistic approach than his fellow gospel writers, piecing together accounts of Jesus' life from existing documents and eyewitness testimonies. ¹

Fun fact: Luke is the only gospel with a sequel in the Bible. The book of Acts (which comes after John) picks up where this book left off.

Summary of Luke

The story Luke presents Jesus as the ultimate prophet: one who surpasses all the heroes of the Old Testament. He's also presented as the savior-king who turns the old concept of kingdoms upside-down—opposing the proud but showing grace to the humble.

1. Jesus is born (1–3)

Like Matthew, Luke tells the story of how Jesus was born. But Luke pulls together a small anthology of stories and poems that surround the Christ child's birth. He sets up Jesus as not only the divine Messianic king, but also the coming prophet who will bring a controversial message—one that not everyone will take well.

2. Jesus' controversial message (4–9)

Jesus grows up and begins preaching this message. It's good news for the poor and the outcasts of society—that is, the humble and unseemly. But it's a challenging message for the rich and powerful people of Jesus' day. The Jews expected their Messiah to overthrow Rome, delivering Israel and setting up his own empire to rule the nations. But Jesus instead comes to save *everyone*, not just the Torah-abiding Jews.

3. Jesus teaches his disciples (9–19)

After this, Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem, and on the journey he teaches his followers what it means to participate in his kingdom. Jesus tells the disciples that the way of his kingdom is the opposite of what you'd expect from a human emperor: he models self-sacrifice, seeking and saving those who are lost.

4. Jesus dies and rises again (19–24)

Then Jesus practices what he preached. He sets up his New Covenant with the disciples, is betrayed, put on trial, found innocent, and killed anyway.

However, Jesus rises again, and appears to his followers.

During a brief period of time before ascending to heaven to be with his Father, Jesus clarifies some of his teachings with his followers—specifically saying that the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings all pointed to the things that Jesus did. He shows them that he's not a ghost, but a flesh-and-blood risen body—and then promises that once he returns to heaven, the Holy Spirit will empower his followers to spread his message throughout the world.

1. Luke 1:1–4

JOHN

While the other gospels tell the story of Jesus, the son of God, John introduces Jesus as *one with* God. John's gospel makes its intentions plain: it's written so that the reader might believe in Jesus and find life in him.

John's gospel focuses more on the divine nature of Jesus than the other gospels. This work records several "I am" statements from Jesus: times when Jesus compares himself to God and his works in the Old Testament. Jesus refers to himself as the "light of the world," the "bread of life," the "way," the "good shepherd," and others. John's gospel is the most unique of the gospels in terms of content, and so while John hits those same general beats as the other gospels, the stories within them are often different.

The gospel is traditionally attributed to John, a fisherman and one of the twelve foremost disciples of Jesus. The book is written in a way that emphasises Jesus' love for his followers and prompts the reader to share that love with others.

Summary of John

The gospel of John covers material that the other gospels don't. While the synoptic gospels have far more content in the pre-passion part of the story, a far larger portion of John's gospel focuses on what Jesus did and taught during his final hours before death.

1. Prologue: Jesus as the divine Word (John 1)

This gospel opens by saying Jesus was present with God at the beginning of the cosmos, and was the co-creator of the world with God the Father. When humanity falls into darkness and sin, Jesus comes to earth to become a light to those who would believe in him. However, John says that some people actually prefer darkness—and they oppose Jesus.

2. The “Book of Signs” (John 2–12)

The section on Jesus' ministry is arranged around seven miracles Jesus performed among the people of Israel—each of which John believes is a sign that Jesus truly is the divine Messiah.¹ These miracles demonstrate the generosity and abundance of Jesus' kingdom, as well as the heavenly nature of what Jesus has to offer. These miracles culminate with Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead.

But despite these works of God, the people Jesus came to refuse to believe him—and the Jewish religious leaders even accuse him of blaspheming. So Jesus withdraws from the crowds and spends the rest of the book with those who choose to follow him.

3. The “Book of Glory” (John 13–20)

This portion of the book focuses on Jesus' self-sacrificial love for his disciples. Once again, we see Jesus holding a Passover meal with his followers on the night he is betrayed. John says that Jesus performs an act of humble service: washing the feet of his disciples. It's a task that only a lowly slave would do in those days, yet the divine king is happy to serve those whom he loves. Jesus does this to set an example of how his followers should humbly love one another: in fact, Jesus believes that love will be the key way that the world will know his disciples follow him.

Jesus comforts and prays for his followers, assuring them that although he is about to leave them, he is preparing a place for them in his coming kingdom. Then Jesus is handed over to those who seek his life—and he dies.

However, he comes back in glory. Jesus appears to his disciples alive and well, having defeated death and evil. His followers finally recognize him as their king and their God.

4. Epilogue: Jesus commissions Peter (John 21)

Jesus performs one last miracle, miraculously feeding seven of his disciples. He then tells Peter that he will die on Jesus' behalf—but that until then, he is to continue feeding those whom Jesus loves. The self-sacrificing abundance and generosity of Jesus' kingdom didn't end when Jesus died. It was only the beginning.

1. John specifically says that he arranged these signs so that the reader will believe in Jesus. (John 20:30–31)

ACTS

This is the second installment in Luke's account of the early church. The first, his gospel, recorded the agreed-upon account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. In his next book, Luke records what the apostles did after Jesus' resurrection—their "acts," if you will.

The book of Acts is significant for several reasons. First, it's the oldest account of Christian history we have. It tracks the spread of the Christian faith from a small room in Jerusalem to the heart of the Roman empire. Although it's not a comprehensive history by any means, it gives us an idea of how the first-century Christians thought about their religion's place in the world.

