

An overview of the Bible

The Old Testament

The Bible opens by telling that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and that everything God made was good. Sin enters the story when human beings want to become like God, and disobey God's command by eating fruit that God had told them not to eat. The effects of sin become evident when one man slays his brother out of anger toward God. Violence multiplies until God determines to purge the earth by a flood. God commanded Noah to build a boat that could preserve animals from every species from destruction. After the flood, God put the rainbow in the sky to assure people that he would not destroy the earth again. Sin persisted, however, and people sought to make themselves great by building a tower that could reach to heaven. God responded by making people speak different languages, so that they could no longer understand each other, and they scattered over the face of the earth.

A new phase of the story begins when God calls a man named Abraham, who lived in the area near the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (modern day Iraq and Syria). God told Abraham to go to a land that God would show him., promising that Abraham would have many descendants and that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him. Abraham responded to God's call, and with Sarah, his wife, he finally settled in the land of Canaan (modern-day Palestine or Israel). There they tended their flocks and herds. The period was about 2000-1700 B.C. Abraham and Sarah became old and had no children until God gave them a son, whose name was Isaac. Isaac in turn had two sons, Jacob and Esau. By means of trickery, Jacob obtained a special blessing from his father. When his brother, Esau, became angry, Jacob fled to the home of an uncle, where he married and became wealthy before returning to Canaan. Jacob--whose name was changed to "Israel"--had twelve sons, but because of family rivalry, his son Joseph was sold as a slave and taken to Egypt. There Joseph managed to become a high-ranking official, and when famine drove the rest of the family into Egypt, the brothers became recon

a given tribe or local community, but to the Greek Empire. The new vision of one world city differed significantly from the conviction that Israel was God's chosen people. Some of the Jewish people liked the new vision and began adopting Greek customs, but others rebelled and insisted that to do so would be to commit apostasy. The governor of that region tried to suppress the revolt by forbidding observance of Israel's law and by turning the Jerusalem temple into a shrine that he dedicated to Zeus in 167 B.C. A group of Jews led by Judah Maccabee successfully recaptured the temple and purified it in 164 B.C. Soon they regained control of the country and set up their own government, the first independent government since Jerusalem had been conquered by the Babylonians four hundred years earlier.

This Jewish kingdom endured for a century. In 63 B.C. a Roman general conquered Jerusalem and brought Jewish independence to an end. The Romans eventually designated a man named Herod to rule Palestine. An ambitious and masterful politician, Herod accommodated devout Jews by transforming the modest Jerusalem temple that had been rebuilt after the exile into an imposing structure of gleaming white limestone adorned with gold. At the same time he built cities named for Caesar Augustus that contained stadiums, theaters, and temples to the emperor.

The New Testament

It was into this unsettled world that Jesus was born, shortly before Herod the Great died in 4 B.C. (The people who devised the calendar we use miscalculated the time of Jesus' birth by a few years.) Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, the village of King David. His mother was Mary, who was married to a man named Joseph. Jesus' childhood was spent in the northern hill country of Galilee in an obscure village called Nazareth. Jesus' public ministry probably began about A.D. 27 after he was baptized by John the Baptist, a fiery preacher who summoned people to repent of their sins before the coming of the Lord's judgment.

Jesus was a teacher and a preacher who announced the coming of God's gracious rule. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1: 15). The coming of the kingdom would mean defeat for the powers of evil and liberation for the people they had held captive. Jesus warned of God's coming judgment, and called upon people to turn from sin and unbelief. He also compared God to a shepherd combing the hillsides for a sheep that had strayed, to a woman scouring her house to recover a missing coin, and to a father running to embrace a long-lost son (Luke 15). God was like the host of a banquet, bringing the maimed and the blind to dine at his feast after the people he first invited refused to come (Luke 14:15-24).

Jesus' actions bore out his message. He was known for his power to release people from the afflictions of leprosy, paralysis, and blindness. Those who had been possessed by demons that made them cry out and writhe uncontrollably were liberated when Jesus cast out the demons. Tax collectors were despised for their graft and complicity with the Roman authorities, but Jesus was willing to eat with them, saying, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mark 2:17). Jesus' followers included a group of twelve disciples, such as the fishermen Peter, James, and John, as well as a wider circle of many other men and women.

Opposition to Jesus arose, especially among the Pharisees and other religious authorities. They acknowledged that Jesus had the power to perform miracles, but charged that he violated the law of God by healing on the Sabbath, when no work was to be done. They argued that Jesus' claims to be carrying out the work of God were scandalous; they charged that his miraculous powers came from Satan, not God (Mark 3:1-6, 22). The leaders also feared that Jesus' popularity among the people would precipitate a revolt against Rome, threatening the security of the nation.

