

CHAPTER ONE

The Bible and its Authority

Over the centuries, the Bible has been seen as a number of different things, from an instruction manual for human beings on how to live their lives to a single utterance of God that is to be taken literally and without question to nothing more than an interesting collection of stories about people who lived in a past age. Many of us will have our own ideas about the role, importance and authority of Scripture in our lives. The point of this session is to help us better know our Bible and to be able to explore with deeper understanding what it means in our lives of faith.

Christians see the Bible as our own, but the story began many centuries before Christ. Many of the stories that are recorded in the Old Testament were orally transmitted from one generation of story-tellers to the next. Over time, and as technology developed, the stories were recorded. The Scriptures were sacred, but were also personal and the stories were told in homes and in synagogues. It was important to gather together to hear the stories told: Jews would never dream of reading Scripture and interpreting it in solitude the way many Christians do. It loses much of its power when that is done. Notwithstanding the antiquity of many of the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures, their fixing as a codified collection was not completed until the Jewish Council of Jamnia (around 95 CE). You may have heard of the Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical Books: these are books that are contemporaries of the canonical Old Testament books but which were not included in the Jewish canon. They are found in the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) from the early Church.

The New Testament is a little different than the Old Testament because it is mostly a collection of letters to early churches and individuals with only a small number of 'historical' books. The earliest writings are some of the letters of Paul to churches which he had founded. Often, he wrote to them to address a particular issue, but because of the reverence in which the early Christian communities held him, they treasured and preserved their copies and passed them to neighbouring churches. Paul gives us some of the earliest developments in doctrine and the life and teachings of Jesus. The earliest fragment of the New Testament that we have is from the Gospel of John and dates from early in the second century (about 125 CE). The Gospels are the greatest source of information on the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus. There are also other writings from the same era which are remarkably similar to the Gospels, letters, and other books from the New Testament, but which, for one reason or another were not selected to part of the canon at the Synod of Hippo (393 AD) or the Third Synod of Carthage (397 AD).

Following is a summary of the sixty-six (39 OT and 27 NT) books of the Bible grouped according to their theme or genre. There is not enough space to give a summary of each book on its own, but a good study Bible will provide excellent background material on authorship, composition, date, and occasion (the reason for writing).

At the end of the summary is a list of questions for reflection and discussion, the point of this programme. Ultimately, the goal is not to overload the reader with information that can be referred to either in these pages or elsewhere whenever necessary, but to provide the necessary basics to foster a conversation between participants about the impact and role of Holy Scripture in their faith journey.

The Old Testament—An Overview

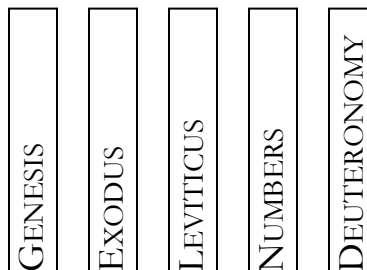
The word “testament” means “will” or “covenant”. The term “Old Testament”, therefore, refers first to God’s covenant to bless humanity through the Jewish nation. It has also come to refer to the writings about the Old Covenant, although, strictly speaking, these ancient books are the Old Covenant Scriptures. In the twentieth century, many theologians grew uncomfortable with the “supercessionism” that is present in naming the two “halves” of the Bible the “New” and “Old” Testaments, which implies that the covenant God made in Jesus superseded the covenant made with Israel, which is debatable. Often, the Old Testament is referred to as the Hebrew Scriptures or TANAKH, the Jewish name of the Old Testament.

Purpose/Theme

The Scriptures of the Old Testament record the story of God’s chosen people, Israel, and their relationship to God’s covenant to bless all nations through them.

The Books of the Old Testament

THE BOOKS OF LAW



THE BOOKS OF HISTORY



THE BOOKS OF POETRY

| | | | | |
|-----|--------|----------|--------------|---------------|
| JOB | PSALMS | PROVERBS | ECCLESIASTES | SONG OF SONGS |
|-----|--------|----------|--------------|---------------|

THE BOOKS OF MAJOR PROPHETS

| | | | | |
|--------|----------|--------------|---------|--------|
| ISAIAH | JEREMIAH | LAMENTATIONS | EZEKIEL | DANIEL |
|--------|----------|--------------|---------|--------|

THE BOOKS OF MINOR PROPHETS

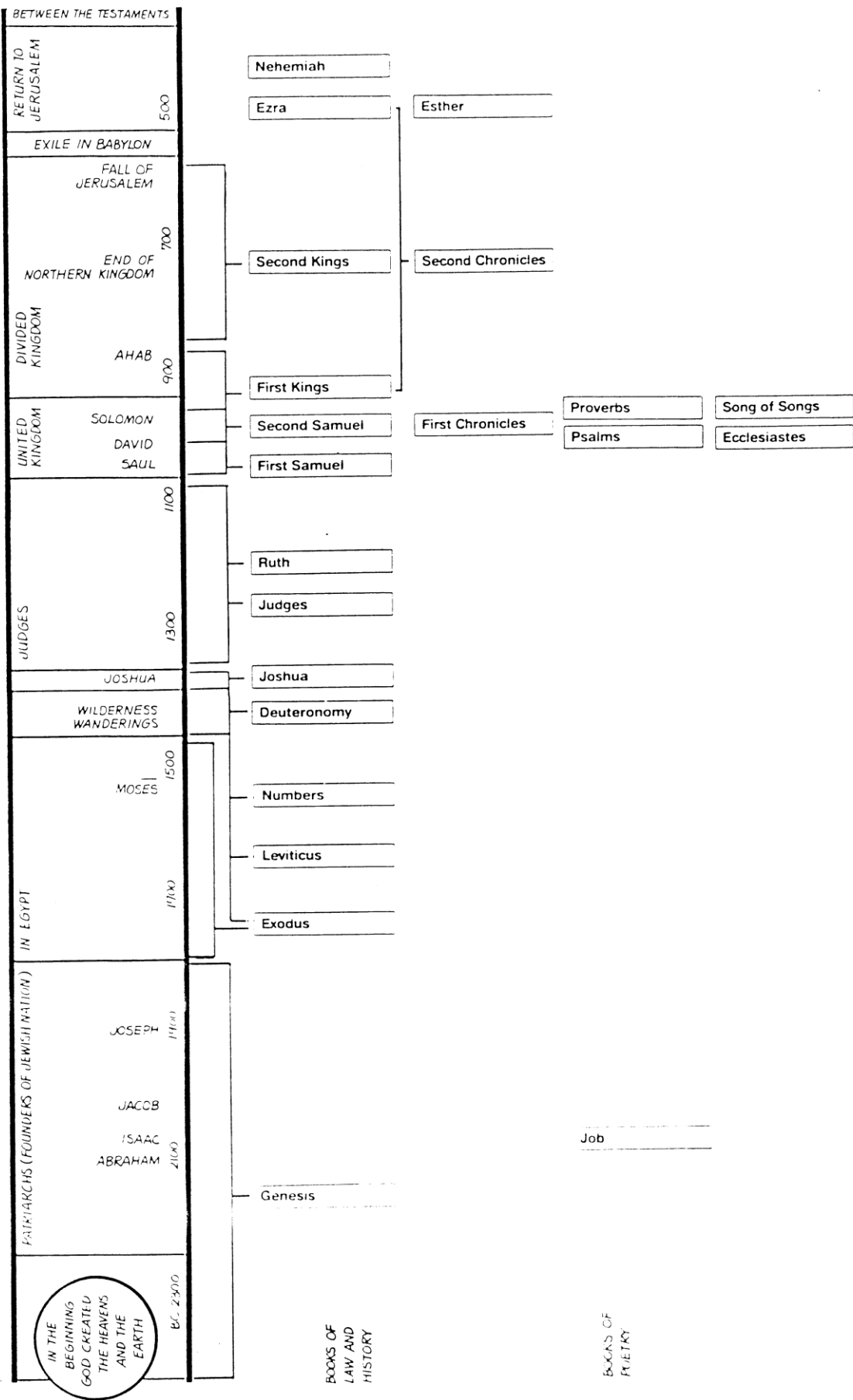
| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------|------|------|---------|-------|-------|-------|----------|-----------|--------|-----------|---------|
| HOSEA | JOEL | AMOS | OBADIAH | JONAH | MIKAH | NAHUM | HABAKKUK | ZEPHANIAH | HAGGAI | ZECHARIAH | MALACHI |
|-------|------|------|---------|-------|-------|-------|----------|-----------|--------|-----------|---------|