Second, Acts marks the time in the Bible when both Jews and non-Jews are treated as equal members of God's family. For centuries, the Jews had told the story of the Tower of Babel (way back toward the beginning of Genesis). It was a moment when the nations of the world were divided across the lesser gods, each one serving their own deities while the Lord Most High chose Abraham to

serve himself. From the moment God chose Abraham, and *especially* from the time Israel received the Torah, the Hebrew people had enjoyed a special relationship with God. They were the keepers of God's throne room on earth (the temple), the keepers of his laws, and the ones whom he had sworn to protect. But now God was uniting the peoples of earth in a new kingdom: one nation of many nations. And the way this happens in Acts deserve a point to itself.

Third, Acts brings in the role of what's known as the Holy Spirit in the church. In the book of Acts, we see the spirit of God empowering Jesus' followers in similar ways to how God's spirit empowered some miracle-workers in the Old Testament. This gives human followers of Jesus some divine abilities, such as discerning lies from truth, speaking foreign languages that they aren't educated in, healing the sick, or even raising the dead. The idea is that instead of God dwelling among humans in a physical temple, the followers of Jesus *become human temples* that God's presence resides in—whether they're in Jerusalem or not.

And finally, Acts introduces us to the character of Paul—someone with whom most of the letters in the New Testament are associated with. Paul wasn't one of the original twelve apostles (like Peter, John, or Matthew). Instead, he was one of the Pharisees. Acts records the story of how Paul turns from being a huge threat to the safety of Jewish Christians to a prolific Christian missionary throughout the Roman empire.

Summary of Acts

The book of Acts can be broken into two main portions, both of which follow the growth of Jesus' following, called the church.

1. The Jewish church grows (1–7)

The book of Acts begins with Jesus, who has already risen from the dead and ascended to heaven to sit at God's right hand. The disciples wait in Jerusalem for a while, until the Holy Spirit descends on them, empowering them to work miracles and speak boldly to the authorities of their time. Some Jews love this message, and the church multiplies in Jerusalem. Peter, one of the twelve apostles closest to Jesus, takes center stage for a while.

But Christianity isn't universally popular. Some of the Jewish authorities see Christian leaders as threats (Christianity is a Jewish sect at this point), and eventually they kill one prominent church member: Stephen. This triggers a wave of persecution for the Christians, led by a young Pharisee named Paul.

2. The gospel spreads through the world (8–28)

But there are two major plot twists. First, Paul has a vision in which Jesus calls him by name. Paul follows Jesus' instructions, and converts to the Christian faith. Second, Peter shares the news of Jesus with non-Jewish people, and sees the Holy Spirit filling them too. The early Christian leaders need to face the facts: God is at work among those who traditionally would have been considered far from him.

This sparks a series of missionary journeys led by Paul, who

shares the message of Jesus with towns across the Roman empire. Well-versed in the Old Testament and zealous for his newfound Messiah, Paul takes every opportunity he can to plant and nurture new communities of believers everywhere. The book ends with Paul being arrested in Jerusalem, and appealing to Caesar—giving him the opportunity to share the gospel freely in the capital of the empire.

THE EPISTLES

We've moved out of the narrative portions of the Bible—that's the last of them. The gospels and Acts serve as a foundation for the rest of the New Testament. These four books tell the story of what Christians believe happened in the middle of the first century. Now the remaining books of the Bible explore the question ... what do we do about it?

Every main player in the rest of the New Testament has already been introduced in either the gospels or Acts. The stage is set. From here on out, it's letters from church leaders to other Christians.

These letters are known as "epistles," and they fall into a few major categories that we've already looked at: the writings of Paul, the letters written to Christians all over, and the apocalypse of Revelation. We're going to look at each of these groups in detail, beginning with Paul's letters.

THE PAULINE EPISTLES

Paul enters the biblical stage in the book of Acts, and his entrance doesn't seem much like that of a future Christian hero. He was a Pharisee, part of the Jewish religious sect that sought to kill Jesus and wanted to put an end to Christianity. His knowledge of the Torah and his zeal for the God of Israel made him a formidable foe to the early church, and then later a formidable leader within the early church.

While Paul was a Jew, he felt personally called to share the message of Jesus with audiences beyond the Jewish community. In Acts, Paul ardently opposes the idea of bringing non-Jewish Christians under the burden of the Torah, instead claiming that people can become part of God's kingdom simply by believing in Jesus Christ.¹ Paul considered himself called to bring as many Gentiles into the fold as possible.²

But that mission ran into some problems. Church communities across the Roman empire (many of which were founded by Paul) were a mix of Jewish and Gentile

believers. So whose mode of conduct was correct? Were the Jews supposed to give up their customs—many of which had been seared into their consciences from childhood? If the Jews kept the Law (as best as they could, anyway) were they somehow morally superior to the Gentiles? And if the Law wasn't necessary to be a loyal follower of God ... why did God give it to Israel in the first place?

These weren't the only problems in the early church. There was also the issue of hardships. Since the beginning, the Christians fed the widows, orphans, and other vulnerable members of their communities. This cost a good deal of money, and the effort relied on the generosity of other, well-off Christians. When a famine or economic downturn hit an area where there were a lot of Christians, it made it far more difficult for the church to minister to those in need. Beyond this, the Jewish leaders weren't fond of Christians, and some Roman cities were more accommodating than others. That meant that in addition to the expenses of caring for the needy, churches also faced threats of discrimination, imprisonment, torture, and sometimes even death.

Paul, the apostle and Pharisee, wrote several letters to both communities and individuals addressing these issues. Although he wasn't an eyewitness to Jesus' works in the gospels, his mastery of the Scriptures and his gifts for organizing his thoughts in writing made him the most prominent Christian theologian of all time.

