

# Structure and Background of the Bible

## THE DERIVATION AND MEANING OF THE NAME "THE BIBLE"

The English form of the plural Latin word *biblia*, taken from the plural Greek word meaning 'books,' comes from the name of a plant, *byblos*. This reed plant was used as material for early writings. Wide strips of the plant were laid out and other strips were laid across and thus the two rows joined together, making a piece of writing material. These pieces were joined together and rolled up in the form of a scroll and called in Greek a *biblos*. In the New Testament the word *biblios* means a 'roll' or 'book;' plural is *biblia*. The Old and New Testament soon became known to the Greek-speaking Christians as 'the *biblia*,' or 'the books.' Later, Latin-speaking Christians borrowed the term and treated it as a singular. From the Latin name the English word 'bible' is derived. The original plural significance of the name should not be overlooked. Jerome describes the Bible as 'The Divine Library.' The Bible is a collection of books written by many different authors over many centuries, yet with one spiritual purpose and unity of thought. It is a library, yet one book. A book with pages was not in use in New Testament times. This appeared shortly after, and was known as a 'Codex.'

## PERIOD OF WRITING

The writings of the Bible span a period of 1500 years, the oldest books being the books of Moses and Job. The last written book was probably the Gospel according to John, written about 90-100 A.D.

## NUMBER OF BOOKS

The Hebrew Bible (commonly called the Old Testament) has 24 books. However, for convenience some of the longer books were kept in separate scrolls and are often now considered as separate works. These include 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra & Nehemiah, and The Book of the Twelve (Hosea-Malachi, known as 'the minor prophets,' are considered one book in Hebrew reckoning). With these changes, the 24 books in most modern Protestant translations are counted as 39 books. Thus, most modern Protestant translations contain 66 books in total: 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New. It is good practice to memorize this order for easy reference. However, the order as we have in our modern English Bibles is not necessarily the "right" order and certainly not how the Bible *must* be read or taught.

## AUTHORSHIP

Most of the Old Testament books make no claim on authorship, however it is likely that the Old Testament was written by at least 30 different people. Since the New Testament is largely composed of letters, it is easier to determine authorship for the New Testament. There are at likely 9 authors of the New Testament Letters (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, James, Jude, Peter, Paul, and the author of Hebrews).

## ORIGINAL LANGUAGES

The Bible is written mainly in 2 languages: Hebrew and Greek. However, the Bible was not written in complete isolation from the surrounding areas/cultures, so some portions of the Bible include influence from other languages as well (Such as Egyptian and Persian). There are significant portions of the Bible written in Aramaic as well. Each language Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek will be discussed in turn.

### HEBREW

While Hebrew did stop being a commonly spoken language for several hundred years, Hebrew is not a dead language. It is the official language of the nation Israel. Ancient and modern Hebrew are more alike than old English and modern English. Hebrew is one of the earliest alphabetic languages. It is a language marked by its use of vivid idioms and poeticism. Hebrew uses anthropomorphisms (i.e. metaphors related to the human body) to communicate, including when speaking of God (e.g. in Exodus 33:23). Nations or groups of people are frequently given a name and personality. For example, you find reference to Jacob, Esau, Judah, Ephraim and Manasseh, when the descendants, rather than the individuals, are referred to. Repetition and parallelism of words and themes are the dominant form emphasis in Hebrew.

### ARAMAIC

Aramaic is a Semitic language originating from Aram (Modern-day Syria). There were a number of Aramean kingdoms and tribes throughout the Ancient Near East which became dominated by the Assyrian Empire. Surprisingly, rather than Syriac, the Assyrian Empire adopted Aramaic as the common language. Aramaic remained the common tongue through the Assyrian Empire (911-605 BCE), Neo-Babylonian Empire (605-539 BCE), and First Persian Empire (539-323 BCE). After 323 BCE, Alexander the Great Hellenized (read *Greek-ified*) the area and Greek became the language for trade, education, and politics. However, Aramaic remained the everyday language in the Near East, and therefore Israel, even through to the domination of Rome in 63 BCE.

During the Babylonian captivity (586-516 BCE), the Jewish exiles adopted this language; it was the language of common intercourse with other peoples with whom they mixed. Upon the return of the captives to Israel, they brought the language back and probably found it had also been largely adopted even by those who had remained in the land. Many born in exile may not have learned the Hebrew language of their forefathers. Hebrew remained the priestly and religious language. Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi all prophesied and wrote in Hebrew. In the post-exile days few of the common people knew Hebrew but all understood Aramaic, hence Nehemiah 8:8 (note also 8:2 and 3).

Thus, we see a great deal of Aramaic influence in the Hebrew Bible, especially in books which were written later. In fact, there are some portions of the Bible that are written entirely in Aramaic (Ezra 4:8-6, 18; 7: 12-26; Jeremiah 10:11; Daniel 2:4-7:28). The first reference in the Bible to Aramaic is in Genesis 31:47. Laban used the Aramaic name and Jacob the Hebrew name, both meaning 'Pillar of Witness'. In view of close connection between ancestors of the Israelites and Aramaic-speaking people, it is not surprising to find many Aramaisms in Old Testament Hebrew at an early date; for example, Judges 5:11 - 'rehearse' (c.1100 A.D.).