We often think of our Bible as a book, but before paper and bindings were invented, the Scriptures were handwritten on parchment or vellum scrolls. See Luke 4:17-20 (Jesus reading the scroll in the synagogue).

When Old Testament Events Happened

APPROXIMATE TIMES WHEN EVENTS IN EACH BIBLE BOOK HAPPENED



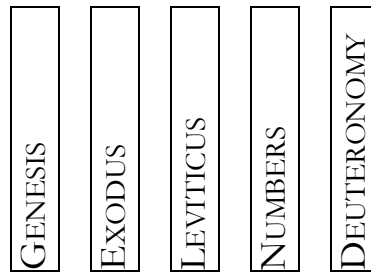
The Books of Prophecy tell about events during the Divided Kingdom, Exile and Return to Jerusalem.

BOOKS OF LAW AND HISTORY

BOOKS OF POETRY

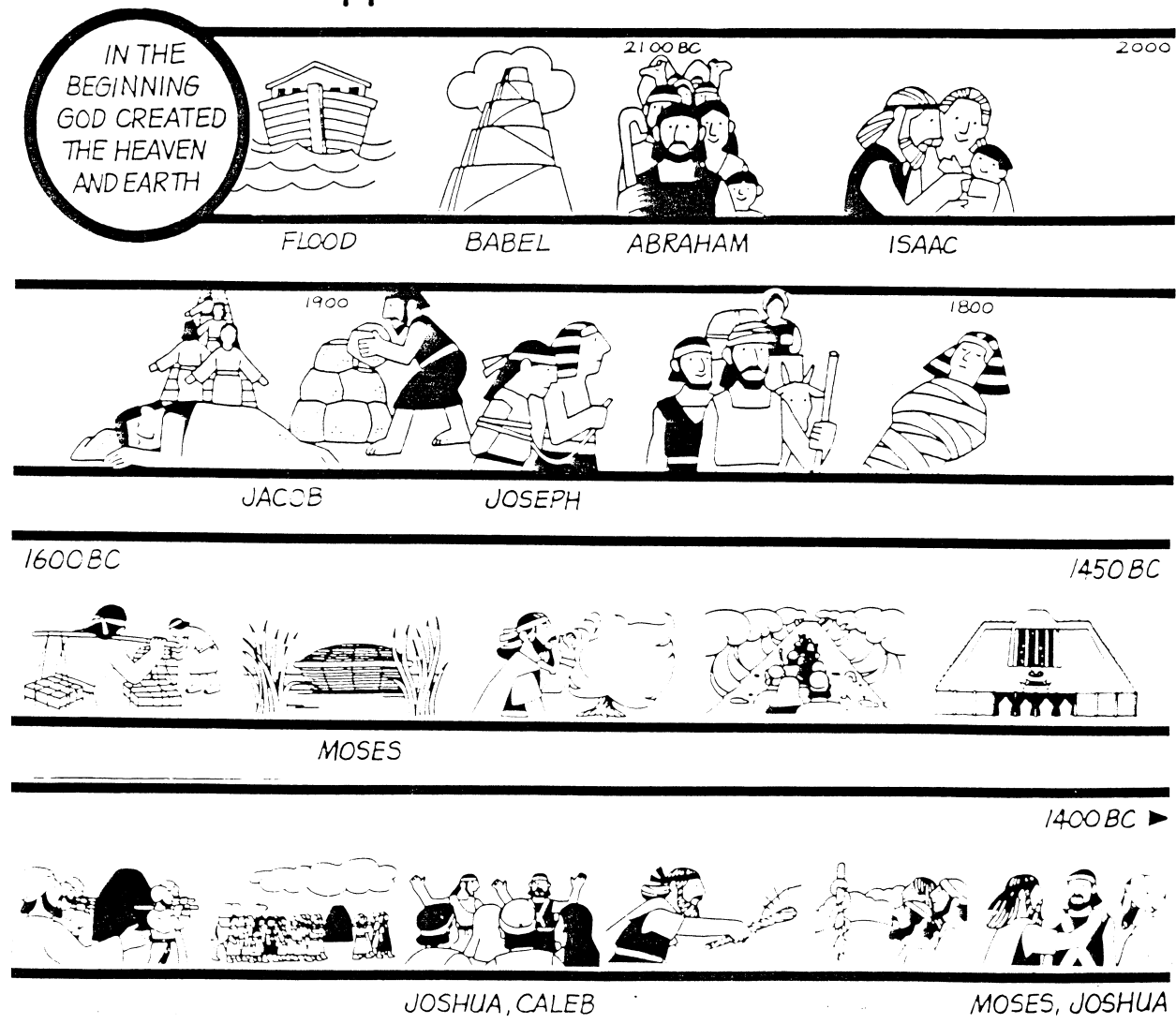
BOOKS OF PROPHECY

THE BOOKS OF LAW

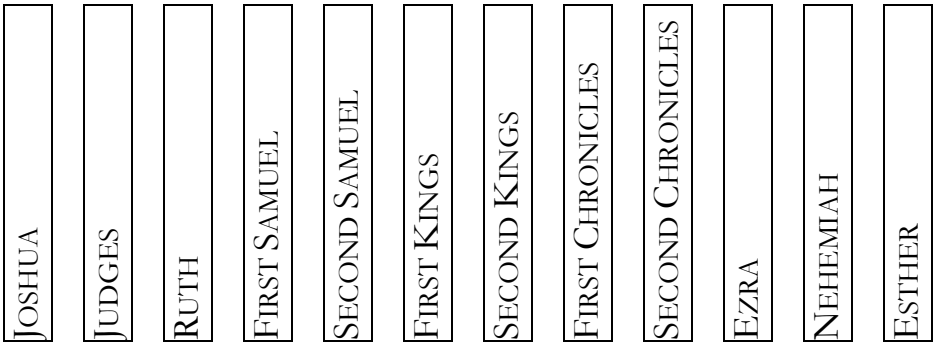


The five books of the Law (known as Torah to Jews) are also called “the Pentateuch”, which means “five scrolls.” At least some of this ancient literature was written by Moses (see Luke 24:27 and John 5:46). These books describe the creation of the world, God’s call to the Hebrews as the Chosen People, their captivity and release from