Paul's letters are generally grouped into two subcategories: the first nine are **letters to churches**, and the final four are **letters to church leaders**. Each of these letters is named after the recipients Paul sent the letter to. (So the book of Romans was written to Christians in Rome, and the

two books of Timothy were written to a man named Timothy.)

Most of Paul's letters tend to have some components in common. Paul tends to open his letters with blessing or statement of thanks, and then transition into a set of teachings. This is where the apostle lays down explanations of the New Covenant: how it works, what Jesus taught, and where humans stand with God. The second part of Paul's letters usually contain Paul's directives for Christians. If the readers affirm the statements in the first half of the letter, Paul believes their behavior should reflect the second half.

We're going to look at each of these letters briefly: both why they were written and what kind of ground they cover.

Romans

Paul was planning a missionary trip to Spain, and wanted to visit Rome first to meet and teach the church community there. However, Paul wasn't as familiar a figure in Rome as he was in other parts of the world—he'd never preached there before. So he wrote ahead to give the Christians in Rome a summary of his message.

The book of Romans lays out Paul's account of what the good news about Jesus is for both Jews and Gentiles. Paul believes that all humans, Jew and non-Jew, are sinners: people who miss the mark of representing a holy God on earth. The effects of sin are death (of ourselves and those around us), but Paul argues that because of Jesus' death and resurrection, God offers life to all who believe that Jesus is truly the Messiah and God-chosen leader of the world. The

Jews aren't the only holy people group now: God is working through everyone who believes in Jesus.

And whereas under the Law of Moses people offered animal sacrifices, Paul says that now Christians are *living* sacrifices: people devoting their lives to the service of their new king, Jesus.

1 Corinthians

The church community in the Greek city of Corinth was founded by Paul (you can read the story in the book of Acts).³ However, Paul wasn't the only Christian leader who influenced the community there. Word came to Paul that the church had become a fractured one, with some congregants claiming to follow Paul, some claiming to follow Peter, and so on. Corinthian Christians were suing each other in court, engaging in sex acts that Paul didn't condone, and incorporating classism in the religious ceremony of the Eucharist (also known as the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion).

On top of all this, they had sent Paul several questions of their own. The Corinthian Christians were curious about marriage, how to appropriately steward the gift of the Holy Spirit, and even things like what was OK and not OK to eat.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to address all these issues. In the first half of the letter, Paul stresses that pride and arrogance have no place in the Christian order: people who use the message of Jesus to feel important or above moral question are not in a good spot. Paul instead encourages the Christians to think of their bodies as temples, holy places, throne rooms of God on earth.

In the second half of the letter, Paul addresses the Corinthians' questions about Christian conduct. He sums up by telling the church that whatever they do, it should be to give glory (weighiness, gravity) to their God. This is the part of the Bible where we find the "Love Chapter" of 1 Corinthians 13. It's a popular read at weddings, but the "Love is patient, love is kind" passage is more focused on the attitude of love that Paul believes Christians should have for everyone. According to Paul, love should be the *modus operandi* of every follower of Jesus—without love, all the miracles in the world wouldn't do any good.

2 Corinthians

The back-and-forth between Paul and the church at Corinth continues. After Paul sent them the letter of 1 Corinthians, some of the people there rejected Paul's teaching. Then Paul visited in person, but that visit ... didn't go well.⁴ The details are a bit sketchy, but it seems that one or more people in Corinth called Paul's legitimacy as an apostle into question. After all, Jesus was supposed to be the divine king of the world, and Paul claimed to be his spokesperson—but why would Jesus choose to work through someone like Paul, who was poor and unimpressive in person?

So Paul wrote another letter, one out of anguish and distress. And together, his visit and the second letter sparked a turnaround in Corinth. People admitted that they were wrong about Paul, and sought to reconcile with him.

So Paul writes another letter—which is what we call 2 Corinthians. In this letter, Paul presents his ideas of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and how that picture doesn't

line up with the world's expectations. Paul compares the New Covenant of Jesus to the Law of Moses. Both appeared with signs and miracles, but the Law had fading effects on the people of Israel throughout the Old Testament. On the other hand, Paul believes the Holy Spirit transforms followers of Jesus, empowering them to become more and more like the Messiah they follow. But that Messiah wasn't a flashy conqueror like the emperors before him. Instead, Jesus came to power by dying on behalf of the people he came to rule. Paul argues throughout his letter that Christ modeled self-sacrifice, generosity, and humility, cheerfully giving of himself—and that's how his followers should behave as well.

Galatians

We've established that Paul considered himself a minister to the Gentiles: someone tasked by Jesus to bring the gospel to those outside the Jewish community. Paul believed that the New Covenant Jesus offered wasn't bound to the Law of Moses: you didn't have to be a circumcised, Torah-abiding Jew to enjoy the blessings of being part of God's kingdom family. But not everyone in the early church was on the same page as Paul.

Paul had founded several churches in the province of Galatia (modern-day Turkey), and many of the people at these churches were not Jewish. At some point, other teachers had come through the area claiming that in order for people to truly be right with God, they needed to comply with the Law of Moses—and that included circumcising all the men. Paul saw this as a power play: these new teachers just wanted to use the Law to dominate

people and brag about how many people they had converted to their own sect.