Aramaic remained the language of Israel until the Arab conquest in the seventh century. It was, therefore, the customary language of Jesus Christ, His apostles, and of the early Church in Israel. Many Aramaic words have been translated into the New Testament; e.g. Mark 5:41, 7:34, 15:34, the latter being a quotation from Aramaic. 'Abba' (Father) is an Aramaic word which found its way into the Hebrew as well. It is an affectionate term for intimate use within the family (Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6). 'Maranatha' in 1 Corinthians 16:22 means 'the Lord comes' or 'our Lord

come'. 'Mammon' in Matthew 6:24 comes from Aramaic 'mamona' meaning that in which one puts his trust. Other instances of words from the Aramaic are 'Golgotha' (the skull), 'Gabbatha' (hill), 'Martha' (mistress), 'Thomas' (twin). In the Gospels and Acts, Aramaic idioms are to be found (as would be expected) as these writings contain the sayings of our Lord and others who spoke Aramaic. This does not, however, imply that they were originally written in Aramaic.

## GREEK

Greek culture is well known in the West. The Greeks were united under Philip of Macedonia in 338 BCE. His son, Alexander the Great, extended the empire and so carried the language throughout the then-known world. The differences between the various Greek dialects were by this process slowly eliminated. In the last three centuries BCE Hellenistic Greek, the 'common speech' or *koine* became the most widely known language. It was the official language of the empires into which the Grecian Empire was divided after Alexander the Great's death in 323 BCE. The Roman Empire which followed was bilingual, with Latin as the language of the army, and Greek the common language of the streets, sports arena, and trade. Israel became incorporated into the Roman Empire in 63 BCE as part of the province of Syria. To the educated, classical Greek was the language of culture and ancient classics. To the lower classes and slaves, the common tongue, *koine* Greek, was the language of their birth. Since many in Israel around the time of Egypt were educated in the Greek language, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the first 5 books of which are called the Septuagint, abbreviated as LXX and Original Greek, abbreviated OG) was well-known. The New Testament authors frequently quote this the influence of the Greek of the Septuagint is manifest.

## BIBLICAL MANUSCRIPTS

Manuscripts (MSS), as the name implies, means "written by hand." All original MSS are now lost, but there are thousands of copies of old Hebrew and Greek MSS scattered mainly throughout libraries of Europe.

### OLD TESTAMENT MSS

In 1948 several ancient MSS were found near Qumran near the Dead Sea. These became known as the Dead Sea Scrolls (abbreviated Q for Qumran), which were discovered in jars in a cave at Ain Feshkha near Jericho. The most important discovery was a complete parchment scroll of the book of Isaiah in Hebrew. Professor W.F. Albright of John Hopkins University, USA dates the scroll the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE: "The script of this parchment is easily a thousand years older than that of the oldest Hebrew Biblical roll previously known." Among parchments more recently found in the cave are portions of Genesis, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Judges. Fragments of the book of Daniel and commentary on Habbakuk.

The previous earliest MS of the Hebrew Old Testament is a Codex of the Prophets at Leningrad. It is dated 916 CE. Another early Codex of the whole of the Old Testament belongs to the early 11<sup>th</sup> Century, also at Leningrad. Oxford has a Codex almost as old. The British Museum has a Codex of the Hebrew Pentateuch commonly dated 9<sup>th</sup> Century. There is also a Cairo Codex of the Prophets completed in 895 CE. The question might well be asked "Why are there so few really ancient Hebrew MSS? This fact is accounted for by the reverent care with which old Jewish Rabbis treated the text. When it was too old or worn for further use, it was given an honorable burial, after being stored in a *genizah*, "hiding-place," a room attached to a synagogue specially dedicated to this purpose. One such *genizah* attached to a synagogue in old Cairo was discovered to still contain its ancient MSS until these were made available to scholars in the latter half of the last century.

Most of the MSS that we have were written by the Masoretes (a medieval group of Jewish scribes) The MSS they produced are known as Masoretic text. Masoretic scrolls contained vowel pointing to

preserve how ancient Hebrew was spoken, since few Jews except rabbis and scribes spoke Hebrew anymore. Meticulous care was taken to avoid any scribal errors; so much so that the scribes would count the number of times each letter of the alphabet appeared in each book, and would mark out the middle letter of the Pentateuch and of the whole Hebrew Bible. "Everything countable seems to have been counted," writes Dr. Wheeler Robinson, in *Ancient and English Versions of the Bible*. When the Masoretic text was finally established by these means it appeared that all previous copies of the scriptures were withdrawn from use and confined to the *genizah*. It will, therefore, be seen that although the MSS of the Hebrew Old Testament are of a comparatively late date, the text is thoroughly trustworthy.

## NEW TESTAMENT MSS

New Testament MSS number about 4,000. By comparison with the Old Testament, it is possible to be almost sure of the exact content of the originals. No other ancient literature is so well attested as is the New Testament, both by the number of MSS and also by the age of existing MSS. It is interesting to compare such writings with, Homer's *The Illiad* or *The Odyssey*, Caesar's *1st Gallic Wars* and the histories of Tacitus. These ancient works of classic Greek literature are known to us through MSS of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. No serious scholar, however, doubts the history of Homer, although the earliest MSS are thirteen hundred years later than their originals. In the Jon Rylands Library, Manchester, there is a *papyrus* Codex containing verses of John 18 which dates from the first half of the second century. In the biblical *papyri* found in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, there are MSS which belong to the third century. The historicity of the New Testament, therefore is well attested and certain to be faithful to the original manuscripts up to 99.98%. The three most famous New Testament MSS are:

**Codex Sinaiticus (Codex Aleph).** This is a parchment copy of the whole Greek Bible, although a good part of the Old Testament has been lost. It dates from the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, and may be found in the British Museum.

**Codex Alexandrinus (Codex A),** written in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, is another copy of the Greek Bible. This is also in the British Museum.