Egypt, the laws which guided them on their way to the Promised Land and how God blessed the people when they obeyed and disciplined them when they disobeyed.

When Events Happened

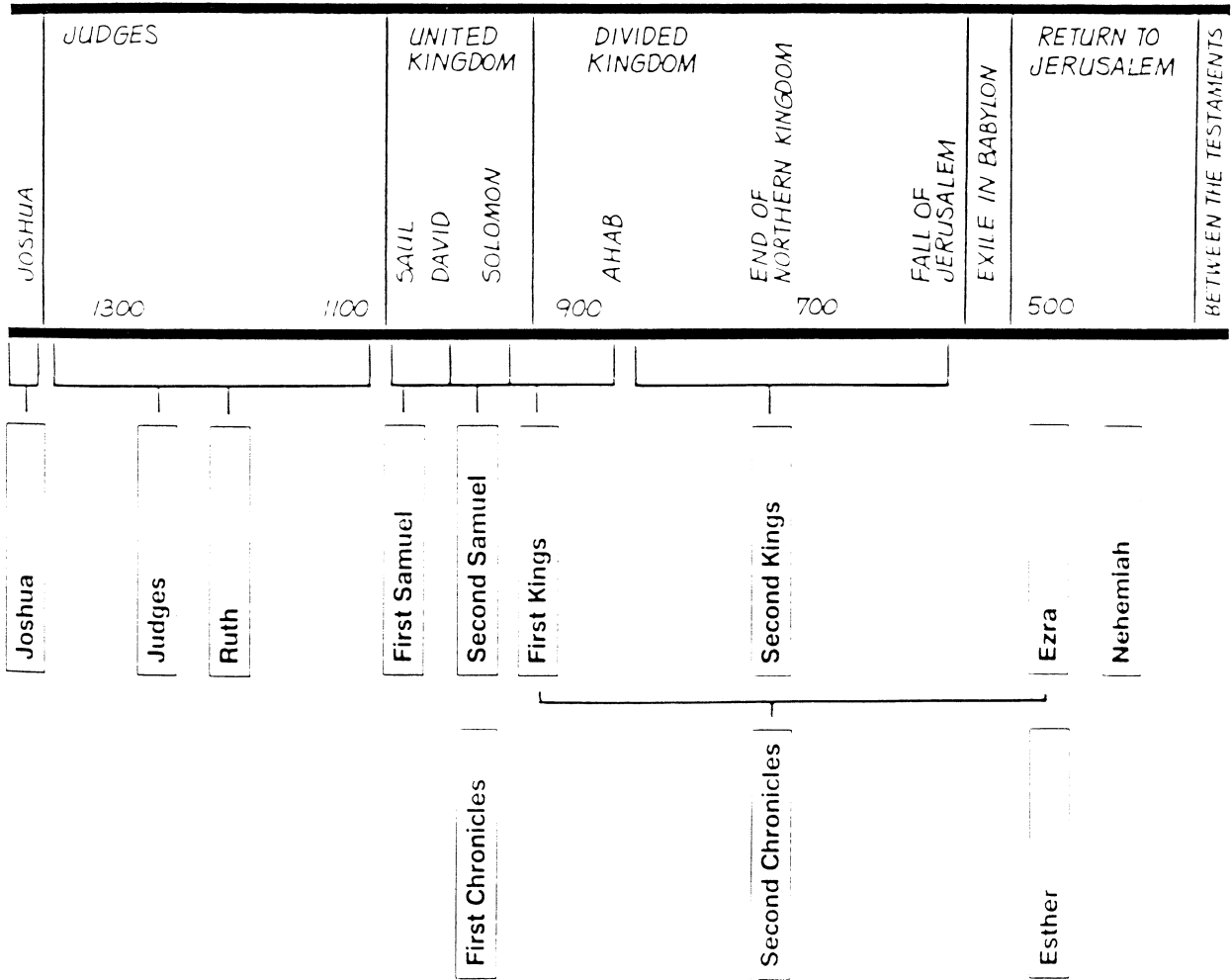


THE BOOKS OF HISTORY

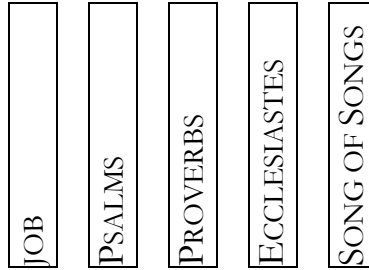


God brought Israel to a new homeland. With God’s help, they defeated their enemies and chose kings to rule them. Sometimes the people remembered God and the covenant. Often they did as they wanted and turned away from God. The nation divided itself in half and both halves ended up being conquered by enemies. The people had only God’s promise to return Israel to its former place.

When Events Happened



THE BOOKS OF POETRY



The five books of Hebrew poetry in the Old Testament contain some of the most inspiring writing in all of literature. Their form reminds us that biblical truth is appropriately sung and celebrated, not just recited as historical fact.