Paul was not happy about this, so he wrote a letter to the Galatian churches explaining why he disagreed with this teaching. He pointed back to the book of Genesis, where God makes his covenant with Abraham. Abraham wasn't Jewish, he wasn't circumcised, and he died long before Moses existed. But God considered Abraham just, simply because Abraham had faith in God. Paul argues that anyone, Jew or Gentile, can become a "true" descendant of Abraham through faith in Jesus. To Paul, the New Covenant is what God uses to make good on his covenant with Abraham long ago: through Jesus (a biological descendant of Abraham) all the nations of the world can be blessed. Lineage didn't matter. Circumcision didn't matter. "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."⁵

Paul believed that Christ had set the Galatians free. Not only were they free from the Law, but they were also free from the human instinct to put self-interest ahead of others' well-being. Paul says that while selfish instincts lead to discord and out-of-control behavior, the Holy Spirit empowers people to spread love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Paul then says that, since the people of Galatia are in the Spirit, they should do as much good as they could for everyone.

Ephesians

Paul writes to the Christians in the Greek city of Ephesus to encourage them. Even though Paul is in prison because of

his faith in Jesus, he wants the Ephesian Christians to take heart. Paul writes about how Jesus Christ has made it possible for both Jews and Gentiles to become part of God's family—and that this was God's plan *all along*. It's a mystery, according to Paul: the kingdom of Jesus has a way of breaking down barriers between different people groups, uniting them in one faith.

Paul then urges the Ephesian Christians to live their lives (or “walk,” as Paul puts it) in a manner that's worthy of this family they've been called into. Paul tells the Ephesians to submit themselves to God, encouraging every member of the family and community to treat each other with self-sacrificial respect and love. Paul sums up by reminding the Ephesian Christians that their “struggle is not against flesh and blood,”⁶ but against the forces of evil at work in the world.

Phillippians

Another one of Paul's “prison letters,” Paul writes an encouraging epistle to the Christians in the city of Phillippi. The Philippian church heard that Paul was in prison, and sent him a gift to support him. So Paul writes a letter not only thanking them for their gift, but also telling them how much joy he finds in spreading the news of Jesus.

Once again, Paul's teachings speak a good deal about the self-sacrificial example that Jesus set for his followers. Paul is a prisoner, but his imprisonment gives him an opportunity to share his message with the prison guard and even some in Caesar's household. He's more concerned about Jesus' interests than his own. Paul writes about how Jesus humbled himself, dying a criminal's death on behalf of

the people he came to save. Paul, likewise, is “pouring himself out” on behalf of Jesus and his followers.

So Paul tells the Philippians to follow his example and find joy in the humble ways of Jesus. The church should be unified, content, gentle, and fixated on what is good.

Colossians

Paul writes this epistle from prison to a group of Christians whom he hasn’t met in person yet: the church in the city of Colossae (which is in modern-day Turkey). Paul’s teachings focus on the nature of Jesus, and the nature of citizenship in Jesus’ kingdom. Paul says that those who follow Jesus have been rescued, liberated from darkness and forgiven of their sins. As far as God is concerned, the people who put their faith in Jesus are part of Jesus, and receive the same kind of love from God that Jesus does.

Paul goes on to explain what he calls a mystery: Jews and Gentiles, people from different nations who served different gods, can come together in Jesus, the Christ. When Jesus died, he disarmed the powers of evil in the world. Both the human condition (selfishness) and the systems that enslaved people were broken, and the opportunity to be in good standing with God became available to everyone. That’s what Paul wants the people of Colossae to know and remember—especially if someone shows up and starts telling them they need to be circumcised, or that they need to observe certain religious rituals, or that they need to subject themselves to harm in order to stay in good standing with God. To Paul, all these systems are just more of the old way. Jesus freed the Christians from the old way. Why re-enslave yourself to

the way the world does things, when you're a citizen of heaven?

Instead, Paul tells the Colossians to remember who they are in Christ. They are to set their minds on the example that Jesus gave them, living in a heavenly manner. Paul tells them that just as surely as Jesus died, the part of them that rebelled against God's order had died, too. The Christians were empowered to love generously, living harmoniously with Christians and non-Christians in their communities. Paul lays out a few specifics for how Christians can mirror Jesus' attitude of self-sacrifice in their households, and closes with a few greetings and a request for prayer on his behalf.

1 Thessalonians

Paul writes to the church in the city of Thessalonica to commend them for their faith, hope, and love—and to encourage them to continue developing these qualities as they await Jesus' return. The first three chapters of this letter are mostly recap: Paul tells the story of how the Thessalonian church was founded, and reminisces on how the Christians there labored with Paul in bringing the gospel to the city.

In the final two chapters, Paul commissions the Thessalonians to “excel still more” in their Christian lives: living wholesome lives, sharing love with one another, and exercising self-control. Paul then comforts them regarding the deaths of some of their members. He anticipates a day when all who follow Jesus will be reunited and justice will be brought to everyone. Paul believes that even the Christians who have died will rise again, just like Christ

did. Until that day, the believers in Thessalonica should live peaceably with one another, respect their leaders, and seek the good of all.

2 Thessalonians

This is another letter to the same group of people in Thessalonica, concerning some of the same issues: namely, the coming day of the Lord and how Christians should live in the meantime. Paul teaches that there will come a day when Jesus will be revealed to the whole world from heaven, with angels and glory. On that day, the Messiah will do what the prophets foretold: giving rewards and relief to the troubled, and punishment for those who oppose him.

There had been a rumor that perhaps this day of the Lord had already happened and that the Thessalonians had missed it. But Paul calms their fears and lists a few things that will take place before that day. A mysterious “man of lawlessness” will be revealed, a person who sets himself up as God on earth, but through boastful pride and shows of power (unlike the humble, service-oriented love that Jesus showed). But before that happens, an even more mysterious person, someone restraining the power of evil, needs to be taken away.