**Codex Vaticanus (Codex B)** dates from the 4<sup>th</sup> Century and is the chief treasure of the Vatican library. There are various other MSS containing parts of the New Testament dating from the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## CANON

Canon is a Greek word meaning 'measuring rod' or 'rule.' It came to mean a standard rule by which things were officially included. As it relates to the Bible, canon means what books are considered a part of the Christian Scriptures. It is often said by unbelievers that certain councils met and decided which books should be included in the Bible and which should not. This is not in accord with the facts. The canon of Scripture grew and the books which were stamped with divine authority became generally accepted by the early church in process of time. The books of the Old Testament had already been accepted as we have them now prior to Jesus' day. When the Church Council of Carthage met in 397 CE and listed the 27 books of the New Testament it did not give them any authority which they did not already have. It simply recorded their established authority as a necessary answer to false teachers of the day. Dr. Foakes Jackson states in his book *History of Church History*, "The Church assuredly did not make the New Testament, the two grew up together."

The Muratorian Fragment, discovered in 1740 by L. A. Muratori is dated between 160 and 170 CE and lists all the books of the New Testament with the exception of Hebrews, 1 & 2 Peter and 3 John. Athanasius in his Festal Letter of 367 listed the 27 books of the New Testament. Jerome and Augustine did likewise shortly afterwards. Previously Irenaeus (135-200 CE), who was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the Apostle John, had attested the authenticity of all the New Testament except the books of Philemon and James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude and Hebrews. Similarly, both

Origen in 230 and Eusebius (270-340), mention that certain of these letters were disputed by some. When the books were canonized they did not assume authenticity, nor as a result of that did they become authoritative; it was because they were authentic and authoritative that they were canonized. Authenticity precedes canonicity.

The early Christians, being indwelt by the Holy Spirit (as are all true believers), were guided by the Spirit in that which they received and that which they rejected. The witness of the Holy Spirit to the divine authority of Scripture is both to the individual and to the church as a community. (John 8:42-48, 10:27, 16:13, 1 John 4:1-6, 1 Cor. 2:14-15, 14:37-38).

## ANCIENT VERSIONS

A manuscript (MSS) is a copy of the scriptures in the original language. A *version* is a translation from the original language into another language or a copy of a translation. There are several early *versions* that were important for the early church. All our modern versions (for example in English and German) are translated from the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. Contrary to popular opinion, our Bibles are *not* “a translation of a translation of a translation.” However, there are a number of early versions that help us understand the world of the early church. Most notably:

**The Septuagint (LXX).** Originally this translation was only of the Pentateuch, and was reputed to be by 72 translators of Alexandria in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE. The name is now often applied to the whole Greek translation of Old Testament which was translated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE (although it would be more accurate to refer to the Greek translation of the rest of the Old Testament as the ‘Original Greek’ (OG). The Septuagint is the version of the Bible which is often quoted by the New Testament authors when they cite the Old Testament. Jesus’ quotations of the Old Testament in the Gospels are usually from the Septuagint (although he likely taught in Aramaic).

**The Syriac.** The Old Testament was probably translated about 200 CE with the New Testament having already been translated earlier. It is not known by whom the translation was made. It was written in a distinctive form of Aramaic similar to the Jewish Palestinian Aramaic spoken by Jesus which formed in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE. This version was used by those early Christians who went Eastward as far as India, and the Nestorian mission to China. The descendants of this Eastern branch of Christianity still speak Syriac today and have remained a distinct expression of Christianity in contrast to the Western church.

**The Vulgate** was the Latin Bible translated by Jerome in 386-405 CE. This became the definitive translation for the Latin-speaking Western church and Roman Empire. There had been many previous translations of the New Testament into Latin and Jerome's work was a revision of these. A new translation was made direct from the Hebrew in the case of the Old Testament. From this version the early English versions were translated, e.g. Wycliffe's. But since the Protestant Reformation, modern versions are translated directly from Greek and Hebrew, not via Latin.

**The Samaritan Pentateuch.** The Samaritans regarded the Pentateuch as canonical. There are not many major differences between the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Orthodox Hebrew, although many minor differences. It was written in ancient Hebrew script and has value in confirming the Masoretic text of the Pentateuch. The Samaritan text predates the Masoretic by many centuries.



## CRITICISM OF THE BIBLE

Criticism of the Bible takes two forms: Lower or Textual Criticism and Higher Criticism.

**Lower or Textual Criticism** is based on comparison of MSS in the original Hebrew and Greek and the early versions in other languages. Textual criticism's aim is to recompose the original manuscripts out of the thousands of copies, and is therefore arduous work. There are many minor differences; but the more MSS available, while increasing the number of minor differences, also confirms the accuracy of the text as a whole. Dr. Hort states in his *Introduction to the New Testament*: "In all these voluminous writings which have been copied times without number, we may be sure that in regard to the new testament the variation of any importance amount to less than one thousandth part of the entire text, while the Hebrew MSS show still less variation. Not one doctrine is affected in the slightest way." Frederick Kenyon in his books *The Story of the Bible* and *The Bible and Archaeology* states "It is reassuring at the end to find that the general result of all these discoveries and study is to strengthen the proof of the authenticity of the scriptures, and our conviction that we have in our hands in substantial integrity, the veritable Word of God...both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."

**Higher Criticism** is so called because it deals with the writing "higher up" in the stream of its existence. It asks such questions as "Who wrote?," "When was it written?," "To whom?," "Where was it written?," "Why was it written?" It investigates questions of authorship, date, and the like. Such questions are less concerned with what the text actually said in its original form. This is, of course, a more disputed form of criticism with many various claims.