Here, the whole range of human emotions is exposed before God. There are complaints and weeping, questioning and rage, as well as praise and worship.

A special feature of this ancient poetry is that its “rhyming” is achieved by the repetition of thoughts, instead of sounds, as in English poetry. One line will state a truth in one way, and the next will build on that truth or restate it in a slightly different way. Psalm 19:1 is a good example:

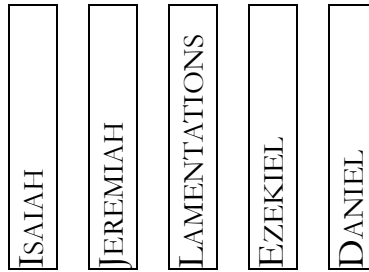
The heavens declare the glory of God;
The skies declare the work of his hands.

Some of this poetry is perhaps older than any other Old Testament writing. Some scholars, for example, believe the book of Job to have been written as far back as 2000 B.C. Many of the Psalms were written by David, a thousand years before Christ, and many of the Proverbs by Solomon, David’s son. But since there are few historical references in the poetic books, it is difficult to establish timelines as with the other books of the Old Testament.

King David, the author of many of the Psalms, playing a lyre. In the Jewish Bible, most Psalms have an instruction at the beginning regarding the musical arrangement.

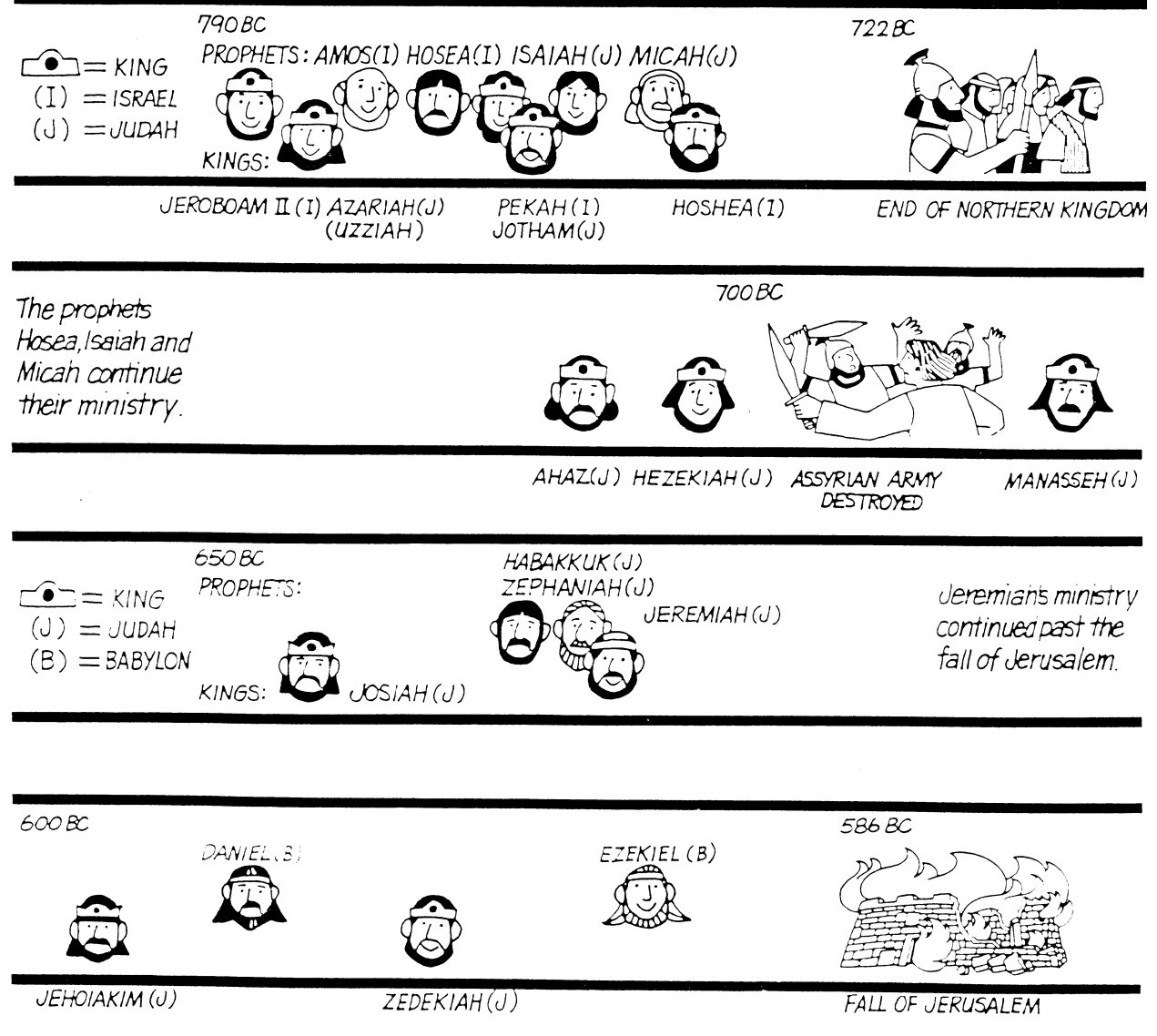


THE MAJOR PROPHETS

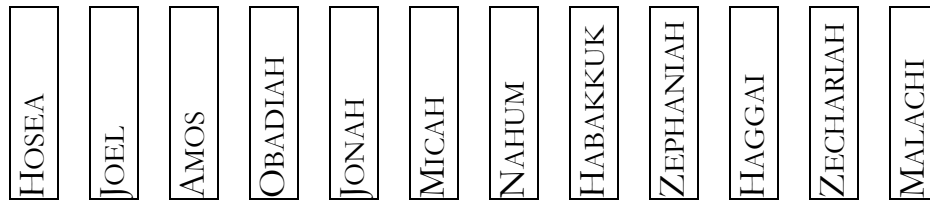


The term “major prophets” simply indicates that these books are the longest books of prophecy in the Old Testament. If, as many scholars believe, Jeremiah was the author of Lamentations, there are actually only four “major prophets” and five major prophecies.