Sound cryptic? It is—Paul’s referencing some of the messages he gave to these people in person, and those messages aren’t preserved. So this part of the Bible that tends to show up in a good deal of end-times theories.

However, the takeaway for the Thessalonians was to continue living wholesome lives and following his teachings. He says that those who can work for a living,

should (apparently a few of the church members were mooching off the other Christians' generosity).

1 Timothy

Now we get into what Christians call the **pastoral epistles**, letters Paul wrote to individual leaders of the church. The first two of these letters were sent to Timothy, Paul's protege.

In the first letter to Timothy, Paul writes to help Timothy protect and structure the church in Ephesus. Paul knows that there are power-hungry teachers who will try to pull people away from the gospel, so he entrusts Timothy with principles for how followers of Jesus should conduct themselves. Paul lays out the qualities to look for in people who want to become church leaders, as well as the types of teaching and conduct that have no place in the church.

2 Timothy

Paul's second letter to Timothy is written toward the end of Paul's life. He commissions Timothy to continue preserving his gospel, and entrusting it to people who can continue the work after they have both passed away. Paul believes that other teachers will try to gain power in the church, using distracting arguments to lead people astray from their service to Christ. Paul urges Timothy to remain a faithful student of the Old Testament, the teachings of Jesus, and the teachings of Paul—and to keep his head when things get rough.

Titus

Paul had commissioned one of his followers, a man named Titus, to set up an order among the Christians on the Greek isle of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea. The culture of Crete was known for being animalistic, self-indulgent, and dishonest. Titus was charged with appointing church leaders in the various towns who could guide self-controlled and harmonious communities. Titus was also responsible for protecting these churches from Paul's enemies, the people who wanted to subject Gentile Christians to the Law of Moses.

Again, Paul writes about how Jesus' New Covenant empowers humans to overcome selfish instincts and seek the good of all. He believes that those who want to hold endless debates about the Torah are harmful to the gospel. Paul says that instead people should live quiet lives as good citizens, showing respect to human authorities and demonstrating humility within the household.

Philemon

The shortest of Paul's letters, this note was written to a man named Philemon, in whose home a church often met. Philemon owned at least one slave, Onesimus, who ran away and caused some degree of damage to Philemon. However, Onesimus had become a follower of Jesus, and a helper to Paul in his imprisonment. Paul now sent the runaway back to Philemon with this letter.

Paul tells Philemon that although he could just tell Philemon what to do, he chooses to appeal to Philemon on the basis of the Christian love they have for one another.

Paul hopes that Philemon will make the right choice himself and set Onesimus free. If Philemon has anything against Onesimus, he should hold it against Paul instead, and welcome Onesimus as a brother the way he would welcome Paul.

We don't know how Philemon responded. What we do know is that Paul intended to arrive soon to visit Philemon, and that the other leaders of Philemon's church would have been watching Philemon to see what he would do. Would Philemon exercise his rights, keeping Onesimus as a slave and getting compensation for whatever harm Onesimus cost him? Or would Philemon take the way of Christ, and sacrifice his own interests on behalf of his brother?

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1. This situation unfolds in Acts chapter 15.
 2. Paul considers himself a priest of sorts in this regard. Like the Old Testament priests in the temple, Paul feels responsible for instructing the people in the ways of the gospel. And just as the priests of old oversaw ritual sacrifices, Paul feels responsible for bringing as many Gentiles as possible into the family of God as "living sacrifices." (Romans 12:1; 15:15-16)
 3. Acts chapter 18 tells how Paul came to Corinth and founded a church community there.
 4. Paul himself refers to it as a "painful visit" in 2 Corinthians 2:1.
 5. Galatians 5:6
 6. Ephesians 6:12

THE GENERAL EPISTLES

Most of Paul's letters were originally addressed to specific individuals and local Christian communities. However, Christians preserved Paul's writings because they found them valuable for churches everywhere.

The early Christians did the same with writings attributed to other church leaders. These letters claimed to be from prominent early church figures, such as Peter. But unlike Paul's, these letters are, for the most part, written to be distributed far and wide through Christian communities. Whereas Paul's letters are named after the people they're written to, these letters go by the names of the church figures associated with them. So the letter written by James is called "James." The two letters attributed to Peter are "1 Peter" and "2 Peter." And the three epistles associated with John are called—you guessed it—"1 John," "2 John," and "3 John."

There's one letter in this group that breaks this rule ... because we have no idea who the author was. And that letter is ...

Hebrews

Technically, Hebrews isn't traditionally considered one of the Catholic epistles. But modern Bibles often group it with the other non-Paul, non-Revelation letters of the New Testament.

Hebrews gets its name because the letter is so full of references to the Old Testament that it *must* have been written with a good deal of Jewish readers in mind. Many Bibles list the book's full title as "The Epistle to the Hebrews." Nobody knows who wrote Hebrews, although many have put forth their theories. Some think it was Paul, some think it was Luke, some think it was one of Paul's many associates—but Christianity hasn't had consensus on this for almost two thousand years.

But that's less important than the content of the book. Aside from Paul's letter to the Romans, Hebrews is the most teaching-heavy epistle of the New Testament. The author earnestly explains how the New Covenant under Jesus Christ is vastly superior to the Law of Moses, contrasting Jesus to the heroes of the Old Testament to show how he is far greater than every single one of them.

The author fears that some of the readers will buckle under the persecution that Christians face: which was coming from both the Jews and the Gentiles. The author is concerned that believers would be tempted to abandon their faith in Jesus and possibly resubmit themselves to the Law of Moses in order to find good standing with God. To the author, this is a spiritually perilous move: if the covenant God made through his own son is ineffective, then nothing else *can* work. He encourages the readers to hold to their

faith in Jesus, knowing that a great reward awaits them if they do.