## CHAPTER AND VERSE DIVISIONS

It is necessary to remember these are later additions and, while based on literary cues, they are not original to the author. Sometimes a chapter or verse division will unhelpfully divide what was meant to be read together as one cohesive unit. The Hebrew Bible had an arrangement of verses earlier than that fixed by the Masoretic period, which is the one that has come down to us. The Bible was divided into chapters in 1244-1250 CE by Cardinal Hugo de Sancto Caro in order to more conveniently reference the Bible. The New Testament was divided into verses in 1551 by Sir Robert Stephanus for further convenience. The Geneva Bible in 1560 was the first Bible to have verses and italics throughout (italics to signify words not in the original language but implied by context). The King James Version of 1611 had marginal references; these had appeared in a small scale in a Bible of 1599. Chapter headings were written by Miles Smith, one of the translators of the King James Version. The Revised Version of 1885 adopted paragraphs and this has been followed by the majority of the modern versions. The titles (or chapter headings) found at the beginning of each book have been added at a date later than the actual writing and vary from version to version.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT

### ORIGINAL ORDER (TANAKH)

As stated previously, the form of the Hebrew Bible in Jesus' day contained 24 books. 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, and the twelve Minor Prophets (Hosea-Malachi) were each considered as one book. The Hebrew Bible was divided into 3 parts: Law, Prophets, and Writings. Jesus referred to the Old Testament in this threefold division in Luke 24:44. The "short-hand" way in Hebrew of referring to this is threefold division is the "Tanakh," which is an acronym for Torah (Law), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Kethubim (Writings), thus T-N-K.

The three major divisions of the Hebrew Bible are:

**The Law/Instruction (Torah):**

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

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

*The Former Prophets:* Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings

*The Latter Prophets:* Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Book of the Twelve (Hosea-Malachi).

**The Writings (Kethubim):**

*The Documents of Truth:* Psalms, Job, Proverbs

*The Five Rolls:* Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther

*The Final Books:* Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles

This last section (Kethubim) was often known as “the Psalms” either by reason of Psalms being the first book in the division or because it was the longest. 'The Five Rolls' were read at the respective Jewish Festivals as follows:

**Ruth** at Feast of Weeks or Pentecost

**The Song of Songs** at Passover

**Ecclesiastes** at the Feast of Tabernacles

**Lamentations** on the anniversary of the destruction of Jerusalem

**Esther** at the Feast of Purim

## WESTERN ORDER

The order and grouping of the Old Testament in most modern Western Bibles (e.g. most English translations) is based on the Latin Vulgate, which in turn is based on the Septuagint and is according to subject matter and roughly in chronological order. There are some discrepancies between the Hebrew order and the Western order, particularly regarding what is considered a book of prophecy. For instance, Lamentations is in the prophetic section because it was considered to be written by Jeremiah, despite Lamentations not being a prophetic book.

**The Law (in Greek: Pentateuch):**

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

**History:**

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

**Poetry:**

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs

**Prophecy:**

*Major Prophets:* Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel.

*Minor Prophets:* Hosea-Malachi. \*Considered minor due to shorter length, not lesser value.

## IMPORTANCE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament was our Lord's Bible. He *constantly* referred to these Scriptures and quoted them, revealing an intimate knowledge of their contents. The Hebrew Scriptures were indispensable to our Lord and to the early church, including the non-Jewish (Gentile) churches. Rejection of the Old Testament invariably paves the way for doubting and rejection of the New; and severely misunderstanding who Jesus was, what he did on earth, and what he is still doing and wants to do in the world. While the Old Testament is culturally far-removed from our everyday lives, it is still relevant and important to grasp for Christians today. It is the unfolding of God's redemptive purposes for humankind. Every chapter and verse of the New Testament (including those who were written by and to non-Jews) assumes an intimate knowledge with the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul, Matthew, and indeed Jesus cannot be properly understood apart from the backdrop of the Hebrew Bible.

## OLD TESTAMENT GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY OF OTHER NATIONS

It is a considerable help to the understanding of the Old Testament to know the location of important cities, places, and major geographical features in the Promised Land and other regions in the Ancient Near East. This should be studied from a good map. It is equally important to know the position of those nations which surrounded Israel and whose history touches the story of the Israelites. Therefore, observe the position of the world powers such as Egypt, the Hittites, Phoenicia, Syria, Assyria, Babylon and Medo-Persia. The location and derivation of smaller nations with which Israel came into contact should be also noted (by reference to a map and concordance) e.g., the Amalekites, the Ammonites, Amorites, Canaanites, Edomites, Midianites, Moabites and Philistines. Knowing the first time such nations (and who is the ancestral father) and places appear in the Bible is particularly instructive.

## THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENTS

From the close of Old Testament history (the book of Nehemiah) to the opening of the New Testament there is a period of approximately 400 years. During this time many changes took place which had varying effects on Israel and the Jewish nation, so that when the New Testament commences, there is a tremendous difference from the closing atmosphere of the Old Testament. The reader of the New Testament finds she is in a new world. It is helpful to know a little of the causes of these changes. Historically, the four hundred years may be summarized into five periods:

#### PERSIAN DOMINATION: 539-330 BCE

Persian domination of the world commenced in 539 BCE with the fall of Babylon, and therefore, for the purpose of these notes, extends from the days of Nehemiah to Alexander's Conquest in 330 BCE. It was a time of comparative peace; the Persians had a different method of domination whereby they allowed their subjects to live in their homelands rather than take use the Babylonian policy of exiling their subjects. Therefore, under the Persian king Cyrus, the Jewish exiles were permitted to return to Israel from exile and rebuild Jerusalem in 538 BCE while remaining under Persian rule. Resulting from Nehemiah's firm stand that the inhabitants of Samaria should have no share in the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim and created their own worship form. This is the reason for the tension between the Jews and Samaritans by the time of Jesus.