When Events Happened

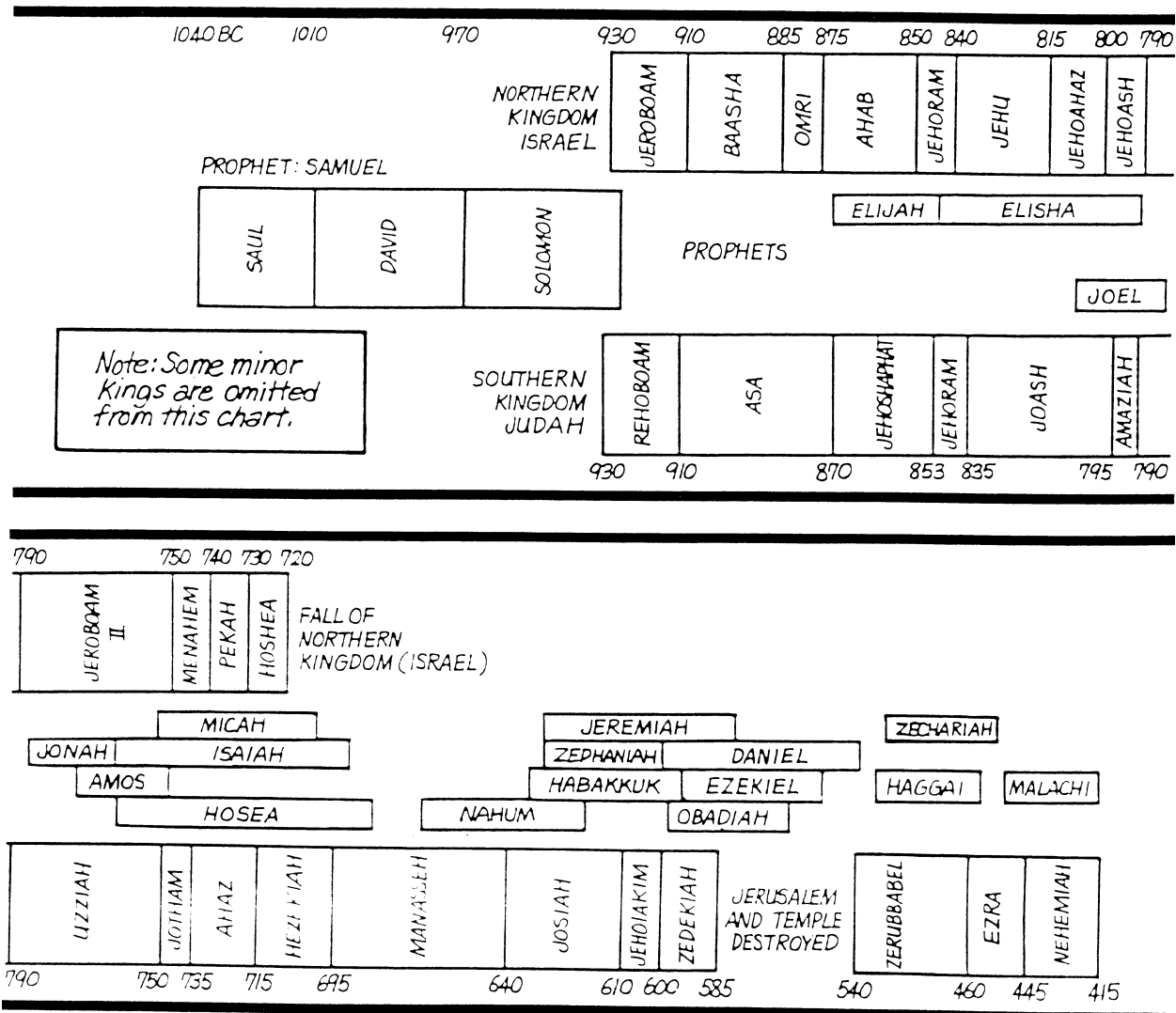


THE MINOR PROPHETS



These twelve books of Old Testament prophecies are called the “minor prophets” because they are shorter than the “major prophets” not because they are less important. Remember that the term prophet means to “forth-tell” God’s word more than it means to fore-tell the future. The role of prophets was not to tell the people what would happen but to seek to explain why something was happening (or had happened).