James

The letter from James is full of directions for Christians scattered throughout the Roman empire. I've called this epistle the "bossiest" book of the Bible: it has a higher concentration of commands for its readers than any other book, even the books of the Torah.

The author simply refers to himself as James,¹ and traditionally the church has assumed he was Jesus' brother.² This letter famously claims that "faith without deeds is dead,"³ and stirs Christian readers to take action based on what they believe. If they truly believe in Jesus, then that faith should express itself by enduring hardship, caring for the poor, refraining from rage and slander, and doing good for those around you.

James pays special attention to status in his epistle. Like all human groups, churches were vulnerable to both ambitious people seeking to gain their own following and rich people expecting and special treatment. This went against the self-sacrificial model Jesus had given the church. The Messianic king had come to die a criminal's death on behalf of his people—there was no room in the church for power plays, favoritism, and infighting. James repeats a line from Proverbs that we've seen play out through the Old Testament: God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.⁴ Instead, James urges Christians everywhere to live in peace with one another, patiently enduring until the Lord returns.

1 Peter

Peter was the foremost of Jesus' twelve apostles. When Jesus asked the disciples who they thought he was, Peter recognized Jesus as the Messianic heir of David *and* the Son of God.⁵ According to the gospels, Peter had caught a glimpse of Jesus' divine form,⁶ and the gospel of John concludes with Jesus commissioning Peter to take care of his followers ... and eventually be martyred for his faith.⁷

If this is true, then Peter knew what kind of suffering awaited him, and also what kind of glory would follow. Christians across Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) who were also coming under persecution for their faith, and so Peter pens this epistle to encourage them as they suffer on Jesus' behalf.

Peter speaks of how God has made Christians into a new nation. Just like God called Israel out of Egypt and made them a holy people, God has now made a holy people from all the nations of the world. Peter says that although other Christians will come under persecution for leaving their old religions, they should still live peaceful lives, obey the laws, and seek the good of the communities they live in. Sufferings will come, but Peter believes it's nothing compared to the glory that will come afterward when Jesus returns.

In the meantime, Peter tells Christians to remain—you guessed it—humble, both before God and toward each other. This goes for slaves and wives (who didn't have the same rights as free men) as well as the leaders of the church. Peter quotes the same line James does: God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble. Peter especially warns

Christian leaders not to use their positions to further their own self-interest, but as an opportunity to serve the people in their churches. Peter concludes by saying that while the sufferings Christians were experiencing were temporary, the glory of Christ's kingdom is eternal—so they should keep the faith until Jesus returns.

2 Peter

This is a short epistle written from the perspective of Peter, who knows his martyrdom is near.⁸ Peter encourages Christians to diligently work out their faith: seeking goodness, knowledge, self-control, and ultimately love. By pursuing these qualities, the followers of Jesus won't become inactive, and they will be equipped to resist disruptive teachings that may arise within the church.

Peter warns that false teachers will arise: people who crave their own gains and use their spirituality to divide, undermine, and take advantage of those who follow Jesus. These folks are greedy and self-indulgent, and threaten to integrate the old ways of corruption, oppression, and selfishness into the kingdom of God—something Jesus died to set people free from.

But Peter believes that by remembering the teachings of Jesus and his apostles, along with the Old Testament, Christians can keep the faith until Jesus returns. Although people will mock the idea of Jesus' return, Peter tells Christians to be patient and live holy lives as they wait for the kingdom of heaven to come fully to earth.

1 John

Traditionally attributed to one of the twelve apostles, the first epistle of John is a free-form, mystical document about how Christians should live. The letter shares some similarities with the gospel of John (both begin by referring to Jesus as the “Word”) and both draw heavily on the differences between darkness and light, truth and lie, children of God and children of the devil, and the divine virtue of love.

This letter moves around a good deal—even scholars have a hard time finding a structure to it. However, the words themselves are simple and profound. In many ways throughout this short book, John encourages followers of Jesus to remain faithful to him, to refrain from sin, and to love one another.

2 John

This very brief letter warns a mysterious “lady” and her children of false teachers who deny that Jesus had come as a human. These people had additional teachings to those of Jesus and the apostles, but the author believes that Christians should simply hold to the original command of Jesus: to love one another. The author advises against welcoming such teachers into church communities and becoming accomplices in their teachings.

The author of this letter only identifies themselves as “the elder,” but this letter is traditionally attributed to the apostle John.

3 John

This epistle is even shorter than 2 John—and it’s the shortest book of the whole Bible. While 2 John teaches against welcoming false teachers in, 3 John addresses the inverse of this problem: at least one power-hungry Christian leader was keeping *good* teachers *out*. In this letter, the elder encourages an individual named Gaius to continue showing hospitality to both the elder and those who adhered to the elder’s teachings.

Jude

The epistle of Jude urges first-century Christians to “contend earnestly for the faith.” Like Peter, John, and Paul, Jude⁹ sees people who have no allegiance to Jesus rising up within Christian communities.

These folks use the message of freedom in Christ as a license to indulge less-than-godly desires. Jude reminds churches how even back in the Torah, not everyone who left Egypt actually believed in God. They enjoyed the blessings of being in God’s community, but when they rebelled against his laws and guidance, they died in the wilderness. In the same way, Jude argues that not everyone who identifies as “Christian” is necessarily following Jesus. Jude calls them “the ungodly,” and tells his readers that you can spot them by their animalistic self-serving attitudes and divisive actions.

However, Jude believes that the Christians can persevere and remain united until Jesus returns. He encourages them to pray, keep themselves in God’s love, and show mercy to those with doubts. The letter paints a grim picture of the

kind of corruption that can enter a church community, but it ends with Jude's firm confidence in God's ability to preserve the church until the final day of the Lord.