#### GRECIAN OR MACEDONIAN PERIOD: 330-167 BCE

Alexander the Great (son of Philip of Macedon) became king at 20 years old. He reigned from 335-323 BCE before dying of malaria. His rise and conquest of the known world is foretold in Daniel 8:1-8 and 10:20. The Jews were treated well by Alexander and were allowed religious freedom. Following the death of Alexander, the Macedonian Empire was divided into four warring factions led by the four generals (Daniel 8:8, 21, 22). Ptolemy founded the Ptolemaic Kingdom in Egypt, which ended with the death of Cleopatra in 30 BCE and the Roman Conquest of Egypt. Seleucus was the founder of the Seleucid Empire in Babylonia, which expanded to cover most of the Ancient Near East. Israel became a buffer state between the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria. This period may, therefore, be subdivided as follows:

**Egyptian Period.** At first Israel was dominated by Egypt. Within this period, under Ptolemy Philadelphus, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint (LXX), began (in 285 BCE) and later became generally used by Greek-speaking Jews. It was introduced into Israel and by the time of our Lord was the Bible of the educated Jew. It is frequently quoted by New Testament writers.



**Seleucid Period.** The Seleucids finally attacked Israel. Under Antiochus Epiphanes Jerusalem was plundered in 170 BCE and for three-and-a-half years the Jews were deprived of religious and civil freedom. A small altar to Jupiter was erected on the altar of burnt offering and on the 25th of the Jewish month Kislev (November-December) 168 BCE, a pig (hint: not kosher) was offered on the great altar of the Jewish Temple which Nehemiah built. The water in which part of the animal was boiled was sprinkled over copies of the Torah scrolls and every part of the Temple. Many consider this to be the fulfilment of the scripture in Daniel 9:27 and 11:31.

#### THE MACCABEAN REVOLT: 167-160 BCE

Also known as the Wars of the Jews. Matthias, a priest and father of five sons, took his stand against those whom Antiochus sent out to carry out idolatrous worship. He fled to the mountains and rallied a devoted band of men. After his death in 165 BCE, his third son, Judas, succeeded him as leader of the Jewish forces in their fight for independence. Judas was known as Maccabeus ('The Hammer') and the name is applied to the rest of the family ('The Maccabees'). He regained possession of Jerusalem and the Temple which he cleansed and reinstituted worship on the same day as it had been polluted three years earlier. Thereafter this was commemorated annually in the feast known as the Feast of Dedication (*Hanukkah*), which was celebrated for eight days (John 10:22). The struggle of the Maccabees continued for twenty years. Judas was killed in 161 BCE

#### THE HASMONEAN DYNASTY : 160-63 BCE

Judas Maccabeus was succeeded by his brother, Jonathan, who became priest and ruler. So it was that the priesthood became vested in the Hasmonean family. Jonathan was murdered in 143 BCE and was succeeded by Simon, his brother, who finally overthrew the Seleucid yoke. He was assassinated in 135 BCE and was succeeded by his third son, John Hyrcanus. A period of freedom and independence followed. Samaria was mastered and John Hyrcanus destroyed the Samaritan Temple. He was succeeded by his son, Hyrcanus II, but his younger son, Aristobulus, assumed the rule. As this time Antipater I was Governor of Idumea. Idumea is the Greek form of Edom of the Old Testament which had been forcibly converted to Judaism under the reign of Hyrcanus I. Antipater of Idumea rallied to the cause of Hyrcanus II and called in the Roman General, Pompey, who defeated Aristobulus and reinstated Hyrcanus II. From that time on Rome ruled Israel via district governors (called *ethnarchs*, which are a political ruler over an ethnic group).

#### ROMAN DOMINATION: 63 BCE – 70 CE

Antipater of Idumea was the father of Herod the Great. At first, Herod had to flee to Rome but later he appeased the Jews by his marriage to the granddaughter of Hyrcanus II, and so the Herods (who were Edomites) entered the Jewish Hasmonean Dynasty and became the vassal rulers of Israel under Rome. In 37 BCE Caesar Augustus confirmed Herod the Great (as he became known) as the ruler of the provinces of Judah, Samaria, and Galilee on the West of Jordan and Peraea and Idumea on the East. He was called "King Herod," although he was only an ethnarch for Rome. Herod sought to please the Jews and the Samaritans by lavish schemes of building. To remain in favor with Rome, he 'Romanized' cities and built Caesarea, naming it after Caesar Augustus. He commenced the expansion of the Temple in 20 BCE, the 18th year of his reign, referred to in John 2:20. Christ was probably born in 4 BCE, shortly before the death of Herod. Herod was in fact a cruel tyrant, the Massacre of Innocents being the particular piece of villainy for which he is chiefly remembered. He was succeeded by his son, Herod Archelaus, who was later deposed by Publius Sulpitius Quirinius (whose Greek name, Cyrenius, is used by Luke). The president of Syria reduced Judea to a Roman Province to be governed by a procurator. During Christ's ministry Judea and Samaria were governed by the procurator Pilate. Galilee was governed by Herod Antipas, another son of Herod the Great, with the title of Tetrarch. We read of Herod Antipas in the Gospels in connection with his unholy alliance with Herodias, his sister, and the beheading of John the Baptist. Christ also appeared before him before being sent back to Pilate to be crucified (Luke 23:7-12). Herod Antipas' nephew, Herod

Agrippa I (grandson of Herod the Great) is the Herod named in Acts 12 as persecuting the Jerusalem Christian church and dying in 44 CE. His son, Herod Agrippa II, was the last Herodian ruler. He was overthrown in 66 CE by his Jewish subjects, which was during the 12<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of the Roman emperor Nero. This revolt by the Jews ended in Rome besieging Jerusalem and destroying the Jewish Temple, which caused many of the Jews to be scattered throughout the Roman Empire in an event called the diaspora.