When Events Happened

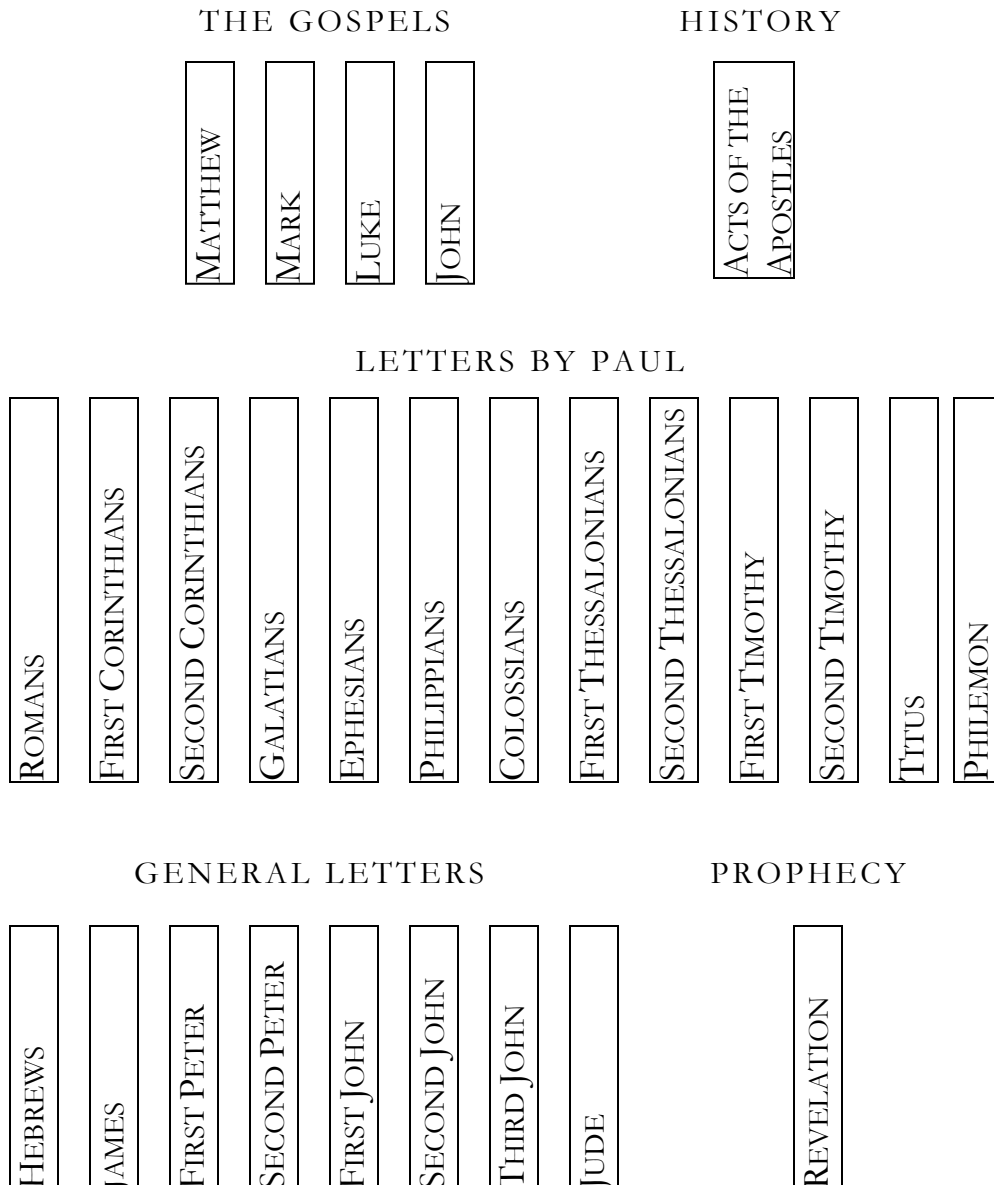


The New Testament—An Overview

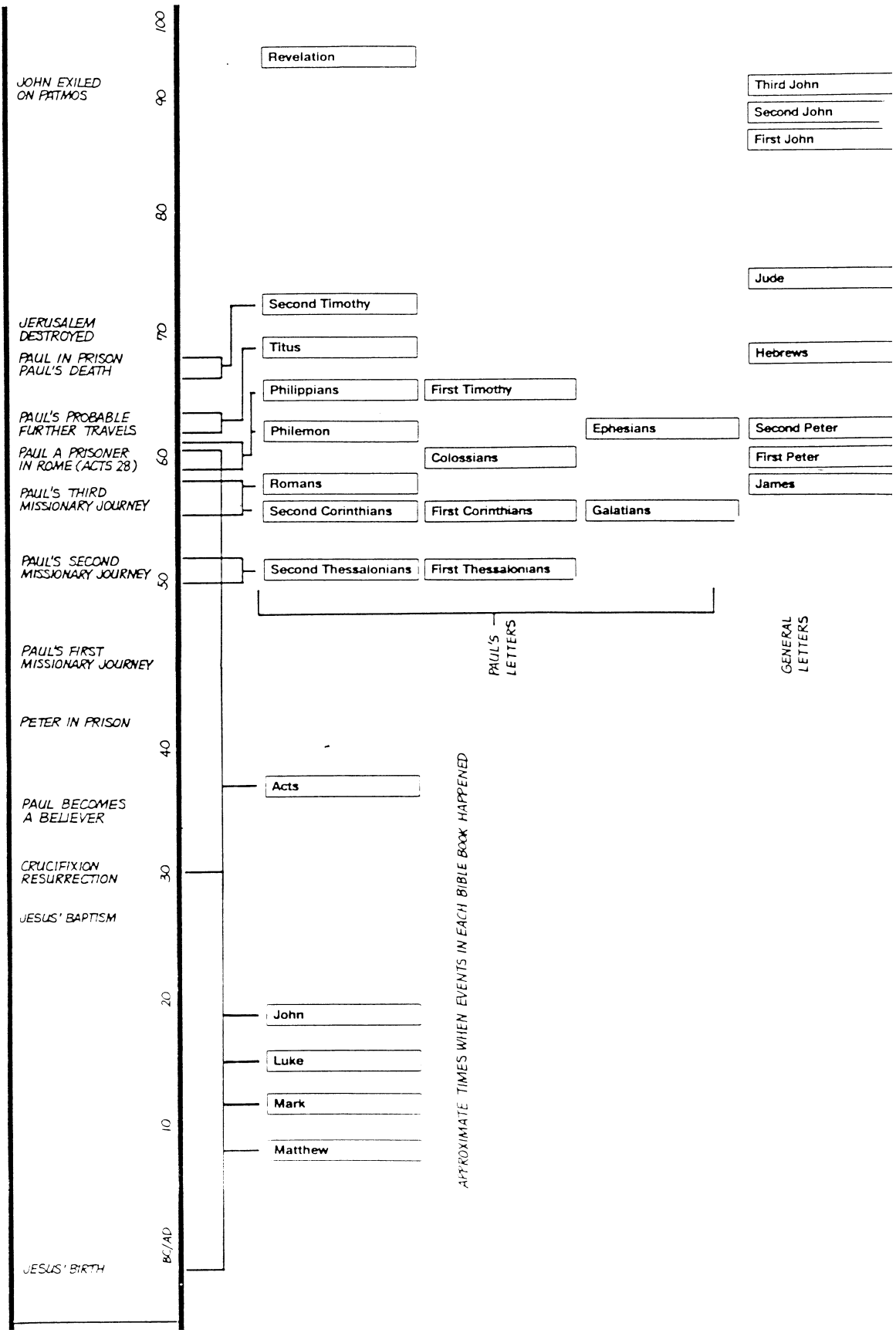
The term “New Testament” refers first to the covenant that God made with all people to save them through God’s Son, Jesus. It has also come to refer to the writings about the new covenant. As the Old Testament is sometimes called the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament is sometimes called the Christian Scriptures.

Purpose/Theme

The Scriptures of the New Testament show how God’s Old Covenant is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It describes how the early Christians became the Church and how to live in the light of the risen presence of Christ.

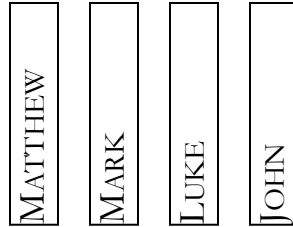
The Books of the New Testament

When New Testament Events Happened



APPROXIMATE TIMES WHEN EVENTS IN EACH BIBLE BOOK HAPPENED

THE GOSPELS



The word “gospel” comes from the Old English term “God-spell.” It translates the Greek word for “good news” (εὐαγγέλιον—from which we get evangelist).