The crisis peaked when Jesus went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival in the spring of about A.D. 30. Crowds of worshipers thronged around him as he entered the city, but one of his disciples, named Judas, collaborated with the authorities to have him arrested. On Thursday evening Jesus ate a final meal with his disciples and went to a garden near Jerusalem. There he was seized, taken to the house of the high priest, and questioned. On Friday morning he was brought before Pilate, the Roman governor, and charged with claiming to be a king. He was stripped, beaten, and hung on a cross where he died later that same day. His body was placed in a nearby tomb cut in rock.

On Sunday morning several women discovered that the tomb was open and that Jesus' body was gone. They were greeted by an angel who announced that Jesus had risen; some accounts add that the women saw the risen Jesus himself. Soon Jesus appeared to groups of his followers who testified that he was

alive. The appearances of the risen Christ eventually ended, but the proclamation of his life, death, and resurrection continued through the work of his disciples.

Belief that Jesus would return in a short time gave great urgency to the spread of the good news about him. Enlivened by the Spirit of God, they gathered in homes for prayer and fellowship. Many of the religious authorities opposed the new faith and some of Jesus' followers were imprisoned or killed. Others fled to places outside Judea, where the gospel message was received by Samaritans and Greeks as well as by Jews.

One of the Jewish leaders who persecuted the emerging church was Saul of Tarsus, better known to us as the apostle Paul. Near the city of Damascus he encountered the risen Christ, who called him to be a proclaimer of, rather than an adversary of, the gospel. Paul set out on a career as a missionary, proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ in the cities of what are now Syria, Turkey, and Greece. His preaching centered on a vivid proclamation of Jesus the crucified Messiah, a message that kindled faith in the hearts of many hearers who were stirred by the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul became a leading figure in the mission to non-Jewish people, who were known as Gentiles. A watershed in the early church's history was the decision that Gentile Christians did not need to practice circumcision and other distinctly Jewish practices (Act 15).

The letters Paul wrote during the latter part of his ministry (A.D. 50-60) are the oldest extant Christian writings. The oldest of the letters is probably 1 Thessalonians, written about A.D. 50. In it, Paul comforts some who were grieving with the message that Jesus died and rose, and Christians, therefore, have hope that others who die will also rise (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14). The congregations in Galatia (central Turkey) were disturbed by some who insisted that Christians needed to practice circumcision according to the Jewish Law. Paul argued that people enter a right relationship with God through faith in Christ, not by observing the Jewish law. Therefore, Christians also live by faith in Christ, not by the Jewish law (Galatians 2:16-20). In the city of Corinth, the Christians had split into factions. When Paul heard about it, he called them back to the unity they already shared in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1). The letter known as 2 Corinthians was sent later, strengthening ties between Paul and the congregation.

Paul was imprisoned because of his missionary activities. While in prison he wrote a warm letter to the Philippians, thanking them for supporting him. He rejoiced at the spread of the gospel of Christ Jesus, who had been crucified and exalted by the power of God, "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend . . . and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2:10-11). Paul also wrote to a man named Philemon, asking that he receive back a runaway slave as a brother in Christ.

The last letter from Paul that we know about was probably his letter to the Romans, written around A.D. 55-57. Paul hoped for an opportunity to preach to the Christians in Rome and his letter provided them with an extended summary of his message before his arrival. The book of Acts tells us that Paul eventually was taken to Rome as a prisoner. Later Christian writings also say he was executed there in A.D. 62, during the persecutions that took place under Nero.

During the final decades of the first century, Christian congregations were established in many towns and cities in the Roman empire. The early followers of Jesus died out, and Christians faced challenges of a new generation. The book of Hebrews compares Christians to the people of Israel, who journeyed in the wilderness for many years. It urges them to persevere in the certainty that God has prepared a place of blessed rest for them. The book of James cautions that faith cannot be reduced to a set of comfortable beliefs, insisting that genuine faith is expressed in actions. The book of 1 Peter assured Christians who were suffering that God was preserving them in faith for the salvation that was theirs in Jesus Christ. The letters of 1, 2, and 3 John were written in the wake of a split within the Christian community. The author took readers back to the tradition they had received "from the beginning" in the hope of restoring fellowship (1 John 1: 1-4).

The last book in the New Testament is Revelation, which is a letter written in about A.D. 95 by a Christian named John. Revelation was addressed to seven congregations that were plagued by false teachings, persecution, and lethargy (Revelation 2-3). The book calls Christians to renewed faith in God and in Jesus Christ, confident that God will triumph over evil. The final chapters bring the Biblical story back to its beginning. In the beginning, people were barred from the tree of life because of sin (Genesis 3:22-24), but in the end the redeemed come to the tree of life in God's new Jerusalem (Revelation 22:2).