## WORLD EVENTS LEADING UP TO THE ADVENT OF CHRIST

In surveying the history of the 400 years prior to the birth of Christ we can see God's ordering of world events in preparation for the coming of Christ and the proclamation of the Gospel. In the rise and fall of human empires, it is seen how each one contributed in some measure and prepared the way for the coming of Jesus, so that it is very true to say that Christ came "in the fulness of time" (Galatians 4:4). The outstanding points to be noted are as follows:

### LANGUAGE

Following the conquest of Alexander the Great, Greek traders and Greek culture had spread throughout the Mediterranean countries. A form of Greek had become the accepted international language of commerce throughout the known world and this language was used everywhere alongside the local tongue. The name given to this form of Greek is *koine*, that is, 'common speech.' The common language of commercial speech considerably facilitated the spreading of the Gospel in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century.

### EASE OF COMMUNICATION, TRAVEL, AND REMOVAL OF INTERNATIONAL BARRIERS

With the rise and rule of the Roman Empire, international boundaries were removed and all Mediterranean countries were under the domination of Rome, so that it was possible to travel from one country to another more freely than in the present day of passports and visas. Wherever Rome went, Rome built roads along which she could move her legions speedily to quell any possible rebellion, so that not only were the international barriers removed, but there was considerable ease of travel. This contributed in no small measure to the evangelization of these countries in the first century. While Rome ruled, there was also comparative peace.

### THE DIASPORA

This is the name given to the Jews who had settled in the many centers of commerce in the Mediterranean area after persecution and failed revolt. In the 1<sup>st</sup> Century there was a colony of Jews in most of the principal cities. It was to the synagogues of these cities that Paul and other early missionaries of the Gospel went and first preached the Gospel. The Jews of the Dispersion became a starting point to evangelization in the city.

### THE MESSIANIC HOPE OF THE JEWS

In the years preceding the birth of Christ there was a rising spirit of expectancy in the Jewish nation that their Messiah would come and deliver them. This spirit of expectancy arose chiefly from two reasons: (1) **The Traditions** which had been added to the Law had become so numerous and complicated that common people found it quite impossible to either know or keep all that the tradition of the elders demanded. People were looking for a new hope of salvation. (2) **The Conquest** of the land by Rome and the consequent oppression, heavy taxation and iron rule had caused the Jews to be eagerly desiring a deliverer.

## HEBREW RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENTS BETWEEN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

In reading the Gospels it is at once apparent that there have been considerable changes in the religious life of the Jewish nation. Reference is made to certain forms of worship and sects of which there is no mention in the Old Testament during the Babylonian exile no sacrifices were offered and the exiles gathered together to hear the scriptures read and to pray to God (Ezekiel 14) so that the emphasis shifted from sacrifice to a veneration and keeping of the Torah and subsequently to the growth of traditions, that is, interpretations of the Law by the schools of Scribes. This led to worship in synagogues.

### SYNAGOGUES

The word means 'assembly' or 'gathering,' but like the English word "church," a word that originally meant gathering became associated with the building in which the gathering assembled. On the return of the exiles to Israel, synagogue worship increased. Every town and village had its synagogue. In Jerusalem many synagogues were built, and in the New Testament they are frequently mentioned. Wherever Jews went they established synagogues for worship, and as has been mentioned earlier, these gave Paul his starting point in the majority of the cities and towns visited in his missionary tours. It was the custom for the elders of the synagogue to call upon visiting teachers or rabbis to read, pray, and preach.

### SANHEDRIN

This is said to date from Ezra's time. It consisted of 70 or 72 chief priests, scribes, elders, or princes of Israel and heads of families. It was the supreme governing body of the Jews. The Sanhedrin's power did, however, vary from time to time according to the ruling foreign power. During the time of our Lord, its power had been curtailed by Rome and although it could pass sentence of death for criminal offences, power to confirm and execute the sentence rested with the Roman procurator (John 18:31).

### THE GROWTH OF SECTS

Sects or names of religious bodies never mentioned in the Old Testament are suddenly found in great prominence in the New Testament. The major sects in the time of our Lord were as follows:

**Sadducees.** The name was taken either from Zadok, the High Priest (1 Kings 2:35) or because they claimed to be truly righteous ones (*Zaddikim*) who laid more stress on the moral law rather than the ceremonial law. They refused to receive traditions or any development of divine truth except the Torah of Moses. Influenced by a Greek philosophy and thought, they refused to accept the resurrection of the dead or presence of spiritual beings besides God (Acts 23:8) and were indifferent to the Messianic hope. Annas and his son-in-law, Caiaphas, were Sadducees and it was the Sadducees that maintained the Temple. Sadducees were wealthy and occupied high positions in the Jewish nation including many positions in the Sanhedrin. They were more bitter in their opposition to the early disciples than the Pharisees, because the disciples preached Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 4:2). Because of their inflexibility of interpretation, when the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the Sadducees ceased as a movement.