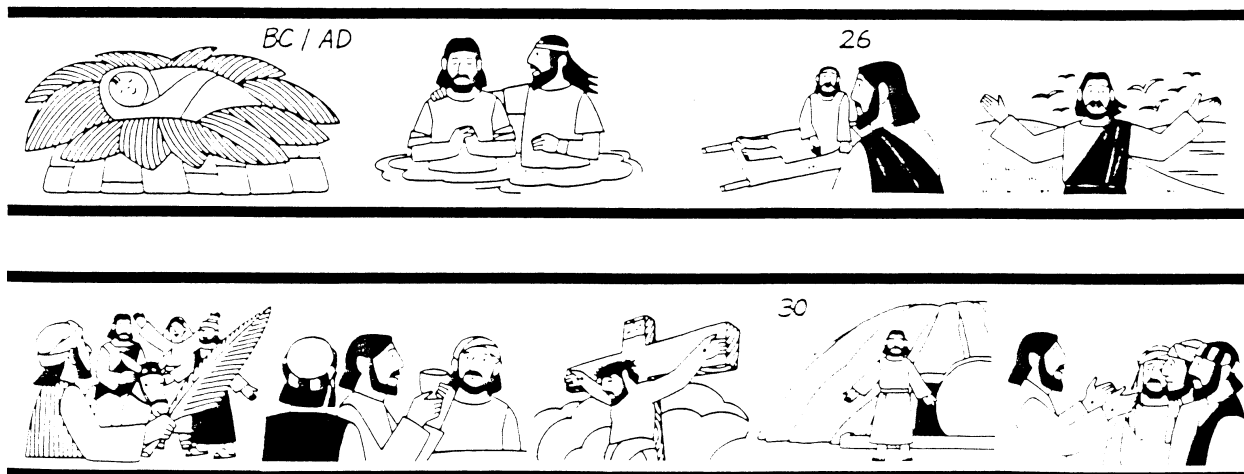
One of the oldest uses of the word in the ancient world was by a king’s herald, who announced the glad tidings of the king’s birthday as he went through the cities of the realm.

This is just the meaning in the New Testament. The four Gospels announce the glad tidings about Jesus.

The ancient world knew about history, poetry, prophecy, and letters. But a “gospel” was new to them. Here, inspired writers wanted to do more than just relate historical detail. They also wanted to create faith (see John 20:30-31). They announced the good news that, just as they saw the Old Testament to promise, God had sent the Messiah, Jesus, to the world.

Why are there four Gospels? Matthew presents one perspective on the life of Jesus, Mark another, and Luke a third. These three Gospels are so much alike (using much of the same source material) that they are called the Synoptic Gospels. Synoptic is Greek for “see with” or “see alike”. They all look at the life of Jesus from an historical perspective. John’s Gospel, however dwells more on the inner meaning of Jesus’ life and teachings.

When Events Happened



HISTORY

ACTS OF THE
APOSTLES

The physician and evangelist Luke is generally accepted as the author of this record of the establishment and growth of the early Church. It emphasises the presence of the Holy Spirit (arriving with Pentecost in chapter 2), the missionary work of Peter and Paul, and how Christianity was not the enemy of the Roman government.

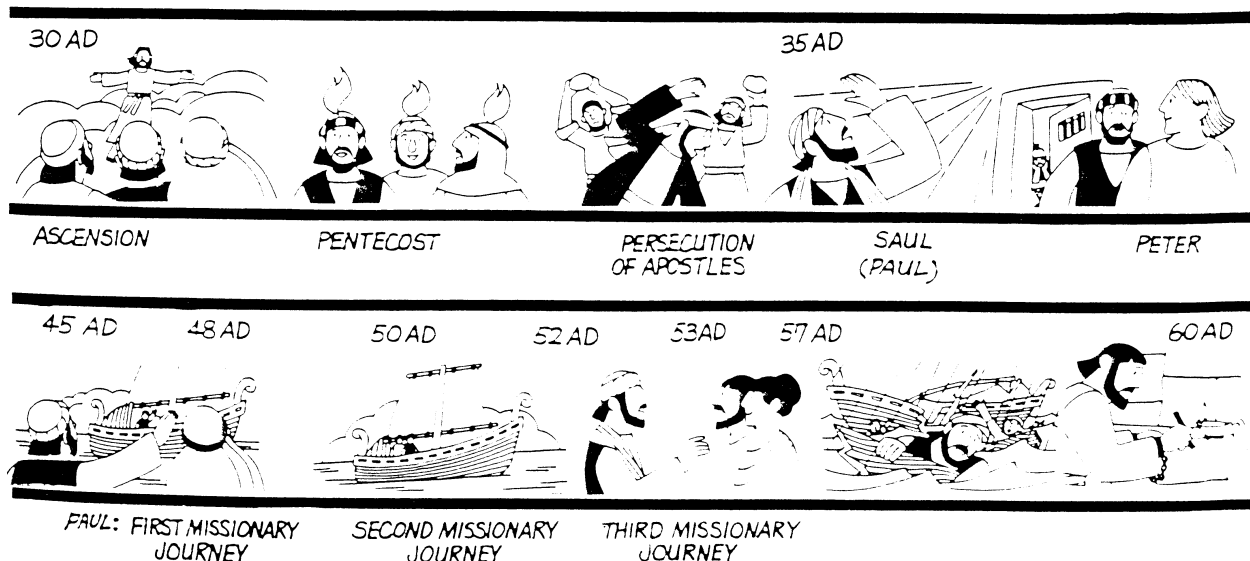
One of the key verses in the book, which relates to why Luke would have written it is this quotation from Jesus just before his Ascension:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8 NRSV)

There are three major movements in the Acts of the Apostles. Each relates to where the Gospel is preached by the apostles:

- ✠ Jerusalem (Acts 1-7)
- ✠ Judea and Samaria (Acts 8-12)
- ✠ To the world (Acts 13-28)

When Events Happened



LETTERS BY PAUL

| |
|----------------------|
| ROMANS |
| FIRST CORINTHIANS |
| SECOND CORINTHIANS |
| GALATIANS |
| EPHESIANS |
| PHILIPPIANS |
| COLOSSIANS |
| FIRST THESSALONIANS |
| SECOND THESSALONIANS |
| FIRST TIMOTHY |
| SECOND TIMOTHY |
| TITUS |
| PHILEMON |

As early Christianity spread, there was an urgent need for Christians to stay in touch with the teaching of Jesus and the apostles, and to know how to apply it to their lives. This need gave rise to the Epistles, or letters, thirteen of which have traditionally been attributed to the apostle Paul.

Paul's dramatic conversion is recorded in Acts 9, 22, and 26. His encounter with Jesus transformed him from a persecutor of Christians to the most influential church-planter and letter-writer among first-century Christians.

Paul's letters were written to two different audiences. The first nine were written to groups of believers in churches in Asia Minor (mostly modern Greece and Turkey). The last four were written to three individuals: Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.

The majority of the letters were also written in three distinct periods: during Paul's missionary journeys, when he was a prisoner in Rome at the time of Acts 28, and after he was freed from prison. Second Timothy is the only letter from another time: it was written later, when Paul was imprisoned again for preaching about Jesus, and was his last letter before he was martyred.