1. The New Testament mentions a good deal of men named James. It was a popular name at the time: the actual Greek name was *Iakōbos*, which comes from the Hebrew Jacob. Since Jacob was a patriarch of the nation of Israel, it's not hard to see why Jewish people would give their sons that name.
2. Jesus had siblings, who briefly appear in the gospels (Mark 3:31–32; 6:3). Where these siblings came from is a bit unclear. Jesus was Mary's first child, but the New Testament doesn't say whether Mary had more children with her husband Joseph after Jesus was born. It's possible that James was a son of Mary, or that James was Joseph's son from a previous marriage.

Either way, James "the Lord's brother" didn't believe in Jesus during his earthly ministry (John 7:3–5), but came to support him after the resurrection (Acts 1:14) and eventually became one of the most prominent leaders of the church in Jerusalem (Galatians 1:19; 2:9; Acts 15:13–21).

3. James 2:26
4. James 4:6; Proverbs 3:34; 1 Samuel 2:3, 8.
5. Matthew 16:15–19
6. The gospels tell a short story of Jesus taking Peter and two other apostles to a mountaintop. Here, they see Jesus take on a divine appearance: his face shines like the sun, and his clothes become brilliantly white. A voice from heaven says that Jesus is his son, and commands that the three apostles listen to him. Christians call this even the Transfiguration, and you can read about it in Matthew 17:1–9.
7. John 21:18–19
8. Whether or not it truly was written by Peter has been a topic of debate within the church for almost as long as the book has existed. About 300 years after Jesus, a man named Eusebius wrote a history of the church, and included a list of books that Christians considered Scripture alongside the Old Testament. Some of the books of our New Testament were widely accepted (such as the gospels, Acts, the letters of Paul, 1 Peter, and 1 John). But some books were "disputed," that is, Christians found them valuable, but weren't unanimous on whether or not they should have been considered holy documents. The epistle of 2 Peter falls into this category. One of the issues surrounding this epistle is whether or not Peter was the true writer, or

if someone else later wrote the letter as if it were from Peter. This might have been done by church leaders to give the letter more authority, framing it as the “dying wish” of such an important early church figure. (Peter likely wouldn’t have had a problem with urging Christians to remain faithful to Jesus even if he didn’t return as quickly as they expected him to.) Whether or not Peter wrote it, Christians have accepted the letter as a valuable reminder for followers of Jesus. For the purposes of this guide, we’ll just call the author Peter.

9. Jude introduces himself as the “brother of James,” which may be a reference to James “the Lord’s brother.” Jesus did have a brother named Jude or Judas—both just different English translations of the same name (*Ioudas*) in Greek. This name comes from another Israelite patriarch: Judah, the ancestor of David. Traditionally, the church has assumed the Jude who wrote this epistle is the same Judas who is in Matthew’s list of Jesus’ brothers (Matthew 13:55).

REVELATION

This is the final book of the Bible. In it, a man named John writes about a series of visions he receives from Jesus Christ. This book gets its name from the first verse, in which the author says that God gave the risen Jesus Christ a “revelation,” a message to share with those who were loyal to him. John, a prisoner on the Isle of Patmos, writes his visions in a letter, which he sends to seven churches in Asia Minor—so technically, you can include this work in the “letters” category. However, the prologue of the book makes it clear that this is more of an open letter.¹

This book is called “apocalyptic” literature. Like I mentioned earlier, “apocalypse” just means “uncovering” or “revealing.” (In fact, the Greek word translated “revelation” in the first verse of this book is *apokálupsis*.) However, when you hear the word “apocalypse” today, it’s usually in reference to the end of the world. That’s *because of this book*.

In Revelation, Jesus gives John a glimpse into “what is now” and “what will take place later.”² This book is full of

prophetic imagery, much like what we find in the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. The book lays out a series of judgments and tribulations that befall both the people of God and those who oppose God, and culminates with a world made new again. So in some ways, Revelation is a story of the end of the world, but it's even more so about a new beginning.

Christians have interpreted this book many different ways through the ages. Some believe that most of the material here is an allegorical reference to the great siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Others believe it's metaphorical for church history or world history since the time of the apostles. Others believe that the things John sees in Revelation will literally happen—a viewpoint that gained a lot of attention via the *Left Behind* novel series in recent decades. Its rich and surreal imagery, its riddle-like writing style, its ability to evoke fear have made this a popular book to reference in art, politics, and storytelling.

But at its core, the book is more about encouraging Christians who are awaiting Jesus' return. The first-century Christians expected Jesus to return in glory soon—within their lifetime, even. In the gospels, Jesus promises to return as the divine Messianic king and give rewards to those who served him faithfully while he was gone. But before that happened, the Roman empire had begun persecuting the Christians who did not renounce Jesus as their king. Where was Jesus' grand return? When was he going to overthrow the oppressors and restore peace and justice? Not only were the first-century Christians wondering when Jesus was coming back, but some wondered if he would ever come back at all.

In Revelation, John provided the church with a vision for how Jesus would tie up all the “loose ends” in Scripture. John pulls heavily from the Old Testament stories, such as the plagues God used to rescue Israel from Egypt, Ezekiel’s visions of God’s throne, and the beastly world empires that Daniel sees God overpowering in the end. He uses these images to craft a narrative of Jesus finally defeating the devil, crushing the oppressive empire of Babylon, and bringing a New Jerusalem to earth, where God and humans can finally cohabitate in peace.