**The Pharisees.** Pharisee means "separatist," for they were separate from the common people. The Pharisees believed the Torah of Moses was given to the Jews to be developed and interpreted. In the Gospels, Jesus challenges some of the Pharisaical interpretation, but many Pharisees were more sympathetic to Christians in the coming years. From the Pharisees comes the Rabbinic Tradition. The Pharisaical interpretation of the Torah was able to more nimbly adapt through the many tumultuous times the Jews encountered after the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE. All other forms of Judaism eventually died out in the first few centuries after Christ, but Judaism as it is known today is a descendent of the Pharisaical tradition.

**The Essenes.** This sect is not actually referred to in the New Testament, but they were a large sect which arose as a reaction to the politically-influenced and Hellenized Sadducees and Pharisees. The Essenes lived secluded lives in the hill country and created their own isolated communities, seeking to live in true purity, venerating the Hebrew Scriptures, but rejecting the “corrupt” Temple sacrificial system. It was the Essene community at Qumran that wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls.

**The Zealots.** These were originally the followers of Judas of Galilee and while similar to Pharisees in religious matters, the Zealots taught that all foreign domination was contrary to God's will. Many Zealots were political extremists who were in favor of military revolt or assassination of key political figures. Of course, the military revolt of 66 CE resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. One of the disciples of Jesus was converted from this extreme sect (Matt 10:4, Luke 6:15).

#### PROSELYTES

One reads the strange word “proselyte” in Matthew 23:15; Acts 2:10, 6:5, 13:43, and elsewhere. These were gentiles (non-Jews) who revered the Hebrew Scriptures and even offered sacrifices in the outer court. They were later divided into two groups in Rabbinic Judaism:

**Righteous Proselytes** were gentiles who had converted to Judaism, were bound to all the doctrines and precepts of the Jewish religion, and were considered a full member of the Jewish people. The proselyte is even circumcised as an adult, if male.

**Proselytes of the Gate** These were resident alien who lives in the Land of Israel and followed some of the customs. They were not required to be circumcised nor to comply with the whole of the Torah. They were, however, bound to conform the following moral ethic: do not worship idols, do not blaspheme God's name, do not murder, do not commit immoral sexual acts, do not steal, do not tear the limb from a living animal, and do not fail to establish rule of law. As might be anticipated, Christianity made considerable progress among these proselytes.

#### THE SAMARITANS

This ethnic group, which still exist today, were descended from the colonists planted in the land by the Kings of Assyria after the ten tribes were taken captive (2 Kings 17). When Zerubbabel and later Nehemiah returned to rebuild the Temple and the City of Jerusalem, the Samaritans' offer of help was rejected and the enmity between the Samaritans and the Jews began from that time and increased with the passing of the years. The Samaritans erected a temple on Mount Gerizim which was later destroyed by John Hyrcanus in 109 BCE. The Samaritans accepted only the their own version of the Torah (which only had minor differences than the Hebrew Torah) and rejected all other Jewish books. We see Jesus on at least one occasion went out of His way to meet the need of one Samaritan woman (John 4:4-42). And taught that Samaritans were to be loved as a neighbor (Luke 10:25-37). The Samaritans in Acts 8 received the Gospel positively from Philip.

#### THE JEWS OF THE DISPERSION (DIASPORA)

These were divided into two groups, the **Hebraists** and the **Hellenists**. The Hebraists clung tenaciously to the traditional Jewish ideas whilst the Hellenists incorporated much of the culture of Greece and had a wider outlook on world affairs. Although the incident in Acts 6 took place in Jerusalem, it was because of the disputation between the Hellenists (sometimes rendered 'Grecians' in Acts) and the Hebraists that the "murmuring" arose. Undoubtedly Paul indicated that he belonged to the Hebraists when he said "I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews," that is, one who had been brought up in the Jewish faith. In point of fact, he had also adopted Hellenistic outlook, was educated in Hellenistic philosophy, and had a mastery of Greek.

## THE LAND OF ISRAEL IN THE TIME OF OUR LORD

After the exile, Israel was no longer divided into Southern and Northern kingdoms. Under the rule of foreign powers, the land of Israel was subdivided into multiple regions. While the borders and form of government for these regions was constantly changing, the larger notable regions are Judea, Samaria, and Galilee on the west of Jordan, and Peraea and Decapolis on the east of Jordan. The position of these areas and of all chief cities and places of particular interest should be carefully noted on a map of Israel in New Testament times.

### JUDEA

Judea was a Roman province ruled by a governor known as procurator. Pontius Pilate is the most notable procurator (Luke 3:1; Matthew 27:2).

Places of outstanding interest: Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ; Jericho; Bethany; Jerusalem; Mount of Olives; Garden of Gethsemane and Golgotha.

### SAMARIA

Judea and Samaria were ruled by the one Roman Procurator. Caesarea in Samaria was the normal place of his residence, except at the Feasts when he resided in Jerusalem. It was to Caesarea that Paul was taken (Acts 23:23-35). Because of tension between the groups, Jews did not normally frequent Samaria, yet it was the well in Sychar that Christ went to speak to the Samaritan woman, and to a city of Samaria that Philip later went preaching the Gospel.

### GALILEE

Many of the inhabitants of Galilee were zealous patriots, held in contempt by the Sadducees and Pharisees of the South. It was in Galilee that Jesus spent His childhood days and the years of His youth. A considerable portion of His ministry took place in Galilee.

Places of outstanding interest: Nazareth; Nain; Cana; The Sea of Galilee (also called 'the sea of Tiberias'); Capernaum, a garrison town where taxes were collected (Matthew 9:9-10); Tiberias, where Herod Antipas had his palace; Bethsaida, city of Andrew, Peter and Philip (John 1:44); Chorazin (Matt. 11:20-24); Magdala, on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee.