Timeline of Paul's Epistles

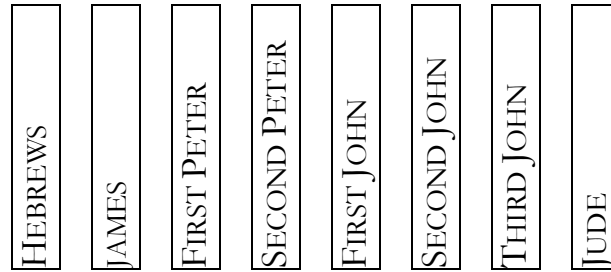
Missionary Journeys

Prisoner in Rome

After Release from Prison

| | | |
|----------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Romans | Ephesians | First Timothy |
| First Corinthians | Philippians | Second Timothy |
| Second Corinthians | Colossians | Titus |
| Galatians | Philemon | |
| First Thessalonians | | |
| Second Thessalonians | | |

GENERAL LETTERS



These letters are called “General” because they are addressed to a more general readership than others, such as Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Most are also named after their author, instead of their audience.

You may find that this list differs from older lists which included the book of Hebrews as one of Paul’s letters. Most modern scholars believe that the author of Hebrews is unknown. Also, since it addresses not a specific church but Jewish Christians throughout the world, it is included here with the General Letters.

When Events Happened:



PROPHECY

REVELATION

The Revelation to John is unique in the New Testament, being more closely related to the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament than anything else. It is a book that has, through the ages, been misunderstood and misinterpreted by many. It is written in the apocalyptic genre, which is closely related to the prophetic genre. “Apocalypse” is a Greek word (*αποκαλυψις*) which means, simply, “revelation”. Somewhere in history, apocalypse came to mean a catastrophic end time, which is one of the many interpretations of this mysterious book, but which is not really supported by the genre or even the content.

An apocalypse is usually a first-person narrative in which the author (normally taking on the identity of some famous ancient Biblical figure such as Abraham) relates one or more revelatory visions about the future or heavenly world or both. Jewish apocalypses often reflect a sharp distinction between the present evil age and the imminent future age of blessing. There is great use of symbolism, often quite bizarre, and a heavenly being who explains the meaning of the visions to the seer is often a stock character.

The book is unclear as to the exact identity of its author. Most scholars agree that it was not written by John, son of Zebedee (one of the twelve apostles) or with John, the author of the Gospel and Letters of John. What we know about the author is found in the text: his allusions to Ezekiel and Daniel suggest he is of Jewish origin but the Greek style of his writing would lead us to believe that he was living in Asia Minor, perhaps after the first Jewish revolt against Rome (66-73 CE) when many were forced to flee for their lives.

It is also unclear when exactly the book was written, although it is generally thought to be from the first century. It may be from the reign of Domitian (81-96 CE) or from earlier, during that of Nero (54-68 CE). What is clear is that the references to Babylon are in reference to Rome (a common practice at the time) and that the sign of the beast (666) is for an historical character (most think Nero Caesar) and not for someone yet to come.

Some Quotations for Reflection

An enquirer visiting an Anglican parish will quickly discover that the Bible is enormously important there. We hear it read aloud whenever we gather to worship. This reminds us that Bible study is more than just a private activity....Listening in a congregation emphasizes that this is a community action. The Bible belongs to the community for the benefit of the community. An individualistic approach does not get us very far in Christianity, and we need the church to help us hear God's word.¹

Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.²

The Law of the Gospel "fulfills," refines, surpasses, and leads the Old Law to its perfection.³

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the holy Scripture we do understand those Canonical books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.⁴

From childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.⁵

As for the books themselves, they were written in different languages and represent very different cultures from our own. They include law, history, poetry, hymns and songs, biographies, letters, prophecies, and sermons. Obviously, if we walked into our local library and picked up a biography, a book of poetry, and a copy of the criminal code, we would approach each book very differently, and yet people often make the mistake of treating every part of the Bible as if it was exactly the same kind of writing.⁶

"Inerrant" means "wholly true" or "without mistake" and refers to the fact that the biblical writers were absolutely errorless, truthful, and trustworthy in all of their affirmations. The doctrine of inerrancy does not confine itself to moral and religious truth alone. Inerrancy extends to statements of fact, whether scientific, historical, or geographical. The biblical writers were preserved from the errors that appear in all other books....Inerrancy is fundamental to the doctrine of biblical authority. Packer wrote, "Only truth can be authoritative; only an inerrant Bible can be used... in the way that God means Scripture to be used." If the Bible contains mistakes, then it is unreliable as a true guide to matters of salvation. If mistakes exist in one part, mistakes may just as easily exist in another part. If the Bible is a mixture of truth and error, then it is like any other book and simply not deserving of any special attention.⁷

Questions for Discussion

How do you use the Bible in your life? Do you read it frequently, meditate on it, hear it read aloud in the liturgy (Anglicans listen to a lot of Scripture in the liturgy compared to other denominations)? Is it history, teaching, part of your life story?

What is the nature of Holy Scripture? Was it given by God in the exact form by which we know it today? Was it written by people who were given the words by God? Who were inspired to write what they did? Who were witnesses to the things about which they wrote and who desired to record them for posterity? Who were trying to get people to believe like they believed?

What might Paul mean in 2 Corinthians 11:23 when he says, “I am talking like a madman”? Or, 1 Corinthians 7:12: “To the rest, I say—I and not the Lord”?

What is the relationship between the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) and the New Testament (Christian Scriptures)?

What might Jesus have meant when he said he came to fulfil the law (Matthew 5:17)?

Can we take the Bible seriously when it makes obvious factual errors or says contradictory things?

What do you think about stories like those in the book of Joshua where God, who is on the side of the army of Israel, not only allows but enables the Israelites to annihilate huge numbers of men, women, and children and lay waste to cities so they have a place to live? Is this a literal story or something else?

What does it mean when someone says they are “just getting back to the Bible and taking it for what it says”? Is that possible? Is there such a thing as bias or perspective?

What are some of the difficulties around translations and paraphrases of the Bible? Everyone loves the King James Version of the Bible—is that a faithful representation of Jesus’ words and teaching?

Can the Bible be used to prove a position? Can individual verses be used in or out of context? Does context matter?

What is the ultimate authority for a Christian? We talk about Scripture and Tradition? What do these mean and how do they relate to one another?

Acts 15:28 says this, “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us....” What might this mean? Does it have consequences for how you view the authority of Scripture?