It’s tempting to read Revelation as a code to figure out. (Again, people have tried for a long time, and some theories enjoyed more popularity than others.) But it’s important to remember that this book was written to inspire faithfulness among Christians despite the actions of the world empires around them. John, like the other authors of the Bible, believed that God was at work bringing the nations back into a good relationship with himself. And like the other authors of Scripture, John believed that it was up to the people of God to remain loyal to him, trusting him to make good on his covenants eventually.

Summary of Revelation

Revelation begins with a vision of the risen Jesus Christ, who appears to John. Jesus’s appearance is drenched in symbolism from the Old Testament prophets and he tells John to write to seven specific church communities in the Roman empire. These churches were dealing with all kinds of problems, from apathy and entanglements with other religions to full-on persecution from the non-Christians in

the city. Jesus calls each church to remain faithful to him, and makes a promise to the ones who “overcome.”

From here, John sees a vision of God’s glorious throne room, and God holding in his hand a sealed scroll. The only one worthy of opening this document is the Messiah, but instead of the fierce, conquering king that one might expect, John sees a fatally slain lamb. (Lambs were used in Jewish sacrifices; this represents Jesus’ self-sacrificial death on behalf of the people he came to liberate.) The lamb takes the scroll and begins opening it.

This scroll has seven seals, and when each seal is broken, something happens elsewhere in John’s vision. Four horsemen³ representing conquest, violence, famine and economic instability, and death ride out into the world. Then the souls of those who were martyred for their loyalty to God cry to him for vindication, and God has them wait a little longer before the final day of the Lord. Although the old human ways of violence, oppression, and death continue, there’s still a promise of coming justice for those who spoke out against these things. Before the seventh seal can be broken, John sees an innumerable crowd of people from all nations of the world who have come into the kingdom of God through Jesus.

The seventh seal triggers seven trumpets which are sounded by angels—and when each of the trumpets sounds, something happens elsewhere in John’s vision. The first few trumpets bring plagues upon the earth, which mirror the plagues in Exodus. But just like the plagues in Egypt didn’t change Pharaoh’s heart, so the people of earth are unwilling to leave *their* various gods and labors to serve God. So God sends two witnesses to serve as prophets on his behalf.

These two are eventually killed by “the beast” (whom we’ll meet soon), but are resurrected shortly afterward, which results in people from all nations praising God.

At this point, John pauses and describes a few symbolic figures who will be key to the rest of the narrative. The first is a woman, who brings forth the Christ child and whose children are those loyal to Jesus and obedient to God’s commands. The second is a dragon, who represents the devil: the enemy of the woman and all who follow God. The third is “the beast,” a king and/or government who is empowered by the dragon to rule the world and oppress the people of God. The fourth is another beast (a false prophet) who causes the world to worship the first beast as a god, and compels them to pledge their allegiance to the beast in order to engage in trade.⁴

Then we see a series of seven bowls of God’s just anger being poured out, most of which result in hard times for those who swore allegiance to the beast. Rather than turn to God, these victims curse God and remain loyal to the beast.

But then things start to turn around.

John sees a very wealthy woman riding the beast. John calls her “Babylon,” a reference to the violent and corrupt world empire that the Old Testament prophets preached against. Babylon is overthrown, and the beast rides to face Jesus, the Messiah, in battle. However, Jesus prevails, the beast is captured, and Jesus and his followers (even the deceased Christians are resurrected) rule the earth in peace for a thousand years. After this time, the dragon gathers everyone he can to wage war against Jesus again, but they are (easily) defeated as well. There is a final judgment, in which all the souls of those who have died are evaluated and judged.

Then we see a reprise of the Bible's opening scenes. There is a new heaven and earth, one where many nations enjoy the presence of God. John uses imagery from the garden of Eden, but also draws from the Old Testament prophets' visions of the New Jerusalem. He sees a world in which there's no need for a temple: the whole city of Jerusalem fits the dimensions of the temple. All is well: humans can peacefully coexist with God in a world of peace, justice, and love. Forever.

And that's how the Bible ends.

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1. The letter begins in the fourth verse of Revelation one, but the first three verses extend a blessing to anyone who would read or hear it.
 2. Revelation 1:19
 3. If you're wondering where the term "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" came from, it's Revelation chapter 6. However, it's easy to draw some heavy parallels between John's account and the Old Testament vision in Zechariah 6:1–8.
 4. Ever heard of the "Mark of the Beast"? Ever wondered why the number 666 has such sinister connotations? All that comes from Revelation chapter 13. The false prophet forces people to receive a mark of the beast's number on either their right hand or forehead—which is a callback to how Moses told the Israelites to bind God's laws to their right hands and foreheads (Deuteronomy 6:8). In Revelation, the number of the beast's name calculates to 666, which is the number you'd get if you tallied the Hebrew numeric values of the letters in the name "Nero Caesar," the Roman emperor who persecuted the church.

THAT'S WHAT THE BIBLE IS ALL ABOUT

There you have it. If you've made it this far, you have enough information to have an intelligent conversation about the Bible with anyone, whether they're a pastor, an atheist, or just your favorite bartender. You know where the Bible came from. You know about the four major covenants that the whole Bible is built around. You know what the Bible was written and preserved for. And you know what it's all about—down to the individual books!

The Bible is a big, complex work of art. And although it was written for people who lived two millennia (and then some) ago, it's still a valuable, useful resource for Christians today. If you enjoyed this guide, I recommend reading through the Bible for yourself. (Give yourself a year or two, if you like.) It's a fascinating book that is, at least, one of the most significant human literary accomplishments. At most, it's the story of God's undying, unwavering love for people like you and me, and an account of how the most powerful being in the cosmos humbled himself to die on our behalf—so that we could be loving and generous like him.