### PERAEA

The Jews from Galilee travelling to Jerusalem would avoid Samaria and hence cross over the Jordan river at the ford at Bethabara in the North and back at the crossing opposite Jericho.

### TETRARCHY OF PHILIP

Area occupied by the half-tribe of Manasseh on the East of the Jordan river. It contained most of the area of Decapolis, meaning 'Ten Cities' (Matt. 4:25).

Places of outstanding interest: Bethsaida (Mark 6:34-45, 8:22-26); Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27); Gergesa (Matt. 8:28); Gadara-Bethabara beyond Jordan (John 1:28, 10:40).

### SYRIA

Apart from the incident in Jesus' childhood when He was taken down to Egypt, the only record of His going beyond Israel was to Tyre and Sidon in Syria (Matt. 15:21, Mark 7:24-31). Some believe Mount Hermon in the Tetrarchy of Lysanias (Syria) to be the scene of the Transfiguration of Christ. Places of outstanding interest: Damascus, the city to which Saul was travelling while he met the risen Lord Jesus; Antioch, the first Gentile city where as the result of the faithful preaching of the Gospel, many turned to the Lord (Acts 11:19-30) and from where the Church sent forth Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13). It was in Antioch that followers of Jesus were first called Christians.



## THE NEW TESTAMENT

### AUTHORSHIP

There are 27 books in what we call the New Testament, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by 9 different authors. The authors were:

**Matthew, John, Peter.** Three of the 12 disciples of Jesus, later known as apostles for their foundational role in the Church.

**Paul. (Greek name: Saul) of Tarsus.** A member of the Pharisees and became a missionary to non-Jews and Church leader.

**Luke.** a Greek and the only certain Gentile writer of the New Testament (Col. 4:14; Philemon 24; 2 Tim. 4:11). Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of the Acts of the Apostles.

**Mark.** Called John Mark, nephew of Barnabas (Acts 12:12 & 25, 15:39; Col. 4:10, Philemon 24; 2 Tim. 4:11; 1 Peter 5:13).

**James.** The son of Mary and Joseph and the brother of Jesus (Matt.13:55; Mark 6:3; Acts 1:14; Gai. 1:19; Jude 1)

**Jude.** Another son of Mary and Joseph and brother Jesus (Matt.13:55; Mark 6:3; Acts 1:14; Jude 1). Compare John 7:5 and 1 Cor. 15:7.

**The Author of Hebrews.** Whose identity is not known with certainty.

### DATE

No date of writing is stated in any of the books but it is generally considered that the earliest of the writings was the Epistle of James, which may have been written about 45 CE. The Gospel according to Mark is often considered to be one of the earliest of the writings. It would probably be correct to assume that all the New Testament writings were produced between 45 and 100 CE. The writings of John are usually considered to be the last and very likely these were written between 95 and 98 CE.

### ORDER & CONTENTS

It can be clearly seen that the order of the books in the New Testament is not in line with the order in which they were originally written or any other chronology. Instead, the books are grouped in 4 major sections:

#### The Gospels & Acts:

The word Gospel (Greek: *Euangelion*) means “Good News.” It is, more specifically, a victory announcement that a messenger would bring after a successful military victory. The word became associated with the letters of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John because they are “the victory announcement of Jesus and His Kingdom according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.” Each Gospel has different sources and a different audience and therefore portrays Jesus’ life and teachings in slightly different but harmonious ways. It is important to remember when comparing the Gospels to one another that historical accounting and citing references was not as “scientifically precise” as it is today. Therefore, one can “quote” someone by capturing accurately their ideas, without quoting them word for word. There were other gospel accounts written, but these were rejected by the Church because they were written much later than the 1<sup>st</sup> Century and contained falsity that didn’t line up with the rest of Scripture. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the “synoptic gospels” because they are very similar in content and structure, although with some significant differences in emphases. Mark’s Gospel is often considered to be Peter’s account of Jesus’ life. Many believe Matthew and Luke were written using Mark as a source. John is a different sort of gospel account that has different emphases and many believe it was written later as a more theological reflection at the end of John’s life. The Gentile Luke writes probably to a Gentile audience and he follows his Gospel with the continuation of the story of Jesus via the Church community and actions of the Holy Spirit.

### The Pauline Epistles

Paul's letters (Greek: *epistole*) to the various local churches and individuals throughout the Roman Empire have become the bedrock of much Christian theology and practice. The order in which the Pauline letters appear is not chronological, but roughly by size (while keeping 1 letter and 2 letters to the same object together). The chronological order of Paul's letters is not certain, but most evidence indicates the following order and dates:

*First Group (52-3 CE):* 1 & 2 Thessalonians and Galatians

*Second Group (57-8 CE):* 1 & 2 Corinthians and Romans

*Third Group (62-3 CE):* Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, Philippians (this group is often called the "prison epistles because it was believed that Paul wrote them during his imprisonment)

*Fourth Group (64-6 CE):* 1 Timothy, Titus, 2 Timothy (these, along with Philemon, are often called the "pastoral epistles" because they were written to individuals about more personal matters rather than being addressed to churches. However, it is clear historically that they were nevertheless read aloud in and circulated among churches).

### The General Epistles

This is the group of letters that are not written by Paul. The other letters are again placed in order of size (while keeping authors roughly together), not chronology. That is, Hebrews is the longest, then James, and so on.

### The Revelation of John

This book contains the revelation of Jesus Christ to John. It is often mistakenly called "Revelations," but it is the singular revelation to John. It placed at the end since it contains a conclusion to the Scriptural canon. It was written while the apostle John was exiled on the island of Patmos at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE.